

# Genie Out of the Bottle

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## Genie Out of the Bottle from Cosmic Tales II Adventures In Far Futures

Edited by  
**T.K.F. Weisskopf**

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## **Dedication:**

**For the next generation,**

**Katie, Max, Peyton & Jackson  
Hannah & Owen  
And, of course, for that great explorer  
Grandma Vera**

# **GENIE OUT OF THE BOTTLE**

*Eric Flint lives in Indiana, Dave Freer lives in South Africa, but they both hang out at Baen's Bar, at bar.baen.com, which is where they met and began their collaborations. This is a tale set in the world of the authors' novels Rats, Bats and Vats and The Rats, the Bats & The Ugly.*

*Dave Freer and Eric Flint*

## **Prologue**

"When shall these three meet again, in thunder, lightning or in rain?"

The dark, hook-nosed lab-coated woman looked as if she might have been one of the witches. And, had this been one of the world of Harmony and Reason's updated Shakespearean plays at the New Globe theatre, the setting too would have seemed appropriate. What she leaned over was no cauldron with simmering eye of newt and toe of frog, but three tissue-cloning vats with their attendant electronics and glassware.

The fetuses developing under the glass covers all looked like unborn rats.

One of them was.

Mari-Lou Evans, once, twenty-four frozen light-years ago, of Stratford-on-Avon, and, like her boss, a loyal part of the New Globe Thespian society, knew her prescribed reply. " *When the hurlyburly's done, when the battle's lost and won,*" she intoned sepulchrally. Then she sighed. "If it ever is, Sanjay. If we don't just lose."

The colony's chief biologist shrugged and pulled a wry face. "Do you think I'd be playing God if we faced any real alternatives?" She pointed to the third breeding vat. "No need for another standard human control, Mari-Lou. We won't be breeding up any more vatbrats for a while. We need to gear up the equipment for mass production of that long-nose elephant-shrew mix. The army has put in impossible demands for quantity. If it tests out fine on emergence, then we're going to have to set up a production line for the creatures."

The chief geneticist nodded. She pointed to the third vat. "The ultrasounds of the bat's gastrointestinal development don't look good, Sanjay. We're going to have to tinker and tweak those genes a bit more in my opinion. Perhaps cherry-pick from the *Tadarida* . It's the size problem. The bigger bats are fruit-eaters, not insectivores."

"Destroy the fetus and start again, Mari-Lou. Make it smaller if need be. The army will just have to take what it can get."

It was the geneticist's turn to pull a wry face. "I hate pulling the plug at this stage."

"And I hate making them intelligent . . . to go and be cannon fodder. I hate implanting alien-built software and cybernetics that I don't properly understand into their heads. But we don't have a lot of choices. Humans are too slow to produce, and the Magh' are advancing faster than we can retreat, never mind stop them. The council of Shareholders are now talking about introducing compulsory conscription for everyone between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. Even that won't be enough. We need more fighters."

The geneticist knew that for a truth. The Magh' tide, even with the assistance of the alien Korozhet and their wonderful new devices, was proving very difficult to stem. She shifted subject. "What are you planning on using for language download?"

Her fellow amateur thespian shrugged. "It's just got to be a spoken source of vocabulary in computer-friendly format for the voice synthesizer. We're a bit short of material so I was going to download the Complete Shakespeare, and the D'Oyly Carte Gilbert and Sullivan recordings. That should do."

Mari-Lou couldn't help but smile. "Shakespearean rats, imagining themselves to be Julius Caesar."

Sanjay acknowledged a hit. "Well, they'll make good soldiers anyway."

She was wrong about that. Both language and genetics shape character. They made merry wives, bawds, rogues and rude artisans, or occasionally pirates. The Rats were great Magh' killers.

They made terrible soldiers.

\* \* \*

In the months that followed, conscription was introduced. So, to the front lines, went the newly produced

and uplifted elephant-shrew troops with their soft-cyber implants. Despite the fact that they weren't even rodents, everyone called the small Siamese-cat-sized creatures "rats." The rats and conscripts slowed the advance of the insectlike Magh' invaders . . . but it wasn't stopped. Rumor had it that genetically modified and soft-cyber uplifted bats were about to be added to the war effort. The colony, planned as the new Fabianist utopia in which harmony and reason would finally triumph, seethed with such rumors. It also seethed with frenetic parties, and young men and women in ill-fitting new uniforms.

Harmony and reason were notably absent.

# 1

A small plane rose slowly, her twin airscrews biting the thicker-than-earth air. The colony—mankind's brave leap into the future—had meant that they had to live in the past. Technology had to be self-sustaining without the interreliant industries of Earth. Some things had gone back a long way—like the propeller-driven aircraft.

Conrad Fitzhugh looked out through the hole in the rear fuselage where the rear door had once been. There was smoke on the southern horizon, where the front lines lay. They'd taken Van Klomp's plane for a look. The alien invaders' scorpiaries had spread their red spirals, twinkling behind their force fields, all the way to the Arafura Sea.

Fitz pulled his gaze inward. He'd see the war front soon enough from a lot closer. He looked nostalgically at the battered little aircraft, and at his fellow sky divers. This would be the last jump for most of them. Bobby Van Klomp had finally gotten the go-ahead to form a paratroop unit. Collins and Hawkes were on a final pass from OCS before being posted to the front. Young Cunningham had just gotten his call-up papers. And Conrad had finally decided to join the next intake at OCS in three weeks' time, despite Candice. He'd have to explain to her tonight. He'd already booked a private table at Chez Henri-Pierre.

He tightened his harness. One of the best things about skydiving was that it stopped him thinking about her, at least for a while. Every man needs a rest from confusion.

\* \* \*

Confusion, smoke, dust and fear. And a dead twitching thing, ichor draining from the severed chelicerae to mingle with the blood in the muddy trench. Pseudochitin armor couldn't cover the 'scorps' joints. And, once they'd learned to operate within the constraints of a personal slowshield, none of the Maggots, not even the 'scorps, could match rat speed. But there were always so many of them.

Ariel twitched her whiskers and fastidiously began to clean them. All the Maggots here were dead. So were the human troops.

Another rat sauntered across the trench, pausing to rifle a dead second lieutenant's pockets. He shook his head glumly at the pickings. "I' faith, these whoreson new officers aren't any better than the last lot. Poorly provisioned. What's a rat to loot in such poverty?"

"You could try looting a Maggot, Gobbo," said a plump little rat leaning against a sandbag stack, picking her teeth with a sliver of trench knife.

Gobbo grunted. Shoved a few things into his pouch and tossed the rest. "Even thinner pickings, methinks, my little Pitti-Sing."

The plump little rat considered Gobbo from under lowered lashes. Gently arched her long tail. "Of course, if it is less thin pickings thou art after, *I* wouldn't try a Maggot," she said archly.

A rat peered out from a bunker. A particularly long-nosed rat with a rather villainous cast to one eye. "Zounds! 'Tis all done then? I fought them off bravely."

Ariel and the others snickered. "In every doughty deed, ha, ha! He always took the lead, ha ha!" she caroled. No sensible rat wanted to fight Maggots, but Dick Deadeye took discretion to the ridiculous.

Deadeye drew himself up. "I was foremost in the fight!"

Ariel snorted. "The first and foremost flight, ha, ha!" she said, showing teeth.

Deadeye certainly wasn't about to ruin his reputation for staying out of trouble by rising to the bait from this particular rat-girl. Ariel might be smaller than most, but she made up for it with pure ferocity. He took in the scene instead. The dead lieutenant, with his turned-out pockets, the several dead human grunts, a dead 'scorp and the body parts of several more of the aliens. "Methinks we'd better send a runner back to let them know we need human reinforcements."

Rats had no problem with Deadeye's being a coward. It was his being a brown-noser that was going to get him killed. "Art crazed?" snapped Ariel, irritably. "'Tis fully two hours to grog ration. What need have we to alert them before 'tis needful? They'd make us work."

Gobbo nodded, sauntered over to Pitti-Sing and leered down at her. "Methinks you can hang me up as a sign at a brothel, before I do that, eh, wench?"

Deadeye looked lecherously and rather hopelessly at the two rat-girls. "Well, then I must go myself."

Gobbo yawned artistically. "Methinks the whoreson fancies a bit of time away from the front."

"The swasher can take himself away from my front," said Pitti-Sing, trailing her tail along Gobbo's shoulders.

"'Tis not an ill-thought-of idea, mind," said Ariel, consideringly.

Gobbo grinned toothily. "Ha. Ariel, I had not seen you flee a fight. Can it be that you've abandoned me to go with this swaggering knave? You saucy jade!"

Ariel chuckled. "Pitti-Sing, you're in for a grave disappointment with this swasher. He's all blow and no poignard. I'd like to stay and watch. But I might be able to buy some chocolate back there," she said, longingly. "The vatbrats sometimes have some. Give, Gobbo. The money you found in that top pocket."

" 'S mine!"

"You got his hip flask, Gobbo," she said, closing on him with a bound. "You wouldn't want to fight with *me* then, would you?"

"Hello. Methinks 'tis a threesome," said a new haughty voice. "I wouldn't hesitate to report this, unless I was insulted with a very considerable bribe."

Ariel turned. A party of wary-looking rats peered around the sandbagged corner. " 'Twould appear that rumors of your demise have been greatly exaggerated, Ariel," said the owner of the haughty voice, and an elevated snout, as he stepped jauntily out of cover.

"Pooh-Bah! Hasn't anyone killed you yet, you cozening rogue?" demanded Ariel, grinning.

The rat shook his head. "No. Alack. But I am sure for suitable fee it can be arranged." He looked at the dead lieutenant. "Methinks you'd better tuck his pockets back in," he said professionally. He gestured behind him with a stubby thumb. "They'll be here in few minutes. They don't make a fuss about us looting vatbrats, but it's the guardhouse and death for snaffling the wares of Shareholders. Didst get much?"

The gleam of silver on the crisp white cloths, and the twinkle of crystal in the candlelight: This was George Bernard Shaw City's finest restaurant, the Chez Henri-Pierre. The crystal glasses were from old Earth. Rumor had it that Henri-Pierre had killed an indentured Vat-scullion who had broken one. The astronomical distance the beautiful, fragile things had travelled was only matched by the prices of the food and the fine wines. The prices, of course, were not listed on the menu. If you had to ask you couldn't afford it. But Conrad had worked out by now that the price was related to the length of the dish's French name.

It was also inversely proportional to the size of the portion. By the exquisite—but minuscule—arrangement on Candice's plate, it was going to cost Conrad the equivalent of an ordinary worker's annual salary. Well, no matter. Conrad was a Shareholder, even if his father wasn't old money. It wasn't as if he was some indentured Vat. And he'd be off to join the army soon. It wasn't going to be easy to break it to her. He hoped that the ring in his pocket would offset the news.

Candice looked perfect in this setting, almost like some milk-white porcelain Meissen statuette, poised and with not a hair out of place. He cleared his throat uneasily. How should he do this?

"Uh. Candy." As soon as he'd said it he knew it was a mistake. She hated to be called that. Van Klomp always did it, at the top of his voice. She didn't like Bobby Van Klomp. She'd done her level best to see that Conrad kept away from the big Dutchman. It was a difficult situation. He and Bobby had come down on one 'chute together. Had resultantly spent six weeks next to each other, in the hospital, in traction. He owed an old friend loyalty. But Van Klomp had gone too far when he'd suggested that Candice might be seeing someone else.

"Um. I've got to tell you something." He felt for the ring box in his pocket.

She looked down at her plate. Conrad noticed that she'd not eaten much of the complex stack of ginger-scented scallops and tiger prawns. "I've got something to tell you too, Conrad." She fiddled with something on her right hand. It was, Conrad noticed for the first time, a band of gold. On her third finger.

She turned it around. It was a diamond solitaire. Tombstone size. A lot bigger than the stone in the ring in his own pocket. "I'm engaged to be married."

Conrad stared at her, unbelievably. Then at the ring. "Who . . . ?" he croaked.

"Talbot Cartup," she said coolly. "I'm sorry, Conrad. This is good-bye."

Talbot Cartup. One of wealthiest men on HAR. An original settler, not, like Fitzhugh, the son of one. At least thirty years her senior. And recently widowed. Very recently.

The bentwood chair and cerise satin cushion went flying. "How long has this been going on?" Conrad demanded, leaning over the table, apparently unrelated events suddenly coming together in his mind.

She colored faintly. "That has absolutely nothing to do with you. Sit down and behave yourself. People are staring."

"Let them stare. I want to know, damn you, Candice."

"If you can't conduct yourself decently, then I suggest you leave," she said icily. "There was no future for us anyway. They're going to raise the conscription age to twenty-six. You will be going into the army."

He laughed humorlessly. "I was going to go anyway. And it's just as well. If I saw that fat creep Cartup, I'd probably kill him. You've been cheating on me, Candice. And, seeing as you'd like me to, I'm leaving."

Blundering blindly through close-set tables, and pushing aside the maître d'hôtel, he headed for the night air and his car. It was a fine reproduction of a mid-twentieth-century Aston Martin. It was his pride and joy.

It was also in the throes of being towed away. Parking over there had been a risk, but he'd been late, and reluctant to hand the keys of his darling to the doorman. Well. He could reclaim it from the pound in the morning. And it wasn't as if he'd been going anywhere right now, except to drive too fast. He set out, walking. Walking nowhere in particular, but going there as rapidly as possible. He strode past the skeletal remains of the huge slowship that had brought the settlers here. The bulk of the twenty-first-century technical heart of the Colony remained here. Conrad did not. He continued on, past the security fence that surrounded the alien Korozhet's crippled FTL starship. Onward without purpose or direction. Brooding. Furious—with himself and with her. Miserable.

It was well after midnight when he realized that his wandering feet had taken him far from the suburbs of George Bernard Shaw City. Far from a taxi to take him home.

And . . . relatively close to the airfield, and the hangar holding Van Klomp's jump-plane. He knew from past experience that the hangar wouldn't be locked.

Briefly he considered taking the little Fokker-Cessna up on a one-way flight. That would show her!

It would also ruin Bobby Van Klomp. The burly instructor had a solitary Share, and not much else besides that aircraft. Conrad knew that Van Klomp was coming in, in the morning, to do the final clearing and storage arrangements. He could scrounge a lift home then.

The clatter of the hangar doors woke him from an uncomfortable dream-chased sleep. And there, in the bright blue sunlight, stood Van Klomp, shaking his head at him. "You dumb bastard. They're bound to think of looking here soon. Where is your car?"

"City pound. It was towed away from the no-parking zone outside Chez Henri-Pierre, where—"

"Where you had a fight with that bimbo, told the whole restaurant you wanted to kill Talbot Cartup, and then stormed out." Van Klomp's face was creased with a wry grin. "And left Candy with a bill to settle, and her with not a dollar in her purse, never mind her taxi fare."

Fitz felt himself blush. "How do you know?"

"The cops told me, *boeta*. When they woke me up at three this morning, looking for you."

"Looking for me at three in the morning? For not settling a restaurant bill?"

Van Klomp gave a snort of laughter. "The way I heard it, there were a couple of tables full of crockery, food and glassware—oh, and a skinny little maître d' that got in your way too. But that's minor, comparatively."

"Comparatively?"

"Compared to being wanted for murder."

"Murder?"

"Well, it is still attempted murder, at this stage. Talbot Cartup's not dead yet." Van Klomp's face was deadpan. "But if he dies, which looks likely, you're for the organ banks."

Fitz swallowed. "And Candice! Is she all right?"

Van Klomp shook his head. "You're a slow learner, Fitzy. She's the one who put the cops onto you. Said you tried to kill him."

Fitz gaped. "I didn't have anything to do with it, Bobby. When I saw them towing my car away, I . . . I was so mad and miserable that I just kept walking. Next thing I realized it was early morning and I was near here. I thought I'd wait for you to come in and cadge a lift home."

Van Klomp slapped him on the back, grinning again. "Oh, I didn't think you'd done it, *boeta*. I could just see the headline: Martial arts, dangersport and fitness fanatic ties old fart wearing woman's underwear to bed, beats him, puts plastic bag over his head and throttles him. When the cop told me about it, I said he was crazy. But face it, it looks pretty bad for you, Fitzy. You yelled that you wanted to kill him in front of a whole lot of witnesses, besides the bimbo saying that you did it."

"Candy?"

Van Klomp nodded. "Swears it was you, looking for revenge. You locked her in the bathroom while you did the dirty deed. Did it like that to humiliate him and incriminate her. Brave girl broke her way out and called the cops." Van Klomp tugged his beard thoughtfully. "Bet your fingerprints are all over her apartment too."



"But . . . ! I was nowhere near there last night!"

Van Klomp shrugged. "Prove it, Fitzy. Me, I think it was probably a sex game that went wrong. She panicked. Needed a scapegoat."

"Candy!" Fitz shook his head incredulously. "No. You must be wrong, Bobby. She'd never do anything like that. She's . . . she's so . . . pure. Prim. There must be another explanation."

Van Klomp took a deep breath. "Rule my brother told me once: Never criticize a man's mother or his girlfriend if you want to stay friends. So: Now I'm going to tell you something that I've avoided saying because I liked you, Fitz. I've known Candy Foster all her life. Her mother also had exactly one Share. Lived three apartments down from me, on Clarges Street. I bet she never told you that."

She hadn't. Clarges Street was just one step up from the Vat tenements. Fitz's parents were comfortably upper-middle-class Shareholders. "No . . . but I'm sorry, Bobby. I don't see what that's got to do with it."

"Nothing. Except Candy always planned to move up in the world. She didn't have brains or business sense. She did have a pretty face and a good body. She was damned good at being just what the men who were stepping-stones on her way wanted. You wanted a pure little ice-maiden. You got one, kid. Candy's been around. You ask any of the boys on Clarges Street what sort of ice-maiden she was."

"I don't believe you, Van Klomp," said Fitz stiffly, knowing deep inside that he was making a fool of himself. "You're making her out to be a prostitute."

