

Chains of Freedom

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Chapter One

Bullets spat up dust all around him. Cobal's disembodied hand slapped the ground where it flopped at the end of the chain which had, till a few moments before, bound the two prisoners to one another.

What the hell had he been thinking? You couldn't escape from the Reliance. His own history should have told him that. Still, anything was better than dying with the rest of those spineless zombies. Death was all that waited back at the prison work camp. Better to die out here; better to die fighting for freedom than to give the Reliance the satisfaction of working him to death. Better to cause them some trouble, even if only for a few moments.

Poor Cobal, all he had wanted to do was his time.

He was an idiot! Just like all the rest of them. Like the people from David's village who had worked blindly for the Reliance. They didn't understand that there should be more to life than the few meager crumbs the Reliance tossed them. No one had listened to his father, and he had been a fool to think they would listen to him.

He looked at the sword in his hand. He had stolen it from the guard, and used it to sever Cobal's hand from his body when Cobal died. The blade dripped with a mixture of Cobal's and the guard's blood. He wouldn't think about it; he would just run. He would escape for all of those who wouldn't. He would escape for his father who hadn't, or he would die trying.

David continued to run long after he had lost them. He ran till he couldn't feel his legs anymore. He ran till he could hardly breathe. He ran till the stitch in his side was unbearable. He ran until he ran into something, and then he fell on his ass.

Stunned, he stared at the pair of boots straddling his calves. He knew the style all too well. The black leather boots with the big brass buckles that went up almost to the knee. It was the style worn by those Reliance soldiers lucky enough to be in the Elite Forces. But the tattered black jeans which were tucked into the boots didn't look anything like what an Elite would wear. There was a low-slung holster, and in it was the biggest, ugliest plasma blaster he had ever seen. A weapon which, like the boots, wouldn't be issued to anyone but an Elite. Where the thick black weapons belt should have been, a thick chain was wrapped around and around her waist and torso. Underneath the chain she wore what was left of a black T-shirt.

Her skin was very tan, her hair was white, and she had possibly the bluest eyes he had ever seen.

Her hair was cut in a Reliance Elite style. A little ragged, but still medium length, still well within regulation standard. She was tall, well over six feet tall, yet hardly the mountain she had appeared at first.

David couldn't decide whether she was an Elite or someone who had rolled one. Then she smiled an all-too-familiar smile: the "cat-that-caught-the-canary" smile that Reliance officers were famous for.

He raised his sword hand, only to realize it was now empty. He hadn't even realized he'd dropped his weapon. *Damn it. All this for nothing.* His muscles bunched to spring away, even as his brain acknowledged the futility of the gesture.

Her right hand moved towards her holster, and he froze. No phony baloney trial this time; she was just going to blow him away. David closed his eyes tight and waited. When nothing happened, he opened one eye carefully and saw an outstretched hand, no gun. He darted a quick look at her face. She was smiling broadly at him

"I have a camp not far from here. Food, clothing, shelter." Clearly she was not a person who wasted words.

He didn't take her offered hand, so she withdrew it, along with her smile.

"Fine, be that way. But while I don't need you, you most certainly need me."

David got shakily to his feet wishing he had taken her help when she had offered it. He dusted himself off, delaying the moment when he would have to meet those blue, blue eyes.

"What makes you think I need your help?"

She laughed. "We are sixty miles from the nearest town. You are wearing nothing but a prison tattoo on your head and what's left of your prison uniform. Like I said, I have food, clothing, and shelter. Not to mention that my camp is next to a stream where you could wash off that foul stench." She smiled again. "But, if you'd rather spend the night hungry and dirty in the cold forest with the bears, that's up to you." She turned and started to walk away.

"How do I know that you're not Reliance?" he asked, still suspicious.

She didn't justify his question with an answer.

"At this point, does it really matter?" she asked looking over her shoulder briefly at him.

David laughed shakily, and shook his head.

"I suppose not. Lead the way," he said, waving his hand in as flamboyant a gesture as his condition allowed.

She obliged, confidently striding away as if on her way to a fire.

He had difficulty keeping up. David got the impression that she only had just the one speed. By the time he reached the mouth of the cave where he assumed her camp was, she was just stepping out with a bar of soap and a towel. Without a word, David took them and stumbled to the stream that ran in front of the cave.

By the time he returned, skin raw with scrubbing and blue with cold, the fire just inside the cave mouth was all he could see. When his brain thawed out enough to think again, he was huddled over the fire, towel wrapped around his waist, clutching his grumbling stomach with his arms.

As his eyes adjusted to the light, he stared stupidly at the crates stacked all around and inside the cave. Like a child excited about his birthday gifts, David greedily opened and looked into box after box. The woman walked over to him and pressed a bowl of soup into his hands without saying a word about him rummaging through her things. She motioned to a folding stool sitting close to the fire, and he sat down. His hunger took over immediately, and he ate three bowls of the soup before he even tried to talk.

"Thank you."

She shrugged and nodded.

"Where did you get all this,"—he motioned around with his hand—"stuff?"

She looked at him with all the tolerance of the wise for the very stupid, and replied broadly. "Why, the Reliance gave it to me, of course. They always give supplies to subversives who want to overthrow their power base." She slapped her forehead in obvious disgust, then asked, "Where do you think I got it?"

David shrugged.

"I stole it, dumbass!"

"Well, that's obvious, but how?" David was feeling defensive. In his town, being one of the few people who read, he was considered quite smart. He wasn't used to being talked to like he was an idiot. Except of course by Reliance personnel.

"I hijack shipments. I used to be Elite, so I know how they operate their shipping routes. It's really not very hard to do. Here on Earth they don't expect it. They aren't ready for it, and well . . . it's easy, that's all." She was obviously trying to be patient, and she just wasn't very good at it.

"My name's David. David Grant," he said, holding out his hand.

After a moment she took it, and they shook.

"RJ," she announced calmly.

David's jaw dropped. After a moment, he closed his mouth, and looked around. Well, that certainly explained the supplies.

"You're RJ? Where are your followers? How many of you are there?" he asked eagerly.

She laughed, and held out her hands as if to ward off his excitement. "Hold on a minute, farm boy. There are no followers. There's just me. A lone ex-Elite, doing my best to confound the system."

"But you're only one person!" He seemed to have a positive knack for stating the obvious.

"Yes, well, I was the last time I looked," RJ said dryly. She got up from her campstool and went to one of the crates. She came back with clothes for him, a first-class soldier's uniform.

He made a face, and she smiled.

"Beggars can't be choosers," she reminded him.

He turned his back to her and dressed. There were a million questions he wanted to ask, but right now his body was the enemy. Struggling with his fly, he turned, "Is there somewhere I can sleep? I'm exhausted."

"I'll get you a cot." She dug around till she found one and a blanket, too.

It was the warmest, the cleanest, and the fullest he had been in weeks. David had barely lain down before he was asleep.

RJ watched the sleeping man in the light of dawn. She liked the way he looked. He was dark, well tanned, with black eyes and hair. He was tall and well built, and his features were strong. In short, he was the kind of man that made stupid women shit all over themselves. Yeah, she liked the way he looked; she liked it a lot.

"R.J.—What does that stand for?"

Her focus shifted immediately to his face. His eyes were open. She'd been caught off guard, staring, confident that he was sleeping. How long had he been awake? Had he noticed her looking at him?

"Huh?" she responded intelligently.

"What's RJ stand for?" David asked again, stretching.

Her eyes were drawn back to watch the play of his starved muscles. "It's not important." She almost spat the words as she got up and walked over to the fire, where she tried her best to look busy.

"Roxanne Jones," he suggested, his voice still thick with sleep.

"That's close enough," she said on a final note.

David sat up and let out a groan. All that running was taking its toll. He hurt everywhere. RJ stuck something in his hands. A bowl of oatmeal. Now, he had never been too keen on oatmeal, but after that gray shit they fed him in prison, oatmeal seemed mighty fine. He ate till he was stuffed, then he started with his questions.

"What do you plan to do with all these supplies?"

"Keep them." She poured herself a cup of coffee. "Why were you sent to prison?" she countered.

David grimaced. Vagueness and questions. Well, you could take the girl out of the Reliance, but . . . Still, it was a fair question.

"I tried to raise supporters to fight the Reliance, but everyone is either too scared, too stupid, or both," he said bitterly. "Someone, or maybe all of them, turned me in. Probably all of them. Self preservation."

"I'm not afraid of the Reliance," RJ stated quietly.

"No, I suppose not. But believe me, most are." David paused, then plunged on. "Not to make light of what you've done, but no one believes you're real. They believe you're a story the Reliance made up to flush out people like myself. Ask yourself what good all this is," he gestured at the crates, "if you don't have people to use them."

"I don't pretend to have all the answers, Mr. Grant."

"Just David," he said.

She smiled, shook her head and went on. "I'm a soldier. All I know how to do is fight. I don't know how to win a people's love or loyalty. I can give orders, but that won't work on rebels very well. All I know about people is that if you strike them correctly, with sufficient force, here, here, here, or here,"—she pointed to his head, heart, solar plexus, and throat—"they will probably die. I'm not too overly good with people, and I don't think anyone would want to follow someone who thinks life is so cheap. I could lead an army, but I can't lead people. My wisdom is in this blaster, my poetry in this chain. Killing I know."

David looked into the fire thoughtfully then he looked at RJ. "What if we formed an alliance? Worked together?"

"To do what? You said yourself, the people are too scared, or too stupid . . ."

"Attacking the Reliance on deserted stretches of road is all well and good, but it's not very visible. If the people could see something, witness it with their own eyes . . . if they could see that one person really can make a difference . . . I almost had them convinced. If I'd had proof that you were real, I think that would have made the difference. You're a legend, RJ. Everyone is talking about you. The Reliance hates you, but the people love you, and they secretly hope that you really exist. But you're not very visible. They can't see you."

"Like I said, I'm not very *good* with people. I do OK with my own kind, but right now I'm number one on the hit list with the army, so I can't very well get in and infiltrate. I'd have to be really stupid to do something visible, and I'm not stupid. Crazy, maybe. Stupid, no . . ."

"Not to be egotistical, but I am good with people. I think I have a way with words. If we could do something visual, make the Reliance see just how unhappy we are . . ."

RJ interrupted him with her laughter. "The Reliance doesn't give a shit if their work units, or even their soldiers, for that matter, are unhappy. They have what they want, and they aren't going to give us what we want because it would mean that they would have less."

"Then we'll get an army and fight them. It's got to be worth a try," David paused. "So what do you say? We could give it a shot. You and me against the Reliance." There was a lilt in his voice, and a fanatical gleam in his eyes. He held his hand out to her.

RJ stared for a second at his outstretched hand. "Ah, what the hell." She took his hand and shook it. "I don't know what we'll do, but we might as well do it together." She retrieved her hand, walked over and rummaged through a box of K-rations. "Ah! Here we go!" She pulled out two small glass bottles.

"A toast," she said, tossing one to David. They pulled off the tops and clinked the containers together solemnly.

"To the New Alliance," she offered.

David nodded approvingly. "To the New Alliance."

Chapter Two

In the weeks that followed, David started to feel more like his old self. He was back to his fighting weight, and his hair was starting to cover his prison baldness. What wasn't going to change was the brand burned on his forehead. A circle with an X through it served as a constant reminder of his hatred for the Reliance and all that it stood for. He ran his hand over it. Darkness had closed in, and the only light came from the fire. RJ planned for them to leave in the morning, but she hadn't told David where she planned to go or why.

"So, I think the first thing we should do is something really big. Something so big they won't be able to cover it up," David was saying. "Like blowing up the Reliance bank in Satis . . ."

"We'd be killed before we could get out of town," RJ said dispassionately. "I understand the need to do something spectacular to grab the public's eye, and I would love to destroy the bank at Satis. I will

do anything to hurt the Reliance, but remember this, David Grant. I don't do suicide missions. I like living. The fact is that I am intensely in love with myself, and fully believe that I am the most important person on this planet, if not the entire fucking universe. So when you talk of suicide missions to blow up banks, then you had better drop the 'we,' because I, for one, have no intention of dying for the cause."

"But Satis is . . ."

"The kind of thing you need an army for. So until we have that army, I suggest you put all your dreams of conquering Satis on hold." She paused. "In the mean time, I suggest we continue to raid supply trains."

"Why? Why not get right to something that matters?" David asked, with angry disappointment. He had learned that when RJ made up her mind that was the end of the discussion as far as she was concerned. She proved it now by snoring loudly and feigning sleep.

They loaded the supplies, including the carefully hidden, fully assembled rocket launcher, onto the military-issue dirt bike they planned to ride. It was cold, so they dressed for it. The clothes David now wore, like RJ's, were not Reliance work-issue. Oh, the plain blue jeans and white T-shirts were, but the black leather jackets definitely were not. They were military-issue. He tied a leather headband around his forehead to hide his brand. RJ had already mounted the bike and was screaming at him to hurry up. He looked back at the cave. It had been the first place he had ever lived where he hadn't had the Reliance breathing down his throat. Even though he was eager to get on with the fight, he was reluctant to leave this place.

"Would you hurry it up?" RJ screamed.

He ran over and jumped on the bike behind her. He would have liked to drive, but he had no idea how. The only thing he had ever driven was a farm tractor, and he hadn't been very good at that.

At first, David sat loosely on the back, but as RJ started slinging them down the rough trail at break-neck speeds, he found himself clinging to her for dear life. She seemed to be oblivious to such obstacles as rocks and trees. He wondered if this was the same woman who had claimed to be a lover of her own life just the night before. David took comfort in the idea that the bike couldn't possibly go any faster, and then they hit the pavement.

David was scared shitless. Up till right then, the fastest thing he'd ever been on was the town whore. He was sure he couldn't have been any more petrified, and then he caught sight of a Reliance cop flashing his lights behind them.

"Oh shit! What do we do now?" David said, his panic showing in his voice.

"We pull over and see what the gentleman wants," RJ said. "Just keep cool, and everything will be all right." She pulled the bike over, and they came to a stop.

The police car stopped right behind them.

RJ got off the bike, and David followed suit.

"Any problem, officer?" she asked.

David tried his best to look unconcerned.

"Standard procedure," the officer stated, proving that he had studied his handbook well. "I'll have to see your military free-days pass."

Of course he assumed they were military. They were wearing the jackets, and they had access to a motorbike. Civilians didn't have either.

David swallowed hard, and started to go through his pockets. Very slowly at first, and then more urgently. It was OK that he looked nervous. After all, everyone was nervous when dealing with Reliance police.

David shrugged, raising his open hands in a gesture of frustration. "I don't seem to have them," he said, sounding quite convincingly upset.

"Could you give me your pass numbers then? I'll just run them through the machine," the officer

suggested with surprising patience.

"Oh, come on, officer," David whined, "who remembers their pass numbers?"

"I do," the officer said. "I'm sorry—he didn't sound sorry; he sounded bored—but you know the rules. I must either see your passcards, or you must recite your numbers so that I may run them through the machine."

David assumed an expression of intense concentration. "Seven, seven, two—no. Seven, seven, four—no." Suddenly, he turned on RJ.

"I could have sworn I told you to get the passcards," he said hotly. David, of course, had never seen a pass-card in his life. RJ caught on quickly; she shrugged.

"I'm sorry," she said, assuming an air of total indifference.

"You're sorry." He sounded as if he were barely controlling his temper. Then he exploded. "Sorry! Why, you stupid bitch! This is the first free-days pass we've had since we got married. You did this on purpose because you don't like sex." All David's very genuine terror lent veracity to his assumed rage, and the outlet in turn helped him regain control.

RJ kept a smile from her face only with great effort, and managed to play along. "Oh, please. You're not going to start all that again are you?" she sighed.

David looked at the officer, man appealing to man. "The Reliance gave me three women to choose from. I went for looks, and wouldn't you know it, I wind up with the one that doesn't like to screw."

The officer started to speak, beginning to look uncomfortable, but RJ jumped in first.

"How am I supposed to get turned on by a guy that likes to wear my underclothes? Would you tell me that?"

"That's a lie!" David screamed back, turning to face RJ.

"Go ahead, officer, ask him to drop his drawers, and we'll just see who's lying," RJ demanded, with an air of wronged innocence.

"Oh, that's not fair!" David cried accusingly. "You know I always wear them when we're on the bike." He turned to the officer appealingly. "They keep me from chaffing. You understand, don't you?"

"Oh, really, Howard, you don't expect him to buy that, do you?" RJ asked with disgust. "It's you who purposely forgot the passes so that you could go back to the house and go through my clothes!"

"Lying bitch!" David screamed. The two faced off, totally ignoring the officer. RJ opened her mouth to scream something back, but the officer had obviously had enough. He whistled to get their attention, and threw up his hands as if to ward them off.

"Enough! It's obvious that you two are only a threat to each other, so just go on about your free days. I suggest that you take the time to try to work out your differences. As you know, the Reliance hardly ever sanctions a second marriage."

"Thank you, officer," David started pumping his hand. "Thank you very much!"

"Yes, well, just do me a favor, and try not to kill each other in my jurisdiction," he said.

He shook his head as he watched them drive away. "You meet all kinds on this job."

It was dusk when they reached the town. It was run-down, but still very much alive. The streets teemed with activity, none of which was Reliance sanctioned. Bars lined the roads, far outnumbering restaurants. They stopped at what seemed to be the busiest bar in town. It had golden arches outside, obviously a relic from antiquity, the plastic coating was beginning to flake. Even so, one could clearly see "Billions and Billions served" written below the arches. In answer to David's question, RJ said that no one knew what the "Billions served" were. Some speculated that they were drinks. Some of the hookers claimed it referred to satisfied Johns, but no one really knew—or cared.

David listened with a feeling of relief as the engine died. They got off the bike. David tried to stretch out his weary muscles, but that only aggravated his saddle sores. RJ looked as sharp as she had that morning, and David fought the urge to smack her. He followed RJ inside, where they sat on stools at the

bar. The bar was low, and the stools were wooden and crudely made. David would have preferred to stand, but he supposed that would have been too conspicuous.

"What's yer poison?" the bartender asked.

"Whiskey, beer chaser," RJ said, without noticing the strange look David gave her.

In David's experience, you could have a whiskey, or you could have a beer, but you couldn't have both at one time. That was against Reliance Law. But then so was most of what he had seen since they drove into town.

"And what can I get for you?" the bartender asked David.

"Ah, just a beer," he said. He was given a beer, and one sip told him that this was not Reliance-approved beer. It was too strong for that. This was more like the "whiskey" they had back home. David took a look around the bar. The other customers, like he and RJ, were wearing non-regulation clothing. There wasn't a proper uniform in sight. You couldn't tell whether these people were farmers, ranchers, cloth makers or military. Where the hell had RJ brought him? As if reading his mind, RJ started talking in a low whisper that was barely audible above the constant din.

"Welcome to Alsterase, David. Nothing in this city is up to Reliance code. This is where escaped prisoners, tax evaders, politicians, and riffraff of virtually every type come to escape the Reliance," she explained.

"I've never heard of it," David said. "Why doesn't the Reliance just come wipe them all out in one fell swoop?"

RJ smiled, then ordered another drink. When it came, she explained. "Like you said, you've never heard of it. To attack the town would be to admit that such a place exists at draw attention to these rebels. Besides, Alsterase plays a very important role in Reliance politics."

"What's that?" David asked. By now, he was thoroughly confused, and looked it.

"If a rebellion ever starts, it's a fair bet that it will start here in Alsterase, the home of the malcontents. If you know where your enemy is, you know where to go to crush them quickly and completely."

David nodded his understanding.

"As long as there's a place for the malcontents to go, they'll go there. As long as they're here, they can't be in the towns stirring others into a rabble. As long as they're not stirring up any trouble, it's in the Reliance's best interest to leave them here to attract those rebellious souls who slip through the system." As RJ finished, she picked up the whiskey and downed it, then started on the beer.

David allowed his brain a few minutes to soak up what he'd just heard. "OK, I think I get it. But if all that is true, what are we doing here? This place is no doubt crawling with Reliance spies." David glanced nervously around the bar as he spoke.

"Oh, no doubt about that at all. Which means that nobody asks any questions or gives out any information. See, everyone's either afraid that you're a spy, or afraid you'll think they're one. Spies in Alsterase are more or less useless."

David nodded slowly. "But that still doesn't answer my question. Why are we here?"

"A little reverse logic. You see, the Reliance knows that Alsterase is the festering place for a rebellion, but then so does anyone with half a brain. So, they don't really expect anyone to try. Oh, there's talk—there's always talk, but nothing ever comes of it. Therefore, this is the perfect place to start a rebellion. A town full of people who all hate the Reliance is the perfect cover, because only an idiot would seriously try anything here. Therefore, a really intelligent person who plays her cards right can march right into a ready-made army. Or at least a unit," she gulped her beer down.

It took several seconds for all of that to soak in. When it did, David still didn't understand, and he didn't like not understanding. He didn't like her drinking, either. While he sat sipping on his single beer (which was making him giddy already), RJ put away six of the combination drinks. Her speech wasn't slurred; her movements weren't clumsy. In fact, the only indication that she'd had anything to drink at all was that her right arm was flopping around like a fish on a pier.

He'd noticed the arm thing before. She seemed to have a habit of jerking it at odd moments; it could be a little distracting. Right now, the damned arm thing was enough to drive him crazy. When she started to order another round of drinks, he decided she'd really lost it.

"Don't you think you've had enough?" David asked quietly.

RJ laughed and patted him on the back, none too gently.

"More than, probably. Bartender! Do it again!" she yelled.

Just as the bartender set her drinks on the table, she felt a hand on her shoulder, and hot breath in her ear.

"Hey, baby, why don't you and me blow this dump?" The man was huge, six-foot-eight if he was an inch. He was gigantic, humongous, fantastically enormous, and damn near as blond as the woman he was coming on to.

"Well," RJ drawled slowly, not even looking at the man. "For one thing, I'm not your baby."

David gulped, and decided to give RJ charm lessons as soon as he got the chance.

"You could be," the big man said.

"You could be well-mannered, too. But you're not," RJ said coolly. "Any man can see that I am with this gentleman."

David looked around for several seconds before he realized that RJ meant him. The smile he gave the big man was sickly at best.

"Oh, I'm sure he wouldn't mind," the big man said, and added menacingly. "Would you, buddy?"

David gulped again. RJ had strapped a gun under his arm before he put his jacket on, but he didn't know if he could get to it—or if he should even try. He wasn't ready for this situation; he wasn't exactly sure how he should react, or if he should at all. Goddamn RJ! She was just sitting there, grinning at him, as if waiting for him to do the right thing. Whatever the hell that was.

"Actually, I do mind," David tried to sound cocky, but somehow, just didn't quite make it. He went for the gun, which turned out to be the wrong thing to do. Someone—he never knew who—hit him in the head with a beer bottle before he could clear leather. His head spun, his vision blurred, and he hit the floor just seconds after his gun.

RJ came off the stool, bringing a knee up into the big man's groin. He let out a howl and bent double. RJ brought her cupped hands down on the base of his skull, and he hit the floor shortly after David.

Some guy took exception to his friend's nose-dive and slung his fist into RJ's gut. It hit the chain-now hidden under her jacket, and he jerked his hand back, screaming. She delivered a well-placed kick to his head, and the second man fell beside his friend.

David kept trying to get up, but couldn't figure out which way that was. He didn't even know where he was, or what had happened. He didn't feel the blood running down his face. The noise around him registered, but it was just that—noise—no words, no sense.

RJ turned just in time to deliver a roundhouse kick into the ribs of yet another attacker. When the girl fell to the floor holding her ribs, she yelled out, "Elite! She's a fucking ELITE!"

"No doubt she remembers the boots," RJ said in the sudden stillness. She announced, "I used to be an Elite. I have been well trained, and I don't have any qualms about killing anyone. So if you're feeling froggy, go ahead and jump."

With this said, she proceeded to kick every willing ass in the bar. She threw one poor man out the window, and another down the bar. In ten minutes, anyone who had thought it was a good idea to kick this stranger's ass had either rapidly changed his mind and left, or was suffering from some degree of bodily disrepair.

RJ stood up straight and took a deep, cleansing breath. Then she walked over to the bar where, by some miracle, her drinks still stood, and slung them down. Turning to David, who lay practically

comatose on the floor, she picked him up, threw him over her shoulder, and started for the door.

Pausing in the doorway, RJ turned, "I'm not paying my bill. I didn't have a good time, and I don't think my date had a very good time either. What's more, the atmosphere in this place stinks." Having said her piece, she stomped out the door, slamming it behind her so hard that the rest of the glass fell out of the broken window.

When they reached the bike, RJ tried to set David's limp body on it. She put her hands in his armpits and sat him up, but as soon as she let go, he almost fell.

"Oh, come on, David," she said in exasperation. "It's been a long damn day."

After several unsuccessful tries, she finally got David to hold himself up long enough that she could get on the bike. At which point he promptly collapsed against her back.

"Can you hang on?" A gurgling sound was her only answer. "Oh, I can tell that this is going to be a fun evening." She jammed David's limp body against the sissy bar with her back, and somehow managed to drive to the motel across the street. Not being in the mood for formalities, she drove the bike right inside and turned it off.

"Hey! Hey!" The fat, greasy, chrome-dome of a manager popped up from his seat behind the desk and waved his black-market nudie magazine in an apparent attempt to shoo them out. Clamping his huge, smelly cigar firmly in his teeth, he screamed, "No pets and no motorbikes in the lobby. That there's the rules. I'm trying to run a classy joint here."

RJ got off the bike and headed for the desk. David fell unceremoniously to the floor. She opened her jacket so that both chain and plasma blaster were visible.

"Lady, I don't care if you have a fucking rocket launcher, you can't bring your filthy motorbike in my lobby." Gun-toting customers were nothing new to him. The sight of a plasma blaster, not even a big one, didn't impress him.

RJ didn't feel like dealing with points of etiquette at the moment. She reached across the counter, grabbed the man by his collar, and lifted him off the floor with one hand. Then she drew her blaster and stuck it up one of his nostrils. Now he was impressed. She didn't even have to mention the fact that she did just happen to have a rocket launcher.

"Me, this pistol, and my incredibly bad attitude all say that I can park this bike up your ass if I like. Do you have a problem with that?"

"All right, all right," the manager huffed. RJ set him down slowly and removed the blaster. He straightened his dirty collar and tried to straighten his now bent cigar. "I swear, you girls are all alike. Give you a gun, and you turn into thugs."

"I need a room for tonight," RJ said.

"Just for tonight?"

"If the room is suitable, we'll be staying longer."

"Oh! How lucky for us!" The fact that the blaster was back in the holster seemed to restore some of his self-confidence, not to mention sarcasm. "Is your friend dead or alive?"

"I don't know. Why?" RJ asked, glancing at the pile of David on the floor.

"Charge more for stiff's. People leave them in the rooms. It makes an awful mess," he said.

RJ nodded. She could relate to that. So she yelled across the room, "David, are you dead?"

The pile of David made that gurgling sound again.

"See, he's not dead."

"He's pretty bad. May die tonight," the manager speculated.

"If he does, I'll take the body out myself." RJ shoved some credits at the man, poured David back on the bike, climbed aboard herself, started the engine and headed for the stairs.

"Hey, you crazy bitch . . . !" The rest of the man's obscenities were lost in the roar of the bike.

They reached the sixth floor in a few minutes. The top two floors of the old eight-story building were in such bad repair that even a "classy joint" like this had them closed off. A few people stepped out

into the hall to see what all the noise was, but quickly lost interest. Just another crazy asshole riding a bike in the hall. Nothing very unusual about that. Not in Alsterase.

Outside the room, RJ stopped and shut the bike off. When she got off, David hit the floor again. He had this falling bit down pat. This time, however, he gurgled and stirred and seemed to want to get up. That he didn't do quite so well—not at all, in fact.

RJ opened the door and pushed the bike into the room. After she was sure it was OK, she went back for David. After all, first things first: men were a dime a dozen, but a good bike was hard to come by. She kicked the door shut and tossed David over onto the bed.

RJ bent over David, looking at the cut in his scalp. It was deep, and about four inches long, but the skull seemed intact. "You stupid jackass. Anyone with half a brain knows better than to pull a gun in Alsterase unless you have a death wish, or full body armor."

She cleaned and stitched the wound, berating David the entire time. "And another thing, never start anything unless you know what's behind you, you stupid prick." She covered him up after stripping him down to his shorts. "You'll live. You won't enjoy it for a while. Not with the headache you're going to have come morning, but you'll live."

Finished, she sat down on the edge of the bed and unwound the chain. Taking a coin from her pocket, she bent it double around a link, adding it to the small collection of change already bent into its folds. She smiled and let the chain fall to the floor.

He felt as if the sun were trying to drill its way through his eyelids. His head was pounding, but the soft, warm, and undeniably female contents of his arms temporarily distracted him from his pain. He smiled. It had been a dream. Prison, RJ, the brawl, all a dream. He was home after all, safe in his own bed with some delectable hometown girl. Jane? Or maybe Susan. He wanted to go back to sleep, but the pounding in his head became more insistent. Why did his head hurt? He put his hand to his head, and found the stitches.

OK, so it wasn't a dream. He couldn't decide if he was relieved or sorry. Without thinking, he pulled himself closer to the woman, and felt himself drifting off into unconsciousness again. Then it hit him. He was in bed with a woman! But who? He opened his eyes slowly. RJ sat in bed, wearing only her pants. She was cleaning her blaster as if it were the normal thing for a half-dressed woman to do while sitting in bed with a man wrapped around her waist.

