

The Last Photograph

by Wrestlr

[M/M, MC]

Synopsis: When his brother goes missing, Peter sets out to find him.

Disclaimer: The naked hypnotist strides confidently into your room. His lips curl in what might be a smile as he dangles his shiny crystal pendulum before your eyes and announces, "Listen and obey. If you are not of legal age, or if you are offended by sexual situations, you will leave this place immediately. From here on, no matter how realistic it may appear, everything will seem like fiction to you, a pleasant dream where scientific possibilities and laws may change according to my suggestion. Now, if you are willing, sit back, relax, and enjoy the ride."

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1.

In the photograph, my brother stands second from the left. He came here with a group of his friends. He'd saved his money all year to be able to spend his summer break roaming around South America with his friends, seeing the continent like the residents did, before they headed back to college in the fall. At least, that was the plan.

The photo shows my brother and all five of his traveling friends. They must have gotten someone else to take the picture. In the photograph, they must have just gotten off the boat in this God-forsaken backwater coastal village. They were two weeks into their trip, and a couple of them already had the patchy beards and scraggly hair that college-age backpackers and hostel-stayers aspire to. They're all wearing shorts, flip-flops, and backpacks--shirtless, smiling, squinting against the sun, setting off on the next leg of their summer adventure. At least, that was the plan. But no plan ever turns out quite as expected.

My brother emailed the photo to our mother, attached to a brief *Having a blast, don't worry, love you* message. She forwarded it to me. That was a month ago. That email message was the last time any of us heard from him.

Me, I left the United States Army a few days ago. Special Forces. I did a lot of tours of duty I can't talk about. I loved the Army, but I loved my kid brother too. Somebody had to go look for him.

That's how I came to be in this backwater village, with all my worldly possessions--the few that weren't in storage back home--packed in my duffel bag. There's some tourism here, a few small hotels, but mostly there's just the people who live here and the beach. I couldn't afford the hotels. I could sleep on the beach. If anyone tried to mess with me?-- Well, the Army trained me well.

How was I going to find him? That part I was making up as I went.

The local police were no help. Backpacks, clothes, cell phones--all their gear was found abandoned on the beach, just a klick or two north of where I sat right then. It wasn't robbery, the police said. My brother and his buddies just left all their belongings and vanished. Six Americans go *kapoof* into nothing? I wasn't buying it. Someone had to know something.

I'd been there nearly a week. The village wasn't that big. I'd quizzed nearly every resident in just a couple of days, waving around the print-out of that last photograph, asking the same damned questions: "Have you seen any of them? When? Where?" Some people thought they looked familiar, but nobody much remembered a clutch of tourist kids from nearly a month ago. Tourists were disposable, hardly worth noticing unless they were waving money, then quickly forgotten once the money was spent. One man told me he remembered them--they asked directions to a bar. Another said he told them where to find the local cat house. Just the sort of things you'd expect a bunch of nineteen- or twenty-year-old college fuckheads on summer break to be interested in, and just the sort of dead ends that would've had me pulling my hair out if it weren't still too Army-short to grip.

I slept on the beach, a couple of klicks north of the town. I bathed and shaved in the ocean, but I still had to buy food unless I wanted to spend

all day fishing and scavenging, which wouldn't leave any time for my search. And I was just about out of money.

There was a small resort hotel on the beach, on the northeast corner of town. Sometimes tourists drifted as far north as where I was camping, just walking the beach or looking for a private patch of sand with no one around. They heard about this town or maybe read about the area in some travel magazine article about locations unspoiled by tourism and came looking for the authentic native experience or some happy horseshit like that. But they were usually pretty damned happy just to be able to get a cold beer and a cheeseburger at the hotel, so they never drifted this far north for long.

Late afternoon, after another fruitless day of looking for clues.

I'd finished a swim in the ocean and flopped on the sand to dry, near where I'd stashed my duffel bag. The water was perfect; it was always perfect. A couple of swimsuited tourists, both men, had set up a little towel-and-cooler operation about fifty yards south of me. They probably were tourists from the hotel. I nodded, they nodded back, and we proceeded to ignore each other.

A while later, the brown-haired one in the red swimsuit walked over, offered me a bottle of beer, introduced himself as Mikhail in a Russian accent. "Call me Mick."

I accepted his beer and introduced myself: Peter. "Pietro," Mick said, smiling, converting my name to the Russian version. Pretty soon, his bleach-blond buddy in the madras-checked swim trunks came over too. He introduced himself as Pedro--nothing too unusual about that in South America, but his accent was pure Brooklyn. They were tourists from New York City.

We talked about baseball, football--"American football, too slow," Mick sniffed, but he knew all the teams and admitted a fondness for whoever was beating the crap out of the Dolphins any particular week. At some point Pedro hauled their cooler over to my spot. I pegged them at around their mid-twenties, same as me. At some point, I also pegged them as gay, and definitely more than friends. Maybe it was their gym-bunny bodies. Maybe it was when they asked me if I wanted to have sex with them. I said no and told them I'm happily heterosexual. The rejection didn't seem to bother them. They just nodded.

They told me about how they met as graduate students in NYU's film department, how in the fall they planned to start filming a project of their own, about a beautiful but fiery Latin dancer from Brooklyn who falls in love with an equally headstrong Russian businessman-cum-gangster. They're pleased with the amount of gunfire and explosions their film will contain. When they found out I had just left the Special Forces, they asked a lot of questions about guns and explosions--"For our project's authenticity," Mick said. That's how I spent the rest of the afternoon talking and drinking beer on the beach with the Russian named Mikhail who liked to be called "Mick" and the Latin named Pedro from Brooklyn.

The more outgoing one, Mick, asked if I was staying at the hotel. I told him no, that I was sleeping on the beach not far from there. When he asked why, I told him the short version about my search for my brother and my dwindling funds. "You must come back to hotel with us," Mick said. "Eat a good dinner at the restaurant, our treat." They won't take no for an answer. Mick leaned in and whisper-assured me, "No strings; just dinner." I had no plans, I had to make the trek back to the town anyway for food, and a dinner I didn't have to cook, pay for, or scrounge for sounded good. I accepted their invitation.

I wasn't worried. If their offer turned out to have strings after all?--Well, for the U.S. Army Special Forces I was a mad-dog killer and well-trained in hand-to-hand. I was pretty sure I could defend myself from the advances of a pair of New York film students.

They insisted I order the steak, and it was delicious. They asked more about my search for my brother, what he was like, had he ever done anything like this before, what did the police say, had I quizzed all the locals yet--and what about our waiter Lucas, with whom they'd been flirting some, had I quizzed him yet?

The waiter, friendly, a young, good-looking guy who probably was about eighteen or maybe nineteen, around my brother's age, didn't look familiar, and I said so. He was heading our way with our latest round of drinks. "The photograph, let me show it to him," Pedro said. I was feeling a little sloppy from the beer. I pulled out the printout of that last group photo, unfolded it, smoothed it out on the tabletop.

