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THE IMMACULATE CONCEPTION OF PRIVATE RITTER Seth Dickinson

Keshaun had imagined a lot of ways the military could screw her over, but immaculate conception in the middle of a three-month cryosleep was a line of bullshit that she'd never anticipated.

Captain Andire gave her the bad news ten minutes out of cryo, when they'd finished her post-freeze medical and implant check. At first she wanted to laugh, and then, when he told her what he was going to do about it, she didn't any more.

"So let me get this straight, sir," Keshaun said. "I'm sitting out the drop on Snowflake because I'm two months pregnant."

Andire would not make eye contact with her. He was doing something on his command cell, probably some readiness report for Battalion. When he spoke, he talked into his paperwork. "You know how it works, Private Ritter. We can back up your brain, but we can't guarantee the safety of your body. If you're carrying a child, you have no place on a high-risk combat drop. God knows what the Loom would do with you."

The medical pallet was cold beneath her naked thighs. She was still in her cryo smock. From her perspective it had been less than an hour since she had gone into the freezer in Jupiter orbit, calm and crisp, ready for her third encounter with the Loom and ready, maybe, to die.

Behind Captain Andire, the rest of her company did calisthenics on the deck, a gang of hairy yogis, all sinew and scar. Cryo had been hard on them. Her buddy Patterson's back was crossed with pale lines of fibrous tissue, like the relic of a bad wound. He had not had those when he went under.

In twelve hours Patterson would be dropping on to Snowflake without her.

"Now just tell me what I'm missing here, sir," she said. "Direct FTL from Earth to Snowflake is three months. I hadn't had sex with a living thing for at least three months before that. I did not go into cryo pregnant. I have a contraceptive implant that is guaranteed to last me ten years with a failure rate of less than zero point zero zero one percent. So I don't understand, sir, how I came out of cryo with this, uh, this kind of condition."

"We're going to look into it, Private," Andire said.

"I don't want it looked into," she said. "I want it removed."

Andire made some kind of note on his cell that probably had nothing to do with her. Still he did not meet her eyes. "I already spoke to the CMO about that. Given the . . . unusual nature of the pregnancy, the decision was made to veto termination of the fetus until the date and method of conception have been determined. We need to know if something is wrong with our cryo systems. And of course we're going to want to check paternity."

She held on against a sickening swoop of rage and impotent anguish.

At last he looked at her and his gaze might have betrayed an iota of apology. "I know it's a bastard move. But it's the right one. You know how much difference a single soldier makes, and if we start losing females to cryo miracles, that could cost us whole worlds. We need to know why this happened."

The Corps owned her body, like it owned all soldiers. The nature of the war made absolute control imperative. She was equipment.

"Screw this," she said. "Sir."

"While you're pissed," Andire said, "I will remind you that the Revised Uniform Code mandates immediate suspension for any direct action personnel who father or mother a child while on active duty. Suspension is indefinite, pending the findings of a disciplinary tribunal on a possible failure of judgment rendering the soldier unfit for combat. So I'm afraid that even if you got your way, Private, you'd be sitting this one out."

And he left her there to shiver, feeling the way she had when she'd taken her first bullet, wondering how something like this could happen.

In Colonial Defense Corps tradition the first meal after a cryosleep is breakfast, regardless of local or ship time. In spite of her status, they let Keshawn eat with her company: flagons of bitter orange juice and French toast and all kinds of tailored foodstuffs that mostly looked and tasted like breadfruit.

Everyone else already knew. Patterson, the man who'd been her other half in battle (but never elsewhere) for two bloody campaigns, broached the topic when she sat down. "This is some straight bullshit, man. They say you're pregnant? How the hell would you get pregnant in cryo?"

"I don't know," she said, wishing that he had kept his well-intentioned mouth shut. She could feel eyes on her; she had not been stared at like this since her first days in basic. Not so long ago she had been Private Keshawn Ritter, rifleman (MOS-11B), Alpha Company/2 Battalion, 2nd Colonial: competent and capable enough to be taken seriously in spite of her sex (ugly, unacknowledged fact, but still fact). Now she was dead weight, a terminal case both tactically and career-wise. Women who got pregnant in the line of duty did not get a second chance.

It was a fate worse than death. The dead could be restored from their scanned backups, given a medal and, eventually, sent out to fight again. Pregnancy meant a dishonorable discharge.

She knifed a grapefruit and scooped the pulp out with her fingers, steaming mad.

It was just unfair. Alpha Company of the 2nd Colonial was a unit with a future, just reaching their peak, seasoned but not yet down with the combat fatigue that eventually killed most units. ("In a war with unlimited nanoconstructed material and manpower," her first tactical instructor had told her, "the critical limiting factor is our ability to keep trained soldiers sane and fresh in an environment of omnipresent danger. That may be why we're losing.") She might have made officer in a few years. She might have died and come back as a war hero.

Patterson was on her side. Maybe a few others, too: Xu Yifen, Gunny Giannocenti. But she figured that the rest of the enlisted were already trying to figure out who she'd boned, and when her implant had gone bad. They probably figured Patterson. She had turned him down for good a long time ago, but in private.

"Goddamn," Xonno said, scratching at the implant jack behind his ear. "I feel like I've got a hangover from the end of time. That last scan was brutal."

They had all been brainmapped before leaving Jupiter. Their digitized selves were somewhere deep in the ship's meat locker, stored on solid-state slabs that hung in the dark alongside rows of pre-gestated human bodies awaiting the imprint of a resurrected mind. The backups would be updated every night, as long as the soldiers on the ground could punch a signal back to the *Costaguana*. An unlucky soldier could, theoretically, die and be resurrected three or four times in a single deployment—three spares were kept on standby. But resurrecting a soldier into endless, punishing combat had a risk factor. Accumulated trauma could cause postmortal disassociation syndrome, the dreaded reaper rage.