David couldn't help realizing just how really built RJ was. Not that he hadn't noticed before now, but clothes did tend to screw up the view.

She blew some debris out of her gun, and it hit him in the face.

"Hey!" He wiped at his face.

"Well, I'm glad to see you're still alive. They charge extra for stiffies around here. Real classy place," she said with a smile.

David let go of her and rolled onto his back. It was the wrong thing to do. The room wouldn't quit moving, and he felt instant nausea.

"You're all heart, RJ." He held his head in an effort to keep it from splitting open. "God, I feel like I've been hit by a tractor."

"Actually, I believe it was a beer bottle," RJ offered. She stood up and grabbed her shirt off the chair where she had put it. She pulled it on and started wrapping the chain around her.

"Do you always have to wear that thing?" David asked making a face.

"Yes," RJ said simply, as she continued wrapping. She strapped the blaster, now in its holster, around her waist, and tied it down to her leg.

"Why? I mean, it must be heavy. And it looks kind of stupid."

"Because I like it," RJ replied dismissively.

David didn't take the hint. "There has to be a good reason for it. I mean, you don't do anything

without a good reason." It was obvious that she had no intention of answering his question. "You know I was damned near killed, and the why of it completely eludes me. You'd think you could answer one simple question."

"Well, you should be just thrilled because there really isn't a good reason for me to wear it," RJ drew in a long impatient breath and then blew it out. "This chain helped me to escape from the Reliance. We were sent on a mission to cleanse this village . . . Do you have any idea what that means?"

David shook his head no. He was so ignorant that it was a real pain in the ass to have to tell him anything.

"It is Reliance policy that when an area becomes over-populated, when there are more people than necessary—you know, when they're using more than they're producing—then the Reliance sends in troops to 'cleanse' a village or two. They say they are just weeding out spies. At least, that's the official story that goes out over the viewscreen. But they kill everyone, David. Every man, woman, and child. I was a major in the Elite Guard. I was trained to fight armed soldiers: men, women, or aliens who were trying to kill me. I had crossed galaxies to battle aliens on distant planets, and now they wanted me to slaughter children. To cut down unarmed civilians and leave them to rot in the streets. To make a long story short, I refused. And I wasn't going to stand there and let *them* do it, either."

Her smile wasn't quite human as she continued. "So, I put a blaster bolt right through my CO's head. The troops stopped shooting at the civilians and started after me. I evaded them easily at first, but then I lost my blaster and took a plasma hit, and things started going downhill fast. Just when it looked as if my chances of survival were nil, I saw this chain. I picked it up, and with it I made a hole in the wall of soldiers that surrounded me. And so, I escaped."

She fingered the chain absently. "I have always looked at everything with a very analytical eye, but this chain . . . It's part of me. You see, I have this feeling that as long as I hold this chain, I will win against the Reliance. It's a stupid, romantic idea, and how it got into my purely logical and unromantic brain is a mystery to me. Still, it's what I believe."

David nodded. Now it made sense. Maybe not to her, but it did to him. "So, as long as I'm on a roll, what does RJ stand for?"

RJ shook her head and half grinned.

"Ruby Jean," David suggested.

RJ laughed, then sobered and looked right at David. "Why do you feel compelled to have all your questions answered? Some questions have no answers. Others are best left unanswered. Ignorance is not always a bad thing."

"Aw, geesh! It's just a name. How bad . . ."

"I'm going to check things out. I'll bring you something to eat." She walked to the door and was gone.

David held his hands to his head. The throbbing seemed even worse now. He tried to stay awake because he had heard somewhere that it was bad to sleep if you had a concussion. What he hadn't been told was that it was all but impossible to stay awake.

RJ kicked a rock down the street as she walked in her Elite boots, carrying her Reliance-issue blaster—so blatantly Reliance that everyone knew instinctively that she wasn't. She kept her hands in her pants pockets and had the air of one who was totally unafraid.

News traveled fast in Alsterase. After all, it didn't have the Reliance to slow it down. Most had heard of the platinum blonde goddess who had whipped Whitey Baldor and half the clientele of the Golden Arches. People stood clear as she walked by. She smiled and nodded her head in a friendly way that served only to further terrify them.

Derelicts, merchants, Reliance spies, rebels, prison escapees and hookers. Alsterase had its share of all of these, and none of them passed RJ's eyes unnoticed.

The roads were narrow and steep and in a state of total disrepair. The rails that once flowed down

the center of the street had been removed long ago for the metal. This had once been a great and beautiful city. The city by the bay was now the city of the discontented and outcast. Its golden gates were long fallen into the sea. It was Alsterase now. Alsterase, where you went when you had nowhere else to go.

It would take a great deal to make this lot into an army. The very things that had driven them to Alsterase and made them the sworn enemies of the Reliance would make them hard to train and harder still to lead. They were a rebellious, undisciplined lot, who had grown out of the habit of taking orders. Still, they had the fighting spirit that RJ was looking for.

She walked down to the wharf area. It was full of cheap thrills like whorehouses, dirty movie parlors and bars, but RJ's attention was immediately drawn to a small island in the bay. It seemed to be almost entirely covered by structures. Structures obviously dating from antiquity and yet, from what she could see of them, they seemed to be in good repair.

She walked over to the edge of the pier, totally ignoring the rotting timbers, to see if she could get a better look. The architecture was at least as old as some of the buildings now laying in heaps around town, yet she could see no signs of wear. She pulled a small telescope from her pocket to help her get a better look, and still she could see no sign of decay. "Curioser and curioser," she mumbled.

"They say is haunted," a voice said behind her.

RJ spun around, but she saw no one. Then there was a jerking on her pants leg.

"Down here!"

It was a little man, about three-foot-three. RJ smiled broadly at him. "Ah, but I don't believe in ghosts."

"Don't, either. Said *they* say, not *I* say." He craned his head back so he could look at her. His glance took in both chain and laser, but he didn't seem bothered. In fact, he looked relieved. "What interest in island?"

"So, who says I'm interested in the island?" RJ asked.

"I do," he replied with an impudent grin.

RJ laughed. "Well, I am a little interested. Do you know anything about it?"

"Only what hear." He walked away, and RJ followed.

"And what do you hear?" she asked, somewhat impatiently.

"Man said been there once. Said evil things chased away. Lightning struck brother down before could get to building." The little man looked sideways at RJ and said, "Of course, know for what is—fishermen's stories. Have seen lights though, sometimes at night. Reason, don't know."

He had a strange habit of omitting words from sentences that RJ found mildly annoying.

"Sometime on very foggy nights lighthouse will come on. Fisher folk say is kindly spirit on some day, and on other say it demon."

"So, to whom am I speaking?" she asked.

"Name's Willie, but they call Mickey," he announced.

RJ nodded seriously, as if there were perceptible logic in his statement. She'd noticed for some time that the little man's eyes kept darting around. He seemed unusually worried, even for Alsterase. Had he sought her out as protection? Even in Alsterase there was safety in numbers. Especially when one of the numbers carried a blaster.

"OK, shorty. What kind of trouble are you in?" she asked.

"Bad," he said with a smile. "See, am bit light-fingered. Lifted man's wallet today. Reliance. Badge in wallet. Now know spy. Soon all Alsterase will know. Unless kill first. This man and another have been chasing all over. Am tired, running out of hiding places," he explained. "Won't dare attack while in such company." The words had no sooner left his mouth, than blaster fire tore up the pier beside her. "Of course, could be wrong."

RJ glanced back quickly. There were two men, one holding the blaster, another with a more

primitive projectile weapon. The man with the blaster would be an Elite, the other a secondary. Both were of course Reliance spies. It wasn't incredible intuition that told her this—although she possessed incredible intuition. It was common knowledge. Elites got lasers, secondaries got projectile weapons, and first-class soldiers made do with swords. At least, that was the way it was here on Earth.

RJ didn't wait around to give them time to aim. She picked up the little man, stuck him under her arm, ran for the nearest pile of rubble, and jumped behind it.

"Oh, come on, little man, we don't want any trouble. I just want my wallet back. Why involve your friend?" The Elite's attempt at persuasion was ruined by the obvious threatening tone in his voice. He was enjoying this. If he had to shoot her, too—even in front of the half-dozen witnesses that were scattered around, it didn't bother him. "You might as well come out. We're going to find you, anyway."

Mickey looked at RJ. "Better go. No sense getting hurt."

"Honey, the day I let some dick with a hand blaster intimidate me, that's the day I hang up my chain." RJ pulled her own hand blaster, and handed it to the midget. "Here, hold this for me." She stood up in full view of the Reliance men.

Mickey pulled at her pants leg urgently. "What doing, trying get killed?"

"Just shut up and stay down." RJ moved away from the pile of rubble unwinding the chain as she walked.

"I don't have any quarrel with you, lady, just tell me where the midget is," the Elite said.

The Elite, he was the real threat. She finished unwinding the chain with a jerk and a flip of her wrist. It snaked out hitting the Elite in the head. *Fawapp! Thunk!* He hit the ground—dead. His blaster skidded across the ground to rest against a dead fish.

The secondary was in deep shit, and he knew it. He could think of only one possible explanation for what had just happened, and he didn't like it one bit.

RJ slowly and deliberately rolled up the chain.

Seeing her take no defensive action, the soldier aimed.

Mickey fired, missing the soldier completely. But the force from the plasma blaster sent him flying into a wall which he skidded down to land with his butt in a bucket.

"Freak!" The secondary hoped he was wrong about that. The midget had distracted him, but he was ready now. Unfortunately for him, the moment of hesitation was more than she'd really needed. He fired, but he lost all interest in the result of his shot. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the chain coming at him—almost in slow motion, like a nightmare. He even seemed to scream in slow motion, "B-i-i-t-c-h-h-h-f-f-r-r-e-a-k!"

The chain caught the soldier in the left side with such force that he was pitched sideways and slammed face-first into the pavement, his nose shoved into his brain. His death was, if not painless, at least mercifully swift.

"Men really just don't know how to talk to a lady anymore," RJ mumbled to herself. "It's a crying shame what this world is coming to." She picked up the weapons of the two dead men, and then retrieved her own blaster from where Mickey had dropped it. She took a few moments to wrap the still bloody chain around her waist, then went to pull the little man out of the bucket. This proved more difficult than eliminating the Reliance spies.

"Thank you. Thank you very much," Mickey said.

"Tell me something. When you kill people around here, are you expected to clean up your own mess?" asked RJ, ruefully surveying the destruction she had wreaked.

"Killing Reliance spies considered community service work. Someone else will clean mess. You saved life." Clearly, this meant a great deal to the little man.

"Well, I do expect something in return," RJ admitted.

"Anything," Mickey promised earnestly.

"First, I think it might be a good idea if we put a little distance between ourselves and these

corpses," she said.

Mickey nodded his agreement, and they went on their way.

Strapped to the wrist of the former Elite, and hidden by his cooling corpse, his comlink glowed and pulsed.

Chapter Three

RJ walked in and threw a bag of food on David's chest. He started awake and was instantly in a bad mood. He looked in the sack and made a face.

"You were expecting maybe veal?" RJ asked sarcastically.

"What's that?" David looked around him. It was almost dark. He'd been asleep for hours, and apparently RJ had been gone all this time. "Where were you? What were you doing?" He was a little angry. He could have been lying here dead for all she cared.

She sat on the end of the bed and smiled at him. "Always with you it's questions." She shrugged. "I believe I have found a good ally, among other things."

David stiffened. "You can't just go about the streets stopping people and asking them if they'd like to help us destroy the greatest power in the universe!" he said hotly. "Some people might not like that. Not to name names, but the Reliance, for one."

RJ shrugged, as if the Reliance bothered her only a little. "If they were the strongest power in the universe—and please try to remember that the universe is a very big place—they wouldn't still be fighting with the Aliens, now, would they?"

"Uh, I really hate it when you do that, RJ." David got out of bed and stormed to the bathroom. Once inside, he held his head in the hope that it would stop that rocking motion. He closed the door and screamed at her. "I hate it when you get technical about shit like that!" A few minutes later, he walked out of the bathroom looking fairly relieved. "One thing's for damn sure, the Reliance can sure as hell tromp our butts. And if you're going to run around telling them right where to find us . . ."

"Relax already, David," RJ said lightly. "The man was a midget."

"So?" David obviously saw no significance in this. "What's a mij-jet?" He fumbled over the unfamiliar word.

RJ looked at him in disbelief. "Are all civilians so ignorant? A midget is a little person."

"So. It's a little person," he shrugged. He didn't believe in fairy stories.

"Why do you think you don't know what a midget is? Can't you ever just put two and two together?"

"A work unit's ability to think is not overly important to a Reliance overlord. I think I do pretty well considering that I didn't have anywhere near the education that you had. I didn't get the breaks that you did . . ."

"Excuse me, ass-bite, but in my job I got shot at . . ."

"Just tell me the significance of this man being a midget."

RJ nodded. He was right. The key to the Reliance's power was ignorance. They gave the people just enough knowledge to do the jobs the Reliance wanted them to do—no more and no less.

"All people with what the Reliance has classified as 'defects' are hunted out and killed. Being a midget is a birth defect. Usually such 'defective' persons are convicted of rape, theft, or murder, and then executed. If they are allowed to reach adulthood at all, that is. Obviously, defective babies are usually stillborn. The people just stand back and let them do it, because they don't trust anyone that's different. That's human nature."

David nodded slowly in reluctant agreement. He remembered how the villagers had reacted to his new ideas.

"This Reliance policy will help us out quite a bit here in Alsterase," RJ announced. Clearly, David was lost again. RJ sighed. For an intelligent man, he could sure be dense at times. "If the Reliance is out to exterminate anyone who's different, then those who are different aren't going to feel very charitable towards the Reliance, now are they?" She sighed.

Light dawned, and David nodded. "So they'll be more likely to join us."

"Well, at least we can trust them not to hurt us." Suddenly, RJ's head jerked towards the door. She tensed. David noticed that the arm started to jerk more, and suddenly she was on her feet.

"What's wrong?" he asked, puzzled.

RJ pulled her blaster.

"What's wrong?" Alarmed, David climbed out of the bed.

"Quick!" RJ ordered. The door flew into splinters, and the biggest man David had ever seen stepped into the room. He dwarfed the man they had encountered in the bar last night. The giant threw a piece of the door at RJ, and her blaster went flying.

David had never seen a GSH, but he knew instinctively that this was one. He'd heard stories about them most of his life, but he hadn't really believed them. The stories were of manufactured beings capable of great feats of strength. Stories told by the same people who talked about gnomes and fairies. Yet here it was, the monster behind the stories. David was terrified. He knew his life was over. Then he realized that the man wasn't paying the slightest attention to him; he was after RJ.

RJ went for the second blaster, but before she could free it from the loops of chain, the giant was upon her. He bashed her head with his fist, the blood flew, and RJ fell to the floor. He lifted the still dazed woman up by a loop in her chain, and threw her against the wall, and still he paid no attention to David.

David saw only one hope for them. He started across the room for the bike. The GSH pounced on RJ once again. David had no idea how much punishment RJ could take, but it couldn't be this much. She had to be unconscious, maybe even dead. He was, therefore, stunned to see the GSH fly across the room and land at his feet, effectively blocking the way to the bike.

RJ ran at the man.

"Are you nuts!" David yelled, jumping smartly out of her way. "He's going to kill you!"

RJ wasn't listening. She hurled herself headlong into the monster's stomach.

"He's going to kill you, and then he's going to kill me," David mumbled as he resumed his trek towards the bike.

All mumbling stopped as David was thrown to the ground by the impact of an incredible weight. He lay where he'd landed, and dazedly watched as RJ jumped up off him, quickly disengaging the chain from her body. She whipped it out at the GSH. It hit the monster's head with a thud. David heard the thing fall, although he didn't really see it, and he was sure it wouldn't be down long.

David crawled the short distance remaining to the bike, where he fumbled to free the rocket launcher. Apparently, RJ had been more worried about losing the damn thing than about having to actually use it. He wasn't having much luck getting it off. She had the chain around the monster's neck, pulling on it for all she was worth. David fumbled with the strings holding the weapon, and the next time he looked, RJ was being choked with her own chain. David pulled frantically at the launcher, and it came loose with a jerk that set him on his butt. He aimed, but RJ was in the way. Then the giant made a fatal mistake; he threw RJ across the room. David fired. The kick sent him crashing into the front wall of the apartment. He saw the rocket hit the monster square in the chest and propel him through the exterior wall before it detonated. When the smoke cleared, there was a gaping hole in the wall, and no GSH.

David tossed aside the launcher and crawled to where RJ lay, the chain still around her throat and blood running from her nose and mouth.

"Don't be dead," David prayed. He poked at her to see if she would move. "Are you OK?" he asked.

RJ opened her eyes and stared at him in disbelief as he unwrapped the chain from her neck. "Oh, yes, I'm fine," she croaked out. "Never felt better. In fact, think I'll go dancing!" By the end of her speech,

she was screaming at him.

David sighed with relief. She'd be fine. David got unsteadily to his feet and reached down to RJ. After a moment, she let him help her up and tilted her head back to slow the nosebleed.

The fat manager finally managed to shove his way through the small crowd that had gathered at the now door-less doorway. Shaking his head and clicking his tongue in obvious disapproval, he surveyed the room.

"The use of rocket launchers in the rooms is strictly against the rules—ten unit penalty." He crossed to the hole in the wall, and looked out. "As for that," apparently indicating the remains of the GSH which were on the street below, "it will cost you fifteen units to be paid immediately. After all, we can't have a corpse plastered all over our doorstep. I'm trying to run a classy place here, you know."

"Why you . . ." David raised his fist threateningly.

"Get the man his money, David," RJ ordered.

David lowered his fist reluctantly, and dug the money out of the pack on the back of the bike. He walked over and counted out the coins.

"And two units for dripping blood all over the room," the fat man said, his hand still extended.

"I ought to . . ." David started to raise his fist again.

"Take your money, and these people, and get out," RJ said as she took the two units out of David's hand and handed them to the manager.

Satisfied, the manager scurried out, herding the crowd out as he went.

"Come on, people! Party's over for now," he urged.

"We're going to have to leave Alsterase for a while," RJ said almost conversationally as she disappeared into the bathroom.

"Why not leave it for good?" David asked. "Last night I almost got killed; today you almost got killed. I think we should take the hint and get the hell out while we still can." He followed RJ as he spoke, but she shut the door in his face, and the lock clicked. "RJ, you need help."

RJ's voice floated out the door. "The last thing I need, my friend, is an amateur trying to help me."

David looked around the room helplessly. The devastation was complete. The bed, dresser, and footstool were broken, the door was gone, the walls were busted at irregular intervals, and a big chunk of the back wall was missing. They, especially RJ, were damned lucky to be alive.

RJ didn't feel very lucky. She looked in the mirror. Her nose was set to one side, and the angle was all wrong. She checked to be sure that the door was locked because she would never be able to explain this to David. She grabbed her nose between her thumb and forefingers, and with a twist, re-broke it. Ignoring the fresh gush of blood, she forced it into place and held it several seconds.

The bleeding stopped, and when she removed her hand a moment later, her nose was as good as new. Grimly ignoring the pain, she moved on to her other injuries. She took the two teeth she held clenched in her left fist and forced the roots back into the already-healed gum. When the bleeding stopped and the teeth were firmly rooted, she moved to the cracked ribs—six at least by the feel of it. Fortunately, they seemed to be in place, or close enough, and were already healing, so she left them alone. Her injuries cared for, she started to wash off the blood, but thought better of it. It was going to be tough enough to explain her miraculous recovery. She left most of the blood.

Satisfied, RJ pulled a black wallet out of her hip pocket and opened it. Inside were three tubes, each four inches long and filled with small white pills. On the other side were a small knife and a syringe. She took one of the tubes out and dumped a pill into the palm of her hand, then threw it down her throat. She took meticulous care to return the wallet to her pocket precisely as she had found it.

She hurt more than she would ever admit, and her damn arm felt like it was about to jerk out of its socket. By morning, though, she would be fine; all thanks to that little white pill.

When RJ came out of the bathroom, she flopped straight down onto the broken bed.

David gave her a worried look.

"Ask me if I'm OK again, and I'll split you," she said. She covered her face with her hands, as if still warding off blows.

Silently, David pulled her boots off and covered her with a blanket. It was dark now, and the temperature was dropping. It was going to be a cold night, especially since they were practically sleeping outside.

"RJ, that was . . . was that a GSH?" David asked hesitantly.

RJ started to make a flip remark, but decided it would take too much energy. "Yes, David, that was a Genetically Superior Humanoid—a GSH."

David sat heavily on the end of the fallen bed. "I always thought they were made up. You know, old wives' tales. Like the little people, but you said there are little people, too."

"Take my word for it, they're real enough." She spoke through her hands, the warmth felt good on the new tissue.

"They say that they don't feel heat or cold as we do," David said.

"They don't," RJ agreed.

"They say their bones are as strong as steel, their skin impervious to almost anything."

"Except rockets." Her small attempt at humor fell flat. "True."

"They say that they never get sick, that they don't age."

"They don't."

"Why are they after us?" David asked in a frightened whisper.

RJ thought that was a very good question. Why had the GSH come after them? It was a sure bet that it hadn't just happened to single them out for abusive treatment. They didn't have the emotions necessary to carry out free thought. Then she realized her error. The dead Elite. Elites had wrist coms. All Reliance enforcement personnel did. He was in pursuit, so his would have been on—SOP. Naturally, he would have been linked to someone in Alsterase. Of course, that other person would be another Elite. GSHs were classed as Elites, and while they very rarely wasted a GSHs talents on Earth assignments, it would probably seem necessary in Alsterase to have a backup that could handle almost every situation. The dead Elite would have given his backup a complete description of her. The com would have provided a complete blow-by-blow of the action, and RJ knew the conclusion the GSH would have drawn. Even the Secondary had known, just before he died. That's why the GSH had ignored David; RJ was the target, the problem. And she wouldn't have been hard to find.

Impatient, David asked again, "RJ, why did that thing come after us?"

"I . . . I made a mistake. I was careless. I should have known he'd be linked. I . . . was . . . careless. I . . . made . . . a *mistake*." She repeated herself in a tone of total amazement. It was as if she had made an impossible discovery.

"You sound surprised," David laughed. "You aren't infallible. No one is."

"I *have* to be." RJ took her hands from her face. Her expression was grim. "I just don't make that kind of stupid mistake."

David could have understood it if she was mad at herself. She wasn't. She seemed confused, as if she just really couldn't accept that she could have made a mistake at all, much less a stupid one.

"Oh, come on, RJ," David laughed in disbelief. "I don't know what this mistake was, but I'm sure you've made mistakes before, and I'm sure you'll make them again."

This enraged RJ. "What makes you so damned sure of that?" She demanded hotly. "People like you make mistakes, not me!"

"You know, I haven't said this before, RJ, but you are, without a doubt, the most pompous, egotistical jackass I have ever known." David stood up from the bed.

"I love you, too," RJ said, and blew him a kiss.

David ignored her and started to pace. "You made a mistake anyone could have made . . ."

"Well, I don't think just *anyone* could have made it," RJ said with a grin.

"That's exactly the kind of shit I'm talking about!" David steamed. "God, don't you ever listen to yourself? Have you always been this arrogant, or did you have to work at it? That . . . thing . . . almost killed you tonight." He stopped pacing suddenly, obviously struck by inspiration. After a moment, he continued, "I saved your life tonight!"

"You saved yourself," RJ said flatly.

"Yes, all right. But, by saving myself, I also saved you," he repeated smugly.

"OK," RJ conceded. "I admit that things looked pretty bad." She shrugged and rolled on her side, trying unsuccessfully to get comfortable.

"Bad!" David repeated in disbelief.

"I still had a trick or two up my sleeve," RJ stated calmly.

"I can't believe you! The thing was strangling you with your own chain. You were bleeding out of every opening in your skull. How were you going to get out of that? This I want to hear!"

She didn't answer. She was asleep, or at least pretending to be. "Bitch," David swore. He dug through the rubble till he found the sack of food RJ had brought him. In spite of the way it looked and smelled, it tasted pretty good. After eating, he threw the sack across the room, shut off the light, and slid into the bed beside RJ.

"Thanks for maybe saving my life," RJ mumbled.

"Bitch," David swore again.

She just laughed and went back to sleep.

He wondered just how badly she was hurt. RJ tossed and turned and moaned in her sleep, and David felt helpless. He didn't know what to do for her, and wasn't sure she would let him do it if he did. She was such an insufferable hardhead.

In her tossing, RJ rolled against David, reminding him again that she was female. Still, David felt nothing even close to desire. It wasn't that he was a gentleman, or at least no more than any other red-blooded man of his age and health. If she were any other woman, he would have done everything in his power to seduce her. But she was RJ, and he had no urge to possess her. To him, RJ was just a guy with an extremely attractive body and a great set of tits. For David, sleeping with RJ was like sleeping with your dog. It was warmer than sleeping by yourself, and gave you someone to turn to if you had a nightmare.

What they had was far more important to David than sex, even more important than love. He made a silent vow to whatever powers might be listening that he would never let anything come between them. That he would not let friend or foe, man or woman, or even their cause, separate them.

When David woke up he heard the shower going. He was freezing cold, and that damned woman was taking a shower! He knew from experience that there was no hot water.

"You're insane!" David screamed at her.

The man in the apartment next to theirs apparently didn't appreciate the noise.

"Keep it down, you assholes!" he yelled, throwing something solid against the wall.

"Bite me!" RJ screamed back. She walked out of the bathroom drying herself. Modesty was not one of RJ's strong suits. But then, having been in the military all of her life, she was used to showering in communal, coed showers.

David took a good look at RJ. She looked to be in the peak of health, not a scratch, not a bruise, not so much as a skinned elbow. Even the sparkle in her eyes seemed genuine. She wasn't hurt, not even a little. That just wasn't possible. Was it?

"You'd think you'd never seen a woman before," RJ mumbled.

"I've never seen anyone heal so quickly," David said defensively.

"Oh. Well, now don't you feel like an ass?" she mumbled to herself.

David smiled. It wasn't very often that he got the better of RJ. He enjoyed it when he did.

"Part of my training included learning how to take a hit, to roll with a blow, how to pull out of a punch so that it does the least damage." She watched David from the corner of her eye. Was he going to buy that?

At first he frowned. Clearly, he was finding that hard to swallow.

"There was a lot of blood coming from my nose and inside my mouth where he loosened a couple of teeth. But besides being a little sore"—which was a lie; her only symptom this morning was a dryness in her eyes which was caused by the drug—"I feel fine. I have taken worse beatings." That was a lie, too.

This time David smiled; he believed her.

RJ sighed with relief. She dressed quickly, topping her ensemble off—as usual—with the chain, oblivious to the dried blood which now covered it, and was coming off in flakes as she wrapped it in her usual fashion. She took the bag off the back of the bike and went through it, checking the armaments inside. Satisfied, she added the pistol gleaned from the dead secondary to the assortment of weapons and explosives.

David helped her, and they dug through the wreckage till they found both blasters. RJ put hers in her holster, then helped David to customize the shoulder harness he'd used for the gun he'd lost in the bar, making it fit the blaster. They grabbed their jackets and bag and left. They were halfway down the stairs when David realized they had forgotten something.

"What about the bike?" David said, stopping in his tracks.

"What about it?"

"You don't plan to walk, do you?"

"I've got a truck." RJ started walking again, and David followed.

"Where did you get that?" David asked.

"We'll find one," RJ said with a shrug.

"You mean STEAL one!" David shrieked.

"Shush," RJ hissed. "Only Reliance bigshots get to own cars. The rest are used by the military or in farm work. Not even an Elite can buy a car or truck. They're too rare, and too expensive. There are several vehicles in Alsterase. Now, use your head, where did they come from in the first place?"

"They must be stolen," David answered.

RJ clapped.

"Well, it's different stealing from the Reliance," David said in a harsh whisper. "You're going to steal from someone who stole from the Reliance, and that is altogether different."

"Then consider it borrowing," RJ said in disbelief.

"It's only borrowing if you ask," David pronounced self-righteously.

RJ decided to ignore him.

But David didn't want to be ignored. "It's wrong. That's all. Anyone who steals from the Reliance is on our side, and we shouldn't take from them . . ."

"If this is too big a moral dilemma for you, perhaps you would prefer to walk!" RJ screamed, fed up.

"Shush, shh!" David slapped a hand over her mouth. He nodded his head. "All right, we'll do it your way, but I don't like it."

"No one says you have to," she said with a shrug.

They walked up and down the streets for what seemed like hours to David. By the time RJ found what she was looking for, the streets were already filled with people. She walked around the red Reliance farm-issue truck, kicking the tires and checking out the paint job, then she popped the hood and checked the engine.

"Damn it, RJ! You're stealing the damned thing, not buying it," David whispered nervously.

RJ slammed the hood. She gave David a wicked grin. "I like to know what I'm stealing." She took hold of the driver's door handle and gave it a heave. The door opened. She jumped in and opened the

passenger door, setting the bag and rocket launcher on the seat as David crawled in. He closed the door and looked around in awe. He had never seen such a machine from the inside.

RJ was under the dash, taking her time hotwiring the vehicle.

"Could you please hurry up and do whatever it is you're doing?" David said anxiously. "We're going to get caught."