"Oh no, she's not that. A hooker is at least fairly honest. And unclench those hands, Fitzy. I'm your mate, trying to help you, even if you don't believe me," the big man said gently.

Fitz took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Van Klomp. You don't like her and you never have. Okay I admit, you were right about her seeing someone else. It's kind of obvious now, thinking back. This Talbot engagement didn't just spring out of nowhere. But I can't believe she'd . . ."

The big man shrugged. "Suit yourself. Believe anything you please. But Talbot is in a coma. And you're going to take the fall for it, unless he comes round. Even then . . . he might decide to stick to her story." Van Klomp grinned ruefully. "I would."

"But—surely I can explain. I'm innocent!"

"Get this straight. It's *Talbot Cartup* we're talking about. The cops want to catch someone to satisfy the Cartup family. And they want someone in a hurry. And that someone, right now, is you. You'll be pieces of liver and lights in a nutrient bath within the next three days, if they find you. There are roadblocks all around town. I came through one on the way here." Van Klomp grinned evilly. "One thing on your side is they're still looking for the Aston Martin. Someone's face is gonna be red. But it's only a matter of time before they look here too."

"So you think I should run?"

Van Klomp shook his head. "Nope. I think you should join the army."

He pointed out of the hangar door. "They've set up a camp just across the other side of the airfield. Ten

minutes' walk."

"But . . . That's a Vat-camp. I'm going to OCS."

"The next OCS intake is in a few weeks' time," said Van Klomp, grimly. "You're not going to live that long."

"They'll find me there anyway. I'd rather hand myself over and face my trial. They haven't got the evidence to convict me."

"*Boeta*. If they have to *make* that evidence, they will. The Special Branch is good at that. They're hunting you hard. But if you walk across to that camp and join the queue . . . once you're inside, they won't find you. Just like they haven't found your car. And even if they do find you, as an army volunteer, they can't touch you."

Van Klomp smiled beatifically. "Thanks to Special Gazette item 17 of 11/3/29, all civil legal matters are held in abeyance until the volunteer is demobilized at the end of hostilities. *And* service time will be considered to be in lieu of imprisonment and deducted from the sentence. As it happens, just last night I was talking to Mike Capra at the Pig and Swill. The law was introduced at the start of the war, to try and draw in more volunteers. Even though there is conscription now, it hasn't been repealed. Mike reckons it's a problem looking for a place to happen."

Fitz stood up. "I'll join up," he said determinedly. "But I still want to clear my name. I don't want to take the blame for something I didn't even have the pleasure of doing."

"First things first," said Van Klomp. "And first is to stay alive, *boeta*. Now, I suggest you leave through the side door and take the long way around. There's a fair forest of bushes just beyond the south end of the runway. I've been trying to get the airfield authority to trim them." He patted Fitz on the shoulder awkwardly. "Good luck, Fitzy. Keep a low profile among the Vats. I'll be in touch, somehow."

\* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, standing in the queue of miserable-looking men at the gate of a barbed-wire-enclosed camp, Fitz saw a police car drive slowly over the grass to Van Klomp's hangar. Then the clerk at the gate asked for his call-up papers.

"I'm a volunteer."

The man shook his head. "There's one born every minute. Name and ID number?"

\* \* \*

By that evening Fitz was beginning to think that maybe the organ banks hadn't been such a bad option after all. But he hadn't had much spare time to think about Candice, either.

"Swing those arms! Left. Left. Left. Right, left. Keep those damned tails straight!" bellowed the officer.

With distinct lack of enthusiasm, the rats complied. "Methinks this shogging new lieutenant hath forgotten that this is not boot camp," snarled one of the rats, indignantly.

"Silence in the ranks!" snapped the sergeant.

The lieutenant was determined to stamp his authority onto his new troops. They'd explained at OCS that an example was necessary. He'd make one. "You. You that was talking. What's your name, Private?"

"Parts, Sah!" said Bardolph, loudly and untruthfully, to a chorus of sniggers.

The new lieutenant lacked both a sense of humor and common sense. "Sergeant. Get that rat's number. We'll see how funny it finds being on a charge."

The human sergeant was not a young Shareholder fresh from OCS. He was a Vat who'd stayed alive in the trenches for some months. His expression was more than just wary. "Sah. If I might advise, sah?" he asked, uneasily, *sotto voce*.

The owner of the shiny new pips did *not* choose to be advised. To be confident enough of your authority to listen to advice from experienced NCOs was not something they'd taught this young man. "If I need your advice, I'll ask for it, Sergeant."

Even Deadeye raised his eyes to heaven. It was done in far more unison than the ragged marching.

"Tonight there will be a full-kit inspection! I have never seen such a sloppy, shabby, gutless lot in my life. Things are going to change around here."

"Whoreson Achitophel, he never will be missed," muttered Ariel, shaking her head.

"Not even," said Pooh-Bah, in a quiet but nonetheless lofty voice, "by the lord of the backstairs passage, or by the master of deerhounds or the Solicitor, or even . . ."

"Straighten those backs! I'll make you lot into soldiers if it kills me."

" 'Twill," said Ariel, under her breath. Elephant-shrews were superb killers. Even cybernetic uplift couldn't make them into soldiers.

\* \* \*

In a boot camp not far from hell . . .

In fact the sign in the middle of the camp read "Hell, 3km back." Conrad Fitzhugh was being reborn. They say that the first time is the worst trauma most humans go through.

It wasn't any better this time around. And Conrad Fitzhugh, born with a silver spoon in his mouth the first time, was discovering that going economy class was very different. You weren't wrapped in a pure wool receiving blanket, for starters.

"It doesn't fit."

"Oh, we'll call the tailor so you can have it made to measure," said the quartermaster's clerk sarcastically, tossing a pile of shirts and outsize underwear at him. "Who the hell do you think you are, vatsum? A namby-pamby Shareholder? Move along. On the double. Change. Dump those civ clothes in the hopper there. You won't wear them again."

Fitz moved. His evening wear had been slept in and walked in. But that was a Silvano jacket even if it was a little crumpled, and he loved those half boots. He didn't intend to throw them away!

"They say there are only two sizes in the army. Too big and too small," said the skinny man beside him, pulling on an overall that incontrovertibly proved his point. The little fellow was unusual in the crowded room. Like Fitz he wasn't eighteen.

"Er. Isn't there anywhere private to change?" asked Fitz, looking in startlement at the young conscripts stripping off with unconcern all around him.

The skinny man paused in the act of putting on his horn-rimmed glasses and chuckled. "You've been out of the dormitories a while."

A sudden harsh realization came to Fitz. He was a Shareholder. His parents had come to HAR as frozen Shareholders. Everyone else here was probably—no, almost certainly—a Vat. Bred up in a cloning vat from a tissue scrap that had made the long journey from Earth. Naturally, every human on HAR was entitled to become a Shareholder. The New Fabian Society wouldn't have it otherwise. Of course, the Company was entitled to recover the costs of cloning, rearing, feeding and educating the Vat-kids before they could buy that Share. After all, utopia didn't come for free. Existing Shareholders were entitled to some return on their investment, naturally. Certain privileges were of course reserved for Shareholders.

He was almost certainly the only Shareholder-boot in this camp. He'd known that. He'd just suddenly become aware that pointing this out could be very bad for his health. He blinked, and began stripping.

"Yes. I've become rather spoiled." He looked at the older man. Twenty-five, at least. He must have been one of the original Vats. Conrad Fitzhugh realized that he was going to need a role model. Skinny looked friendly enough. But how to initiate a conversation? He'd never had much to do with Vats. They were servants, mostly.

The little man took it out of his hands. He had obviously made his own assessment, and probably had a very sensible reason—Fitz would make two of him. "These kids make me feel ninety. They're likely to beat us fossils up. We should stick together." He stuck out a hand. "McTavish. Call me SmallMac." He grinned wryly. "Everyone does."

Fitz took his hand. "Fitzhugh. Um. Call me Fitz."

"So, what was your line on civvy street, Fitz?" asked SmallMac, attempting to cram the remaining issue gear into a kit bag, a job requiring two more hands than he had. Fitz held the mouth of it open for him. It gave him a moment to think. All Vats worked—they were in debt. Fitz had never worked a day in his life. Only those Shareholders with very few Shares or a desire to work did. It had been a long-standing source of acrimony between him and his father. "Um. I did a lot for the Parachute club." It was not strictly a lie.

"Oh. Van Klomp," said SmallMac, satisfied. He returned the favor with Fitz's kit bag. "One of the best of them. Good-o. Looking at your clothes and hair, I thought you might be one of their pretty boys."

Fitz had no doubt who "them" were. And he wasn't surprised that his new acquaintance knew who Van Klomp was. It was a small colony for a loud voice.

"And you?"

SmallMac smiled wryly. "Oh, I played with horses. Kept me out of the army. But they decided I wasn't young enough anymore. Besides being a bit slow."

"Move, you lot! On the double."

Carrying their kit bags, they ran again to get their heads shaved. Then to have slowshields implanted. To get infrared lenses implanted. Then, still carrying the kit bags, straight to drill.

Fitz had gone into this strong and fit. He'd heard about boot camp—although he was sure that OCS candidates did not have nineteen-year-old Vat sadists as instructors. He'd vaguely thought that the suffering associated with boot camp would be for other people. Less fit people. His aching body was beginning to realize that the purpose of exercise here was twofold. As a secondary thing, it was to get you into condition. Principally, it was to break you. No kind of fitness is enough for that. He was as exhausted as SmallMac by the end of it.

He'd also come to realize he'd been wrong about the wiry little man. SmallMac, while lacking in upper body musculature, had incredibly strong legs and fantastic balance. He'd been a horse-breaker for a large riding academy—quietly excused military duty because of his employer's connections. Unfortunately he'd had a falling-out with his boss. So here he was, carrying a pole, at a jog.

"Are they trying to kill us?" panted the horse-breaker.

"No. Well, not quite. One step short of it."

"But why?" asked SmallMac. "I thought they wanted soldiers. They'll end up with wrecks."

"My sensei explained it to me," said Fitz. "Most humans aren't natural killers. You can make them into soldiers, though. Humans will fight bravely, using the skills you train into them. You can either bring them up from the cradle to do this, in which case you have samurai. Or you can make soldiers in six weeks. They won't be anything like as good as samurai, but it is quicker. But to do that they have to get you into a state of physical and mental exhaustion, in which old habits are forgotten. The soldier doesn't think anymore. He just has to obey. Obey unconditionally."

"Hmm. A bit like breaking horses. Well, not my way. But one of the ways. I see the advantages," panted SmallMac, "to the army anyway, of getting conscripts young and fresh out of Vat-school. They're pretty blank anyway, and used to obeying orders. It's a lot harder for them—and us—dealing with old fossils."

"Yep. We're foolish enough to question things and to think for ourselves."

"Speak for yourself, Fitz. I'm too tired to."

"That's the whole idea. Come on. We've got to run again."

\* \* \*

"This is your bangstick." The instructor held up the short-bladed assegai. "This is your new wife. You will

sleep with it. You will run with it. You will eat with it in one hand. You will clean it. You will love it. You will treasure it. God help you if I find you without it, because He is the only one who may be able to."

Fitz looked at the issue weapon. Three feet long with a foot-long blade and a cutout into which a shotgun cartridge was inserted. Personal shields, which stopped anything moving faster than 22.8 mph, made projectile weapons useless. So: You had a short little spear, a trench knife—which, as a connoisseur of knives, he was almost ashamed to touch—and a funny little ice-pick thing. Technological advances seemed to have sent weaponry back to the iron age.

The next three days were a blur of the worst that life had ever offered Fitz. Aside from the lack of sleep and the sheer physical grind, he'd never even cleaned his own boots before. Or made a bed.

He learned. But not fast enough.

The corporal picked up the corner of the bed with its display of laboriously polished, ironed, starched and folded items and tipped it onto the floor. Fitz, standing at attention by the foot of the bed, couldn't see what was happening. He could hear it, though.

The young corporal came and stood in front of Fitz, and lifted his chin with one finger. He looked at the name stenciled on the overall. "This is a sty. And that makes the person living in it a pig, Private Fitzhugh. A filthy fucking pig. What are you?"

Silence.

"You're a slow learner, Private. I'll ask you one more time before your entire squad does two hours of bangstick drill in full kit. What are you?"

"I'm a pig, Corporal. A filthy fucking pig," said Fitz. *And you are two seconds from being dead, you snotty Vat-shit*, he thought.

"Right," said the Corporal with a nasty little smile. "Your squad mates can sort out the pig in their midst. There'll be another inspection of this tent in one hour. I expect this pigsty to have become a decently starched bed by then. Otherwise, it's full-pack drill for all of you."

He walked out.

"You stupid bastard!" yelled Ewen, the self-elected squad tyrant. "Can't you make a bed properly? Another fucking inspection. I've got a good mind to—"

SmallMac interrupted. "He saved us all a couple of hours' full-kit drill, Marc. Come on, we've got an hour. We'd better all get stuck in."

The stolid Vat-kid from the next bed, who had been scathing about Fitz's ability to polish boots, nodded. "I reckon. Come on, Marc. You do the best hospital corners in the company. I've got some spray starch. We're all for it otherwise. We can beat the Oink up later."

Marc Ewen tugged his jaw. "I suppose so. Come on, Oink. Move it up. Drop us in it again, and you're for it."

The beating got delayed by a session of P.T. and a five-kilometer run. In the manner of these things, it kept being delayed until it was forgotten.

\* \* \*

The slowshields had caused small arms to be dispensed with in this war. Both sides still used heavy artillery, however. It could destroy defenseworks, soften up or even bury the enemy. And the pounding could drive anyone mad.

The rats knew by now that when it stopped, the legion of varied creatures that made up Magh' infantry would mount an assault. Sometimes they came surging over no-man's-land like a tide. Sometimes they came pouring out of burrows like lava.

But they always came, if the pause in the bombardment was more than momentary. From the minute the heavy shells started to fall, the troops in the trenches knew the attack was coming. The sector had been quiet for some weeks and Lieutenant Lowe thought that he had at last begun to instill some discipline in these unruly rats.

The shells had fallen thick and fast for the last six hours. The HAR gunners tried to give as good as they got, but the humans simply couldn't match the range, accuracy or sheer volume of fire that the insectlike Magh' mounted. The colony had turned all their spare manufacturing capacity into producing food for the guns . . . but the Magh' capacity appeared to grow, along with their scoriaries. The original invaders had set up five of the vast, odd, flattened termite heaps, each one miles in diameter. One scoriary for each of the vast ships. But the creatures were obviously reproducing a lot faster than their human opponents.

Then the guns had fallen silent.

"Where do you think you're going? Come on, form up. A proper military formation, now. The Magh' are coming," said the lieutenant, his voice cracking.

Ariel leapt acrobatically onto his right shoulder. And Gobbo to the other. "If what, you shogging whoreson?" asked Gobbo, twitching his whiskers.

The lieutenant nearly fell over backwards. "Get off me! Get to your posts!" He pawed at the two rats. "Argh, let go!"

Gobbo's long red-tipped fangs had closed through his thumb. Ariel was even more direct. She had her teeth at his throat.

Pooh-Bah looked up at the lieutenant, who was now standing very, very still. The rat said, pompously. "And secrets of state, I will sell for a very reasonable rate: This is one that never will be missed."

Ariel pulled her fangs away from his throat. "Methinks you must choose, Bezonian. You can run and be shot for desertion. Or we'll let the Maggots kill you. And if they fail, we shall deal with you. The Maggots will take the blame."

"I . . . I'll have you all court-martialed and shot— *EEK*. Magh'!" he shrieked, as the varied white grub-shapes poured over the top of the trench.

\* \* \*

The lieutenant's flight lasted less than thirty yards before one of the Magh' caught up with him.

"Help! Help me!" he yelled desperately.

Gobbo shook his head as the venomous barbed tail stabbed through the man's uniform. "Help me, *if you please*, Lieutenant."

### 3

The seven of them were on their way back from the mess hall in the moonlight when they came upon two very, very drunken NCOs. Under most circumstances this would have been a good reason to turn and quietly walk away. In fact, they all checked. It was the whimpering that was coming from a thing at the feet of the two corporals that made Fitz decide to walk forward. That, and the fact that SmallMac was already doing so.

Coming closer, Fitz saw that the bundle lying there was human. Or had been, before they'd started kicking it.

"Whatsh are you lot doing here?" slurred the one man.

"KP duties, Corporal," said SmallMac, kneeling next to the victim.

"Well bugger off to y'r tent. And leave that little dickhead alone."

"We're taking him to sick bay, Corporal," said the small man, his glasses glinting in the moonlight.

"Like fuck you are!" The corporal swung a vicious kick at SmallMac's head.

Fitz caught the man's foot and extended the swing. He gave the falling corporal a far-better-placed kick in the solar plexus. The corporal doubled over as he flew. And as his fellow drunk swung wildly at him, Fitz hit him neatly on the jaw.

"Holy shit! Let's get out of here!" gasped one of the conscripts.

"What the hell do you think you've done, Fitz?" demanded another, horrified.

Fitz ignored them. He leaned down and grabbed both of the drunk NCOs by the throats. Neither was a particularly large man. The little Vat they'd been beating was even smaller than SmallMac. "Is he okay?"

SmallMac shook his head. "Hard to tell. He's not really conscious. Blood coming out of his ears by the feel of it. Let's get him to sick bay."

One of the drunks began to struggle. Fitz brought their heads together with a crack and tossed them aside. SmallMac was already staggering to his feet with his burden. They linked arms to form a chair. And ran. Three of the others ran too, heading for their tent with as much speed as possible. The other



two came along to the sick bay. One of them actually had the forethought to run ahead and pound on the door. There was always a medic on duty.

When it opened . . . Fitzhugh realized that things could get a lot worse. Two medic NCOs, the camp doctor, and Major Ogata were all there—playing cards on one of the examination beds.

"What is it?" asked the medic who had opened the door, plainly not pleased.

"Emergency, sir. We found this man. He's been beaten up, sir. He's unconscious."

