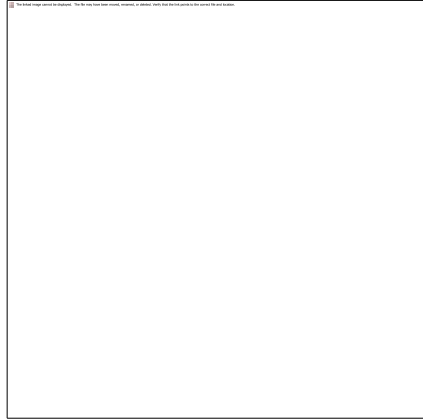


~ Walking On Water, Running On Alcohol ~

by The Fallen

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2nd Place

The Athenaeum's 2009

SF/Fantasy Contest

DISCLAIMER: This story is intended for mature readers only. There are scenes of a sexual nature and a lot of violence, although oddly for me not much foul language. :) The following story is © 2010 and is written purely for entertainment purposes. It cannot be reproduced in any shape or form without the author's prior consent.

She was a hard, desperate woman caught in a hard, desperate rain.

For the umpteenth time, Shang Wei Amy Copperfield felt herself slipping in the thick mud and had to put a hand out to steady herself. The whirring of her personal Niao hovbot grew louder as it compensated to remain half-a-dozen inches or so above her. With considerable effort, Amy dragged a foot free and kept moving. She felt like throwing up.

She shivered in the downpour. It was a cold, wintery rain, one that fell hard and seeped through every gap in her armor, soaking her to the skin, chilling her to the bone. Each droplet almost seemed to be a tiny balloon of ice, freezing and splattering against the reflec plates. Her filter was working overtime to keep her visor from fogging up. She honestly couldn't remember the last time she had been dry. She had caught herself daydreaming of a hot bath yesterday. Fat chance of that. Right now she'd count herself lucky if she could just make it off this damn Chairman-forsaken planet.

It was hard to just walk. A simple thing, something even an infant could manage, but which on this planet was next to impossible. The 'rainy season' the colonists called this time of the too-long year, in their typical understated fashion. When the company had first got to Lost Heep, they'd cursed the light pink dust that passed for earth, complaining that it got into gun breeches, magazine clips, into their clothes, through their filters, fouling everything. That was true enough. Every member of her hundred-strong company had been coated in a fine layer of light pink dust within an hour of setting foot on the planet's surface, and everyone had bitched about it.

Amy hadn't minded. It was a soldier's right to complain. But then the rains had come and almost overnight the pink dirt had turned to thick, gloopy reddish mud. No one cursed the dust anymore. No one even talked about the mud. They didn't have strength enough to complain any more. It was best to save what little strength you had for walking.

Now she labored to move, sinking up to mid-calf level with each step, then wading through an ankle-deep puddle, then back through a river of mud again. It would be easier if she was on the gravel road but that was thick with the damn colonists. A thin snaking line of settlers, more than two hundred in number, trudged along the road, with the struggling soldiers lining each side. If the soldiers were wet, miserable and laden down, it was nothing compared to how badly the colonists were faring. Their clothing was ripped, sodden, and encrusted with solid mud, their faces streaked with dirt and filthy rainwater, their eyes lined and tired.

They hadn't wanted to leave their homes. She didn't really understand why. Her father had been a factory worker back on earth, before the Fall, and he had told her of how important the home was. She didn't understand him then and she didn't understand the colonists now. A home could be made wherever you chose. It wasn't a permanent thing. Maybe it was the army talking, she thought, but she couldn't understand how anyone could get so attached to a place. But almost to a man, the settlers had wanted to remain back in the town of Murdstone.

But they had no choice. If they stayed, they would have died. No one with any sense would argue differently, not that in her experience colonists had ever had much sense. Amy's company had been ordered to forcibly evacuate the colonists. Of course, that had been a simple enough order on paper; in practice, as always, it had proven a little more difficult. But she had got it done and the colonists had packed up and left. Now they resented everything: the rain, the cold, the exhaustion, but especially the soldiers.

Damn it, Amy thought as she stumbled in the mud yet again, it did these peasants good to see soldiers suffering. They always looked down on soldiers. It didn't matter if they were poor or rich, educated or ignorant, hard-working or lazy; they all considered themselves better than the PLA. Even now, when Amy's small company was all that stood between them and the Yaoguai, she would still catch them looking down their noses at her. It infuriated her. She had worked hard since enlisting, working her way up through the ranks through sheer determination. You'd think these people would be a bit more humble.

Her hangover was rapidly turning into a migraine. She stood still for a moment, reaching up to adjust the dampener on her helmet visor, allowing even less light from the overcast day in. She took the opportunity to check the company, bringing up the life-signs display with a flick of her tongue, wincing against the green dots of light that appeared before her eyes, each indicating a healthy and active trooper.

A couple of the lights to the on the furthestmost right of the column were flickering. That was worrying but after a quick whack on the side of her helmet the lights stabilized. The padding slammed against the side of her head, which made her brain seem to rattle around in her skull. That was a mistake. It took a while for the pain to subside. Krud, she needed a drink.

Six weeks ago there had been an almost full complement of a hundred and twenty men. Now there were less than thirty. Her company had been reduced to an understrength platoon and she had been reduced to acting like a Shao Wei, while her only surviving Shao Wei was in turn humbly assuming the role of Liu Ji Shi Guan. At least she was still getting paid the same, she thought wryly, although Chairman-alone knew when they'd ever get a pay download again.

One of the peasants near Amy lurched forward suddenly, sprawling out onto her hands and knees. An overpacked kitbag slipped off her shoulder, spilling its contents over the road.

It was a bad fall and the woman stayed on all-fours for a long while, gasping to get her breath back. She had scraped a knee on the gravel, the fabric of her wet pants ripped open to show bloody, torn flesh underneath. She swore loudly in English, spitting out a mixture of rainwater and saliva.

Amy recognized her now, although the name still escaped her. The woman was the town's doctor, well-liked and respected by all the settlers, which in Amy's ordered mind made her a threat. Amy had learned very quickly that this woman was someone the rest all listened to, and so she had made a concerted effort to win the woman over. She'd had to work hard to be polite and respectful, asking rather than demanding, being civil and circumspect rather than blunt and to the point, even going so far as trying to mix socially with the doctor, and how she had hated every damn minute of that.

Everyone kept wearily walking on. No one stopped to help. So much for all that respect and love, Amy thought. That's what you get for siding with the people who force you out of your homes. The doctor may still have been smart but she sure as hell was no longer popular.

Lumbering over to the side of the road, Amy unceremoniously shoved a thickly gloved hand under the woman's armpit and hauled her to her feet. She worked as hard as she could to make it look effortless.

The woman tried pointlessly to brush the mud off her clothes. Her white coat, thin and little protection against the fierce elements, looked now as if it had been dyed pink. She glanced at the palms of her hands, noting the thin streaks of blood she was leaving on the coat from grazes in the flesh, and frowned, then looked up her savior. Even sinking in the mud, at five feet ten, Amy towered over the diminutive doctor.

"Thanks," the doctor said, flashing a toothy smile at Amy. It was a smile that probably worked wonders on bawling children, anxious parents, and nervous patients, but something about it bothered Amy. There was something else behind it, she thought, like the smile hid a secret that only she knew but which everyone wanted to learn. Amy was sure glad that this woman couldn't read her expression through the plexi-steel of her visor. "Damn, that smarts."

She had an elfin look about her: high cheekbones, green eyes, a button nose with a silver piercing, small lips, a tiny, almost fragile frame. Her short black hair was plastered down against her scalp. There had been blue stripes in it a week ago, Amy remembered, another unsubtle show of defiance to the world. Well, a rebellious nature didn't help you survive any better, did it?

"I'm okay now, thanks," the woman said, still smiling. "You can let go."

Amy realized that she still had one hand on the woman's elbow. Amy wanted to say something but wasn't sure what she could say. She'd given up talking to any of them days before. Instead she released her grip and stepped back a little, then bent at the waist to pick up a pack of syringes from a puddle. There were medical supplies strewn everywhere over the road, being kicked around and buried into the mud by the merciless stomping of the evacuees.

The doctor fell to her knees and joined Amy in retrieving what they could, stuffing each valued item back into her kitbag, snatching some from under the feet of passer-bys. Even with some items being broken and others disappearing, the pack was still crammed full. It was a wonder how she had managed to make it all fit in there in the first place. There was no food, no water, no money, not even a spare change of clothes; there simply wasn't space for it. She was carrying every piece of medical supply she could. For the first time, Amy saw just how hungry and exhausted this unfortunate woman looked. Hell, they all looked tired. Amy herself was running on stim-jolts and caffeine patches. For the second time in the last few minutes she was glad the helmet hid how she looked.

But still, to sacrifice everything for people who now resented you, including even what you needed to live, and to have to live on what scraps those people would now give you, that was... stupid, Amy thought. You wouldn't catch her doing it. Physician heal thyself.

Amy got to her feet and readjusted the plating around her waist. Damn thing always got shuffled out of place when ever she crouched. As she tugged on the projectile-resistant fabric, the smaller woman struggled to her feet and faced her. For a brief moment they were like rocky outcrops jutting free from a stream, as the tide of colonists moved around and past them. The stillness held sway over Amy for a second or two, then she was jostled from behind and the spell was broken.

She felt like she had to say something but she wasn't sure what. She'd given up speaking to any of the peasants days ago. Finally, she said: "You sure you're okay, boshi?"

Her voice was louder than she expected, amplified by the speakers in her helmet. She'd been barking orders last time she had spoken to anyone. She tongued the volume control and toned it down a little.

"I told you before, Captain," she replied, using the English word for Amy's rank, "you can call me Jenny. And yes, I'm fine."

Amy nodded, not in agreement but rather at the memory resurfacing. Doctor Jennifer Wickfield, that was her damn name. Now why had that proved so elusive? "Your friends don't seem to care," she said, nodding at the trickle of people still moving past. There weren't many left now; their delay had meant they were almost at the end of the column.

"They're too tired. It's hard to even think straight."

"You're very forgiving. It's a pity they aren't the same."

"They'll come around," Jenny said with a self-confident smile.

Amy grunted in disagreement. "I doubt it."

"You should be more optimistic."

Well, there's an understatement if ever she heard one, Amy thought. But there's not a krudding lot to look forward too, was there? This was the third planet they'd lost in as many years and things were only going to get much worse.

A few months back, while stuck on a carrier en route to Lost Heep, she'd overheard a PLAN officer foolishly talk about the domino theory, about how once one planet fell more and more would soon follow and it would be harder and harder to stop. There was some truth in that, she supposed, although personally she believed that the more appropriate analogy would be removing stones from a bridge. You could knock out a lot of stones before the bridge eventually collapsed but if the keystone was taken... To her mind, the Republic had been lost as soon as the damn Yaoguai had taken Earth.

She said none of this, of course. Even these days it was wise to keep such demoralizing thoughts to oneself. Especially these days, perhaps. That naval officer had been shot shortly afterwards, she remembered.

"Your hands are shaking," Jenny said.

"I'm cold."

"Doesn't that get up have a regulator?"

"No," Amy said, which was only half a lie but a whole lot simpler than explaining how it once had a decent temperature control system built into the armor but it had long since broken down.

Jenny eyed her suspiciously. "When was the last time you had a drink?"

Behind the reflective visor, Amy's face took on a hard, displeased look. Once a doctor, she thought bitterly to herself. Still, shame on her for engaging this infuriating woman in conversation. "Just keep moving, boshi," she snapped.

Another smile played around Jenny's lips as she hefted the kitbag back onto her shoulder. It was almost as if she was amused by the barriers Amy was raising, like this whole conversation had been a game to her. But she said nothing and turned away, limping a little on her wounded leg.

As she followed behind her, for some unfathomable reason, Amy felt a twinge of guilt for being so harsh. "You can take care of that on an evac-shuttle," she called out after the doctor. "Your knee, I mean."

Ahead of her, she saw the doctor was looking up over the hill as she walked. "If the shuttles come."

Amy jogged after her, the gravel crunching hard under her thick-soled boots. When she caught up with the doctor, she slowed to a walking pace. The smaller woman's stride was a lot shorter than hers, and that and being out of the damn mud was a pleasant breather. She should really be re-assuming her allocated place in the escort but a few more minutes wouldn't hurt.

"They'll be there," Amy said with a confidence she didn't really feel. For the umpteenth time today she checked the beacon indicator on her visor display. It was still blinking. At least another six li until they reached the rendezvous point, although the vanguard of their column could probably contact one of the navy transports in orbit a lot sooner, their suit signals boosted by the beacon, provided of course the com-sats hadn't been knocked out.

Six li, she mused. Assuming the colonists kept making the same slow progress they had been over the last few days, that meant maybe another two hours before they got to the beacon, maybe less than an hour before they could call for evacuation. If they got there with no mishaps; if the com-sats were still active; if nothing happened to the beacon in the meantime; if the navy was still maintaining geostationary orbit. That was an awful lot of ifs. Too many for Amy's liking, not that she'd ever admit as much.

"They weren't at Trotwood," Jenny said, breaking Amy's concentration.

"I tell you they'll be there."

Another of those maddening smiles. "Now who's being optimistic, Captain?"

Amy ignored the jibe and fell back, deliberately trying to put some distance between her and the doctor. With a sigh of resignation she stepped off the road and back into the thickly cloying mud, sinking almost immediately up to her calves. She suddenly felt exhausted, as if the brief respite or perhaps the conversation had drained most of her remaining energy. Not all, though. She somehow managed to keep walking.

Her comlink crackled. In her visor, she saw Zan's name flashing. She tongued for open comms but made sure to keep the conversation limited to their ears alone.

"Eight-One?"

It wasn't her formal designation, but rather a company nickname. Loyal troopers had always called their commanding officers 'eight-one', after the traditional day of the revered Nanchang Uprising, more than a hundred and fifty years ago, when the PLA was first founded. No one was really sure why. It was a tradition, that's all, and like most traditions in the army it was generally blindly followed.

"Go ahead, Zan." She slipped back into speaking Mandarin without thinking. As all orders within the PLA were given in Mandarin, every soldier regardless of their nationality was

expected to learn at least the basics of the language. Not that it really mattered, for as part of recruitment process each soldier had a translation implant fitted behind an ear which could translate any language with only a slight delay. It took some getting used to, hearing an echo in a different tongue. As a raw recruit Amy had thrown up for three days, her equilibrium shot by the surgery.

Amy had the implant deactivated presently as she spoke Mandarin fluently, partly because it was a requirement to finishing officer training school but mostly because it made life simpler and safer. More than half the soldiers in the PLA were of Chinese origin and so being able to converse with them face-to-face without the aid of the implant was an important sign of respect that worked both ways. Besides, she had lost count of the times she had overheard other officers talking in slang about her behind her back, thinking she wouldn't understand what was said.

And worse still, in some rare cases the implants had malfunctioned at inopportune times or even been knocked out by EMP devices. If that happened during combat and you didn't speak a common language, you were screwed.

"Remember rule number four?" Zan said, laboring across the road to walk along beside her.

She did, although she was loathe to admit it. She sighed, knowing he could hear her. She looked up the line of marching colonists and spotted Jenny looking back over her shoulder at her, smiling coyly. Damn, that was annoying. Distracting too. What the krud did she have to be so damn happy about? What did any of them? Amy turned to look at Zan, trying to get the doctor out of her mind. He was right, after all.

"Yes, Zan," she said reluctantly. "Fratting is never worth the trouble it brings."

"So say we all," he intoned solemnly. Zan Hou had been Amy's first lieutenant for more than two years now. He'd been with her longer than any of her other subordinates, yet surprisingly she still didn't know very much about him. He wasn't much for sharing personal histories. That was probably a good thing, if even half the rumors about him were true. Company gossip had it that Zan had once been a member of the infamous Immediate Action Unit but had been thrown out due to being too over-zealous, if such a thing were possible.

Personally Amy doubted it. Sure, Zan was certainly tough enough to be in the IAU - he might be almost twenty years her senior but you could tell just by looking at him that he was as hard as nails that had been soaked overnight in vinegar - but he didn't seem the type to be involved in the politics of army life. And over-zealous? She'd never known him to be particularly enthusiastic about anything, except maybe sleeping. The man could sleep anywhere at anytime; it had to be seen to be believed.

He was loyal though, she knew that much for sure. Not necessarily to the Republic, although certainly to his fellow soldiers. He fought hard and followed orders well, although he was also smart enough to act on his own initiative. A good low-level officer, in other words, and he'd probably never get any higher than his current rank. Not unless the butcher's bill grew. After all, if Amy died in action the company would be his, such as it was.

And most of all he knew how, and more importantly when, to fight. She couldn't really ask for any more.

"These two sheep are fleeing the Republic..." Zan started.

She groaned. If there was one thing guaranteed to make her hangover much worse, it was one of Zan's terrible jokes.

"No, wait, this is good. These two sheep are trying to get out of the Republic in a stolen flyer when they're stopped by the Navy. They have to try to explain why they're leaving. So they admit that the NSB are arresting every elephant they find. 'But you're not elephants!' the Navy officers say. And the sheep reply: 'Try telling that to the NSB.'"

Amy laughed in spite of herself. It certainly wasn't a good joke. Maybe the exhaustion had made her a little punch-drunk. "I wouldn't tell that one too often or too loudly, if I were you Zan. Not once we're back in such esteemed company as the People's Navy. You know how those bastards can be."

She heard him snort in derision, showing his clear contempt of the navy that most army grunts had. "What are they going to do? Shoot me?" He wiped a thick clump of sludge off his shoulder armor, leaving deep burgundy streaks in the encrusted dirt. The green and red identifier could hardly be seen beneath the mud. He tapped the flag with a thickly padded finger. "Army looks after its own. The Navy! Fuck all their ancestors to the eighteenth generation!"

Instinctively, Amy nervously checked her comlink, insuring that no one could overhear them. She trusted her soldiers as far as it went, and in combat there were none better, but you never could tell. All it took was a little bit of ambition and a touch of ruthlessness, someone with an eye on advancement speaking the wrong words into the right ear. As for the colonists, they were all Northern Bloc-ers. If any of them spoke Mandarin, she'd yet to see any sign of it.

She licked dry lips. She really needed a drink. "Listen, Zan, do you have any...?"

She never got to finish the sentence. The display in her visor suddenly started flashing with an amber outline. Two dots at the very rear of the column were also now amber. Her comms immediately switched over to full access and several voices crackled loudly in her ears. She stopped walking, knowing without looking that Zan was already moving forward to take charge, directing the colonists to start moving as fast as they could. She took time to focus on her visor display. Checking the name beneath the first amber dot, she tongued a control and the overhead map immediately faded slightly, a small section of the bio-data of the highest ranking soldier in the rear guard appearing to one side.

"Report, Yi Ji Shi Guan," she barked, unslinging her QBZ-63 rifle from its magnetic holdings on her back armor.

"Enemy sighted!" The corporal was struggling to keep his voice calm. She couldn't really blame him for being nervous; he was only seventeen years old and hadn't seen any action at all before

being assigned to her company. Now he'd probably already seen too much. He repeated himself. "Enemy sighted!"

He really didn't need to say that. The switch from green to amber in her display had already told her as much. She pulled herself up onto the road and began to sprint back, pushing through the last few colonists who were stumbling past her in a blind panic. "I need numbers, distance, threat-level. Anyone have more info?"

A private chimed in. "Two lieshou, around eighteen hundred chi away, in the woods. They spotted us about the same time as we saw them. Uploading now, eight-one."

Stalkers. Damn Stalkers. Bai mu, she swore under her breath as she ran, bai mu. And where there were Stalkers others of the Yaoguai wouldn't be far behind. Still, there were only two. That meant a scouting party. With luck, they could get out of this without too many losses.

As soon as the private's comlink merged with hers, the map shifted and changed. She cut back on scale a little and saw blue dots that represented the Yaoguai blinking into existence at the far edge. Thankfully the rear guard was already spacing out, responding well to the potential danger. She made a mental note of the private's name. Kwan. Well, he'd kept a level head so far. Maybe there was NCO potential there.