Pedro asked the waiter in Spanish. My Spanish is good, but Pedro spoke like a native--even his Brooklyn accent disappeared. The waiter finished distributing our drinks, then frowned at the photograph. He said, yes, he remembered them, maybe a month ago--which would be about the right time frame. He remembered because they stayed here at the resort, were boisterous and loud, drank a lot, tipped well. He always remembered the good tippers, in case they came back. Mick and Pedro exchanged a knowing look.

Did the waiter know where they went? Yes, he had told the boys about some old ruins in the jungle to the north, maybe a day's hike away. Few tourists went there. Out of the way. Difficult to reach, but very nice. Rumored to be haunted by the spirits of the original natives who built it. Only the locals knew of it. He was sure they had gone there. Could he

give us directions, maybe arrange for a guide?--We'd be willing to pay, of course, Pedro assured him. And we'd be very grateful, Mick added, also in perfect Spanish. Very, very grateful. There was no mistaking the look he gave Lucas.

We? Pay? Pedro and Mick were going too far. I didn't have the money to pay for anything that wasn't essential, and I didn't remember making my investigation into some Scooby Doo Mystery Tour to supposedly haunted ruins accompanied by a couple of tourists I'd just met.

The waiter smirked, trying to smile. Well, certainly, he would be happy to take us there. He had tomorrow off, and he had a truck, could drive us there himself, most of the way anyway. He knew a back road that ran near there, then the trip could be finished on foot. Cut the trip down to just a couple of hours, plenty of time left over to enjoy the sights if we found no trace of the brother. He would be happy to do this--for the right fee, of course. There was no mistaking his meaning.

I whispered, "Uh, Mick, I don't have much money. Just ask him for directions."

Mick waved me away and continued haggling with Lucas over the fee. They agreed on a number. They agreed on a time--meet in front of the resort at eight in the morning. Mick handed over cash, payment for dinner, a tip, and a sizeable deposit in advance for "guide services" so Lucas could buy gasoline for the trip. Lucas slipped away, obviously happy with the arrangements.

"So it is settled," Pedro said to me in English, Brooklyn accent back in full force. "You will stay the night with us. Our room has a sofa that pulls out to a spare bed. Tomorrow, we go look for your brother."

I made my excuses. This was too much; they didn't have to do this; I

could find the ruins on my own. No need to inconvenience them.

No inconvenience, Mick assured me. It makes perfect sense, he said. No need to trudge all the way back to the beach, then all the way back here the next morning. Better to just stay here on their spare bed. They had more booze in their mini bar; we could continue drinking. And there were adult movies.

I knew what they wanted. I was about to remind them I was heterosexual when Mick added, No strings, and Pedro nodded. Just new friends enjoying some beer and porn before a good night's sleep.

I knew what they wanted. I wasn't drunk enough to go as far as they wanted, but I decided it wouldn't hurt to let them watch. And I did owe them from bringing in another possible lead.

In their room, Mick hit the mini-bar, and Pedro turned on the television. "You like blondes, yes?" he asked me. He navigated his way expertly through the onscreen selections, and seconds later, on the screen a woman and her made-for-porn tit job were climbing out of a barely there bikini and into a hot tub. Mick put a tumbler of vodka in my hand--"cheap American crap, like piss next to even the worst Russian vodka," he complained. I settled down on the couch, carefully taking up too much room for them to join me, to watch the screen and do my part.

Mick and Pedro took their drinks to the king-sized tourist bed. I kicked off the shoes I'd put on before dinner, and peeled off my tee-shirt. I stuck my hand into my jeans and massaged my genitals. My eyes were locked on the screen, where the blonde was rubbing an assortment of pool-cleaning gadgetry between her balloon-breasts and moaning. I sipped the vodka. From the corner of my eyes, I saw Mick and Pedro

kissing, watching me, starting to peel off their clothes, making out now, watching me, naked and probably already hard. I didn't care what they did, as long as they did it over there and to each other.

The onscreen blonde had climbed mostly out of the hot tub and progressed to using the pool attachments for purposes their manufacturers never intended, riding them in a way that made her breasts bounce in time with her moans. I hadn't been with a woman in a long time. The blonde and my hand were doing their job. I lifted my hips and pushed my jeans and underwear down to my ankles. From the bed, someone gasped appreciatively. I'm six-four, Viking-blond, and I have a wide chest with a little hair across my pecs and a tight, well-muscled body thanks to the U.S. Army, but the crowning glory is the thick eight and three-quarters inches I pack between my legs, which was standing straight at attention and thwopped against my navel when it popped free of my pants. I settled back, started stroking it. It needed both hands. I used both hands.

After a couple of minutes, Mick climbed off the bed and knelt beside the couch. He was naked and hard too, but nowhere near my length or thickness. He reached for my cock. I nudged his hand away, still stroking with my other. He reached again, and I knocked his hand away again, this time with enough force to nearly topple him. He wised up and withdrew.

A few minutes later, Pedro took his shot. He crouched naked by the couch and bent his mouth toward my meat. I pushed him away. He tried again, and I pushed him away. "No," I told him. He ignored me and tried a third time, then a fourth, and a fifth. Persistent bastard.

On maybe his tenth attempt, I figured I was drunk enough, and anyway maybe I owed him more than just a show. Maybe there was no harm in

just a blowjob, if I ignored him and paid attention to the blonde on screen. This time, Pedro's lips touched the head of my cock, and I let my hand slide away. His jaw practically unhinged, and he swallowed my thick rod like a snake. Definitely an experienced cocksucker. I've been blown by a lot of women, and there's nothing better than a blowjob when they're an experienced cocksucker. I moaned my appreciation.

Pedro tried to stick his finger up my ass, but no way was I ever going to be that drunk. I pushed his hand away and clamped my thighs tightly together so he couldn't try that again. Pretty soon he was bobbing up and down on my lengthy rod, using his hand to supplement his mouth, as the blonde onscreen bobbed up and down on this pool wand thing she had stuffed up her cunt. Pedro did things to my dick with his tongue that I hadn't felt in a long time, plus a few things I'd never felt before. I put my hands behind my head, displaying my body to Mick while Pedro serviced me.

"Gonna cum," I hissed. I didn't want to cum in his mouth, so I hauled his head off my cock at the last second and finished myself off by hand, spraying my cum on my chest, arm, and hand as a very nice orgasm tore through my body, making all my muscles twitch and jerk. Pedro discretely withdrew. Somebody handed me a towel. I cleaned up, pulled up my jeans, then sprawled out on the couch. The booze, a full stomach, the orgasm, and the soft cushions, so much more comfortable than sleeping on the beach, had me sleepy, and I closed my eyes while Mick and Pedro rutted at each other like bulls on the bed.

2.

The next morning, we met Lucas. He pulled up in this ancient Ford truck; calling it "beat up" would be too kind--it looked like it had been driven off a cliff repeatedly. Mick had brought a backpack, he threw it in the back, and we climbed in. Mick and Pedro rode in the cab with Lucas, and I climbed in the back with Mick's pack and Lucas's toolbox, preferring the open truck bed to the tight squeeze of the cab.