"So?" RJ sneered. She had never hotwired a vehicle before, and while she understood the principle, she was having a little trouble putting it into practice. It was made more difficult by the fact that the new "owner" had attached several safeguards to stop people from doing just what she was trying to do. "If someone comes, I'll just kill them." She might have been ordering lunch by the tone of her voice.

"I'd rather not have to kill someone over a car, if you don't mind, RJ. Did anyone ever tell you that you can't just kill every one that pisses you off?"

"Yes." She had finally succeeded. She touched the two wires together and the engine roared. "I killed them." She laughed at her own joke.

"Very funny, RJ. Now, could we just go?"

"OK, OK, don't get your shorts in a knot." She got into the seat, closed the door, and they were on their way. As they pulled out, RJ saw the owner come running out of one of the buildings. She waved wildly at him and roared off.

Whitey Baldor chased after them, screaming till he ran out of breath. He finally gave up. Hands on knees, he watched till they were out of sight. He recognized that pair. Two nights ago that woman had kned him in the balls so hard that he still hurt. Then she'd knocked him cold. He'd been out for something close to three hours. Whitey laughed, shaking his head he turned back toward his apartment. He laughed again and looked back in the direction she had gone. "God-damned gutsy bitch."

"I've always wondered how they could see out of these things," David ran his hand over the glass. "I still don't have any idea."

"Keep your hands off it; you're smearing it up. It's one-way glass. Because of the way it's made, the driver can see out, but from outside you can't see in."

"When I was a kid I used to think they drove through some form of magic. Later, when I stopped believing in magic, I thought they used something like a view screen," David said. "It's kind of a letdown to see it's something so simple."

RJ nodded. It was funny what people would make up to explain things they didn't understand. The Reliance didn't tell them anything, so they had to make up their own answers. In a way it was ingenious, even if they were mostly wrong.

"I still don't understand why they do it this way," David said. "I mean . . . what's the purpose?"

"Ah, my friend, that is because you have yet to understand the Reliance. The glass in Reliance vehicles is one-way for the same reason that Reliance police wear masks over their faces. Intimidation. People fear the unknown, the unseen. From outside how do you know whether there is one man in this vehicle or five? You don't. When a man covers his face with a mask, how do you know whether he is in a good mood or a murderous one? You don't. How do you even know he's human? You don't. The point is that people expect the worst. Therefore, there are always five men in the truck, the men is always in a murderous mood, and you're never sure that they're quite human. They scare us, so we imprison ourselves."

"Slaves to our fear." David's voice sounded far away. He himself was scared. He crossed his arms and put his fists in his armpits to hide his nervousness. He didn't know exactly what RJ had planned, and as she said, you tended to fear the unknown. *Slaves to our fear*, he reminded himself. *I won't be afraid*. It wasn't as easy as it sounded.

He imagined a whole patrol could swarm down on them at any moment. His palms were sweaty, and his mouth was dry. RJ sat there as they traveled along through the maze of David's imaginary

policemen and hummed a tone-deaf tune which seemed to be in time with the jerking of her right arm. Humming and jerking, jerking and humming. After an hour, David could stand it no more.

"Would you please stop it!" he screamed.

"What?" she asked, obviously not understanding what he meant.

"All that humming and arm-jerking," he said.

RJ was momentarily taken aback; then she was mad. "I can stop the humming, but I can't stop the arm jerking. I wish I could. It's a side effect of battle fatigue. Unless I concentrate on it, it jerks. Not enough to be debilitating, just enough to be annoying."

Now David felt like a real ass. "I . . . I'm sorry," he stammered. "It's just that . . . well, do you have to be so damned . . . happy?"

"I'm sorry, David; in future, I will try to be more morose." With that said, she started right back humming again.

It wouldn't have been so bad if she could carry a tune, but she couldn't have carried a tune in a bucket.

"Hum hum hum hum huum hum hum hummm."

He couldn't take it any longer. Two hours of RJ's offensive humming was enough to drive a man to suicide.

"Shut up!" David screamed at the top of his lungs.

RJ clicked her tongue. "My, my. Are we feeling a bit testy today? Humm?" She smiled pleasantly. She was infuriating.

"You are without a doubt the worst hummer I've ever heard in my life. In fact, I've blown farts that were better," David said truthfully. To his surprise, RJ seemed upset by his criticism.

"Yes, well, there's not much chance to hear music standing in mud up to your neck or crawling through a jungle on your belly on some plague-infested outer world," she hissed.

David was intrigued. It suddenly dawned on him just how much RJ must know. She had the answer to every question he had ever asked about the Reliance. She had told him that she had fought on the outer worlds, but he had never realized just what that meant till now. RJ had traveled through space in a spaceship. She'd walked on other worlds, come face-to-face with aliens.

"Tell me about the outer worlds." His voice was as eager as a child's.

RJ hesitated only for a moment. No one had ever really been interested in where she'd been or all that she had seen, and she found herself willingly spouting all she remembered of the outer worlds. She told him of Trinidad, the planet with five inhabitable moons. Of Ufora, the jungle world where the rivers could change daily, and where new plants could spring up in a single day, making it impossible to follow the same trail twice or to locate a missing man. She told him of Urta, Deaka and Sheows and the ultra-modern cities Earth-descended humans had built there. She did her best to explain about their seasons and their different plant and animal life. She even explained the customs and fashions of the native intelligent life forms which had been encountered on two of Trinidad's moons.

"They believe that these moons were once one planet, and that it was split in two. That's how they explain that the same primitive being wound up on two different worlds. Their cultures are identical. Their language is even almost the same. From what the archaeologists can dig up, both cultures are the same age. So, it's a sure bet that no one transplanted them from one moon to the other. The experts maintain that the two moons were once one planet that split somehow. I find that difficult to believe, however. The likelihood of anyone's surviving such a cataclysmic event is pretty slim."

"So, how do you explain it?" David asked curiously.

"I don't," RJ said with a broad smile. "What's the point? They exist as they are. The Ingits don't ask why, so why should we?"

She spoke on, telling him about Deakard, the planet of their alien enemies. The Aliens called themselves Argys, meaning "Peoples of the Red Star." They held four planets called Arg, Varg, Garg,

and Farg. She explained to him that the Reliance didn't want Deakard, and that the Argys didn't want Earth.

"See, they're in the same spot we're in. They've used up all their home planet's resources. Deakard isn't even fit to farm. We don't have any metal ore left, no petroleum products, nothing of real value as far as the Reliance is concerned, but we still have soil and air. Deakard doesn't even have that. They manufacture their own air, and grow all their produce on another planet, importing all their food. On Earth, we may import metals and plastics, but we *export* wool, cotton and wood products. Not to mention the occasional shipment of meats and vegetables that can't be grown on the outer worlds. Deakard sucks its worlds dry."

"So why do they stay there, why don't they move to their other worlds?" David asked.

"For the same reason a good share of the Reliance bigshots stay on Earth. They're safe on Deakard, just like we're safe on Earth. Because they've got nothing there that we want, and we've got nothing here that they want, the home worlds are safe worlds. The fight is over the colony planets that are still rich in mineral content. Mostly, they fight over a planet called Stashes, because both planets claim it."

"What's so special about Sta . . . ashes?" David asked, stumbling over the name.

"It's got the highest mineral content of any of the planets, and that's about it." RJ sounded far away. "It's a big, hot rock of a planet. Very little water, and half of that's poison. The animal life is aggressive—so is most of the plant life. The air is barely breathable. Breathing it for a period of three months cuts your life expectancy by ten years. Some can't breathe it at all. I saw one man die after being exposed to the atmosphere for less than ten minutes. On Stashes they say that if the enemy doesn't get you, it's a sure bet that the planet will."

She saw she wasn't boring David, so she kept talking.

Stories unwound of battles fought on worlds so distant it was hard for David to fathom. She told him of technology he had no idea existed. She opened his mind to a new and wondrous universe filled with fantastic machines, horrid alien beasts, and beautiful and dangerous places. Battlefield after battlefield was spread before him. Battle after battle. RJ had seen it all, up close and personal, and he began to understand why human life was so cheap to her. Sometimes he could see a picture of it so vividly in his mind that he was almost sick. Other times he seemed to be drawn into the fever of the battle, to feel the adrenaline of those who fought.

She had been so many places and done so many things that he found himself wondering just how she had squeezed all of it into her short life. Even if he stretched his imagination to its fullest he couldn't believe that RJ was any more than twenty-five.

RJ was a good and articulate storyteller. There was, however, one thing she hadn't talked about that David was intensely curious about.

"Just what is a GSH?"

"As you already know, GSH stands for Genetically Superior Humanoid."

Clearly, while David knew what GSH stood for, he had no idea what a Genetically Superior Humanoid was.

RJ sighed. "Well, they take a human embryo . . . Do you know what an embryo is?"

David shook his head no.

RJ sighed again and went on indulgently. "It's a baby before it's born—when it's just first made."

David nodded, but made a face that said that this was the most gruesome thing he had ever heard of.

"Anyway, they take this embryo . . . by 'take' do you think I'm saying that they take it out of the mother?"

David nodded his head.

"Well, they don't. God! You're hard to explain anything to! You don't even know a simple word like embryo. What the hell do you call them, little baby seeds?" RJ said, her patience wearing thin.

"We don't talk about making people," David said with equal disgust. Didn't she understand that the populace had been deprived of any but the most basic knowledge for centuries?

"OK. They take the Mommy stuff, and the Daddy stuff and mix them together in a petri dish; embryos result. Then they use a process called gene splicing." She wasn't even going to *try* to explain gene splicing to David. "Through this process they take out qualities they don't want, and put in qualities that they do want. They use chemicals, too. To put it simply, they shape this embryo into the person that they want it to be. In the case of a GSH, they build the perfect soldier. They grow them in a special solution in vats, and when they are old enough they're born. In other words, they take them out of the vats. Then they feed them growth hormones and information till, within a year, they are fully grown and know all that they will ever need to know."

Something still puzzled David.

"How does the Reliance control them? What's to keep them from doing whatever they like?"

"Good question. It would seem that such beings could easily take over and probably would, but they can't. When they are still in an embryonic state, their minds are altered. First, all emotions except loyalty are removed. They are then brainwashed so that their only loyalty is to the Reliance. They aren't capable of anything else. They eat, sleep, live, breathe and kill for the Reliance. Obeying orders, and completing their assigned task gives them a sense of accomplishment which is as close as they get to happiness.

"Then there's the box planted in the base of their skulls. If they show any signs of rebellion at all, this control box can be detonated. It literally blows their brains up inside their skulls. The box blows of its own accord when the GSH reaches the age of fifty. The Reliance is afraid that after that, their conditioning might wear off. They couldn't have that. There is no escape for them. They must serve the Reliance. So you see there is really nothing superior about them at all. They are slaves just like everyone else. Worse, really, because they have no free will."

"You sound like you're sorry for them!" David said in disbelief.

"I . . . just think it's wrong, that's all. Here is this thing that could have everything and the way it is it has nothing. Take for instance the GSH who tried to kill us last night. He went after me exclusively, because logically you posed no major threat. So he ignored you and never realized that *you* were the real threat. If I were the GSH, I would have killed you first, because it would have been easy. Then I could have given all my attention to the Elite without having to worry about where you were. Sometimes the most logical thing to do is something illogical. Emotion causes you to think illogically." RJ finished with a shrug.

David laughed. "You're twisted."

She took it as a compliment.

Towards nightfall, the fuel gauge cranked over to empty, and RJ pulled into a Reliance fuel station. David thought he would die, but RJ acted as if she belonged there. The attendant filled the truck while she went inside and got a couple of sandwiches and some bottled soft drinks. David didn't dare breathe till they were three miles down the road.

"Are you crazy?" David breathed at last.

"Where did you think we were going to get the alcohol to run this thing, David? Squeeze it from a tree maybe?" RJ asked sarcastically.

"I thought we'd steal it late at night when no one was around. I had no idea that you would be blatant enough to pull into the damned Reliance fuel station in broad daylight! You even went inside to get sandwiches, for God's sake!" David screamed.

RJ just grinned.

"It's not funny, RJ."

"I guess you'll never understand, will you? Those people who run that station are just class-two work units. Only authorized Reliance personnel drive vehicles. Therefore, if a vehicle pulls in, it must be

Reliance. Right?"

"OK. But the way you're dressed"

"They wouldn't care if I were buck naked and had 'The Reliance Sucks' painted in bright red letters across my butt. Don't you see? They service the vehicle, not who's driving it. All they do is fill the cars and trucks, and give you a sack lunch if you need it. They're not expected to think, so they don't."

"But what if another Reliance truck had pulled in while we were there?" David asked.

RJ started to say something.

"No, wait, don't tell me. Let me guess. We kill them, right?"

"You're getting better," RJ cooed.

"You're sick, you know that, RJ? Real sick."

"Hand me a sandwich," RJ said, pointing at the sack.

He did.

"That's your answer to everything, isn't it? Just kill it!" David said hotly.

"Hand me my drink," she said, through a mouth full of sandwich.

He handed it to her after opening it.

"What happens when you don't kill someone? What happens when they kill you?"

"You quit worrying about it," RJ grinned crookedly.

David shook his head in disbelief. Not a damned bit of sense arguing with her about it, she wasn't about to change her mind.

They drove for another hour then pulled off the road and parked. RJ pushed a button on the dash and almost gave David a heart attack when the seat flipped out of its own accord to make a bed. He and RJ marched in separate directions to relieve themselves, and returned almost simultaneously.

RJ took off her chain and boots and lay them in the floorboards. Then came the blaster.

David just sat there.

"What's with you?" RJ asked, wondering if he was still mad over the fuel station thing.

"I thought I'd take first watch," he said with a smile. "After all, you did all the driving."

"No one needs to take watch, David. No one's going to find us." She took off her shirt and hung it on the steering wheel.

It was a strange thing to notice, made even stranger by the fact that he hadn't noticed till now. The golden-brown color of her skin, which he had attributed to time spent in the sun, wasn't a suntan at all. There were no tan lines on RJ's body. Her color was natural, and he had never knowingly seen anyone naturally colored this way.

"Is that your natural color?" he asked, thinking perhaps it was a side effect of being exposed to something on some alien world.

"My hair?"

"No, your skin." To his surprise, RJ looked nervous.

"Why?" There was a suspicious tone to her voice.

"I've just never seen anyone colored like that. I thought it was a tan, but it's everywhere." He blushed as he said it.

RJ sighed with relief. Just farm boy curiosity, nothing more than that. "Where I come from a lot of people are colored this way." She turned off the lights and lay down, covering herself up with her jacket.

David was satisfied with her answer. He just didn't understand why it had made her so uptight. She must have thought he was coming on to her. Now he was really embarrassed. He took off his own boots, weapon and shirt, then lay down and covered up with his jacket. He purposely lay as far away from her as possible. If she had thought he was coming on to her, she could stop thinking so now. David knew he wouldn't be able to sleep. RJ had filled his head with too many things to think about. He looked out the window at the full moon.

"RJ?"

"What?" It was obvious, from the tone of her voice, that she wasn't ready for more questions.

"Are there people living up there?" he asked.

"Up where?" RJ asked with an indulgent sigh.

"On the moon."

"There's a spaceport there. All spaceships dock and take off from there. Everything goes from here to there through a matter transporter, and vice versa. It saves the ships having to use the energy and fuel to break away from Earth's gravitational pull. Not to mention the stress of re-entry." She was glad she had already explained matter transporters to him, otherwise she would have, no doubt, had to explain it now. "The station itself is really very impressive. It spreads across the surface of the moon like some great spider, its tentacles occasionally catching and holding a ship so that it can be loaded or unloaded." For someone who had been reluctant to answer his question, she now seemed only too happy to fill him in on all the details. "You can see Earth from up there. It's quite a sight. I've seen grown people weep when seeing it for the first time. It is lovely, but it's the space view of Deakard that I have imprinted on my heart. It lies there in the heavens cold and black and distant. At just the right angle, you can place it so that both of its red suns are behind it. The light catches on the silver of the buildings that cover its surface, and makes for a glittering effect which almost, but not quite, overcomes the sinister look of the planet. I've never been to the surface of the planet of course, but someday I hope . . . I would like to see it again."

When she spoke again, her voice was wistful. "There is something in seeing it that I can't quite explain. It stirs the senses. You seem to smell things you have never smelled, see things you have never seen, hear things you have never heard, and want things you have never wanted before. For me, it was as if I had never really been alive before. As if I had been asleep all my life, and then I woke up and realized that I hadn't really done any of those things. It was as if a new day had dawned, and I could do anything I wanted. I guess it was at that moment that the seeds of rebellion were planted in my heart, because I knew I wanted more from life. And I knew the Reliance wasn't going to let me have it." RJ suddenly seemed to realize she was rambling. "We'd better get some sleep."

The next day, shortly after noon, they reached their destination. The road had been cut through the mountain so that it ran between two cliffs. They made their camp at the very top of the cliff so that the whole roadway could be seen. They hid the truck in a clump of bushes. RJ set the weapons out in a pattern on top of the ridge. David helped her as she tied a rope around a tree and went down the side of the cliff to set explosive charges; this process took the rest of the day.

Then they waited. One day passed, then two, then three. When, on the fourth day, David was eating yet another burnt dead animal and crunching on some weed RJ said was wholesome, he'd had enough.

"Are you sure that this is a supply route?" David asked for the five-billionth time in four days.

"Yes, and don't ask me again." If David was getting tired of waiting, RJ was just as tired of his constant bitching.

"We've been sitting on this cold-ass mountain for four days, and not one truck has gone by. Not even a small one," David said. He threw down the rest of the meat. "Just what the hell was that before you burnt it to a crisp?"

"Some sort of bird," RJ picked the meat up off the ground and started eating it—bone and all.

"I really hate when you do that," David said, making a face.

"I know. That's why I do it," RJ said flippantly.

David stood up and started stomping away. "That's it! I've had it with waiting for nonexistent convoys in the middle of nowhere. I've had it with trying to live on things that weren't even good before you burned them, and I have really had it with you!"

RJ said nothing; she ignored him.

David turned abruptly around. "Did you hear me?"

"No. I was trying to listen to the convoy." She pointed down the road.

He could see them.

There were a few moments of pandemonium as they went to their respective positions.

The two topless four-wheel-drive vehicles were positioned one before and one behind the huge cargo truck. The vehicles held a full company of soldiers.

"Must be some good shit," David said excitedly.

"Shush," RJ ordered, and there was no doubt that it was an order. She held the detonators in her hand, waited for just the right moment, then—*BOOM!* The first two charges sent rocks as big as the vehicles raining down into the road. Now they couldn't go forward. The mountain shook so hard that for a second David thought they were going to go down with it. *BOOM!* She blew the second set of charges. Now the road behind the convoy was blocked as well.

David saw RJ pick up the rocket launcher. That was his cue. From behind his rock, he started firing. Not at anybody, just firing. That's all he had been told to do, and he soon found out why as the bullets and blasts started to bounce off his rock. He tried to make himself as small as possible behind it as shreds of rock rained down upon him. "Holy shit!"

While they were all shooting at David, RJ made her move. She jumped out of hiding, aimed, and fired. The rocket hit the uncovered vehicle in the front. There were no survivors. RJ hit the ground before anyone had a chance to fire at her and crawled on her elbows and her knees over to where David was.

"You knew they were going to shoot at me," David accused.

RJ gave him one of her crooked grins.

"You did a very good job. Being a target isn't as easy as it sounds." She jumped up and took off running.

He wished that she would tell him what the hell she was doing. David didn't know what else to do, so he shot his gun, although all he was hitting was the trees above him.

RJ fired, but this time all but one man jumped clear before the rocket could hit the uncovered car. RJ discarded the rocket launcher, and pulled out her sidearm. She checked quickly to be sure that David wasn't watching. In an apparent suicide attempt, she took a running leap off the top of the cliff. Landing with both feet on top of the truck, she shot three men before the truck stopped shaking, then jumped to the ground. RJ calculated quickly that there were seven men left.

The first three were easily dealt with. They had taken cover from the "snipers" on the ridge, but hadn't counted on fire from behind. RJ had no qualms about shooting a man in the back. Dead was dead—it didn't matter how they got that way. The fourth man stumbled into her, and wound up with a face full of fist. The fifth heard the fourth's cries and came to help. He got a blaster bolt in his scalp for his pains.

David couldn't see RJ. Even up here the smoke was getting thick. No one was shooting at him anymore, so he crept out of cover on his knees and elbows. He traded his blaster for the rocket launcher when he came to it. In his opinion, bigger was always better.

The man had lost his weapon after one of the blasts. He felt helpless; the smoke stung his eyes so that he couldn't see. If he coughed, they'd find him. He wasn't sure, but he thought one of them was down here with them. If he could just get his hands on a gun! How many of them were there? How many of his people were dead? He didn't know. He had a bad feeling that he was going to die today, that they were all going to die today. When he saw the woman, he did what any good Reliance man would have done. He pounded the metal bar—his only weapon—into her head. She went down to her knees. Then he put a stranglehold on her and waited for her to go limp, but she didn't. Instead, she stood up, with him hanging on for dear life.

She plucked him off her back and pitched him against the truck as if he were a toy. The dazed man looked up into the laughing eyes of his opponent. He was gripped by cold fear; the thing he fought wasn't

human.

"Go ahead, freak, kill me," he spat at her. "Someday they'll do away with all of you, and people like me . . ."

She went ahead and killed him.

David peered cautiously over the edge. Through the smoke he saw RJ, then he saw the man crouching behind what was left of one of the four-wheel-drive vehicles, his weapon aimed at her. David didn't think, he aimed the rocket launcher and fired. It's safe to say he didn't get the result he wanted. He missed the man and hit one of the vehicles. The man fell back, temporarily stunned, and a big hunk of the vehicle landed on RJ pinning her underneath it. David dropped the launcher and ran down the mountain as quickly as possible.

"RJ! RJ!" he screamed, running towards her. He knelt beside her. Only her head, shoulder and one arm were sticking out. Her eyes looked blank. David buried his head in his hands. "Oh, my God! What have I done?" He wept.

"You mean besides throwing a piece of car on top of me?" a pained voice cracked. Her eyes blinked.

David was only a little relieved.

"RJ! You're alive!" Clearly, from the tone of his voice he was sure she couldn't remain that way for long. Maybe the kindest thing would be to give her the blaster and let her end it.

"I'm not squashed, David, I'm just pinned," she said, ignoring the look of doubt on his face. "Push on that corner up there, maybe you can rock it enough so that I can pull myself free."

David put his weapon down. He put his shoulder to the chunk of twisted metal and pushed for all he was worth. "It's not budging," David said frantically.

"Keep trying. If you could just move it a little, I could get out," RJ was insistent, so David kept trying.

RJ felt him before she saw him.

"David." She pointed with her free hand.

David saw the wounded man trying to sneak away, but he didn't care. The important thing now was to free RJ.

The man started to run.

RJ was frantic. "Leave me, I'll be all right. Get after him."

"But, RJ, what could it matter? Let one get away."

"You don't understand, he knows what I am. He'll tell the Reliance . . ."

David didn't have to hear more. If RJ thought it was important, it must be. He nodded and took off after the man.

When David was well out of sight, RJ put her hand on the edge of the chunk of metal. She braced herself, took a deep breath, and threw it off of her. She stood up slowly. "Ugh! That smarted." She rubbed at her ribs and back, took one of the pills, and sat down to give it a few moments to catch. In a matter of seconds she felt fine.

She was torn. If she left David to catch the man, he might lose him, and then the man would get back to the Reliance and tell them what she was. If she got up and went after him herself, David would become suspicious. There was no way around it; she'd have to take her chances that David could catch the man. Besides, it wasn't really very likely that they would believe what the soldier had to say anyway.

The man had been hurt by the blast, and David easily overtook him. David leaped, caught hold of the man's heels, and the man fell to the ground with a thud, face first into the dirt.

The man kicked out of David's grasp and jumped to his feet. David got up as quickly as he could. He expected the man to flee again, but he didn't. David didn't see where he got it, but suddenly the man

had a knife in his hand. He lashed out at David and David barely stepped out of the way in time. David silently thanked RJ for not listening to him when he said he knew how to fight. She had taught him some basic martial-arts techniques, and one of the things she had taught him had just saved his life. Another trick she had taught him allowed him to use the soldier's failed attack to bring him down. As the man passed, David brought his knee up, kicked out and landed his foot just below the guy's knee. The soldier hit the ground hard.

"Why fight for the Reliance?" David asked. "Why not put down your weapon and join us?"

The man rolled quickly into a sitting position. He looked at David. David had no weapon, but he did. "Die, Rebel." He jumped up and ran at David.

David wasn't ready. He managed to grab the hand that held the knife and keep himself from being stabbed, but he wound up on the ground with the soldier on top of him.

The soldier smiled. He smelled blood—David's.

They wrestled with the knife, but David realized that the man was much stronger than he was, and better trained. In a minute his strength would give out, and the man would stab him. David knew he wasn't going to get out of this through strength or skill. That left only one thing.

"RJ! RJ!" he screamed, looking at an imaginary personage. "Go ahead! Shoot him!"

The man's head swung around to look and his grip slackened just for a second.

A second was all David needed. He forced the knife back into its owner, and blood poured from the wound like water from a faucet. Quite by accident, David had managed to sever the man's external carotid artery.

The soldier looked at David, a look of sheer terror on his face. He knew he was dying, and it was because he had fallen for one of the oldest tricks in the book. His limp, lifeless body pitched forward, landing on David like a bag of wet sand.

David had to work at getting out from under the body. When he did, he couldn't hold what little lunch he'd eaten. He couldn't believe what he'd done. True, he had cut Cobal's dead hand free of the manacle, and he had shot the GSH with a rocket launcher sending him flying through the wall, but nothing had prepared him for this. Nothing could have. The man had looked at him as he died. David had seen his life drain from him. He was covered in the man's blood. It smelled sickeningly sweet; he'd never forget that smell. He watched where the blood pooled up in the dust at his feet as it dripped off his clothes, and then he threw up some more.

He had hunted this man down, and he had killed him. Nothing could be the same now. The man had run, and he had chased him down and killed him. Why? Because RJ had told him to, that was why.

RJ! RJ was still trapped under the chunk of car.

He raced back as fast as he could, sighing with relief when he saw RJ sitting on a rock, rubbing her ribs, a pained expression on her face. He ran up to her.

"How did you get out?" he asked.

"Did you get him?" she asked, not looking up. If she had, the answer would have been obvious.

"Yes," David said hotly.

"Good," RJ replied.

"Good," David repeated, sounding sick. "A man is dead." He looked around him in disgust. "A lot of men are dead."

RJ's answer was to get up and limp over to the truck.

"Don't you feel *anything*?"

"Hungry." RJ sighed as she turned to face him. "We are fighting a war, David. It's us against the Reliance. This was partly your idea, if I remember correctly. These men fought for the Reliance. That made them our enemies. You can't win a war unless you kill the enemy. That's just one of the rules of this game."

Logical. David gave her an angry look. How could she be so damned cool about the whole thing?

People were dead, and the hard, cold fact was that his companion didn't give a damn as long as she got what she wanted. Sure, RJ had killed a lot of people, but that didn't excuse her complete detachment from the whole thing. David knew that no matter how many men he killed, he would never get used to it.

RJ opened the doors to the truck, then smiled. She was apparently very pleased. "A shipment of the new Z-27 Laser sidearms."

She looked at David. "So, now what do you say, David?"

"I don't know if it was worth it," he said, looking at his blood-covered feet and the carnage all around them.

RJ snorted angrily. "OK, Mr. Conscience. Why don't you jump on your high horse, ride up to the top of the cliff and get our equipment and the truck. I'm sure your conscience wouldn't allow you to dig through the pockets of these dead men and take all their units."

David nodded and left gladly. RJ placed some charges at the bottom of the rubble pile, got behind the truck and detonated. She was good at this. A path was cleared wide enough to get their truck through.

"God damn it, RJ! Tell me when you're going to do that!" David screamed from atop the cliff. "I might have been in the blast area for all you know."

"Oh, bitch, bitch, bitch," RJ grinned. She went about the tasks of picking pockets, making sure the dead bodies stayed dead, and picking up the soldiers' fallen weapons. She had just finished when David arrived with the truck.

"You sure you can load these crates?" David asked indicating her leg.

"I'll have to, won't I?"

"I could do it myself," David offered.

"It would take too long. I'll be fine. When the convoy doesn't call in, the Reliance will send a reconnaissance team, and they'll no doubt be Elite. May even have a GSH with them."

David had never worked so fast in his life. The truck bulged with its load. They covered it with a tarp.

"Maybe we shouldn't take all of them."

"Ah, you worry too much," RJ took a can of spray paint and started to paint her name on the roadway.

"Do we have time for that?" David sounded worried and more than a little irritated.

"Always," she said with a smile. Finished, she threw the spent can down, got in the truck and they sped off.

"I still say we shouldn't have taken them all. It looks like we're carrying something we shouldn't be," David said.

"Our first drop is close. We'll leave the top layer there. That should make us less conspicuous and get some weight off the axle." RJ obviously wasn't worried. She started to hum.

David gave her a hard look, and she grinned.

"OK, OK, I'll stop."

"RJ, just how did you get free?" David asked curiously.

"One of the alcohol tanks on one of the vehicles exploded. By a stroke of luck, the explosion pushed up the piece I was trapped under just enough so that I could get free." It was so absurd that he bought it without further question.