She reopened her private comms channel with Zan. Judging by the overhead display he was already organizing the troopers escorting the civilians, forcing them into a second line of defense if she failed. She could always rely on him.

"Zan?"

"Go ahead, eight-one."

"How many Hundun mines do you have?"

There was a brief delay. "Four. Between us, twenty-seven."

"I want an irregular diamond spread laid across the road where you are."

"Understood."

"Make it quick, Zan," Amy said. "I'm not expecting to hold them long."

She tongued to zoom out again and saw the vanguard was moving fast, in pairs, towards the beacon that lay somewhere beyond the hills. They only had to cover less than four li now and she silently willed them to move, move, move. Behind them, the cloudy mass of the colonists was moving in an uncoordinated dash. It was an indistinct blurry-edged mass, as being citizens they weren't considered important enough to be given implants and for the most part they chose not to buy their own. Here or there she saw a flash of brightness from the few individuals who had

implants: either ex-military, ex-government, or just the idle rich. That last option wasn't very likely, she supposed, not here on Lost Heep.

She wondered briefly if the doctor had an implant. Many years ago, back before the Fall, Amy had been stationed in Heilongjiang for a few months and had dated a local model while stuck there. The model had tattooed a tiny cartoon dragon over her implant. She had hid it under her long, sable hair most of the time, Amy remembered, but it was damnably cute.

Amy was still racing back along the road when the border of her visor display began flashing red.

"Enemy contact," several voices reported almost immediately afterwards.

She saw the Stalkers pounding across the open ground. They moved fast but with a heavy gait, the noise of their progress so thick and loud that it was almost painful, even through the audio filters built into her helmet. She saw several of her troopers without helmets, and one was bleeding from the ears but hadn't seemed to notice yet. She'd get the doctor to check him out later, if he lived so long.

Each thump seemed to shake the ground, although she had long since learnt that was just an illusion. As the Stalkers advanced, they seemed to pulsate, each throb altering their shape in a way that would send you into madness if you stared at the edges for too long. And the Stalkers were the least unnatural. Most of the old soldiers, those who had lived through more than one battle against the damn Yaoguai, had learnt how to look at them without actually focusing on them. It was the only way you could stay sane, if that were possible in such a futile never-ending war.

And each time a Stalker expanded to its full extent it launched a couple of dozen shards at her men. It looked random, like most things about the Yaoguai, but she knew it wasn't. Each barrage was too well placed, landing in just the right spot each time, throwing up small bursts of bright red blood and dark red mud.

The rear guard was already returning fire, working in pairs, one man aiming and firing, the other man moving, repositioning for a better shot, keeping an eye out. They were performing well so far but she knew how shaky their morale was. If she let this drag on for too long, let too many men, good or bad, die in this pointless skirmish, she'd lose them all.

A third Yaoguai blip appeared on the edge of her visor display, then another. So there were four now. That made things a lot more difficult. Not impossible though. Keep control, she told herself, keep focus.

Amy took aim at the nearest Stalker and fired a short burst. She held the gun low, braced hard against the thick armor plates on her hip, which enable her to walk forward while still retaining some accuracy. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the bullets hit the centre mass of the thing in a tight concentration, rippling against what passed for skin.

She took a quick look around, saw no one was out of position and that she wasn't needed, so fired again. The rifle clicked loudly. She glanced down, saw the ammo clip was still almost full, and swore loudly. She hated this gun. The damn thing kicked like a mule and jammed too often. It was an easy enough fix but it always seemed to happen at inopportune moments. There wasn't a soldier in the whole PLA who didn't detest the rifles and railed against using them.

Still, they didn't have much of a choice. Like everyone else, she'd been trained to use particle beam carbines that had been standard issue at the time of the Fall. Those had proven to be next-to-useless when thrown up against the Yaoguai. There was something about the Yaoguai's biological make-up that made them shrug off the charged particles seemingly without any ill-effects. So the Central Military Command found itself with a massive army that was practically powerless in the face of the enemy, and therefore had to resort to desperate measures by rapidly switching their manufacturing infrastructure over to producing an old pattern rifle, one that fired cased ammunition, something that had been seen for more than thirty years.

The rifles Amy's company used were rush-built by factory workers on the Far Systems, perhaps the only place that was still safe for humanity, although rumor had it there was a Yaoguai fleet threatening even that sanctuary now. Between the shoddy construction, the damage the weapons suffered in shipping, the appalling black market fakes that slipped in to each shipment, and the cheap, mass produced ammunition they all used, it was no wonder the rifles jammed as often as they did.

She tossed the rifle overhead, certain the Niao hovbot hovering a foot or so above her would catch it easily. It did and immediately began working on the weapon. Amy unholstered her pistol and checked it over before looking around her again.

She saw three of her men go down, another nearby stood transfixed, staring down at the bloody stump where his arm had once been. She shouted orders for the remaining line to spread out, thinning itself but filling the gap.

It seemed by now that the Stalkers must have picked her out as leader. A cluster of shards whistled past her. She wanted to dive for cover, to keep her head down, to hide in the soft ground, but she knew she couldn't. Instead she stood tall, allowing her men to see her, to watch her as she walked through the incoming fire without apparent concern. It was standard procedure for all officers in combat situations, dictated by the higher command. It helped strengthen the regular soldiers' resolve. It was also stupid as all get out. Krud, she really needed a drink.

Amy tried her best to ignore a particularly close shard and studied her visor display, hoping she wasn't shaking too visibly. Numbers appeared by each dot that represented one of her troopers, showing their ammunition consumption.

"Ease up, Chuang," she instructed. "You're wasting ammo. Short, controlled bursts. We want to discourage these wangbadan, not necessarily kill them."

She heard muttered swearing but let it go. They could resent her as much as they liked so long as they did what she asked.

The number of black dots on her display was slowly growing, showing soldiers running out of ammunition, even if only temporarily. There were red dots there now too. This was taking too long. She risked a look back up the road but could see nothing in the driving rain. They needed to start falling back. She opened her mouth to issue the order and then a heavy impact struck her helmet.

Her head snapped back so hard and she reeled from the blow, staggering and losing her balance in the slippery mud, falling to her knees. She could already hear the metal being scrunched aside as the shard ate its way inside. She tugged at the latches at her neck with a free hand, her fingers clumsy in the thickly armored gloves. Panic began to set in as she heard the plastic of the visor crack loudly, and she jerked the helmet clean off over her head, tearing apart the fabric seal.

Blinking, her eyes watering as she adjusted to the daylight, she hastily threw the helmet away from her. It splashed into a puddle of dirty ruby-colored water. She shot at the chusheng thing several times in anger, then tried to calm herself.

"Fall back!" she called out, shouting as loud as she could. The comlink built into her collar would still relay the order but without the helmet it just felt natural to yell. "Use the road! Fall back by squads!"

Her Niao was reporting the jam was cleared, so she holstered her pistol and let the hovbot drop the rifle back into her hands. This rain was unbelievable. It was almost hard to catch a breath without spluttering. She wiped water out of her eyes.

The rearguard was already obeying her order but was moving faster than she would have liked.

"Slowly!" she yelled, loosing off a couple of shots at the Stalker that had cost her the helmet. "Keep firing! Break only when I tell you!"

Her comlink chirped and she heard Zan's voice.

"All clear, eight-one." About damn time, she thought but didn't reply. "You might want to move a little quicker, Amy."

It must be serious, Amy thought, for him to call her by her first name. She bawled at her men to run and they did, immediately turning and sprinting as fast as they could up the road. None of them even bothered to fire anymore, or even look back, some of them even going so far as to reattach their rifles to their armor. She followed suit, her hovbot straining its motors to keep up with her pace.

Behind her she could hear the heavy thumping of the Stalkers coming towards them. God, without a helmet the noise was almost unbearable. And it was erratic now, the sole injured Stalker dragging itself and moving more slowly than the others. It wasn't giving up though. It took a lot more than a few bullet wounds to drive these things off, she knew.

They ran past the section of road that Zan and his team had mined and she glanced down at the surface. They'd done a good job of hiding the mines in such a short time. You could hardly see where the gravel on the road had been disturbed. The rain had helped, of course. She had no fear of the mines going off, as they were designed with little sensors to read the soldiers' implants and recognize them as friendly. They hardly ever malfunctioned.

The Hundun proximity mines had originally been intended to take out small vehicles. They were compact little spheres, packed with both explosives and a devastating ion implosion charge. They wouldn't even come close to scratching a tank or other armored fighting vehicles but it could easily rip through anything lighter. The army had long since learnt to put them to good use against Stalkers. You needed a lot of them though. She hoped thirty or so would be enough to stop four of the wangbadan.

The mines went off as they scrambled up the rocky path cut into the hill. At the very crest, Amy was helped by Zan and another soldier, each gripping her under a shoulder to haul her bodily upwards. Regaining her footing, she turned to observe the aftermath of the explosions far below. A few of the other soldiers from among those that had been the last up the hill along with Amy also stayed on the ridge to stare down at the carnage.

The road where the mines had been placed was now blackened, scorched and pockmarked with numerous craters, each the size of a tank hatch. A good portion of the road's surface was covered with a viscous blue gunk, streaked with white, and little oddly angular splinters of what might have been bone, crystal or even metal. No one was really sure what the krud those things were. It was hard to make out details at this distance, especially without the ocular enhancement her helmet would have offered, but Amy had seen enough Yaoguai innards up close to know what they looked like. Already the driving rain was doing its best to wash the thick goop away.

Only one Stalker had survived unscathed. It was the one they had injured, which struck her as strange. Still, she supposed, it had been unable to keep up with the others and so had not even been in the blast zone. Now it wove from one side of the road to the other, winding in an irregular pattern back and forth. It seemed to be uncertain whether or not it should continue, or perhaps it was unwilling to touch the stinking, fetid remains of the others. For all she knew it could be grieving. She turned away. Who the hell cared what the thing was doing, so long as it wasn't coming after them?

Amy turned and began walking away, following the rest of what remained of her company to the waiting beacon.

Zan jogged to keep up with her. She could tell by the sound of his voice that he was grinning like a fool. "Not much left, was there?"

"It won't last," she said grimly. "They'll keep coming now they know where we are. Let's keep moving."

* * * * *

With the wounded in tow, it had taken the rearguard longer than Amy had expected to reach the beacon. Two long and exhausting hours later the towering beacon finally came into view.

They'd been incredibly lucky back in the skirmish, only losing two men. But another five had been wounded badly, and three of those were unable to walk unaided. Amy had reprogrammed her Naio to assist in carrying one of the wounded on a stretcher. Technically, the weight of the injured man was probably beyond the machine's specifications but it seemed to manage somehow. And it freed up another soldier to fight if need be.

But the fight hadn't come. The men had been apprehensive, uneasily watching out for any sign that the Yaoguai were returning in force to hunt them down. But there had been no sign of the Yaoguai; no Stalkers; no Launchers; not even a solitary Seeker. That was unexpected, she had to admit, although she wasn't about to be ungrateful. And even the rain was slacking off a little.

As they all shuffled past the frankly inadequate perimeter defenses, Amy looked up at the beacon. It was itself at least as high as a two-storey building, built solidly upon a huge landing platform that was probably another storey high. Both the beacon and the platform were built sturdily but cheaply, thick steel girders riveted to strong wire mesh, embedded in substantial concrete emplacements. All of it was decaying, rusting, crumbling. The camouflage paint, a bizarre mixed pattern of reds and browns, was chipped and peeling.

Not that the camouflage had been needed until recently. The whole beacon had been protected by a visual shroud, which deflected sensor readings. Trying to find the PLA outpost with any kind of electronic equipment was a hopeless task. You literally had to stumble over it before you would know it was there.

But for obvious reasons the shroud was automatically deactivated once the beacon was turned on. And that meant the Yaoguai had no doubt detected the outpost by now. Sooner or later, Amy thought, the bloody nose she'd given the Stalkers was probably going to be avenged.

She noticed that Zan had already set up a guard at the steps that led up to the landing platform. Smart man that he was, he'd even put a two man team at the bottom of the emergency ladder, although that couldn't be lowered to the ground except from the top. A determined man could still climb the girders that supported the platform though but she could only worry about so much at one time.

Amy shouted for him and he ran up smartly. He had his helmet off and his thickly set features were creased into a smile. Somehow he didn't look the least bit tired. How in hell was that possible, Amy wondered angrily?

"Yes, eight-one?"

"How many men do we have on sentry?"

"Twelve in a wide circle. I sent out Hartigan and Kwan out on a low patrol."

She nodded. By her count that left only ten men left, not including Zan or herself, and half of those were wounded. "Okay. I want you to gather as many explosives as you can lay your hands on. Keep mines and grenades, but use anything else you can find. No holdouts. I want this whole place wired and ready, understand me?"

"Sure," Zan said, and she could see that he did. He frowned suddenly. "I hardly recognized you."

Amy looked at him, confused. "What?"

He handed her a helmet. The collar fabric was stained with blood and soaking wet. The ID tags read Jurgen. "I don't think I've seen you without your helmet for a week or more."

She smiled at him and self-consciously ran her fingers through her long blonde hair, tied back in its habitual ponytail. She knew even without the aid of a mirror that she must have looked haggard and worn, her skin dirty, sweaty and lined. She imagined dark circles under her watery blue eyes, framed by too many crows' feet. All of a sudden Amy felt every single one of her thirty-two years and probably another decade or two on top of that.

"Do I look that bad?" she asked Zan.

He shook his head, but was grinning widely. "No, but then I'm not a doctor."

Amy let that one go. Damn, he knew her too well. She was too tired to retort anyway. Instead she just smiled back at him, then tried to steer the conversation back on track.

"Well, get the damn doctor to check over our wounded. Then choose half-a-dozen men to help you. Tell the others that they're to try to get some sleep."

"We won't have long."

"I know. If you have to, order them to use their sleep inducers. A quarter-hour induced sleep is better than nothing."

He grunted, showing his disagreement. Like most soldiers, Zan disliked the sleep inducers that were built into the army helmets. Theoretically they were supposed to give you an hour's sleep in just five minutes and therefore a full night's sleep in less than an hour. The idea was to keep soldiers on their feet as much as possible in a single day. But there were plenty of horror stories about the inducers. Migraines, brain embolisms, tumors, even cancer; the inducers were rumored to cause them all. At the very least, everyone complained of headaches or migraines the day after use. Amy wouldn't even pretend to understand how the damn things worked; all she knew it was something to do with delta waves.

She sympathized; after all, she didn't particularly like using the inducers either. However, she knew that if the rest of the company felt half as exhausted as she did, they really needed sleep to function.

"Problem?"

"It won't be easy. You know how they hate..."

Her patience finally wore thin. "Just do it, Zan!" she barked.

He immediately snapped to attention, arms by his sides, back ramrod straight, eyes staring fixedly at a point just over her forehead; a shining example of a perfect subordinate, even in his grimy uniform. His response was loud and clear. "Yes, sir!"

It was all Amy could do to suppress a grin. Zan was a good warrior, a capable leader, and generally an easy-going soul. And there was no one else she'd rather have by her side in the middle of a firefight. But was he a good soldier? No, probably not. He'd probably even admit that himself if she asked him. And when he pretended to be, which he only ever did when pushed around by an idiotic superior officer, he usually went overboard.

She rubbed a hand across her eyes, wearily. "I'm sorry, Zan. It's just..."

He unfolded instantly, dropping the pretence and moving from rigid attention to his usual casual indolence in a single effortless motion. A big grin showed that the confrontation was forgotten. He was almost impossible to offend. Doubtless, that was why they had remained friends for so long. That and he tended to take good care of her, to worry over her when no one else would, not even Amy herself.

"No problem," he said, cutting her off. "Rather you than me, eight-one. With great power comes a shitload of paperwork."

She was surprised when he handed her a water canteen. She took it, then realized what was really in it and that he must have taken it from one of the dead or wounded soldiers. She thanked him and he trotted off, pushing through bunches of colonists and yelling orders to his soldiers.

Amy unscrewed the canteen cap and took a long swig. He'd watered it down, the clever bastard. If nothing else, that served two purposes: one, it made the booze last longer; and two, he had made sure she remained at least semi-sober. She sighed. She really needed to talk to the colonists, to let them know what was going on.

Instead she hesitated. She took another quick drink, tucked the canteen inside her uniform, and then turned her attention to the second-hand helmet Zan had given her. She overrode the ownership codes and quickly made it her own, then uplinked the visor's software to the beacon to track any response. The confirmation codes immediately flashed on the visor. So some good news and some bad news, she thought. At least the Navy had responded. Unfortunately there was only one trace on the beacon's sensors.

Amy held the helmet between her hands for a moment, thinking over her next move, then sighed and reluctantly moved off towards the landing platform, hitching the helmet to a belt loop as she

walked. She mounted the steps that led up to the platform and then turned around to address the crowd.

"Listen to me!"

No good. Half the colonists were near enough to pay attention but the others either didn't hear her or didn't care to listen. Of course, she could have utilized the speaker system built into the helmet but this was the kind of message delivered by a kind human face. Those who wanted comfort would find it, those who disbelieved her words would realize she meant it all.

"Listen to me!" she shouted, her voice commanding and authoritative. It worked; all the colonists were listening now, the furthestmost moving closer, all those faces staring up in the rain, all those hearts wanting a miracle. They wouldn't get one, Amy thought sadly. She looked around them all, her stare moving from mother to child to father to brother to grandmother, from worry to blind faith to fear to hope. Her eyes caught those of the doctor, standing in a puddle near the very front of the crowd, and the brunette smiled up at her.

Suddenly Amy felt a warm surge inside, fighting out against the cold. She turned away, angry at herself for allowing the brief distraction.

"I know you're cold, wet and scared," she said to them all. "I know you didn't want to leave your homes and now all you can think of is leaving this world. And I know I told you that if we made it to the beacon we'd be safe." She paused. "Well, I lied."

They looked confused. Somebody at the back shouted something but she couldn't make out the words.

"Here's why. There's only one shuttle coming."

A groan of anger swelled through the crowd. She had to raise her voice again to be heard.

"You can be as angry as you want but it doesn't change a thing. One shuttle means only forty people. I want Category A women first, with any children they have, then Category A men, then Category B women and so on."

They didn't like that at all. There was a moment's pause and she could almost sense each and every one of them trying to work out their individual odds of getting a seat on that shuttle. The poorer folk, those with no skills and no career outside their abandoned dirt farm back in Murdstone, would soon be getting angry. Amy could sense the two soldiers between her and the colonists were tensing. She rested a hand on the shoulder of one of them, just so he knew not to overreact.

"What about the rest of us?" someone at the front yelled.

"Why does the army get to leave?" came the next angry shout.

Amy held her hands up for quiet. "We're not leaving. We'll stay and protect those of you who are left behind. You have a chance with us, that's the best I can promise you."

She stepped down, pushing past the first few colonists. The crowd began murmuring among themselves. A few colonists looked angry, but most just looked dispirited and defeated. With one or two exceptions they had accepted her words at face value. Some were crying, mostly those in families, who knew now that they would be separated.

Amy felt a hand grab hold of her elbow and she turned swiftly, immediately on the defensive and her anger ready to boil over. When she saw it was the doctor, she forced herself to bite down on that fury and swallow it. She even managed a weary smile.

The doctor, however, was all business. "What about the wounded? Surely they should be placed on the shuttle first?"

Amy shook her head. "No wounded."

"Are you crazy?" Jenny said disbelievingly. "It doesn't matter what happens here, if they stay on Lost Heep they don't have a chance. You must know that, surely? Two of your men need immediate surgery, it's probably only the painkillers their suits are pumping into them that's keeping them conscious, and another..."

Impatiently, Amy interrupted her. "What you say may be true but let me be clear: able-bodied people will stand a better chance somewhere else. Besides, I have my orders."

"And do you always follow orders, Captain?"

"Only when they make sense, boshi. You'll be at the front of the queue."

If she was disbelieving before, Jenny Wickfield was now stunned. "Me?"

"You're a doctor. That's a Category A occupation, in case you didn't know. So you leave."

"Like hell I will!" The doctor's face was bright red with indignation. "If the wounded are staying, I need to stay too!"