Lucas drove like a maniac. Though he was probably around eighteen, he'd obviously been driving these roads for years. He went way too fast over roads that were way too rough, bouncing me around the truck bed like a rubber ball, and once nearly causing Mick's backpack to go over the side. Might have, too, if I hadn't grabbed it.

The roads turned to dirt, then to a barely there trail into the jungle. Lucas barely slowed. The truck bucked more than an amusement park ride. If I got pitched out, would they even notice I was gone? Bodies disappear quickly in the jungle.

He drove maybe two hours, possibly more--I lost track of time. The jungle was thick, made getting a good read on the sun's position difficult. Still morning, but hard to say when. The truck slowed, rolled into a partial clearing. Now I could hear something other than the sound of my body slamming against the truck again. Lucas stopped the truck, killing the mariachi-rock version of "Twist and Shout" playing on the radio. There was a cinderblock house, the remains of one anyway, being dismantled by the jungle. The others piled out of the cab. I handed Mick's backpack to Pedro and hauled my banged-up self over the side and down to the ground.

While Pedro went off to one side, unzipped, and pissed, Mick was his

usually chatty self. "This place, I love it. The jungle, the beaches. Very beautiful. We started in Mexico City, you know, and that was wonderful, but very much like Manhattan, but it was always hot. And then, we went to Guadalajara and around the coast to Acapulco, and down to Costa Rica, then down the peninsula to here, and the jungle and the beaches are the most beautiful thing I have ever found. We came down here to get drunk on the beaches and fuck. It is also very lucky for us too, because we make such good friends." He grandly waved his arm at Lucas and me. Lucas, returning to our group in the middle of Mick's chatter, smiled nervously. I wasn't sure he spoke English well enough to have understood half of what Mick said.

God help me, I wasn't sure I could get through the day if Mick didn't shut the fuck up.

Lucas hauled two machetes out of his toolbox. He hefted one and offered the other, grip-first, to the three of us. I took it, knowing I could handle it and not sure I trusted the two New York gym-rats with a blade.

Lucas led the way, with me right behind. The underbrush wasn't bad. The trail had been traveled recently, but here, if you turn your back on the jungle for even a couple of days, the jungle kicks your ass and tries to take back what belongs to it. Pedro and Mick brought up the rear. Mercifully, Mick did indeed shut up, apparently willing to lose himself in the ambiance of his jungle adventure and the stories he would tell about it back in the concrete jungle called Manhattan.

The jungle was dense. Too dense to see much beyond the trail. Lucas knew the way. We hiked for at least an hour into the growth. Even in this shade, the summer heat and humidity were choking. Lucas took off his shirt. Mick and Pedro immediately doffed theirs too. A few minutes later, even I had to bow to the necessity and pulled my tee-shirt off,

tucked it in the back of my jeans.

Pedro asked in Spanish how much farther. Lucas laughed and said, also in Spanish, "Those boys, they were all the time saying the same thing when I brought them here: 'How much farther, how much farther.' American boys can be such children!"

I thought to myself, *Those American boys were probably the same age as you, you skinny smart-ass punk.* Then I realized just what Lucas has said. He brought them here? The night before he had said only that he gave them directions. Maybe I wasn't one of the Hardy Boys, but I knew enough to be suspicious. Maybe it was nothing. Maybe he took my brother and his friends on a nice, simple hike through the jungle and back, and then they disappeared sometime later. Maybe there was no connection to my brother's disappearance at all. But there was also the possibility Lucas was the last person to see my brother alive.

Suddenly I was glad to have the other machete. Just in case. I didn't want to be a killer. I didn't want to be a mad dog again. But I would if that's what it took to find out what happened to my brother, rescue him if he was still alive, bury him if he wasn't, and get out of this in one piece.

And then we started finding paver stones underfoot. Then through a little tunnel of trees, and into a broad open place, there were the ruins. I'm not big on sightseeing, but it was pretty cool.

Lucas played tour guide. He pointed out a partial ziggurat that he said must have been the local temple. There was a structure like an arena. "Big" Mick said, impressed.

Lucas said it was where they played a game that involved putting a ball through a stone hoop still mounted on one side of the "court." The other side had already collapsed as the jungle reclaimed the place.

"This is where they put the heads through to score?" Mick asked in English.

Lucas looked confused. Pedro translated what Mick said into Spanish.

"No," Lucas said in Spanish. "They used a ball."

Mick looked at me. "I thought heads?"

"You're thinking of Central America," I tell him. "There's some evidence the losing teams were sacrificed."

"And they played like soccer?"

"Any body part but your hands."

"See, soccer rules. Much better than American football."

I turned away. The time was well past noon now; I was losing patience, and we still had the long return trip to make. "Show me where you took the boys," I said to Lucas in Spanish.

He led us to the collapsing "temple." We picked our way through a gap and down into a space below the ziggurat itself. Pillars supported the ceiling. Sunlight probed through cracks here and there in the ceiling, enough half-light that we could see. Carvings like crawling snake bodies lined the walls.

"This," Lucas said, "was where they got separated."

Separated?

I knocked the machete out of Lucas's hand and a second later had him against the wall, my arm at his neck to let him know how easily I could

break it. I snarled in Spanish, "Okay, asshole--tell me everything, and tell me the truth. Do you understand?"

Lucas's eyes were wide, panicked. I'm a big, strong guy, and the Army trained me well.

Mick and Pedro were stunned. "What are you doing?" Mick asked, tugging at my arm but unable to budge it. Like I said, I'm strong.

I said in Spanish, for Lucas's benefit, "This punk knows a lot more about my brother than he's been telling us." Mick gave up, unslung his backpack, rummaged through it. I snarled, "He said he brought them here, and they got separated. Then what, asshole? Then what happened?"

Lucas gasped around my arm. "I--I--"

If Mick and Pedro were over here, what was making that noise over there? I looked and glimpsed a shadow break away from a pillar and run.

I don't know exactly what I was thinking, but suddenly I was off Lucas and tearing off into the shadows after the runner. He headed back into the darkest part, but I'm fast and heard him directly ahead. I launched myself. My shoulder connected with his hip, and we both went down, rolling on the rough floor. He fought, but I was a trained professional, and I soon had him immobilized on the stones.

He hadn't shaven in a while, and he was a lot thinner, but even in the half-light I recognized his face. Not my brother, but he was the second from the right in that photograph. "You! You're one of Paul's friends. Tell me where he is!"

"Lemme go!" he croaked.

Footsteps ran up behind me. "He caught him!" Mick said.

Under me, the kid struggled fiercely and jabbed: "No! Lemme go!" I still had him down--I weighed more, I was stronger, and I knew what I was doing. He didn't even come close to getting away from me.

"Hold him still," Mick barked. While I had no trouble holding the boy down, I wasn't sure holding him completely still was an option. He wriggled, desperate to escape. I'd let him up once he calmed down, and said so, didn't he know we came here looking for him? What the hell had him panicked like this?

While I was saying that, Mick stuck his hand in the boy's face. He held a small bottle with a mister top--one of those little three-ounce spray bottles. *Fsst!--Fsst!* He squirted it twice in the boy's face.