"Bring him in. Get him onto the examination bed."

Fitz and SmallMac complied.

"Christ! I want an IV line up on this kid," snapped the doctor.

The doctor and medics moved into action.

That left the four of them . . . and Major Ogata, who had moved against the far wall to allow them passage. Ogata, with JAG flashes on his shoulders, had arrived in the camp three days before. Nobody knew quite what he was doing here, but he had been taking some bangstick drills. "Stand," he ordered coldly, as they attempted to melt back to the open door. "Just what happened here?" he asked. He pointed to one of the young Vats in the group. "You speak."

The youngster looked around, nervously. "We were on our way back from KP, sir. We . . . we found that private in the alley between Q-stores and the chaplain's offices, sir. We brought him here."

"You had no part in beating him up?" All of them shook their heads.

"We wouldn't have brought him in if we had, sir," said SmallMac earnestly.

The major looked at them with cold speculation. "Maybe. And maybe you realized that you or perhaps your companions had gone too far? You know who did this."

"Sir, KP ends at 2100," said Fitz, calmly. "Look at the time now, sir. We haven't had time to administer that kind of beating."

Ogata looked at his watch. Looked at the doc and his two medics. Then, nodded.

"Two men have been killed in this camp, and a number of others have ended up seriously injured. As yet no one has been prepared to testify. I have been sent here by the Attorney General to put a stop to it." With a ghost of a smile he said "The army doesn't want soldiers dying before they reach the front."

The major's eyes narrowed. "If I have to drill this entire camp until half of you end up as clients for the lieutenant"—he pointed to the doctor who was helping the medics to get the boy onto a stretcher—"I will find out who did this. I'll need all of your names and numbers. Then you can get yourselves back to your tents." He jerked a thumb at the victim, now being carried through to the military ambulance. "He doesn't need you anymore."

As far as Fitz could see it was a lose-lose situation, especially for the four of them. All the conscript-boots dropping dead on the parade ground weren't going to affect the guilty parties in this case.

On the other hand . . . If they grassed . . . the instructors would see that they suffered in interesting ways. And Fitz—by now—had a grunt conscript's faith in the fairness of the system: ten to one, the two corporals would get off while they carried the can.

Just then fate, in the shape of two drunken corporals, intervened. They also obviously did not expect the sick bay to be occupied by anything more than one easily intimidated medic. And they were less than observant as they barged in and turned on the four privates.

"All right, you lot of little scabs! Where's Margolis? We haven't finished with him. Or you. Especially you," one of them snarled at Fitz.

Standing against the wall behind them, Ogata cleared his throat. "I think I have solved that little mystery."

The two corporals turned, and looked in horror at the pips and JAG flashes. As one they tried to bolt.

"Halt!" yelled Ogata. They didn't.

"Privates! Catch those two. Restrain them," snapped Ogata.

It was not an opportunity that came the average boot's way very often. An order from heaven, as it were. By the time the two corporals had been caught and "restrained"—one by SmallMac with his powerful horse-breaker's legs applying a life-threatening scissors, and the other by being sat on—a number of scores from the last five and half weeks had been settled. Then a squad of guards and the guard commander arrived at a run.

Ogata looked grimly at the two prisoners hauled before him. Sniffed. "I'll want blood samples from these two when the Doc gets back. And I want sworn statements. Now. Before anyone gets either intimidated or clever."

He turned to one of the guard detachment. "Get me Lieutenant Belsen. I'll use the doctor's room for the statements. I'll want these men one at a time. There will be no discussion amongst them." He turned to Fitz and his companions. "I advise you strongly to stick to the bald truth. If one of your statements does not agree . . . you will be subjected to further investigation and charged."

The lieutenant arrived at a run. He was a young, rather sadistic and sarcastic man, a once-minor Shareholder who obviously enjoyed controlling life and death for a large number of conscripts. The camp commandant was a bumbling and mediocre career officer. Belsen's overeagerness appeared to give the old man dyspepsia. But the lieutenant stepped a wide and wary berth around Ogata.

Fitz's turn came. He stuck to the truth. Under the circumstances it seemed like pretty good advice. The major, and the lieutenant who wrote it all down, seemed satisfied.

"Very well," said the major. "Read through the document. If it is correct, put your number and signature at the bottom."

Fitz did. He was then dismissed, and told to wait in the outer room. It looked like it was all over.

Ogata and Belsen came out with one of the statements. "Take those two NCOs to the second room under guard," said Ogata. "The medical personnel will be here to take blood samples in a few minutes. Then you can take them to the cells." He looked down at the piece of paper he was carrying. "Fitzhugh, you've made a mistake with your serial number. This will have to be corrected, signed again and

witnessed." He held out the piece of paper.

Fitz looked at it. The number was a simple enough one: his own ID with an army prefix. "There is no mistake, sir. That is my number."

Lieutenant Belsen lifted Fitz's chin with his swagger stick. "You're a fool, Private. The last four digits indicate Shareholder status. Making up a number was bound to trip you up."

Ogata pursed his lips, shook his head and sighed. "You obviously wanted to derail the course of justice with something the court-martial tribunal was bound to pick up. Slick, Fitzhugh. But not slick enough."

Fitz felt the blood drain from his face. "Major. I *am* a Shareholder," he said angrily.

In reply, Ogata tore his statement up. "Very funny, Private," he said grimly. He turned to the guard commander. "Put this one in the cells also. Not the same cell as the other two. I'm going to contact military police headquarters and have them moved there. No sense in keeping them here."

Fitz found himself spending a cold night in a cell in the guardhouse. He'd been made to clean it and was then given breakfast, while the sounds of the first parade of the day went on outside. It was silent and monotonous in the cell. Fitz had never thought the day would arrive when he would have preferred to be on parade to any other possibility.

## 4

Dick Deadeye, the walleyed rat-coward, edged his way into the tent where Sergeant Marcowitz was reporting to Captain Witt. "Gamma 425 section lost most of their humans when we pulled back, sir. Forty-three casualties and seventeen shipped out the field hospital. Lieutenant Lowe was among the dead, sir. Several minor injuries that will be back, but at the moment there are only four privates and two NCOs still fit for duty."

The captain steepled his fingers. "I have asked for reinforcements, but we're stretched. Southwestern Sector command says the new intake are about to finish boot camp. We'll get some of those. In the meanwhile those troops will just have to be integrated with other companies." He sighed. "And the rats? What have we got left there?" His voice showed distaste.

The sergeant consulted the clipboard. "Two casualties, sir."

The captain hauled himself to his feet. "The human troops get massacred—and those filthy little scavengers lose two out of five hundred! I'm sorry, Sergeant, but I smell a rat—"

"'Tis only I, Dick Deadeye, Captain," squeaked that hero, peering out from behind a canvas chair. "We

don't get to have a bath very often on the front." He scratched his scraggly nose with a stubby pawhand. "Except when it doth rain. And then methinks 'tis more like a shower."

"What the hell are you doing here, rat? Sergeant, get it out of here. Or rather let me get the MPs. We need to make an example of a few of these—"

"Er. Captain." The sergeant interrupted. "This is one of the rats that Captain Shweto, um, bribed to be informers. Dick Deadeye isn't it?"

"Shweto's dead," said Captain Witt, his tone indicating that he'd liked his predecessor as much as the sergeant liked this rat.

Dick Deadeye nodded. "Aye. Shog him for a debt-dodger. He still owed me for the last lot."

"Owed you? I suppose you've come to collect, and you expect us to believe you," said the sergeant, dangerously.

"Poor Dick Deadeye. My name and my looks are against me. A merest trifle. A matter of a hogshead of grog."

"They're habitual liars," said the sergeant. "And cowards, too."

Dick Deadeye did his best to look affronted. "In every doughty deed I always took the lead!"

"You give yourself airs!" said the sergeant, disdainfully.

"Nay. 'Tis the food," said Dick Deadeye. "But some more grog will fix that. I've come to give you warning, Captain."

The captain leaned forward. "I don't want warnings. I want to know why most of my human troops died in the last assault and only two of the rats did."

The rat twitched his nose and looked thoughtful. "Methinks the two were a bit slow? Or mayhap too busy tail-twisting to notice? It can happen, or so I'm told." The rat sounded regretful. "Now, I have decided. I don't just want grog this time. I believe 'tis tradition to demand your daughter's hand in marriage, but to be honest, I fear she may have inherited your homely face and bad complexion. And while your nose is a more attractive length than that short little stump that doth do most humans service, you lack a tail entirely, unless 'tis hidden in your trousers. So: you'll give me Ariel. And a gill of liquor per man whose life I've saved. Twice that for your own, even though I daresay 'tis not worth half as much," said the rat, head on one side and rubbing his paws thoughtfully, for all the world like a merchant at a market stall.

The captain and sergeant gaped at the rat. "Wh-what do you mean . . ." stuttered the captain.

The rat held out his paws. "'Tis clear enough. I know marriage is not something we rats have hitherto aspired to. But I have despaired of ever winning her affection. And from what I can gather this 'marriage' thing is just the ticket for an ugly fellow like me." He looked at the sergeant quizzically. "Woman are then bound to 'serve, love and obey,' when married, aren't they?" he asked. "It says so in *The Taming of the Shrew*."

Sergeant Mary Marcowitz missed. But only because she moved fast enough to harden her slowshield.

"I meant, what do you mean about saving our lives?" snapped the captain.

"Why, what I said, sirrah," said the rat. "The others said that the Maggots disposed so efficiently of you humans in the last assault that they thought they would let this burrowing clean you out of here too. They're going to leave you to this lot."

"You mean . . . there's a mine?"

"Aye. Ariel said 'twas unsporting not to tell you. But at length 'twas decided you wouldn't listen anyway." The sergeant and the captain were already out, yelling for action stations.

The sergeant headed for the rat quarters, where she found the rats about to depart.

"Traitors!" she screamed.

\* \* \*

The outer door opened, and Fitz heard the unmistakable sound of someone snapping to attention. A recognizable chilly voice spoke. "At ease, Sergeant. I believe you have Private Fitzhugh here."

"Yes, sir! The prisoner is in cell two, sir."

"I'll speak to the man alone, Sergeant. He's to be released. There was a misunderstanding," said the major.

"Sir."

The sergeant led Major Ogata through, clattered the keys and let the major into the cell. The sergeant walked off back to his desk. Ogata waited carefully until he'd gone. Fitz decided that two could play the waiting game.

"I made a mistake," said the officer quietly. As usual, he allowed almost no trace of expression into his face or voice. "I should have recognized the name. You're free to go, and there will be no mention of this on your record." Now he allowed a glimmer of a smile to appear. "You won't be called as a witness in the assault case. Nor will your affidavit be rewritten. Somebody else might recognize the name, and they might not be quite so slow."

Fitz was not feeling too fast himself. "Uh. Thank you, sir."

The major nodded. "Special Gazette item 17 of 11/3/29 still stands. But I wouldn't bet on the legislature not repealing it, and not making that retroactive, if they discovered you. Talbot Cartup is a powerful man. He controls the Police Special Branch handling colony security, you know."

Fitz hadn't—but then it wouldn't have made any difference anyway. "He's alive, sir?"

Ogata raised his eyebrows. "You're pretty cool, Fitzhugh. I think so. I'm afraid I haven't followed up on his well-being. However, it appears that Private Margolis will live. In fact I have just been to the military hospital where—as the local enforcers can't get to him, and he thinks he's dying—he has confirmed your testimony."

Now he smiled properly for the first time and stuck out his hand. "I've never met you, and it has been my

pleasure not to do so. Good luck, Private Fitzhugh. I think one good deed fairly well cancels the other out."

Fitz took his hand. "Nobody would believe me, but I didn't do it."

The major looked steadily at him. "I was a prosecuting attorney before the war, Private. You're right. No one would believe you. Now get lost. Collect your boots and belt from the desk sergeant and get back to your squad. Good luck."

Outside, blinking in the sunlight, Fitz wondered if it was going to be as simple as that. It was Sunday, officially a day off after the morning parade. Mostly it was spent polishing, ironing and preparing for the week ahead. He walked slowly back to his tent.

"Fitzzy!" SmallMac yelled. "Hey, guys, he's back."

Fitz was amazed to find himself being slapped on the back and grinned at.

Marc Ewen had always found the two older men in his tent and his squad something of a trial. He was standing with his hands on his hips, surveying the scene, taking no part in the congratulations. If there was going to be trouble, Fitz realized, it would be with him. He was the only one in the tent who had persisted in calling Fitz "Oink."

"Hey, Oink. SmallMac says you gave two instructors a hiding at once," he said. There was a testing quality to his voice. He was used to thinking that he was the toughest man in the squad.

Fitz shrugged. Best to try and deal with it peacefully. They had barely two more days of boot before they were posted out. He just had to get through to Tuesday. "I know a trick or two, Marc. We can go over to the gymnasium and I'll show you. Friendly, of course."

Marc Ewen shook his head and smiled. He was considerably larger than most of the Vats, and had been a meat packer before his call-up. He was as strong as one of the bulls whose carcasses he used to heft around.

"This I'd like to see, Oink. But we'll keep it friendly."

A few minutes later the squad and a few others were in the gymnasium, and on the mat Fitz showed Marc Ewen—gently—how to use a meat packer's strength against him.

Ewen stood up. Nodded. "Okay. I guess SmallMac told it straight. Run me through that again, so—"

His sudden silence was caused by the entry of a crowd, mostly from B Company. They seemed to have padlocks with them. Attached to their belts. And the belts were in their hands, not through their belt loops. "Well, well. There he is. Golden boy Shareholder," said the leader of the mob, B Company's official bruiser, a gorilla called Bennett. "We'll take over, Ewen. We'll do a proper job."

Marc Ewen faced them, hands on hips. He shook his head. "Butt out, Bennett. This is our affair. Got nothing to do with you B Company goons."

The man snorted. "He's a fucking Shareholder. We heard it from the guys who were on duty last night. And Sarge Lenoir confirmed it. He was there when that little shit admitted it himself. Move out of the way, Ewen. He's going to have an accident."

Fitz tensed. There wasn't any way out of the gymnasium, except past the mob. But he was damn well going to take a few of them with him.

To his surprise the broad Marc Ewen stood his ground "Take yourself and your crew back to your tents, Bennett. He's one of us. If anyone takes it out of him, it'll be us. And it's not going to happen."

"You're full of shit, Ewen. He's a fucking Shareholder. He admitted it!"

SmallMac nodded. "So what if he is? He's sweated and bled with us. He's done full-kit drill with us, and ended up in the guardhouse just for helping Margolis—who was from B Company, I might remind you beggars. You boys take him on and you'll have to take us on, too."

There was a tense silence. There were a good forty of them to twenty of Fitz's company. And the others had padlock-weighted belts.

Fitz cleared his throat and pushed his way forward. "Look. I *was* a Shareholder. Once. But now I'm a private the same as the rest of us, in the same army as the rest of us. I'm part of A Company, tent 17. And I'm damned if I'm going let my squad mates bleed for me. I'll fight you one at a time or all together, first. Any one of you got that kind of guts?"

The pack had come hunting, expecting the prey to run. This was something entirely different. But Bennett wasn't going to back off. "Sure. This is going to be a pleasure. An education for you, namby-pamby Shareholder."

"Don't do it, Oink. He's a killer," warned Ewen.

Fitz just took off his shirt, assessing his opponent as he did. Bennett took off his shirt too, in a deliberate camp mockery of Fitz. The man had more body hair than your average gorilla, and muscles that would have done that creature proud, too. He would probably weigh in at two hundred and forty pounds against Fitz's one-eighty.

"Watch out for his head," said one of Fitz's squad mates, taking his shirt. "He likes to close and head-butt. And watch out for your eyes with those thumbs."

Fitz nodded and stepped forward. He'd been in camp with these men for nearly six weeks now. He was no longer naive enough to believe his martial arts skills would simply overwhelm Bennett. The dojo was quite unlike real fighting.

But he was unprepared for the suddenness and unpredictability of the assault. He had no intention of getting into a clinch with the man. And then he was. Bennett had managed to grab him and was pulling him in by the shoulders, his forehead coming down to smash Fitz's nose to pulp. Desperately Fitz ducked sideways. Bennett's head cracked against his eyebrow-ridge instead.

Bennett threw Fitz over his hip.

It was a foolish move. Had the big man kept Fitz in the clinch, things could have ended nastily and very quickly. As it was, Fitz rolled clear and was back on his feet as Bennett landed, hard, on his knees, where he'd expected Fitz to be.

"Get him while he's down, Fitzy!"

"Kill him, Oink!"

Fitz stepped back instead. Blood was trickling from the cut above his eye. "Get up, Bennett," he said, keeping his voice cool. The man could plainly fight and fight dirty. He was fast and had the weight advantage. Taunts would mean nothing to him. Disdain however . . . might make Bennett mad. And hopefully that wouldn't help his fighting or his judgement.

Bennett lunged forward. Fitz danced aside, and gave him a sweeping kick that assisted Bennett's forward progress. The man sprawled again. "Up, Bennett. I'm not finished with you."

"I'm gonna rip your damned Shareholder head off." This time he stood up slowly, expecting Fitz to wait.

Fitz did not oblige. He found himself, to his alarm, enjoying the fight. He'd had weeks of abuse and this was the first time he'd been able to plan to strike back at anything. There was none of the aseptic, sterile, and controlled atmosphere of the dojo fights here. This man would kill him if he could. And the crowd too, were hungry for blood. Still, the sensei's advice was as clear as a neon sign. Never do quite what the opponent expects. And make him pay for each breath, while you keep your own breathing steady. Bennett's stomach muscles were like iron.

But no one's kidneys are that well protected.

"Up, Bennett."

This time his opponent was more wary. He expected attack. He was watching for dodges and kicks. He lunged, arms wide to catch the expected leap. Fitz stood right where he was and hit him. Punching for a point on the other side of Bennett's face.

The man had a jaw like an ox. But he wouldn't be smiling for a while. Not without pain.

Fitz kept hitting him. Keeping out of the reach of the shorter, heavier man.