Enough was enough, Amy thought. "Be quiet!" she snapped as her temper finally got the better of her, using what she called her parade ground voice: loud and authoritative. It drew attention from the civilians around her and even a couple of soldiers unspooling a roll of detonation wire paused in their task to look over at them.

With her mouth hanging open, Jenny looked like someone had slapped her.

Amy sighed and tried her best to be more conciliatory. Arguing angrily with this woman was going to get her nowhere fast. She had to reason with her. "Look, boshi," she said in a placatory tone, "I'd like to spend all day and all night explaining to you how valuable you are and how the

Republic is in desperate need of doctors right now, but I'm almost out of stim-jolts, patience, bullets, and most importantly time. So here's what we're going to do. I'm going to tell you one last time to get on that shuttle and you are going to do as you're told."

Amy didn't give her a chance to reply. She had the feeling if she did it would only result in the argument breaking out again. Instead she turned on her heel and walked away, yelling at a nearby corporal to start organizing the colonists by category.

* * * * *

Amy knelt by Corporal Song Wu and smiled down at him. She tried to make the smile reassuring and comforting but she doubted it looked convincing. How could it be? Half the man's stomach was missing, eaten away by a Yaoguai shard before he had managed to tear the disgusting thing out.

Only a tightly-wound bandage kept in what little remained of his innards and he clutched at the large wound, dark brown-reddish blood seeping between his fingers. The company's medical supplies were almost non-existent and certainly not up to dealing with these kind of injuries. To make matters worse, their only medic had been killed in a Yaoguai ambush weeks before. She hated relying on the civilian doctor but they really had no choice.

Song shifted in his position, groaning in pain as he moved to try and get more comfortable. The doctor had said by rights he should be lying down, flat on his back, but he had refused. Instead he was propped up in a sitting position against one of the low perimeter walls. His fingers clenched at the hole in his stomach. The bandage was slowly turning red. The stench was overpowering.

"Please forgive me for not saluting, eight-one," Song said quietly, managing a weak grin in return. There was a trickle of dried blood at the corner of his mouth.

Amy raised an eyebrow in a gently mocking expression. "You're supposed to stand to attention too, Yi Ji Shi Guan."

"I would if..." He spasmed suddenly, coughing up a chunk of dark red blood into his palm. When the coughing fit subsided, he wiped his hands on the grass. He had always been a meticulous soldier. Even over the last few tiring weeks Song had done his utmost to keep his armor spotless. Funny how even now small things like that hadn't changed. She imagined he was more upset at the mess the wound had made of his uniform than the prospect of death.

She rested a hand on his leg. "I know, Song."

They said nothing for a long time. He coughed once more and she offered him a drink from her canteen, which he waved away.

After a while, Amy handed him a rifle with two spare clips. It was all she could spare. They'd recovered what little ammunition they could from all the wounded and one soldier had been

smart enough to grab a few pouches from the dead before retreating earlier but even so there was precious little left.

"We need time," she said quietly. It was hard to look him in the eye.

Amy saw him frown, clearly not understanding. She looked down at the rifle she had given him and his gaze followed her. When he looked up at her, he had a hardness to his face, although she couldn't honestly tell if it was from anger or determination. Perhaps a little of both.

"We'll do our best, Shang Wei."

She reached out and touched his shoulder gently, showing him that she was grateful for his bravery, then got to her feet. "I know you will."

"Shang Wei?"

"Yes."

Song slotted one of the magazines into the rifle and checked it over as best he could. "I have a daughter," he said quietly. "She's about your age. Has a government job out on the Far Systems."

Amy smiled. "Thanks, Song, but I don't go on blind dates."

He laughed, which turned into another spasm of coughing. "Damn, that hurts."

"I'll tell her, Song, don't worry."

* * * * *

Amy spent the next fifteen minutes checking on the remaining wounded, asking each of them for only one thing and promising them so much. Even so, she knew she had the best part of the bargain. She doubted if she could ever do what they were willing to do, were she ever unfortunate enough to be in the same situation. And yet not a single man had quivered, protested, or even questioned her need. Hell, one had even volunteered.

Malone, one of the company's few other Americans, had lost an eye to a shard and hadn't been able to get all of the filth out. He'd have been better off leaving the whole damn thing in, at least that way he would have died quickly. But now the little tiny piece of crystal stuck under his flesh was eating its way into his brain, agonizingly slowly. He could have asked to leave on the shuttle; she might even have agreed. If he made it to a fully equipped and well staffed Navy sickbay, he might have made it.

Instead he had sought her out and requested permission to stay with the others. What little remained of his eye beneath a bandage patch kept undulating. It made her uneasy but she forced herself to maintain eye contact with him. Again, it was something so little but which meant so

much. And she could hardly refuse his appeal, even if all she had wanted to tell him was to go somewhere solitary and blow his brains out.

A total of six men were staying behind. It made her proud and terribly ashamed at the same time. But, Amy supposed, that was everyday life in the PLA.

She walked beneath the platform, looking around the compound for Zan. She needed to know how close he and his soldiers were to finishing up with the explosives. The sooner they could get out of here after the shuttle left the better off they'd all be. As she ducked underneath the girders on the far side, she was startled by the doctor calling out to her.

Amy ducked back beneath the girders and waited for the short woman to run up. The landing platform high overhead didn't offer much protection from the elements but it was better than nothing. It felt surprisingly good to be out of the downpour, even for just a short time.

The doctor joined her under the girders a few seconds later, rubbing the rainwater off her face with a damp sleeve. She was gasping slightly from the exertion of having to run through the thick mud, and couldn't speak straight away.

Amy decided not to give her the chance.

"Have you checked on my wounded, boshi?"

The doctor frowned, as if the question had caught her off-balance rather than the sodden ground. "Yes. Anderson and Zao have minor injuries. Zao's arm took some shrapnel. I'm not sure from what."

Amy knew. Zao had been standing on the very edge of one of the blast zones during the skirmish. He'd been lucky enough not to take a shard or two. Instead he'd been hit by pieces of Xu's heavy armor, and judging by the bloody state of his own uniform quite a few chunks of Xu too.

"It's not serious but he won't be able to use it until I can set the bone and do some better work on the cuts. The others..." Her voice trailed off. Then she smiled suddenly and changed tack. "I've decided to stay."

"This again."

"Yes, this again. If the wounded aren't being allowed to go, then I'm staying to look after them."

Amy sighed. "I don't think you understand, boshi."

"Stop calling me that!"

"Doctor, listen to me. The wounded are staying here. You are not. Your fellow colonists are not. I am not and neither are any of my men. And don't ask me where we're going because I don't know yet. But believe me when I tell you no one is staying here except the wounded."

It sank in at last. She shouldn't have expected a civilian to understand. "Oh," was all Jenny finally said, in a quiet voice. "What about no man left behind?"

"Grow up, doctor."

"I'm serious."

"So am I," Amy said angrily. "That kind of krud belongs on the propaganda posters."

* * * * *

Most of the charges had been placed by the time the shuttle landed. It looked so small, lonely and fragile up there on the huge flat platform; it was almost dispiriting.

Billowing clouds of dirty smoke and a shower of rust-colored water thundered down from the metal platform and the concrete surround as the shuttle slowly descended. The civilians were gathered too close to the platform really, Amy believed, eager to get off this world as soon as possible, but at least they weren't actually under it. Those standing nearest were drenched by this new artificial downpour, their clothes billowing wildly in the shuttle's downward exhaust.

By the time Amy ran up the steps the shuttle's landing ramp was already dropping onto the platform with a heavy clunk. The engines were slowing but not shutting down completely. The Navy wasn't planning on hanging around, that's for damn sure. She supposed she couldn't really blame them.

Two of the crew were jumping down from the ramp. The tallest, a thickly set man without a single hair on his head, stepped up to her. He was dressed in a scruffy Hai Jun San Ji Shi Guan uniform with a tricolor flag patch sewn onto his shoulder: horizontal stripes of green, yellow and blue. Amy didn't recognize it.

"You in charge here?"

He spoke heavily accented French, which most likely meant that he came from one of the surviving African colonies. It took Amy's implant a second to repeat the question in Mandarin.

"Yes. Shang Wei Amy Copperfield, 8th Company, 17th Army Group."

He tilted his head as she spoke, listening to his own implant translate her words. With his head shaved, Amy could see the tell-tale bulge of the implant just behind his right ear.

"What the hell is going on? Where did you guys come from?"

"Murdstone, over in the Eastern Flats," Amy said hurriedly. "We probably don't have time for long explanations. I have two hundred and twelve civilians here that need immediate evac."

"Okay," he said with a quick nod. "We can take forty-two, maybe even sixty if we cram them in like sardines, but the Lieutenant will have the final say. Any wounded?"

"The wounded are staying."

He didn't even blink. "Okay. Probably for the best."

She turned back and waved at the soldiers guarding the steps to start letting people through. Colonists started running up the steps and the two crewmen started motioning for the people to get inside, showing them how to buckle themselves up. There was already a commotion starting at the foot of the steps; no doubt someone arguing that their own family couldn't possibly be broken up. She tried to ignore the noise, letting Zan deal with it. She promised herself she'd only get involved if there was gunplay.

One of the pilots was working his way back through the shuttle. He'd reached the top of the ramp by the time the first colonists were buckling themselves into the restraining harnesses. He jumped down off the side of the ramp and motioned for Amy to join him as he walked to the edge of the platform. He didn't say anything but just stared off into the distance.

Amy broke the silence. "Why only one shuttle?"

"What?" He had to shout over the sound of the engines. He spoke Mandarin then, she noted, although his pronunciation was terrible. He looked Slavic, maybe Ukrainian. There were a lot of Ukrainian pilots in the Navy. Nobody really knew why.

"Only one shuttle," Amy repeated, speaking louder and leaning closer. "My men who activated the beacon told me that they detailed how many refugees we had."

"We left the *Huang Di* with three. The other two didn't make it."

There was nothing to be said to that, Amy supposed. She had no way of knowing whether that was true or not. If the DDG *Huang Di* was a destroyer, and it probably was, then it could have had the full complement of a hundred and twelve shuttles. On the other hand, what ship hadn't taken a few hard knocks over the last decade? For all she knew, the *Huang Di* might only have three shuttles left, or even just the one.

"Are things bad up there?"

He looked at her as if she was a fool. "About as bad as it gets. We're not going to be able to hold on much longer. The Yaoguai are pumping this system with more and more carriers."

"I don't suppose you've been told where the fleet is heading for next?"

"They don't trust a lowly shuttle pilot with that kind of privileged info, Captain." He was quiet for a moment, then reluctantly added, "I don't like running."

Amy shrugged. "You get used to it."

"I suppose the Army does."

She was insulted by the slight but knew she was supposed to, so she said nothing. He touched his ear and tilted his head to listen for a moment. Amy glanced over her shoulder and saw one of the air crew talking.

"Any idea where you're going to go?" When Amy looked back at the pilot, he added: "You could try for Endell."

Amy studied him, wondering briefly if he was just ill-informed or if he was trying to lead the conversation somewhere she didn't want it to go. He seemed to be studying her. He had blonde lashes, she noticed, as he blinked to keep the rain out of his cold blue eyes. She stared him down in return. He was tall and lanky, like most pilots. Probably something to do with spending so much time in zero gravity, she supposed.

"Endell was overrun the week before last," she finally said. Endell was a small port further east, built on a rare plain beside the Spenlow. She'd been briefed on the entire region before being sent on this E-and-E (escort and evacuate) mission. If she'd been wearing her helmet it would have been easier; she could have just called up the info she needed with a flick of her tongue. Her brow wrinkled as she tried to remember what she'd been told.

Endell, Endell, she repeated to herself, trying to jog her memory. Named after the first Englishwoman to land on Lost Heep. One of the oldest towns in the northern hemisphere; it had been more than forty years since the first colonists had settled there. Original population before the invasion was around ten thousand; a small town by a lot of standards but not for Lost Heep. Even the cities on this damned planet weren't much bigger. Small industrial base, employment mostly sea-based: hydrogen farming, mariculture, aquaponics, algaculture, the usual. Evacuated partly more than a month ago, most of the civilians flown out, only essential workers and their families staying behind. Several companies had been moved in to protect the infrastructure.

Then the 14th Army Group had taken a hammering on the Blunderstone Plains up north from a Yaoguai army that appeared from nowhere, right after the Naval fleet defending this system's skip-point went silent. The Central Military Command had to rapidly rethink things. The soldiers in Endell were desperately needed elsewhere, so they were withdrawn. And then the Yaoguai had approached the town nine or ten days ago, a stepping stone on the way to the west and so the last remnants of Endell's civilian population had been hurriedly evacuated.

At least they hadn't been forgotten, not like the farmers of Murdstone. They'd been overlooked by everyone, even the Yaoguai, although that hadn't lasted for very long. The Yaoguai wouldn't tolerate the taint of humanity on a planet they had claimed, even such a small blight as

Murdstone. They'd poured into the tiny town not so long after Amy had managed to drag the colonists out.

The pilot was saying something. She had to ask him to repeat it.

"The Yaoguai have moved on. They're interested in the bigger cities out west. Latest Naval IntRep says there's not a Yaoguai within forty kays of here." He caught her eye and shrugged. "I'm just telling you what I've been told. We didn't even know you guys were here. When the beacon was activated nobody was sure what to do."

Typical fucking Navy, she thought. They never know what to do. You'd have to hand them a GPS and point them in the right direction even if they had a Near Systems hooker lying in front of them with her legs spread and a 'Free-for-Servicemen' tattoo on her stomach.

"My commanding officer thought it was a trap set by the Yaoguai. Took some convincing for him to give us evac clearance."

"I hope it was worth it," Amy said sourly.

"It never is," he said, giving her a sharp look. "I'm serious about Endell. It's your best shot."

"I don't like fighting in towns. I always seem to have bad luck."

He shrugged. "If you want to get off this mudball, you don't have any choice. The next nearest beacon is more than eighty kays to the north. If it's still standing."

About a hundred and sixty li, Amy thought. It was out of the question. If it was just her and the company, they could risk it. They'd travel faster, sleep less, and their smaller numbers would keep them hidden more easily. But with the civilians in tow, things would be much harder. They'd have to walk at the colonists' slow pace, keep to the open and thus in plain sight, and they'd waste so much time. They'd never make it.

And that was only provided the Yaoguai hadn't knocked the beacon out. They hated the structures. Something about the signal drove them out of whatever passed for their skulls, like nails being clawed down a chalkboard. The beacons were hard to find, of course, but there was always the chance that they could stumble over them, and whenever they did they tore the places to bits.

She could leave the colonists, she supposed. Abandon them to the Yaoguai. Walk away and not look back. Leave them to their own fate, whatever that might be. She shook her head. No, she couldn't. She had her duty... and something else. Something uncertain pricked at her thoughts. Was that her conscience, she wondered? It had been so long since she'd needed to use it, she'd forgotten what it felt like.

Endell was only fifty miles or so from here. If they walked for the remainder of the day and only rested for a few hours, they could be at the town late tomorrow morning, even at the much slower pace set.

"Are you sure about this?"

He didn't look sure. "There are no guarantees, Captain. If you can make it there and the fleet is still in place, they might risk some more shuttles. There are several landing sites in the town and at least a couple of upload stations. You should have no problem contacting someone, provided the Yaoguai didn't wreck everything."

That wasn't likely, Amy thought. Aside from the beacons, they tended to leave settlements of the Republic pretty much intact. They weren't bothered by the homes, the factories, the schools, none of it. Sure, there was often collateral damage, but once the Yaoguai had a city firmly in their grasp they generally left the places alone. Maybe they didn't understand cities. Maybe on their own planets they just wandered about, free-range, unlike the battery-chicken life of most humans. Or maybe they just had their priorities straight. Win the war first, kill all the humans, and then worry about demolishing what was left. It seemed to be working for them.

"My Chief Petty Officer there tells me you're not giving up your wounded."

"That won't be a problem."

"Yeah? Why..." He stopped in mid-sentence, frowned, and then looked at her with a new-found respect as what she planned sunk in on him. And maybe, just maybe, there was a little fear in his eyes too.

One of the flight crew approached and saluted. "We're fully loaded, Captain. Sixty-seven souls, all told."

The pilot nodded. "That's going to slow our response time." He turned away then paused. "Try Endell, Captain, that's the best I can do for you now. Good luck."

* * * * *

They all heard the gunfire about half-an-hour later. The marching didn't stop exactly but the line of colonists and soldiers seemed to abruptly ripple, like a garden slug ballooning as it hauled itself over a twig that barred its path, as people slowed momentarily to listen.

Amy herself paused by the side of the road, tilting her head to listen as the remaining civilians trudged past her. Whatever the Yaoguai used to launch their shards made no noise, so it was only rattling of the PLA automatic rifles that could be heard. It sounded so faint, even with the amplifiers built into her adopted helmet; she was a little surprised any of the colonists could hear it.

She thought she heard a deeper rumbling beneath the almost constant crackle of gunfire. That could mean the Yaoguai had summoned a Launcher, although if they had she didn't know how the accursed lumbering thing would have been brought up so quickly. If that were true, the men she'd left back at the beacon wouldn't last even as long as she had hoped. Or were her ears merely playing tricks on her?

There was a slightly larger boom suddenly. Some of the colonists glanced at her then, fearing the worst, and in unspoken answer she shook her head. They'd know that sound when it came. That was most likely a thrown grenade.

It sounded like her men were giving a good account of themselves. But the gunfire was slowly getting less insistent.

She felt like crying, but knew that was only because of her exhaustion, and so instead bit down on her bottom lip hard.

Then, without warning, the beacon exploded. They couldn't see it, as they'd passed over more than one hill already. But they could feel it. It seemed like the ground shook, even at this distance, and she saw several of the civilians stumble.

Amy turned back to stare at the horizon. She could see the sudden flare of light from behind the hill and her visor immediately darkened to protect her eyes. Strictly speaking it wasn't one explosion, rather a series of co-ordinated blasts, but each detonated so closely behind the last that they almost looked and sounded as one.

She'd been expecting the explosion but even so it had made her jump. She tasted blood and suddenly realized that the shock of the explosion had caused her to bite through the skin of her lip. She swallowed, hating the coppery taste.

"Keep moving!" Amy bellowed, noticing that the line seemed to have stopped. She directed her anger more at her own soldiers than the civilians, as they should have known better, but all of them needed to be told. She heard Zan repeating the command further down the line. "Keep moving, damn you!"

Already at the back of the column there were some families straggling, falling further behind, and that meant the rearguard she'd placed were moving at a snails pace, if at all. She ordered them to make the civilians pick up the pace, telling them to be as forceful as they had to. Shove them if you have to, she told them, hit them with your rifle butts, kick them, push them, insult them, just keep them moving. They'll thank you for it later.

Now she was getting some dirty looks from some of the soldiers around her. Mostly the younger men, those who'd been recruited more recently, from the Brigade's most recent stopover on Barkis. The older hands were more forgiving. They may not have liked what happened, what she'd done, what she'd asked of their friends and brothers-in-arms, but they understood. And they were grateful that it wasn't them. Combat fatigue would do that to you, she knew that well

enough. After a few years in the PLA, or worse still after just a few weeks in a crappy hotspot like this, and you'd soon start being grateful for the small things.

She looked back at the rearguard and saw they were finally moving, then glanced up the column, intending to make sure Zan and the others were keeping up a good pace. It was then that she saw the doctor.

Jenny was further up in the column, making no effort to hide, walking along determinedly with her backpack held over one shoulder. If, like the others around her, she had stopped to watch the destruction of the beacon then she had certainly not stopped for long. She was moving past the other colonists, almost as if she wanted to get to the head of the column for some reason. She was looking around her as she walked... and then Amy realized why she was walking so fast. She was searching for her. Or maybe trying to keep away from her; she damn well should be.

The doctor looked over her shoulder and saw Amy staring at her. For a moment there was confusion on her face as she studied the almost anonymous armor Amy wore, then she finally caught sight of the mud-encrusted insignia on the shoulder plating. The damn woman grinned awkwardly. At least there was a sheepish look about her, Amy thought irritably. The doctor shrugged, as if to say, you didn't really expect me to do what I was told, did you?

Angrily, Amy turned away and roared for Zan. Moments later he jogged back from the very front of the column to fall in beside her.