RJ took a coin from her pocket and bent it over yet another link of chain. Coins on her chain, like trophies on a shelf.

David shook his head and looked at the blood on his clothes.

The Z-27 Laser sidearm was smaller and, unlike the bulky plasma blasters, had no kick. It was

deadly accurate, and RJ was very pleased to have them to add to her hidden arsenals.

David was surprised and impressed by the piles of supplies RJ had scattered across the countryside. In old mine shafts, under the floorboards of abandoned buildings and in holes in the ground covered with plastic tarps and tree limbs. Apparently she had planned to do more than raid supply trains long before she met him.

By the time they returned to Alsterase, they had hidden all but one crate of the weapons.

They struggled up the stairs with the crate.

"I still say you're nuts," David whispered. "If we get caught with this crate of lasers . . ."

"We're not going to get caught," RJ said as they struggled around a corner.

"We're carting them around in broad daylight. Anyone could see us," David whispered back urgently.

"How will anyone know what's in this box?"

"Oh, I don't know, RJ," David said sarcastically, "but they might read the side of the box right here where it says 'Reliance Arsenal, Z-27 Laser sidearms'."

"No one pays attention to what's written on a box," RJ said, shrugging it off. Just then, they met the manager. His immense bulk made it all but impossible to get up the narrow stairway.

"Oh, how lucky for us! You're back!" he said flippantly. "You'll be happy to know your room's just like you left it, no door, gaping hole in the wall, etc. So, what's in the box?"

"Just what it says, Z-27 Laser sidearms," RJ answered.

David squirmed. If he could have reached her then, he would have punched her in the mouth.

"Yeah, sure, everybody's a wise guy." The manager gave her a patronizing laugh. "I'm telling you right now, if that's a dead body . . ."

"What if it is?" RJ said, poking him in his fat stomach with a finger of her free hand.

"I'm not cleaning it up," the fat man said heavily.

"Our room is well enough ventilated that it shouldn't bother anyone."

Turning to David, RJ continued in the same sarcastic tone, "Come on, honey, let's take Irving home." They continued their trek up the stairs.

The manager shrugged and started back down.

"Do you delight in making me squirm?" David spat.

"Well, you are kind of cute when you do it," RJ answered with a smile.

Finally, they reached their room and gratefully set the crate down. They looked around. As promised, their room was just as they had left it. Gaping hole in the wall, everything totaled, door gone. What David couldn't believe was that the bike was there, and seemed to be in one piece. He supposed they had gotten their bluff in. David ran and threw himself on the broken bed.

"Guess there really is no place like home."

Chapter Four

They took the bathroom door and hung it in the front doorway. It was about five inches short, but beggars couldn't be choosers. Of course, this meant they had no bathroom door.

RJ had just taken a shower and now she was drying off. David found himself watching her. Just for a second, he got an uninvited picture of those long legs wrapped around him, those breasts pressed tightly against his chest. He shook the thought from his mind, and made a conscious effort not to watch her.

It had been an incredibly long time since he'd had a woman. Too damn long if he was looking at RJ. A woman should be soft, sweet, and gentle. Someone to be protected. Any woman who would break a

man's neck with her bare hands and then eat a sandwich was not the girl for David.

RJ started to dress. First she pulled on straight-legged black pants, then a white tank top. She pulled on her boots, strapped on her blaster, and then started wrapping the chain around herself. This time, she just wrapped it around her waist. David preferred this to the way she had been wearing it. She threw on her jacket.

"Sure you won't change your mind and come with me?" she asked.

"No, I think not." David rubbed his head. He still remembered catching the beer bottle with his skull and remembered stopping alongside the road so RJ could pull the stitches out.

"I'll stay here and guard the lasers. Bring me something to eat."

"OK, but I can't promise I'll be right back." RJ started for the door.

"Why not?" David wanted to know.

"Don't wait up." She grinned and went out the door.

First she took the truck back to the exact spot where she had "requisitioned" it. Then she walked back the five blocks to the Golden Arches. It was just twilight, and the air was cool and filled with the smell of food being prepared. The smell from one restaurant was particularly sweet, and RJ decided to come back there to eat and get David's dinner.

Whitey Baldor sat at a table with a brunette in his lap. He'd just eaten dinner, had a few drinks, and was planning to take this girl and do what he wanted with her. He couldn't have been happier. He didn't even notice the hush that fell across the bar till some jackass had the utter gall to sit at his table and flop his boots right next to Whitey's drink. He quit kissing the girl and looked up to see who had dared to interrupt his space.

"You!" he said in disbelief.

"Me," RJ smiled broadly.

"Get up," Whitey ordered the girl in his lap.

"But, Whitey . . ." she started to protest. Whitey dumped her on the floor.

"What do you want?" Whitey growled at RJ.

"Want?" RJ repeated innocently. She watched the dark-headed girl walk away in a snit. "I don't want anything. I've brought your truck back with a full tank of alcohol." RJ found the barrel of Whitey Baldor's gun pushed firmly against her head. "It pulls a little to the left, and it's not very good on fuel, but nothing that couldn't be repaired with a few minor adjustments."

"I could blow your brains out right here Lady, crowd or no crowd. You're in Alsterase now. No one gives a shit. I could . . ." He cut his speech short. Something very cold, hard and sinister was nestled against his balls. He looked at RJ, who just smiled.

"You might blow my brains out, Mr. Baldor, but not before your balls bounce off the far wall," she said, still smiling. She moved the pistol against him. "I don't see any reason that we can't talk civilly."

"You got this thing about my nuts, don't you, lady?" Whitey withdrew his pistol, wiping the sweat from his brow as she took her weapon away from his privates.

"Could I get a beer!" she yelled. She was quickly brought one. The usual bar noise started up again. The moment of tension was over. She sipped at the beer.

"What do you want from me?" Whitey asked again with venom.

"I think it's fair to say that we got off on the wrong foot," RJ said.

"Your foot, my balls," Whitey said harshly.

"Knee," RJ corrected with a smile.

"Your brains for my nuts is looking better and better," Whitey hissed. "You made me look like a fool in front of the whole bar."

"You *did* start it," RJ reminded him gently.

"You stole my truck," Whitey continued.

"I *borrowed* your truck. For which I am willing to pay you," she said with a crooked grin. Now she had Whitey's full attention. "Is there somewhere we could go?"

Whitey was game. The owner, a personal friend (well, maybe not a personal friend, but someone who believed that Whitey could shove him into a beer bottle, butt first) had an apartment in the back of the bar. Whitey wasted no time in dragging RJ—under the watchful eyes of all the patrons of the Golden Arches—into the back room and shutting and locking the door.

"OK, baby," he took off his shoes and flopped down on the bed. "I'm ready to be paid."

"Fine." RJ reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a laser pistol. She tossed the pistol onto the bed beside him.

"What's this shit?" He picked up the weapon. He wanted the woman, not a damned laser. Then he noticed the design. He stood up. "This is the new laser Z-2-11!"

"Z-27," RJ corrected.

"Where did you get it?" Whitey asked.

"I stole it—God! Men ask stupid questions."

"It's very nice, but not exactly what I had in mind," he smiled. "Let's call this laser the first installment." He reached out and touched the side of her face. It felt good, but she pulled away before he could get any further.

"Let's call it payment in full," she stated firmly.

"Does it have any trade-in value?" he asked hopefully.

RJ laughed. "Think of it this way. Sex lasts only a few minutes, but a good laser side arm is forever."

"You only say that because you haven't been with me," he bragged. He knew from the look on her face that he wasn't going to talk her into anything. He didn't understand any of this. "Why?" He held up the laser. "I mean, you had already gotten away with it."

"My friend and I have decided to take on the Reliance. Having done this, the last thing we need are more enemies."

"You know, we could do wonderful things for each other," he said with a sigh.

RJ laughed. "I'd better go."

"No! Wait a minute," he jumped in front of the door. "If you walk out now, they'll know we didn't do it. I have a reputation to protect."

RJ smiled.

"If you could maybe make a little noise?"

She grinned and nodded.

"Thanks."

She groaned. "Like that?"

"A little louder. I don't think they can hear you." He went over and started bouncing on the bed. "So, tell me more about this suicide rebellion of yours."

"Are you interested?" she asked.

"It depends on what the membership package includes," he said with a smile.

She groaned again.

"Oh, that's much better; that does credit to our race."

She gave him a look.

"Sorry, is it supposed to be a secret? It's obvious to anyone with half a brain, but hey, my lips are sealed. You know, taking on the Reliance isn't like beating up a bunch of drunks in a bar. No one can beat the Reliance." A statement of fact with undertones of bitterness.

"You've done a very good job removing the mark," RJ said.

"Don't get any ideas, lady. I wasn't a political prisoner," Whitey informed her.

"And I'm no lady," RJ said.

"Then why are we faking it?" Whitey asked with a broad smile.

Why indeed, RJ asked herself, but she knew why. Want, need and desire, were old enemies of hers, and the hardest to fight. Still, she managed an answer.

"You don't have to be political to hate the Reliance. You don't need to be political to fight them." As she finished she let out another long moan.

"Say yes," Whitey prompted.

"What?" she asked in disbelief.

"Say 'yes.' Scream it ecstatically," he begged.

"For the life of me, I don't know why I'm doing this," she said, and then said "yes" just in the way he had requested.

"Beautiful," Whitey said with a sly smile. "Before you try to win me over to your cause, I think you ought to know that I was sent to prison for killing my wife."

RJ looked at the way he jumped up and down on the bed. "No doubt you fucked her to death," she guessed.

Whitey laughed. "No, I just hated her guts. The damned Reliance demanded I marry her. I hated that cunt. So, one day she burned dinner, or some damned thing, and I planted a hatchet in her brain." He had hoped to shock her.

"Hey, a man can only be expected to take just so much," she said. "Well, that's the last moan you're going to get out of me."

"Too bad, I was just starting to enjoy this." He quit bouncing, and put on his boots. He picked up the laser and stood up. "Keep this hidden?" he questioned.

"That would be best, yes," she said.

He walked over to her and messed up her hair. When she started to protest, Whitey commented, "You have to look authentic." He looked at the chain. On impulse he grabbed one of the loops and dragged her against him. He kissed her on the mouth quickly, then released her. "Now you look like you've just been kissed."

Her protest died unspoken. She groaned. "I like you. You're incorrigible."

Whitey nodded and reluctantly opened the door. He held it for her as she walked out, then he followed. When he caught up to her, he put an arm over her shoulders. She put her arm around his waist, and he walked with her out of the bar.

She stopped just in front of the door. "Whitey," she protested, "how far does this charade have to go?"

"I was hoping it could go back to my place," he said with a roguish grin.

"I think we've gone far enough," she said.

"Not for me."

"You're pushing it," she hissed.

"Well, at least kiss me goodnight. For them, not for me."

"For them, not for me," she said.

He took her in his arms and kissed her. He didn't find her all that unwilling. It was a good three minutes before she even attempted to push him away.

"Whitey," she protested. "Whitey!" she said more urgently.

"What, what?" he asked angrily. "You like it, I like it. Let's go back to my place . . ."

"I hardly know you," she said quickly.

"So that never stopped anyone," he said. "At least not here in Alsterase."

"I kicked you in the balls," she reminded him.

"I forgive you," he said with a shrug.

"Then I'll do it again," she said with a sly smile.

He took a step away from her.

"OK. All right."

She started to walk away.

"Wait a minute." He caught up to her.

She looked at him suspiciously.

"I just want to know your name, then I'll leave you alone."

"Why?" she asked.

"Because I'm a sensitive guy. I like to know the names of women I'm going to have explicit sexual fantasies about."

"RJ. My name is RJ." She left.

As promised, Whitey didn't follow. He watched her till he could see her no more, and it was only then that he realized what she had said. RJ! She said she was RJ. He decided right then that if she was *that* RJ, he would follow her. Of course, at that point if she had been Dogaretha, the Death Whore of Valgares, he would have followed her.

RJ sat down in the restaurant, ordering for herself and something for David. She smiled when she thought about Whitey Baldor. He'd be a good ally if he could ever get his head out of his pants long enough. The food was good, and after her own cooking, she ate it with pure delight.

She saw the man walk in, and watched the waitress walk over to him. The waitress made the mistake of looking up at RJ, giving them away.

No doubt, the man had been looking for her.

She remembered seeing the waitress leave earlier. It had only been for a few seconds, so RJ hadn't thought too much of it. Apparently she'd been gone long enough to contact this man. As RJ watched she saw the man give the girl money. A lot more than he'd have to pay for the cup of coffee he bought. She ate her dinner as if she didn't know she was being watched. When she finished, she paid, picked up the sack for David, and left. As expected, the man followed. No doubt hoping she would lead him to her friend. She turned a sharp corner, her shadow following quickly.

He saw nothing. The alley was a dead end. Then he heard something behind him.

The shape that separated itself from the shadows was obviously female. She held a weapon.

He moved to draw his own.

"Oh, I wouldn't," she said coolly. She walked over and took his weapon from inside his jacket. "So, why follow me?"

"I don't know what you mean." No doubt he thought that he could bluff his way out.

"Then I'll tell you." She pulled up his sleeve and ripped the communicator off his arm. This time she checked to be sure it was off.

"It's just a watch," the man said.

RJ crushed the communicator in her fist and let the pieces fall to the ground. "And I'm just a girl. Come on, man. You can't kid a kidder." She smiled at him, her white teeth shining in the darkness of the alley.

"What are you going to do to me?" The man had gone from cocky to terrified in a few short seconds.

"That depends on what you tell me." She rubbed his chin with her laser. "Why were you looking for me?"

"You and your friend killed a GSH. The Reliance wants to know how," he answered.

"Nothing about the Elite and the secondary on the pier?" she asked curiously. The man's eyes got big. "Oh, so you didn't know who did that. People in Alsterase are pretty tight lipped. Still, I guess blowing a GSH through a wall and making it go splat all over the ground is the sort of thing people tend to talk about." She paused to laugh at him. "So, did you find out what you needed to know?" She

laughed again.

"A bitch freak," the man mumbled it, but RJ still heard him.

He shouldn't have said that. He shouldn't have said that at all. She grabbed the man by his collar and lifted him off the ground. "I can't help what I am," she hissed. "You *chose* to be a Reliance spy." She holstered her weapon and dug the wallet out of her pocket. She carefully replaced the wallet after extracting one small pill. She held her palm flat and showed the pill to the man.

He pulled his head back.

"Do you know what this is?"

He didn't answer.

"Do you?" She hissed the words with venom, and shook him till his teeth rattled.

"It's Pronuses," the man answered with a gulp.

"Do you know what happens to a normal human when he takes Pronuses?"

He knew. He tried to squirm free, kicking her in the process. It was a futile attempt, it didn't even phase her.

"Interesting statistic on Pronuses. Did you know that the suicide rate is incredibly high among Reliance spies? Guess the job gets them down. You'll never guess what they use almost exclusively." She held out the pill. "Pronuses."

"They'll never believe I committed suicide," the frantic man whined. "I've got no reason to kill myself."

"Oh, that's lame, desperate and lame. The Reliance doesn't give a damn about you or anyone else. Do you really believe that they know whether you're a candidate for suicide or not? Do you really believe that they care?" She shoved the pill in his mouth, past his closed teeth, and down in his throat. By the time she let him go he was dead.

She picked up David's dinner from where she had set it on the ground and marched back to the restaurant. The waitress was obviously surprised to see her back so soon, or at all for that matter. Reliance spies usually killed the people they were spying on as soon as they found out what they needed to know. It was just tidier that way. RJ ordered a cup of coffee. When the waitress brought it, RJ grabbed her arm in a vice-like grip.

"A Reliance man followed me when I left here," RJ said accusingly.

"You're hurting my arm," the girl protested in a whisper.

"Good, good," RJ grinned wickedly. She forced the girl's hand to lie flat on the table, then dumped cup of hot coffee on it. The girl let out a scream.

The guy behind the counter started to come to her aid. RJ pulled her blaster with her free hand and aimed it at him; he stopped in his tracks.

"A small accident," RJ explained making it sound like a threat.

She didn't let the girl's arm go. She gave the girl a menacing look.

"That's a bad burn. Could have been worse; could have been your face."

The girl started to whimper.

"I don't want anyone to know you talked to that man. I don't want anyone to know he was looking for me. I don't ever want to turn around and see that anyone's following me, ever again. If I do . . . do I have to get vulgar, or do you get the idea?"

The girl nodded her understanding.

"Good, good," RJ said with a happy smile. "I hate to waste good coffee." She finally let go of the girl. She stood up, and picked up David's dinner. "Notice that I am not leaving a tip." She laughed wickedly as she left the restaurant.

RJ woke him up to eat. Having eaten, David now found he couldn't go back to sleep. He looked at RJ where she lay. Even in her sleep the arm jerked. That must be irritating as hell. He imagined she was

probably used to it.

For some reason, David couldn't quit thinking about his family. When he had been ten, his younger sister died of a disease which RJ had recently told him was easily cured. Two years later, his mother died in childbirth. He now knew that this, too, was uncalled for. The Reliance had the medicine and the technology, but why waste it on work units? In the Reliance, people were an expendable commodity.

One day, not long after David's mother died, the Reliance came and took his father away. He had done something, but they never told David what. His father was sent off to a prison camp, and David was moved into the home of another family. A family that couldn't afford him any more than they wanted him. They made sure he knew he was an inconvenience for them and delighted in telling him that his father's selfishness would ruin them all. It was during this time in his life that he first started to harbor the idea of overthrowing the Reliance.

Somewhere in David's mind, he had long cherished the fantasy that his father was alive. That someday they would be reunited. But after David's first week in prison, he had to admit that his father was dead, that he was an orphan.

He wondered about RJ. Did RJ have a family somewhere? Did she have parents who loved and worried about her? He couldn't see RJ with a family, couldn't place her as sister or a daughter. If she still had family living, she never talked about them. Perhaps they had had a falling out. David got the impression that if you fell out with RJ, you fell all the way out.

Suddenly, he was feeling melancholy. He missed his family. He wanted to wake RJ up and ask her about her family, but if he did, she would no doubt rip his arm off and beat him to death with the bloody stump.

He could vividly remember playing with his sister in the road in front of their cottage. His mother would walk out every few minutes and tell them not to play in the road. Stupid advice; there was no place else to play, and the only traffic was the Reliance evaluation team which drove through once a month.

There was never much time to play. When their work shift came up, they would go as a family to the fields and work. Even this was a fond memory for David, because at least they had been together. When their last work shift ended, they would go home and eat a quiet meal. Sometimes, after dinner, they would walk down to the village viewscreen and watch the carefully regulated Reliance programs. Most of them he realized now were little more than Reliance propaganda, but at the time it had served as their only form of entertainment, their only link to the world outside their village. Each day was pretty much like the one that had gone before.

That was not the case in Alsterase, not the case anywhere where people were free.

Chapter Five

He really couldn't be bothered. As head of Reliance's Sector 11-N, he had more important things to do than worry about such trifles as this.

"So, this RJ person has raided another shipment," Jago said blandly. "So what?"

"She had help this time, Excellency. We found one set of civilian footprints. There may have been more. After all, we know she wears Elite boots herself," General Right explained.

"So?" Jago sighed out.

"We lost an entire convoy, Sire. The shipment stolen was of the new Z-27 laser side arms," Right said with urgency.

"So?" Jago still didn't get it. What did any of this have to do with him? Didn't the military take care of this sort of thing? He stretched out on his giant pillow, looked around the sheik-like elegance of his surroundings and sighed yet again. "Can't you take care of this without bothering me?"

"We need your guidance, Excellency," the General said. Jago lay there like a great beached whale.

Beautiful women hurried around working hard to fulfill his every obese desire. Right hated Jago, but Jago had power, and Right was smart enough to know that he had better not wipe his own ass without written orders from Jago.

Jago was infamous for blaming anything that went wrong on his underlings. He also had a bad habit of having the people he blamed executed. So Right, who was a perfectly capable individual, never did anything without orders in triplicate from this stupid, obnoxious blob.

Jago was busy playing with the right tit of one of his lovelies, and was totally ignoring Right. "Excellency, I really think you ought to take these rebels more seriously. This is the sixth convoy that has been attacked, and the sixth shipment stolen in the last ten months."

Jago snorted in disgust, oozed to an upright position and picked up the report. Without so much as glancing at it, he ground out, "OK, we've got six convoys lost to this RJ person. Now you say this rebel has help, but you don't know how much. What the hell *do* you know?"

"We know she's female because she saw fit to write that out for us on her first raid. We have deduced that she must have been an Elite at some time. We don't know anything else. We haven't been able to pick up enough DNA to make any sort of test. She's not stupid, that's for damn sure."

Jago moved his immense bulk to a standing position, and began to pace back and forth. This was very bothersome. Rebels used to be happy to hide during their work shifts, take more than their share of food and cheat on their taxes. Why did they suddenly find it necessary to pick up weapons and blow up convoys? And why did they insist on stealing weapons that Jago was completely unfamiliar with? They were ruining his day. He flopped into his throne with a great dispatch of blubber, and tapped his chins with his finger in a very discontented manner.

Life could be a real bitch. This whole episode had done nothing for his heartburn. Rebels looting supply trains, as if it were perfectly normal and above-board, troops that couldn't stop an old lady from jaywalking, and a General who wouldn't ball his wife without orders in triplicate. There were days when running all of Sector 11-N could be a real drag.

"OK Right, I'll bite. What do you want me to do about it?"

"If we could shift some of the GSHs off their regular assignments and put them with all the important . . ."

"Get the papers, Right, and I'll sign them. I'm tired of all this." Jago waved his hand dismissively.

"As you desire, Excellency." Right clicked his heels and went off to do the necessary paper work. Putting GSHs with the supply trains might be a little extravagant, but it would certainly be effective.

The young man stepped into the laboratory and was silent. He waited patiently at the old man's shoulder.

Finally, the old man sighed and looked up from the sophisticated electron-escalating light-infused microscope he was using. He didn't like to be disturbed. "Yes, what is it, Poley? And make it quick. I'm very busy."

"You wanted information on the random unit?" Poley asked.

Suddenly, the old man's eyes sparkled with interest. Professor Stewart clasped his hands together in an excited manner. "So, what has the little devil done this time?" he asked with anticipation.

"She has destroyed another convoy," Poley smiled a small smile. "It was carrying some of the new Z-27 laser pistols. All Reliance Personnel were killed. All Reliance vehicles destroyed."

Stewart broke into a bout of hysterical laughter. He patted Poley on the back. When he finally quit laughing, a fanatical gleam entered his sky-blue eyes. "Do you realize what's happened, Poley?" He didn't give Poley a chance to answer. "She has taken it upon herself to fight the Reliance. And, as if that's not good enough, she's winning!" He turned back to his work at the microscope. "Despite all her training, all the years she fought for the Reliance, she's rebelled. She's turned her hand against them," Stewart said happily.

"You sound as if you hope she will win," Poley said.

"Who cares one way or the other?" Stewart said with a shrug. He looked up from the microscope. "We're scientists, Poley. We're not political. The important thing is that the experiment is a success."

"Of the twelve units, only this one still lives," Poley reminded him.

"One out of twelve isn't that bad," Stewart said defensively.

"Those are not very good odds. I calculate that if this one does not stop her fight against the Reliance, she will not live beyond six more months," Poley said. "Then the experiment will be a . . ."

Stewart pulled a box from his pocket and pressed a button on it. Poley became totally immobile.

"Damned cocky machine," Stewart humphed. "Give a robot a personality, artificial intelligence, and the best years of your life, and what do you get? Back talk. That's what." He looked at the deactivated Poley for only a moment. "Uppity robot." He reactivated him. "What do you say?"

"I'm sorry, Dad," the robot looked down at his feet. "I'm just worried about RJ, that's all."

Stewart just stared at him. He shook his head and laughed. "Really, Poley. Sometimes you surprise even me. I'm sure RJ will be just fine. After all, you are only my *second*-greatest creation."

Chapter Six

RJ heard someone pounding on the door, so she got up and pulled on her pants. The knock became more urgent, so she picked up her blaster.

"Who the hell is it?" She tried to sound alert, but the truth was that she didn't feel up to a fight just now.

"It's Whitey Baldor."

RJ sighed with relief. "Come in," she lowered the weapon only when she saw that he was alone. "I'd ask you to sit, but . . ." she shrugged around the room.

Whitey was not a man who closed his eyes to the obvious. Yes, he saw the hole in the wall, but that was not what caught his eye. There was only one bed. The man slept on one side, and the covers were pulled back on the other. Obviously, RJ and this man were lovers. He wondered for a moment what someone like RJ was doing with a wimp like that.

"So, Mr. Baldor . . ." she started.

"Whitey," he corrected with a smile.

"So, Whitey, what can I do for you?"

He smiled broadly.

"Let me rephrase that question."

"As long as your friend is asleep . . ." Whitey winked.

"Don't you ever give up?" she asked with a grin.

"Not till I get what I want," he said. "Right now, you're at the top of my list."

It was at this time that David woke up, but he preferred, for the time being, to pretend to be asleep. He wasn't sure that he liked what he was hearing.

"You may have a considerable wait. Care to fight a war while you're waiting?"

"Ah, why the hell not? If you're really RJ," Whitey said.

"Don't I look like an RJ?" she asked.

"As a matter of fact, yes." He looked at David. "You know it's all over town that you and I" he coughed, and RJ smiled. "I, of course, love the publicity, but aren't you going to get in trouble with him?"

By now, David was positive that he didn't like what he was hearing.

"I'm not afraid of David," RJ said, dismissing the whole thing.

"Oh, is that his name?" Whitey smiled. "That's cute. So, tell me, is it love, or just mutual lust?"

"None of your business," RJ replied with a sly smile.

David could pretend no longer. He sat up and rubbed his eyes. When he opened them, he took a double take. "Him!" he screamed angrily. "You slept with him!"

RJ didn't like the tone of his voice. "I'll do as I damn well please." She wrapped the chain around her waist and over her shoulders.

"Do you think you could quit panting long enough to help me patch up this wall?" she asked Whitey.

Whitey smiled broadly. "I could give it a shot." He followed her out of the room, but paused before closing the door to look back at David.

"You might as well accept it. I'm going to take her away from your scrawny ass." He swung the door closed with an air of self-confidence that made David fume.

"Smug fucker," David cursed the door. The vision of RJ with this great hulking lummoX drooling all over her made David's blood boil. He felt very much the way a father feels towards his daughter; he didn't want RJ himself, but he didn't want anyone else to have her, either. Especially not this giant blond jerk.

David got up and walked to the hole in the wall and looked out. What was that? He saw it again. Someone had moved down there. Behind the old dumpster. He couldn't see anyone now. The funny thing was that David was sure that whoever it was had been watching, looking for signs of activity. It might just be paranoia, but he decided to tell RJ when she returned, just to be on the safe side.

Willie Jones, who preferred to be called Mickey, ducked quickly behind the dumpster. He didn't know whether it was a good idea to be seen or not.

It hadn't been difficult to find out where the platinum blonde goddess was staying. Not after she had blasted the GSH through her wall. He had been watching, waiting for her return. Now she was back, and he wanted very much to get in touch with her, but he would wait till she was alone. Mickey'd had no cause to trust anyone save himself, but now he trusted the woman. She had gone out of her way to save him when she'd no reason for doing so. All his life, no one—not parent, grandparent, aunt or uncle—had gone an inch out of their way for him. They had shoved him back and forth like a hot potato. When it became obvious that he wasn't going to grow, the Reliance had sent a message to his family saying that they would be coming for him. Even at twelve Mickey had known what that meant. He left home and went into hiding.

It hadn't been too hard to pass himself off as a child. What was hard was earning a living. Since Mickey couldn't risk Reliance involvement, he just sort of fell between the cracks. No one was going to take on an extra kid unless the Reliance ordered them to. To stay alive, he had learned to pick pockets—a career at which he excelled. Eventually, like most who have fallen out of grace with the Reliance, Mickey wound up in Alsterase.

He wanted very much to belong to something. This woman's interest in him had given him hope that he wouldn't have to spend the rest of his life alone. If being with her meant going up against the Reliance, so much the better.

RJ and Whitey scavenged the streets of Alsterase gleaning materials from structures long ago abandoned. When they came back to the apartment with their haul, David looked at it skeptically, but it soon became apparent that RJ and Whitey knew what they were doing. In less than two hours, the hole was patched.

While it couldn't be said that it was as good as new, it would keep the cold out and the warmth in. At least you couldn't see out of it.

David hadn't helped much. In fact, he hadn't helped at all. He was mad, and didn't even attempt to hide the fact. He did offer to go get lunch.

"Good idea, I'm starved," RJ said.

"Fine," David huffed. "Money, RJ?" He held out his hand, and she gave him a fistful of units. "Well, I'll just be going then." He left, being sure to slam the door good and hard on his way out.

"What in hell is wrong with him?" RJ said hotly. Whitey just shrugged. If she didn't know, he was damned if he was going to tell her.

"So, RJ, want to make the walls go thump?" Whitey asked, flopping down on the bed.

RJ laughed and shook her head.

"No, huh? Well, then how about I jump up and down on the bed, and you can groan," Whitey smiled broadly.

RJ laughed louder.

"I'm serious."

"What was your military specialty?" RJ asked.

"You're changing the subject. I was talking about sex," Whitey told her.

"Humor me," RJ said with her best crooked grin.

"I was Elite. I specialized in small arms and guerilla warfare. You?"