"What the fuck are you doing?" I snapped at Mick, craning my head to look at him, realizing too late the boy under me was gradually ceasing to struggle.

Fsst!

Mick sprayed me point-blank in the face with something that felt like water but stank like weeds. I yelled, "What the fuck!"

Fsst!--Fsst!

Twice more. I couldn't make my arms or legs work right. I was having trouble thinking right. Everything seemed to spin.

3.

I opened my eyes. It was pitch-dark--I couldn't see anything. I was naked. My hands were tied behind my back.

I lay on my side. At first, I thought I was lying on some kind of grate. No, I was in a cage. Not a cage for holding people--an animal cage, maybe intended for a large dog. It was small, just shy of three feet tall, three feet wide, and five feet deep. Big enough I could lay there and move around some, but not big enough I could sit up fully or even stretch out full length. I'm six foot four and muscular, and my body felt cramped from being folded into nearly a fetal position for a long time.

I rubbed my chin against the wire wall, trying to judge how long I'd been there by my beard stubble. A day? Longer? Less? Didn't feel like a full day's growth yet, so just a few hours, I guessed.

The wire grate floor cut into my flesh. In the dark, I had to investigate with my fingers as best I could, with my hands tied behind me. The mesh was one-inch squares. I could get a finger through, but no more, definitely not my whole hand. I couldn't find the latches. However the door was fastened, I couldn't reach it. I wasn't even one hundred percent sure where the door was.

I heard someone moving around. Not stumbling in the dark. Moving confidently. Probably wearing night vision goggles or something. I listened intently.

Whoever it was finished whatever he was doing. Footsteps approached me. The deep male voice boomed out of the darkness only a few feet away and over me. "Name?"

I said, "Peter."

"Why are you here?"

"I'm trying to find my brother. His name is Paul. Is he--"

"Quiet."

I was smart enough to shut up.

"We know who you are. Your brother is here. Now you are too. If you are a good boy and learn your lessons well, you will earn privileges. If you are not, you will earn punishments. Do you understand?"

I didn't, but I said, "Yes."

I heard footsteps walk away, a door open and click shut. The interview was over. No sense calling out, because no one was there to respond. But now I knew two things.

First, the voice was Mick's, only without the Russian accent.

Second. I knew my brother was alive, and close by. That felt like a victory.

Time passed. In the darkness, I tested my bonds, my cage, my senses. Without vision, I depended more on hearing and smell. The area around me was silent, but it smelled like a kennel.

At some point, my bladder reached capacity. I wouldn't give my captors the satisfaction of crying out. I held it as long as I could, until the pressure built beyond uncomfortable. I maneuvered my hips to the cage wall and let the piss flow through the mesh. Ahh, relief.

I knew what they were doing. I'd been trained to resist it. They were using darkness, confinement, and degradation to break my spirit and my mind. Brainwashing takes time, but it's remarkably simple and remarkably effective. Boredom, isolation, and sensory deprivation were the first step, would numb my mind and lower my resistance. If they left me here long enough, my mind would go blank, become desperate for stimulation--any kind of stimulation. My mind would turn on itself, question everything about my sense of identity. Once they used this first step to break my sense of self, they'd try to turn me, tell me I should change, convince me. I'd come to believe them, to crave their slightest approval, to desire the change they demanded. Then they could mold me into whoever or whatever they wanted. But that would take time.

I could distance myself from the degradation temporarily. I could deal with the isolation and the darkness. All I needed to do was wait for an opening, that one time they screwed up. I'd make my escape, find my brother, get out of there, and bring back the authorities. I just hoped they didn't wait too long to screw up.

Some time later, my bowels cramped. I needed to shit. I couched my ass into one corner of the cage and voided my bowels. I made a mental note to block off that area from the way I used the space in my cage. I didn't want to roll in my own shit.

The metal grid floor of the cage bit into my skin. I ignored it. I dozed.

"I see, filth, you've already learned your new home is also your toilet."

The voice startled me from a half-sleep. I hadn't heard footsteps approach, hadn't heard anything. I should have heard. I turned my head in the darkness toward where I thought the voice came from.

Mick's voice in the blackness sounded as if he were kneeling beside my

cage, just a few inches away but behind me. I could hear the smile in his voice, the confidence. That was disturbing.

"Mick, what the fuck?" Meaning, *what the fuck is going on, where the fuck is your accent, why the fuck is this happening, is your name even Mick, what the fuck happens next*--all sorts of things. But there was no response. I rolled myself as best I could in the confines. "What the fuck is going on here?"

"If you behave and do as you're told, filth, you will earn privileges. The first privilege will be a mat for the floor of your cage."

"I want to see my brother."

Silence.

"Mick?"

"Your brother is healthy and quite happy. His friends, too. They are being trained. Just like you will, if you behave. We have broken many men here. There is no shame in yielding to us. Cooperation just helps the process go faster. Your brother did not fight us long. There is no need for you to suffer either when you too can cooperate instead."

I kept my mouth shut.

"No protest, filth? Good."

Something slid along the cage wire. In the darkness and silence, my hearing had become preternaturally sharp.

"Open your mouth."

Something poked my lips. "What is it?"

"Nourishment. Open your mouth and suck."

A straw slid between my parted lips. Yes, Mick definitely wore infrared goggles or some other night vision device. He had no trouble seeing in the darkness.

I sucked. A bland semi-liquid, tasting vaguely like oatmeal and beans. The blandness was calculated to give me no taste stimulation, no respite from the deprivation. I sucked and swallowed, suddenly ravenous. I drank the mixture until the straw sucked at air on the other end.

The straw was plucked out of my lips. I heard footsteps. "Mick?" I begged, my first failure, but heard only the soft click of the door shutting.

Time passed. A day? More? Who knew? My hands remained tied behind my back. The restraints were not tight, but they prevented movement effectively. I dozed, slept, sang old songs in my head. At some point early on, I'd accidentally kicked my feet through my shit in the corner; my feet and calves were coated. Periodically, Mick would push a straw through the bars to feed me, saying only, "Eat." When my bladder burst or my bowels cramped, I'd relieve myself as best I could in the corner. With insufficient room, though, my lower body was caked with dried piss and shit.

More time. I woke from a doze with the sudden sense that I was not alone. I was hungry. "Mick?" I bleated, wanting food or even the human contact of knowing he was there. I immediately hated myself for what saying his name revealed. He had stopped talking to me except to tell me to eat, but that one word spoken in the darkness meant I was not alone, at least for those few minutes.

Something rattled. The wire floor vibrated against my touch-deprived

skin. Near my feet, the sound of metal on metal meant the door was being opened. I briefly contemplated kicking it, knocking whoever this was backward, but with my arms tied I wouldn't be able to get out of the cage quickly enough to press the advantage. No, I needed to wait for a better opportunity.

"Out, filth." Mick's voice.

My body protested as I made forced it to move. Inactivity made my joints stiff. I managed to get myself turned around and pushed myself toward where my feet had been. Underneath me, the metal grate of the cage became a concrete floor.

"On your feet."