"Break it up," hissed someone from the doorway. "The captain and Lieutenant Belsen are coming across. Break it up now or we're all for it. Grab both of them."

Fitz backed off, and Bennett fell to his knees again. "Get him up against the wall bars." Fitz pointed. "Bennett. I'll fight you anytime you like. But not now. Later."

The big man looked at him through dulled eyes, as three of his friends hauled him upright and over to the wall bars. "Later."

"Hold on to the bars. And don't look at them. Your face is a bloody mess."

"Ten- *shun!*" yelled someone from the door.

Fitz stood rigidly facing the wall bars, blood trickling down his face.

"As you were. Carry on." The captain walked slowly around the room. Fitz did some slow pull-ups on the bars. He saw, from the corner of his eye, that Bennett was doing push-ups. Well, that was one thing all of them could probably do by now, even if punch-drunk. And it kept his face down.



It was a long exercise session, until someone at the door said, "All clear."

Bennett stood up. His mouth was bloody. It would be badly swollen by nightfall. His rebroken nose did not make him look any less like a gorilla. "What's a Shareholder doing here anyway?" he asked, awkwardly feeling his nose.

Fitz watched him, warily. The man didn't look as if he was about to attack again, but he'd been fooled once. "I volunteered."

The Vats in the gymnasium gawped at him.

"Why?" said one finally.

Fitz shrugged. Answering honestly might save him continuing this fight or having too many others. "I am supposed to have killed a man. He was in a coma last I heard."

"Who?"

"Talbot Cartup."

\* \* \*

Fitz hadn't been prepared to find himself a hero. He hadn't realized just how notorious Cartup's "Specials" were among the Vats. In fact, as a Shareholder, he'd barely known the Special Branch existed.

\* \* \*

"Atten- *shun!*"

The commandant surveyed them. Walked along the line. Paused in front of the rigid Fitz. "Where did you get that black eye from, Fitzhugh?"

"Slipped in the shower, sir."

The commandant looked at Bennett. "And I suppose you slipped in the shower, too?"

The hulking man nodded. "Eth, thah," he slurred.

The commandant shook his head. "You damned Vats have no self-control. Well, you can try fighting the Magh' for a change, instead of each other. You're being posted out. You'll get a twenty-four-hour pass to wrap up your last affairs in the civilian world. Posting lists are up on the central notice board. Dismissed. Fall out."

*NCO training course. Camp Dendro.*

Fenton, Brett 24031232334000

Fither, Miguel 24003107455000

Fitzhugh, Conrad 24950101803371

\* \* \*

His name had been inserted by hand. And it was initialed by Major Ogata and the camp commandant.

Fitz gaped. That was one list he hadn't bothered to look at. This man's army had not posted a single list in alphabetical order, with the posting listed afterward. That would have been far too simple and logical. No, instead there had been a number of lists, depending on the unit. Your name could be on any one of them, so you had to search each one.

This had been the one he'd least expected. It had certainly not been one he'd put his name down for.

SmallMac's name wasn't in the Equestrian unit either. It was on the same list as Fitz's.

Inserted and initialed in the same way. So were the other two who'd been there that night.

\* \* \*

That first pass had an almost surreal feel to it. Walking out of the camp gates . . . The air was just too crisp, the sunlight too beautiful, the grass too green. And nobody was yelling at them. Strolling down the road in a casual, deliberately out-of-step snaggle of other dazed but happy-looking squaddies from tent 17, Fitz wasn't even fazed that he'd have to walk a couple of miles to get to a bus stop, instead of having the Aston Martin. It was just great to be out. There was also an "eye-to-the-storm" feel about it. The life expectancy of frontline troops was short, and everyone knew it.

"I am going to drink myself into a stupor, wake up, stay in bed and get drunk again," announced Ewen with great satisfaction. "I don't see myself getting to spend much of my pay where I'm going."

"You're abnormal!" said one of lads. "I haven't seen a woman for six weeks. Even the colonel's bulldog bitch was starting to look sexy."

Ewen laughed. "Women get posted to the front, too. And if one eighth of what my cousin Dimitri told me is true, we'll catch up on our shagging. Everyone is scared and everyone is bored. There is nothing much else to do but shag and die. But booze . . . Enlisted men are allowed two blasted beers a night—if you're not in frontline trenches. Dimitri said they end up buying the stuff from those rats. Reminds me. You guys had better buy whatever chocolate you can get and smuggle it in. The rats will pay through the nose for it."

"I hear there are a lot of places in town that won't admit men in uniform," said another one of the men, cracking his knuckles suggestively.

"Keep out of trouble, Isaacs," said SmallMac. "The town's crawling with MPs. I've heard they get a bonus for every Vat they beat up and toss into the cells."

"Huh. They'll have to catch me first. So what are you going to do, SmallMac? Kiss a horse or two?"

"That's not a polite thing to say about my wife and daughters," said SmallMac, looking indecently happy.

It left Conrad Fitzhugh feeling indecently sad instead. SmallMac was one of the few who got regular mail. Somebody out there loved him. Which was both sad and frightening at the same time. Fitz hadn't spoken to his father for two years, since his mother's death. Who else did he have to see? They were either in the army or belonged to the other life that that stranger, Conrad Fitzhugh, Shareholder, had led. Or both. SmallMac had someone that he could go back to. And to whom it mattered if he was killed.

Fitz wondered now, from a dispassionate distance, what Candy would have said if he had killed himself. Or if he was killed in the war. He hadn't thought about her much in the last six weeks. He resolved to go and straighten things out. After all, Cartup was either dead or he wasn't. One way or the other it didn't really matter now. And he'd go around and see his father, too.

He caught a bus into town. Took another to Van Klomp's apartments on Clarges Street, on the off chance that Bobby's army plans had gone awry. Besides, he hadn't a lot else to do, except look at the girls on the street. It was quite amazing how beautiful they'd become over the last six weeks.

The door opened. Meilin, Van Klomp's factotum, manager of his small electronic repair business, general fix-it woman and fanatically loyal Vat-servant, looked at Fitz blankly. Fitz had been a regular caller for the last five years.

"Where is Bobby?" he asked with a grin.

"I am sorry, sir," said Meilin stiffly, doing her best Vat-butler imitation. "Mr. Van Klomp is not home. He's at military headquarters. He is due back this afternoon, if you would like to call again?"

"He's not got that parachute regiment formed *yet*?"

Meilin sniffed. "He believes that it may be happening today, sir. That's what Mr. Van Klomp believed yesterday, and the day and the week before too, sir." Meilin spoke with an urbanity that betrayed how Van Klomp must have been making the walls shake for the last while. "If I might have your name, sir? I will tell him that you called."

Fitz shook his head. "Don't you know who the hell I am, Meilin? Conrad Fitzhugh."

The factotum—who did everything from packing parachutes, repairing electronic cameras and writing invoices for Van Klomp—blinked. Her mouth fell open, and she hauled Fitz into the apartment, neatly kicking the door closed. "Good Lord, Mr. Fitz! The boss has been trying to track you down, discreetly. I'd never have recognized you in a month of Sundays. You've changed."

"I've had a haircut."

"No." She shook her head firmly. "It's your posture. Well, you're tanned, and your face is thinner. And the uniform and the haircut, I suppose. But you don't look like . . . well, the youngster you used to be."

"The spoiled Shareholder brat, you mean." Fitz grinned.

"Oh, you were never as bad as some of them, sir."

"Damned with faint praise," said Fitz, laughing now, flopping down into a chair. "Anyway, do you know what happened to Cartup? And has Bobby got any drink left in this place?"

Meilin gave him a wink. "I hide it. Otherwise, that useless bunch of Shareholder friends of his drink it up. And Talbot Cartup recovered three days after you disappeared."

"So I'm in the clear after all! Well, well." He stood up again. "Hold the drinks, Meilin. I'm going to pop in on my old girlfriend. Clear the air. Tell her I wish her well. Y'know, there's nothing like six weeks of boot camp to give you a new perspective on life."

"Do you think that's a good idea?" asked Meilin worriedly. "She did try and have you arrested, Fitz. Why not wait until Van Klomp gets home?"

Fitz shook his head. "When he gets home I'll be back with a few decent bottles. I'm going to see Candy, see my Old Man. Get things off my chest."

He went out onto the streets of George Bernard Shaw City, whistling. Took a cab across town. He really must get the Aston Martin out of hock. The fines on it must be astronomical by now. He walked up the stairs to Candy's rather pretentious penthouse apartment door. He felt in his pocket. He still had the key in his wallet. Then he paused. He must remember to give it back to her. After all, he had no rights to it anymore. He knocked politely on the imitation oak-paneled door.

She opened it, and stared as blankly at him as Meilin had.

"Afternoon, Candy."

She gave a little squeak of pure, unrefined terror. "Conrad! Don't. Please. I promise . . ." she panted, backing away.

He shook his head at her. "I haven't come to hurt you. I just came to say good-bye, good luck and I hope you're happy. I'm off to NCO training and then probably the front. There's a chance I'll get killed, so I'm clearing things up. I just came to say good-bye. And no hard feelings. Anyone could make a mistake. I suppose it was natural you should think that I'd done it."

"You—you're not—" she whispered, hands still ready to thrust him off.

He shook his head, walking calmly into the familiar apartment, a bubble of unholy amusement at her reaction making him grin. "No. I'm not even mad that you accused me. I suppose it was a natural thought."

"Oh, I know it wasn't you, now. It must have been one of Talbot's enemies, who did it to shame him. It was half-dark and I made an awful mistake. Look, Conrad, I . . . I'm most terribly sorry. I'm just a weak woman. Talbot organized it all . . . He made me break up with you. I promise. Of course I'm really still in love with you, darling." She stepped up to him and embraced him, plastering herself onto him.

As she rubbed her breasts and thighs against him, and lifted her beautiful face to be kissed, Fitz had to admit that maybe Van Klomp had called the shots remarkably closely. What a damn fool he must have been. All the same, it was distracting to have her body this close, after six weeks of sweaty male company. He pushed her away, but gently.

"It's all right, Candy." He rather enjoyed calling her that, now. "You don't have to fake it. Look, it's over. I just came to say . . . well, I've gotten over it. I wish you happy. I guess you got what you really wanted. I'll be going now."

She looked consideringly at him. "Must you? Yes, I suppose you'd better. Look, sit down for a minute. There are a few things you gave me that I want to return. They're in my bedroom . . . unless you want to fetch them with me?" she asked, licking her short upper lip.

Was that an invitation? Now? After all this? Suddenly, Fitz knew he'd rather bed a viper. "I'll wait."

He sat down.

And about two minutes later—someone smashed the door in. Three of them. They were firing as they came barrelling in.

Fitz reacted as any soldier in HAR army would, under the circumstances. He froze to immobility—as the sudden hardening of his slowshield forced him to. He did see one of the men fall, as the other two emptied their pistols. And then—as the army-issue slowshield was no longer being fired at . . .

Fitz stopped being immobile just as the two paused to reload.

They never got that chance. Fitz dropped one with a marble-based lamp—which made a better club than a light—and in the semidarkness dropped the other attacker with a disarming kick to the forearm and a punch that flattened the man against the wall, knocked loose a fair amount of the plaster, and put an original Miró painting onto the man's head. It was the best use the picture had ever been put to, in Fitz's opinion, but Candy had liked it.

Kicking a pistol ahead of himself, Fitz stepped across to the overhead light switch and the wall-mounted telephone. Clicking the lights on, Fitz picked up the telephone and tapped in the emergency number.

"Police? This is Conrad Fitzhugh at 207 Kensington Mansions, Masden Boulevard. There's been an armed break-in by some thugs. I've got a couple of them. You'd better get here quickly—and send an ambulance, too. One of them has been shot by his mates."

Fitz put the phone down and ran to check on Candy. The bedroom was empty, and the bathroom door was soundly locked. Sensible girl! He knocked on the door. "Candy! Are you all right?"

There was a terrified whimper from inside.

She must be frightened witless. Getting involved with ultrawealthy Shareholders was one thing, but nothing could have prepared her for this. Their politics were dirty. No wonder she'd blamed him. "It's all right. I've dealt with them. The cops are on their way."

"Thank God!" she said.

"You're not hurt?"

"I'm fine."

"Good. Stay in there until the cops get here, Candy. I'll call you when it's safe."

He ran back through to find one of the attackers determinedly staggering towards a pistol. Fitz dealt with him. Hard. He took some duct tape from the drawer under the telephone and did some trussing and gagging. Then he did some first aid on the gunshot victim.

He was busy with that when the ambulance and half a dozen uniformed policemen arrived. He stood up, allowing the two paramedics to take over. The police lieutenant looked at the two burly trussed-up men, and prodded one with his toe.

"Well done, soldier! These Vat-bandits are getting more cheeky by the day. Firearms! I'm tempted to shoot the bastards with their own guns and save the courts the trouble. It'll be the organ banks for them,

for sure," he said, beaming. "Come on, boys. Take 'em away. Better put some cuffs on them, read them their rights and take 'em to the station. Simpson. Nygen. You two had better accompany the medics and keep that one under guard."

Fitz tapped him on the shoulder. "Candy—my ex-girlfriend—sensibly locked herself in the bathroom when these guys broke in. Can we go through and let her out? She's terrified, poor girl."

The police chief beamed expansively. "Sure, soldier. Though why she worries with a guy like you around, I don't know."

They went through and the police lieutenant knocked cheerfully on the bathroom door. "Lieutenant Swiggers here, ma'am. You can come out now, ma'am. We've got the miscreants safe under lock and key."

Candy emerged with her cell phone still clutched in her hand. "Lieutenant! Thank God you're here." She pointed at Fitz. "Arrest him! He's wanted for attempted murder."

Just at this point one of the uniformed cops came through. "Uh. Lieutenant. The paramedics just found this in the injured guy's pocket."

It was a badge. And an ID card. "He's a Special Branch detective."

\* \* \*

Van Klomp shook his head at Fitz, who stood behind the bars of a holding cell in the GBS Central Police Headquarters. The big man sighed. "As my mother used to say: *Lelik is nix, maar stupid!* Fitzzy, you're so dumb it almost isn't funny. As soon as I got home, and Meilin told me where you'd been thickheaded enough to go, I got hold of Mike Capra and headed here. We nearly beat you into the place. You moron! *Of course* Talbot Cartup had to stick to Candy's story when he came around—or be the laughingstock of the town. Now, Capra will talk to you. I believe they've scheduled throwing the book at you for the morning."

"But Bobby, those guys—who turned out to be Special Branch plainclothes security police—tried to kill me."

Van Klomp snorted. "Dead men don't have to go to court, Fitz. Much more convenient, *né*. The security lot act as enforcers for some of the top Shareholders. And Cartup is their boss."

Fitz sighed. "Bobby, can you get a message to my father?" He looked down. "I've been thinking the last while that I need to sort things out with him. I was going to go and see him after I'd seen Candy."

"You should have done it first, *idiot*," said Van Klomp roughly. "He would have told you not to be so stupid. He came to see me the day you went into the army. I had him on the phone a few minutes back."

\* \* \*

Mike Capra stood up. "Detective-inspector, you've stated that you entered the premises at 207 Kensington Mansions through a smashed-in front door. Was the door broken before you arrived there?"

The thick-set man nodded. "It was."

"At this point you state that the accused, who was lying in ambush, opened fire on you without any warning or provocation."

"That's what I said, yes," said the detective. "And these are the same questions you asked DI Scott. You've got the sworn statements of two trained officers on these points."

Mike Capra nodded. "The court has indeed. Thank you. I have no further questions."

"The prosecution may call its next witness," said the judge.

The next witness was a demure-looking Candice Foster in a virginal white blouse and neat gray skirt. "It is safe, Judge? He is restrained, isn't he?"

The judge nodded benignly. "Quite safe, my dear. You may take the oath."

Fitz was amazed to learn just how insanely jealous and violent he was. And how he'd locked her in the bathroom—on his second attack while he waited in ambush for her fiancé. She did some most artistic weeping and shuddering, too. To the point where the judge cautioned Capra to be gentle in his cross-examination.

"M'lud! When am I ever anything else?"

"When it suits you, Capra," said the judge, dryly.

"Precisely, M'lud. It does not suit me to be anything else but gentle when I am forced to defend a man accused of so vilely abusing one of our most respected citizens. A person who would dress such a man in lacy yellow polka-dotted women's underclothing, tie him to the bed, beat him and then suffocate him with a plastic bag, deserves little."

Talbot Cartup cringed. The prosecution had been very circumspect about the exact nature of the assault. The press gallery scribbled frantically.

"Now. Ms. Candice Foster, could you clarify one point? On the occasion of the second assault you have stated that the accused broke down your door."

"Yes. He's a very violent man. Very strong. I tried to fight him off, but—"

"Thank you, Ms. Foster. There is no need to upset yourself with the sordid details. Now: On the occasion of the first assault—I have examined the police report in detail. I could find no report of forced entry on that occasion. How did the accused get in that time?"

She shrugged. "Maybe he climbed in the window."

Mike Capra looked thoughtful. "Number 207 is a penthouse apartment, is it not?"

"Yes," she nodded proudly. Everyone knew those cost a mint.

"You say he came into the lounge where you and your fiancé were sitting in discussion, at which point he forced you both through into the bedroom, and you into the bathroom. You must know where he came from? Through which door, Ms. Candice?"

"My bedroom," she said thoughtfully. "I remember now. The window was open."

"Thank you. I have no further questions at this point."

"Very well. I think the court will recess for lunch. The defense may present its arguments and I should be able to deal with sentencing today," said the judge.

\* \* \*

"I thought you said we should be able to wrap this up, Mike," hissed Fitz. "The judge has already decided to sentence me. And you hardly even questioned those damn liars. Even that lying doorman who says he saw me there. Recognized my car."

"Patience," said the Capra. "When you want to catch monkeys you put lots of tempting things in the calabash. You don't frighten them off *before* they have their hands in it. We'll do the nasty questions and scaring after lunch. They've been very cooperative. Don't be ungrateful. Go and enjoy your nice prisoner's nubbins like a good boy. You'll be back on army rations soon."