"I've been a colonel—temporary battlefield promotion. Lieutenant mostly." She played with a link of her chain. "Also Elite."

"Most of us are. So why did you leave the Corps?" Whitey was more than a little curious. Being Elite was a privilege. Elites rarely decided to just defect. There was no reason for them to rebel; they had everything they could want. Except real freedom of course. He wondered what could have made her leave her post and go after the Reliance with such a vengeance. He would have stayed right where he was and probably never noticed what was wrong with the world if they hadn't made him marry that fucking bitch.

"Simple enough. I don't like their tactics. I don't like the idea that some people are better than other people just because they were born into a high-ranking Reliance family. I like to fight; I won't lie about that. But I can't feel good about fighting if I don't think I'm on the right side, and cleansing missions aren't really my idea of sport. To make a long story short, I shot the CO in charge of the slaughter, ran like hell, and here I am."

Whitey nodded his head, satisfied with her answer.

They were laughing by the time David got back, and he practically threw their food at them.

"I ran into a man at the restaurant who was only too happy to tell me that you slept with him," David said hotly, pointing at Whitey.

"So?" RJ shrugged.

Whitey turned away so that they couldn't see him fighting his laughter.

"So? Is that all you have to say for yourself? So?" David shouted.

"I *didn't* sleep with him, but I don't see why it should matter to you if I did." RJ did not even do him the courtesy of being defensive. Hell, she didn't even stop eating. "Really, David, why should you care who I fuck?"

In spite of himself, Whitey let out a laugh. He couldn't help it. David gave him a hot look, and Whitey shrugged. "That's the problem with a military bitch, Mac. Very cold, very calculating, and not very compassionate."

David was silent. He started to eat, giving RJ dagger-filled looks the whole time.

Finally, she could stand it no more. "Why are you looking at me like that?" she demanded.

"Like what?" David asked innocently.

"Ugh!" RJ growled in anger. She tried to ignore him, but he wouldn't be ignored.

"If you want to fuck everyone in Alsterase . . ." he started.

"I didn't fuck him, but even if I had that would hardly be everyone in Alsterase," RJ said through gritted teeth.

". . . I don't care. I mean, it's certainly none of my business," David said haughtily.

"I'm glad you understand that. Now, will you just let it lie?" RJ went back to eating.

"Fine!" David said on what was supposed to be a final note. Of course, it wasn't. "It's bad enough that you did it, but then to lie about it."

RJ murmured a curse. "You're sick, David," she said. "You're a sick man, and you obviously need help."

Whitey unceremoniously kicked off his shoes and lay down on the bed as if he belonged. He was for the most part, forgotten at this point.

"Everyone thinks you're living with me and sleeping with him," David said indignantly.

"Oh, and you must uphold your reputation," RJ mocked.

"Fine," David started for the door.

"Where are you going?" RJ asked.

"Out to get laid," he said bluntly.

"You better take some money with you," RJ said in a hateful tone. For some reason, the thought of David's having a woman distressed her, but she hid it well.

"I don't need money, smartass," David stomped out of the room.

Whitey looked up at RJ. "You know, as long as he's going to condemn you, and he's gone, we might as well . . ."

RJ shook her head.

"Are you having trouble understanding 'no,' Whitey? Has it got too many syllables for you? Thanks for the help. Don't be a stranger."

He was being dismissed. She opened the door, Whitey got up, grabbed his boots, and walked out. He turned briefly. "You really don't know what you're missing," he said, winking.

"Yes, I think I do," she smiled. "Take care, Whitey." She shut the door.

RJ sighed, and leaned against it. "God, men are assholes."

Her eyes were still dry from the Pronuses, and she was going to have to do something with her hair and nails before the rapid growth was detected. She went to the bathroom and washed her eyes with water, then she dug the kit from her pocket. First she pulled out the knife and cut her nails. It was no easy task. The toenails were especially hard. She dumped the clippings into the toilet and stood in front of the mirror. She hated to cut her hair. She never seemed to be able to get both sides to match. As a result, she usually wound up cutting it shorter than she had originally intended. Unfortunately, this time was no different, and she had her hair a good inch shorter than she wanted it. She dumped the hair into the toilet with the nail clippings and pumped the handle. She had a moment's anxiety when it looked like the toilet wasn't going to flush, but after a few curses and some tinkering, all was clear. She gave her hair one last disgruntled look, and went into the other room.

For the first time she really looked at the room. She was living in a pigsty. David was off fucking some bimbo, and she was living in a pigsty.

Without really thinking about it, she started to clean up the mess. Originally, she thought that she'd just remove the obvious junk, but before she knew it, she was searching the building for cleaning supplies. The janitorial supplies were practically nonexistent, so she decided to bring it up the next time she saw the fat man with the corpse fetish. Every time she thought about David, she scrubbed a little harder. By the time she admitted that she was mad—about what, exactly, was unclear—the whole place was spotless, and the smell was gone. She sat down on the crate of lasers and surveyed her handiwork.

"It's still a dump, but at least it's a clean dump," she muttered to herself. "No place like home," she added on a sarcastic note.

Then it hit her like a brick. Home. She'd never really had a place to call home before. A sleeping bag in a barracks full of people she had no desire to know. Alone with no privacy; the worst possible scenario. Never any place she could call home.

Then her thoughts turned to David. He had been gone a long time. She wondered what he was up to, and if she was pretty. She stood up and started to pace. The longer she paced, the faster she went.

The faster she went, the madder she got. Why did she care if he had a woman? It was certainly none of her business. Hell, let him have a dozen for all she cared! Except that she *did* care, and that was, of course, what made her the most angry. She knew that logically she should kick back and spend the rest of the evening contemplating anything except what David was doing, but all she really wanted to do was track this whore down and rip her face off. When a knock came on the door, she snapped.

"Now who the fuck is it, and what the hell do you want?"

"Is Mickey," a small, unsure voice choked out.

It took only a second for the name and voice to register. She mentally chastised herself.

"Wait a second, buddy," she took a deep breath, and then went and answered the door.

Mickey looked reluctant to enter.

"I'm sorry, Mickey, it's been a rough afternoon."

He gathered his courage and entered. "If a bad time . . ."

"Not at all, why don't you sit down?" RJ said, waving towards the box of lasers.

Mickey waddled over and sat down.

"It's good to see you."

"I watch island. Find out things . . . don't know name?"

"RJ."

His eyes lit up with recognition, and he stared at her as if expecting the spectacular at any moment.

"So, what have you found out?" she asked as she sat down on the bed.

"About island, not much. Fishermen swear is haunted. Say see ghosts and hear strange sounds. I watch. Many times see lights." If he'd had a tail, he would have wagged it.

She looked thoughtful for a moment. "If there are lights, then someone is over there."

"What I thought," he said.

"What about recruits? Would any of these assholes fight? Would they join us?"

"Most think fighting Reliance useless."

"At least we know they're not stupid," RJ said with a grin.

"Not cowards, either. If prove can win, might be inclined to join." It sounded like he was telling her so little, and he had worked so hard to find all this out. He hoped it would be enough to get him accepted. He had no way of knowing that RJ would have recruited a dog if she thought he was loyal.

"Stand up and look in that box you're sitting on," RJ said. He did so, and his eyes grew wide with delight and awe. He was a thief, and such a theft as this obviously impressed the hell out of him.

"They're the Reliance's newest hand-held weapon. I want you to take one."

Mickey was excited. He knew that the offering of the weapon meant he had been accepted, but . . .

"Remember what happen last time?" Personally, he hadn't been happy with the results. He rubbed his behind and grimaced.

RJ smiled at the memory of the midget with his butt jammed in a bucket.

"This is a laser, not a blaster. It has no kick. That's why it's the new, improved weapon. Take one, you'll need it."

He picked it up reluctantly, but once it was in his hands, he smiled.

"Keep it hidden."

He nodded.

"Needless to say, I'm not supposed to have them." She showed him how it worked. "Come on, let's go have a look at those lights."

Mickey held on for dear life as RJ drove the motorcycle down the stairs.

The fat man met them in the entrance hall. "Hey, how many times do I have to tell you? No riding motorcycles in the building. It's in your lease . . ." He kept screaming as she roared out of the building.

RJ's driving didn't scare Mickey. He felt as if nothing could happen to him as long as he was with her. It was a feeling of security the likes of which he had never before experienced.

RJ parked the bike beside the rickety pier. She got off and, much to Mickey's amazement, picked him up and put him on her shoulders. She walked onto the pier. The boards creaked under her feet. She stopped. Sure as hell, there were lights on the island. She clicked her tongue.

"I wonder who's out there, and, more to the point, why?"

"All the time watch. No boats come. No boats go. No helicopters," Mickey informed her.

RJ nodded and looked thoughtful. "Could it be some Reliance thing?"

"Don't know."

She looked at the lights again. It was no trick of the water and the city lights. It wasn't a reflection. There were lights on out there.

"It's certainly curious."

"Want me keep watching?" Mickey asked eagerly.

"Yes, but quit asking questions. It wouldn't do for people to know that we're interested." RJ turned and started down the boardwalk.

"You hungry?" she asked.

"Always." Mickey liked the view from RJ's shoulder. For once, he was looking down on people instead of up. Life could be a real drag when all you ever saw was people's asses.

They went into the first restaurant they came to. Both RJ and Mickey ducked as they came through the door. RJ took Mickey from her shoulder, and they found a table.

"What ya want?" the waitress asked shortly.

RJ looked up at her and smiled a satanic smile. The waitress cringed. "A little respect, for one thing," RJ said through gritted teeth.

"Sorry, ma'am," the waitress said quickly. "It's been a long day. What can I do for you?" It had been a long day, and the last thing she needed was to get her ass kicked. This had to be her. This had to be the woman who had kicked Whitey Baldor's ass in the Golden Arches.

RJ ordered and the waitress placed the order promptly. She brought the beers at once. "Your order will be ready shortly."

"Thank you," RJ said with equal politeness.

Mickey lit a cigar.

RJ shook her head. "Didn't anyone ever tell you that smoking will stunt your growth?"

Mickey smiled and stuck the cigar in RJ's outstretched hand.

She took a long drag and handed it back.

"Hear you and Whitey Baldor are having a thing," Mickey said conversationally.

"Don't believe everything you hear," RJ said with a smile.

"Whitey Baldor's a nasty piece of work," Mickey told her.

"So am I," RJ took another drink of her beer. "He hates the Reliance. That's the only credential you need to join my army. I don't give a damn about his manners."

"So, are you and Whitey having a thing?" Mickey asked with a mischievous smile.

RJ shook her head and smiled. "Mickey, it would shock you to know just how virtuous I am."

David experienced no trouble at all picking up a woman, getting her to take him back to her place, or having his way with her. He certainly felt a hell of a lot calmer than he had in weeks. He'd needed a woman's attentions, and this one had been good. But it was late, and he wanted to go home now. He sat on the edge of the bed, getting dressed.

"Do you have to go, lover?" the woman asked, as she rubbed against him in a provocative manner.

"I'm afraid so," David stood up and finished pulling up his pants and zipped them. "It's been nice."

"Can I see you again?" she asked.

David looked at her. She was a dark-haired beauty. He smiled and nodded.

"Yeah, sure . . . sometime." He pulled on his boots, blew her a kiss, and was gone.

When he returned to the apartment, it was obvious that RJ had been busy. It was even more obvious that she wasn't home. No doubt she had gone off somewhere with that giant person. He went into the bathroom, stripped and started the shower. He heard the front door open.

"RJ?"

"Ax murderer," RJ answered.

"Where's the bike?" he asked.

"I decided to make lard-ass happy and leave it in the lobby," RJ started to take the chain off.

"The apartment looks nice," David told her.

"Thanks," she finished taking off the chain and let it fall to the floor. She sat down on the bed.

David really had no idea what possessed him at that moment, but the words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.

"Where were you?"

He heard the curses as he turned off the water. Damn it, he couldn't help it. He'd never really got to be a big brother to his own sister. Now, he wanted to protect RJ, but damn her, she didn't want or really need protecting.

He was just stepping out of the shower when RJ stormed in, obviously ready to let him have it. He cringed in anticipation. He knew from past experience that RJ wasn't likely to pull any punches. She'd call him every choice word that came into her head.

RJ was prepared to let him have it. *Hypocrite* came to mind; so did *slut* and *miserable-mother-fucking-pencil-dicked-moron*. She took one look at him standing there buck-naked, and didn't say a word. It didn't make any sense. How many men had she seen nude? A hundred, two hundred, a thousand? She'd never felt like this before. Her heart was pounding, her breath seemed to come in gasps, and her palms were sweating. Must be some new reaction to the Pronuses. She should have called him a stream of profanities that would make a whore blush, but the words wouldn't come.

Finally she said, "Everyone in Alsterase is getting fucked except me. If you don't believe that, I don't give a shit." She left him in the bathroom alone, but didn't quit looking at him. She wondered if he'd had a woman, then knew, instinctively, that he had.

"Fucking whore," she mumbled.

"What's that?" David was brushing his teeth, and hadn't heard what she'd said.

"Nothing," she took off her pants, and hurled them against the wall. It was irrational, but she felt better. When he came out of the bathroom, she went in. The shower didn't make her feel any better.

She could see David lying in bed, smiling stupidly at the ceiling. He was nice and content. She wasn't. She turned out the lights and got in bed beside David.

"RJ, I'm sorry that I made such a scene. If you want to sleep with that fellow, that is your business, and I had no right to . . ."

"Jump to conclusions. I told you I didn't sleep with him. You and I aren't lovers. Why should I lie to you about it, and why should you care what I do?" She rolled over so that her back was to him.

David put a friendly hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, RJ. I guess I got a little overzealous in my role as big brother. You forgive me?"

She made a noise that might or might not have meant yes.

David was in too good a mood to assume that it was anything but agreement. He lay back to get comfortable. "RJ, what were your parents like?"

"I was raised Elite," RJ said quickly.

"Huh?"

"I was an orphan, or a bastard, or something. I stood out from the other kids. So, instead of being

sent off to the work camps, or farmed out to some other family, I was raised Elite. If you're raised Elite, you go right into service. You never really know anything else, and you can bet on going in as an officer."

"Do you ever wonder about them?" David asked.

"Who?"

"Your parents."

"No." There was a final note in RJ's voice.

For once, David let it lie.

Chapter Seven

The next week RJ stayed more or less at home. She wanted to give the side effects of two doses of Pronuses so close together a chance to subside. Mickey took up residence with them, feeling very privileged to have a moth-eaten twin-sized mattress on the floor.

David found a way to occupy his time. He took to going out on a nightly quest, the object of which was to bed everything with hips and tits in the entire city. So far, things were right on schedule. He had everything it took to impress the local women; he was tall, good-looking, breathing, and had a dick. The girls of Alsterase were neither too particular nor particularly moral. Anyone, anytime, and anyplace. If they were attached you might have to give them a second to get rid of their current mates.

David was out, bent on yet another conquest, so RJ decided to go out as well. Whitey and Mickey were only too glad to tag along.

They sat at the corner table after persuading a young man and his girlfriend that they didn't want to sit there. The place wasn't packed with atmosphere nor was it particularly clean, but both Whitey and Mickey assured RJ that the food was the best in Alsterase. The three of them were a sight to see, so it was no wonder that they were looked at with a certain amount of interest. This lot stood out even in Alsterase, which was quite an accomplishment.

After eating, they relaxed over their first round of drinks. RJ went so far as to plop her feet in the middle of the table. Whitey draped a huge arm over her shoulders.

"I really don't see why you put up with it," Whitey said, playing with a lock of her hair.

"What? You slobber all over her?" Mickey asked lightly. Whitey gave him an angry look, and he shrugged.

Whitey returned his attention to RJ and repeated. "I don't know why you put up with it."

"OK, Whitey," RJ said in an exasperated tone. No doubt he was going to hit on her. After all, it had been almost twenty minutes since his last attempt. "What?"

"David's gallivanting all over town, poking anything that will stand still long enough," Whitey said.

RJ shrugged. "I don't care what David does," she said with a flip of her head. Both Whitey and Mickey laughed at the lack of conviction in her voice. "I've told you both before, and I'm telling you again. David and I are not now, nor have we ever been, lovers. I really don't care what he does."

"All right, RJ. Then, if everything between you and David is so . . ." Whitey paused in thought, "what's that word?"

"Boobs!" Mickey said.

Whitey gave him a confused look.

"Look at boobs on waitress." He pointed.

RJ hit his hand.

"Oh!" Mickey protested, and rubbed his hand.

"RJ, if everything between you and David is so . . . ARG, what is that damned word?" Whitey hissed.

RJ had no idea what compelled her to fill in the blank for him. She knew damn good and well what he was up to. "Platonic," she said, helpfully.

"Exactly. If you and David are so platonic, why can't you and I . . ." he whispered something particularly wicked in her ear.

"No." RJ said quickly.

"You're a cold bitch, RJ," Whitey whined in mock despair.

David staggered home. The woman had been a disappointment. Her looks had promised so much, and she'd had so little. It wasn't fair. It really wasn't. Sometimes it seemed to him that the more beautiful a woman was, the lousier she was in bed.

He'd had far too much to drink. That, he admitted, hadn't helped. The combination of bad sex and too much liquor had given him the granddaddy of all headaches. All this fun was wearing him down. He wished RJ were home, but she wasn't.

"Off with the boys again, you bitch." He laughed at his own joke, then held his head. RJ's jacket was lying on the bed. It was a stroke of luck, because she usually wore it. He'd seen RJ take pills out of her pocket. No doubt they were pain pills. He rummaged through her pockets till he found the leather pouch, pulled it out and opened it. He saw the pills. Smiling with the anticipation of relief, he walked into the bathroom and filled a glass with water.

RJ had been about to suggest that they leave when the stranger walked in. "You ever see him before?" she asked her companions.

They both said no.

"He doesn't look like trouble to me," Whitey didn't understand her curiosity. He wondered whether he should be jealous or not.

"He also doesn't look like your typical Alsterase riffraff."

He was a tall, thin, good-looking man. No growth of beard, his clothes were well cared for, and he was clean. Militarily clean.

"You think he's a spy?" Mickey asked.

"If he is, he's being awfully blatant about it," RJ said.

"Whitey and I will create a diversion. You pick his pocket."

Mickey nodded eagerly.

"Why, you two-timing slug!" RJ screamed, standing up and slinging the rest of her beer in Whitey's face. Whitey didn't have to act shocked. He jumped up, slinging the beer off himself. As every eye in the place turned on them, Mickey slipped away.

"You platinum blonde bitch," Whitey screamed back. "I ought to knock the crap out of you."

"Do it and die, fuckface," RJ said, poking him in the chest.

"Oh, I love it when you talk dirty to me," Whitey said with a broad leer.

RJ fought her smile. "Fuck you, Whitey Baldor!" she screamed.

"I wish you would," he grabbed her and kissed her full on the mouth.

When he let her go, she whispered, "What the hell are you doing?"

"Creating a diversion," he grinned. He bent and kissed her throat.

She gave up and laughed. She kissed Whitey on the cheek, and they both sat down. Mickey crawled out from under the table, as if he had been hiding there till the fight was over.

"Get it?" RJ asked him.

He looked hurt.

"Would I not?" He took the billfold from a pocket, and handed it to her under the table. She opened it and began to examine the contents.

"Well?" Mickey asked eagerly. Whitey, on the other hand, was totally occupied with chewing on RJ's earlobe.

"Three hundred units, a picture of a naked woman . . ."

"Let me see," Mickey moved so that he could look over her shoulder. Apparently he wasn't impressed, because he sat down again.

"Ahha!" RJ said in a pleased-with-herself tone.

"Ahha, what?" Whitey came up for air long enough to ask. Without waiting for an answer, he moved to her neck.

"Discharge papers, *dishonorable* discharge papers. Our stranger used to be an Elite Captain. It gets better. He was a pilot—starship class," RJ said. She looked thoughtfully back at the man. "He could be useful to us." She was trying to decide whether she should approach him or not when three of the local bully-boys decided to hassle him. "Shit!" RJ said.

Whitey gave up on her temporarily.

"What?" he sighed.

"Oh nothing. It's just that I've had such a pleasant evening, and now I'm going to have to kill those men," RJ said coolly.

"What ya want here, stranger?" the lead bully-boy asked.

"To live a quiet life," the stranger was obviously scared, but trying not to show it.

They laughed at him.

"Live a quiet life," the lead bully laughed. "In Alsterase?" He kicked at the man's stool.

"Leave him be," RJ ordered.

"Keep your woman out of this, Baldor. We got no beef with you," he said, turning toward Whitey. He wasn't afraid. The three of them could take Baldor, and he saw nothing to fear in either the woman or the midget.

Whitey laughed. "Zero, no one owns this woman. You'll see why if you persist in starting trouble."

"The name is Zant." Losing interest in the stranger, Zant motioned to his buddies, and they moved toward the table where the three were sitting. "I don't mind kicking your ass, Baldor, or screwing your woman while you're unconscious. So why don't you just stay out of this?"

"It's a shame that a man who is such a prick doesn't have any balls," RJ said coolly. She didn't move. Not even so much as to take her boots off the table.

One of Zant's boys got antsy waiting for the fight to start and pulled his knife.

Mickey swung his arm out from inside his jacket, and fired the laser he clutched in a white knuckled fist.

The man fell dead.

RJ moved quickly. She jumped up, taking the midget with her.

Whitey overturned the table, throwing it with a growl.

The other customers either fled, ducked into safe spots, or donned protective headgear.

RJ dumped Mickey on the floor, and he ran to hide behind the bar. As far as he was concerned, he had done his part.

Zant and his pals were joined by two more who had stayed in the background until then.

RJ looked at Whitey, and smiled. "Well, at least it's a fair fight now."

"Shall we?" Whitey asked, bowing slightly and motioning RJ forward.

"You first, dear," she offered with equal politeness.

"I'll use you, you smug bitch," Zant promised.

"You'll have to get it up first," RJ chided.

The fight was on. Zant drew a knife and ran towards RJ. She simply grabbed the wrist that held the knife as it came at her. She pulled the arm out of its socket, then slung Zant into the floor, face-first

before he had time to scream. Then she stomped on the back of his neck, successfully putting him—and everyone else—out of his misery. One of the other men grabbed her around the throat with his forearm. She slung him over her shoulder and looked up in time to see another thug getting ready to hit Whitey in the head with a table.

Whitey was occupied at that moment with throttling a man against the far wall.

"Whitey!" She screamed the warning as the man she'd just thrown down got shakily to his feet.

Whitey let go of his man and turned, drawing his sword. He plunged it through the tabletop into the man's chest, and pulled it out in less time than it takes to tell it. The man with the table staggered and paused, but didn't fall. Whitey immediately returned to his interrupted labors.

As RJ's slightly dazed opponent pounced on her again, she hit him in the chest hard enough to stop his heart. He gasped once and hit the floor at her feet.

The man with the table was still staggering. Whitey took a finger and pushed on the tabletop. Man and table both went down.

"Whitey, grab them and let's go," she pointed to the pilot who was hiding with Mickey behind the bar.

Whitey grabbed the man by the collar and unceremoniously pulled him to his feet.

"Come on, Mickey," Whitey ordered.

Mickey ran to RJ, and she put him on her shoulder. They left the bar, Whitey pulling the discharged captain along by his collar.

"Ah, thanks a lot," he stammered. "Sorry I didn't help, but I'm not really much of a fighter."

"Pilots usually aren't, Captain Levits," RJ said simply.

"How . . ."

RJ held up his wallet.

He slapped his pocket. "Why, you . . . !" He reached for it, and she jerked it out of his reach. "Why did you stop them from beating me up? So that you could take my wallet?"

"I don't want your money." RJ tossed the wallet in his general direction.

"What then?" Levits asked while deftly plucking the wallet from the air. Nothing wrong with his coordination, at least.

"You're a pilot. You're a coward, but you were an Elite. So, in spite of what you say, you know how to fight. My friends and I are going to overthrow the Reliance," RJ explained.

"Good luck," Levits laughed in disbelief.

"Did I say something funny, Whitey?" she asked him in an ominous tone.

"Not at all, dear," Whitey said, tightening his grip on Levits' collar just a bit.

"I don't like to be laughed at, Mr. Levits. Call it a weakness, a flaw. I have absolutely no sense of humor where that is concerned." She stopped and folded her hands behind her back.

Mickey quickly repositioned himself.

"Now, either you want to help us, or you don't. It's that simple."

Suddenly, the sight of the woman standing there calmly with a midget climbing all over her like she was a tree didn't look funny. Not funny at all.

"And if I say no, you kill me," Levits said.

"That is the Reliance's way, not ours. We don't want anyone with us who doesn't want to be here. We are fighting tyranny, Mr. Levits. I won't fight it with more of the same."

She motioned for Whitey to release him.

"Take some time, Mr. Levits. Think about it. If you have come to Alsterase, it's because you have nowhere else to go. Alsterase is a hard place, especially if one is 'not much of a fighter.' It's not the sort of place to be friendless, and it's not easy to make friends here." She tapped his cheek sharply.

"Come on, boys, let's go."

Levits watched them leave. He shook his head and laughed—quietly. "Fight the Reliance! She must be mad." He laughed louder. "Crazy bitch."

He looked down the long dark street. A cool breeze blew, and he pulled his jacket tighter around him. He set his mouth in a firm line. He didn't need anyone, and he certainly wasn't going to join her in her suicide rebellion.

David looked for some instructions in the leather pouch. It would be nice to know something about dosage, but several minutes of search turned up nothing. He put one into his hand. If one would do it, another would be better. He popped another into his hand. He was about to take the pills when he heard the door open.

"RJ?" he asked.

"Ax murderer," she answered. Mickey jumped down and retired to his mattress.

"That was only funny the first fifty times you did it, RJ," David replied testily. He was in no mood to deal with her questionable sense of humor right then. He walked out of the bathroom and held out his hand.

"How many of these do I take?"

RJ looked at them in panic. "Where did you get those?" she demanded.

For answer, he held up the leather pouch. Whitey saw the pouch. He'd seen them before; he knew what they were. Moreover, he knew what it meant.

RJ was across the room in a heartbeat. She grabbed the pills from David's hand and flung them down the toilet.

"Wash your hands, wash your hands!" she ordered.

When he didn't move, she pulled him into the bathroom and forced him to the sink. She turned on the faucet.

"Wash your hands." There was no denying her tone.

"What the hell is going on?" David asked, as he began washing.

"Those are poison, David. Lethal poison," she said.

"But I saw you take them," David said as he scrubbed even harder.

That confirmed it. Whitey had no doubts left. He didn't know how she came to be, but she was, and he knew what she was. Surprisingly, it didn't change the way he felt about her. One thing was for sure. She hadn't lied. She wasn't David's lover. Somehow knowing what she was made him feel better. Now at least he knew the reason she wouldn't sleep with him.

"I saw you take them," David said again as he scrubbed at his hands.

Whitey laughed. "Now, she would have to have an amazing constitution to do that. That's Pronuses."

"What the hell is Pronuses?" David demanded.

"It's a lethal drug." He looked at RJ in admiration and shook his head. "Only you could get hold of a freak kit."

She looked at him expressionlessly. He couldn't tell what she was thinking. He prayed he could block her as easily as she seemed to block him.

"My God, my hand's blistering!" David exclaimed.

"It's all right," RJ said, handing him a towel.

"Don't tell me it's fucking all right! I damn near get myself killed over a goddamned headache, and you say it's all right?" David wasn't feeling overly understanding at the moment. "Why are you carrying around lethal poison anyway?"

"It's a weapon." She shrugged. "You never know when you might want to poison someone. It's a lot more subtle than shooting, clubbing or stabbing. If you work it right, you don't even have to be there when they die."

David was more persistent than Whitey deemed to be safe at this moment. But then, he had two things up on David. First, he was relatively sure he knew why she had them, and second, he hadn't nearly eaten the damned things. For once, Whitey sympathized with David's reaction.

"I saw you take them," David persisted.

Whitey just laughed, as if he thought David were the world's biggest fool and flopped down on the bed.

RJ sighed in exasperation. "I had some pain pills; they're gone now. Want me to run out and get you some?"

"No thanks," David turned to the bed to lie down, but Whitey was lying in the big middle of it.

"Do you mind?" he asked sarcastically.

"Well, actually, I do, but . . ." Whitey got up. David lay down. "You know, David, someday I'll be staying and you'll be going."

"In your wet dreams," RJ said, not without a smile. "Good night, Whitey."

"Ah, but Mom, it's early yet," Whitey whined, then ducked out the door. "Good night, my love!" He waved flamboyantly, and was gone.

RJ sighed and started to unwrap the chain. It had been a long damn day.

"David, I'm really sorry about the Pronuses."

"I feel very, very lucky. Another second, and I would have eaten the damn things. Next time you're going to carry poison around, you might at least tell me." David was still sore. He wasn't really mad at RJ, it was just this damn headache. "I think Whitey is serious about you," he said in the best bantering tone he could muster.

"The only thing Whitey Baldor is interested in is getting a piece of ass," she said, although she knew it wasn't quite true.

"If all wanted was piece of ass, wouldn't hang round." This piece of wisdom from Mickey, whom RJ had believed to be asleep.

"What's that supposed to mean?" RJ asked indignantly.

"I think what he means is that if all the man wanted was a piece of ass, he could get that anywhere. Believe me, it's easy. If that's all he wanted, why on earth would he continuously hit on the only woman in all of Alsterase who actually has the word 'no' in her vocabulary?"