With my hands behind my back, getting my feet under me was difficult. I staggered my way upright. My legs felt unsteady, but I was standing for the first time in ... how long?

A hand grabbed my arm and pulled me. Unready, I nearly fell but managed to stumble along.

"Your first lesson. Stand there, filth. Do not move."

Something told me to keep my mouth shut, not ask questions. I stood right where I was. I heard something slide, then water rushing loud as thunder. A high-pressure hose. Mick was hosing out the cage.

"Stay still."

Suddenly water hit my chest. I yowled my surprise before I could stop myself. This was not the same high pressure spray I'd heard blasting the cage, just a regular hose, but unexpected and strong enough to knock me

back half a step. The water was cold--not chilled, just the cold of having not been heated. I'd been through worse. I managed to keep my footing. Mick sprayed my body from feet to chest. My skin roared with the force and sensation of something touching it.

"Close your eyes."

Mick sprayed my face. I sputtered through the soaking, turning my head this way and that to avoid the pressure on my eyes and sensitive parts.

The water stopped. I heard the hose and metal nozzle hit the concrete, water running down a drain in the floor. Footsteps in the water, closer. Something rough touched my skin, something slick. I smelled soap. Mick scrubbed my skin hard with something. I grunted but said nothing. He lathered my chest, my arms, my neck, my face--more sputtering--stubble, my military-short hair, and my back. He skipped down to my legs.

"Squat a little."

I bent my knees, bent my torso forward a few degrees. With a lighter touch, his hand ran the soap between my ass cheeks, which had parted slightly from the squat. His fingers lingered over my asshole. I pressed my lips together and accepted the indignity. His finger traced slow circles around my pucker. Sensing he was watching me through his goggles for a reaction, I kept my eyes forward and my expression impassive. He pressed his finger inside to the first knuckle, forcing an involuntary grunt from me.

"Like that, huh, filth?"

I said nothing.

"I said, you like that, filth? You say, 'Yes, sir.'" He punctuated my pushing his finger deeper inside my ass.

"Yes, sir!" I barked. It hurt a little, but I'd suffered through worse.

"Good boy."

His finger withdrew. I heard him lather his hands. I expected him to attack my ass again, but instead he reached between my legs from behind and soaped my nut sack, rolling my balls around in his hand, testing the size and weight of them. His rough touch felt good--better than good. Mick knew what he was doing. My cock began to swell. I felt myself blush. Fortunately, he couldn't see that from where he knelt behind me.

"Stand up straight."

I heard Mick come around in front of me. His soapy hand grasped my mostly hard cock, making me gasp again. He stroked it. "Nice," he said. After a few strokes, he had me fully hard, all eight and three-quarter inches. His hand felt great, sliding slowly and gently along my shaft. I found myself wanting, needing, craving his hand to keep stroking.

"Ahh!" I choked. My balls began pumping, orgasming. My cum spurted and mixed with the soap covering Mick's hand.

"Good boy, filth."

I felt both shamed by what I'd let him do and pleased by his praise, pleased I'd earned praise from him. Fuck!--That meant they were getting to me.

The spray resumed, gentler this time, as Mick rinsed the soap off my body. Then the hose dropped to the floor again.

Something poked my lip. "Open." The straw slid into my mouth and I sucked the bland mixture. I was hungry. It was filling. This time, it tasted slightly more of peas and carrots than beans.

"Name?"

"Peter."

"No." Something tapped my chest and--*zap!*--an electric jolt burned at me, even the tiny flash of blue-white light nearly blinding after my time in darkness. I staggered back half a step, more surprised than hurt. The pain was nothing I couldn't handle.

"Name?"

If I were going to try to break someone, I'd attack their core sense of selfhood, starting with their name. Changing their name is the first step to changing who they are.

"Name?" Impatient.

Had Mick told me what name they would use to try to break me? What had Mick called me? Then I remembered.

"Filth?"

"Very good, Filth."

Something clasped my shoulder. I flinched, but it was only a hand, a gentle congratulatory squeeze.

"Why are you here?"

Days ago, I'd said I came to find my brother. That answer would get me

another zap. I tried, "I don't know, sir."

Nothing. Then, "Why are you here?"

What were my options? *To be broken?* Too self-aware--I couldn't let them know I understood what was happening. *To cooperate?* Too vague. What had Mick said that first day? I'd turned every word over and over in my head since looking for clues.

"To be a good boy and learn my lessons well?"

Silence.

Nothing.

"Yes, that's correct." Mick sounded surprised. "Very good, Filth." The squeeze on my shoulder lingered longer this time.

I heard something rustle. Mick ignored me for several long minutes. A hand on my arm led me briskly across the floor again.

"On your knees, Filth. Back in your cage." His voice was gentler this time, less hard, more the way he would speak to a puppy.

I knelt. My knees and shoulder found the bottom and one side of the cage. I knee-crawled my way inside. Mick shut the door behind me, locking me in again.

There was a mat on the floor of my cage.

4.

A door opened, and the lights came on. I flinched, blinded, eyes clamping shut, dazzled after so long in darkness. A man I didn't recognize in a generic uniform led in a naked youth. I didn't recognize the youth either at first--he was glassy-eyed and freshly shaven, body hairless as a newborn's except for his eyebrows, and even his head was shaved--but it was Paul's friend, the one I'd tackled at the ziggurat. He had something around his head, a gold metal strip, maybe a quarter-inch tall and as thick, running around his forehead and cranium, a small bandage over it at the back of his skull. He shuffled along, as though sleepwalking, behind the stranger. The stranger led him to another cage, the same as mine, with a mat across the bottom. The friend climbed in, curled up as if going to sleep. The stranger shut and locked the cage, pulled a small device from his pocket, poked at a few buttons on it, and walked away.

"Hey! What happened to him?" I asked, nudging my head toward the youth.

The man ignored me. He switched off the lights and left.

I'd seen the room, though. I knew the layout now.

I was still going over my memory of looking around the room when I heard someone near my cage. I'd gotten used to the sound of the kid breathing quietly in the cage several feet from mine. The sounds covered the someone's approach.

"Sir?" I asked the darkness, hungry for food, for the bathing when Mick would touch me, the simple human contact.

The cage door opened. "Out, Filth." Mick's voice. I found myself grateful for his company.

He hosed down my cage. He hosed down my body. But this time, after he soaped and rinsed me--"On your knees."

I knelt.

"Lean forward. Further. More."

My hands were still restrained behind my back. I feared if I leaned forward much more, I'd lose my balance and fall face-first. My shoulder met something, solid enough to bear my weight, and I leaned against it.

Mick positioned my ass in the air. With my hands restrained behind my back, balancing on my knees and shoulder was tricky. His fingers poked between my ass cheeks. He found and jabbed them up into my hole.

"Uhng!" I protested, surprised by the sudden invasion.

His fingers entered me as far as they could go. My ass spasmed and contracted and tried to eject the intruders, but Mick worked them deep inside me. He had lubed them, and I was thankful for that.

Mick took his time working his fingers around inside my ass. I'd had fingers inserted for medical exams, but never like this. I could take this. No matter what he threw at me, I could take it.