"Problem, eight-one?"

He was smiling, she could tell just by the tone of his voice even if she couldn't see him through the thick reflective plastic of his visor. Luckily for him he'd switched over to their private comms channel; she was in just the mood to chew him out here and now on the open channels. God, she wanted to smack that smile right off his face.

"What the hell is she doing here?" Amy demanded. "She's supposed to be on the damn shuttle!"

To his credit, Zan didn't pretend not to know who she was talking about. Instead he shrugged, the plates on his armor clattering with the motion. "She insisted."

"And you let her?"

"What could I do?"

She stared at him in disbelief. "Gai si! For Chairman's sake, Zan, you're probably two feet taller her, outweigh her considerably, have a longer reach, and could probably kill anyone on this damn planet with just your thumb! If nothing else, you have a krudding gun! Why the hell didn't you make her get on the damn shuttle?"

He shrugged again. "She's a damn fox spirit. Would you refuse her?"

"I already did, Zan."

"Then more fool you, Amy."

Amy said nothing. She was fuming, glaring at him, her anger only barely under control. He couldn't see her reaction, of course, but he knew her well enough to judge her poor temper. The silence dragged on, broken only by the sound of marching feet and the occasional chatter over her com-link. She was doing her best to remain calm.

Finally, she said quietly: "What are you driving at, Zan?"

He touched his left shoulder with his right hand, ever so briefly, almost as if there was an itch he needed to scratch. She knew it was a nervous twitch. It was an old wound. Last year, back during the defense of the Maldon Gates, he'd dug out a shard from beneath the bone. Now he only ever thought about it when he was uncertain of his footing, which wasn't very often.

"How long has it been since Jane died?"

"You know how long. I'm not going to talk about this, Zan."

He shrugged again. "Your choice, Shang Wei. But you know as well as any of us, if in this army there's something no one else seems to want and is there for the taking, you'd be a fool not to steal it."

"Get back to the head of the column, Zan," Amy told him sourly.

* * * * *

The column of civilians and their escort of soldiers had kept walking for another ten hours or more before Amy finally called a halt. Most of the colonists collapsed at the side of the road immediately, some even falling asleep as soon as they were lying down. Small wonder; everyone was exhausted, having walked for the entirety of yet another day. Amy could have insisted they kept going, but the tiredness was already causing stumbles, sprains and twisted ankles. And the pitch black of the night wasn't helping. Most of the soldiers had helmets and their visors provided adequate night vision. She and Zan could even see well without the helmets, thanks to their TL lenses.

Amy knew most of her soldiers were tired too. Too few had managed to get any sleep back at the beacon, and even then it hadn't been much. Still, they were better off than the colonists. At least nearly all of her soldiers had sleep-inducers, and she made sure at least half of them had made use of them.

Her suit chronometer was telling her it was just past three in the morning, planet-time. A thirty-hour day took some getting used to, and it was probably taking its toll on her men, who usually kept to Beijing-standard time regardless of their location. That was another reason why she felt less guilty for ordering her men to use the inducers.

She was pretty damn tired herself. She wanted to sleep, she really did. She knew she needed to, too, even if it was half an hour induced. But she felt too jittery to sleep. She'd burnt through her last stim-jolt more than an hour ago and wasn't about to go around asking for another. Alcohol was one thing, stim-jolts were another.

Amy walked through the colonists, picking her way carefully over each prone person, telling them to be quiet and still as possible, that they could only stay here for an hour and a half at most, to get what sleep they could. As careful as she was, she couldn't avoid standing on some of them accidentally.

The doctor wasn't sleeping, she noticed. The damn woman was checking on the wounded amongst the colonists. She seemed to have a boundless reserve of energy. If she was tired, and she sure looked like she was, then she wasn't showing it. Most of the colonists were smiling at her, exchanging food and supplies, being nice and friendly. Amy was genuinely puzzled by that. She would have thought peasants like these would harbor long grudges. She'd known rad-fleas with longer memories than these people.

The doctor laughed at something one of the colonists said. Not so loud that Amy would have to tell her to shut up, but more than loud enough for Amy to overhear. Was that deliberate, Amy wondered? Fox spirit be damned, Amy thought, the woman was going to be trouble.

It was freezing cold. It wasn't winter in this hemisphere, not for another month or so, but the weather had taken an unexpected turn for the worse recently. The rainy season had started early and temperatures had dropped faster than anyone had expected. The chilly cold was bearable during the day but at night, it was intolerable.

Some of the colonists contemplated lighting a fire, but Amy quashed that pretty damn quickly. It was bad enough their own heat signatures were lighting up sensors like a bunch of drunken fireflies; there was no need to add to it. Let them huddle together and keep what little warmth they had.

The soldiers were fine, of course. Most of their regulators were still working, keeping them warm, and more importantly diffusing their own body warmth and hiding their heat signatures from anyone searching for them. Again, Amy felt herself contemplating leaving the colonists on their own, wondering if the company's chances of survival would be any better.

She checked in on Zan and found he was sleeping already. She realized she hadn't given him any specific orders, so he'd just bunked down on the side of the road. Not that he'd left anything undone - she'd already found he'd ordered a third of the men into sentry duty, sent out a couple of two-men teams on patrol, one ahead, one behind, and ordered the remaining soldiers to get some sleep.

Following his own rule number four, he'd even ensured the soldiers slept in batches, each a respectable distance away from any of the colonists. Amy doubted anyone would be stupid enough to get involved with one of the peasants, but you never could tell. In short, Zan had organized everything before going to sleep. She couldn't have done it better herself. She wasn't

so sure she would have, given how tired she felt. More often than not Zan could predict what she wanted. She wasn't sure she liked that. Especially considering what he'd been trying to say about that damn doctor earlier.

She kicked him between snores. He woke with a start, the soft whine of the inducer winding down as he struggled to his feet. He was all apologies, but she waved them away, and brusquely told him to take sentry duty for half-an-hour. She was going to do the same, then they could each sleep for a short while. He acquiesced with only a few minor grumbles, passing his helmet on to a soldier standing guard over the sleepers.

Amy headed south, towards the heavy stream that ran along the road onl about a single yin away. As she walked she used the com-link built into her ruined collar to alert the other sentries to her approach and positioning. By rights they should be able to read her location from her implant, but it was always best to be on the cautious side. Tired and nervous soldiers sitting alone in the darkness tended to make mistakes.

It took her about ten minutes to reach the creek and once there she clambered down the near side until she was ankle deep in the icy water. The recent heavy rains meant that the stream was higher and much faster moving than normal; she could make out patches of grass below the waterline. Amy leant back against the mossy bank, twisting too and fro, nestling herself into the thick mud until she was comfortable. It was as good a position as any. She had a clear line of sight over the other bank and across the gently rolling grassland for as far as she could see. And the stream would be a good defensive position for her should she spot something and a slight barrier to any advancing Yaoguai if she needed to fall back.

The only thing she was worried about was falling asleep. Already, now she had stopped moving, she could feel the cold, clammy fingers of sleep creeping ahold of her. She found herself shaking her head to try to clear her thoughts. Even the cold light rain didn't help.

She planted the butt of her rifle firmly into the thick mud beside her, then reached inside her armor to dig out Zan's flask. The bitter alcohol burnt her throat, and she reveled in the taste. It woke her up, that's for damn sure, even if it didn't help with the cold any.

"Should you be drinking on duty, Captain?" a soft voice called out from above her.

Amy almost coughed up a big mouthful of the watered-down liquor. She spluttered, some of the fiery liquid dribbling down the front of her armor. The acrid stench of the alcohol wafted up from the quickly spreading stains in the fabric. Great. Not that she was worried about smelling bad; she must have stunk to high heaven already. Hell, seeing as how she didn't exactly know what kind of alcohol Zan had found, she should just consider herself lucky that it wasn't eating through her uniform.

She looked up and saw the doctor leaning over the edge of the river bank, staring down at her with a knowing smirk on her face.

"You're supposed to be back with the others, boshi," Amy said, wiping the back of her mouth. For some strange reason she felt guilty for being caught drinking. Normally, it didn't really bother her. Krud, she was well aware that her drinking was an open secret amongst the company, although no one would ever dare mention. No one but Zan, anyway. So why did it matter to her now? She tried to move past the uncomfortable situation, tucking the canteen back inside her armor. "You're lucky you didn't get lost in the dark."

"I have a very good sense of direction. It's one of the many talents I possess."

Amy rolled her eyes. "Is that right? Remind me not to ask about the others."

"You won't have to. I'll share them with you when the time is right."

Clumps of dirt fell from above; Amy could feel the scattering of soil hitting her head and hear it bouncing of the reflex plates on her shoulders. She looked up, squinting to protect her eyes, and saw the doctor was lowering herself over the edge. Damn it, Amy thought, was she planning on staying?

"Normally," Jenny said, as she gingerly clambered down the bank of the stream to join Amy, "I would prescribe some benzodiazepines for someone like you..."

"Someone like me?"

"But I suppose it would be pointless. To begin with, I guess the chances of finding any bennies soon is pretty remote. And even assuming I did find some, you wouldn't take them, would you?"

She had managed to climb down the bank without falling and needing rescue; that was something to be grateful for, Amy supposed. The doctor was now standing calf-deep in the stream, the cold water rushing around her pants, but she didn't seem to notice. Instead she was trying her best to brush the mud and dirt off her hands.

Why she was bothering was beyond Amy. Her clothes were torn, filthy and disheveled, stained with blood and dirt, soaked through from the pouring rain. Worse still, when she was done wiping her hands on her lab coat, she threw herself down on the river bank beside Amy, not seeming to mind that now her clothes would be thoroughly coated in mud. How could one person be so contradictory?

"You shouldn't be out here."

"Why? Isn't it safe?"

Amy said nothing, suddenly aware of the woman's closeness. She was thankful that her rifle was between them, acting like a barrier.

"Back there," Jenny said, gesturing over her shoulder, back towards the road, "I'm one of more than a hundred people guarded by less than a dozen soldiers. The ratio is a lot lower in this stream. One-to-one. I think I'm much safer here."

Amy looked her up and down. "Don't be so sure."

Jenny laughed quietly. "Yeah, right, Captain. Like you'd ever take a risk that didn't come out of a bottle. Do you realize I still don't know your first name?"

"It's Amy."

"Amy." She rolled the word around her mouth, enjoying the way it sounded. "Well then, Amy, tell me this. How the hell can you see anything out here? It's pitch black. I almost broke my neck three times getting out here and that was after I had to find my way back to the camp to ask for more precise directions from Private Bai."

It was all Amy could do not to laugh. "I do okay," she said.

"Army secret, is it? You know, your eyes looked almost white for a moment there. Like a flash. You can't see anything, really, can you?"

Amy tapped a finger against the corner of one eye, then realized the movement was probably lost in the darkness. "TL lenses. Standard equipment for officers, just in case."

"TL?"

"Tapetum lucidum. It reflects and intensifies what little light there is. Taken from a wolf gene, I think. Not as safe as the visor, or as effective, but pretty good in a pinch." She glanced at the doctor. "And I shouldn't have told you that. The PLA don't like civilians knowing too much about what they have going on."

"Oh. Well, don't worry, your secret's safe with me. Besides genetics isn't really my specialty. You don't have a helmet?"

"Mine took a shard back at the firefight. We don't have enough to go around, so we're using them for sleep."

She nodded, understanding. "Which is why you officers are standing watch, right?"

If she didn't know as much already, Amy realized just how damn clever this doctor was. For someone who knew nothing about military life, or at least claimed too, she'd figured out the reasoning behind the choice of sentries quickly enough.

It put Amy on edge a little. She didn't really like smart women. In her experience, they tended to be more trouble than they were worth. She wondered if Jenny would prove to be the exception, but she doubted it.

She liked the barracks-queens, the women who liked soldiers only because they were soldiers. They might not be dumb, although a lot of them honestly were, but they expected little and demanded less, at least outside of the sack. They were easier to be rid of too. Zan often joked that she only wanted fire-and-forget relationships.

But intelligent women bugged the hell out of Amy, if she was being honest. They wanted too much, most of which she couldn't give. Smart conversation, for one. Amy didn't consider herself stupid, at least not where it mattered, but she was no Einstein. Commitment was another popular demand, although the army pretty much put paid to any chances of that. Or at least Amy usually let it. And her just being in the army was another big stumbling block. She had lost count of the number of women that had asked her to retire.

Yeah, smart women were trouble. She never knew what they were thinking, never won an argument with them, always felt second-best in the relationship. Hell, it pissed her off just thinking about it.

She said none of this, of course. Instead she just tried to keep the conversation simple. "Rank has its privileges."

"And its burdens," Jenny said pointlessly.

She was wiggling, inching closer, so much so that Amy had to pluck her rifle from the mud and place it over on the other side. That wasn't particularly wise, she knew, as it meant the rifle was on her bad side. Like most of the soldiers, she'd been trained to fire the rifle with either hand, but that wasn't without its own problems. She wasn't such a good shot when firing from her left, and the way the rifle was designed meant that the cartridges would be ejecting right in front of her face, distracting her at best and possibly even damaging her armor at worst. That hadn't been a problem with the old particle beam weapons.

When she felt the doctor huddling up to her, she forgot such concerns. The woman's slight body pressed gently against her own, worrying Amy a little. She wasn't entirely sure how to react to this. It wasn't the way women usually approached her. Normally, women were much more direct with her. She wasn't sure why, maybe she just gave off that vibe. If, of course, that's what this was. But truth be told, right now she didn't know what the hell this was.

"You cold?" Amy asked. She resisted the temptation to slip an arm around the doctor. She tried to justify the idea to herself; it would only be a protective gesture, surely?

She couldn't feel much body warmth through the sodden fabric but she could still feel each and every movement. The damn woman couldn't have been comfortable, surely? The armor Amy wore was clunky, cold to the touch, and wasn't that comfortable to wear, let alone try to lie against. And anyway, the thick plastic plating was non-conductive, so the doctor couldn't be getting practically any warmth. Unless she didn't know that, which Amy supposed was possible. God, this was so frustrating! Amy swore under her breath. Damn smart women. Nothing but krudding trouble.

She could feel the doctor nod, although she didn't reply at first. "I suppose there's no point in asking if you're cold, is there?"

"Not really, no."

"I didn't think so. You wouldn't tell me if you were, would you?"

"No."

"You don't like to give much up, do you?"

"Not if I can help it."

She was moving even closer now, really snuggling in tighter. She was so petite, Amy realized that now more than ever. With her head resting on Amy's shoulder, her feet only just came down to Amy's knees. It made her seem so... fragile. Damn it, Amy thought, wasn't she supposed to care for every civilian, even the annoying small ones?

"Why are you here, Captain?" Jenny asked quietly.

"I go where the PLA tells me to go."

"That's not what I meant."

"It's what you asked."

"You know, if I wasn't so tired already, a conversation with you would exhaust me."

Amy laughed out loud at that. She hadn't wanted to, had tried to keep the laughter trapped deep within her, but somehow it had bubbled up out of her. It was because she was too tired, she told herself. Her defenses were down.

She saw the doctor was smiling and that made her strangely happy. But there was also something else behind that smile; it was almost a feral, predatory flash of teeth.

"So there is a human inside all that plastic and Kevlar then?"

"I guess so."

The doctor moved suddenly, lifting herself up out of the muddy river bank. "Prove it," she said playfully.

Jenny was twisting, moving closer, swinging one leg up and over so that now she straddled Amy. She loomed over Amy with a straight back, her hands supporting herself in the mud on either side of the warrior. Subconsciously, Amy's eyes flicked to her left quickly, checking to make sure her rifle was still there. Icy rainwater dripped from Jenny's head onto Amy's neck, rolling

down to creep under the torn fabric of her collar seals. She almost shivered. It was from the cold, she told herself, just the cold.

Amy was about to speak, about to say something, probably something stupid like asking the damn woman what the hell she thought she was doing, but her words were cut off when the woman abruptly lowered her head and kissed her.

There was a hardness to the kiss that surprised Amy, a ferocity almost. In the darkness there was a momentary clash of teeth, painful for just a second, then the clumsiness was forgotten as their lips brushed and parted, then the very tip of the woman's wet tongue slipped along the length of the narrow gap between Amy's partly open lips.

Agonizingly slowly, Jenny broke the kiss. Her lips glistened wetly. She was still smiling, Amy realized, although this time it was a self-satisfied smile. Not a starving animal anymore, but one who had cornered the prey and was enjoying the final moves of the game.

Amy felt the woman's weight shift. Her hands moved to Amy's waist, feeling the flatness of the soldier's abdomen through the fabric of the armor, then perhaps searching for something, a belt buckle, a zip, something, then giving up. Amy felt the delicate fingers moving up over her lower ribs, then nudging the large breastplate. It was hard to feel anything good through that thick plastic, except for the smallest of pressures as the hands moved and pushed the breastplate down a little.

Amy wasn't sure what to do with own hands. She was having trouble thinking, and right now she knew that it wasn't just the exhaustion that was to blame. After a few seconds, she placed her own muddy hands on Jenny's hips. She gripped tight, feeling the flesh through the sodden fabric of both her own gloves and the doctor's clothes, pulling down hard.

Amy could really feel Jenny's weight now, pressing down on her pelvis, pushing her further down into the glutinous mud. It wasn't much weight, the petite doctor couldn't weigh all that much, but it was uncomfortable, the clunky armor plates on her thighs and the bulky pouches that ran around her hips both digging into her skin painfully. Jenny must have felt so too, for she was adjusting her position. And that really wasn't helping, Amy thought, as she tried not to concentrate on the feeling of the smaller woman's crotch grinding against her

The doctor's hands were at her neck now, the nimble fingers dancing up first to touch the long scar that ran across the right underside of the chin, the fingertips gently tracing the puckered line of darker flesh. Then the hands moved to either side of the neck, cupping underneath each ear, pulling her head up to force Amy into an even deeper kiss. This time that delectable tongue pushed hard between Amy's lips and circled her own.

As this second kiss ended, Amy was ashamed to hear a wild, uncontrolled groan escape from her mouth. It was a groan that spoke volumes, which told of an ache that had never gone away, of an itch that longed to be scratched, and of a desire unfulfilled.

The fingers at her neck were now fidgeting with the armor seal at her collar. The ragged edge of the fabric meant the seal was damaged and some of the clasps were warped beyond repair.

"Damn it!" Jenny swore as her numbed fingers slipped off the metal clasps once again and her impatience finally got the better of her. "How do you get out of these things?"

It wasn't easy, Amy thought. Maybe this was why. The PLA didn't like soldiers fooling around while on duty, and certainly not while they were supposed to be keeping watch. Hell, she wouldn't have put it past the Central Military Command to have designed the damn armor with that in mind.

Jenny's fingers slithered off another clasp and she swore again. The delay gave Amy a little time to think. She really shouldn't be doing this. If nothing else, and there were plenty of other sensible reasons she could think of, she was supposed to be on sentry duty. If she caught one of the soldiers under her command doing this, she'd make his life a misery for months. And that was assuming the best. Right now, the Yaoguai could be approaching under cover of darkness. Sure, she couldn't hear anything but that was no consolation.

"Forget it," she said quietly.

The fingers kept moving and she realized Jenny wasn't listening. "No, I can get it. Just give me a second..."

"Boshi," Amy said determinedly, taking a firm hold of her wrists and pushing the hands away, "it's not a good idea."

Jenny straightened up as Amy let go. She frowned, her oh-so-inviting lips pursing in dissatisfaction. She didn't say anything, although for a moment Amy thought she was about to, but instead just nodded tersely and then clambered to her feet. She slipped in the mud and steadied herself by accidentally placing a hand on Amy's thigh without thinking, which was almost enough to make Amy reconsider.

Taking a few steps back, the doctor made another half-hearted effort to brush the dirt off her clothes, and again, it did little or no good. Then she moved towards the bank of the stream.

Amy called out to her. "Boshi, wait."

Jenny hesitated. You didn't have to be an expert in body language to tell she was deliberating over whether to turn around or to start climbing. After a second, she did turn. Amy had half-expected her to look angry, but instead all she saw on the woman's face was weariness and disappointment.

"Do you know how to use a gun?"

"Well, I've never really seen the need."