"Because I'm a challenge, I guess," RJ snorted and dismissed the subject. She finished undressing and went to bed. After several moments of trying to achieve a comfortable position, she decided it was impossible and gave up. She looked at the ceiling. Then she looked at David. *Wonder where you were. Idiot! You know where he was. Off with some slut making the beast with two backs. An angry scowl crossed her face, and she resumed looking at the ceiling. I don't care. I could have anyone I wanted. She started counting cracks in the ceiling. I wonder if she was good-looking . . . Well of course she was, David's too shallow to even look at a woman for any other reason. She frowned. I wonder if she was any good?* She looked at David again. He couldn't sleep either; he was frowning. RJ smiled and looked back at the ceiling. *I'm guessing that means no. Good. I would be amazing, because, after all, I'm good at everything . . . Provided of course that I didn't crush my lover during orgasm. Damn, now look what I've done . . . I'm depressed and horny.*

She sighed and looked over to see that David was asleep. She had half a mind to wake him up. *That's right, you bastard, sleep. God knows you get laid plenty. Hell, I don't even think you realize that I'm a girl most of the time. All the guys I used to shower with in the service . . . they used to get boners in spite of all the saltpeter the Reliance put in everything.*

David rolled over—so he wasn't asleep. What was more, from the look on his face, the headache was getting worse. *Good! I don't care if I am being illogical and petty. When you're as old as I am and you still haven't gotten laid, you're allowed to be illogical and petty.*

She tried not to think about David with other women, because for some reason the thought was very distressing to her. Of course, the more she tried not to think about it, the more she did. And the

more she thought about it, the madder she got.

Just then, David was unwise enough to speak to her.

"RJ?"

It took her several seconds to suppress the urge to scream interesting things at him, like, *You miserable whoremongering, womanizing little piece of shit!*

"Ugh." That was the only sound RJ could make when she was biting her tongue.

"Are you awake?" he asked.

"Ugh," RJ said again.

"Is that a yes or a no?" David asked with a laugh.

"That's a maybe," RJ said, trying to keep the angry tone from her voice.

"What's RJ stand for?" he asked.

RJ muttered a few choice curses.

"Ah, come on, RJ."

"Let it lie, David. Even if I told you, it wouldn't mean a damn thing to you. It doesn't mean anything. It doesn't stand for anything. My name is RJ. It's just something to call me instead of 'hey you!' Who cares what it means or what it stands for? Your questions will be the death of us all."

Chapter Eight

It had been a long and tiring drive across half of the country. The truck had suffered multiple breakdowns, and they'd been stopped several times by the Reliance cops. Sometimes they could bluff their way out. But when they couldn't, there was always RJ's special way of dealing with people who became annoying.

Now, it was just him and RJ. Getting ready to face God-only-knew what, armed only with blasters and a cock-and-bull story. David didn't really understand why they were here or why what they were doing was important. RJ said do this, do that, she explained what to do and how to act, but what she had never explained was *why*.

"I don't know. It doesn't seem right waiting for them . . . tricking them like this," David said.

"Right shmight," RJ said, checking to make sure her uniform was straight. "You wanted to do something that everyone would notice, and this can't go unnoticed, David. After today, they're going to know we mean business. Don't get squeamish on me." She straightened her uniform yet again.

"I don't know why you're bothering so much with looking just right when you refuse to take that damned chain off," David said, then added in an exasperated tone. "Reliance cops don't wear chains around their waists."

"I'm not a cop. I'm a freedom fighter," RJ said with mock fervor, hands on hips, chin up staring into the distance.

"It's not funny, RJ," David said in disgust.

"Chill out, will you? I only have to look like a cop for a few minutes. It just so happens that I'm not worried about my disguise. I just want to look my very best when I assassinate a governor. I've never done that before, you know."

"You're sick, RJ. I swear, sometimes I think you're really as warped as you make out to be." He gave RJ a contemptuous look.

She just grinned. "What can I say, David?" She shrugged and the grin left her face. "I am what the Reliance made me, and I love my work."

Jack Bristol was the governor in charge of military affairs for the area that was known by the

Reliance as Zone 2-A. As such, he lived and traveled in luxury with an armed escort.

Four first-class soldiers armed with swords and riding motorbikes surrounded his armor-plated limo. He shared the limo with four laser-carrying Elites. And the driver, who was a second-class soldier, was carrying a projectile weapon. Because of this—and because Jack Bristol had never seen real combat in his life—the governor felt as safe as if he were in his mother's womb.

Jack was the first to see the barricade. "What the hell is that?" He didn't like to be delayed. As governor, he hardly ever was.

"It appears to be a barricade, sir," the driver informed him helpfully.

"I can see that, you fool," the Governor blasted. "What's it doing there?"

"I don't know, Your Worship," the driver replied, and stopped himself from saying. *No doubt it's there to annoy asshole bureaucrats in armor-plated limos.* He smiled at his thoughts and said over his shoulder, "No reports have come in over the radio, sir."

The entourage came to a halt. The only alternative would have been to turn around and go back the other way. That would have served no purpose. There was no reason for them to think that they were in any danger because there wasn't anything particularly strange about surprise road-blocks in the middle of Reliance territory.

The woman—obviously the commanding officer—walked purposefully over to the lead motorcycle.

"See what's going on," Jack ordered one of the Elites. The man got out, making sure that the door was closed securely behind him. He walked over to the woman, they spoke, and he returned to the limo.

"Well?" Jack demanded.

"There was a threat made that someone would try to assassinate your person on the stretch of road ahead," the Elite said. "They are checking the road for mines or ambush parties. It should only take them a few minutes."

"This is ridiculous! How could any rebel know our travel route?" the governor asked hotly.

"It was on the viewscreen that you would be arriving at Greenside base to do an inspection. This is the only route to Greenside Base . . ."

"Stupid PR people. They really don't understand the importance of security." Jack pulled a face. "Why didn't they contact us by radio?"

"They said that their equipment is acting up."

"Oh, that's par, isn't it? The viewscreen work, but our radios don't." Jack pulled a face. "All this talk of rebels makes me tired. Tell them to move. We can take care of any trouble we come up against."

"Sir, the threat came from RJ," the Elite warned.

"So? She scares me no more than any other rebel. Tell them to move their stupid barricade. I'm in a hurry. I've wasted enough time already," Jack ordered.

The Elite nodded and got out of the limo again.

As the Elite reached RJ, David joined her.

"The Governor says to move the barricade," the Elite informed them.

"Sorry," RJ said, and added on a final note. "My orders came down from Jago. We were told to keep this road blocked till they've made their sweep. I'm keeping it blocked."

"Between you and me, Jack Bristol is a real prick," the Elite informed her. "If you don't move that barricade, your butt's going to be in a sling."

"If I move it, and the Governor gets killed, I can put my head between my legs and kiss my ass goodbye," RJ said hotly. "You know Jago's policy. If it fucks up, kill it . . . I'll take my chances with Bristol any day."

"It will only be a few more minutes," David said calmly. "Surely, it's worth a few minutes of time to make sure that he arrives at Greenside Base in one piece."

The man looked at David and smiled. "I know that, and you know that. But the governor is in his armor plated limo, his god is in his heaven, and you would be hard-pressed to prove to him that he is

anything but perfectly safe. Truth is, I doubt Ole Ironguts Bristol has ever seen open combat."

RJ and David both laughed.

"If you could just see fit to let us through . . ."

"Sorry," RJ said flatly.

The Elite mumbled a curse and returned to the limo.

"Well?" Jack demanded when the Elite returned.

"They refuse to move the barricade," he reported. "They are under orders from Jago."

"I can see I'm going to have to handle this myself. Oh, why must Jessy surround me with idiots?"

Jack got out of the limo, ignoring the Elite's protests, and marched up to RJ.

"I want this barricade moved immediately!"

"Sorry, sir," RJ said.

The governor stopped just inches from RJ. "Do you have any idea what kind of trouble you're going to be in . . ."

"I don't think you are aware of just how dangerous these rebels can be." RJ posed purposefully.

"Why, they could even pose as Reliance police officers and set up a barricade to stop impatient governors."

The look on Jack Bristol's face told her that he was only too aware of the laser pressed against his stomach.

"Keep your hand away from your gun, and I might, *might* being the operative word, let you keep your mid-section."

"This is an outrage," the Governor sputtered in an angry whisper.

"I'm a rebel. Outrages are my specialty."

She nodded at David. He moved into position, pulled the pin on the gas canister and lobbed it into the open door of the limo. Then he ran and kicked the door closed to keep the gas in.

One of the first-class soldiers pulled a projectile weapon he shouldn't have had, and RJ blasted him. A second went after David with his sword, and she bored him through the head. The other two fell before they even knew what was happening.

Governor Bristol stood there in stunned silence.

RJ smiled, removed his laser, tucked it into the folds of her chain, and put her own sidearm away.

"What is all this?" Bristol was scared. This bitch meant business.

"This is rebellion, Governor," RJ announced.

She looked at David. "Get it."

David nodded and went to the stolen police car. He emerged with a silver briefcase. The governor knew what they wanted now, and he shook with the magnitude of their crime.

"You can't open it without my help, and I won't help you," the governor announced.

"Oh, I think you will." RJ pulled the laser and pressed it against his head.

"You're going to kill me anyway," he scoffed.

"Use your brains. As long as you have hostage value, you're safe," she said. "As long as you don't give me any trouble, you're worth more to me alive than dead."

"The gas should have dissipated by now." She motioned towards the limo. "Of course, if you're not going to be cooperative . . ."

The governor moved over to the limo. The door was geared to his finger prints, and those of his entourage. No one else was going to be able to get in. He opened the door, and RJ smiled broadly.

"Very good."

She motioned David towards the open door.

David threw in the dummy case, and pulled out a similar one. He coughed. "Damned shit! Damn you, RJ," he coughed again.

"Don't be such a wimp, David. A little sleeping gas never hurt anyone." She took the case, smiled, walked over to the hood of the limo and set the case down. Then she looked at the governor expectantly.

"Open it."

"And if I won't?" he asked.

"Then I kill you and take my chances. And yes, I know that the wrong combination sets off a charge that can blow up everything for a ten-foot radius. Therefore, my friend and I are going to stand way back here while you open it. Just in case I've read you wrong, and you are the hero type." She held the laser on him.

Jack hesitated. He looked at the combination buttons. He was a loyal Reliance man. Press the wrong buttons and he did them out of their trophy. Of course, he also blew himself up. Damn it, if he opened this case for them, he was putting a Pandora's box in their hands that would take the Reliance months to close, and they might kill him anyway. He keyed the first sequence of numbers.

If he opened this box, he was betraying the Reliance. He did the second sequence of numbers. Again he paused. He keyed in the third and final sequence and the lid flew open to reveal his personal computer. RJ smiled, walked over and closed the lid. The combination was now a permanent part of her memory. She picked up the case and smiled at the Governor.

"I thank you and the people thank you," she said.

She looked at David, and he came over took the case, and started for the police car.

She grabbed Bristol and started pulling him along.

He was surprised at the direction they were suddenly going in—not towards the stolen police car, but back towards his limo. She had no intention of using him as a hostage or for ransom purposes. Bristol's attention was captured by the body of one of the first-class soldiers that had fallen across the hood, his sword still clutched in his hand. If he could just stall her, there was a chance.

"Why me? What have I done to you? What have any of us done to you?"

"It's not what you've done to me, Bristol," she spat, stopping and turning to face him. "It's what you asked me to do to others. I was sent on a 'cleansing' mission. The order for the authorized slaughter of unarmed civilians came across your desk. You ordered it."

"The thinning of the population is necessary . . ."

"Then you should understand everything I do." There was a noise in the brush; nothing dangerous, probably a rabbit, and she turned only for a second, but it was long enough for him to pick up the sword and sling it into her side. Apart from a nasty tear in her shirt, nothing happened. She slung off the face shield and helmet in anger, and when she did a look of total shock crossed Bristol's face.

"You . . . But why? Why?" Total confusion. He obviously knew too much, so she shot him in the head before he could say anything else.

David came running up. He had seen the sword hit her. "RJ . . . !"

"And you didn't want me to wear the chain," she said lightly.

"Why'd you kill him? I thought you said he was insurance . . ."

"That's what I told him. I knew he'd consider himself to be too important to kill," RJ said grinning smugly.

"You planned to kill him all along!" David shouted in disbelief.

"It's not like I didn't tell you that I was going to assassinate him. If it makes you feel better, he did try to kill me," she said. "Think of it as reflexive. When someone tries to kill me, I kill them back."

David threw up his hands and stomped back to the car as RJ dragged Bristol's body over and loaded it into the limo.

She flung in a grenade and closed the door. She was in the police car before the grenade detonated. She looked back and grimaced.

"Yuck! What a mess."

David refused to look back. Just the thought of blood and various body parts thrown against unbreakable glass was enough to make him sick.

"Was that really necessary?" David protested.

"Dead people don't talk," RJ said, by way of an explanation.

RJ hit the siren, and they roared off. She patted the case and smiled.

"Now there will be no stopping us. We will be invincible." She let out a stream of maniacal laughter just to mock his moral concern, but the fanatical gleam in her eyes was real enough.

"I don't know, RJ," David said in a troubled voice as he shoved the case into a backpack to conceal it from view. "I'm beginning to wonder if the end justifies the means."

"Always! Always, if the end is freedom," RJ said sternly.

"What gives us the right to kill?" David asked hotly. "What makes us any different from the Reliance?"

"We are right, and they are wrong. That is all the difference I need." RJ was beginning to lose patience with him. David was the poop at every victory party.

David looked at the bag that held the case. "I just find it revolting that this little box is worth nine lives."

"Ten, but who's counting? Sit there and condemn me, David. I really couldn't care less. You talk like it's a game, at which you believe I'm cheating. This is not a game, David. It's a war. In war, people die. Whoever kills the most people wins. That's the only rule that counts."

She took the news of Governor Jack Bristol's death very hard.

Jessica Kirk was senator of Zone 2-A, but it wasn't because she had lost the head of her military that she ordered Reliance flags to be flown at half-mast. That wasn't why she had locked herself in her room and refused all visitors. Nor was it why she had flung herself across her bed and broken into tears.

Jack Bristol had been her lover, and she had loved him. She hadn't believed he was truly dead till she'd seen the body. Or, rather, what was left of the body. It had been all she could do to keep her composure intact till she got back to her room. Now she cried.

She cried for the empty feeling in the pit of her stomach, for wasted time and nights spent alone that could have been spent with him, and she cried for all the things she should have said, and never quite got around to. When she had finished crying, she decided to go after RJ.

She dried her eyes and went to her terminal. She punched up every bit of data on RJ, and then she called her new temporary head of the military.

"Fools, you are looking for the out-of-the-ordinary. Look for the ordinary. Look for a military or police vehicle. I want everyone checked out. If one of them doesn't belong, then you've found RJ. She couldn't have gotten more than a hundred miles away by now. Don't fuck up this time. I want her, and I want her dead. If anyone spots her, they are to wait for backup. I don't want her to get away. Do you understand, Perkins?"

"Yes, Senator," he said, "but . . . we have no idea what she looks like or . . ."

"She looks like someone tough enough to kick the asses of several Reliance soldiers at once. She looks like someone smart enough to make elaborate plans and carry them out successfully!" Senator Kirk yelled. "She looks like an Elite. Find a female Elite in that sector who isn't supposed to be there, and you've found her. Now get your asses in gear. If she gets away, heads will roll." she turned off her terminal.

She fought the tears.

"Fat, incompetent fool!" she screamed in rage. This was all Jago's fault. All her requests had been denied or overlooked. She talked daily with Right, and he was trying to do his best for her, but getting Jago to take any action more exerting than scratching his own ass was close to impossible. Now Jack was dead. Was it her fault? Was there anything that she could have done that she hadn't? She could think

of no stone she had left unturned.

Till now, Jessica Kirk the senator had let the chain of command deal with this. In fact, Jack had more to do with the RJ thing than she had. But now, Jessica Kirk the lover wanted revenge. Suddenly it had become personal.

"Oh, you are clever, RJ. Very clever. But this time you have met your match. You cannot fight me and hope to win," Jessica muttered into the emptiness of her office.

Jago and his band of fools had more or less ignored RJ, hoping that she would go away. RJ hadn't gone away, and now Jack was dead. Eventually, they would all pay, even that malignant tumor they called a sector leader. Yes, even Jago. They'd all pay for her grief—for Jack's death. But first she had to deal with the main perpetrator of the crime. First, she had to kill RJ.

She stood up. "I can be clever, too." She walked over to the mirror. "Let's see you match wits with a master." She stared at the image in the mirror. Her eyes were bluer than blue, and already clear of any signs that she'd been crying. She ran a comb through her platinum blonde hair and checked the makeup on her dark skin.

RJ was humming in her usual tuneless fashion. David was chewing his nails. He had quickly joined that group of people who firmly believed that people who couldn't carry a tune shouldn't try to sing, whistle, or hum. *Especially* hum. He was about to lose his cool and scream rather loudly at her, when she abruptly stopped. He immediately wished that she would start up again. The lack of humming no doubt meant that there was something a lot worse about to take place. His fear was confirmed when he saw RJ looking in the rear-view mirror.

"Don't look now, but we've picked up a military patrol," RJ announced cheerfully.

David turned to look, and a laser blast hit one of their tires.

RJ managed to put the vehicle into a controlled skid, and they stopped. "Damn! I told you not to look." She grabbed the pack that held the case. "Let's move!"

David didn't wait around for further instructions. He got out of the car and rushed to catch up with RJ.

"They're going to kill us," David whined.

"They're not going to kill us," RJ said. "Just keep your head, and do what I tell you. Here, take this." She handed him the pack, and he put it on his back. She started to unwind the chain.

The damned patrol was almost on them, and she was playing games. It wasn't a small patrol, either; a topless vehicle, three motorbikes and a three-wheeled ATV. The ATV was in front, and that turned out to be a bad place. As the three-wheeled contraption roared in for the kill, its driver met with the killing end of RJ's chain. The driver fell, but the vehicle kept going.

RJ jumped on the trike, and ordered it to stop. She quickly slung the chain around herself as David boarded, and she was off before the rest of the patrol realized what had happened. They recovered quickly, however, and the chase was on.

The trike wallowed like a pregnant cow. It had never been designed for more than one rider. Their pursuers were closing in, and the laser blasts they fired were getting closer and closer to their mark.

"They're going to kill us!" David moaned, close to hysteria. "They're going to kill us. You shouldn't have killed our hostage!"

"They're not going to kill us," RJ stated flatly, gunning the machine for all it was worth. She knew there was only one place that this beast was going to be able to stay ahead of the patrol: off the road. The problem being that there was no place to get off the road right here. RJ took a quick shot at their pursuers. Surprisingly, it hit one of the motorcyclists square in the chest and sent him flying.

Fortunately, RJ had driven these things before. On some of the outer planets, three-wheeled ATVs were the most popular mode of transportation. David had never been particularly happy with RJ's driving, and at this moment it seemed to him that if the patrol didn't kill them, RJ would.

"They're going to kill us! They're going to kill us!" David's whine was beginning to sound like a

chant.

"They're not going to kill us!" RJ shouted over her shoulder, as she finally swung off the pavement and onto a dirt road. This gave her an edge. She still couldn't find a place to get into the woods. If she could find a small trail they wouldn't be able to follow. A laser blast clipped the trike's fender and showered David with sparks. RJ jerked the trike sideways and swung it down an even more primitive road.

One of the bikes skidded out in the gravel. The rider was thrown into a tree, and the bike slid on down the road.

RJ nearly lost it on a sharp corner, and the patrol gained precious ground.

"They're going to kill us . . . they're going to kill us . . . they . . ."

"They're not going to kill us!" RJ didn't need his pessimism. Just then, something tugged at her leg. She glanced down quickly. Nothing serious. Still, even a glancing shot from a laser hurt like hell. Now she was pissed.

The last bike made a bad move, slipped just a bit, and the car hit it. RJ sighed with relief and satisfaction. The ATV could easily outrun the car on this terrain. No sooner had this happy thought flashed by than the engine started to cough. A glance at the fuel gauge showed why.

"They're going to kill us . . . they're going to kill us . . . they're go . . ."

"David." RJ's voice was dangerously calm. "If you don't shut up, you won't have to worry about them, because *I'm* going to kill you. I AM GOING TO KILL YOU!"

The ATV uttered a final splutter and died. RJ jumped off the bike. "Someday you'll laugh about this." She gave his neck a quick, precise chop and caught him as he went limp. As she lay his unconscious form on the ground, the vehicle was almost on them.

"That's right, come on." She fingered the chain and smiled smugly. "Come on, motherfuckers. Let's get this over with, once and for all."

The soldiers stopped firing. One of the rebels was dead, and the other was obviously giving up. Live rebels were valuable. But suddenly, the woman wasn't standing still anymore.

"What the hell . . . open fire!" the captain screamed.

RJ ran at them full speed. Just as it seemed sure that she would make impact with the vehicle, she jumped and landed in the vehicle with them. The chain lashed out. In seconds, all five men were dead. RJ stopped the car and unceremoniously tossed the bodies out. Then she walked over to David.

"David."

No response.

She slapped him lightly on the face. "David. David, come on."

He stirred. "Ugh, what happened?" He opened his eyes slowly. "Was I hit?" Then he remembered. He jerked into a sitting position. "I *was* hit. By *you*," he accused.

"You were hysterical," RJ explained.

"I most *certainly* was *not*!" David said indignantly.

RJ raised her eyebrows.

"OK, so I was a little on edge. Couldn't you just slap me?"

"Not nearly as effective," RJ said with a crooked grin.

David gave her a hard look.

"I'm sorry, OK? I lost my cool. It was the first thing that popped into my head."

"Knocking me out! That was the first thing that 'popped into your head?'" David screeched.

RJ walked over and got into the car. "Are you coming?"

He hesitated, so she started to leave without him. He ran to catch up.

"Why are we going back this way?" he asked.

"To pick up one of those bikes. They must have been on the road looking for us a long time, and

this damn thing's almost out of fuel, too. We ought to be able to siphon out enough to get us a full tank on a bike."

"Why did they just start shooting at us? I mean, they didn't even pull us over and question us!"

"Well, like I said, they had been on patrol for awhile. They were probably hot to shoot at something, and when we couldn't be reached over the radio . . . when we weren't on their frequency . . ." she shrugged.

"But what if our radio was broken, or . . ."

"The Reliance deals in statistics, David, not people. Odds were that we were their target. They were right."

"But what if they hadn't been?"

"I thought that was what the war was all about."

"Lost them?" Jessica screamed. "Lost them?" Her eyes blazed fire. She checked the map. "They've taken one of the bikes, but they still can't have gotten far." She drew a circle on the map. "Concentrate the search here."

"First thing in the morning, Senator," Perkins confirmed, saluting.

"Now, fool. Bring in fresh troops. They're running, but they'll try to rest. They'll have to. Now is the time to find them, and we're not going to stop till we do."

"As you wish, Senator." He bowed and left her office, happy to escape her presence.

RJ threw David a carton of the K-rations she'd found on the bike.

"I'm not eating. Not this crap, anyway." He set it on the ground beside him and lay back on his bed of leaves.

"It's all we have and could be all we have for awhile," RJ said. She sat on a pile of leaves she'd raked up and started to eat. "They weren't planning to be out long. No camp gear, no extra ammo. They didn't pack much food, either."

David sat up and watched RJ eat in disbelief.

"You're eating a dead man's food," David said with a note of disgust in his voice.

"Well, then he can't bitch, can he?" she asked with a smile.

"If you hadn't killed that man, he'd be eating that food right now," David said in a faraway voice. A shiver went up his spine.

"God, I hate it when you're morbid. It's just *food*. Peel off the foil top, pick up the fork on the left and eat," RJ said.

"I can't." David lay back down.

After a few minutes he sat up, picked up the tray, peeled off the top and started to eat.

RJ smiled smugly, but said nothing.

"I'm hungry," David growled defensively. "So, what's next? Satis?"

"God no!" She tapped the pack with the case in it. "This should tell us our next move." She'd finished eating and tossed her tray aside. She took the case out and started to hammer out the code.

"Careful, careful!" David said, flinching.

RJ just grinned as she opened the case.

"Damn it, RJ, why don't you write the combination down somewhere? One wrong number and you blow us both into tiny, bite-sized David and RJ pieces."

RJ just continued smiling as her fingers flew across the keys. "You worry about the damnedest things." She looked away from the screen just long enough to see that David was not at all happy with her cavalier attitude. "David, do you know what 'total recall' means?"

"I don't know, and I don't give a . . ."

"It means that I remember everything I ever saw, everything I've ever heard." She went back to the keyboard. "I don't forget *anything*. I'm certainly not likely to forget something as simple as the combination to this case."

"That must be great!" David said, impressed in spite of himself. "Hell, I can't remember my name half the time."

"Most of the time it's more a curse than a blessing." RJ's voice dragged. She didn't stop working with the computer, but she wasn't smiling any more. "There are some things that are better off forgotten. It can be real hell being able to remember in detail something you would just as soon forget." She smiled then. "A wise man once told me, 'Be careful what you wish for, you just might get it.'"

David finished eating. His curiosity aroused, he moved to sit behind RJ. He looked in awe at the print out screen. It was like the viewscreen in his village, except much smaller. Instead of pictures, there was a steady stream of letters and numbers. He understood that by hitting the keys, RJ was making the numbers and letters appear. Beyond that, he was lost.

"What do all those letters and numbers mean? Are they important?" he asked.

"Yes," RJ replied shortly.

"Well, what do they mean?" he asked again.

RJ sighed, then said in the most patient voice she could muster. "It's computer lingo. This computer is tied into Zone 2-A's military computer. All the data on military operations in the zone are stored there. With this portable model, I can access the main computer and extract any information I deem necessary. Because it is tied into the system, it won't show a break-in. It can tell us about any shipment of arms or anything else in detail. How many troops are in the convoy, how many vehicles, what sort of material they are transporting, et cetera., et cetera."

David understood now why the box was so important, and why they had gone to so much trouble to get it.

RJ stopped the scrolling on the screen. "Hum."

"Hum, what?" David asked.

"That's very interesting."

"What is?" These letters and numbers didn't look any more interesting to David than the others had.

"Most of the more important shipments are being accompanied by GSHs. Still, with this we ought to be able to avoid those. I wish I knew where we were. I could see if there are any troops close to us," she added thoughtfully.

"You mean you don't know where we are?" David asked in disbelief.

"Haven't the vaguest," RJ answered, obviously unconcerned.

"I thought you said you had total recall," he said.

"I do. I also have a lousy sense of direction. I can tell you this: we are somewhere north of the point where the patrol started chasing us." She shrugged. "There are no road markers on these pig trails we took. I know where we are in relation to where we were, but I can't put it into anything that I can use in the computer. I'm not too worried. They won't try anything till morning." Suddenly, she looked up and seemed to be listening. "Of course, I could be wrong." She packed the computer back into the pack, jumped up and ran for the bike.

David had learned to trust RJ's instincts. He got on as she started the bike. "What is it?" he asked.

"I hear bikes." She roared off into the woods, choosing not to return to the road. She also didn't bother to turn on the headlight. This was none too safe considering that it was now pitch black.

"RJ, the lights," David reminded her, thinking that perhaps it had slipped her mind.

"No!" was all she said.

David didn't argue. Actually, considering the way RJ drove, he'd just as soon not be able to see.

The Elite Captain got off his bike. The infrared scan showed where the bike had left the road. He

got on his comlink. "Senator Kirk, this is Captain Sikes."

"Here, Captain," she said, but made him look at the back of her head.

"We've found where a cycle left the road."

Now he had her attention. She turned to face him. "Then don't stand there, imbecile. Get after them! I want those rebels dead!" she almost screamed.

"Yes, Senator."

"And Captain . . ." she added.

"Yes, Senator?"

"If you fail, I will not feel very charitable towards you."

Her tone made Sikes shiver. "I won't fail, Senator." He cut the link. "Let's move out." He started out with his four men on the trail of the bike. He had to kill these rebels or face the wrath of Senator Kirk. For some reason he didn't feel confident. He shouldn't be feeling uneasy. He had the scan, and with that he couldn't lose them. Surely, four secondaries armed with projectile weapons and an Elite with a laser ought to be able to overpower two tired rebels who'd been on the run all afternoon with no food and no rest. If nothing else, their bike should be running low on fuel.

They drove up on RJ and David's rough camp. Gone—damn it! Sikes saw an empty food tray and the piles of leaves. Damn! They'd eaten and probably rested—so much for *that* part of his fairy tale. He got off the bike, retrieved the food tray and looked around quickly. There was nothing to indicate that he was dealing with any more than two rebels. Good, he didn't need any more surprises. He stuck the tray in his pack and took off again, following the heat trail the rebels had left.

The bike lugged up the hill. It hadn't been designed for the kind of abuse it had endured since RJ seized it. The patrol was closing in on them. She now not only heard them, but she could see their lights. The bike reached the top of the hill, sputtered and died. RJ's attempts to start it were futile. She quickly jerked the battery off the bike and stuck it in the pack.

David just sat there.

"Come on, get off and let's go."

"What's the use, RJ?" David said. "Couldn't we just accept defeat gracefully?"

"I am a six-foot-two-inch woman. I don't do *anything* gracefully." She took a timed charge from her pocket, set the timer and stuck it to the bike's fuel tank. "Coming?"