"Tight ass, Filth. You a virgin back here? Get ready for my dick."

I felt him kneel behind me. He slapped my butt a few times, the suddenness made me gasp. Mick laughed and spanked me again, harder. Then he placed his erect cock between my butt cheeks and shoved. The head felt like something the size of a fist inside me and I yelped--

"Ahh!"--before I could stop myself. Mick kept pushing until the head and shaft of his cock was inside me.

Pain roared through my body, stopping me from thinking about anything except the intrusion in my ass. I trembled and my shoulder nearly fell off its prop.

Mick pulled back, then slammed back in, repeating that maneuver over and over. He moaned.

I felt the excess lube drip down the back of my ball sack. I was getting used to the pain. My cock was soft--this was not erotic for me at all--and I could handle the pain. It was proof I was not dead inside yet.

Mick reached under my stomach and grabbed at my cock. His fingers were lube-slick, but my cock refused to get interested. The pounding in my ass prevented my cock from getting hard for his massaging hand. He tugged at my flaccid prick with rapid, yanking strokes.

He fucked me without mercy, and I refused to beg for any. "Gah!" he cried finally, and his body tensed, and he collapsed across my back. My shoulder slipped and, and my head fell against the concrete. Mick clung to me for a minute. I felt his softened cock slide from my tormented asshole.

Mick pulled away. I heard a plastic snap, the sound of a condom being removed.

Mick's hand gripped my arm and he hauled me to my feet. He led me through the darkness. The friction of walking made my asshole protest.

"Kneel."

Cage time. I went down to my knees.

"In you go, Filth."

I crawled forward.

"Stop."

I was halfway into the cage, but I froze. Mick fiddled with one of my wrists, and my hands came loose. "Thank you, sir," I breathed, feeling the ache of my long immobilized arms suddenly swinging free.

"Inside."

The gate closed behind me.

I said, "A question, please, sir?"

Mick sighed--but I had said *please* and *sir*. "What?"

"The kid." I nodded toward where I thought the kid's cage was in the darkness, knowing Mick could see. "What happened to him, please?"

"He cannot be trained the usual way. Perhaps his time alone in the jungle is to blame--it can make a man crazy sometimes. He has been haloed. That will force his obedience. You would do well to remember and learn from this. Otherwise, a man like you?--nosing around where you don't belong, asking questions--you might've disappeared into the jungle never to be seen again. We know you were military. Your training will be an asset if you learn your lessons. That is the only reason you are here and still alive, Filth, instead of rotting under some tree back there in the jungle."

5.

I investigated the gate of my cage. Now that I could move my arms--now that I'd done some pushups as best I could in the too-short cage, and some crunches and other exercises to get the blood flowing and muscle tone coming back--I needed to investigate the latch. I had to be silent, because I'd already learned Mick would sometimes be nearby without me hearing him.

I heard someone crying softly in the darkness. The naked youth, whimpering

I whispered, "Hey. You okay?"

Silence, then a shaky voice, "Who's there?"

My name is Filth. "My name is Peter. I'm Paul's brother."

"You're the guy who jumped me, right? Back at the ruins? Are you really Paul's brother?"

"Yeah." Meaning *all of the above*. "I came looking for him," I added, which explained how I came to be there. The details could wait.

He told me his name was Justin. He told me about how Lucas showed them the ruins, then some other guys jumped them. They drugged Paul and the rest. Justin got away, hid in the jungle. He was terrified of the jungle--Lucas had told them stories about all the jaguars and snakes and poisonous frogs and spiders that could kill a man in seconds--so he stuck near the ruins. Sometimes men came back to look for him, but he always got away. Sometimes they left food, but he never touched it, fearing it was drugged. Instead, he learned to find fruit in the jungle. He thought

the isolation was bad--maybe he went a little crazy. He didn't know where this place was, but the trail on which Lucas had led them to the ruins came from the south, while the men looking for him always came and went to the northwest. He thought the ruins were nearby, but just a drop site, a distraction.

I asked if he had seen Paul. No.

He asked what I thought was going on. I said I thought we were being subjected to psychological torture--I did not say *brainwashed*. All he said to that was, "Shit."

After a while, he asked if I knew why. I didn't have an answer for that.

From what he told me, they hadn't bound him like they had me. He was just a college student--they weren't afraid of him. He said he had quickly figured out the latch and kept sneaking out of his cage. He had tried to escape but the room door was always locked. They weren't much worried about us getting out of the cages since we couldn't get out of the room.

I heard something metallic rattle, heard a door creak open from the direction of Justin's voice. I heard something shuffle closer, something bumped my cage, groping, searching quickly. Justin's whisper came from right outside. "Can I come in? I really need ..."

"Okay."

He worked the gate of my cage open and slipped inside. We sat cross-legged, side by side, knees barely touching. In the darkness that slight contact was how we confirmed the other's continued presence.

They had moved him along much faster, had only kept him in darkness for less than a day. They had a drug, like the spray they'd used on us at

the ziggurat. It numbed the mind, made him feel cooperative and docile. They used it to make sure he was controllable, followed orders.

They had technology, a chair, a screen--it assaulted the brain with images. He said it was like some science fiction movie where subliminal messages turned people into programmed puppets. Justin said the images hammered away at his head until he couldn't think straight. The technicians weren't pleased, though--they said the normal programming would not work on him, something about his brain--and then they gave him a drug that knocked him out. When he woke up, they had installed this band, this "halo," around his head. He said it whispered things into his head, made him feel like a zombie, unsure which thoughts were even his.

That part sounded weird. I decided to ignore that. I touched the metal band, though. It was on tight and didn't budge. "Ow," Justin protested when my fingers strayed too close to the bandage I'd seen at the back of his skull. "It's okay--just real sore."

He leaned against me. I put an arm around his shoulder and listened to his snuffles and small sobs in the darkness.

You have to remember who you are, I told him. No matter what they do to you. Remember who you are. Hold on to that. Sooner or later, we'll get free. We'll get Paul. We'll get out of there. Just hold on. Wait for an opportunity. Be ready to take it.

His arms circled my chest and he hugged me the way a child would. At around twenty years old, Justin *was* nearly still a child in some ways. I understood fear, and I understood the need for comfort. After a moment of tenseness, I allowed him to hold himself against me.

At some point, his body shifted, his head and shoulder found my lap. My

hand rested on his shoulder. He rocked his body back and forth, trying to comfort himself. The slide of his shaven scalp against the base of my cock felt ... awkward and interesting at the same time. My cock hardened. I was glad the lights were out and he couldn't see, but surely he felt it when he rocked his skull back and forth and brushed my boner. It felt good. Mick's violation of my ass had not been sexual to me, but my body responded to the warmth of Justin's skin. He couldn't see my embarrassment in the dark. Good.

I leaned back against the wall of my cage, enjoying the simple human contact, until I felt Justin lift his head, turning his face downward. His shoulder moved. He found my stiff cock with his hand. That woke me up from a half-doze and I froze. But in a moment of weakness, I didn't tell him to stop. He pulled on my dick shaft--a slow, nursing grip, up and down, slow and sweet. I didn't move. Justin did all the work.