\* \* \*

And so it was.

"M'lud, first I'd like to ask that a policeman be dispatched with my assistant to bring the accused's wallet from his personal possessions here, to be used as evidence."

"That should have been entered as evidence beforehand, Mr. Capra, as you well know."

"M'lud, the court shares a building with the Central Police Station. This seemed the most obvious way of dealing with any possibility that anyone might tamper with the evidence. I have grounds to believe certain members of the police are in fact in collusion with the true perpetrators of these crimes."

The judge raised his eyebrows. "That's a serious accusation, Mr. Capra. I hope you can substantiate it."

"I'll do my best, M'lud. Now, if a policeman could accompany my assistant to recover my client's possessions? I will proceed with other evidence in the meanwhile."

The judge nodded. "It is irregular, Mr. Capra. But under the circumstances, proceed. Granted."

"Objection, M'lud!" protested the prosecution.

The judge shook his head. "Objection overruled. Continue, Mr. Capra."

"M'lud, if we could proceed to exhibit one of the evidence which I have entered. As you can see these are certified copies of the lease of 207 Kensington Mansions and payment records for the rental thereof. Could I ask the clerk of the court to read out in whose name the lease is held, and from whose account the rentals were paid?"

The judge nodded. And the reedy-voiced clerk read, "Conrad M. Fitzhugh."

As the court bubbled and a furious Talbot turned on Candy . . . the policeman and Capra's assistant returned with Fitz's wallet.

"Please give that item to the clerk of the court," requested Capra. "And sir, if you could be so kind as to examine the inner pouch of the wallet. You should find a key there. Please hold it up."



He did. "M'lud. That is the key to Number 207 Kensington Mansions. Another copy of this key was in the possession of the agents, Messrs. Smythe and Austing. With a letter of authority from the tenant and both Mr. Smythe and Mr. Austing, as well as the block-caretaker, we ascertained that key held by Smythe and Austing fits the lock. I have their copy of the key here. I think we can establish that the two are identical. I should like to enter these as exhibits two and three. If the clerk of the court would like to examine them?"

The reedy-voiced clerk was enjoying himself very much. And he could indeed confirm the two keys were identical. The judge had to bang his gavel and call for silence after that.

"Now, M'lud, I don't believe the charge of breaking and entering . . . into one's own property can be entertained. I think we should also question the credibility of a witness who expects us to believe a large man would climb the outside of a five-story building to enter by the window, or by breaking down the door, when he has the key in his pocket. I would also question how someone who felt she was in extreme danger from my client didn't even bother to change the lock. Far from being guilty of breaking and entering . . . in fact my client should charge Ms. Foster and Mr. Cartup with trespass."

In the sudden silence Candice's voice, protesting to Talbot, was remarkably clear. "I forgot he had a key. He always knocked."

"Objection!"

"Sustained." The judge nodded to the clerk. "See that the charges of breaking and entering are struck from the roll. Proceed, Mr. Capra. As usual, you are providing the court with much entertainment." The judge's voice did not indicate that he approved.

"I do my best, M'lud," said Capra, urbanely. "I have here a statement of account from the municipal pound. As you will see, the vehicle which the night concierge at Kensington Mansions described in such loving detail, was impounded some four hours before the incident is supposed to have occurred. He also said my client entered the building by the front door. This is unusual for a man who is supposed to have entered number 207 through a window." Capra turned to the judge. "I think it is very clear that one or the other or both of these witnesses is lying."

The judge raised his eyebrows. "At very best that they were mistaken, Mr. Capra. I will grant you that their credibility is somewhat dented, and the lengthy testimony of Mr. Brenner should probably be subjected to a motion to strike."

Capra nodded. "My feelings exactly, Your Honor. Now we come to the second alleged attempted murder: that of DI Carr. We have already established that the two officers in question may possibly also, at best, have been . . . mistaken, as to the door being smashed in before they arrived."

"Objection!"

"On what grounds, Mr. Penquick?" the judge asked icily.

"Er. The defense is putting his own interpretation of events on the testimony of two respected officers!"

"He's putting *my* words to their testimony. It is, in my opinion, a very generous interpretation. Continue, Mr. Capra."

"Thank you, Your Honor. I'd like to call Dr. Liepsich of the HAR Institute of Technology as my first

witness."

An untidy, long-haired man proceeded to the stand, took the oath and scratched in his scraggly beard. Capra proceeded onward.

"Dr. Liepsich, you are head of the physics department at HARIT. I believe you are also chief consultant to the HAR defense force on Korozhet equipment. The soft-cyber and the slowshield particularly."

The scientist grimaced. "For my sins, yes. Although I would have more luck explaining them to brain-dead first-year art students."

Mike Capra persisted. "But you are the best expert on the function of the slowshields that the military issue to their troops."

"Yep. Dead simple things, really. From the functional point of view. They harden if anything moving faster than 22.8 mph passes through the exclusion zone."

"Can a soldier turn his shield off?" asked the defense attorney.

"Nope," said the scientist. "They're as idiot-proof as possible. They're surgically implanted, draw power from the user's electromagnetic field."

Capra nodded. "And just what would happen if someone wearing one fired a pistol?"

Liepsich shrugged again. "Does the word 'colander' mean anything to you?"

The judge cleared his throat. "Could you stop speaking in riddles, Dr. Liepsich? Mr. Capra, what is all this about?"

The physics professor looked at the judge as a man might a beetle crawling out of his sandwich. "It means," he said with an air of exaggerated patience, "that if your accused over there had shot the cop—as the other two cops testified he did—the ricochets inside his own slowshield would have killed him. It is a physical impossibility. He didn't shoot anyone. He can't. They lied. Is that clear enough?"

The prosecuting attorney had leapt to his feet. "Your Honor, I object to the witness drawing unsupported conclusions."

The untidy professor looked at the attorney. "Meatball, when you have the intellect to manage elementary arithmetic without counting on your fingers, you can tell me I draw unsupported conclusions. In the meantime I suggest you go off and learn how to tie your own shoelaces."

The judge was forced to resort to his gavel to quell the riot. "Dr. Liepsich, desist with abusing our learned friend. I caution you that if you do not moderate your tone, I might have to find you in contempt. What I meant was I wanted to know what this slowshield issue has to do with this case?"

Mike Capra cleared his throat. "M'lud, I don't believe that the prosecution had seen fit to inform you that as of the fifth of last month, my client has been a volunteer, serving with the HAR defense force. He therefore has a surgically implanted slowshield. He therefore cannot have shot anyone on the afternoon of the seventeenth instant."

The judge cocked his head. "He's a member of the *army*?"

Capra nodded. "Yes, Your Honor. A private."

The judge looked at the documents before him. "And he joined as a volunteer on the fifth?"

Capra nodded again. "Yes, Your Honor. It is a matter of public record."

"Then I have no jurisdiction over this case. By the terms of Special Gazette item 17 of 11/3/29 he cannot be prosecuted for misdemeanors committed prior to this, while he is in the service. A foolish statute, in my opinion, but nonetheless, that is the law. And for any crimes he committed after that date, he should be tried by the military, not, thank goodness, by me. And anyway, it is my considered opinion that there is no case against this man."

"In that case, Your Honor, may I raise a motion that these charges be dismissed?"

The judge nodded. He looked at the prosecution. "I do, however, instruct that the police investigate and appropriately charge the two detective inspectors who lied under oath. Much as I deplore Dr. Liepsich's abusive manner, I cannot fault his conclusions. It is my opinion that the prosecutorial work done here was more than appallingly sloppy." He struck the desk with his gavel. "Case dismissed."

\* \* \*

Walking out of the court, arm in arm with Van Klomp and his father, Fitz couldn't help grinning. "Well. Now all I have to face is a charge for being AWOL. I'll have to get back to camp as soon as possible.

Van Klomp cleared his throat. "As it happens, a major from the Attorney General's office contacted me about that. Scariest man I've met for a long time. Fortunately, he seems to approve of you. He said if you have an affidavit from the judge, to the effect that you'd been illegally detained by civil authority, you'd get away with it. Give it to your commanding officer. The army looks with disfavor on civil authorities messing around with their own. Capra's hopefully organizing it right now."

\* \* \*

The camp commandant looked at the affidavit. Shrugged. "Not my business anyway. You've been transferred to OCS instead. Someone higher up obviously decided that the Vats would murder a Shareholder, now that, thanks to the newspapers, everyone knows you are one. You're due to report there tomorrow. So, it looks like I should give you another pass. Try and stay out of trouble on this one."

## 5

"We need more loyalty. More courage. More military backbone." Thus spoke the plump jellyfish of a general, Blutin, who was officially the head of HAR's army.

"We had to resort to bribing them with drink. It's the only thing we've found that actually motivates them," said his 2IC, General Cartup-Kreutzler. "We're forced to apply the harshest of military discipline, too. They desert with regularity. It's only the grog ration that keeps them in the trenches at all. We need you to sort this out and to treble production."

The colony's chief biologist sighed. "You asked us for some animal that we could uplift with this Korozhet device that would be an efficient killer of the insectlike Magh' invaders. We took one of the best naturally equipped species, that we could breed quite fast. Now . . . you're telling us fast isn't fast enough. You need more rats. Are they no good as Magh' killers?"

The two generals looked at each other. Blutin might be the senior, but he always let Cartup-Kreutzler lead. "They do seem to be very good at killing Magh'," admitted Cartup-Kreutzler.

"Then why are you experiencing such high mortalities?" she asked dourly. "I must tell you, gentlemen, that we simply cannot step up production. Our facilities were never meant to carry the load they are doing now. If anything, production is going to decline as certain irreplaceable equipment breaks down."

"Er. Well, we've had to execute rather a lot in training," said Blutin. "Slacking. And for military crimes. Insubordination. Desertion. Refusal to obey the orders of a senior officer. That's why we want you to improve their attitude."

Devi Sanjay laughed. There was no humor in that laugh. "Attitude? You want me to change their attitude in my cloning vats! I can't change their nature. *You* will have to change their nurture."

They looked blankly at her. "What do you mean, ma'am?" asked Cartup-Kreutzler, finally.

If there was one thing Devi hated it was being called "ma'am."

"I mean you'll have to change the way you train them."

Blutin shook his head. "We can't do that. It . . . it's not the way it is done!"

Cartup-Kreutzler backed him up. "Yes, I must really insist that you leave military matters to us, Professor Sanjay. It's not your field of expertise."

Devi Sanjay looked at the two generals coldly. She refrained from saying "it's not yours either."

Mentally, she shrugged. She'd hit brick walls before. In the Shareholders' current panic, they would give their support to these idiots and not to the voice of reason. Before this war, the HAR army had been a rather trivial out-of-the-way make-work place to dump well-connected incompetents. Now, with the Magh' invasion, the army had assumed a central position in human society. Unfortunately, it had retained its idiots.

"Well, you're going to have to give up these executions. We can't replace the rats or the soft-cyber units you're . . . using up." She had managed not to say "wasting."

"Discipline must be maintained!" snapped Cartup-Kreutzler. "We've got to set an example or the rats will be far worse."

She looked dispassionately at the two. No wonder humans were in such trouble. "If I might suggest . . . Simply remove the troublemakers and repost them elsewhere. Tell the rats that remain that the

troublemakers have been executed. From what you've told me, they're in no position to know any different. Tell the reposted ones they've been reprieved. It would give us breathing space here at the cloning labs. And we'll experiment with a different language download on the bats."

The two generals looked at each other. "I suppose that might work," said Cartup-Kreutzler reluctantly. "We can send them to areas the Korozhet advisors say are imminent attack zones."

Blutin looked suspiciously at her. "What has language got to do with it? I don't see why they're required to speak anyway."

"Language shapes the way you are able to think. For example, Zulu has no distinct word for the color blue as opposed to green. This makes describing the difference between hydrous and anhydrous copper sulphate difficult," she said dryly.

The two generals looked blankly at her. She decided to continue anyway. "The microprocessor in the soft-cyber unit 'learns' how to translate thought patterns into words existing within the vocabulary download. This is naturally a little imprecise. The software in the cybernetic unit selects the nearest possible word with impeccable logic. Unfortunately, English isn't terribly logical. It does mean that you can't think of a complex matter which you do not have words for, however."

A dim light dawned at the end of Cartup-Kreutzler tunnel. "Could you arrange it so that they don't know the meaning of fear?"

"Unlikely," said the scientist dryly. "It's a core word in the human vocabulary. And without the concept you would be even shorter of soldiers. Gentlemen, I've heard your requests." She emphasized that word. "I've told you what can be done. Now, if you'd excuse me, I shall see about implementation."

Without asking their permission, she got up and left. It would be better if she could depart this overplush office, and this chateau with its fake military grandeur, without explaining that the bats would be getting downloads of Irish nationalist folk music and old Wobbly songs.

Devi Sanjay had joined the New Fabians back on Earth as a young idealist, with many others, planning a utopia. She'd seen the ideals of her compatriots wither as they became part of the entrenched privileged class. She wasn't young anymore. But she, personally, had not quite lost all her idealism. When she'd left Earth, humans had been the intelligent species of the universe. Alone. Special. Now she knew that intelligent life was not rare. There were the alien enemy—the Magh', the alien allies—the spiny beach ball Korozhet, and, according to the Korozhet, hundreds of others in this part of the galaxy alone. Evil ones such as the Jampad and Magh', friends like Korozhet. She'd fostered two new intelligent species herself. The army still regarded them as trained animals. Biomechanical weapons. Things.

Devi Sanjay knew they were wrong. Things stopped being things when they reasoned. And, like the aliens, they would not see the world from a human perspective. Devi had never explained just why she had chosen the species she had, or the language downloads that she had. Her reasons were subtle, and her plans and vision deep. Some of them had very little to do with the war.

Humans had let the genie out of the Vat. Of one thing she was certain: it wouldn't be that easy to put the two new intelligent species back. She'd given the rats some of the most intense and skilled portrayal of human drama and history. Now she was about to do the same, with emotional and revolutionary content instead, to a species that could indeed kill Magh'—among other things.

Whatever came out of the meeting of these three . . . humans, rats and bats, all endowed with a shaping

human heritage, when the hurly-burly was done . . . would not be in the smug plans of the aging New Fabian Shareholders.

\* \* \*

The rats marched between the shock-stick-armed MPs, to face the bored-looking tribunal. The clerk listed their numbers. The officer presiding looked up from the sheaf of papers in front of him. "You are charged with aiding and abetting the enemy, desertion and murder of your human officer. We have affidavits here from the OC commanding and Rat 235645670045, known as 'Dick Deadeye.' Do you have anything to say in your defense?"

The rats looked in puzzlement at the officers. "We never did any a-betting. 'Tis a good idea, mind," said Gobbo.

"Murder?" said Ariel. "'Twas pesticide. And that is no crime. We asked."

The officer ignored her. "We note that Rat 235645670045, known as 'Dick Deadeye,' is deceased. I presume he was murdered to try and cover up your heinous deeds."

Pooh-Bah shook his head. "Humans doth mistake rats' morality. But then we find you incomprehensible. He took liberties that he wasn't invited to with Ariel."

## 6

"Oink! I mean, Lieutenant," said Ewen, the big private grinning all over his ugly face. But, also, saluting earnestly.

"At ease," said the newcomer to Ariel's chief supplier. "I feel uncomfortable enough with this bird shit on my shoulders without having to run into my old squad. What are you doing here, Ewen? I thought you'd been posted to the artillery."

The big private shrugged. "I got caught running a black-market trade with the rats. When it got to the court-martial they couldn't quite pin it on me. So I got posted here to 'Fort Despair.' What did you do wrong?"

"Other than graduate from the OCS course, nothing I can think of. Why?"

Ewen shook his head. "You always were a bit slow—sir—even when it came to making a bed." The private grinned broadly at the memory. "This is 'Fort Despair.' Where they send the malcontents and troublemakers. It's a hot sector. The Maggots are pushing forward fast and hard. The Maggots are supposed to do the job for them without having to go through all the hassle of finding evidence for a court-martial." The private laughed. "We read all about your little court case, Oi . . . Lieutenant."

"We'll have to keep it 'Lieutenant,' Private. Too damn difficult otherwise."

The big man smiled. "I reckon I won't have any trouble taking orders from you. Sir."

\* \* \*

"This is Lieutenant Fitzhugh. He is the new OC for this sector," said the sergeant.

The rats seemed vastly uninterested. The humans—and they were a rough-looking lot—looked as if they were already planning to desert or kill him.

Fitz looked speculatively at them, without saying a word, until they began to get uncomfortable. Then he sighed. "Right. Listen up all of you. I gather you are all here to save the army the trouble of killing you legally." There was low-throated grumble. "It probably hasn't occurred to you that they'd give you an officer that they feel the same way about."

The grumble was silenced as they digested this one. Fitz ground his fist into his palm. "I'm planning on pissing on their fireworks, soldiers. I'm here because I got up the noses of certain powerful Shareholders. Private Ewen here will fill you in on all the gory details. For a fee, I'm sure. But to cut a long story short, I was a boot with the conscripts. I know every 'stute trick you lot can pull. And they will not happen. Is this clear?"

There were a few mutters. "On the other hand, I am not going to waste your time with petty crap. There will be weapons drills, come hell, high water or shelling. Your bangsticks will be sharp and ready. Hygiene will be of the highest standard we can manage out here. God help anyone I find crapping in their foxhole. For the rest, I'm really not interested. When, if, we get out of here, you'll worry about polished boots and belt buckles. Until then, don't waste your time or mine." There was a muted cheer. He hushed it with a wave. "I'll want to talk individually to all of you, especially the combat vets. I've no intention of obliging anyone by dying easily. I want that attitude from all of you. Dismissed. Back to your posts."

There was a silence. And then Ewen began clapping . . . It caught on.

Fitz waved it down after a minute. "Enough. We can see if you still want to clap in a week's time. To your posts."