David jumped off the bike and ran after her. They heard the explosion, and turned just in time to see one of the Reliance bikers thrown through the air. A split second, later the newly damaged bike exploded.

"One," RJ said in a satisfied tone. She started to run again, and David followed, shaking his head. RJ's sense of timing never ceased to amaze him. Somehow, she had calculated to the second when the patrol would come even with their abandoned bike.

Captain Sikes stopped just short of catching the blast. Now they were four. Sikes' illogical sense of doom mounted. He looked at the picture on his comlink—once again he was privileged to view the back of Senator Kirk's head.

"Senator."

She turned.

"Senator, I . . ."

"I take it that you do not have good news for me, Sikes," she said angrily.

"I've lost a man," he said. "But the rebels are on foot now, and we should have them shortly."

"How did the man die?" she asked curiously.

"An explosive device was set up on the bike. I see no tripwires, so I assume that it was a timed charge. They must have estimated how long it would take us to arrive at this point."

"She must know that you're tracking her with infrared," Jessica thought for a second. "OK. Stay to one side of their trail and be careful. She'll no doubt set more traps. You can't kill *them* if *you're* all dead. This RJ is no one's fool. From the data we have on her, it is more than likely that she used to be a high-ranking Elite. So, Sikes, help is on the way. All you have to do is keep a bead on them. In a few minutes, that whole area will be so full of troops that a fart couldn't get out. Just don't lose track of them."

"I won't, Senator," Sikes said. Communication ended.

He looked at his men. Two of them were busy with the body of their fallen comrade. "Leave him. If we don't catch RJ, what happened to him will seem like child's play."

They started off, but without their former enthusiasm, and using much more caution.

Sikes' lower lip trembled. His hands inside his gloves were unnaturally sweaty. He was an Elite. He'd seen combat before. Hell, the odds were in his favor, and more troops were on the way. The rebels were on foot now. The odds were all in his favor. Still . . .

He wondered how well they were armed. Hell, they had to be pretty well armed. They had killed the governor and his entire entourage, not to mention the patrol that had first spotted them. Another charge went off on the trail beside them. One of the men was startled and almost went down. This explosion wasn't as spectacular as the first, because it didn't have the added attraction of the alcohol tank exploding, but it still scared the shit out of them.

Sikes bit his lip to stop the trembling. He knew now that he was fighting something the likes of which he had never fought before. These two fanatics were fighting for a cause. How could men who fought for a paycheck and the dubious glory of plastic medals match their spirit?

Sikes was a Reliance man. He had a Reliance wife and two lovely Reliance children. All his loyalty belonged to the Reliance. After all, he had been raised Elite. He knew in his heart that the Reliance protected and nurtured the people it served. But he couldn't help but respect the people he hunted. They fought with a fervor that he didn't have now, and probably never had possessed.

The thought of a rebel Elite intrigued him. He knew he had never had the inclination. He really couldn't conceive of any Elite rebelling. Elites had it made in the Reliance. They got the best of everything.

He did know one thing. For whatever reason, she had to believe that she was right. Just like Sikes knew *he* was right. After all, that was the way wars got started, and *this* was *war*.

"Damn! I missed!" RJ stopped, and David tried to catch his breath. "They must have figured out what I did, and started to follow the trail to one side." She thought about it for a second, then grinned. "OK, assholes, try this." She took more charges out of her pocket and planted one on either side of the trail, taking care not to disturb the ground too much. After all, she didn't want the infrared to detect that they had done any more than walk by.

"I can't . . . believe it! You're actually . . . enjoying . . . all of this!" David gasped, exhausted. RJ grabbed his hand and started to drag him along. "I . . . don't know . . . if I can . . . go on," David said between gasps.

"Of course you can," RJ said. "You have to. That was the last of the charges."

"Great! No cycle . . . no charges . . . What do . . . we do . . . now?" he puffed. This had all ceased to be fun for him about two miles back.

"Now we improvise, David," she said simply. "Now we use our heads."

Sikes got on the comlink again. This time, Kirk was facing him, and he decided that this was worse.

"Well?"

"I've lost another man, and yet another needs medical attention. Two bikes were destroyed," Sikes informed her. He didn't know how he managed to sound so cool with his heart stuck somewhere in his throat. The wounded man was screaming in the background.

"What happened this time?" Jessica demanded.

"She must have figured out what we were doing. The second charge missed us—it was on the trail, we weren't. She set charges on both sides of the trail this time."

"Imbecile! You should have known that she would change her tactics to match yours. She's obviously timing you. Change your pace. Set no patterns. Go back and forth, on and off the trail. That should throw her off. If she had mines, she'd have used them by now. I will not tolerate failure, Sikes."

"Yes, of course, Senator." This time, it was Sikes that cut the link. He looked at the smoldering remains of the bikes and the rider.

"You, ride with him."

The man did as ordered, in spite of his barely functional leg.

"What can you do to me, Senator?" Sikes mumbled. "If we fail, there won't be any of us left to punish."

Sikes was following the other bike, so it was that bike's driver who screamed out in pain. Not Sikes.

The lead bike fell. Sikes stopped short and jumped off, laser in hand. He scanned the area, but saw nothing. The man held his upper arm. It was a nasty wound, and the blood flowed freely. Sikes helped him to bind the wound then he looked at the trap.

The limb of a small tree had been sharpened into a spear. The top of the tree had been tied down, and a rope wrapped half way around the base of another tree. The rope was then stretched across their trail at chest height, and carefully placed on the small limb of another tree. Crude, but obviously effective. The secondary was lucky. If he'd been any further away, the spear would have struck him in the head. Any closer, and it would have hit him with enough force to penetrate a limb or his body cavity.

Sikes once again called the Senator. This time, he was in no mood for pleasantries. "I've got good news and bad news." Was that hysteria in his voice? He couldn't be sure, and he didn't really care.

"What do you mean?" Kirk asked.

"The good news is that she's out of charges. The bad news is that she doesn't need them." Sikes moved his arm in an arc, so that Jessica could see the trap. "So, tell me how I plan for that. I don't have enough men to go on."

This attitude did not please Jessica. "They are only two people on foot in the dark . . ."

"And I am the only one in this troop that isn't badly wounded. We can't go on. If you send us on, you send us to our deaths, Kirk."

"If you come back here without their heads, Sikes, I will kill you myself. Now quit wasting time. Don't you realize that you are giving her time to set another trap?"

Sikes moved out. This time he took the lead. He moved cautiously, slowly. He was resigned that he was riding to his death. He had no doubt now. That was why he had felt strangely from the first. That was the reason for his dread. He was going to die. *It's true*, he thought, *foresight is real. Too bad I'll be dead before I can tell anyone.*

She'd set another trap. This one took even less time. They really couldn't afford to rest, but David's labored breathing told her that they must. She was tired, and she knew that this meant that David must be on the brink of total collapse. The fact that he had held up this long was a credit to his strength and his force of will.

The Reliance would be deploying more troops. At any moment, their running could shove them right into another patrol. These men were just the dogs sent in to tire them out. To bark until the others were in position, and then point the way.

Plans formed in her mind, and were discarded. She needed to know more about the situation to make any real plans. If she had had time to fiddle with the computer, she could figure out what they were sending in. She would have been able to call up maps and try to figure out where they were in relation to

the troops, but that could take as much as thirty minutes. That was thirty minutes they didn't have. She was running out of tricks, and they were running out of time.

Sikes barely saw the rope in time to stop. If he hadn't been looking so carefully, he wouldn't have seen it at all. This time, the rope was just inches above the ground. Sikes got off the bike. He picked up a rock, slung it at the rope and watched in horror as the area he would have occupied burst into flame. The stench of battery acid bit his nostrils, his eyes teared, and he retreated to a safer distance, coughing. It was clear, now. She was a devil. This trap was the worst thing Sikes had encountered in all his years with the Reliance. Apparently, she had rigged a tree as before. Instead of a spear, however, she'd attached the opened battery in the improvised catapult. When the rope was tripped, the highly volatile acid was slung over the target area.

Sikes was old enough to remember a time when batteries contained a much more stable acid, but like everything else, the Reliance had been forced to start using a cheaper and less stable alternative. This stuff was less efficient in some ways, but much more lethal. Instant combustion—what a horrible death!

Slowly, it dawned on Sikes that this trap was even more subtle. The recent drought made the forest a tinderbox. Already the fire raged out of control. In a few hours, it would successfully block the deployment of troops from the east, and that was where the roads were. He got on his bike quickly and passed the flames before he, too, was blocked off. Sikes called Jessica on the move. "She's set the forest on fire," he reported calmly. "You'd better send in some extinguisher planes, or we'll be completely cut off."

"Immediately. Just get after her," Jessica ordered.

Damn it, they were going to fart around and let her get away! She quickly checked her map. She already had troops deployed in the area. A quick check of wind direction and velocity told a story she didn't like.

"Damn!" She checked again to be sure. "They're heading right into the fire." She got on her communicator. "Captain Fry, the rebels have started a fire and it's headed your way."

"We see it, Senator," the Captain said. "I think we can beat it and join Sikes."

"No, you don't have time. If you don't retreat, you will be stuck in that box canyon. You have to go west," Jessica ordered urgently.

Captain Fry beat his wrist communicator against a tree. "What's that, Senator? Can't hear you." He hit it again, "We've got a bad link—must be the fire."

"Damn it, man . . ."

"You're fading, Senator," Captain Fry hit his wrist unit hard enough to break it. He looked up at the secondary soldier who stood beside him.

"Oh, dear! My wrist com seems to have broken." He nudged the man, and said jokingly, "Give a woman a title, and she right away thinks she knows everything. Come on, let's go give Sikes a hand."

The extinguisher planes didn't arrive in time to save Captain Fry and his troop. Seventeen soldiers burned to death in the box canyon. Death by fire was terrible. Terrible to hear, terrible to see, but the most terrible thing of all was the smell.

It was an even more terrible thing to live through.

Alexi pulled himself through the flames. How he had escaped with no more than the equivalent of a bad sunburn was nothing short of a miracle. His sleeve was on fire. He stopped, dropped and rolled, then jumped up and ran again. He couldn't stop long. To stop was to die.

The smoke made him cough, and his brain was a blur. Too much horror. Dead, all dead. He'd been with some of those people since he'd made it to third class. They hadn't died like soldiers. They hadn't died in battle. They had died screaming like terrified children as the flames engulfed them.

He'd worked hard to make it to third class. He'd seen quite a bit of action. But none of his experience or training had prepared him for this.

Alexi was ambitious. He wanted to make it to Elite, then on to governor—maybe even Senator. It was a wild dream, a dream of power. He'd worked hard.

Then he'd almost died in a fire.

Till now, he had never seen how intangible his dream was. Now he realized the absurdity of it. He'd been third class for six years. He'd been passed over for promotion to Elite twelve times.

Who was he kidding? He was forty-five years old. At his age, if he hadn't been promoted to Elite, it wasn't likely that he would be. Hell, they hadn't even offered him a wife yet. Governor Alexi, Senator Alexi, what a fool he'd been.

He'd seen how the high-rankers lived. They had everything a man could dream of. He had nothing. He had busted his hump for the Reliance, and they sent him to die. *No reward in that.* And if he'd died, who would have cared? *Who would even notice?*

Well, 1-Z-2678-11 bit the big one today.

Anyone to claim his ashes?

No.

No? What a shame.

Yes, what a waste. Do you have any idea how much energy it takes to reduce a body to ash?

Oh, this one was mostly done when it got here.

No one to claim the ashes?

That's right.

Well, then put him with the others on the public gardens.

"No!" Alexi screamed out loud and doubled his pace. He wasn't going to die in this damned fire and become fertilizer. He wasn't going to die a nobody.

RJ and David came to a river. The water ran hard and fast. RJ stepped in and David followed. At this point, he was too exhausted to do anything but follow dumbly. The current was strong, and the rocks were slippery, but worst of all, the water was frigid.

"The infrared won't be able to track us in the water," RJ told David, though for once he didn't ask.

The water got deep, up to David's waist. The current was strong, and David no longer had the strength to fight it. He collapsed from sheer exhaustion.

David had been holding on to her for the past three hours, so she felt his grip on to her chain loosen. She turned just in time to see David go under. She didn't think; she just dove in after him. It wasn't easy, but she caught hold of him and pulled his head out of the water. He was OK, or at least he was still breathing. She wrestled him out onto the bank, caught her breath, and pulled her laser. She looked at it in a defeated sort of way, and poured the water out of it. It would be useless till it dried. She was sure she didn't have time to strip, dry and reassemble it now. She quickly checked the case to make sure it hadn't leaked. It would be the shits to have gone through all this for nothing. The case was tight, and the computer was dry.

She was exhausted; running on empty. No wonder David had collapsed. She couldn't afford the luxury of rest right now, however. That meant only one thing. She reached into her pocket, pulled out the leather pouch and extracted one of the pills. She swallowed it dry. As always, the effect was almost immediate. She took a deep breath; she'd be good for hours now. She began to replace the pills, but stopped. Smiling wickedly, she dumped one into her palm, replaced the cap and carefully stowed the pills in her kit. Then she took a cup from the pack and filled it with water into which she crushed the pill. Using the knife from her kit, she cut several three-foot lengths of straight limbs from a nearby tree. Sharpening each stick, she dipped the sharpened end into the Pronuses solution and set them carefully aside to dry briefly. She poured the remaining solution over the sharpened spearheads for good measure,

then tossed the cup across the river. She packed up quickly, tossed the pack over one shoulder, David over the other, picked up the spears and started off again.

"They went into the river. The infrared won't . . ." Sikes found himself on the defensive again.

"I don't want your excuses, Sikes." Jessica had lost any sign of patience hours ago. "All I asked was that you not lose them, and now you tell me some story about the water. Find them. Now!"

"Yes, Senator," Sikes grated out. Transmission ended.

"Captain, look!" The man pointed to something on the trail ahead of them.

They stopped beside the cup. A quick scan showed that the rebels had crossed the river at this point. Somehow, Sikes didn't share the secondary's enthusiasm. The people they hunted didn't make mistakes; she'd left the cup for a reason. Still, they crossed the river, leaving the man with the wounded leg behind. There was only one set of footprints on the other side, but the depth showed that one was no doubt carrying the other.

"One of them must be wounded," the secondary said.

"Or just exhausted. Remember that they have been on foot all night," Sikes said. "Come on, we should be able to catch them easily now."

They had traveled only a minute or two when the screaming started. They ran back, weapons pulled. But when they arrived it was obvious that the wounded man hadn't died of any direct attack. Even from across the river, they could see that the man's face was bubbled and misshapen. Sikes saw the cup in the man's hand. Only one thing could do that. Sikes looked away.

"God damn her! Is there nothing she can't get her hands on?" Sikes cursed.

"What happened to him?" the secondary asked, sickened.

"Pronuses poisoning. She must have laced the cup with it," Sikes said.

"Pronuses! But only *freaks* have Pronuses!" Obviously, the man was now terrified.

"Don't be a fool, man. Only Elites wear Elite boots, but she's got a pair of those, too. Come on. Let's go before the trail gets cold."

RJ found a clump of brush and put David into it. She covered him with leaves, partly to keep him warm, and partly to hide him. It was time to get rid of the dogs. They were following her footprints. If that told them where to find her, it also told *her* where to find *them*. She walked back down her own trail then crawled into a tree with her spears to wait.

Sikes stopped. He held up a hand, and the secondary stopped, too. He could feel it. She was watching him. The spear hurled through the air to land with a pounding thud in the secondary's chest. Death came so instantly that he didn't have a chance to scream. He fell backwards, his body arched once, and then he was still. The boiling of his flesh told Sikes that such a direct hit was unnecessary.

"Go ahead! Kill me! I can't see you, I can't stop you! Go ahead!" Sikes screamed. He spread his arms wide. "Come on, kill me! But at least have the guts to show your face."

RJ was never one to deny a man his last wish. She jumped down from the tree.

Sikes' reaction to her appearance wasn't quite what she'd expected.

He stared at her in horror and confusion, mouthing words he couldn't get out. His reason, already stretched tightly, snapped.

RJ raised the spear.

"How? Why?" Sikes gasped.

"The answer to 'how' is easy," she smiled broadly. "I'm a freak. 'Why?' Because I want to topple the Reliance. Is that all? May I kill you now?" Actually, she didn't wait for his answer.

He fell to the ground and rolled. The spear missed, but his blast hit her square in the chest and sent her reeling. He took the opportunity to run, but he knew that a blast to the chest wasn't going to slow the freak down for long. He turned on his comlink, and there was Kirk.

"You're not killing me!" he laughed maniacally.

"Sikes, what's going on?" Jessica demanded.

"They're all dead. But not me. You're not going to kill me, you freak!" He threw his comlink against a tree, where it shattered. He'd lost her for the time being, but she'd heal. Then she'd come to kill him. He laughed hysterically. "You won't kill me!"

RJ had taken the full blast in her chest. She stopped and leaned against a tree. She tried to catch her breath, but ended up slumping down to the ground. She had to catch him, but it would have to wait. Hell, she could see her breastbone through the hole in her chest.

"Oh, bother." She took another Pronuses and waited for the effects. "Pride goeth before a fall. Father always said that." She felt better. Glancing down, she saw the damage rapidly repairing itself, so she got up and continued the chase.

The hunter had become the hunted, and as was so often the case, the hunter couldn't handle the role reversal. RJ found her quarry hanging limply in a tree with a rope around his snapped neck. She quickly took his jacket—he'd ruined hers, after all. She took his shirt and sidearm, too.

Addressing the corpse, RJ commented dryly, "You know, if you start killing yourselves, you're going to take all the fun out of this little war."

On the way back to get David she stopped just long enough to take the dead secondary's clothes and weapon. Then after she uncovered him, RJ traded David's wet clothes for the dry ones. Oh, the pants were a little wet from wading the river, but nothing compared to the wet, muddy mess that David had been wearing. David groaned as she changed his clothes.

"Oh, just shut up and go back to sleep. A lot of help you are." She picked David up and started out again. Right now, her only plan was to keep moving.

Jessica tried desperately to reach Sikes. She couldn't. She played back his last communication. The word "freak" echoed through Jessica's brain. She quickly erased the communication from the terminal's main memory.

She was tired of playing. It was time to get serious. She put on her combat fatigues. If you wanted killing done right, you had to do it yourself. She wanted RJ dead, and if Sikes wasn't dead already, she had to kill him, too.

It took all of RJ's skill to continue dodging the ever-increasing number of patrols in the area. Now there were helicopters, and that made it decidedly more difficult.

After two hours of carrying David, she sat down for a rest. She slapped him a bit. Till then, all the bouncing and trouncing and tossing from one shoulder to the other like a feed sack hadn't made him so much as stir and mutter. Therefore, RJ was surprised that the gentle slap had any effect at all.

David stirred.

"Yes, it would be nice if you woke up now," RJ commented sarcastically. She rubbed her Pronuses-dry eyes as David rubbed the sleep from his.

He was awake, and he looked around in a disoriented way.

"Have a nice nap?"

"What happened?" David asked. He felt nauseous and his ribs and stomach hurt.

"You passed out." She got up and helped him to his feet. "Can you walk now? We've got to keep moving, and I'm tired of carrying you."

He nodded, although he held his head when he did so, and looked a little green.

"The water," he mumbled. It was like he was remembering some horrible nightmare. "Under the water . . ." He remembered hands grabbing him, pulling him out, a gasp for air, and then all was dark. He knew only that RJ had pulled him out of the river. If she hadn't, he'd have surely drowned. "Thanks, RJ."

"Don't thank me yet. We've just been spotted." It wasn't her imagination, either. The helicopter flying just above the tree tops tossed out two brightly colored smoke bombs.

"What the hell did they do that for?" David coughed out. "Now they can't see us."

"Now every troop in the area knows where we are. By the time the smoke clears, we'll be surrounded. Come on." She ran, pulling him after her.

Alexi saw the colored smoke, but he went towards it for a different reason than his fellows. If RJ died, almost everyone would know, and everyone who knew would care. Pro or con, no one would be indifferent.

#

RJ and David broke into the clearing. "Hit the ground and stay there."

"Why?" David wanted to know. "What are you going to do? What can you do?"

"Just stay down." She didn't have time to explain.

She ran into the clearing. As she had expected, the helicopter spotted her. It swooped down for the kill. RJ waited till the runners were dangerously close. Then she jumped for all she was worth and caught hold of one of them.

"Where'd she go?" the gunner asked the pilot.

The pilot shrugged.

"Where did who go?"

Both men turned to look at the woman standing on the runner. Their mouths hung open in disbelief.

"Oh, you meant me." She grabbed the gunner and jerked him out of the helicopter.

The pilot drew his gun and fired point-blank.

RJ looked from the hole in her jacket to the stunned pilot and frowned. "Damn it, I just got this jacket."

The man screamed as she grabbed the front of his shirt in one hand. His scream rose to a shrill soprano as he was hurled out of the chopper, and didn't stop till he hit the ground with a wet thud.

RJ finished climbing in, took the controls, turned the chopper around and set it down close to David.

David didn't have to be told twice. He ran and jumped in, thinking that RJ would take off immediately.

She just sat there.

"What are you waiting . . ." then he saw the Elite with the rocket launcher.

"Turn the bird off, and get out—slowly."

There were three others with him, all holding lasers pointed directly at them.

RJ turned off the helicopter.

"OK, get out. Hands up!"

RJ and David did as they were told. They stood before the group, arms held high.

"So, you're the great RJ. You don't look so tough to me." He raised the rocket launcher, and aimed it at her.

"In all fairness, you're not seeing me at my best," RJ replied dryly.

RJ was probably the only one there to notice the badly battered trooper stumble into the clearing. One part of her mind processed his presence, and decided that he had come in for the kill.

"Die, traitor!" The Elite's finger tightened on the trigger.

RJ prepared to throw herself to the ground. Her laser should be dry by now, and with it, she could give these four a run for their money.

Then two unexpected things happened. First, David flung himself on her, knocking her to the ground. Second, the soldier who had stumbled into the clearing shot the Elite before his finger could close

on the trigger.

In the pandemonium that followed, two of the remaining Elites fell to RJ's laser, and the third to a second bullet from the stranger's gun.

The three looked at each other for only a second. No word was spoken.

RJ grabbed the rocket launcher, slung it into the chopper, jumped in and started the engine.

David grabbed up RJ's spears and got to the chopper only seconds after the stranger got into the back and sat behind RJ.

They lifted off just as troops started pouring into the clearing.

David had never flown before. He found the feeling exhilarating.

"We're flying, RJ! Flying like a fucking bird!" He jerked on her shoulder in an excited fashion.

"If you don't quit pulling on her, we're going to be dropping like a fucking turd." Alexi had flown before; he'd even had a few chopper lessons once upon a time, but he still didn't like it.

RJ saw the chopper coming up on their tail. "Buckle in."

For once, David complied without question. Alexi fastened himself into the gunner's harness. RJ swerved, but the blast came so close that it shook the chopper.

"That was fucking close," Alexi said.

"Hang on." RJ flipped the chopper upside down and came in behind the other bird.

"All right!" David said, like a kid on a carnival ride.

"Fire," RJ ordered.

Alexi hesitated. That was a Reliance chopper. The chopper opened fire on them. One bullet shattered the windshield in front of RJ. She kicked the safety glass out all the way so that she could see.

"Fire! Fire, or I'll kick your ass out of this chopper," RJ said with a hiss.

Alexi had no doubt that she meant it, nor did he doubt that she could do it. He took careful aim and fired. Then he watched as the chopper exploded in flames, and knew that there was no going back now.

The next chopper to come in pursuit was newer and better equipped. Their first rocket missed. RJ was a superb pilot, but she couldn't outmaneuver the super-chopper indefinitely.

"Can you fly?" RJ asked Alexi.

He nodded reluctantly. "A little."

"Take over." She didn't give him much choice. She unstrapped herself, grabbed the rocket launcher, and stepped out on the runner.

"Are you nuts?" Alexi asked, taking the controls.

"She's nuts, but she's OK," David assured him.

RJ braced herself and prepared to fire. The pursuit had the same idea, and the two rockets hit simultaneously. RJ's rocket hit them squarely, and there was no more pursuit. Their rocket hit the tail of the rebels' chopper, and blew off a piece. It rocked and spun the chopper violently, and RJ fell.

"RJ!" David shrieked. He unbuckled himself, and moved quickly to the door. RJ was hanging on the runner. David hung on to his safety belt and with his other hand reached out and grabbed RJ. "No sense hanging around down there." He pulled her back inside as she cursed his sense of humor.

RJ took the control seat, throwing the rocket launcher off her arm.

"Out of rockets," she said as Alexi started to grab it.

"So, now what? Here comes another one." Alexi pointed. He was beginning to wish he'd stayed on the other side.

"Hand me one of those spears, David. Be careful not to nick yourself; I've poisoned the tips." He handed her one. She took firm hold, positioned the spear and slowed the chopper.

"What the hell are you doing!" Alexi screamed in disbelief and terror. "We've got half our tail shot off. That means that we have damn little sideways motion. They've got a fully operational bird. Machine guns, rockets . . ."

RJ slung the spear.

"Yes, but they don't have a pilot." RJ said smugly, as the other chopper raced towards the ground. Alexi just sat there with his mouth hanging open.

"Isn't she neat?" David asked lightly.

RJ fled as another chopper came in. She was beginning to lose her cool. Enough was fucking enough. She was strung out on Pronuses. Her eyes felt like her lids were made of sandpaper, and her arm was jerking so much it was becoming increasingly hard to control. It had been a hard couple of days on the front, and she was starting to take this all very personally.

"I want a bath," she said longingly.

"What?" David asked.

"Nothing," RJ said with a smile. She looked at David. "Ever wish we'd gone into another line of work?"

David smiled and put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. "Know what you mean, partner. The hours are a bitch, and the pay sucks."

RJ patted his hand.

"We can't outrun them, can we?"

"No," she said. "But we're not going to give up, either."

"Never crossed my mind." David looked at the rocket launcher, then he saw the smoke bombs. He was so excited, he couldn't speak. He picked both up. "RJ?"

She smiled. "Find the rest."

"It could work," Alexi said.

"Of course it will. You load and prepare to fire. Get it in the cockpit."

Alexi nodded grimly.

David dumped eight smoke bombs on the floor between RJ and Alexi.

"Fire on my command," RJ ordered.

Alexi nodded.

RJ slowed and dropped so low that it looked like they would crash into the treetops. As she maneuvered, she took time to be grateful that Earth had no War Birds. They would have been dead long since on one of the outer planets where the equipment was all-new and lethal.

The chopper swooped in for the kill.

"Fire!"

Alexi's aim was right on the money. The first smoke bomb landed in the cockpit of the attacker, which immediately filled with smoke. The pilot was flying blind, and was too close to the trees. It crashed, and RJ pulled up.

"Reload."

The order was unnecessary, as Alexi was already doing so. There was one chopper left that they could see. They could run, but then they would be chased.

"Fuck you," RJ swung around, heading straight for the last chopper.

"What the hell . . ." Alexi was as shocked as the pilot of the other chopper.

The chopper pilot couldn't believe it. Hell! Their tail was shot off, and they were coming after him. He didn't know whether to attack or to run away. While he was wondering, a smoke bomb landed in his gunner's lap. Suddenly he couldn't see.

"Get rid of it!" he screamed.

The gunner was trying to do just that, but it rolled off his lap and got lost on the floor. The pilot knew of only one thing to do. He went up. There shouldn't be anything to hit up there. The smoke was choking him and making him dizzy, sick. Something hit his gunner. He never knew what. The gunner fell

from the craft screaming, still tied to the chopper by his half-fastened safety harness. The pilot's head was pounding. Who would have believed this shit could fuck you up so badly? No sense calling for help, there wouldn't be any. The rebels were getting away. Well, he thought, at least he wouldn't have to face Senator Kirk's wrath. He passed out, and the chopper went down, making him just one more of the casualties.

Chapter Nine

By the time Senator Kirk arrived, all she could do was assess the damage and try to figure out what had happened. To do this, she decided to go to the beginning and follow the rebel's trail. She took General Sacks with her, although at this moment she wasn't sure that she really wanted company—especially Sacks.

"I really can't see what good following this trail will do us," Sacks grumbled.

They stopped their bikes at the spot where RJ and David had set up their rough camp. Jessica got off her bike and started to look around.

"We should be after them. We should be trying to find them."

"And how would you suggest that we do that, Sacks?" Jessica asked hotly. "Should we ask them nicely? Yoo-Hoo! Oh, Rebel Terrorist! Could you please set off a smoke bomb or something so that we can find you?" She saw something on the ground, and moved towards it. "We must see just who we are up against. Obviously, these two people are a lot more capable than our soldiers, since a large number of them died out here trying to catch two Rebels. AH!" She reached down slowly and moved the leaves aside. She carefully lifted the discarded food tray with two fingers. "So, RJ, you do occasionally make mistakes." She put the tray into her backpack. Then she got on her bike and they started out again. The next stop was the booby-trapped bike. Jessica seemed oblivious to the body of the man who had died here.

From here, the rebels had gone on foot. She got off her bike again, this time taking her pack and the infrared scan with her.

"Let's go," she ordered.

"On foot!" the general shrieked. The three first class soldiers with them didn't seem any too pleased themselves.

"You'll join me, General. You men will follow on the bikes." She was not in the mood to argue with the arrogant jerk, and with her rank, she didn't have to.