"Shit, you're big," he sighed. I do have a big cock. His appreciation made me proud. "So fucking big, just like Paul." I refused to think about how he knew what my brother's erection was like.

He kept sliding up and down, going slowly. Long, even strokes. I felt his body vibrate as he stroked himself with his other hand, going faster and harder than he stroked me. I felt his hand clamp tighter around my cock. He sighed. Something hot and liquid hit my leg. His cum, I realized. I'd never had anyone's cum touch me except my own.

Too late to worry about that. My own balls were suddenly ready. "I'm--"
"Shh."

His lips found the tip and wrapped around the head, and my load exploded into him. My body bucked up from the narrow cage floor as the sensation exploded all through me. I needed this. My orgasm was

intense.

When it was over, my cock softening, I felt his tongue brush around the head of it in the darkness. I turned my head the other way. I whispered, "I think you should go now."

Justin said, "Okay ... Thank you."

I should thank you, I thought, but said nothing.

He pulled himself away me. My cage gate rattled. A moment later, Justin's rattled.

At some point, Justin dozed. I heard his soft snoring. I closed my eyes and slept too.

6.

I woke when something smacked hard against my cage.

"Wake up, Filth!" Mick, and not looking happy at all.

Light. I could see.

I risked a glance at Justin's cage. It was empty.

"Hey!" Mick slammed his fist against my cage. "Don't try looking for your boyfriend. He's already been taken away for his new training. I hope you two enjoyed yourselves, 'cause there won't be much of him left when the techies finish with his head. These cages are meant to help make you bond with your handler--they're not a fucking game of musical chairs, sneaking in and out for your little blow-job session!"

Mick sounded like a jealous lover. Out of all though, though, one word caught my attention. I definitely didn't like the sound of *handler*.

Mick slammed his fist against my cage again. "Hey! Pay attention. I was going to feed you before your lesson today, but now--I think an empty stomach will help you remember to pay attention in the future, Filth." I watched him dump my liquid meal onto the concrete floor. "Well? Aren't you going to thank me for not beating the crap out of you?"

"I ... Thank you, sir."

"Shit." He ran his hand across his head and scowled at me. "It's time for your lesson. Are you ready?"

"Yes." What I was ready for was Mick to open the cage gate. With room door open, I had an escape route. I could kick Mick's face in,

incapacitate him, stuff him in the cage, and have myself a five-minute head start before anyone discovered my escape. I could find Paul and get us the fuck out of there. No matter where we were, there had to be a way out.

"Whatever you're planning, Filth, don't bother." Mick said. He showed me a bottle like the one he'd sprayed in my face at the ziggurat, an unspoken threat.

Mick opened the door. "On your feet, Filth."

I began to crawl out of the cage.

A new voice from the doorway asked, "Is this the one?"

Mick whirled and exclaimed, "Sir! I wasn't expecting-- Yes, this is him, sir." He hissed at me, "On your feet, Filth. The Leader wants a look at you."

Okay, I could play along. I snapped to attention, a familiar posture from my Army days.

The new man stood in the doorway of my room. He looked vaguely interested and vaguely bored at the same time. He looked my naked body up and down. "So this is him," the Leader said, as if undecided whether to be completely unimpressed.

"Yessir," Mick gushed. "Excellent physical shape, as you can see. Wide-ranging military background, American Special Forces. Exceptional leadership skills. Already after only four days, his resistance level has dropped to nil. He'll be ready for field work within the month."

"Hmm." The Leader walked over to me and eyeballed me close up.

"What's your name?"

"Filth, sir," I barked in the way that always pleased Mick.

"Not your trainee name. Your other name. Don't lie to me. You haven't been here long enough for the training to take hold."

"Peter, sir. People call me Pete."

The Leader snorted and turned to Mick. "I think you still have more work to do. He is trying to pretend he is unaware of what we are doing. By pretending to be farther along, he intended to deceive us," the Leader said.

Mick jabbered, "I agree, sir. I think he's too dangerous to be trained the normal way. If you read my report--"

"Reports are bullshit. Still, you may be correct. Have the technicians map his mind, just in case we have to use more advanced procedures. His military skills and command experience will be valuable assets, but there are multiple ways to make his skills work for us."

They were ignoring me. The door was open. This could be the slip-up I'd been waiting for.

The Special Forces made me a mad-dog killer. My hand-to-hand combat skills are impressive, if I do say so myself. Right then, Mick experienced my shoulder-to-stomach skills as I suddenly bolted not for the door but right for him. I caught him in the stomach and heaved. With the wind knocked out of him, he careened into that Leader guy and they both went down.

By then, I was out the door and into the hallway beyond. I turned right.

I'm fast. I might have spent the last few days locked in a cage, but my muscles were still in good shape and they responded to the kick of adrenaline flooding me. Special Forces training taught me a lot about sneaking unseen and unheard, but right then I needed speed and distance instead, and my legs provided both. Running naked through the hallway beat being a passive prisoner, and I've never been shy anyway. But, I didn't see anybody else around. I mean, no one--as if the facility was deserted. Maybe they only had a skeleton staff.

Identical doors lined both sides of the corridor. Some had numbers. Some were completely blank. One hallway seemed as good as another so I zig-zagged down several.

No turning back now. My plan was to find a way out. Find Paul if I could and take him with me, but find a way out and bring back the authorities if I couldn't.

I paused in yet another hallway. How the hell did people tell them apart? I tried each door, quietly. All were locked.

One door at the end was unlocked. Overhead lights flickered on automatically when I eased it open. If the lights were off when I opened it, that meant no one had been inside for a while to trip the light sensor. I slipped inside. I needed clothes. I needed weapons. I needed something to give me an edge.

This was some kind of small storeroom, almost completely empty, except for a few cleaning supplies. What could I use as a weapon? An aerosol can: that might come in handy for blinding someone. A plunger: I popped off the rubber end and had a perfectly good wooden stick that I could use as a truncheon.

Armed, I slipped back into the corridor and continued on. A side hallway

split off. Down it, I saw a bright red sign mounted at the ceiling-- "Emergency Exit"--and an arrow pointing to a door with a window in it. It couldn't that easy, could it? Only one way to find out.

Emergency exits usually had alarms, but I wasn't going to pass up the first exit I'd found. Emergency exits usually don't have guards. A quick peek at the corner of the window told me this one had two, both fit-looking men, standing in the area beyond, guarding what looked to be the exit. The guards wore nondescript uniforms but appeared unarmed. Apparently the Leader decided to have the doors covered just in case.

I needed a diversion, something to separate them. I rattled the aerosol can against the bottom of the door and waited. Sure enough, one of the guards investigated. The moment he stuck his head through the door, I cracked the plunger handle across his jaw, just short of hard enough to break it, then grabbed his head and slammed it down against my upcoming knee. The guard collapsed.

The other came at me. I blasted him in the face with the aerosol and ducked, and he rushed by me, blinded and clawing at his eyes and howling. I slammed the truncheon across the back of his neck and he went down.