Sanity had to be husbanded carefully. A dead soldier could be restored, but a crazy one was gone for good.

The drop went down on schedule. *Costaguana's* gunships cleared a landing zone in southern Boreas continent, north of a mountain range called the New Little Himalayas and just about an hour's foot march south of the planetary capital at Green Guinea. Alpha Company dropped in full armor, each soldier carrying enough firepower to level a city. Opposition was scarce at first. Either the area was clean, or the Loom virals were playing Trojan horse.

The problem on Snowflake was not the kind that could be solved with kinetic kill rods and orbital weapons. The Loom must have slipped their people on-world months ago, each one superficially human but armed with something that the Corps called an external imperative system and the soldiers called the viral.

It was neither a computer virus nor a biological weapon; neither a religion, nor a creed. Maybe it was telepathy. Maybe it was a weaponized version of the same thing that made a song or a phrase stick in your head. It spread through the population in two phases: a silent, latent period lasting months or years, and then a sudden emergence. The vector was classified but appeared to require prolonged contact.

Whatever it was, it made you part of the Loom. You did not become a zombie or a human circuit board. You still had feelings, a family, a personality, a sense of humor, a taste (or distaste) for greasy breakfast food, a favorite sports team, and a pet cat. But somewhere in your head you stopped wanting to settle down in a nice little house with your nice little family and work a good job until you died.

Instead you made the decision to drop your life, turn your neighborhood into an armed camp, capture and convert all the uninfected you could find, and then locate a ship that could take you and your fellow Loomers to another world to start the process over again. The infected carried out this program with all the ingenious, enthusiastic devotion of people working on their favorite hobby. They were creative and practical; they did not forget their education, their friendships, or their loved ones. They might have been freedom fighters in

some kind of colonial rebellion, except that their goal, their heartfelt desire, was not self-determination and lower taxes, but the creation of more Loomers.

You could no more talk them out of this than you could talk an ordinary human being into killing her family with a straight razor and calling it modern art. When you were a Loomer, you were normal, and it was the rest of the human race that was certifiably nuts.

What happened on Loomer worlds after total population conversion was deeply classified. It was apparently bad enough to justify total destruction of the planetary surface.

Case zero was Aerie, a colony nearly five years from Earth by military FTL. The CDC went in after the planetary government collapsed, and discovered exactly how dangerous an insurgency with one-hundred-percent participation could be. It was a bloodbath.

The Loom's virulence argued for the theory that it was an alien weapon, some kind of self-replicating meme. But there were whispers that colonists on Aerie had been playing with forbidden things—running single consciousnesses across multiple bodies, running people in parallel, using meat as hardware. Maybe that had gone wrong. Who knew? Who cared? It was here. It was spreading.

In the past sixteen years, the Loom had devoured thirty-six billion people: one quarter of the human race. When a colony was judged a lost cause, CDC warships bombed the surface into magma, but always—somehow, somehow—some of the virals slipped offworld.

A few colonies had been saved, the virals identified, isolated, and wiped out. But the spread was accelerating. Snowflake was three months from Earth. Stopping the infection here would require a grueling campaign to isolate the infected from civilians and then root them out, village by village. In the meantime the CDC would have to keep the local population compliant and under control. COIN, counterinsurgency warfare, had always been bad work, grueling and stressful. There was no respite from the fear. Anyone and anything could kill you, anywhere, at any time.

Standard training said, a little optimistically: an elite unit generally lasts twenty months in combat with the Loom before total breakdown and the onset of psychosis.

Alpha Company had been in the shit for going on fifteen months now. This was a critical hour.

And Keshawn Ritter would be on the sidelines, waiting for a dishonorable discharge and an unwanted new family member.

Costaguana's observation deck was buried deep in the heart of the ship. Its windows were purely virtual, live glass hooked up to the tactical sensors: an imitation view, but a near-perfect one.

Keshawn sat on the room's back bench and watched Snowflake turn beneath the ship.

Dear Mom, she wrote. Something's gone wrong. I might be coming home for good after this deployment. I hope you're not too lonely. With love, Keshawn.

She stared into the cell for a long minute and then sent the letter off for censor check and batching. FTL relay would carry it back to Earth along with the ship's daily reports.

Sometimes Mom would write back immediately, if her server was in good shape; sometimes she lagged behind realtime and it took days or months.

This was a privilege her comrades on the ground did not have. Aside from tactical data and brainscans, no unessential signals were allowed onto the ship, in case the Loom viral could somehow be transmitted digitally. Her last two deployments had left her out of touch with her mother for months, and she had returned to a backlog of letters. She had only skimmed them. Thinking about home was a distraction, and it made her angry.

The ship creaked around her. Thermal expansion tapped at the hull like the fingers of an idle hand. Then, again, silence.

The hatch opened. Captain Andire came into the room and sat down next to her. She straightened to salute, but Andire waved it away. "I'm here for a personal conversation," he said. "So let's not stand on protocol, Private."

Andire did not go groundside with his company; most of the officers stayed on-ship and operated by teleproxy, using combat drones. They knew too much to risk falling into Loomer hands.

"Sir," she said. "I appreciate the visit."

"How are you feeling?"

She considered how honest she should be. "Deeply frustrated," she said.

"This must be just the kind of thing you joined up to avoid."

Flash of memory: some white, middle-class, college-bound bitch from her DC Anacostia high school's fast-track program, speaking to a friend about the Corps. *"It's a socialized correctional program for the children of whores and addicts. A way to stop them from becoming whores and addicts, too."*

"Pretty much," she said.

Andire looked down at Snowflake—white and green and pale blue, under the bridal veil of a brewing storm system—and back up at her. His eyes were deep-set and calm. She felt some of her frustration with him slipping away.