\* \* \*

Fitz leaned against the dugout wall. His father had given him two items on that last pass. "Take this tin of boiled candy. The candy is new. The tin isn't. It's been through four Earth wars with various Fitzhughs." The tin was a thin, flat one. The paint had long since worn off. But there was a deep gouge right across it. "Tradition has it that you will keep it in your left breast pocket."

The other thing he'd given him was a piece of advice: "Forget what they told you in OCS. When you get to your unit, talk to your NCOs. Let them lead you around quietly until you know enough not to make a fool of yourself."

"So tell me about the rats, Sarge," said Fitz to the rat-corps sergeant. "Before I make a fool of myself."

The sergeant permitted himself a hint of a smile. "Bit different from our last lootie, sir. He knew it all when he got to us. They told him at OCS how to deal with them."

Fitz raised one eyebrow. "Sergeant. They also told me how to deal with Vat-conscripts. Seeing as I've

been one of those, and I know how they messed up there . . . I thought I might try asking one of the people who really run things."

Now the sergeant was grinning openly. "Ewen said you were a 'stute one. Well, sir, there is a whole set of different rules for dealing with them. They've got no morals at all, for starters. And they speak sort of English, but they don't think like we do. They take things very literally, and they still think like rats—you know, food, sex and strong drink are the only important things in the world, and devil take tomorrow and the hindmost."

"Ah!" said Fitz with a smile. "Like most of my boot-camp Vat-companions."

"Bit like, sir. But the difference is they don't seem to get concepts like respect for rank or a uniform. You earn respect personally. They don't have much loyalty, not even to each other. You can force them to do things, but the minute your back's turned they won't do them. The honest truth is it is easier to buy 'em than to try and do it any other way."

He looked warily at his new CO. "Er. I've heard, sir, all the human rat-corps NCOs who survive crook the mortality records so they've got some extra grog on hand."

Fitz didn't turn a hair. "Hmm. I trust you will continue to do so. And what else do they fancy?"

The sergeant was getting to like his new lieutenant. "Well, drink's best, sir," he said with a grin, "but you'll find lads like Ewen run a good black market in chocolate, lighters, knickknacks, fancy goods. They find tails the sexiest part of the body so they like to ornament them."

"And where do they get the money for all this?" asked Fitz. "I was under the impression they weren't paid."

"Ah," said the sergeant, giving him the sort of look a proud teacher might give a star pupil. "There you have it, sir. The rats' chief vice is looting. If the Maggots had loot, we wouldn't be able to hold them back."

\* \* \*

The rats were lounging in the OP, discussing the curious behavior of the humans. "Methinks he is popular enough with them. They clapped."

"You mean he is pronging yon Linda. Methinks I have heard of that. They call it Vat-shagging," said Gobbo, knowledgeably.

Ariel stared at him in puzzlement. "Art mad? What sayest thou?"

"Well, he hath got the clap," said Gobbo. "Ewen said *he* was sure he had it from her."

"Not that sort of clap. The clapping you get for being popular."

"'Twas my thought you could not be my kind without being popular," said Gobbo earnestly. His ears twitched. "Hist. He comes."

The rats were earnestly doing what they were supposed to when Fitz arrived. None of them leapt to attention. "As you were," said Fitz, dryly.



They went back to their lounging, which hadn't been quite what he'd meant. That was what the sergeant had meant by "take things very literally." Well, he could work against them, or work with them. . . .

He sat down, and hauled out Van Klomp's parting gift. A hip flask full of HAR's best yet attempt at a single malt. It was a reasonable exchange for the gift of an Aston Martin replica. "Does anyone here want a drink?"

One rat—smaller, therefore a female, at a guess—with a rakish tilt to her tail and a particularly rich chocolate color to her fur, was quickest. She snatched the hip flask and leapt to a niche in the wall while the others were still gaping. "'Tis mine!" she squealed triumphantly.

"'Tis not right, Ariel. That's not what the whoreson said!" protested another of the rats.

Fitz saw that a mighty fight was brewing. So he neatly snagged the hip flask back. It came with a clutching rat. "All of us." He stared at the rat who was still clinging to the hip flask, but whose teeth were now bared viciously. "And I will personally bite the tail right off any rat who tries to hog it all. Which would be a shame as yours is one of the sexiest I've ever seen."

To the sound of ratty chuckles and a couple of very credible wolf whistles, she let go. And winked salaciously at him. Then she sniffed. "You've got chocolate," she said, suddenly fiercely intent.

"Indeed. And we'll discuss my parting with some in a few minutes."

A pompous-looking rat strutted forward, a cup made out of a bangstick cartridge outstretched. He motioned at the hip flask. "For a suitable insult, I, as Minister for Interior Affairs, will tell you her weaknesses. Although, as Minister for Defense and Lord High Archbishop, I will say Ariel's tail is not without risks."

Ariel, remaining perfectly confidently standing on Fitz's knee, her eye fixed on his breast pocket, said, "Shut up, Pooh-Bah."

He'd placed the names now. Ariel—the sprite in Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Pooh-Bah from *The Mikado*. The names were an affectation he'd heard about. A side effect of the language download into their Korozhet-built soft-cyber units. As the soft-cyber unit selected the nearest approximate meaning to what the user meant, the name would probably reflect the nature of the beast. "Let's start with names."

"Bardolph." "Gobbo." "Pitti-Sing." "Trinculo." "Caliban." "Poo-Bah-for a reasonable fee." "Hymen." That one arched her tail provocatively at him.

"Paws off, bawd. I found him first," said Ariel.

No heroes. No kings. Rogues and lechers, in their own self-image, by the sounds of it. Well, he'd have to work with the clay he had.

"Get some mugs." He gestured with the hip flask. There was a scamper and a scattering. Except for Ariel. She merely unscrewed the silver cup off his flask, and grinned rattily at him. "Methinks I'll stay put, 'til I have that chocolate."

He shrugged. "I'll drink out of the flask."

"I should have thought of offering to do that," she said, as he doled out liquor.

"You snooze, you lose," he said cheerfully. "Now, to business. I've decided to pay a bounty on Maggot chelicerae. For every left chelicerae you have for me after the next assault, I'll pay one HAR cent—multiplied by the number of live troops I have under my command. At the moment I have some two hundred rats and sixty men, four NCOs and myself. Work that out in booze or bars of chocolate."

The rats began frantically counting on paws and toes and tails. After a while Ariel said. "'Tis no use. Help us with the mathematics. Our base eleven doth make calculation much labor."

"How many Maggots can you kill in one assault?"

The rats blinked at him. "As many as is needful. As many as doth threaten us. Sometimes there are too many," said Ariel. "Then we run away."

"Call it ten each. At that rate—if everyone survives, you rats will get \$26.50 each. Of course it gets less if anyone dies."

"Methinks I have found more looting in a lieutenant's pocket," said Trinculo.

"Ah." Fitz was unsurprised by the admission. "But then he's dead, and there is no more. And that's one lieutenant among two hundred. Your chances are not good. This way . . . you're onto a sure thing. Of course I'll have to put a ceiling on it, or I'll go broke. Say \$50 a month. That's what the army gives conscripted privates."

Ariel tapped the side of the hip flask suggestively. "I'm in. Now this rotgut sack you have in here: 'tis remarkable easy to drink compared to issue grog, even if it doesn't have a proper bite to it. How about another, then?"

"Well, for those who are in, naturally," said Fitz, innocently. He could afford \$10,000 a month for a private army, he thought as he poured. Candy's apartment had cost him about that—and he wasn't having to pay for that anymore. He'd cancelled the lease.

Ariel drank the whiskey slowly, speculatively, unlike most of the rats who were into chug-and-splutter. "Methinks I shall nursemaid this one," she announced. "For if he dies, we get naught." She looked curiously at him. "Besides, I want to inspect his naked weapon and see if he's adequate for a girl like me." She wrinkled her whiskers and revealed that the stories of his exploits had reached the rats. "This 'woman's underwear.' Explain?"

Fitz was still blushing at the idea that a rat might consider his wedding tackle too small. Or interesting. The sergeant had been right about no morals . . . or inhibitions! "Ah. Underclothes. Um. Panties and brassieres. Suspender belts."

"Doth speak riddles. Small pants? Things for grilling meat?"

"Women . . . um, men too, wear a second pair of pants under their clothes. To cover their private parts."

The rats would obviously have found astrophysics more comprehensible.

\* \* \*

Fitz discovered that Ariel took "nursemaid" to mean she was going to take up residence in his magazine pouch, or on his shoulder. But the day wasn't out before he discovered that this casual invasion of his

privacy was worthwhile.

The nightmare creatures struck just at dusk. None of the pictures or lectures had prepared Fitz for the reality. Or for the speed and ferocity of it all. They'd said at OCS that up to seventy percent of human soldiers never survived the first major assault. Now Fitz understood why. And he also knew that if it wasn't for his pocket assassin-cum-bodyguard, he'd have been dead five times over in that assault. Rats were everywhere. Blur-fast lethal killers with a terrifyingly casual attitude to their killing. And Fitz discovered that "ten each" was a gross underestimate of their potential and the Magh's sheer numbers.

"Sector headquarters on the blower, Lieutenant."

"Hell's teeth. Have you told them we're under attack?!"

"They know, Lieutenant. The line on either side of us folded. They're sending reinforcements into those trenches, hoping to hold line two. They thought we—being in the center of the attack—must all be dead. They want us to retreat."

"Tell 'em we're still holding. We don't want to be outflanked though." Fitz turned to one of the NCOs. "What are our losses like, Corporal?"

The man was grinning like a dervish, despite the blood soaking his shirt from a gash on his chest. "Slight, sir. Five men I know of. Some wounded, but there are no more Maggots coming over. We're fighting them coming along the trenches from the sectors next door now."

"Are we going to hold them, Corporal?"

The man nodded. "The rats have gone kill-crazy, Lieutenant. I've never seen anything like it. The Maggots usually send a lot of 'scorps. This is all light, fast stuff. Easy to kill. Those damned rats would have killed twice as many if they didn't stop to take a claw off each one. Some kind of new rat-craze."

"Tell 'em. Hell, no. I'd better tell them." Fitz ran for the field-telephone bunker.

"Lieutenant Fitzhugh here."

"Captain Dewalt here. Colonel's orders. Sound a retreat for any survivors, Lieutenant," said the voice on the other end.

"We've held them off, sir. And there are no more Magh' coming. We're mopping up."

His words didn't appear to have registered with the Captain. "We'll have stretcher teams in the second trench line. Leave the rats . . ."

"We've held them off, sir," repeated Fitz, louder now. "No need to retreat."

There was a stunned silence. "What! That's ridiculous. . . . I'd better confer with the colonel. Stay near the field telephone."

Fitz didn't. Instead he left—at a run—to see how the fight with the Magh' from the next-door sector was doing.

The answer was: not well. The rats were there . . . but several of them were sitting down, leaving the fight to the human troops. And those that were still fighting were going to die. It was not that the Magh' were overwhelming. It was just that the rats seemed to be behaving like clockwork toys . . . in need of rewinding. "What's wrong?" yelled Fitz to Ariel as he ran forward to the fray.

"Methinks they're faint with hunger."

Of course! He'd been told the elephant-shrew genes gave the rats phenomenal appetites. They must have fast metabolisms and little stamina. "Feed the rats! Give them any food you've got, especially sugar, or we're dead!"

He hauled out the tin of sucking candy and flung it at a sergeant, before running into the fight. "Get someone across the west side and tell them," he yelled, bangstick stabbing through pseudochitin.

He had no idea how fast the rats would recover. He was relieved to discover that it was really quick, and that the average grunt, when faced with death or parting with precious little luxuries he kept next to his skin, would reluctantly part with the luxuries. The east side trenches of the late Lieutenant Zuma soon would be free of Magh'.

As he set off across to the west side, he was met by a panting private. "Sir. Colonel Brown on the line. He's insisting we retreat."

Fitz stopped. "Did you give him your name, Private?"

"I couldn't get a fucking word in edgeways, sir. Sorry, pardon language, sir."

"This is a war, not a kindergarten, Private. A pity Private Johnstone was killed before he could give me the message. He is dead, isn't he?"

The private grinned. "Yes, sir. I saw him die. Poor fellow."

"Stick to that story," said Fitz. "And see that the field telephone has a convincing accident. Cave part of the bunker in. The fight's all over on the east side. If we can lick them on the west, I'm not running."

Ten minutes later Fitz called in from the west side's field telephone. "Yes, sir. My apologies, sir. I was called away from our field telephone to deal with an immediate crisis. Unfortunately the instrument was destroyed and the man I had instructed to remain with it was killed."

He waited for the volcano to subside and then answered the last question.

"Where am I calling from, sir? Why Section B3, sir. On our west side. We've already secured the east side. We'd like some relief, Colonel. We're pretty thin spread holding three pieces of the line."

There was a long silence from the other side. Then: "You're making your fellow officers look bad, Lieutenant. Hum. I'll get some men up to you at once. They're waiting in trench line two."

# 7

In the seven weeks that followed, Fitz's section survived a sequence of small probes and one more direct assault. This was somewhat worse than the first one. But Fitz's new system of buddying two rats to each human soldier worked remarkably well. The rest of the rats he used as a free-range strike force. And this attack seemed almost like a spearpoint aimed at his piece of the line. Once they'd stopped it, they didn't even have to deal with the other sections. And then even artillery bombardment slacked off.

They eventually had to retreat after three weeks of near idleness and weapons drill, because the line had folded to the west of them. "It's almost as if they won't hit here, because we're strongest here," grumbled Fitz. He never thought he'd miss Magh' attacks, but the boredom made keeping the troops in readiness hell. There was drunkenness, gambling, and several fights about women . . . and fights about men among the women. Only the rats seemed content.

Sergeant Ellis nodded. "It's always like that, sir. The Maggots always attack where we're weakest."

"Suggests good intelligence, doesn't it, Sarge?"

"Can't be military intelligence then, sir," said the sergeant, handing him a couple of sealed dispatches.

Fitz cracked the first open. "Well, glory be! This'll cheer the troops up. We've done our two-month frontline stint and we're being pulled back to third line for a month to rest the men."

"Be about the fullest company to get rested," said the sergeant. "Half the time the companies have to be replaced and re-formed before that. The lads'll see some leave, too. You get a week when you're on third trench," she said with relish.

"That'll be a shock to civvy street," said Fitz dryly. Life expectancy in the trenches was about forty days at the moment. Inside, he was deeply grateful that he would be returning some eighty-three percent of his men past that. It was something you didn't dwell on here. But it did make boredom sweet. He opened the second envelope. Blinkered. "It appears this bunch of ne'er-do-wells is due to attend a medals parade at sector headquarters. And yours truly is promoted to lieutenant first class. With the corresponding increase in pay of seven dollars a day, and family and retirement benefits."

"The family and retirement benefits sound good, sir," said the sergeant. She'd given up trying to get into Fitz's pants a while back. Ariel was a good dog-in-the-manger. But the sergeant still cast sheep's eyes his way sometimes. Fitz avoided them with care. That was a set of complications he didn't need here, as their CO. Still, as a normal male there were certain intentions he was planning to follow up on that seven-day pass, when he didn't have a minder.

\* \* \*

In dress BDUs that now had a row of ribbons on the chest, and a second pip on their shoulders, Fitz blinked at the bright lights outside the troop disembarkation station. He put his bag down and wondered

just where to go now.

"To find some food and drink," said the bag, in Ariel's voice, obviously guessing his thoughts.

"What the hell are you doing in there?" he demanded.

"Methinks I am crossing my legs and tying a knot in my tail. Hurry up and let me out before I pee on your kit."

Given the alternative, letting her out seemed the only option. And, tempting though it might be, he couldn't just run off and leave her there. She had kept him alive in the trenches, after all. So, with a curious rat peering out of his magazine pocket, he took a taxi into town. It was at her orders he stopped at the Paradise Pussy Club, too. It had a flashing neon cocktail-glass sign.

\* \* \*

The bouncer eyed the man in uniform uncertainly. While officers in full-dress uniform, complete with ceremonial swords, were regular and welcome visitors to the club, men in BDUs were not. However this was definitely an officer, even if he was wearing dress BDUs. Against his better judgement he'd let him in.

\* \* \*

In the pale hours of morning, Fitz looked cheerfully back at the club. It had been a great evening. The lap dancer would no doubt recover from the bite on her well-padded tail-end . . .

He gently patted the rat whose long nose protruded from his pocket, issuing ladylike snores. He'd had a wonderfully vulgar evening with a delightful girl, who had just discovered Cointreau. She'd thought that the strippers and pornographic backdrop movie were the best live entertainment she'd ever seen. Well, it was also the only show she'd seen. Of course, Ariel had also thought it was the side-splittingest comedy she'd ever seen. Rats have no taboos about genitalia or even sex. But what a wonderful girl. She had a biting sense of humor and just happened to be a rat. Damn fool of a bouncer should have understood that. The man would almost certainly recover. Saunas weren't that hot, were they?

It seemed a little early on such a delightful evening—or morning—to go and visit the parental abode. His own residence had been sold. He'd terminated the lease on the only other place he'd had a claim on, and anyway, Candy probably wouldn't have been glad to see him. Perhaps 4:00 a.m. was a little late to go and see if Van Klomp had gone soldiering, finally. He walked idly through an alleyway, where a foolish man waved a knife at him.

"Empty your pockets, soldier," sneered that shifty soul.

Fitz shrugged. "On your head be it."

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, now in search of an all-night store that sold chocolate, he'd gently woven his way up to two men in uniform with white bands around their hats and asked directions. One had been about to prod Fitz in the gut with a nightstick, when he saw the pips on his shoulders. While the MPs were pointing Fitz toward an all-night convenience store, someone with a much faster metabolism was opening the doors to the paddy wagon. Ariel had not survived her only brush with the law not to recognize one.

They zigzagged their course onward rather like that extra stray neutron in a fissionable mass. Letting a rat inside the doors of something like Aladdin's cave was rank foolishness. Fortunately, Fitz was by now sober enough to point out the closed-circuit television to her. She was even more fascinated by this

concept and insisted on breaking into the security room to inspect the monitors. The puzzled alarm-response crew found nothing.