"Whatever for?" Sacks whined.

"Because I said so," she spat with venom. She turned cool eyes to him. "And, in case you've forgotten, I'm in command. If I tell you to shit, you had better drop a turd. Do you understand, Sacks?" she screamed.

"Yes, of course, Senator. A thousand pardons." He got off the bike and got his pack.

"Double time," Jessica took off. She expected him to keep up, and he did—just. They followed the path RJ had taken as well as they could. The fire had wiped out part of the trail. She stopped and studied the ground.

"Doubtless, you've noticed that one of our rebels is wearing Elite boots," Jessica said to Sacks.

Actually, he hadn't, but he nodded anyway. He didn't have the breath to talk.

Jessica looked at Sacks and frowned. She didn't like the implications. Sacks was a strong, healthy man at the peak of physical health and strength. As an Elite General, he couldn't have been anything else. He was damn near done in, but the rebels had continued from here. Had, in fact gone on to wreak devastating havoc. How could they, if Sacks' condition was any indication of what theirs had been . . . Add to this that they probably hadn't slept for twenty-four hours, and that it had been night, and Jessica

started to form a picture of her adversaries that she did not like at all.

They came to the river, and Jessica waded in.

"You've got to be kidding," Sacks groaned.

"In," she ordered. Sacks complied.

Thirty minutes later, Sacks had had it. "I can't believe they walked in the water this long. I'm freezing."

So should they have been. Jessica had a sinking feeling. Ten minutes later, they came to Sikes' discarded bikes.

Sacks only had to take one look at the body to know what had happened to the man.

"Pronuses." He swallowed hard.

Jessica nodded, and picked up the cup. She sniffed it.

"She laced the cup with it. This fool must have used it." She put the cup in her pack. "Come on, this is where they crossed over." On the other side, Jessica found where RJ had pulled David out of the water. From the amount of water still on the ground, Jessica deduced that they must have both been drenched from head to toe. She looked fleetingly at Sacks. He was huffing and puffing, trying to catch his breath. He was on the brink of exhaustion. Likewise, one of the rebels had been in worse shape than the other. She scanned the footprints, and puzzled out the prints left by the rebels.

"One of them had to carry the other one from here. The one with the Elite boots."

Sacks nodded silently. He didn't find that too hard to believe. Ten minutes later, he collapsed. Jessica left one of the men with him, and took the other two with her.

She found the body with the spear sticking from its chest, the face twisted and distorted.

"Very clever. Pronuses-laced spears." She put her foot on the man's chest and pulled the spear out, oblivious to the gore that oozed out of the now-open wound. Both soldiers swallowed hard. Jessica shook her head.

"A direct hit was unnecessary. You were showing off, RJ." She was talking to herself.

There were two sets of Elite boot-prints on the ground now, and they were going every which way. It was obvious that RJ had lost the dead weight of her partner at this point. Jessica followed the clearest set of prints. One set of Elite prints followed another. Sikes and RJ were apparently about the same size, because she couldn't distinguish between the two. Still, Jessica had no doubt who was chasing whom.

Even so, Jessica was not prepared for what she found. She stopped short with a gasp. Sikes was dancing there in the air like a puppet on a string. This explained Sikes' last hysterical outburst. He had cracked. She really couldn't blame him. His troop had been meticulously picked off. One by one, each had fallen. He had been alone, and he knew there was no escape. He hadn't given RJ the satisfaction of killing him.

"Oh, Sikes," she sighed a deep and heavy sigh. If he had lived, Jessica would have killed him herself, but she still hated to think of him dying like this. Sikes had been a brave man, a strong man. But he couldn't fight RJ. Jessica thought she knew why. She assessed the damage, and her worst fears were only confirmed. There just couldn't be any other explanation for all that she saw.

At the end of the trail, she talked to a third-class soldier who had been on hand to witness the slaughter in the air.

"What did they look like?" Jessica asked.

"What?" The man was in shock. He'd been hit in the arm by a piece of shrapnel. It wasn't a bad wound, but it hadn't been anything but field-dressed, and he was in a great deal of pain.

Jessica didn't care. She was out of patience with the whole damn lot of them.

"The rebels, man. What did they look like?" She demanded.

"I wasn't very close. They were both over average height. The man was very dark, average build. The woman was . . . well, she was blonde . . . as blonde as yourself, Senator, and her skin was about your color."

"A hybrid," the third-class Captain—the soldier's commander—said.

Senator Kirk stiffened. She turned icy blue eyes on him, and his blood ran cold.

He shrugged. It wasn't like it was any secret that Kirk was a hybrid.

"They were joined by a third man," the soldier said.

"He had to be one of ours," Jessica said thoughtfully. "He must have sympathized with her, and gone over. God, if she builds an army, there will be no stopping her." Again, the Senator was talking to herself.

"I don't believe that for a minute," the captain said. "He must have been one of her men."

Jessica slammed the palm of her hand into her head. Partly because she couldn't believe that a man with so little in the way of brains had made it to third-class captain, and partly because after all that had happened, hitting her head felt good.

"It's no wonder they got away. There is not a whole brain in the entire Earth-based Reliance army. RJ and her friend were alone, being chased all night and most of the day. You want me to believe that this fellow just happened to stumble upon them here at the exact moment that all this"—she made a flamboyant hand gesture—"happened? Do you have any idea what the odds of that happening are?" She was yelling in rage by the end of her speech.

The Captain stood there silently. Obviously, he was trying to do the math in his head. "No, Senator. I don't know," he said at length.

Jessica ripped his captain's patch from his shoulder. "Think about it, private. Think about it long and hard. Save all your money, and maybe someday you'll be able to buy a brain. They are doing wonders with artificial intelligence these days. Wait around and maybe technology will catch up with you."

Jessica stomped over to the chopper that was waiting for her and boarded. "Take me back to Capitol. Get me the hell away from all these incompetent fools."

"At once, Senator."

Chapter Ten

General Right walked into Jago's Throne Room and bowed as was required.

"Oh, what is it now?" Jago sighed. He popped a grape into his mouth, and then said around it, "Well?"

"RJ and the rebels . . ."—Somehow, that sounded better than *RJ and one other rebel*—" . . . have assassinated Governor Bristol. Troops were deployed to exterminate them, but with no success. Senator Kirk is reporting the destruction of numerous pieces of Reliance hardware, as well as the deaths of more than fifty soldiers, including Elite Captain Sikes, who apparently went mad and hanged himself." Right tried to report it in the bland, emotionless tones he had been taught at the academy, but it was difficult. This was the most excitement they had seen on Earth in centuries.

"Oh, damn! And this started out to be such a nice day." Jago rested his fat chin on his pudgy-fingered hand and looked at the wall with a pout. "I suppose you want me to do something about it." He sighed heavily. "I'm starting to dislike this RJ person immensely. She is interrupting my life. I want her dead."

"We all want her dead, Excellency. As Governor General of Sector 11-N, I feel it is my duty to go to Capitol 2-A and assist Senator Kirk in putting these rebels down," Right said.

"Then why are you bothering me? Why don't you just do it?" Jago asked hotly.

Right cleared his throat and handed a paper to Jago. Jago read it carefully.

"What is this, Right?" Jago asked suspiciously.

"Sir?"

"This states that you will report directly to Senator Kirk—that you would take your orders from

her, and not me. That I am to give you and that hybrid absolute control in matters concerning the rebel RJ," Jago paraphrased: He didn't really understand what it all meant, but he was sure that he shouldn't like it.

"For your protection, Excellency," Right said.

"How so?" Jago asked with the lift of an eyebrow.

"Well, Sire, you couldn't possibly be blamed for any mistakes that we might make since we wouldn't be consulting with you."

Jago thought about that for a moment. He finally decided that he liked the sound of it.

"I wouldn't have to hear any more about who this horrid RJ person was killing or maiming?" Jago asked hopefully.

"Of course not," Right smiled on the inside.

"Or what she's stealing?" Jago asked, still suspicious of anything that sounded this good.

"That's right."

"And I wouldn't have to deal with you until this thing with the rebels was all cleared up?" Jago asked, beginning to get excited.

"Regrettably, no, Sir. I will be leaving General Zaks in control here," Right said.

Jago laughed happily. Zaks was known for his meekness. He wasn't likely to be as brash about interrupting him as Right was. Jago signed quickly and handed the paper back to the general.

"There you go, Right. I wish you luck in your endeavors." He motioned towards the door. "Have a good trip. Give my love to the hybrid bitch of Capitol."

Right bowed quickly and left. When the door closed, Jago gave vent to his joy.

"No more RJ! No more Right! No more Right bugging me about RJ, who's always stealing weapons that I have no knowledge of!" He shoved a nectarine in his mouth, and looked like a pig stuffed for baking.

They'd ditched the chopper and were now hoofing it. RJ spotted an unguarded farm truck. She decided that this meant that the owners wanted her to have it.

"I think this is where we part company," RJ said to Alexi. "You'll have to find your own way from here."

"Now, wait a minute!" Alexi started in disbelief. "I'm going with you!"

"I don't think so," RJ said plainly.

"I saved your wretched neck!" Alexi exclaimed.

"Maybe," RJ said, shrugging it off.

"Maybe!" Alexi was incredulous. "Undoubtedly!"

RJ sighed heavily. "Why do men always assume that they have saved my life? Is it some male thing? Does it make you feel good to think that I am so helpless that I must be saved?"

"He had a rocket launcher pointed at your head," Alexi reminded her harshly.

"And from that one little fact, you assume that I was having trouble?" RJ just shook her head in disbelief. "Thank you for maybe saving my life. Now, goodbye."

"Listen, lady . . ."

"Ladies don't carry guns," RJ informed him shortly.

David listened to RJ. He had been watching her. She was having trouble walking straight, and her arm was jerking ferociously. She obviously wasn't thinking straight, or she wouldn't be trying to get rid of such a valuable ally.

"RJ, this man can help us."

"What's your name?" David asked Alexi as RJ snorted her disapproval.

"Alexi. I'm a third-class soldier. I want to join the Rebellion."

"No," RJ said decisively. She was only too aware that she wasn't thinking clearly. But she didn't think she was wrong about her ill feelings concerning Alexi.

"RJ, he's a fighter, and he wants to join . . ."

"Ah, but why does he want to join?" RJ rubbed her Pronuses-dry eyes. She looked at Alexi. Oh, he had no intention of turning them over. He wasn't a plant. He meant what he said. But he wanted to join them for all the wrong reasons.

"For God's sake, RJ, you recruit a pickpocket and an ax-wielding wife-murderer, but *this* man makes you uncomfortable. You're strung out, that's all. You're not thinking straight." David was a little aggravated with her.

"I know what I'm doing," RJ said hotly.

"Do you? We are fighting the Reliance, and we need every man we can get." David tried to keep the anger out of his voice. After all that had happened, RJ was more than entitled to a little paranoia.

"David," RJ motioned with her hand, and David followed her out of Alexi's hearing. "He's no good. If he joins us, eventually there will be trouble."

"RJ, we're supposed to be partners, aren't we?"

RJ nodded.

"Then I want Alexi."

"Then you shall have him, David," RJ hissed. "But know this. If that man stays, he will be trouble. If he stays, eventually I will have to kill him. His blood will be on *your* hands, not mine."

David smiled reassuringly. "You're just tired."

They walked back to Alexi, who was looking at David hopefully.

"You're in," David told him.

The smug smile Alexi gave RJ only confirmed what she already knew about him. Alexi was a weasel, but she'd be sure that he was a useful weasel for the time being.

Jessica met Right as he stepped out of his plane. They embraced, then headed for Jessica's car. It was a short trip from the airstrip to the interior of Capitol.

They sat in the back together while an Elite drove. They were silent for a long time, then Right ventured condolences.

"I was sorry to hear about Jack's death. He was a good man, and a good friend."

Jessica's lip quivered a little, but that was her only sign of emotion. She was still silent.

"The whole of the Reliance grieves with you."

"Not that fat bastard." Her mask of calm crumbled to be replaced by rage. "Jack asked for help months ago, and Jago did nothing. You tried, Right. I don't blame you. I know how hard it is to get that slug to do anything except bed some poor unfortunate wretch of a girl, or stuff his face. Jago is as responsible for Jack's death as RJ is." She turned to face him, and the rage he saw there was more than a little frightening. "I tell you, Right, when I am done with RJ, I will deal with Jago in the same fashion. I mean to have their heads."

"Shh," Right warned, motioning towards the driver.

"I really don't care who hears. Jago would be a class-B worker if his brother weren't World Commissioner, and even he thinks Jago's an idiot."

"I realize that you're upset, Jessy. But threatening to kill Jago is dangerous."

Jessica laughed, then sobered. "Not nearly as dangerous as this RJ we face. I don't mind telling you that I fear her much more than Jago, or anyone else for that matter." She ran down, in detail, all that had happened, excluding only what she was sure RJ was. "There's no body, Right." She choked a little on her words. "Just pieces smeared all over the inside of the car."

"His box?" Right questioned.

"It was there." She fought to control her tears. "The only thing keeping me going is the need to have

this RJ dead."

"Where do you suppose she got the Pronuses?" Right asked curiously. Trying to take her mind off her loss.

"I imagine she could get anything. Do you know that she has the utter gall to wear Elite boots?" She had calmed herself by sheer willpower. "We aren't up against a dissatisfied work unit; she's one of our own. At one time, she was probably a high-ranking Elite with combat experience on the outer worlds. Her army grows daily. Today she gleaned a third-class soldier—a man with an otherwise flawless record. If loyal soldiers will leave the ranks to join her, think what will happen to work units."

Right's eyes grew huge as the implications hit him.

"And she could do it, Right. I have no doubt about it. We could have our first real rebellion since the Reliance seized control four hundred and ninety-four years ago."

While Right was busy getting himself settled in to his new office, Jessica was sitting alone in hers, tapping her fingers on her desk impatiently.

The man walked into her office.

"What took you so long?" she demanded.

"Sorry, Senator," he said, depositing the two small disks on her desk in front of her. "The DNA on the items was sparse and contaminated by other organic material. It took some time to sort it all out and get a true reading."

"Go away," she said ungraciously.

He was only too happy to comply. Senator Kirk had never been the best person to work for, but lately she was impossible.

When she was sure he was gone she locked the door. Then she put the first disk into the terminal. This was the man. Not bad looking. David Grant, Class D work unit. Imprisoned for acts of treason against the Reliance. Died in a logging accident. The computer droned out dates and other unimportant data. Jessica removed the disk.

"Someone was covering their ass." She hissed the words, her jaw tight with rage. It wasn't the first time a prisoner had escaped and been marked dead. It was easier that way—less paperwork. Jessica picked up the second disk carefully. She looked at it for several long minutes. She had a gut feeling that her worst fears were about to be confirmed.

"So, RJ, let's see what you look like." She put the disk in with trembling fingers, then sagged back in her chair and closed her eyes against what she saw.

She might as well have been looking in a mirror.

"Senator Jessica Kirk, Elite . . ." before the computer could say more, she ripped the disk from the terminal and crushed it in her fist.

Several hours later, Jessica woke with a start. The dream she'd been having hadn't been a pleasant one. Sleeping alone had never bothered her before. Perhaps because it had never seemed so permanent. She got out of bed and put on her robe. She took a cigarette off the bedside table, lit it, and took a long drag. Then she started pacing.

The thought of RJ curled around her lover, safe and snug, ate at Jessica's soul. It wasn't fair. Jessica felt lost and miserably alone.

"OK, Stewart. You've got some explaining to do." She put out her half-smoked cigarette, and got dressed.

Poley ran into Stewart's lab. He shut the door heavily.

"Oh, whatever is it now, Poley?" Stewart asked without looking up from the microscope.

"It's the random unit, sir," an edge of excitement to his synthetic voice.

Dr. Stewart abandoned his microscope and started pacing in anticipation. "So, what's she done now?" Stewart asked happily.

"She's assassinated Governor Bristol . . ."

Stewart started laughing, and didn't stop until Poley had given him a full report on all the damage. Suddenly, he stopped pacing and a worried look replaced the laughter.

"Damn," he said in a put out tone.

"Is there something wrong, Doctor?" Poley asked.

"She used Pronuses to poison the tip of those spears." Stewart was thoughtful.

"So," Poley didn't understand the problem.

"So, tin head, how long can it take them to realize what RJ is, if they haven't already? After that, how long before they realize that I'm the only one with the brains to have created her?"

"Dr. Preston . . ." Poley started.

"Oh, don't make me laugh." The professor looked far from laughing. "Preston is a smug fool."

"His endeavors in both robotics and genetics equal yours." Poley was trying to ease the professor's mind, but Stewart didn't take it that way.

"Ha! Preston! Equal to me! Never! Has Preston created anything to equal RJ? NO! Oh, no he hasn't. And do you know why, Tim Pants?"

"Because he wasn't concerned with perpetuating his own genes," Poley answered excitedly. He thought he'd done well, so he didn't understand the doctor's wrath.

"Because, you great metal fool, I have more brains in my little finger than that idiot Preston has in his whole body!" Stewart screamed.

"Oh," Poley said. "That was my next guess."

"Preston could never duplicate one of my creations. Only a complete and utter fool would mistake RJ for one of Preston's abortions," Stewart hollered like a lunatic. "Why, Preston has trouble making a sandwich!"

"Of course, sir," Poley said, making it obvious by his tone of voice that it was a humbling experience to be allowed to work in the company of an intellect as vast as Dr. Stewart's. "I was simply suggesting that the Reliance may mistake RJ for one of Preston's creations."

"Are you trying to patronize me, Poley?" Stewart asked suspiciously. "Anyone with a single ounce of sense is going to know that only I have the necessary knowledge and intellect to have created RJ. Anyone with even a spark of intelligence would know that. Preston doesn't have the good sense to dump piss out of his shoe without being told. Preston, make RJ? Ha! I have studied amoebas with more intelligence." He sat down on his stool, folded his arms across his chest, and proceeded to pout. "Only a complete and total idiot would mistake one of my projects for one of Preston's."

"Of course, sir. But, as you have often told me," he cleared his synthetic throat. "The heads of the Reliance are a bunch of butt-brained buffoons who wouldn't know shit from computer chips without a diagram."

Stewart began to laugh again. He jumped off his stool, and hugged his metal friend. "Oh, quite right, Poley. Only a complete idiot would mistake my work for Preston's. But that defines the Reliance *perfectly*! They will probably assume that RJ is Preston's work, and go bother him." He sat back down at his microscope. "I am quite safe."

Not ten minutes later someone walked into the room. "Tell them to go away, Poley. I don't have time for people today."

Poley was silent.

"Go away," Stewart said irritably. He didn't bother to look up. "Next time you ignore an order, Poley . . . I'm going to fire you."

"Dr. Stewart?" Stewart's head jerked up quickly. He hit his head on a light fixture, and fell off his stool, holding his chest.

Jessica jerked the old man up off the floor and shook him roughly. "Oh, come on, old man. Who do you think you're kidding?"

"He's an old man. He has a spastic heart." Poley took Stewart from Jessica's rough grasp and helped him back onto his stool.

A quick look told Stewart that this was not the random unit. This had to be one of the others. The random unit had a defect, and she would never have treated him disrespectfully.

"What right do you have to bother me when I'm working?" Stewart asked hotly.

"I am Senator of Zone 2-A." Jessica informed him haughtily.

"And I suppose you think that gives you a right to be rude," Stewart said curtly. Then he started to laugh. "Did you hear that, Poley? A Senator."

"Do you find that amusing, old man? I could have you arrested for what you've done."

"And just what have I done, dear?" Stewart asked innocently.

"I think you know, old man," Jessica spat. "One of your creations is running amok. Destroying anything that gets in her way . . ."

"And one of my creations is a Senator. I'm so proud."

"Listen to me, you crazy old fool . . ."

"Is that any way to talk to your father?" Stewart asked, aghast.

"If you don't cooperate with me . . ."

That sounded like the start of a threat. Stewart didn't like threats. "You'll do what? Tell them that I made RJ? That I also made you? Do you really want all your hoity-toity friends to know what you are?" Obviously, from the expression on her face, she did not. "So, let us dispense with the threats, shall we, J-6?"

"Jessica," she grated out. "My name is Jessica Kirk."

"So, without any unpleasantness. What has brought you back to the fold?"

Jessica cringed. She had never in her wildest dreams ever thought that she would have to deal with Stewart at any level. "How many?" she asked at length.

"How many what?" Stewart asked cagily.

"How many like myself did you make?"

"Oh, that." He played with something on his work bench. "Twelve."

"Twelve!" Jessica held a hand to her head.

"If it makes you feel any better, there are only two of you left."

"How can you be so sure?" Jessica asked.

"I placed a transmitter at the base of each of your skulls that emits only as long as the unit is viable. Of course, RJ's is dysfunctional." He scratched his head as if wondering how he could have made such an error.

"What do you mean?" Jessica asked.

"Well, till most recently, I thought you were the only one left. But when RJ started her little reign of terror . . ." He shrugged extravagantly. "I knew that had to be one of my girls. Of course, I already knew where you were, and what you were doing, so it couldn't be you. I suppose RJ's unit must have broken."

He gave Poley—who had a very confused look on his face—a warning look. "It must have been one that you assembled."

"Are we . . . are we all the same?"

"Of course," Stewart answered.

Poley looked about ready to speak, and Stewart fingered the shut off box in his pocket. Poley stood silently.

"So, for all practical purposes, I am fighting myself." She seemed to ponder this.

"It should make for an interesting addition to my experiment," Stewart said, rubbing his chin.

"Imagine, if you will, two great minds attached to two superior bodies. Together, you might well conquer the Reliance. Why fight her, J-6? Why not join her instead?"

"Join her against the Reliance! Have you gone mad? You talk treason, old man!" Jessica was enraged at the mere suggestion that she would join RJ.

"Well, it's a sure bet that she won't join you." Stewart answered her rage with careful calm. "Pitted against each other, neither can win."

"I shall win. I will track her down and utterly destroy her." Jessica's eyes burned with all the hate and rage she possessed.

Stewart clicked his tongue. "My, my. Why such malice?"

"Because she chose to kill and mutilate my lover as a sign to the Reliance," Jessica spat out.

Stewart looked shocked, then pleased. "Did you hear that, Poley? J-6 had a lover. And you argued that they could never lead normal lives." Stewart laughed heartily.

Jessica had enough. He was laughing at her. He was laughing at her heartache. She grabbed his shoulder in a vice-like grip, and he stopped laughing.

"J-6, you're hurting my arm," Stewart said, angrily. "Let me go at once!"

Jessica surprised herself; she let him go. "My name is Jessica . . . Senator Jessica Kirk!"

"Stalemate, Senator. Tell them that I made RJ, and you also have to tell them that I made you. Tell them what RJ is, and if they catch her, don't you think they are going to notice the uncanny resemblance? Don't you think they are going to start to ask questions about you? A few simple tests, and any fool would know . . ."

"I don't need you alive." Jessica informed him in her most menacing tone.

Stewart just smiled. "You gain nothing by killing me."

"Satisfaction." Jessica hissed.

Stewart laughed. "Satisfaction? In killing me? Why? What sort of challenge would I be? I'm an old man whose days are numbered. The brain is still strong, but the body is tired. You could kill me with the poke of a single finger. I am old and tired of fighting death. So, if it would give you satisfaction to take what little life is left to me . . ." He stopped speaking and opened his arms as if inviting her blow.

Jessica gave him a black look, then turned and stomped off towards the door. She turned just as her hand touched the knob. "This isn't the end of it, old man. Not by a long shot."

"I didn't think it would be." Stewart watched her as she made her exit.

Stewart reached in his pocket and hit the activation button as he addressed Poley. "That girl is a little high-strung."

"Why did you lie to her?" Poley asked in confusion.

"Shush, tin fool." Stewart hissed. He waited till he was sure she was out of hearing. "Perhaps I shouldn't have allowed them to keep their emotions."

"Why did you lie to her?" Poley persisted.

"She was supposed to be dead." Stewart was thoughtful. Her calling unit must have failed. "So, I have two left. A rebel and a Senator." He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Pitted against each other, there is a good chance they may both wind up dead. I will have to intervene, or the entire experiment will be jeopardized. If Jessica goes after RJ in grief-stricken vengeance . . . well, neither can win." Stewart got up and started to pace his laboratory. "I must decide which one has the best chance of survival, and then work to help that one."

"I have always been partial to RJ, myself," Poley said.

"You know, my metal-bodied friend, I sometimes wonder if I didn't make you too human!" He sat down and put a finger to his mouth. "So, J-6 had a lover." He moved his finger from his mouth. "And RJ killed him to make a political statement. Allowing them irrational thought; that was my first mistake. I could have altered their minds, but at the time it just seemed like too much bother. Now, I'm beginning to think it would have been well worth the effort. RJ running around in her suicidal revolution. J-6 going after

RJ. It's all madness. Madness, I tell you. I don't have the strength, the determination, or the bloody time to run up another batch. I'm an old man, Poley. An old and very tired man. One of them must live. Unfortunately, that means—I hate to say it—that the other must die. Poley, I want you to find out everything you can about both RJ and J-6. I want to know which has the greater chance of survival."

Stewart knew his decision must be based on facts. He had never been political, and now was not the time to start.

Jessica looked over graphs and charts on her computer screen. General Right stood attentively at her shoulder, although she clicked through them too fast for him to actually see anything.

"There is no apparent method to her madness." He grabbed her hand, gently stalling her rapid progress on a map of the zone. He pointed to the red marks on the map to further explain his meaning. "She steals a load of supplies . . . tents, K-rations, clothing, etc. . . . here. Three weeks later, she steals a shipment of projectile weapons here—clear across the zone. A week later she steals a load of medical supplies just an hour's drive away. A month later, they're back across the country, stealing a load of our new laser sidearms. Two weeks later, and halfway across the country, they steal yet another load of supplies. Two days after that, they're two hundred miles away, stealing a load of plasma blasters. Then yesterday they steal—are you ready for this?—boots! That makes no sense at all. Obviously, these raids are made at random, and without any prior study of the contents. Yet they have not stumbled upon a single one of the convoys harboring a GSH. They must just have the most incredible luck."

"It has very little to do with luck," Jessica said shortly. She had done everything in her power to make RJ's life difficult. She'd doubled the number of GSHs accompanying the convoys. She'd set up random roadblocks. She'd scrambled the shipments and changed shipping routes.

Nothing.

RJ was outwitting her. She didn't know how, but it was obvious that RJ had an edge. Jessica was not as blind to the obvious as Right seemed to be.

"There is most definitely a method to her 'madness' as you call it. An army doesn't just need weapons. It needs food, clothing and shelter. And yes, even boots. She's collecting the provisions for an army." She looked carefully at the map. "These raids are anything but random. How can we prepare any real defense if we don't know when or where she will strike next? RJ is preparing her army to march, and so far our attempts to stop her have been ludicrous."

"There is no reason to believe that she is doing anymore than stealing the supplies. There is no sign of any sort of a rebellion, much less one on that scale. In fact except for RJ, there is no sign of an organized rabble anywhere."

"What about Alsterase?"

"What about it? The entire population of Alsterase couldn't use one sixteenth of the pilfered supplies. Besides, there is nothing to suggest that there has been any kind of uprising in Alsterase," Right explained.

Jessica was silent for a moment. Then she spoke her thoughts aloud. "RJ's got an army. Somewhere. At least, she knows where to get one. I've got to believe that, or nothing she has done makes any sense." She contemplated the ceiling for a moment. "And I believe that she never does anything that doesn't make perfect sense. What I don't understand is how she's missing the GSHs."

"Well, she must just have the most incredible luck," Right suggested a second time.

"There is no such thing as luck in matters of war," Jessica snapped back. "Somehow she *knows*."

"Impossible. She would have to have a box." Right assured her.

Jessica's head snapped up. Her eyes had a carnivorous shine to them. "What did you say?" Her quiet voice made Right's skin crawl.

"I said she would have to have a box." Right's voice was a little more choked than he would have liked, but at least he had been able to fight the impulse to cringe.

"Of course!" Jessica slammed her fist into her palm. "That's it! That's the answer. She's been sitting

with a box, carefully picking and choosing which cargoes she wants and which ones are safe."

Right looked at her and shook his head sadly. The whole thing had finally gotten to her. Her cable had snapped. "She couldn't have a box. All of the boxes are accounted for," he said carefully.

"Not Jack's." She got up and started pacing, picturing the whole event as it must have happened. "She got it from Jack." No longer a hunch, she now knew her statement was true.

"But they found Jack's box with him," Right reminded her.

"No! They found *a* box with him." Jessica sat down on the edge of her desk and looked at Right. "You can bet that no one checked to make sure that it was his box—a *real* box. RJ threw a plasma bomb into the armor-plated limo and closed the door. Everything inside would have been covered with a thick, bloody, pulpy coat of what had once been men."

Right swallowed hard.

"Can you see *anyone* digging through that to make sure of anything? If they saw a part of what could have been his box, that would have been all the confirmation they needed." Jessica's features turned into a mask of white-hot anger, cool, but deadly. "That's why she did it. So that no one would notice, so that no one would look. She didn't kill Jack to make any sort of grand point; she just wanted the box. All along, she only wanted the box. It didn't matter who she got it from. She killed Jack to cover up the theft of the box." She looked out her office window and smiled a sadistic smile. "So, RJ, you're using the box," Jessica looked at Right. "Anything that can be pushed can be pulled. I think it's time we did some pulling, Right."