"If you want to tell me anything more about what happened," he said, "now would be the time. There won't be any repercussions for something you say off the record. And maybe I can help."

"I don't fraternize within the unit, sir," she said. "The last time I had sex was in a Nova Aniva whorehouse, six months ago." Nova Aniva was three months from Earth, and, like a whole host of other colonies—Hathor, Tumbleweed, Forgiven, Chorus— within a month of Snowflake. If they had deployed straight from there to Snowflake, perhaps the pale-skinned Russian whoreboy with the steroid body could have been the father. But he had worn a condom, and in any case, they had not gone straight to Snowflake.

"There is no way I can be pregnant," she said. "I was frozen solid and my blood was full of chipmunk antifreeze. This is some kind of mistake."

He took out his command cell and showed her a picture of a fuzzy gray spot inside a conical olive-drab wash of striated tissue. "The CMO says that's your baby," he said. "They

have no idea how it developed in cryo, but it wasn't there when we left Jupiter, and the DOC is definite. It had to be sometime during the last three months. During cryo."

She wanted to squash the thing. "I'm a medical miracle," she said. "They're going to write papers."

Andire laughed.

"I don't want to go home," she said. "I was a vital part of the unit, sir. I know that."

"I read all your letters to your mother," he said.

She looked up sharply, but he met her gaze and shrugged. "You know they go through a censor. Are you really that surprised?"

He was right; but there was a distinction between knowing that they were read and knowing who read them. "And?" she said. "Why does that matter?"

"You're a good soldier, but there are other things to do with your life. Go home and be with your mom. Have your child, raise it with her. You'll be together if the Loom reaches Earth."

"You mean when," she said. "When they reach Earth." They were told nothing about how the war was going, but they all knew.

Andire's granite football-coach face creased around a smile. "If we were just a little tougher, a little stronger, if we had a few more good hard people," he said, "then I think we could turn this thing around. Color me an optimist."

"Sir," she said, "my mother's been dead for six years. She died of a drug overdose."

Andire blinked slowly and his lips pursed. She had seen him do that when going over casualty counts. "Then who writes those letters back to you, Private?"

She tapped the implant jack behind her ear. "She had a backup. Welfare gave her a scan every two years. Hers was . . . way out of date. She thought I was nine, and that my dad still had a job."

Civilians did not get new bodies. Her mother's digital self lived on in a public metascape, run by an FDPA subcontractor, overrun by crime: Chinese encryption rings and Indonesian botnets, stealing bandwidth for their own use. Sometimes her mom's server crashed and she had to be rebooted. To Keshawn it always felt as if her mother did not remember quite as much afterward.

"It sounds like a difficult life," Andire said. "But it produced a good soldier."

"A good ex-soldier."

"I don't want to lose you, Ritter. You're a natural. You know we can't waste talent."

The comment was meant to comfort, but the words nearly brought her to her feet in anger. She had wasted herself. That, at least, was the way the Corps would see it; never mind that it was not her fault, that it felt like a rape.

Her body was equipment and this damn thing was a defect, more lethal than a jammed rifle—but her body was also *her* and what had happened was a trespass, a violation, as tangible as her father’s fists.

“Sir,” she said, “I want to know who the father is.”

He looked up at her and his face closed up like armor, like a scab. But he said: “I’ll see what I can do.”

She slept alone in Alpha Company’s bunkroom, remembering cold nights on Nova Aniva when her squad huddled together for warmth, reeking of foxhole and complaining about each other’s boners like a gang of homophobic schoolboys. The Corps took anyone, man or woman, who could meet its physical standards, but ultimately you would—male or female, gay or straight—end up as one of the boys.

Unless you did something that reminded them that you were *not* one of the boys.

She had done nothing wrong; she knew that. But it was not completely apparent to her that she still *believed* it. Her body had betrayed Patterson and her other comrades, in a way that they—the men, at least—could never betray each other. It was cruel and it was ironic and it felt fucking medieval to her, but from their perspective, it probably also felt true.

As she was falling asleep she developed a splitting headache and felt heat behind her ear. Her implants were still passing copies of her brainstate to *Costaguana’s* computers, updating her backup, as if she were on the ground with the others.

That gave her a small, irrational comfort.

In the morning she was nauseous and her breasts were sore. She self-administered a drug cocktail that drove the malaise away and tried to read reports from groundside, but her cell was locked out of the company tactical network. She ran down to the dorsal hangar bay and watched the automation load a resupply dropship. Palettes of selective anti-personnel rounds. Perimeter cobwebs. Power cells for anti-mortar lasers. Man-portable network elements of an IED detector. A lot of medical supplies.

A rack of cloned arms in vats of straw-color liquid, the skin tone a match for Patterson’s, fingers gently clenching and unclenching. The vats had stenciled labels: *Palliative Care Shipment: Day 2*.

Day two. The campaign on Nova Aniva had lasted two hundred and nineteen. Fern had lasted a month longer. Unless she aborted, she would deliver the baby aboard the ship; they would not let her into cryo while she was pregnant.

Nor would they let a newborn in. She would be awake for the flight home to Earth, nearly alone save for the flight watch.

“I’m gonna go nuts up here,” she told the loading bay’s machinery. Her voice echoed.

When she went back to her quarters her cell had a message for her, signed by CMO Gainful-Shuzir.

We are unable to determine the paternity of the child. Analysis of your cryo-system continues. We will report our findings to your disciplinary tribunal when we return to Earth.

“This is unbelievable,” she said. “This is wrong.”

Keshaun filed a formal notice of leave with Captain Andire. "Given that I will no longer be foot-mobile in a few months," she wrote, "I plan to spend the rest of my time as an able soldier maximizing my fitness and familiarizing myself with the ship, so that I can assist the watch crew during the flight back to Earth."