Amy unbuckled her holster and withdrew her QSZ-107 pistol. Holding it by the barrel, she held it out for the doctor to take.

Jenny shook her head. "I've seen how little effect your rifles have on the Yaoguai, Captain," she said, and the stress she placed on the last word saddened Amy a little, "so I don't think that will help."

She hadn't understood, Amy thought. "It's not for them. Trust me, boshi, you don't want to end up in one of their experimentation camps. Take it."

"No, thanks," Jenny said, shaking her head again. "Unlike you, Captain, I haven't given up just yet."

That comment hit home. Amy clenched her jaw and tried to keep her cool. "You know, they won't spare you just because you're a noncombatant. Nor because you're a doctor. And I've seen what they do to the few prisoners they do take."

There was silence for a moment, but then Jenny smiled. It was a warm, friendly smile. A smile that broke through all the resentment, the fatigue, the regret, and that was forgiving and loving all at the same time.

"I have faith in you, Amy," she said in almost a whisper. "You'll get us all through this."

Amy felt like crying. "You're asking too much of me. I'm not in the miracle business."

"Well, you should be," Jenny said before turning to begin the trek back to where the colonists were camped out. "They seem to follow you around."

* * * * *

The forward scouts reported sighting Endell early in the next morning, when the sky was still the dull reddish-grey of a Lost Heep dawn. They spotted it from a craggy ridge that overlooked the basin, a huge semi-circular plain border by a lake on one side and the steep curving hills on all others, and they waited there until Amy and Zan brought up the rest of the column.

Ever-cautious, Amy kept the vast bulk of the refugees on the near side of the hill, low down where the slope was much more gentle. She and Zan then climbed up the precipitous hill and joined the scouts. The small group of soldiers lay flat on their stomachs, staring down at the small port town, studying it and the surrounding area for any dangers.

Having joined the PLA at the age of fourteen, Amy had spent a good half of her life off-planet. If she wasn't travelling from one system to another, then she was posted one of the PLA training stations, or sent on border patrol in the Far Systems, or escorting a Navy convoy, and so on. It was rare that she would find herself dirtside, and when she did it was usually for military exercises that didn't last too long. Hell, she never spent too long in any one place, not if she

could help it. And the army made sure she drifted, even more so since the war started, and especially so since the Fall.

Never before had she imagined what it would be a colonist, to actually settle down and live somewhere permanently, making a home for herself. But there was something about this place that made her think of what that kind of life could be. She had the weirdest feeling, almost as if she could quite happily spend the rest of her life here.

At one time, before the Yaoguai came, it must have been a beautifully secluded valley. The plains around the town that bordered the hills were divided into large oblongs of farmland, each separated from the others by hedgerows, fences, low stone walls, and dirt roads. A few months ago they must have been meticulously farmed, kept so neat, but now they were wild and overgrown. The long grass in the fields waved in the rain, changing shade from light pink to ruby red as they shifted to and fro.

The stream they'd followed for most of the night was now an astonishingly wide river, criss-crossed by countless bridges inside the town, and that river opened up broadly into the lake. Spenlow Lake it was called, so Amy's visor was telling her, although calling it a lake was like calling the average planet a marble. It dwarfed the Great Lakes back on Earth. You could probably fit all of them into Spenlow with room to spare. It was a sea, maybe even an ocean, but on this planet it was only a lake. No wonder so much of Endell's trade was built around water.

And it was probably a source of recreation too. The beaches, each spreading out irregularly on either side of the town like two jagged dragon wings, were astonishingly beautiful. The sand was colored such a light shade of pink that it almost looked white, and the thick crimson rocks that jutted out into the lake here and there meant there must have been many secluded coves for lovers.

Ah, shit, she said to herself. What the hell was wrong with her? She was being over-sentimental. This town was nothing special, no idyllic paradise. Sure, it looked pretty but you could say the same of a thousand other places on every single world they'd lost.

Amy tried to block the uncomfortable thoughts from her mind by instead trying to remember the longest time she had been dirtside since enlisting, deliberately distracting herself by thinking about something so trivial. It would have to have been three years ago, right before the Fall.

She was a lowly Shao Wei then, only in charge of a small platoon. She smiled to herself as she considered that she had probably had more men under her command back then than she did right now. Promotion may come quick in wartime, as the saying goes, but you still end up doing the same old work.

She had fought on Chillip, one of the dozen or so habitable planets in the Home Systems. It had been one of the biggest losses the PLA had ever taken, a rout, really, a shambles. Chairman only knew why the damn Yaoguai wanted the world so badly. One of their burial worlds, or so the xenologist-types had said at the time. Amy hadn't cared, not when she'd seen everyone around maimed or killed in explosions, or eaten from the inside out by a shard or two. Why she alone

survived out of the entire company, she didn't know. For months afterwards, she'd wondered if the only reason she'd been promoted was because she was the only one left alive. Extreme bravery in the face of the enemy, that was what her citations had said. Cowering in a water-logged crater for six hours, curled up into a fetal ball, covered with mud, filth, shit, and what remained of two or three of your men, pissing yourself because you were so scared, having lost your particle beamer in the confusion, and just wailing, sobbing, pleading for it all to stop. The higher-ups had a very weird definition of bravery, Amy had discovered.

She tongued a command in her helmet controls and the optics clicked, enhancing the image as she scrutinized the town. She had a much harder time imagining Endell as being so idyllic. Even from up on the ridge it was possible to see the damage inflicted on the town but the extreme magnification of her visor hid nothing.

The town was totally abandoned. There were only a scant number of buildings remaining fully intact. Most had taken only a little damage but on the nearest edge of the town there were heaps of rubble where structures had collapsed, walls that were battle-scarred, blackened with smoke, and heavily pock-marked from bullets and explosions. It looked like the buildings on the quayside further north, mostly warehouses judging from their size and construction, had also taken a beating.

A lot of the bridges within the town were no longer standing, but a few of the smaller ones survived reasonably unbroken. One of the larger bridges had wooden planks laid over the gap in a makeshift repair. That wasn't a problem that concerned Amy, it wasn't like they'd be moving heavy equipment or armored vehicles over them. Still, her tactical mind was already figuring out a good defensive position. There were only three bridges that led from the main body of the city to the point that jutted out into the lake, one nothing more than stumps of rubble but two looking viable.

It was called Dickens Point, her visor was telling her as she brought up the overhead view, and was a narrow finger of land, still connected to the main body of the town by a stretch of ground only wide enough to house a few small buildings and three narrow roads. Those roads could be blockaded and mined, along with the bridges, and so any attackers would find themselves funneled in to pre-arranged firing lanes. Provided it was only a ground attack, of course, but Amy didn't really seem the Yaoguai wasting flyers on such a small band of refugees.

But there was a problem. The nearest landing pad she could see was back in the main part of town. That meant the point, while a good defensive position, was a death-trap. Only one way in and no way out. Amy searched the town but only saw two of the three landing pads that were supposed to be there. She couldn't see the third anywhere. She asked Zan, who told her that it was a subsidiary pad, built and maintained by a private company based on the point. How he knew this, she didn't know, care or ask. If he said it, she knew it was the truth. And it settled matters. Dickens Point was where they'd make their last stand, no matter how things turned out.

Zan opened up a private channel between him and her, and kept his voice low so the other scouts nearby wouldn't overhear. "So did the good doctor find you last night?"

"Yes, thank you, Zan."

"And?"

"Nothing happened, Zan," she told him, which wasn't strictly true. Still, half a lie was better than being totally untruthful, and usually more convincing too.

"She's not a nu tongzhi? I could have sworn..."

She sighed when she realized he wasn't going to let this go. "Zan, it really doesn't matter. I have more pressing concerns on my mind right now."

"Really?" There was a disapproving tone in his voice. "And how about tomorrow, Amy? Will it not matter then? Or the day after? Or next week? If you keep avoiding..."

She interrupted him. "We may not have a tomorrow, Zan, that's what worries me. When we're safe and sound back amongst our Navy friends, en route to whatever hellhole is next in the grand scheme of things, I promise you that I'll lock myself and the doctor, or any other damn woman you want to name, in my cabin for a whole week, okay?"

He scoffed at that. "Of course you won't. There'll be some other crisis that demands your attention and..."

"That's enough, Zan," she said quietly but forcibly, "I don't have time for this." He fell silent, so she opened her comms to a broad channel, ensuring that all the soldiers on the ridge could hear her. "We'll head down there, I think. Only a small scouting party, just in case."

Zan spoke up again. She noticed he was talking across open comms too. "We should take Dartle. He grew up in Endell before marrying and moving to Murdstone."

So that explained how Zan knew of the third landing pad, Amy thought. He'd been talking to the colonists. It made sense. She should have thought of it herself. They were lucky that one of the peasants was a local boy.

"Not 'we'," she said. "We can't afford to lose both officers, Zan."

"It looks quiet enough to me."

"You willing to take that chance?"

"Yes," he said. "I just don't think you should."

"Well, the Central Military Command disagrees with you and they have the final word, I'm afraid. I'll take Bai, Chuang and Hartigan. Dartle too, if he's willing."

"He will be," Zan said, and there was a tone in his voice that implied the unfortunate colonist would go with them whether he was willing or not.

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Glass crunched underfoot as Amy carefully made her way along the quay that formed one side of Dickens Point. Most of the windows in the surrounding buildings were broken. Regular glass had a way of shattering when the Yaoguai got within a certain distance. Amy had even seen the high-tensile plastics of visors and vehicle screens crack, although that was much rarer.

There were no bodies to be seen; there never were. The shards the Yaoguai launched tended to gorge themselves on organic matter, dissolving everything over a very short space of time. And the Yaoguai never left their dead behind. When one was killed, the others would shuffle around it, protecting the corpse from any further abuse, and slowly they would absorb the remains. After just a few minutes, no sign of the fallen alien would remain.

So the port seemed deserted. It was eerie. There was some noise, if you took care to listen for it. The occasional birdcall, the soft scuttling of rats and other vermin running around the debris, the creaking of old wooden timbers, and the occasional scraping of cracked concrete walls and floors resettling. But there was no movement, none that human eyes could see. Even the lake water, safely secluded behind this artificial harbor, seemed still.

If the town had looked damaged from far up on the ridge, it was nothing compared to how it appeared close up. Luckily, it looked like Dickens Point had suffered a lot less destruction than the rest of the town. Another reason why holing up here was a good choice, Amy thought. Still, it hadn't escaped unscathed. The scouting party had already passed many large piles of strewn rubble and a few buildings that had been reduced to nothing more than burnt out shells.

They passed some kind of temple, which Amy found odd, for she, like most of the inhabitants of the Home Systems, had been raised strictly atheist. One of the lessons her father had drilled into her from an early age was that everybody had to find their own God, whatever that might be. For some it was money, for others it was work, and for many it was enlightened self-interest. She supposed for her it was the army.

Back on Earth, religion was pretty much dead and buried. There were still a few kooks in every community, of course, but most of the religious folks had spread out to the Far Systems in the hope of a little more freedom than the Earth government gave them. Well, to Amy's mind freedom was over-rated. Besides, those kind of people were usually just praying by numbers. She found the whole thing rather ridiculous.

The army quietly discouraged their recruits from falling in with any religions. Unofficially, army policy followed the three 'we don'ts': we don't approve of your religion; we don't disapprove of your religion; and most importantly, you don't promote your beliefs. That usually deterred the religious folks from signing on the dotted line. Not always though. They'd had a devout Buddhist in the company last year, Amy recalled. His god hadn't helped him any. There wasn't much any god could do against a shard eating out your brain, Amy supposed.

Was this a Buddhist church, she wondered? She didn't recognize any of the symbols or icons on the outside and she wasn't about to go inside. She made a mental note to ask Dartle if he was religious. He didn't appear to be but if she was honest with herself she wasn't really sure how she could tell. She couldn't remember seeing a church back in Murdstone.

The five soldiers climbed over more rubble, this pile almost blocking the entire width of a road. The entire second floor of a workhouse had collapsed into the street.

To her left, out of the corner of her eye, Amy spied Lie Bing Bai clambering into the ruined building. The young woman crouched by a piece of orange rusty pipe that jutted up from the wreckage. Amy wondered briefly what she was doing, then saw that it wasn't a pipe but a spigot. She heard the soft clicks as Bai reattached her rifle to the rear of her armor, then watched as the woman twist the tap. A soft trickle of water began to run.

"They have water!" she exclaimed in surprise.

"There's probably a reservoir. Probably still plenty left in it. Besides, they most likely had a few desalination plants working before they left." Amy smiled to herself mischievously, then added, "I'd check it before drinking though."

Bai looked up in horror. Just as Amy had expected, one armored gauntlet was cupped, dripping wet and on its way down from the young woman's mouth.

Amy chuckled. "I'm sure it will be fine, Bai."

* * * * *

The scouting party moved on. Soon after they found a huge warehouse building near the very end of the Point.

Amy's visor was indicating this was the target building, the one Zan had pointed out to her as housing the landing pad. She signaled out to her men to follow her, then remembered that Dartle was with them and he lacked any com-links, so she called out to him too. The street led to a pair of metal doors built into the southern facing, more than large enough to guide a vehicle through.

The thick doors were dented in a few places, with a large gouge down one side showing silver metal beneath the dull black paint. There was a sign over the doors but too much of it was missing for it to be read. Amy checked the doors without thinking, tugging on the bulky handles, but the doors refused to budge. A judicious application of a thermite patch quickly solved that issue.

The rusting doors squealed and protested as Amy and the others pushed them aside on their railings. If the warehouse appeared huge from the streets outside, then somehow it looked even larger inside. That was impossible, Amy thought, so it must have been a trick of perception. But as she walked forward she realised the cement floor had a slight downwards incline. Perhaps that accounted for some of the confusion.

The squad moved forward, each of them tracking in puddles of dirty water. It was good to finally get out of the rain, Amy thought, shaking her head and then running a gloved hand through her long blonde hair.

The warehouse, or whatever kind of building it was, was divided in two. Her small scouting party was standing in a large open area with no windows, more than a hundred yards long and nearly twice as wide. The other end of the building was narrower, probably only around sixty or seventy yards deep, but it was hard to be sure as it was blocked off by a wall, dotted with strong metal security doors. It looked like there were at least three storeys, which only emphasised the towering height of this almost cathedral-like building. If there was a basement too then this place would almost be big enough to house the entire mob of refugees, Amy thought.

Amy motioned for her soldiers to spread out and start checking the rooms. As she did so, her visor darkened all of a sudden and she looked up to see the glare of the wall-mounted lights. She looked over her shoulder and saw the young Bai standing with her hand on a lightswitch.

The sheepish young woman shrugged. "I thought it was worth a shot."

Amy grinned at her. Bai was only sixteen, still relatively new to the army. And she was proving to be a decent soldier, although terribly naïve still. Naturally inquisitive too, which usually landed her in trouble. Perhaps she'd grow out of that, perhaps she wouldn't. Most likely she'd never get the chance.

"Power and drinking water," Amy heard a pleased Dartle say. "The power probably comes from the lake-based generators. So long as there's water in the lake, the power will keep flowing. It's all automated."

Well, you could have mentioned that a little earlier, Amy thought, but she didn't say anything.

"Good thing too," Dartle added.

"What makes you say that?" Amy didn't really care about the power being on. She and her company were used to roughing it. They had a good shelter here and soon, if she had time enough to prepare, good defences too. That made their situation better than it had been in days. But the civilians would be grateful for the power, she supposed, to be dry and warm, and to have some semblance of normality. Although a big place like this would be almost impossible to heat properly.

Dartle pointed upwards at the ceiling. "No chance of getting those open if we didn't have power."

Amy glanced up and saw what he meant. Overhead, this part of the building had an arching retractable roof. She should have realized earlier. How in krud would shuttles be able to land inside the building if the roof was a permanent fixture? The cement beneath her boots was scarred and pitted in places, blackened too, with multiple large dark rings littering the floor, and the gloomy burnt pattern continued up the walls. That explained the lack of windows and the

hefty reinforcing along all of the interior walls, and those in turn probably explained how this building had survived the Yaoguai occupation of the town without taking too much damage.

She ordered the squad to split into two teams of two; the first, Bai and Hartigan, would make a thorough and careful search of the interior of the building; the second, Chuang and Xi, would sweep the perimeter outside.

She stayed with the civilian and he showed her where the primary set of controls for the retractable roof were built into the wall, protected by a heavy metal shield that the user slid aside. Dartle even went so far as to open the roof a foot or so, checking to make sure everything functioned as it should. Amy made a mental note to ask him to train several of her soldiers on how the controls worked, although they looked pretty simple.

Using her comlink, Amy spoke to Zan and told him to bring the colonists down, although she advised him to be careful. His reply was terse and direct, which unsettled her a little. He didn't usually hold grudges. This whole stupid situation must be bothering him more than she thought. She promised herself to make more of an effort later. She didn't know what she could do but she was sure she'd figure something out. It didn't do to have your second-in-command upset with you. At times it was unavoidable but never over something as trivial as this. Besides all that, she considered herself and Zan to be friends as well as comrades. Maybe that was a little foolish. If nothing else, she honestly thought he had her best intentions at heart.

Bai reported in shortly after that, telling her the building was clear and then adding, in an excited voice that there were dormitories on the second level, with enough bunk beds to house around twenty or thirty people. That would please the civilians, she thought. Maybe they could even get some heat from somewhere. After all, if the power was working then there must be heating, although Amy thought it would be a pain in the ass to heat a building as large as this. The heat signature would be off the charts of course but the way she figured it the Yaoguai would learn they were here sooner or later anyway. Turning the heat on just meant it would most likely be sooner.

And she wanted this over with. She was so damn exhausted, so tired of running, of seeing her company whittled down little by little. One way or another, Amy wanted this to end.

Let the Yaoguai come.

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By the time Zan and the last few stragglers of the refugee column had reached Dickens Point, it was getting dark. By the time everyone was settled in, several hours later, night had fallen completely. Far out to the west, the night sky was glowing a dull blue. The Yaoguai must have started burning the bigger cities, cleansing them with that unnatural crystalline fire of theirs, wiping all trace of humanity away.

It meant this world was almost lost. The aliens only started focusing on the physical structures mankind had constructed once they had driven the human military off and they were absolutely secure in their possession of a planet. That was a worry.

Amy had only seen the blue glow before and she'd never seen the flames close up. Not many people had, she supposed, not and lived. She'd heard stories about them, of course, but who knew which were true, if any. The most persistent rumors said the flames cracked like glass when they burned, as if someone had thrown a light bulb into a fire, only constant, and they devoured everything in their path.

She stood in the open doorway, entranced by the distant azure sky. It was only when she shivered that she realized how cold it was getting. They had been keeping the large doors open to make all the coming and going easier, and even though they'd managed to turn on the building's heating system out here in what the soldiers had taken to calling the hangar it was bitterly cold.

Bai and Hartigan had found an upload station within the upper floor of the building and she'd had them working there for an hour or more, sending out an immediate evacuation-required message over and over. So far they hadn't managed to raise any orbiting vessel, Navy or otherwise.

She had ordered them to only talk to her or Zan about any response they got, and more importantly she had been very clear that they should only tell the officers if they weren't getting any. She didn't need the rest of the company getting demoralized. The brief concern that the fleet had already left orbit, maybe even the system, flickered across Amy's thoughts. Maybe the situation was even worse; maybe the Navy had been decimated. Everything else was going so right, she had a pessimistic feeling that such a disaster was strongly likely. Maybe it was the blue glow in the distant sky that made the fear so much more solid.

There was no point worrying about it, she decided. Either the Navy would get their rears into gear, answer the damn distress signal and pull them all out of danger, or the Yaogaui would come and she and everyone else would fight until they could fight no more. Fifty-fifty. She'd faced worse odds before and come through.

And she felt they were as prepared as they could be for either scenario. She'd had teams out laying the few remaining Hundun mines out in the nearby streets, hiding them in rubble and under debris. Zan had managed to scrape together some Lei Shen anti-personnel mines and those had been scattered among the Hunduns at random. Behind those pathetically scant minefields, the soldiers had erected barricades, blocking off all the access streets on the Point with whatever they could find: slabs of concrete rubble; broken furniture; burned-out vehicles; street signs; anything.