Then, it was dawn, and since a passing taxi was available, Fitz had taken her to see Van Klomp. Unfortunately for the HAR Bolshoi Ballet company . . .

Van Klomp was only due back from his new unit that night. Fitz had peacefully fallen asleep—a good soldier can sleep anywhere, anytime—on Van Klomp's sofa. So that left Meilin talking to Ariel. And the subject, naturally enough, was Fitz himself—his reputation, and the trouble he'd had with the law, and, of course . . . Candy.

What was less predictable—unless you knew rat-nature—was that this long discussion should also involve pornographic backdrops and closed-circuit television. Meilin knew quite a lot about the latter, as that was one aspect of Van Klomp's business. Neutrons are very small. What they can cause is not.

\* \* \*

There was a sonic boom. Well. The return of Van Klomp, anyway.

"Can't you keep away from troublesome women?" demanded Van Klomp, on meeting the rat with a glass of his port in her hand.

She blew him a raspberry, a rather good one, as she'd only learned to do so the night before.

He blew one back that nearly flattened her ears. "So what have you been doing so far, boykie? Nothing as stupid as last time, I trust."

Fitz grinned. "We've toured one of GBS city's finest establishments, namely the Paradise Pussy Club, and visited my father. Cordial terms are restored, but his advice is that we're too alike to keep it that way if we share a house. So I've come to bum a piece of floor. It's got to be drier and more comfortable than where I've been sleeping lately."

"And welcome. Pull up any piece you like. So, what did the old man think of a visit by a rat?" He looked disapprovingly at the bottle Ariel was clutching. "Did you steal his booze too?"

Ariel lifted her nose at Van Klomp. "Pshaw. Of course I was well behaved. 'Twas an experience. I never met a real live progenitor before. He told me to look after Fitz, because it is obvious he can't look after himself."

"True," said Van Klomp, taking the bottle away from her. "And having visited the ancestral home, what excitement is planned for tonight? More visits to cathouses?" he asked with vast tolerance.

Fitz lifted his aristocratic nose. "I am going to introduce Ariel to culture."

Van Klomp snorted. "There's a Bavarian beerfest tomorrow night. Or is that a bit upmarket for a rat who has stolen half my port? Or maybe you were thinking of Chez Henri-Pierre again. He won't let a Vat in the front door. I'm sure he'd be charmed at a rat—especially after your last visit. And then you could go and watch the HAR Bolshoi Ballet's performance of *The Nutcracker Suite*."

"The latter sounds about right. I think we will give Henri-Pierre the go-by," said Fitz, loftily. "His portions are too stingy for Ariel, anyway."

"Besides, I haven't finished all your port, yet. And Meilin is cooking dinner for us. Curried tripe," said Ariel with an expression of bliss.

Van Klomp laughed. "I'm tempted to come along just to see what a rat makes of the ballet. But I've got work to do tonight. And beside, the beerfest is more my sort of thing."

\* \* \*

The acrobatic Ariel thought ballet was quite funny for about five minutes. She was mostly fascinated by the large flatscreen DVD backdrop, which was a great saving in set changes. When Ariel pointed out it was rather reminiscent of last night's pornographic one, only with worse dancing, Fitz had to turn his laughter into a fit of coughing. He still attracted a number of disapproving "hushes."

Ariel also alarmingly disappeared from their private box for a while. There were no screams or other sounds of pandemonium, so Fitz didn't allow the look of glee on her ratty face to worry him too much. She did however adore the Cointreau-centered liqueur chocolates he'd bought her.

He'd have slept less soundly if he'd known that she'd spent the rest of the night driving around with Meilin, part of it in a very exclusive Shareholder neighborhood. And part of it visiting a couple of Vat-girls of negotiable virtue and adaptable morality. It was, Ariel concluded, a lot more fun than the ballet.

"This lot should bring down the house," said Meilin with a particularly evil grin when she'd finished editing the film.

Ariel looked puzzled. "Why? 'Tis very funny, but not explosive."

Meilin snorted with laughter. "Believe me, this is H.E."

"And her," corrected Ariel, pedantically.

\* \* \*

"You're Lieutenant Conrad Fitzhugh?" The MP at Van Klomp's door asked.

"Yes," said Conrad warily. What had Ariel been up to? Besides running up the beer waitress's dress last night?

"Colonel Brown has ordered your recall, sir," said the MP apologetically. "There's been a major incursion in your sector. We've got transport waiting for you."

Fitz nodded. "Give me five minutes to get into uniform and get my kit together."

Ariel was unbelievably dozy. It was almost as if she hadn't slept.

It was a long drive to the front. She snoozed most of the way, contentedly.

\* \* \*

The general bowed his tiara-wearing plump wife into her seat. Ballet wasn't really his favorite entertainment, although he'd known an entertaining ballerina a year or two ago. But Maria was a true aficionado. And when all was said and done, it was her money. The war and cost-plus on artillery ammunition had made the Cartup clan enormously rich.



Having ogled the dancers and ordered some champagne, and salmon-and-watercress sandwiches for the interval, he settled into a comfortable doze.

He was woken by the buzz in the audience.

And no one was saying "hush."

It took a few moments of unbelieving blinking to be sure he wasn't hallucinating.

This was taking *avant garde* theater to new limits. The last time he'd seen anything like that backdrop had been at the Paradise Pussy Club. And that hadn't been quite so explicit. And while the female in the leather outfit wielding the whip was a stunning platinum blond . . . her partner did absolutely nothing for his lacy polka-dot knickers and black bra. And even fishnet stockings couldn't help legs like that.

The two dancers continued to pirouette with grim artistic determination as the huge screen behind them showed the details of his brother-in-law's face.

Talbot Cartup had always liked to sport a figure in high society. He was frequently seen at the opera and ballet. But never before in quite such detail.

The general missed the part showing the interviews with the two ladies of the night, discussing his transvestite brother-in-law's enjoyment of the rather bizarre perversion of semisuffocation. They did mention their prices for what was a very risky pastime. But General Cartup-Kreutzler was too busy trying to break into the very securely locked projection unit.

As it turned out, the DVD in the unit was amazingly bare of fingerprints.

And while the booking for the ballet trebled, it did rather change the way people regarded the art form.

\* \* \*

"Captain?" said Fitz, looking at the bars being handed to him.

"We're out of officers," said the colonel, grumpily. "We lost seven including two captains and a major when we were pushed back to line three. Those troops of yours are heading for court-martial. They're not exactly refusing orders. They want you. We just lost another two officers and your NCOs pulled the men back into the trenches. And what is this story about troops fraternizing with the rats?"

For a moment Fitz thought that Ariel must have put her head out of his pocket. Then he realized what the man was getting at. "Ah. It's a system we've evolved that works. Men have the stamina, rats the speed."

"Well, like your crazy idea about paying them, I'm not having any of it," said the colonel cholericly. "Just see you that get them over the top and that you recapture line two. You've got two new second lieutenants fresh out of OCS. See what you can do, Captain Fitzhugh. Put some discipline into this lot."

\* \* \*

"Impossible, Talbot. He's back in combat. And Major Van Klomp is on a forced march with his men." The general looked in disgust at the telephone. Waited for his brother-in-law to stop rabbiting on. "There is nothing you, or even I, can do about it. Anything direct is almost certain to backfire on you now. I would certainly quietly withdraw those charges, because if the matter comes to court, you're going to end up being sued out of existence. You're a laughingstock and the best you can do is to go to that place of yours in the north and stay there. The town won't forget you in polka-dot panties for a long time."

\* \* \*

Candy Foster was sitting looking gloomily at the door. He hadn't been near here since it happened. Hadn't called. It was his fault, not hers. She did it because that was what he wanted. She had no real interest in sex. Never had had. But it was a useful lever. So she'd panicked when he wouldn't come to after the plastic-bag thing. Her fingers had been stupid with fear and she hadn't been able to get it off. But at least she'd managed to tear the plastic, and hide that stupid leather outfit under a gown when the paramedics came. The story about Conrad had been born out of that panic. Talbot had decided to stick to it to save face. Had that ever blown up in his stupid *face* !

A brown envelope dropped through the letter slot in the door.

Candice opened it with trepidation. Talbot's brother-in-law's influence had stopped her getting call-up papers before. But this letter definitely began with . . .

"Greetings."

With her academic marks she knew she'd wash out of OCS. Let it be catering or nursing services. That was where nice girls were posted. She could change her hair color and use some skin pigment. Maybe change her name too. No one would recognize her. Hopefully.

Infantry school.

## 8

"They're pounding us, Captain. Going to push forward soon," said the slight, bespectacled lance corporal.

"SmallMac! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Transferred in. You're getting a reputation, Fitz. You keep your men alive. And you don't lose."

It was a heavy weight to bear. "I won't always manage to do either, Corporal McTavish," he said quietly. He knew that in this man's case he was carrying a pregnant wife and two small children as well.

SmallMac shrugged. "Ah, but you try to do both, Captain. That's a rarity in a Shareholder officer."

Fitz found that, with the remnants of the rats (numerous) and the humans (few) from the collapse of the forward trenches, he had double his previous troop complement. There were only three other officers—a major who was keeping himself very busy with the troops who were furiously digging in behind them and two fresh-out-of-OCS lieutenants. He held a hasty staff meeting with them and his NCOs.

"Right, based on previous experience, we know when their artillery stops, the Maggots will come swarming."

"You mean the Magh', Captain," said one of the new lieutenants.

Fitz gave the snotty wet-behind-the-ears brat a look that would curdle milk. "Lieutenant Pahad, you'd better learn to speak the language that your men speak, or you'll be a mortality statistic. While I'm on the subject—Sergeant Major, I want you to detail a veteran NCO to each of these new officers. You two—" he pointed at them in their new, crisp BDUs with their new, shiny pips— "will listen to those men. Take advice from them before you give any orders, if you have time."

Pahad drew himself up. "How are we supposed to establish authority under those conditions, Captain?"

Fitz noticed that the other youngster had said nothing. For his sake, and the sake of the men this young idiot would command, he continued. "Lieutenant Pahad. Does the term 'frag' mean anything to you?"

"No, Captain, it does not," the man said stiffly.

"It's an old combat word. One my father told me about. From a long-ago war on old Earth. Unpopular officers who went into combat usually had a fragmentation grenade dropped into their pockets—a few seconds before it exploded. Our troops are combat veterans. They'll take orders or they wouldn't have survived. What they won't take is crap from wet-behind-the-ears ignoramuses who know nothing about real fighting. The average life of a soldier on the front is about forty days. The average life of a second lieutenant is half that. If you're stupid enough to think that that is coincidental . . . then you're a dead man walking. Now, I don't personally give a shit if you get killed. But if the NCOs in your unit tell me you wasted a single troop's life through your arrogance . . . you'd better *be* dead. Because I'll kill you before my troops do. Is that clear?"

The lieutenant gaped at him. But Fitz noticed that the other one nodded.

"Ahem." The sergeant major cleared his throat. "What you may not know, sir, is that the captain here has the best Maggot-kill rate we know of. He's also known to be an absolute bastard—pardon my saying so, sir—" he nodded at Fitz— "at weapons and fitness drill. He's also got the best troop survival rate on the front. Most of his men are veterans. And we get volunteers wanting to serve under him. That's a first for the hottest sector on the front. You're privileged to serve here, son." Which, as the sergeant major was perhaps two years older than Pahad, was not unamusing.

Fitz stopped the incipient reply with a finger. "Right. Enough of this. If you have any problems with me, Lieutenant, see me afterward. If we live through this, you can go and complain to the colonel. In the meanwhile, you will spend the next eight weeks on the front lines."

"If *you* survive that long," muttered SmallMac.

Fitz pretended he hadn't heard him. The white-lipped lieutenant certainly had. "Now, I've told Ariel to get the rats to work as the rats in my old command did. Two rats per human. The rest will be split into three groups, Sergeant Major, two cover groups and a backup. For each cover group I want two strong, fit, experienced soldiers. They'll be carrying heavy loads of rations and sugar for the rats. I want fast packhorses with brains. For the third group I want light, fast troops, twenty of them. They're our backup and, if we get a chance, our spearhead group. I want troops who can run."

"Sah! I'll confer with the platoon sergeants and have them assembled."

"Do that. And tell the troops the first one to cause trouble or bad feeling with the rats is going to answer to me, personally. Now, medics . . ."

\* \* \*

At three that afternoon, the Magh' guns fell silent. And the fighting began. They came in waves over the top. They came in columns out of tunnels. And they seemed to be only hitting Fitz's patch of the line. It was obvious that they intended to push the weakened front into a beachhead. The Magh', it appeared, did not know the meaning of "retreat" or "fear."

They learned the meaning of "die."

Fitz nearly learned it himself. Lieutenant Pahad did. As Sergeant Anderson said, the Maggots had merely saved the captain trouble. But toward dusk the attack began to slow down. The last wave was more of a splash than a wave. As the Magh' artillery began to cut loose again, the rats and troops in Fitz's third group, with him at their head, went over the top. Moving as fast as a slowshield would allow, taking advantage of the Magh's weaker eyesight, they pushed into the human-abandoned old second line. The Magh' here were few and far between. Obviously the creatures had thrown everything at the human line. How fast they could move more troops up to fill the gap was an unknown. But the old line two was not under artillery bombardment. Fitz began to move men and rats forward. He rested them in the relative tranquillity of the comparatively easily recaptured line. The Magh' had moved their artillery forward in anticipation of the human line falling. Now, rather like Drake and the Spanish Armada, Fitz realized his men were too close to be fired on. If he had reinforcements now, he could keep pushing, maybe even to the Magh' force field edge. Only one massive human assault had managed that in the past, at vast cost in lives and materiel.

Fitz got on the radio to sector headquarters.

"Colonel Brown."

"Try and hold them a bit longer, Fitzhugh," said the colonel. "We've almost got the earthworks finished for the new trenches. And the attacks usually slack off at dusk."

"Sir. We've held them off. In fact, we've retaken the old line two. I've got my troops working on repairs right now."

"What? Impossible!" huffed the colonel, sounding less than grateful. "It must have been less of an attack than we'd expected."

"We estimate between ten and twenty thousand Magh', sir. But we have a bit of an advantage right now, sir. We appear to be so close that their guns' elevation capability does not allow them to fire on us. We think they've moved their artillery to our old line one. I'd like to press the advantage, sir. We can take those fieldpieces. But we'll need more men. Reinforcements before dawn."

The colonel showed the military dash and flair which had taken him so far in HAR's make-work prewar army, and seemed destined to push him higher as the most incompetent of the mediocre-to-useless chateau-officer class. "Um. Well. Er. Don't you think you should play it safe?"

"We can hold these lines, sir, if that's what you want me to do," said Fitz. "But capturing some of the Magh' artillery would let us onto the technology they're using. It would be quite a kudo for you."

"Hmm. I don't like your newfangled way of doing things, Fitzhugh, but you do get them done," said the colonel. "Yes. Advance, see if you can take a Magh' fieldpiece. I'll see if I can scare up some reinforcements."

"If we push too far, sir, without reinforcements, we could lose even these trenches. So I'm afraid I need

a firm commitment, sir."

"What? Damn your eyes, man. You'll have them. Take those guns at all costs," boomed the colonel.

"At least a company of rats, sir. Maybe even a few of these new rats, if possible."

"You're insufferable, Fitzhugh. Get me a gun and you'll get them."

"I'll rely on you for that, Colonel. Out."

"T'faith. What a whoreson Achitophel!"

Fortunately, Fitz did not transmit Ariel's accurate comment to the colonel.

\* \* \*

The advance began. It was rapidly obvious that the Magh' had never met such tactics from the HAR armed forces before. The usual slow buildups and massed assault of the meat-grinder war that the HAR chateau generals fought, they dealt very effectively with. They simply outgunned and outnumbered the humans, and it appeared that the Magh' generals also had no objection to vast body counts. The idea that a thrust might be matched with a counterthrust, immediately, without two or three days of troop movements, appeared to have taken them off-balance.

"Get me Major Bartok," snapped Fitz to the radio operator.

The artillery officer was obviously bleary with sleep. Great, thought Fitz. Our artillery is near ineffectual and here we are in a major battle, and their commander has been catching up on his shut-eye. "Major. We're retaking our old front lines. Your men are shelling us." Slowshields at least meant they weren't being killed. But they could be buried, and slowed down.

"Huh?" said Bartok. "But we were pushed back two days ago. There's been no major advance planned."

Fitz ground his teeth. "Major. I'll set off a red flare. Your range finders can pick it up. We're fighting hand to hand in the trenches of our old trench one. It's slow going because we're thinly stretched. We've got the defensive troops from one trench line occupying two and fighting in a third. We've been promised relief before morning."

"First I've heard of it," grumbled the major. "It wasn't mentioned at last week's staff briefing."

Fitz had to stop talking to help Ariel with a pair of arrowscorps, which was probably just as well, as it stopped him biting the fool's head off. Then he let off the flare and went back to trying to keep his temper and get the human gunners to stop firing on their own side.

"Check with Colonel Brown. We've taken advantage of a situation. Look, it would help us if you could range your guns beyond us instead."

"Hmph. I'll put you onto the gunnery officer for tonight. Out."

The gunnery officer at least was simply cooperative. And his gunners, despite the fact that HAR industrial technology was still battling along in the nineteenth and early twentieth century and their fieldpieces were to match, were more than cooperative. Their rate of fire increased, which, as Fitz had

heard, took nothing short of a miracle. At least somebody back there wanted them to succeed.

Then he and Ariel were fully engaged again, in the first hard fighting in this trench. They'd reached the gun emplacements. The Magh'der, the kind that tended the fieldpieces, were there in numbers and it was obvious that they felt about their strange weapons the way ants do about their grubs. But they appeared to be genetically designed to tend guns . . . not fight rats and men.