Captain Andire gave her leave. "Confine your movements to the crew spaces," he told her. "That's an order. I don't want unauthorized personnel anywhere else."

She knew that he would be too busy to enforce that command. The officers left on the ship would be in their immersion tanks, running the battle.

She turned off her implanted locator and went running. On the first few days she confined herself to the crew spaces as she had been told, sprinting the troop bay, circling empty halls at a controlled lope. She had run these halls just after Nova Aniva, but somehow they seemed grimier now, the air thick with the tang of tired scrubbers and chemical leaks. The vessel was aging before its time.

She felt her own personal wrongness: her body was alien, unfamiliar, in more ways than the tiny thing in her womb seemed like it could cause. She had never been pregnant before; but she'd never felt so keenly aware of her body before either. It was no longer equipment—it was a crime scene, a site of trespass.

On the sixth day, she popped a hatch and went down into the logistical decks, wearing a taser on her hip and the thermal lining of an EVA suit to dampen her signature on the ship's internal sensors. She jogged between the drab obelisks of supply crates and paced her own reflection down an ossuary where bones grew in small white tanks. Her route took her through the missile cells and the sleek glass webwork of the ship's gunnery computers. On these lower decks her feet rumbled to the distant brontide of the ship's reactors.

She saw strange things down here, signs of decay and disrepair. A ship's clock running years in advance. Empty missile cells where ordnance had been fired, yet never reloaded. Jupiter's dockworkers must be getting lazy, or overstretched. Desperate times.

On the ninth day she went deeper, into the vault, the afterlife, the armorclad viscera of the Soldier Survival System. The light here was red and it was blood-hot, like the guts of a beast. She stripped to a jog bra and shorts and went in, telling herself that a dishonorable discharge could not be made *more* dishonorable, even though it probably could. She had been in this part of the ship once before, during training, but never since.

She walked the observation gantries above the vats and looked down into the amniotic gel where the backups were grown. Stenciled letters in the tanks read: *SOLDIER SURVIVAL SYSTEM BIOC COMPONENT REPLACEMENTS. INVENTORY BY SCHEDULE 2B21. MAINTAIN THREE CLONES PER SOLDIER.*

In the tanks beneath her she saw body after naked body slumbering in the yellow gel, each a set of triplets. Three Pattersons, curled in on themselves like a fist; and there was Andire, as rigid and chiseled in the tank as he was in life.

She found two copies of herself, tall and long-legged, a runner's build, dark skin still somehow raw in its newness. They looked stronger than she felt, unmarred, uninvaded.

The third slot in that tank marked RITTER, K. was empty.

So were two of Gunny Giannocenti's slots. One of Xu Yifen's.

Either they were short on clone bodies or—

She stared, her mind awlirl, and while she probed at the possibilities, the blood reek and the heat overcame her. The room began to turn dizzily.

She shook her head and took deep breaths as she worked her way back out, certain now that the mystery of her pregnancy was tied into something else amiss aboard *Costaguana*.

Fever dream, dimly aware that she was thrashing and grunting, alone in the empty bunkroom:

On Fern, in the middle of her first deployment. Years of training had not prepared her for the sheer savagery. The virals were thick in the city of Coriado's Cape, in the schools, at their day jobs, multiplying in silence. There was no way to know how many, or where. Detection required a twenty-minute brainscan using a hand unit. But Coriado's Cape had a population of nearly a hundred thousand within the city limits proper, and the hand scans would be too slow.

Quarantine went up on day one: no one left their home on pain of death. Keshawn's squad drew orders to scrub the city of the homeless and execute them as potential carriers. There was no time to scan each drifter individually.

Vivid flashbulb memory: kicking a petite Asian woman to the curb. Long, accented scream; words of protest she did not understand. Single shot to the skull. Later, after they burned the bodies, an abstract scrawl of dried blood and brain, like sidewalk chalk.

Sanity is the scarcest resource we have, her old instructor told her.

Later, during block checks, her squad went door-to-door in a suburban neighborhood. She smashed open the door to the north half of a beige duplex and found a family of four in the living room, hugging each other, crying. Their hands were joined over something on the floor, small, electronic, wired.

She saw herself, for an instant, as they saw her: eight-foot titan of oilslick-black armor and bulging compound eyes.

"Take cover," she broadcast. "I think we've got a four-oh-six here." She raised her rifle to kill them.

Detonation an instant later. The blast tossed her back into the street as the house unpeeled itself like a tomato on a firecracker.

Explosions daisy-chained down the block: all the houses going up, one by one. At the edge of her vision, debris and body parts pattered down into a swimming pool. Gas and water mains ruptured and the steam rolled across the neighborhood like morning fog.

Her squadmates moved through the mist, checking each other's armor, exchanging terse reports. "I guess we got a positive," Patterson said. Someone chuckled.

"*Bloodhound four-one, check in,*" her link said. Captain Andire, in orbit, probably worried.

"Warlord six, Bloodhound four-one, no casualties," Gunny Giannocenti said. "Sequential IEDs. Just amateur work. Lot of collateral."

That night, back in the forward operating base in the city's Secure Zone, she cried until she had dry heaves.

The only one who was not affected by the bloodshed was a man named Thurston. Barely two hours after the initial drop, he met an aide at the Secure FOB's security desk, a gorgeous redhead named Clarisse. They were together that night and effectively inseparable by the end of the week. He was head-over-heels in puppy-dog love. Nobody was more motivated to save Fern than Thurston.

Keshaun and Patterson helped him out by standing watch outside the storeroom where he rendezvoused with Clarisse. "I'm going on some training maneuvers tonight," he'd say. "Make sure I've got security." And they'd stand out there and roll their eyes while things fell over and crashed around inside the room.