Amy had been pleased to see that many of the civilians had helped with the construction of the obstacles, eager to finally be doing something useful.

On the bridges, they made improvised minefields with what little explosives they had left. It hadn't been enough, so they'd set up a series of tripwires connected to batches of grenades. Each

one wouldn't make the average Stalker even pause but together they might discourage one. And that was only a bonus; ideally they were just to act as an early warning.

Now that all the defenses, such as they were, were in place, Amy had ordered some of her men to go on sentry duty and others to go out on patrol. Patrolling served three purposes: one, it kept the men active and on edge, it stopped them getting complacent; two, the patrols would probably spot any encroaching enemy; and three, they had been given permission to salvage whatever they could. That last reason had proved surprisingly practical, as already some of the early patrols had brought back food. None of it had been fresh; tinned goods and dehydrated ration packs seemed to be the only edible finds. But there was plenty of it and anything was better than starving or hunting rats. Even the colonists had seemed happy with what they were given.

Amy had been forced to make the distinction between salvaging supplies and looting. There was a big difference between finding stuff for everyone that was desperately needed and pillaging valuables from wrecked homes. She suspected her warning wouldn't be listened to, but as long as the patrols were circumspect, she'd turn a blind eye.

The doctor had requested permission to go out with one of the patrols in order to find any medical supplies they needed. Amy had refused at first but when the doctor had protested and made a good argument for her going, namely that she was the best person to judge what they needed and to identify the correct medications, Amy had been forced to concede. She found it hard to say no to that woman. Not impossible, but damnably hard.

Amy found herself wondering if the doctor had returned yet. She thought about checking on her but that meant asking Zan which two soldiers he'd sent out with her, so she decided not to. She hadn't raised the subject of the doctor with Zan again, not yet. She wasn't quite sure what to say.

She saw a dim light out of the corner of her eye. It shone through a thin blanket hung over a broken window in a nearby building. Most of the hundred or more remaining colonists were crammed into this building, spread out in the dormitories, the workers' canteen and the factory floor, although Amy had been sure to make it clear that the uppermost level remain off limits to all civilians. It did the soldiers' morale good to be able to get away from the demanding colonists, even for a short while. There was a large recreation area up there, and she'd designated that as the company's sleeping quarters. She'd even requisitioned an office for herself, to serve as her own overnight accommodation. It was a luxury, she confessed, but only a minor one. It wasn't like there was a comfortable four-poster bed in the office or anything. She'd probably end up sleeping on the hard, cold floor, with only her paltry army-issue blanket for warmth.

She figured she'd let everyone get some real sleep tonight. A full eight hours for everyone, not just the colonists but also the soldiers. No inducers. She'd ask Zan to pick half of the soldiers and those lucky ones would take the first shift. The others, herself included, would sleep the next morning.

Of course, there wasn't enough room for everyone, even in a building of this size, so her men had broken open some of the surrounding buildings and moved small groups of civilians into those. She wasn't entirely happy with that solution. She couldn't spare any men to stand guard over

those colonists, and that meant they would be slow to respond to any alerts, good or bad. Still, it couldn't be helped. You could only push civilians so far. Soldiers could be shoved a little further, of course, but even so you still had to be careful even then. A good night's rest for everyone would make a world of difference. She'd see some more optimistic outlooks tomorrow, she was sure of that. If only the damn Navy would respond.

She saw shadows move around the light in the building opposite, the shapes playing across the blanket that served as a crude barrier against the elements. It took her a little while to make the shadows out as two people, one tall, one short, and then she realized the couple were holding each other, making the most of their newfound comfort and solitude.

She stared through the pouring rain at the shadow play, watching two lovers embrace. She felt a little dirty watching them but all the same found she couldn't look away. It reminded her of something she may have had once but had long since lost. She felt sadness clenching around her heart.

So caught up in the scene was she that she didn't hear Zan approach from out of the downpour.

"You feeling alright, eight-one?"

"Hmm?" the distracted Amy said. "Yes. Yes, I'm fine, Zan."

He stepped through the doorway into the light and shook himself like a wet dog, dislodging a spray of dirty rainwater. Amy turned away and wiped icy cold droplets off her face. She frowned in annoyance.

"The last of the mines have been placed," he said. "You'll be able to see them on your visor by now."

She nodded. "Okay. Warn the civilians not to go past the perimeter, will you?"

"You kidding? I doubt any of them want to venture out in this. Not now they're warm and dry. Your doctor is the only one crazy enough to dare."

Her doctor? Since when had Jenny become *her* doctor, Amy wondered? She opened her mouth to say something then thought better of it. The last time they'd talked about the doctor the conversation had taken a turn for the worse. Maybe it was safer if she didn't take the bait this time.

Zan studied her for a second, deep in thought. Perhaps he was wondering why she hadn't responded. She saw that he'd got a shotgun from somewhere, probably 'liberated' from an abandoned home in the main part of Endell. His rifle was slung in its magnetic clips on the back of his armor. She didn't comment on the new weapon. She may not have approved of how he acquired it but an extra weapon could always come in useful, and it saved rifle ammo too.

"Your Niao is burned out, I'm afraid," he said finally. "You pushed it too far."

"I think I've pushed us all too far, Zan." Amy sighed and looked at her friend. "Why don't you go and get some sleep?"

He shook his head. "You need it more than me."

There was some truth in that. She felt exhausted. On other hand, it didn't feel right getting some sleep before all the lower ranks had. It smacked of privilege. You had to watch those things. She remembered how, even as a lieutenant, she had resented the ranking officers getting the best of things while she was working her guts out. It might only be a little thing, but sometimes that was all that was needed to push someone over the edge. The last thing she needed right now was a soldier flipping out.

She realized Zan was saying something and had to ask him to repeat it.

"You see what I mean? You didn't hear a word I just said, did you?" When she shook her head, he continued. "It won't hurt you to get a good night's sleep. I'll be sure to wake you if anything happens."

"You sure you don't mind?"

"Of course not," he said, grinning. "But I have a surprise for you first."

"What?" Amy blinked in astonishment at him. "What are you talking about? You know I don't like surprises, Zan."

He continued to smile with an infuriating smugness. "You'll like this one. Come on."

Zan led her through the security doors away from the landing pad and then up three flights of stairs to the uppermost level of the building. She wanted to ask him what the hell was going on, even to order him to stop and tell her what he was up to, but she was just too tired to argue. Instead she followed obediently.

They walked down the corridor, past the empty recreation hall, then the few office spaces. The lights on the wall up here were faulty, flickering in an annoying erratic pattern. At the end of the corridor, Zan motioned to another security door and used his PLA access code to override the lock. There was a soft beeping, the light on the lock turned from red to green, and the door popped open. Zan grinned again and gestured for her to go first.

Amy couldn't help gasping as she stepped through the door. She hadn't bothered with any locked doors earlier, when she made a cursory inspection of the building. Now she wished she had.

It was a simple locker room, that was all, clean and in good order, but beyond that was a large tiled shower room. A shower. An actual, real, physical, hard-to-the touch shower. It might only have been an old chemical shower, probably big enough for a dozen people at a time, but to her it was amazing. After all, she hadn't seen a shower in over two weeks. Chairman be revered, it was a working shower, a krudding working shower, a... wait...

"It does work, right?" she asked Zan.

His grin was even wider and she realized suddenly that this was his way of apologizing. "Yeah, it works. And there's plenty of hot water now the heating system's been running for a while. The water pressure's still good, I've already checked."

He reached over to open one of the lockers and took out a thick bath towel. It was thick, plush, and seemed clean enough, although it smelt a little dry and musty. That didn't matter. She would dry herself with a fifty-year old napkin so long as she got to shower first.

"No one has used it yet," Zan said, "I've made sure of that. So knock yourself out."

Amy was already eagerly unfastening the clasps at her collar. "Thank you, Zan."

"Think nothing of it," Zan said, heading for the door.

"Be sure to let everyone know they can have hot shower, so long as it's on their own time." He nodded and began pulling the door shut, pausing only when she spoke again. "But Zan... not for half-an-hour or so, okay?"

* * * * *

With a loud yawn, Amy leaned back in the office chair. She pinched the bridge of her nose wearily, then shook her head fiercely as if that alone would shake the drowsiness away.

There was something she was missing. She couldn't quite put her finger on what it was, but there was a gap somewhere in their improvised defenses and for the life of her, she couldn't see it.

She really needed to get some sleep. After days of being kept ticking over by stim-jolts, alcohol and sheer adrenalin, her body was finally rebelling and demanding rest. After fighting, marching, arguing, and the need just to keep going and going and going, she now had the chance to stop. To stop and breathe, to revel in the peace, the calm, and the quiet. And it was *so* strangely quiet in this little haven of theirs. Even with the gentle sound of the occasional conversation out in the corridor and the constant pattering of the rain on the wall behind her, Amy was having a little trouble adapting to the silence.

It certainly wasn't helping her keep awake. She needed something that would. Sadly, she had gone through all her remaining alcohol before they had even reached Endell. There was some coffee being brewed by the colonists down on the ground level, that would probably help, but she really couldn't be bothered to traipse all the way down there, especially not when she was wearing next to nothing.

So instead she shook her head again, trying to focus on the readouts as best she could. The glass screen, smudged by greasy fingerprints and smeared with dust and dirt, blurred a little. She had to rub her eyes just to try to make sense of what she was seeing.

Lie Bing Bai might have been a little foolish and inexperienced but the girl knew her way around electronics, Amy had to give her that. On Zan's orders, he once again proving his ability to predict what she wanted, Bai had worked in the office while Amy was in the shower. She'd somehow managed to reactivate the computer systems built into the wide desk and with a plethora of wires had patch Amy's adopted helmet into the desk's systems.

That meant everything that was normally represented solely on Amy's visor was now displayed on the large glass screen. She was trying her best to study the layout of their impromptu defenses, seeking out any obvious weaknesses. Right now she couldn't see any but she wasn't sure if that was because there honestly weren't any or because she was too worn out to spot them. The minefields, showing up as odd patterns of diamond icons, looked inadequate but she supposed that couldn't be helped.

The plastic chair creaked as she leaned forward to look closer. She was seriously considering sleeping in the chair. It wasn't really all that comfortable but she was sure it would be a hell of a lot better than the hard, cold floor.

She thought about drying her hair some more. It was still damp. Earlier, she had dried it as best as she could but had hurried, feeling guilty about how long she had already spent in the steaming hot shower, and had probably tied it back sooner than she should have. The wet towel was over by the door, thrown haphazardly on top of her discarded armor.

The armor was currently running a self diagnostic. Already several problems were showing up. Amy had expected the incorrect helmet and the torn collar seals to raise flags but so far the armor had also told her of one other glitch. The readout in the corner of the desk screen was indicating that the left shoulder plate had a hairline fracture in it. She'd be damned if she could even see the break but if the system said it was there, well, it had to be there. But she'd worry about it later. The program wouldn't be complete for another hour or so, not unless she cancelled it for any reason, and so there might be worse to come. And besides, she was more concerned with letting the armor dry out a little.

Right now she was clad only in the olive green a-top and panties that she usually wore under the armor. The garments were filthy, sweat-stained and rank, and Amy had hated the idea of putting them back on again after finally getting herself clean but she there was no other choice. It was that or walk around butt naked. She smiled wryly at the thought. None of her soldiers would bat an eyelid at that, she supposed, but it would probably freak a lot of the colonists out. And anyway, the cotton underwear was so damn thin she might as well be naked.

Even with the heating system running, it was still bitterly cold. She shivered and the shiver turned into another yawn. She really needed to get some sleep. Failing that, another hot shower would be good. She contemplated sneaking down the corridor and taking another shower but then thought better off it. After all, it would be greedy of her to take two showers when some of the colonists still hadn't taken one yet. And although she was accustomed to showering with others, she really wanted to have the luxury of bathing on her own.

No, maybe she should just get some sleep. She rubbed the back of her neck, trying to ease out the tension. Her left shoulder was bothering her for some reason.

Someone knocked on the door. Amy tried to ignore it but the knocking continued, soft and persistent. She opened her mouth to yell something, to shout at whoever it was to get lost, but then changed her mind. It could be something important, she supposed. Ah well, so much for sleep.

Amy lowered the screen back into the desk, hearing it click as it deactivated, and then got up, stretching out the kinks as she moved. It always felt a little weird when she first took off her armor after a long time wearing it. Like being naked yet clothed at the same time. She'd never quite gotten used to it. In theory, a PLA trooper could stay encased in the armor for half a year or more but after about three or four months the filters in the oxygen recycling system tended to give out. All the same, the PLA liked to boast their soldiers could wear the suits indefinitely.

Not for her. The longest she'd ever been was a month-and-a-half and that had been more than long enough, thank you very much. The one aspect the creators had deliberately left out of the armor design was comfort. The damn things weighed a ton and were too bulky really. The older armor, made solely of impact resistant and energy dissipating fabric, had been comfortable and almost a joy to wear. But those had been phased out when the Central Military Command had finally accepted that the thin material, designed to protect primarily against particle beam weapons, was next-to-useless against shards.

She threw the door open angrily. "What the hell..."

Her words caught in her throat as she realized it was Jenny standing before her. Amy glanced down the length of the corridor in both directions. No one else was around.

"Sorry," she finally said lamely, "I thought you were somebody else."

Jenny raised an eyebrow in a sardonic expression. "I'd hate to be them, whoever they were."

Amy looked down at the petite woman and suddenly realized she wasn't wearing her lab coat. It was a little unsettling, Amy thought, for she had grown accustomed to seeing the doctor in the dirty and stained smock over the last few weeks. She wasn't even wearing that awful red sweater and her ragged slacks.

Instead, she was barefoot and wearing a dress. Amy blinked in astonishment. A krudding dress! It was a sheer dark green number, made of some kind of metallic fabric that shimmered in the flickering light of the corridor. It was a little too large for her, thin straps and deep breaths seemed to be the only things holding it up, but it looked really good on her.

It was only the distracting curves under that dress that made Amy miss the obvious. In one hand Jenny held a dark green bottle and in the other she clutched two mismatched glasses. Normally the prospect of a good drink would be the first thing to grab Amy's attention.

"Is that a wine bottle?"

Jenny tilted her head noncommittally. "Well, it's a bottle. A full one too. Although whether or not you consider what they grow in the vineyards down south as wine depends on how discerning your palate is."

One thing Amy knew she wasn't was discerning, in any particular sense of word. She licked her lips, eyeing the bottle.

"What it lacks in taste it makes up for in potency," Jenny went on. "Believe me, it's got quite a kick to it."

"Well, a kick is what I need."

"Really?" Jenny stepped past her, moving into the room.

As the small doctor moved past her, Amy caught the very slightest hint of peaches in the air. No, she thought, not peaches, but definitely some kind of fruit, the kind that smelt too sweet to be anything but artificial. She sniffed loudly, not caring what the woman thought of her, and she detected the harsh chemical smell of the soap from the showers beneath the citrus scent, along with the barest trace of perspiration.

So she showered, wore a slinky dress, and managed to find a bottle of wine from somewhere. Well, she was making an effort, that's for damn sure. If Amy wasn't so tired, maybe she would appreciate it a little more.

"I'm having trouble staying awake," Amy admitted.

"My, how we differ. I am having trouble falling asleep. Still, perhaps the 'wine' will help us both. It's already helped me."

Amy frowned in puzzlement. "How so?"

"It got me in the door," Jenny said with a sly smile. She leaned against the edge of the broad desk, putting the bottle and glasses down beside her. "Is that scowl a permanent fixture?"

Amy realized she was still holding the door open, so she pushed it shut with a soft click and turned to face the doctor. "Sorry, my patience gets a little frayed when I'm exhausted." Why was she apologizing so much, she wondered?

"Ah, trying to scare fatigue away. That's a recognized medical technique, I understand."

"What are you doing here, doctor?"

"How many times do I have to tell you, Captain? You can call me Jenny. Unless army regulations forbid it, of course, in which case I understand."

"You're not answering my question."

"Okay." She seemed uncertain of what to say, as if she had planned this little encounter out step-by-step, right up to this point, and from now on she was being forced to wing it. "I'm not good at being direct though."

"Could have fooled me."

The smile returned, almost shyly, and then she spoke, a little hesitantly at first. "Amy, I'm cold, I'm tired, I'm hungry and most of all I'm lonely. Tonight I was talking to some of my patients and I realized something. I could eat some reheated army rations and I wouldn't be hungry. I could wrap up warm somewhere and sleep through the night, and then I wouldn't be cold or tired. But when I woke up in the morning, I'd still be lonely."

"I doubt loneliness is much of a problem for you, boshi."

"You'd be surprised," Jenny said, and just for a moment Amy saw past the defenses, the humor that acted as thin bandages over deep wounds, and saw the air of vulnerability about her. "I'm not asking much, Amy, honestly. This doesn't have to go anywhere you don't want it to go."

Amy pursed her lips in disbelief. "And what about last night?"

"I told you, I'm not good at being direct."

"If you're staying, at least pour me a drink."

The smile widened. "Not the most gracious of invites, but I'll take it." Jenny hopped off the desk and unscrewed the bottle. She poured a good amount of wine into one of the cheap plastic glasses and handed it to Amy, before pouring herself some.

The second glass had less than half the wine of the first, Amy noted silently. She studied the dark purple-ish liquid for a second or two, then took a cautious sip. It had a kick alright. Krud, it was making her eyes water. What proof was this? She'd had stronger but only once before on a Navy ship, and that had mostly been shuttle fuel.

"So where the hell did you get the wine? Or that dress for that matter?"

"Private Chuang found them for me. I didn't ask where."

"Remind me to have a word with Chuang tomorrow. Looting is not acceptable."

"Well, I wouldn't call it looting exactly. In his defense I told him the wine was an essential medical supply."

"And the dress?"

Jenny took a long drink, almost draining the glass. "That was my idea. I thought you'd appreciate it."

Amy walked around the desk and sank into the chair. Jenny followed her, turning around, and saw there was nowhere else to sit, so now sat on the corner of the desk. She crossed her legs, causing the dress to rid up a little and show a good amount of fleshy thigh. If that wasn't deliberate it was damn good timing.

"And that's what you look like out of that armor, huh?" Jenny said,

Amy felt self-conscious suddenly, and tugged at the bottom of her cotton wifebeater, trying to cover up a little.

"Relax, Amy. I'm just teasing. And you shouldn't be so self-conscious anyway. You look great."

"You must be blind."

"If I drink a few more glasses of this, I very well might be." She smacked her lips. Amy knew what she meant. Her lips had begun tingling as soon as she drank some of the potent alcohol, now she was worried she couldn't feel them at all.

"How did you get that scar?"

Amy self-consciously touched her neck. "Barfight."

"That's it?"

"What?"

"I expected something more."

"Like some stupid heroics?"

"No, I meant more details."

Amy sighed and reached for the bottle. "There's nothing more to say," she said, refilling her glass. "It was a stupid fight, fuelled by drink, and I got the worst of it. Does that answer your question, boshi?"

"Not really, but with you I'm learning to be happy with what I get. Why do you keep calling me that?"

"Boshi?"

"Yes. What is that? Army slang?"

"You ask an awful lot of questions."

"It's called a conversation, Amy, you should try it."

"It just a term we use for medics. Does it bother you?"

"Hmm." She thought about it for a moment. "I guess not."

Amy took another drink. Jenny was right, she thought, she should try to participate in the conversation. If she didn't, she might as well ask Jenny to leave, and she didn't want that.

It was just difficult. She didn't really ever have conversations, not that she could think of. Giving and receiving orders was probably her limit, even when flirting with women. Occasionally talking to Zan and the others couldn't count, surely? Damn it, serving in the army was easy compared to this. Company-level tactics, basic enemy biology, weapon technical specs... all of that came easy to her. Talking to women, or at least to this particular woman, was a skill that eluded her.

"So how long have you been on Lost Heep?" She groaned inwardly. Wow, that sounded lame even as she said it.

Jenny didn't seem to notice. "Four years. Before that, I did my residency in a hospital on Titan. Not a good time really. I got out as soon as I could."

"Why come here?"