Looking at the pod of captured alien weapons in the infrared torchlight, Fitz allowed himself a brief moment of triumph in front of his cheering troops. Even the rats were caught up in it. "Methinks these should be worth a good few claws, eh, Captain," chittered one, cheerfully, kicking the wheelless platform, with its long stabilizers.

Ariel licked a slash on her shoulder. She pointed at the barrels. "Long muddy congers aren't they? Fair give you envy, Gobbo."

She stuck her long nose into the air. Sniffed. Twitched her ears. Fitz noticed several of the other rats doing the same.

"Methinks, it is the cat," said Pooh-Bah.

"'Tis time to cut and run," Ariel announced. "The Maggots are coming thick and fast from back there."

"We should be getting backup soon. We'd better dig in. Issue rations all round," said Fitz. "Radio. Let's get the Colonel and find out why they aren't here yet."

\* \* \*

Minutes later Fitz knew fear. "We've taken their gun pod. Three fieldpieces, sir. But we need reinforcements if we're to hold them."

The colonel paused. "Er. I consulted General Blucher, and he refused to countenance moving troops until morning."

"Morning will be too late, Colonel," snapped Fitz. "The Magh' are just about solid out there. They want to retake their guns and they're not counting costs. If you want these guns, if you want this trench, if you want my men to survive, I need reinforcements *now*."

"Well, I'm sorry, Captain Fitzhugh," said the colonel huffily. "but there is nothing I can do, *now*."

"Useless asshole."

There was a splutter of outrage from the radio. But Fitz was too busy to care.

"If we try to pull back now, we'll be exposed to the faster Magh'. So. We'll need a rear guard."

"What about these guns, sir?" asked the surviving lieutenant.

"We'll do our best to destroy them, Lieutenant Cavanagh. You've done well today. You'll be leading the retreat back to trench two. We'll hold them as long as we can here. It'll be over to you to hold them there. Bring up as many men as possible from trench three. Sergeant. Drawing straws time. I want one man in three staying here."

The young lieutenant was pale. "With respect, sir. I'll stay here. You lead them back. You're worth a lot more than I am to the troops. I'm going to try and turn these guns on them."

*A good kid*, thought Fitz. *I wonder why he got sent to "Fort Despair?"* Probably too good, just as the other one had been too obnoxious. In the midst of mediocrity and incompetence, "good" was unpopular. He shook his head. "Lieutenant, thank you. But what I'm asking you to do is no lesser task. It's a tough one. You must keep the retreat orderly, keep it disciplined or it'll turn into a rout, and then we're lost. If the troops are panicked and half-dead with exhaustion when they get to trench two, they won't hold that. And I'm relying on you to do that, rather, because the rats will stay for me. They won't for you. And without them we have no rear guard. But it is a good idea about the guns. Now, move out. Go. Give us a flare when you have less than fifty yards to go."

The lieutenant saluted crisply. "Damn that lily-livered colonel and his stupid general to hell, sir. I'll hold that trench, come hell or high water." He turned. "Sergeant. Move them out in an orderly fashion. The first man to run or panic had better keep running because he'd be better off if the Maggots killed him than if I caught him." His voice cracked slightly. But the troops obeyed him, as if he were a veteran.

Three minutes later the old front line was populated by a skeleton crew of men and rats. And Fitz was wrestling with the guns. SmallMac and Ewen were assisting. Fitz's heart had fallen still lower when he'd seen the faces of his old squad mates. But . . . the lots had been drawn. Someone had to get the short straws. Some of those who retreated had families too. But he wished like hell he could have sent SmallMac back too.

Ewen, a man who could lift half an ox carcass back when he'd been a meat packer, strained with Fitz to turn barrels. They could tilt the entire structure but not turn it. There were no wheels, just flat metal platforms.

SmallMac nearly knocked them both flying, as the barrel began to rotate under its own steam. "What the hell are you fiddling with, Mac!"

The ex-horse-breaker gave a wry grin. "There must be electronic locks holding them, Fitz. Damned if I'm going to call you 'Captain' when we're all going to die. This disc here looked likely, and we need to learn to work them before the Maggots arrive."

"Hell's teeth. You're right and I'm an idiot. Each of you to a gun. Fiddle. I just hope we don't shoot at our own men or blow these things up."

Three minutes later they had rotation and elevation licked. They had reloading done too. Firing . . . well it was only when Fitz thought of the flat-scorpion shape of the gunners that Ariel discovered where the firing lever was. Tailgunners! Still, the shots they managed to direct toward the enemy were probably ineffectual, especially as the guns could not be elevated beyond a certain point.

"Bugger this for a joke!" yelled Ewen as the first Magh' came over the top. He cranked the gun barrel down furiously. Instead of using it as the howitzer it was designed as, he directed the barrel straight at the oncoming mass. It couldn't be elevated enough, but it could be depressed.

For the next few moments it rained slowshielded Maggots and earth.

"Yes!" The other two also hauled their gun barrels down.

The Maggot shells couldn't actually blow the enemy apart, not inside slowshields. But their weapons had

been intended to fling a shell at high trajectory for a few miles. At this close a range it could physically remove anything. Blow them away if not apart. And the flying debris hardened slowshields and stopped the Magh' advance.

"Gather around the guns!" yelled Fitz. As long as they could keep them off the guns, as long as the shells lasted, they could hold back the bulk of the Maggot tide. With more luck than judgement he managed a skimming, plowing shot along the ground nearly parallel to the trench. Not only did it blow away the bulk of the wave of Magh' who had been pressing forward, but it also hardened the slowshields behind them. "Retreat on the guns," he yelled again, desperately reloading, knowing that his lucky shot had bought them the time to do so. Ariel bit down on something and a claw cut Fitz's face. He was in pain, but this was no time to stop and think about it. He must fire again! The rear guard surged back toward the gun pod, fighting their way through the few Maggots who had reached the trench. Soon, he had a reloader. And as the humans and rats fended off close attackers, the curiously silent alien howitzers were used in the fashion of the siege cannon of the fourteenth century.

Despite this, the Magh' seemed endless. Even the light of a flare behind them was of no help. There was no retreat now. The Magh' had surrounded them. And the shells were getting few.

Fitz saw Ewen abandon his gun and attempt to wade though the swirl of Magh' fighter bodies, using his huge strength to pick them up and fling them away . . . And then he went down under the tide. The rat that had been on his shoulder ran across Magh' backs. It nearly made it, too. SmallMac also was plainly out of shells—and defenders. There were still some fifteen men and an equal number of rats around Fitz's gun.

And he had three more shells.

SmallMac must have seen the rat nearly make it running across Magh' backs. He leapt.

Only the man didn't try to run on their backs. He leapt onto the biggest long-legged runner there. Astride it. Out of reach of claws and stingers.

The horse-breaker used all the skills at his disposal to cling to something that hadn't ever been ridden. Stayed on and somehow propelled his alien steed though the press. And then flung himself at the raised tier at the far end of the gun platform.

A claw snagged his foot. For a moment it looked as if he'd be pulled down. Then a rat bit through the clawjoint. Screaming . . . grabbing anything for handholds . . . SmallMac was up.

And so were they. Whatever control SmallMac had grabbed on the tier was raising the entire platform. Men and rats scrambled, snatched for purchase as the whole platform wobbled gently up into the sky, the rotors underneath lifting, clanging into suddenly hardening slowshields, faltering, lifting again. Maggots leapt frantically after them. Fitz saw Ariel go down under one. He lunged at it, pulling it aside.

Its razor-edged claw cut into his thigh and up toward his belly . . . before something stopped it.

Ariel.

The hovercraft-mounted gun was genteelly blundering deeper into enemy territory. As he lay there bleeding, Fitz saw SmallMac, his face white with pain, sticking his bangstick into holes plainly intended for a claw. And, although it nearly had them off, turning the thing in a wobbling circle toward the HAR-held lines.



With Fitz holding on to Ariel, and she holding on to him, consciousness faded as the handful of rear guards headed home, in the dawn.

## 9

His first memory of the hospital was clouded with anesthetics and pain. But after a couple of weeks, that too cleared. On the first day that he actually knew just who he was, a Vat-visitor with glasses in a dressing gown and on crutches came to see him.

"SmallMac!"

"Captain." The bespectacled man managed a salute, despite the crutches.

"I thought you weren't going to call me that anymore."

"That was when we were going to die," said Lance Corporal McTavish with a grin. "And that appears to have been delayed."

"And the rest? Ariel?" There was a lump in his throat. He felt sick and weak and like crying.

SmallMac pulled a face. "Injured. Spanoletti came through it all with no worse than a few cuts. She's been to see all the rats. Apparently Ariel looks like she'd been through a fight with a grizzly. She'll live, though. We lost one of the rats to injuries. Pitti-Sing, I think. The rest of us . . . thirty-one men and rats in all . . . made it. Some of them won't fight again. We had our doubts about you making it though, Captain. You owe your life to Ariel and some pretty sharp medics."

"And to your riding and flying skills."

"For a minute I almost thought we had cavalry," said SmallMac, wryly. "But I won't be riding again for a while. I've lost the foot. On the plus side I won't be marching again either."

"Hell. I'm sorry. But . . . that's your livelihood."

SmallMac shrugged. "I was getting too old for the falls anyway. And, well, I was nearly dead, like poor bloody Ewen. I hear I'm due for a desk posting here in GBS city. I'll be able to sleep out with my family! There's many a poor bastard who would cut their own foot off for that."

After that came Fitz's father. Other survivors. Parachute Major Van Klomp.

And then Ariel came to visit him. Rats of course were strictly not allowed in the hospital.

Fitz looked at her. Ariel's rich fur was bandaged. So was one paw. The once beautiful little creature looked bedraggled. Her delicate ears were tattered.

But worst of all was the bandaged stump of a tail.

"I've just come to say good-bye," she said, in a voice that was unaccustomedly subdued.

"Have you been posted back to what's left of our unit?"

"No." She twitched her tail stump. "I . . . methinks . . . I'll . . . I just wanted to see you a last time. To be sure you were still alive."

Fitz knew this rat. He'd long since stopped regarding her as anything other than another person. The crucible of the front line was far too hot for the metals in it not to meld. He'd learned to understand some of the things she left unspoken. Ariel was going to die. Rats did without most things except food and sex. Losing her tail was like a man losing his balls, but a lot more public.

"I despair of ever winning affection." Voice synthesizers were not designed to carry the loss. But Fitz understood anyway. Ariel . . . Ariel had been accustomed to being the very best. To being sought after. To knowing herself as desirable. Well. He knew partly how it felt. The left side of his face was never going to be anything but a mask to frighten children. The wounds on his thigh and lower abdomen had been repaired. But he couldn't bet anyone his left ball anymore.

"I still love you, Ariel. I love you for what you are, not for what you look like. I don't have a tail myself."

The rat snuffled. "I always thought 'twas a sad lack in you."

She scrambled up the bedclothes, and gave his throat a slight nip. Rats didn't kiss but that as a gesture of trust and affection was as close as it came—a sort of "I could rip your jugular out but I won't."

"Take care," she snuffled, and got up to leave.

"Where are you going?"

"Away."

"Stay. Please stay," he begged, urgently.

She paused. "Why?"

"Because I need you. Well, because I still love you. And tails have never been very important to me. Um. And because I have chocolate for you. We humans never offer chocolate to those we don't love."

"Never?"

He knew the prescribed rat-reply. "Well, hardly ever."

She even summoned up a ratly look of acquisitiveness. "Chocolate Cointreau straws? I wouldn't stay for less. Someone who loved me would give me those."

"Hmph. Cupboard love," he said loftily, knowing he'd won at least a reprieve, especially as he had some of the desired item.

She took it. To his surprise she offered him a bite. It was the most unratty gesture he'd ever seen her make. Then, with her sticky chocolate, she burrowed under the bedclothes. "Well. I can't love your tail. I still think 'tis a sad lack in you. I mean size does count, and a girl could get some respect with a boyfriend like you, if you had a tail in proportion."

\* \* \*

When Fitz opened his eyes again, there was a four-star general, and several other staff officers, looking at him. He hoped that the general was not aware of the beady eyes peering at him from under the blanket. There were also two people who bore the unmistakable mark of "press" even if one hadn't borne a shoulder-cam as well. The other one grimaced. "Better focus on the right side of his face. He's not a pretty sight on this side. Right, General, you're on. Roll it, Paul."

Fitz discovered that he was now a major. The bits of gold in his hand seemed a very poor recompense for his troops' lives. "And for service over and above the call of duty in the capture of the first intact Magh' fieldpiece: The George Bernard Shaw Cross, first class."

"Thank you, sir. But I believe the credit should go to the men and rats in my unit, sir. A number of them lost their lives in this action, and I'd like them to get the recognition for their courage. And we captured an entire pod of Magh' guns. We'd have held them if Colonel Brown had sent us the reinforcements we were promised. Loss of life and loss of those fieldpieces is due to his and General Bulcher's decisions not to back us up." Fitz hoped this was going out live.

The general was only momentarily discomfited. "General Bulcher was unfortunately misinformed by the colonel. The matter is under investigation. But you and the men under your command did very well under the circumstances. A rather substantial number of medals are being awarded. Lieutenant Cavanagh will command one of the most decorated units on the front." He cleared his throat. "I believe you may be invalided out of active frontline duty, Major. You're a valuable soldier. Too valuable to waste on just any desk job. Which is why I have ordered your transfer to the Military Intelligence Corps. You'll be replacing Major Dunsay."

"No thank you, sir. I'd like to try and get fit, and return to my unit."

The general looked as if he'd just bitten into a slug in his salad. He made a quick recovery. "Intelligence is where you can really make a contribution to the war effort, young man. However, I am open to other requests."

"Very well, sir. I'd like to add a severely injured rat to my staff. We need someone who understand rats, sir. They're valuable military assets. It's due to them and the courage of my troops that I owe what success we had. It is my feeling that the rats should be paid. They'd be much better motivated then."

The general blinked. "Yes. Well. We shall have to see what can be done. The bats that we are about to introduce will make a great deal of difference too, eh."

A little later when the general and his entourage had left, Ariel emerged. "Why did you agree?" she asked, helping herself to a grape.

Fitz shrugged. It was a painful experience. "Because . . . God knows if either of us will ever be fit to fight again. And, well, the Maggots always attacked where we were weakest. They obviously have good

intelligence. We also need it. And maybe at Military Headquarters I can get something done about idiots like Colonel Brown and General Bulcher. Maybe we can make the system work."

Ariel chuckled. "'Tis the HAR army we speak of, Fitz. Methinks it will be 'once more into their breeches' and bite their bollocks."

Fitz grinned. It hurt his face. "We'll try it my way first, okay?" He looked at the order that the general had left behind.

It was signed: *H. Cartup-Kreutzler* .

He stared at the signature for a long time. He began to understand just why he'd been posted to "Fort Despair." Or why the orders for relief had been delayed. And just what his posting to "Intelligence" might be. It wouldn't stop him. But it would make for interesting times, ahead.

Ariel shrugged in her turn when he pointed it out. "Methinks we'll end up doing things in my way after all. 'Tis the only way the army works."

\* \* \*

A few minutes later, they had another visitor. An elderly woman, this was, wearing what looked like a laboratory coat. She was holding an antique-looking item in her hands. A brass object of some sort. At first, Fitz thought it was an oddly shaped teakettle, until he realized it was an oil lamp.

The woman placed the lamp on a small table next to the bed and gazed down at Fitz. He couldn't read the expression in her face. There was *something* there . . . Amusement, maybe, combined with satisfaction. Hard to tell.

Then the woman spotted Ariel's nose poking out from under the covers. She smiled, and murmured some verses under her breath. Fitz could just barely make out the words.

\* \* \*

"The culminating pleasure that we treasure beyond measure,  
Is the gratifying feeling that our duty has been done."

\* \* \*

Fitz cleared his throat. "May I help you, Ms. ah . . . ?"

"Just think of me as John Wellington Wells. A dealer in magic and spells. And that's all I'm going to tell you."

She started to turn away, gesturing with a finger at the oil lamp. "A gift I brought for you." Her eyes went back to Ariel, whose entire head was now sticking out of the covers. "I'm glad to see it will be trebly appreciated."

And with that, she headed out the door. On her way through, Fitz heard her murmuring: "The genie out of the bottle, indeed."

\* \* \*

When she was gone, Ariel popped out from under the blankets. "You humans are a daft lot, but that is the first one I have ever heard quote Gilbert and Sullivan." She scrutinized the gift on the nearby table with a rat's usual intentness when the possibility of loot arose. "What's that?"

Fitz shrugged. "Nothing you'll be interested in. Me neither, actually. It's an antique kind of lamp."

Ariel was puzzled. "What for? When you want light, you flip a switch. When you want light and can't get it—like in a tunnel in a Maggot raid—that silly thing will be useless. Won't even make a good bludgeon."

Fitz shrugged again. "Like you said, humans are all daft. That old lady, for sure."

But Ariel had already leapt onto the table. Though disgruntled, she wasn't going to leave even a faint possibility of loot unchecked.

She lifted the lid. Then, squeaked sheer glee.

*"It's full of chocolates! And—!"*

Ariel reached in and plucked out a little sample bottle of Grand Marnier. Then, clutching it to her chest, she replaced the lid and perched herself atop the lamp. Looking, for all the world, like a guardian demon.

She gave Fitz a slit-eyed stare.

"I'll share the chocolates—maybe. If you're sweet to me. But the booze is mine."

Fitz rolled his eyes. "Rats!"

"It's important!" insisted Ariel. "There's not going to be any of that human folderol in *this* romance." Now, she looked positively indignant. "Won't ever find a rat—sure as hell not a rat-girl—getting her stars crossed. Much less her loot. That silly crap's got to go."

Fitz leaned back in the pillows, chuckling. He thought he understood now—a bit, at least—of the weird old woman's last words.

"Genie out of the bottle! One way to put it, I guess."

"Why do humans have so many useless words?" grumbled Ariel. "And what's a 'genie,' anyway?"

"You are." Fitz thought about it for a moment. "Or maybe we are."

**THE END**

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