Thurston's performance evaluations were 10 percent better than anyone else in the company. Gunny Giannocenti put him on point every day, but he never cracked.

Four months into the Fern campaign, just after Thurston had started talking about picking out a ring, the noises coming out of the storeroom got a little wild and then they heard Thurston scream. Patterson kicked the locked door down. Keshaun ran in with her taser up to find Thurston naked on the floor and the girl Clarisse straddling him with some unhappy percentage of Thurston's genitalia dripping blood in her right hand.

In her left she had a half-inch monomolecular scalpel that might have cut through combat armor. The scarlet stain went up to her wrist.

Clarisse said: "I want all of you fucking bastards to know that you aren't safe anywhere."

Keshaun tased her half a second after she put the knife through Thurston's throat. When she spasmed and fell off him, the blade cut sideways and opened his jugular.

When they woke up one of his clones and put his last download into it he demanded to know what had happened to Clarisse. They lied to him, he saw through it, and then they told him the truth.

He killed himself twice, first with his rifle, then by hanging. When they were down to his final dirtside body they clamped him in irons and left him in the Secure Zone, unable to send him back to the ship in case he had picked the viral up from Clarisse.

But the scans said Clarisse was not Loom. Her sisters and her parents had been. Alpha Company had killed them during their third day on Fern, in a suburb called Little Mud. Word had reached her.

After that they all treated the "Secure Zone" like the joke it was.

At the time, Keshaun had wondered what it would take to make her crack like Thurston. And she had tried to stow a seditious line of thought: is this worth it? Is it worth fighting the Loom, if the fight costs us so much?

Is that why we crack?

Keshaun awoke to the feel of sweaty sheets and Captain Andire's face, swimming into focus above her.

"I gave you an order and I expect it to be obeyed," he said. "No more trips off the crew deck. Am I understood?"

"Sir!" she said. "Why are we short on clones, sir?"

"One more violation and I'm going to put you in solitary, Private," Andire said. "So turn your locator back on. That's an order, too."

Keshaun thought about the situation.

What she knew was that her body had been invaded and that someone had to be responsible. She had an objective: find the bastard. She had a way to achieve it. Now she needed to execute.

Andire had once said: work with the assets you have.

She drew her service pistol from her thigh holster, in its habitual place on the right side of her bed, and pulled the covers away like a stage magician conjuring something. Andire twitched and went for his own gun. She had him covered before he made contact with the grip.

"Turn around," she said. "Walk."

Andire took deep, slow breaths and raised his hands. "Don't screw yourself over, Private. Don't throw away your chance to get out of this clean."

She got out of the bed sidelong, weapon steady on him. "I said walk."

Captain Andire was not the *ship's* captain, nor the overall commander of ground forces; he was just a company commander. But his absence would be noticed. She had minutes at the outside. *Costaguana* was huge and sparsely populated, but it was not blind.

She shepherded him down into the logistics deck, through the bone stations and the gunnery, into the fast-clone tanks. He kept his hands behind his head and his eyes forward, even when she guided him out onto the catwalk over the vats.

"I'm going to ask you a few questions," she said. "If you delay or hedge, I've got plenty of spares to work on." She gestured down into the vats with her free hand. "Your corpse would be good motivation."

"This is really unexpected, Ritter," Andire said. There was something wry in his voice. "I thought you liked me."

"I don't want to do this. I really don't. But goddamn it, sir, I am right on the edge." She checked her sight picture. "There is this *thing* inside me that I don't want there, and I need to know why."

She swallowed and plunged on, running on intuition and half-baked theories. "I know someone thawed and inseminated me mid-cryo. So who the hell did it? Was it an experiment? Black ops? Who is the father?"

"Patterson," he said. "Patterson is the father. Your battle buddy."

"Screw you," she snapped. "Don't fuck around with me."

"It was Patterson. I have proof." Very slowly he curled his fingers back and released the command cell on his left wrist. It fell to the deck and he kicked it back toward her.

She scooped it up and held it in front of him. He spoke to it: "On. Clear all access restrictions. Authorization Andire, voiceprint match, check duress. Password `Cecilia.'" "

The cell came alive under her touch. Bizarrely, it seemed to agree that Andire was under no duress. He was calm.

She said: "Open search. Paternity data. Private Ritter, Keshawn. Vocalize first result."

"Password `immortals,'" Andire added, unprompted.

The cell spoke in an uncanny burr. "CMO's conclusion is that the father of the child is Private Patterson, Mandar. Gestation progress approximately two biological months; estimated date of conception three months ago, on Hathor colony, mid-op, with mid-partum suspension due to cryosleep, duration one month. Investigation of possible rape waived by Captain Andire, Shawn, reason: extenuating strategic circumstances, authorization - "

She had to force herself not to fire. "Rape?" she said. "You're going to try to pin this on Patterson *raping me*? On a world we were never even deployed to? We were leaving Jupiter three months ago, Andire."

"We were on Hathor," Andire said. "Winning. For a change."

"I told you not to fuck with me," she said. "We were at Jupiter."

Andire was speaking slowly now, the way he did under fire, when people started to die. "It was Patterson. He cracked when you had to kill the kids, Private, when you had to waste a whole schoolyard for the second time. He went stark raving mad that night. You had the chance to shoot him dead before he started, but you didn't take it. Afterward, you told me to forgive him, you said he didn't know what he was doing, that he was your friend. You said it was your fault. That you had given him the wrong signals."

Her blood was hot in her ears and her lungs seemed to work only grudgingly. She talked over him while he said all this, repeating: "I had an implant. I can't get pregnant. It lasts ten years. I had an implant!"

Andire sighed and rocked on the balls of his feet. "You don't have an implant anymore, because you're not the same you."