"Not much choice really," Jenny said with a shrug. "The colonies offered doctors a good deal if you agreed to move out. Even so, not many people were willing to go. Even fewer now, I suppose. But back then, you had no chance of running your own practice back in the Home Systems, not unless you were rich or connected."

"And you're neither?"

She laughed. "Sorry, no. I'm going down in your estimations, aren't I?"

"I wouldn't say that," Amy said quietly, eyeing her over the half-empty glass.

"Well, I wanted my own practice. It's what I always wanted. And like I said, I needed to get off Titan."

"It couldn't have been easy." That was true. It didn't matter where you went, the settlers on the colony planets were all were fiercely independent. They tended not to take to newcomers. Damn peasants. What was the old saying? If you didn't have three generations buried dirtside, you didn't count.

"Not at first perhaps. But an off-world doctor is better than nothing. What about you? Where did you call home?"

Amy thought about the question for a while. It was sad how so often now that question was posed in the past tense. Well, for most people of the Republic anyway, she supposed.

"The army's my home, I guess," she finally said, speaking honestly. "I joined up when I was just a kid; the army's all I've ever known. All I can remember, anyway. I suppose I could say Beijing. I spent six years there after enlisting and another two after I got married. My parents were American though."

"You're married?" Was there was a tinge of resentment in the doctor's voice, Amy wondered, or was she just imagining it? No, it was there all right.

"Was," Amy said simply.

"Oh. Divorce or..." Her voice trailed off. Jenny was cradling the glass with both hands, not looking at her. She seemed a little ashamed at how quickly her defenses had shot up.

"My wife died."

"I'm..."

"Don't."

"What?"

"Don't say you're sorry. Everyone's always sorry."

"I..." She seemed uncertain of what to say. Amy took pity on her.

"It was a long time ago."

"How long?"

"Two years, eleven months and three days." Amy didn't need to think before answering.

Jenny nodded, comprehending. "The Fall."

"Yes."

"You know," Jenny said, very quietly, "you're not as tough as you look."

"Very few people are."

"I suppose the armor helps in that regard."

Amy smiled weakly. "It does."

"Do you miss her?"

"Jane?" Amy asked, although the answer was obvious really. She poured herself another drink. This stuff wasn't so bad once you got used to it. This was her third full glass. Jenny was still on her first. "Every damn day."

Jenny frowned. "Do you want me to go?"

"No."

They drank in silence for a while, the soldier taking big gulping swallows of the strong wine, the doctor demurely sipping.

"You want to hear something funny?" Jenny finally said. "About how lucky I am?"

"Sure."

"When did you get the orders to move us?"

Amy thought about it. "A while back. Four weeks or so."

"After the planetary network went down?"

"Yes."

"You see? Lucky. If you had been able to access the network you would have read up on the town, right? Scouted out the area, researched all the troublemakers, that kind of thing?"

"That's the standard procedure, yes."

Jenny smiled nervously. "Yeah, well you would have seen there's an arrest warrant out for me."

Amy choked on her wine, spilling some down the front of her a-top. She cursed as she tried to brush away the liquid, only succeeding in spreading the dark stain further. She honestly couldn't imagine what this backwater doctor could have done to deserve that kind of trouble.

"What the hell for?" she spluttered.

"Two months ago I was assigned to Horizons."

"Horizons?"

"A military hospital ship. The notification made it quite clear I had no choice. I let them know otherwise, in pretty plain language. The arrest warrant was posted within twenty-four hours of me returning the notification. When you guys first showed up I thought you'd come for me."

"The army does like overkill," Amy admitted.

"Yeah, well, after a bit of thinking I realized how ridiculous that was. Not to mention egotistical. So I kept quiet."

Amy laughed.

"What's so funny?"

"You ended up caring for a bunch of soldiers anyway."

"I suppose I did."

"So what were you supposed to be aboard Horizons?"

"Chief Medical Officer. They were going to make me a Major, can you believe it? I would have outranked you."

For the second time in as many minutes, the astonished Amy had trouble swallowing her drink. This time, however, she managed not to spill any of it. She thought carefully about how to phrase her next question. It didn't matter. Jenny might not be good at being direct but it was the only way Amy knew. "Isn't that a little...?" she blurted out.

"You think that a lowly farmland doctor can't hold such a high position?" There was a smirk on Jenny's face, showing she wasn't really insulted by was instead amused by the soldier's preconceptions. "I graduated summa cum laude from New Harvard with a PhD in xenobiology in addition to my MD. After my residency, I was being strongly pressured to move to into a prestigious fellowship but I just couldn't take it any more. All that damn research and responsibility."

Amy shook her head in disbelief, not at what Jenny had just said but rather at the situation she found herself in.

"You have a problem with that?"

"With your degree? No. It's just smart women bother me."

"You're threatened by intelligent women?"

"Not threatened as such. Just outclassed."

Jenny laughed. She had a nice laugh, throaty and deep, which belied her small stature, and it had a touch of the wicked about it. Amy smiled back at her but she couldn't prevent the smile turning into a yawn.

Jenny seemed to take that as a hint. She put her glass back down on the desk and stood up. "I suppose I should be going, leave you to get some sleep."

"I suppose."

Her fingers were playing with the glass, Amy noticed, her fingertips tracing the rim, around and around.

"We almost finished the whole bottle," Amy said regretfully.

"So we did. It didn't help. I'm still wide awake."

"It's your guilty conscience."

Jenny looked at her, non-plussed. "It is?"

"Yep," Amy said harshly. She tried to keep her face straight, her tone serious, although it wasn't easy. "I made it clear looting wouldn't be tolerated. Now you feel guilty because you're standing here in front of me flaunting stolen goods."

She opened her mouth to say something but Amy didn't give her the chance.

"If you want to ease your conscience, I'd suggest you rid yourself of the evidence."

Finally, Jenny caught on. She smiled, thought about it for a second, then slowly pulled the dark green dress off over her head and casually dropped it on the floor beside her.

Amy bit her lower lip involuntarily. She was aware she was staring but couldn't stop herself. She could feel something stirring deep inside her, a growing passion that was fuelled by a heady mixture of strong alcohol and even stronger desire. She had to remind herself to breath.

The doctor had been wearing absolutely nothing under the dress and now she stood, uninhibited and unashamed, just a bare foot or so away from Amy.

And she was stunning. There was no other word for it. It wasn't that she was perfect. Her hips were a little too wide for her frame, her breasts a touch too small for Amy's taste, and her neck perhaps a tiny bit too long. But somehow all those trifling imperfections only made her all the more... well, perfect, damn it.

Jenny moved, stepping closer, and as she did so Amy caught a flash of something dark on her back. "Turn around," she said quietly, trying her best not to make it sound like an order.

It was a dragon tattoo. A long-bodied black dragon, that curled upwards lazily, just as the smoke from a dragon's nostrils would lazily curl up to the heavens. It was a big tattoo, reaching all the way down the petite woman's back. It was beautiful too, incredibly detailed and well-inked. Amy could almost swear the dragon was alive, the way the baleful eyes glowered at her from the woman's shoulder blade. If she didn't know better, Amy would swear it was Yinglong.

She grinned ruefully. Damn dragons and smart women. A combination she could never resist. She reached out and gently touched the dragon, tracing the curving line of the serpent's body, all the way down from under the neck to the small of the woman's back. Jenny shivered as Amy's fingertips crossed her spine but smiled she looked back over her shoulder.

Jenny turned around and took hold of Amy's hand, keeping the fingers extended. She pulled Amy's hand towards the nape of her neck, then guided the hand slowly downwards in a curving pattern. It took Amy a second to realize she was tracing the pattern of the dragon again, forcing Amy's fingertips to brush almost imperceptibly against the soft skin. Down from the left shoulder, across the collar bone, tenderly circling around and under the right breast, her palm gently grazing the erect nipple, then down across the smooth abdomen, curling back and further down.

She didn't break eye contact for one second. Amy was entranced by those light green eyes. Dragon's eyes, she thought, dangerous eyes.

Amy felt Jenny turn her hand palm up, still gently brushing the silky skin of the stomach, and then guide the hand between her thighs. Amy slid a single long finger through those dark curls, pushing gently through the heat and the wetness, the finger slipping deep inside the petite woman, who let out a sudden gasp as Amy began to thrust her hand back and forth, slowly at first, then faster and faster.

A slow groan broke out from between Jenny's clenched teeth, almost a hiss, as the steady momentum and pressure drove her nearer the release she so obviously craved. The continuing even tempo of that movement, along with those stern blue eyes staring up at her, was too much. She closed her eyes, leant her head back, and reached up to clutch at her hair. Her breathing was ragged and she almost felt as if she was about to pass out.

And then Jenny came. She wanted to cry out, to scream, to yell her satisfaction out to the world, but no sound escaped her open mouth. It was all she could do to breathe as the orgasm swept over her. She felt herself shuddering, her body reacting as if it had a mind of its own, and had to put a hand out on to the desk to steady herself.

Amy rose, pushing the chair back as she stood, and slipped her arms around Jenny's waist, drawing her close. Through the wine-stained fabric she could feel the smaller woman's heart beating hard and fast against her chest. Jenny looked up, smiling, and wrapped her arms around the Amy's neck.

Without seemingly any effort, Amy lifted the brunette up onto the desk.

"So far this isn't much of a punishment," Jenny said with a playful smile, then when she saw Amy's confusion added, "for the looting, I mean."

"Don't be so sure," Amy told her, pulling off her a-top and leaning over the smaller woman. "I haven't even worked up a sweat yet."

* * * * *

Amy was woken by the sound of someone rapping on the door. Not again, she thought, and then winced as she slowly opened her eyes and the harsh ceiling lights bore down on her. Couldn't she get a moment's peace? It seemed like she'd only fallen asleep a few minutes ago. She moaned sleepily, closed her eyes again, and tried to cover her face with the thin army-issue blanket. The blanket wouldn't move, so she grabbed a fistful of the wool and tugged hard, rolling over on to her side.

That was a mistake. Maybe she was still half-asleep, or maybe her memory had been fogged by the large amounts of alcohol she had consumed the night before, but whatever the reason, Amy had forgotten that last night she and Jenny had chosen to sleep on top of the wide desk.

She fell off the edge of the desk, pulling the blanket with her, and landed hard on the floor with a loud thud. It woke her up immediately. She yelped in pain and then swore loudly and at length, stringing together an impressive torrent of curse words in English, Mandarin and several other languages that would have made even the hardest provost blush.

She wasn't sure if it was the sound of her falling, the sudden loss of the warmth of the blanket, or the constant swearing that woke Jenny up. The small brunette groaned then propped herself up on her elbows, peering over the edge of the desk.

"Are you alright?" she asked sleepily.

"Do I krudging look alright?"

Jenny looked down at her for a second, saw how Amy was stuck in a tangle of blanket and cursing as much as was humanly possible, and suddenly she began laughing.

She tried to stop, covering her mouth and waving a hand to show that she meant no offence, but kept giggling. "Oh, I needed that. I'm sorry. No, really," she said when she swore Amy glaring at her, "I mean it. Anything broken?"

Amy got to her feet, wincing and holding her lower back. She stretched backwards until she heard her spine crack and then grimaced. No, nothing was broken, she decided, although she'd be accepting a sizeable contribution to her collection of bruises. She shook her head. "Only my pride. And that's been the property of the PLA for the last twenty years."

"Doesn't matter then," Jenny said, still giggling.

"I guess not."

She realized whoever was at the door was still knocking, and unlike last night the sound was loud and urgent. She bent over to pick up her clothes and retrieved the shiny green dress at the same time, throwing it to Jenny. After pulling her undergarments on, she jerked the door open furiously.

Lie Bing Bai still had a hand raised to knock again but she lowered it quickly when she recognized the foul temper her commanding officer was in. She opened her mouth to speak, then shut it, then opened it again. She looked like a drowning fish, Amy thought.

"This better be good, Bai."

The young private looked terrified. "Sorry to wake you..." She paused for a second, catching sight of Jenny over Amy's shoulder, "...both... but you need to know this."

Amy sighed exasperatedly. "Know what?"

"The Navy, Shang Wei."

"What about the Navy?" It was a stupid question really and if she had been firing on all cylinders Amy might not have needed to ask it. But she was still tired and her head was absolutely killing her. That southern wine had a hell of a kick on the next day too, it seemed.

"They've responded," Bai said excitedly. "They're aware of our need for evac and have diverted part of the fleet."

Amy heard Jenny gasp behind her. She didn't blame her. The Navy, those krudding useless, Chairman-forsaken, no-good low-lives, those saints, were finally going to prove their worth. They were going to get off this krudfest. They were going to make it. Chairman bless the ever-loving Navy, she thought.

"When?"

"About ten minutes ago. They're sending five shuttles to get us. The Tempest, the Stormcloud, the Peggotty... I can't remember the other two, sorry, Shang Wei."

Amy waved away the concern. Who the hell cared what the shuttles were called, so long as they got here. She moved back into the room, motioning for Bai to follow, and started hurriedly pulling on her armor. The damn fabric was still wet through and it felt horribly cold and clammy against her skin.

The private took only one timid step into the room, holding the door wide open with the flat of her hand, and making absolutely sure she was looking only at the floor.

"Good morning, Private Bai," Jenny said with a warm smile. She was already dressed but then she had a hell of a lot less to wear.

Bai didn't look up. She was blushing, Amy noticed. "Morning, doctor," she said, then started to ask if they'd had a good night but immediately fell silent when she realized her Captain was staring fiercely at her.

"Only five shuttles?" Amy said, thinking out loud. "That won't be enough. They sent three the day before yesterday and only one made it. I don't imagine things up there have gotten any better."

"The response said they were sending escorting gunships."

Amy grunted by way of a response. Gunships, she thought? Well, that would make a difference. Hopefully it would be enough. She buckled up the breastplate of her suit and started working with the collar clasps. The damn things wouldn't fasten.

So, she calculated silently, ten minutes since they got the Navy's response. Give the Navy ten minutes to get the crews together and the flights prepped... no, better say fifteen minutes, knowing them. It only took twenty minutes or so to get through the atmosphere, provided you in the right orbit in the first place and didn't run into too much trouble on the way down. Then they just had to land inside the building and get all the colonists aboard. Say another fifteen minutes. Krud, was it possible? Could she really be off this damn world within an hour or two?

"Does Zan know?" she asked.

"Sure," Bai said, the excitement and relief evident in her voice. "Everyone knows."

Damn it, Amy thought, that hadn't taken long at all, had it? It wasn't that she was against telling the colonists, sooner or later she'd have to anyway, but she'd much rather it be later. It would have been easier to keep control that way. With the prospect of rescue and freedom from the army's tyranny (or hers really, but they amounted to much the same thing), they'd get more rebellious. She'd be lucky if she didn't have to spend the next hour or so fending off complaints and demands from all corners.

"Alright, Bai, back to your post. You're to inform me immediately of any change in the Navy's plans. Zan too. Understood?"

"Yes, sir!" Bai saluted, gave a quick thumbs-up to the doctor, who just smiled in return, and then ran back down the corridor to the upload station, pulling the door shut after her.

Jenny stepped forward and reached up to Amy's neck. For a moment, Amy wondered what the hell she was up to, then relaxed a little when the brunette's nimble fingers started fastening the collar clasps.

Their eyes met and Amy smiled faintly. It was odd, having someone helping her don the armor. It had been a long, long time since someone had cared what she looked like. She kind of liked it, although she would never admit as much.

"There," Jenny said, patting Amy on the collarbone, "you almost look presentable. She's a sweet kid."

As she pulled on her thick gauntlets, Amy frowned. She almost asked who she meant but then realized they were now talking about Bai. "Yes, she is. Unfortunately sweetness doesn't last very long in the army." Or anywhere else these days, she thought, but didn't say so. "Where the krud is my helmet?"

Jenny bent to retrieve the helmet from under the bundled up blanket and then handed it to her. Amy took it, attached it to the side of her armor, then unlocked the suit's weapon bonding. The bonding was a security measure, preventing any unauthorized personnel removing the gun from the armor, and while it was attached it was impossible to fire. She left the weapon magnetically clipped to her armor though; there was no need for her to carry it right now.

Jenny reached out and laid a gentle hand on Amy's arm. She could hardly feel the light grip through the heavily padded fabric. Amy lowered her head and kissed her, reveling in the softness of those pink lips, the smoothness of the skin, and the exquisite way that tongue caressed her own. She clutched hard at Jenny's back as the passion grew within her, aware that she was probably hurting her but unable to stop.

After another moment, Amy reluctantly broke the kiss. "I have to go," she said quietly, although she made no effort to leave. She still gripped the brunette tightly, pulling her hard against the cold plastic armor.

Jenny rested her head against Amy's shoulder. "I know."

"So what now?"

"Horizons, I guess," Jenny said with a small shrug, her face still buried in the breastplate. "If my luck holds. I don't really see the army arresting a much-needed experienced doctor."

"That's not what I meant."

There was a moment's silence. "Oh. I don't know. But there's hope, Amy. You're going to have to start believing in miracles sometime."

Amy smiled weakly and gently kissed the top of the brunette's head. "Not quite yet, boshi."

* * * * *

Amy found Zan outside standing on the edge of the quayside, pissing into the lake. He seemed to take an almost perverse delight in disturbing the serene cam of the water's surface. He must have

cut a hole in his suit. That was foolish as it compromised the integrity of the armor, especially in vacuum combat, but it was common practice amongst the male soldiers, who generally disliked the way the suits took care of that particular bodily function. Most officers turned a blind eye to the custom. Actually, Amy thought, she was kind of wishing that she had turned a blind eye to it this morning.

She'd had to almost force her way through the crowd of colonists in the building. It was already close to turning into a damn riot in there. To be fair, some of the peasants had been gracious enough to thank her, although she'd been quick to point out that they shouldn't be thanking her too early. Naturally, her warnings had fallen on deaf ears. Even a little enthusiasm could be a dangerous thing in the wrong places.

Of course, most of those who had tried to stop her had voiced complaints. She'd ignored those, brushing them aside as she made for the exit as fast as she could. It had been a relief to get out in the fresh air, even if it was still raining. There was a faint fog hanging around, mostly at ground level, and even that had a reddish tinge to it, like dragon's breath. A good omen, Amy thought, although she guessed it would dissipate soon.

Mind you, the fresh air wasn't doing her hangover any favors. Krud, her head hurt. She rubbed her forehead in hopes of alleviating some of the pain as she stood next to her lieutenant.

"Morning, eight-one. I have nothing to report," Zan said with a malicious grin. He shook himself a couple of times, then readjusted his uniform. "How about you?"

She ignored the question. "An hour or less, Zan, and we'll be back with the army. Can you believe it?"

He smiled at her. "Never thought I'd be so happy to see the Navy."

"You and me both."

"You see, eight-one? All we had to do is make you get a good night's sleep and we took care of things."

"Yeah, yeah."

"So a little bird told me that you had an enjoyable evening."

"I slept well, Zan, thank you."

He was grinning still. It looked as if he was biting the inside of his cheek to stop from laughing. "Yeah, I bet you did."

"What changed your mind, Zan?"

"What?" He was confused by the change in tack.

"Rule number four, remember? One of your strict rules."

He thought about it for a minute or two, and then spat a heavy glob of phlegm into the lake.

"Well, I wasn't going to say anything, but I honestly thought we weren't going to make it out of this one, even with you bravely leading the way." He caught her eye, saw her disbelief, and held up a hand to stop her interrupting. "Yeah, I know. I must be getting old. My faith is waning, I guess."

"Anyway, I thought we were doing okay until we reached the beacon. And then... well, they sent one shuttle." Zan shook his head disgustedly. "One krudding shuttle!"

Amy didn't correct him. If she had, he might have clammed up.

"So I started thinking that things didn't look so good. From then on, I figured rules didn't really matter anymore. I kinda felt that..." He was finding it hard to speak. There might have been tears in his eyes, although Amy would never have believed it if she wasn't seeing it. "Well, I thought you deserved a little of what you had with Jane, before we all..."

She cut him off to save him any further embarrassment. "Alright, so we need to start making plans for the evac of the colonists, Zhong Wei."

He nodded, accepting the escape route. "The way I see it, if at least three of the shuttles get through we should be able to get all of them out. The fourth will be for us, I take it?"