Memory of running yesterday, of the feeling that her legs were not quite *hers*, that all the subtle learned patterns of her body were incrementally off—

"We never torched any schools!" she shouted. "We were never *on* Hathor! Hathor is closer to Earth than Snowflake! It's clean as a goddamn whistle!"

When she shouted her gun twitched a little up, and a little left, and Andire spun down and right and jumped. He went into the nearest vat, in among the bodies, and kicked as he hit. The splash of straw-colored amniotic gel blinded her and she roared at him, furious.

By the time she had a shot, he was deep among the hibernating corpses, going for a maintenance hatch on the far end of the tanks. He was gone, deeper into the ship.

She turned the other way and ran, into the bowels of the vats, his last words ringing in her ears with each frantic heartbeat. *You're not the same you.*

She did not follow Andire. First she made sure that he could not follow her. His cell was still open to her commands. "Disable unit tracking," she said.

"Done," it said.

She trotted out of the vat room and deeper into the beast. The slabs of slate-black neuro-mimetic cell storage that held her company's digital backups were behind an armored bulkhead. She used Andire's command cell to open the security doors. The air that came out was dry and flat but strangely charged.

She went in. The NMCs stood like stacks of tar pancakes in neat rows, each tower of cells scaffolded by armored supports as tough as warship hull. Arm-thick black cables made impressionistic hydras in the space between.

Keshaun went to the nearest tower and put Andire's command cell up against an interface jack. "Connect," she said.

"Online. Limited access only."

"Give me the upload activity log for Alpha Company," she said. "Display."

If what he said was true . . .

The screen went blue and then white alphanumeric characters marched across it in an eyeblink:

snowflake theater upload log, alpha company

no activity

The log was empty. Her unit was not being backed up. The nightly implant burns were meaningless; the data was being thrown away before it ever reached *Costaguana's* vault. It was just a show.

You're not the same you. What did it mean?

"List previous theaters," she said. Before Snowflake, Alpha Company had deployed on Fern and Nova Aniva.

select, the screen said. fern theater. nova aniva theater. god's grace theater. forgiven theater. conestoga theater. chorus theater. hathor theater. snowflake theater. total deployment time +39 months.

Thirty-nine months on record. Most of it on worlds she never remembered visiting.

An elite unit lasts twenty months in combat with the Loom before total breakdown and the onset of psychosis.

She began to tremble.

"Display last major transfer operation," she said.

download operation. hathor theater, day 118. authorization: andire, captain shawn I.

A download meant data taken out of storage and placed in their heads. Usually that was a resurrection.

"Who was downloaded?" she said.

alpha company, the screen said. all enlisted personnel.

"What was downloaded to Alpha Company?" Her voice cracked.

complete overwrite using brainstates from nova aniva theater, day 219 (victory day), plus supplementary scripted material (logistical ops at jupiter).

They had all been wiped clean, their memories replaced with earlier versions of themselves. She remembered Nova Aniva like it was last month . . . but that was a lie, a fabrication; it was years in her past.

"Why?" she said. "For God's sake, why? What was the logged justification?"

maintain peak combat effectiveness. counteract collapse of morale and unit integrity. avoid prolonged combat psychosis and postmortal disassociation.

And she understood.

Keshaun did something in the NMS stacks that took a little time but a great deal of concentration. She almost did not finish. Her implants seared the inside of her skull and made her cry out in agony and heave bile onto the deck.

operation complete, the command cell said. stand by. . . .

She felt their footsteps through the decking before she ever heard them, the *patter-patter-patter-pause* legbeats of shipboard security drones: low-slung tarantula-hulled machines sniffing out her chemical traces.

She ran.

"Hey," her command cell said, in a man's voice. Andire. He could not have made his way back to the crew deck yet, but there was no shortness of breath. He was waiting nearby. "Private, can you hear me?"

"Piss off," she said. "I turned off the locator."

"I don't want to hurt you or the child," he said. "I'm going to explain what happened. I need you to understand that this was your choice."

Keshaun opened a hatch with a jab of the command cell and took the next corner at a dead run, her bare feet gripping the deck. Signage pointed her onward, deeper into the ship, away from the drones and in the general direction Andire might have gone. She still had her pistol, and a way to find him.

"I am just fine with hurting the child," she said. "I don't want Patterson's goddamn rape baby."

"That's not what you said then."

"You're lying."

"He nearly shot himself when he realized what he'd done. You stopped him. You told him that the mission was more important, that you had a job to do, that it was as much your fault as his. I don't know if you believed it, but you were strong."

She had nothing to say to that except the desire to cry like a child. She had trusted Patterson like a brother. She had trusted herself never to be so stupid.

Her mother had said the same sort of things about her father. *It's my fault. I provoke him. He doesn't mean to hurt me.*

When Keshawn spoke again her throat was tight. "You wiped us and rolled us back, didn't you? That's the big secret? Instead of backing us up, you've been reverting us."

"Yes. You were at peak effectiveness after Nova Aniva. Not much later, the reaper rage began to set in."

Pieces were falling into place in her head. One of the ship's clocks, running years ahead. Empty ordinance bays. The scars on Patterson's back, the ones she did not remember him having after Nova Aniva.

They had never returned to Earth. They had moved on, fighting on world after world, hitting the Loom relentlessly. Three years of battle, not the mere months she remembered.

The deception must have been immense.

"So did we make a difference?" she asked.

"We saved every colony we dropped into. We were the best, Private, probably the reason they're not at Earth already. I think we might even be pushing them back."

"And it drove us batshit insane," she said, because she could imagine no other reason that Patterson could be driven to rape her, and no other reason that she would assume the blame.

Down a steep ladder. Long, flat dash along a companionway. She cut her bare foot on something raw and metal and kept going without breaking stride. Equipment damage.

"Of course it did. We kept up an unsustainable pace. The rollback at Hathor was the second. The first was after Forgiven. In that one I edited out your memories of unit members that we'd lost for good. Peirune. Lojack. A few others."

"Who?"

"Exactly."

"And the missing clones in those tubes?"

"We had casualties. You died on Forgiven. That's why your contraceptive implant didn't work; your replacement body wasn't grown with one. The hormones get in the way."

"If he raped me on Hathor," she rasped—running, still running—"how the hell did I manage to keep the baby? We were there for two months after the . . . attack."

"You were in the field, so you kept your period suppressed. You assumed you still had an implant, because you believed you were in the same body you'd had on Nova Aniva, the same body you were born in. You had no reason to believe you could be pregnant. And you were still fighting alongside Patterson. By your own choice."

"You motherless bastard. You *must* have known. You do those goddamn medical checks."

She spared a moment to glance at the command cell and check something. Green lights winked at her: PROCESSING COMPLETE. A hatch opened before her when she gestured at it.

"I needed you both to stay focused on the mission, so I kept it quiet. Then the Loom nearly killed Patterson in an ambush. It wasn't clear that he was going to make it, and he hadn't been backed up since Nova Aniva. I had to tell you both then. I asked you what you wanted to do about the baby."

The web of scars on his back that she had not remembered from Nova Aniva. He had earned them on Hathor, after the rape.

"And we made a deal, Private, the three of us. You were both broken, deep in psychosis, completely cracked. I could've cleared your memories, aborted the fetus, and rolled you back. It would've been the smart thing to do; you're a good soldier, a valuable fighter. But I couldn't live with the idea that this could happen again. Keeping you and Patterson together was dangerous. So I offered to let you keep the fetus—it was what Patterson wanted—and in exchange, I'd use your pregnancy as a reason to ship you home. Get you out of the killing. Get you away from him. And you accepted, Ritter. You wanted out."

A deal. Get her away from her attacker, from the man she'd trusted with her life. Get her out of the bloodbath and the psychosis.

Send her home in disgrace. And she'd *agreed*?

"You're lying," she hissed. "I would never make that call. I am not a fucking coward."

But she thought of her mother, and the way Mom had quietly accepted Dad's abuse, right up until the end.

"Everyone breaks, Ritter," Andire said. "Even the best. Even you."

Had she broken badly enough to seize the child as a way out? Could the combat psychosis really have driven her that far? Or was this all just a lie to place the blame on her?

No way to know. No bearing on the present. She was as divorced from that person as from this body that had betrayed her. She had to execute.

"You've murdered this entire unit twice over," she said. "You killed the people we were and replaced us with the people you needed us to be."

"Knowing what happened to Patterson, do you honestly regret what I did? Would you want the reaper rage back? Or your memory of the rape?"

Almost on him. "Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because I want you to know that you made a choice."

Not her. Someone she'd never wanted to become.

"Hey, Andire," she said. "You should have turned your locator implant off."

"I wouldn't be telling you all of this if I didn't want you to find me."

She went through another hatch and moved out into a green, warm compartment, echoing to the steady drip of water. One of the ship's greenhouses. The command cell told

her Andire's locator was twenty meters along the main row, behind an industrial-size ceramic planter.

Keshaun went down the row, sweeping left and right with her pistol, and snapped around the corner toward him.

She found the bloody cylinder of his locator implant lying on the floor next to a discarded knife. She realized her mistake just as Andire hit her in the back like a weapons-grade rhino. The impact threw her to the deck. She struck hard, hands up and in a diamond to break her fall.

By the time she had her breath back, he had her pistol and four meters of distance. His right arm dripped from a long, slender wound where he had cut his locator free.

He kept the gun on her.

"Do it," she spat. "Waste me and the fetus. Clean up your mess. You should've done it when you had the chance, Andire, when I was still in cryo."

"Believe me, I was tempted. I never wanted you to know any of this. I knew waking you up again was a risk." He twitched his free hand, beckoning for her to roll over. "But I'm a good person. I care for my people, Private. Patterson wanted you to be safe. I promised him you'd go home. I could've left you in cryo—but who knows what the freeze would have done to the infant? I promised him, and I promised you."

Patterson and Andire. Brothers-in-arms. Making pacts over her body like they were trading a lucky rifle. Whatever ambiguity had worked into her awareness blew away like blood from an exit wound.

Blame the victim. Compromise her. Make her believe it was her choice. Kind of a familiar playbook.

"Anyone who makes promises to rapists is really stretching my definition of good person," she said.

While she said this she thought: Patterson knew about the rollback before it happened? How. . . ?

Andire blew air through his nose and grimaced. "He is not a rapist. What happened to him could have happened to the best man on Earth. He went insane. You blamed yourself as much as him."

He gestured at her wrist and jabbed with the pistol for emphasis. She threw him the command cell and he caught it. "Ritter," he said, "while this whole thing has been a goddamn mess, there's one thing I want you to know."

She kept still, waiting. "What?"

"I had your consent before the first wipe. I had everyone's consent, in writing, in case C-COM came after me. You all wanted to go the distance, stop the Loom, save Earth. Be heroes. You were willing to be wiped and rolled back."

Galvanic flash of intuited clarity: the picture complete. "You told us before the first wipe, on Forgiven? Did you tell us again on Hathor? Is that how you kept us sane? *Did you tell us that we'd be wiped before he raped me?*"

Andire's mouth curled as if she had just touched a raw wound. "It was the only way to keep the unit going during the school purges. I promised that you wouldn't have to live with the memories of anything you did."

She saw him wince before she even drove the point home. She did it anyway. "You told a bunch of borderline psychotics that they could act without consequence," she said. "And you're shocked that I was raped?"