"Maybe. I was thinking we'd stagger the last two shuttles. Half our men on the third with forty or so of the civilians, same on the fourth. We shouldn't need the fifth at all unless something goes wrong."

"Which it usually does."

"In this army, yeah." Amy checked her suit's chronometer. About another ten minutes and the first shuttle would be landing. The Navy was making good time. Last she'd heard from Bai they had reported a relatively clear path down, although the gunships had taken a little enemy fire.

"Let's try to make sure the civilians know the plan. Boarding by categories again, highest to lowest. I don't have a problem with families staying together this time, so long as we have enough space."

"I'll get Jiang on it. She likes these people and they seem to respond well to her. Chairman only knows why."

"Good. Tell her to get a move on. We've probably got only about ten minutes or so."

"Will do. I can tell you this much, I don't like the idea of owing some flyboys anything."

"Who does?" Amy said, sharing a smile with him. "Have you called the inland patrols in yet?"

During the night, she had ordered a couple of two-man teams to go on patrol outside the town. It was an unpleasant task, stuck out there in the cold and the rain, especially when their comrades were back here in relative warmth and comfort, and Amy hadn't liked sending the men out, but it was an extra line of defense against any possible enemy attack. Now it looked like she had just been over-cautious.

Zan told her he had not, thinking it would be best to leave it to the last possible moment, and then asked if she wanted him to contact them now.

"I'll take care of it. You go and break the happy news to Jiang."

Amy quickly pulled on her helmet, reattaching the seal and activating the visor. As the graphics sprang to life in front of her eyes, she located where the patrols last known report had come from and tongued the controls to bring up the overhead map, zooming out so that she could see everything.

Strange, she thought. She couldn't see any of the four dots that represented the soldiers on patrol. The graphics were a little fuzzy though. Maybe there was a problem with the helmet. She smacked the side of her head, hoping

Well, the graphics cleared up but there was still no sign of the patrol. She zoomed out a little more. Still nothing.

She opened a comms channel. "Hartigan? Acknowledge, Hartigan. Liu?"

Nothing. She kept repeating the names, hoping there would be some response. There was only one reason why the dots wouldn't show up at all. By rights, all four should be glowing green. If any of the men were wounded, then the dots would change to amber. Even if they were dead, the dots would be red. But no dots? That meant the men no longer existed and that meant...

Her voice grew quiet. "Oh, krud."

The helmeted Zan immediately ran back to her. "What is it?"

She didn't reply. Instead she tore off the helmet and began running towards the barricades. She heard Zan start sprinting after her, barking out orders into his own helmet, summoning soldiers from the surrounding buildings.

She had known this would happen. Everything had been going so well. They had been so damn close to leaving Lost Heep. It was her own damn fault.

She had asked the Yaoguai to come and they hadn't disappointed her.

* * * * *

The Yaoguai had brought Blinkers. She should have expected it really, or least prepared for it. But she hadn't and now she and her company were paying the price. Not just them either; some of the colonists had found weapons from somewhere and had chosen to fight alongside the desperate soldiers.

It explained how the patrols had been taken out so silently, so quickly. It also meant that the Yaoguai got into the town so much faster than anyone had expected. Amy cursed herself and she fired off another short burst over the pile of rubble she and a few others were defending. She had been so damn stupid. She had let herself get distracted and not thought things through enough. She had known there was a weakness in their defenses and she shouldn't have stopped until she found it. But no, she had to go and get stupid overnight.

And all the same, she knew they had been incredibly lucky. If Amy hadn't checked the patrols when she had, the Blinkers would have been in amongst them before anyone could do anything and then everything would have been lost.

A Stalker launched itself towards her and Amy backed away, tripping over debris, almost falling. Then Zan pumped two shotgun blasts into the side of the Stalker, forcing it off-balance and giving her time to scramble to her feet and move back. She saw the Stalker quiver and knew what was coming. She and Lie Bing Hoi fell to the ground immediately. The three colonists, armed only with pistols and wearing nothing but their own cheap farming clothes, didn't have a chance. A cluster of shards tore into them and the screams were horrifying but thankfully short-lived.

One fell by Amy and she saw the thing scratching towards her, making an awful mewing sound as it moved. She jumped to her feet and hauled Hoi to his.

"Fall back," she told him, pointing with her free hand. "To that street corner there."

Move back, she thought. That's all they had done since the skirmish began. The mines had done little to slow the advance of the Stalkers, killing one and perhaps lightly wounding another, but they had kept coming. The barricades had had more of an effect, grinding the alien attack to almost a halt.

But then the damn Blinkers had reappeared from nowhere and started blinking their larger brethren over the barricades. Blinkers, officially designated as Zhayuns, were nasty little bastards, Amy thought. They had no weapons of their own and thankfully were a lot easier to kill than any of the other Yaoguai, although drawing a bead on them was damn near impossible. Somehow they were able to teleport, not only themselves, but other Yaoguai, if only for very short distances, and that meant every PLA soldier hated them intensely.

At least they were a rare sight in battle. No one really knew why but everyone was grateful. Just a few of them could cause havoc. Maybe the Yaoguai didn't have many of the damn chusheng. Maybe they were slow to breed or something. Again, Amy didn't really care.

A torrent of bullets flew past her as she and Hoi ran. The doorway of a building exploded as they ran past, showering them with debris and engulfing the street in a cloud of grey dust. Hoi cried out as he stumbled and she turned back for just a second, then saw the wriggling end of crystal embedded in the man's back and the deep cracks appearing in his armor as the thing dug its way in. Hoi cursed and then looked up at her.

"Keep going, Shang Wei. Don't let...."

Another explosion drowned out his words and Amy ran for cover, ducking behind the street corner just as another shard ricocheted off the wall.

The comlink in her collar crackled with static suddenly. "Second shuttle is away," Jiang reported matter-of-factly. Then there was more static, harsher and louder. No, not static. It was gunfire. Jiang's voice returned to the comlink. She was breathing hard. "Fage! Gai si gouzaizi!"

Amy touched her collar. "Jiang, calm down."

"Sorry, Shang Wei. A damn Blinker got into the building. I took care of it. Third shuttle now landing."

Amy looked up as she saw the second shuttle roaring overhead. Just a little longer, she thought. They just had to hold off the gai si Yaoguai for a little while longer and at least the colonists could make it out of here.

The one surviving Navy gunship followed the shuttle, strafing the lines of Yaoguai. One stalker blew apart as the high velocity cannon shells tore into it and another started wailing from the damage it sustained. Chairman bless the Navy, Amy thought, and then sighed. The gunship was leaving, escorting the heavily-laden shuttle on its way up to rendezvous with the fleet.

"Launcher!" someone suddenly shouted. It must have been a civilian as the hoarse voice didn't come through the comlinks. "Launcher!"

She peered around the corner and saw the huge indigo mass a hundred yards or so away, leaving the cover of a large warehouse that had hidden it until now. Streaked with sickly white, the sight of the thing almost made her throw up. Just like all the others, the Launcher was impossible to look at directly. If you tried to, your eyes started hurting. But the Launcher was so big it was hard not to look at it.

"This is Copperfield," Amy said into her comlink, "confirm Launcher."

Krud, they were in real trouble now, she thought.

But she was proved wrong, at least for a short while. The Yaoguai had apparently had enough of being on the receiving end of aerial fire. The Launcher folded back in on itself and pulsated, each throb of its large vile body sending a horde of shards, each three times the size of those fired by a Stalker, up into the air.

It had reacted a little slowly, but not slowly enough. Most of the Launcher's shards had missed their intended target but enough hit home. The Navy gunship reeled under the impact, the shards eating their way through the metal and tearing apart one of the engines. Suddenly the gunship was no longer flying but careening downwards, dirty black smoke billowing from the ruined engine, pieces of wreckage scattering across the bay, and the ground shook with a tremendous explosion as the vessel crashed into the quayside.

Amy was thrown off her feet and landed painfully on top of rusting metal girder. She stood, still dazed by the blast, and stared the massive cloud of dark smoke rising into the sky. She felt sick, mad at herself that she was even a tiny bit thankful that the Launcher's wrath had been spent on the gunship rather than her soldiers. It bought them more time. Launchers were bigger and much more dangerous than Stalkers but they were slower in every respect, including how long it took them to fire off their bigger shards again.

"Third shuttle is almost loaded," Jiang reported.

And thank the Chairman for that, Amy thought. She took off at a run, heading back down the street towards the building that housed the landing pad. They had no more barricades, no more minefields, no more time. She ducked and dodged as she ran, doing her best to use what little cover there was. There was gunfire from somewhere up ahead.

A Blinker appeared out of nowhere to her left and she shot the beast without thinking, slamming four or five bullets into the centre mass.

"Zan?" she called into her comlink. "Where the hell are you?"

The reply came almost instantly. "Two streets away. Still alive although not sure how long that will last. The bastards have broken through here."

"Here too. Hoi's gone."

"So's Chuang. And Xun."

"Get on that damn shuttle as soon as it lands, Zan."

"Way ahead of you. Are you near?"

"Almost there."

"You're passing Bai."

"What?"

"Bai's still behind you."

"I didn't see her."

"Ten feet back to your left. She's not moving. What the hell is she doing?"

Jiang's voice broke in. "Third shuttle is away. Fourth will be landing soon. I'm joining the Shao Wei."

"Negative, Jiang. Both of you, get on the damn shuttle," Amy ordered, slowing to a halt. She looked around her, ducking as another couple of shards smacked into a thick water pipe with a deafening clang. "Don't wait."

She saw Lie Bing Bai then. The young woman, still a teenager really, was crouched in a ruined doorway. Her rifle was still slung on her back. She was crying, tears rolling down her dirt-streaked cheeks. Damn it, Amy thought, she didn't have time for this.

"Bai!" she yelled. "Let's go!"

There was no response. Amy sprinted across the road and knelt beside her.

"Lie Bing Bai! Look at me!"

The woman looked up. There was such uncomprehending terror in her eyes that it took Amy aback for a second. Had that been what she looked like when the relief column found her back on Chillip, Amy wondered?

"Bai..." Amy corrected herself, choosing to use the woman's first name in the hope of getting through to her. "Zhen, you have to move. You can't stay here. You understand me?"

Bai nodded weakly.

"We're going to run for the landing pad. The last shuttle's leaving so we have no time to waste" Amy saw the look of alarm in the woman's face and tried to make her voice more reassuring. "Don't worry, I won't leave you. But you have to run and you have to fight. Can you do that?"

The terrified young woman nodded again and clambered to her feet, unclipping her rifle, then wiping at her face. "You won't leave me, Shang Wei?"

Amy tried to give a friendly smile. "I won't. Are you ready? Then let's go!"

As soon as the two soldiers bolted from their hiding place, a storm of fire erupted, and the rubble around them clinked and chimed as shard after shard bounced off concrete and metal. Miraculously, neither Amy nor Bai were hit and they kept running.

They ducked around a corner and saw the landing pad at the end of the quay, only sixty yards away. Almost there. The horrible pounding sound of approaching Stalkers resonated down the street and Amy saw

She expected Bai to panic but was pleased to see the woman kept running, loosing off a burst of fire as she moved. Amy added her own firepower but even so it only made the first Yaoguai to stumble backwards a little. Still, it was enough. They were past the Yaoguai now and still sprinting for safety.

Thirty yards to go. They could see the large doors of the building were still wide open and the large shuttle resting on the pad inside. The shuttle's rear was facing the doors and the ramp was down. She saw a figure moving on the ramp and thought at first it was one of the crew but then she recognized the dirty lab coat. Damn it, she thought, Jenny was still here! She was supposed to have left on the first krudding shuttle! Damn the woman's stubbornness!

Zan and Jiang were at the doors, keeping up a steady covering fire. They had both disobeyed a direct order. If they all lived through this, Amy would be sure to remind them of the importance of the chain of command, and then probably buy them both a very large drink. Zan had lost his helmet in the fight and his comlink must have been damaged too, for he was yelling something at them and Amy could barely hear him.

Twenty yards. A Blinker jumped in from mid-air and scrambled for cover. Jiang shot the creature as it landed, the heavy bullets from her rifle tearing the creature apart.

Fifteen yards. They were going to make it.

She saw Bai go down to her left, instinctively ducked as another torrent of shards flew overhead, stumbled and fell to the floor, her rifle scattering out of her grasp. She looked up to see Jiang had taken a shard straight in the face. Zan was still firing, thank the Chairman.

Bai was screaming, yelling almost incoherently at the pain. If she had been crying before, now she was sobbing uncontrollably. To her credit, she was still firing. Her shots were wild, as she held the rifle with only one hand, her other was clutching at her shattered calf, but she kept the trigger depressed.

Amy retrieved her rifle and then crawled over to where the young soldier lay in a pool of blood.

"My leg, Shang Wei, the shi dan is in my leg!" Bai screamed again, her sudden twisting sending a series of bullets flying erratically down the street. "It's eating me!"

"I know, Bai," Amy said, trying her best to keep her voice controlled and level. "Keep firing, you hear me. Focus on when your shots go."

Amy also now began firing single-handedly, and with her free hand she reached under Bai and grabbed a fistful of the woman's collar. Straining with effort, she began walking backwards, bent over almost double as she dragged Bai as hard as she could. A trail of thick red blood ran down through the dust as she hauled the almost dead weight another few feet. Something white burst through the gaping maw of Bai's wound. She hoped that was just bone.

"But it hurts!"

Amy spoke forcefully, loudly. "Life hurts, soldier. Keep firing!"

Bawling, Bai didn't say anything more. Instead she gritted her teeth and gripped the stock of her rifle with her bloody left hand, stabilizing the gun.

Another few feet and then another explosion. The blastwave caused Amy to momentarily lose her grip on Bai and she had to stop firing for a second to get it back again. Her ears were ringing and when she held a hand to the side of her face there it came away covered in blood. She felt for a wound, found none, and realized it was from the never-ending pounding of the Stalkers. She'd lost her rifle and couldn't see it anywhere. She fumbled for her pistol then thought better of it, instead grabbing the silent Bai with both hands.

She could hear Zan now. He was yelling at her to move, that she was the last.

Only a few more feet to go. She could see Jenny clearly now, one hand firmly clamped around a safety handle, the other reaching out, imploring for her to move faster.

Amy grunted with effort and managed to drag Bai a little further.

Then there was another explosion behind her and she went sprawling to the floor. Her head hit the concrete with a clunk that made her see stars. Everything was blurring ahead of her, and she could see Jenny screaming but could only hear a ringing noise, and there was terrible burrowing pain in her left shoulder. She managed to rise to all fours and tried to crawl but something was hanging on to her. She looked back, still hearing nothing but a loud humming, and saw Bai had fallen over her legs. The woman was twitching as a shard ate through her windpipe.

The pain in her shoulder was horrendous. She could taste blood in her mouth and she tried to say something but only ended up spitting out a loose tooth. She looked down, her vision shaky, and saw the tooth, stark white in a spreading pool of dark blood. Oddly, it reminded her of this planet's moon harsh against the night sky.

The blood kept spreading, and strangely it flowed upwards, filling all of Amy's vision. Soon all she could see was red and slowly that red darkened until everything was black.

* * * * *

When Amy opened her eyes again, all she could see was white. There was a bright light coming from somewhere and it burned her eyes, even when she scrunched them up so tight it hurt. Her skin itched and she could feel cold streams of sweat running down her face. Her hair was thickly plastered with sweat and strands of it stuck to her cheeks.

She was lying on her back, she could tell that much, but she felt constricted somehow, like she was tied down. She tried twisting free but that only made things worse; now it seemed there was a heavy weight on her chest and hips. Her hands were caught too; she couldn't move them. She tried turning over on to her left side but a scream of agony burst out as the pain overtook her. There was something terribly wrong here and she was frightened to learn what it was.

As the cry died in her throat, something above her clicked noisily and the pain quickly faded away. The light slowly seemed to be fading too. She opened her eyes and saw the lights above her were dimming. Everything was becoming grey. She was so tired. All she wanted to do was sleep.

There were voices suddenly, that jerked her back awake and then she saw blurry grey shapes looming over her. She blinked several times and the faces swam in and out of focus. Something was being said, about her rather than to her, but she couldn't make out the words. A cool hand touched her temple, gently brushing dark blonde tresses away from her face. More words, softer now, spoken close to her ear, but she still didn't understand. She tried to reach up to hold the hand but couldn't.

And that was how it went for a week or more. Brief waking periods of confusion, harsh bright light, pain and then the clicking sound that took it all away, and always, always, that soft caring voice crooning to her.

On the eighth day, the lights didn't seem so cruel, the pain not so intense, and the grey shapes that moved back and forth around seemed a fraction more solid. She still felt trapped but knew now it was only due to a tangle of sheets and blankets wound around her limbs due to her restlessness while asleep. A bed then, somewhere in a white room. It took her a while to put the pieces together. A hospital.

By the tenth day, she could make out voices, speaking in both English and Mandarin, although the meanings still eluded her. But when the soft voice breathed in her ear, she heard every word.

I'm here for you, Amy. I won't leave your side. You're going to be fine. You have to be. I love you, Amy.

On the eleventh day, she truly woke, and found Doctor Jennifer Wickfield sitting in a chair beside the bed, watching her intently. The pain was almost completely gone, although how much of that was due to the drugs the automated system pumped into her was anybody's guess.

Jennifer smiled a little worried smile. She was so beautiful and the mere sight of her made Amy want to weep with relief and joy. She looked tired but good. Her short black hair was now once again streaked with blue dye and the lab coat she wore over conservative clothes was clean and white.

"You look a lot better," Jennifer said.

Amy tried to speak but could only manage a croak. Jenny stood and poured her a glass of water from a pitcher on a bedside table.

"Slowly," she told Amy, stroking her hair as she drank, "and take small sips."

After soothing her dry throat with the icy cold water, Amy finally managed to get her voice back. "Where am I?"

"On board Horizons."

Amy managed a weak smile. "Ah. They got you then?"

Jennifer returned the smile and nodded. "They got me. Probably just as well. I've been able to be your own personal doctor." She paused, thinking hard, and then added, "And your surgeon."

"What?"

"You can't feel it," Jenny said, quick to try and reassure her patient. "The painkillers make sure of that."

"Can't feel what?" Amy was beginning to panic. "Tell me!"

"You lost your left arm. We had no choice, Amy, I swear. Zan and I managed to drag you on the shuttle but by that point the shard was firmly embedded. If we hadn't taken your arm off right there and then..."

Amy turned to stare at the bandaged-covered stump that jutted out of her left shoulder. She hadn't felt it. Or rather, she hadn't *not* felt it. Up until Jenny told her, she honestly had no idea the arm was gone. Phantom limb syndrome, she had heard others call it. She'd always scoffed at the idea. Well, more fool her.

She looked up, her memory coming back to her. "Zan's okay?"

"He's fine. Not even a scratch. He's worried about you though."

"And Bai?"

A long pause told Amy what she already suspected, but Jenny replied anyway. "She didn't make it. You and Zan, well, you two were the only..." Her voice trailed off. It didn't matter. She didn't need to say anything more.

Jenny fished in one of the deep pockets of her white coat and pulled out a small blue box. "They told me to give you this." She opened the box and gingerly placed it Amy's remaining hand.

Amy brought the box up closer to her eyes, so she could focus on it. Inside, resting on plush tan padding, was a small circular iron medal. A red and white ribbon was mounted above the medal. There was an emblem in the center but her eyes hurt and she couldn't clearly make it out, nor the words that ran around edge.

"They?"

"A General Shiang and some other high ranking officers. All very formal and proper. I can't say I liked them very much."

Amy clicked the box shut. "I don't want it."

Jenny said nothing, just gently took the box from her and hid it away in a drawer of the bedside cabinet.

"A hundred and ninety-three," she said quietly.

"What?"

"That's how many people you saved, Amy. That's why they gave you that medal."

"They can keep it," Amy said bitterly.

There was a silence for moment, then Jennifer rose to stand beside the bed. She reached out and took Amy's hand between hers, squeezing it gently.

"You remember how I said you weren't as tough as you looked?"

"Yes."

"I was wrong."

Amy smiled. "Well, don't look so surprised, boshi. Miracles follow me around, remember?"

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