As she spoke, ugly, imagined possibilities came to her and she threw them at him. "Are you sure it was only Patterson? Or that I was the only one raped? What else did they do after they learned they wouldn't remember?"

He was stone-faced and still.

"That's what's people are going to hear about, Andire."

For a moment he looked as terrified of this as she was, but she saw him master his fear, smother it with necessity and his goddamn patronizing certitude.

He said: "Nobody will listen. What people are going to hear about is the Corps winning the war."

His fingers danced on the cell—probably checking the activity log—but his grip on the pistol did not waver. "C-COM is already begging to know how I keep my unit going. The whole military will move from the backup-and-resurrect model over to the new rollback-to-peak paradigm. Sanity is not going to be a limiting commodity anymore."

"And you decided to risk that whole plan by letting my body keep this fetus? You could've edited me out of everyone's memory, left me in cryo, just aborted the damn thing and kept fighting, but instead you risk it all on *me*?"

He smiled thinly. "Sometimes, Private, I get hung up on morality."

Go to hell, Andire, she thought.

"I'm pretty sure you're wrong on one count," she said. "Somebody's going to listen. Maybe not the people you're expecting, but somebody."

"I don't have anything to hide. The whole flight crew was in on this. When C-COM sees what we've achieved - "

At that moment he read something on the command cell and paled.

The cell chimed and spoke: "Shipboard security reports that Private Ritter has been apprehended aft of Frame 33, near the clone vats. Units 31E and 31F made the arrest. She was out of uniform and covered in amniotic gel."

Keshaun's face was bruising up. She could not grin. She flipped Andire off instead.

Andire spoke rapidly into the cell, clipped and terse. "Wait. Listen. There are *two* of them. She woke up *both* her remaining clones. She gave them both a different message—that one's just the decoy, you have to find the *other* one—"

A sound like a gunshot echoed through the ship's hull.

"Escape pod launch aft of frame 57," the command cell reported. "Dorsal sensor failure. No track. No beacon. Contact lost. Attempting ballistic project. Failed. Attempting optical track. Failed."

Silence.

After a moment, Andire turned the cell off and looked down at her. He smiled: resignation, regret, infuriating paternal concern.

"That's that, I guess," he said. "You know, I have your mother's backlogged correspondence, Private. Letters we couldn't deliver without giving away the date. She's been worried sick about you."

He leaned down to help her up.

Keshaun scythed his legs from under him. He fell against the planter. She rose, got a knee into his groin, and pushed his face down into the dirt. He resisted, so she kneed his testicles four more times and ground his face deeper.

She could not bring herself to kill him.

When he was out cold, she fell away panting, and spat. In the distance she heard: *patter-patter-patter-pause*.

They pulled Keshaun naked from the escape pod's shock gel, like a grotesque pantomimed C-section. Nights on Snowflake were cold, and they had left their stock of thermal blankets back at the FOB—who expected to treat a case of exposure on a combat patrol?—so Gunny Giannocenti carried her all the way back at a quick trot, curled in the arms of her warsuit.

On the way there Keshaun rehearsed what she had to say. She knew she was a newborn, and therefore shaky, but the downloaded memories were bright and clear.

When she was done with her story they all stared at each other. Patterson looked at the ground and made small, spastic drumming motions on the barrel of his rifle.

"So we're not . . . us?" Xonno said. "We're old copies of ourselves? Peak performance specimens?"

"And she's not Ritter either. The real Ritter's up in orbit. God knows what the REMFs will do with her." Giannocenti shook her head in amazement. "Simultaneous clone activation. Jesus. They say that's how the Loom got started. That was a hell of a gamble, Ritter."

Keshaun accepted a mug of hot chocolate from someone behind her with a grateful nod. "She wanted you to know. I'm not sure she cared about anyone else—not Earth, not the press—but when she woke me up, her instructions made it clear that you had to know."

"I'm sorry, man," Patterson said, and began to cry. "I'm so fucking sorry. I don't remember doing it, but I did it, maybe I'd do it again, so I'm really fucking sorry."

There was a moment of horrified silence before Keshaun slugged him in the shoulder. "Man the hell up. We've got work to do. We can hash it out later."

Gunny Giannocenti raised her face to the ceiling. "We're angry, okay, but he says we agreed to do this. Twice, now, we agreed to this. So do we change our minds? Is this really what we signed up for?"

"Can't go on forever," Xu Yifen murmured. "Can't maintain the cycle. Sooner or later it's got to end. Maybe we should ask to get out. Tell him we've done enough. Maybe he'll listen."

"Or maybe he'll just revert us again," Keshawn said.

"Do we mutiny?" Xonno asked. "Try to take the ship? Or wait until we get back to Earth—for real, this time—and go public? And hope he doesn't revert us again before that?"

"I don't know." Keshawn mulled hot chocolate in her mouth and looked around the circle. "From the standpoint of winning the war, it's . . . it's a good plan. Andire is on to something. We saved a lot of planets. A lot of people."

"Screw that," Patterson said thickly. "It clearly doesn't work well enough."

"You don't cover that kind of shit up," Giannocenti said. "That's not right. A soldier gets raped, man *or* woman, you've got to do something about it. Not keep it quiet so your program gets funded."

She shrugged broad, armored shoulders. "It's common decency."

There was a moment of yawning horrified silence as they all looked at each other, wondering: *how many of us. . . ?*

"So what's the plan?" Keshawn said. "When we're done down here, do we bargain? Do we mutiny? Ask him to tell us what's happened next time he reverts us?"

Or, she didn't say, do we do it again? Do we stick with what's worked, victory first and damn the price?

Long silence in the circle of huddled soldiers.

Patterson swallowed and looked at her. "Look, I just want you to know, I wouldn't want you to keep the kid. That's not right. It's just not right."

Keshawn figured that she would be relieved to hear that, if she ever saw herself again.