Now the only thing between me and the door was twelve feet of air--
--And Mick, who tackled me from behind. "Got you, fuck-face!"

We went down. I twisted, but so did he and I still took most of the impact. I shoved him off me. Before I could reach the door, he was on me again, and we slammed into the wall. I went for his eyes with one hand. He knocked it aside with his arm, and his other hand was in my face with that spray can.

Fssst!

I went down. The world spun. Everything felt far away, like it was happening to someone else.

Fssst!

"Like that, Filth? Absorbed through the skin. Quite effective."

Fssst!

I couldn't seem to focus on anything. Everything seemed slow, dreamlike. My arms and legs wouldn't move right. I found that really funny and heard myself giggling

Mick picked himself up and stood over me. "I told him, you're too dangerous to train the normal way. He'll have to believe me now." That struck me as funny and I snickered some more. He spoke into a little device. "We have him secured ... Yes, sir ... Yes, sir. I'll bring him in right away." He clicked it off and slid it back into his pocket. "It's your lucky day, Filth. You're skipping right to the hardcore plan."

The guards hauled me up roughly to my feet--more giggles from me--and practically carried me along. Mick led us down a hall, then another. The identical halls struck me as funny, and I chortled most of the trip.

Mick led us into a room. Wherever I was, it wasn't the ruins, or the resort town. The town had nothing this high-tech. Things here were newer. Spartan. Lots of surfaces that were white or silver or gray, antiseptic colors. I felt giddy, high, and something about the lack of color made me giggle. At some point, I caught my reflection in a mirror-like surface. I thought my multi-day stubbled, distorted reflection looked silly, and I laughed some more.

This new room was centered around a semi-reclining clinical chair. The

guards dumped me into it. I tried to say *Thanks, fellas* but it came out, "Ankzz eyluhzz."

Mick fastened straps around my ankles and wrists and neck immobilizing me. "I'm gonna enjoy watching this," he said.

A technician began shaving my head. It tickled and I couldn't stop grinning like a fool. Two other technicians moved in and affixed electrodes and other sensors to my head and chest. One put speaker buds into my ears. High-tech gear cupped my head, holding it firmly in place. Another found a vein in my elbow, and I felt a needle bite into my skin.

What I remember after that were flashes. Just images. No narrative. No continuity. The drug made me sleepy, but I fought it. It made the technicians moving around me seem like a dream--whispers around me, images of people moving here and there around me. I barely registered the sight of one before he was replaced by another. I felt a sharp pain bite at the back of my skull--I'd have winced except my head was held immobile. Words, images, a spot of nagging pain that eased into numbness. Was this some kind of brainwashing set-up? I heard about this shit while I was in the Special Forces. Images, words, all zipping by around me, until finally I couldn't fight the drug anymore and the world slipped away from me.

7.

"Petey?"

Who was whispering my name?

"Hey, Petey? Wake up. It's me."

I opened my eyes. My head ached, like something tight was wrapped around it, with a dull throb of pain in the back. My eyelids were the only part of me not stiff and cramped. The lights were out. I couldn't see a thing. But I was used to darkness.

"Drink this."

A straw crawled across my lip. I put my mouth around it and sucked. Water. I hadn't realized how dry-mouthed I was.

"Don't drink too fast. That's enough for now." The straw withdrew.

"You awake now?"

I recognized the voice. "Paul? Paul!"

"Shhh!--Keep it down. Yeah, it's me, Petey. I'm not supposed to be in here."

"How are you? Are you okay?" I gripped the wire mesh with my fingers. Paul groped and found my fingers--that was about the most we could do through the mesh. I recognized the feel, the smell--I was in my cage. The lights were off. Why wasn't I surprised? I was too happy to care about that.

"Yeah. This place takes some getting used to, but it's cool. What about you, bro? My first couple of weeks were kinda rocky. You holding up okay?"

"Yeah. Chair ... My head feels funny. They drugged me with something ... put me in a chair ... I My head hurts ..."

"Don't sweat it, bro. You'll be fine."

"Get me out of this thing!"

"Can't, bro. They locked you in. I don't have the key. I'm not even supposed to be in here. But I heard rumors you were here. I wanted to see you."

He pushed the straw back to me, and I drank greedily. He told me they'd be back for me soon. He had to be gone by then.

He didn't know where this place was, except that it was in the middle of the jungle somewhere. He didn't know why he and his friends had been brought here, except they weren't the first and apparently those "in charge" thought no one would come snooping around. He couldn't tell me anything about those "in charge."

Our conversation lasted five minutes, tops. Paul got more and more nervous. I could tell from his voice. Finally, "Listen, bro, no matter what, just remember I'm okay. This place, it's okay once you go along with the program. Don't fight it, okay? And don't worry about me. I'll try to see you again soon." And then he was gone.

I stayed awake in the darkness, concentrating on everything about Paul--the sound of his voice, every word he said. I didn't want to forget anything.

8.

Mick kicked my cage.

That woke me--I hadn't even been aware of falling asleep. My morning wood started wilting immediately.

"Wakey, wakey, Filth--though I guess I should call you Soldier now."

Apparently I had a new name. I wondered why and what that meant.

Mick took a device out of his pocket and poked at a few keys. After a moment, the cage door clicked as the lock disengaged. Electronic lock. Mick had pressed three buttons, which meant a three-digit unlock code. He kept the key device in his front left pants pocket. I'd remember that.

Now that I knew escape was at least possible, everything looked like pieces of an opportunity.

He barked. "Get out here." I noticed he stepped back a respectful distance out of range as I crawled out and stood up, stretching my stiff back. I hoped my satisfaction didn't show.

He grinned, an evil expression. "Shall we see how it works?" He held up the little device that could have been a mobile phone but wasn't, not exactly. He made a big show of typing at a few buttons.

Something felt ... not normal in my head.

Active mode, this little voice in the back of my head said.

I snapped to attention.

My eyes were locked forward, but I still saw Mick's satisfied grin. He held up a metal tray. In its surface I saw a distorted reflection of my head. My head and face had been shaved. There was something gold around my forehead.

Mick's tone was evil and smug. "Like the new look, Soldier?"

I couldn't think of anything to say.

"Oh, that's right--you Soldier types aren't that talkative unless it's in your mission parameters. Well, guess what. Your ass has been haloed, motherfucker, just like I recommended in the first place. You won't be trying no more of that escaping shit now."

Halo ... What was it Jason had said about something whispering in his head?

"Here," Mick said, pushing a bundle at me. "Get dressed."

I had my orders. I took the stack of clothing and began dressing myself. Camouflage patterned cloth. Some sort of basic military uniform. Tee shirt, blouse, pants, socks, boots. No underwear, no helmet or cap.

I dressed with practiced efficiency. I'd donned pretty much this same type of uniform almost every day when I was Special Forces.

That little device of Mick's doubled as a communicator. It pinged and he put it to his ear. "Talk," he said. After listening, he said, "I'm bringing him now."

Mick led me through the hallways. I followed him because it didn't occur to me to do anything else.

He led me to the room with the chair--or maybe a room like it, since this one had multiple chairs in a row facing the screen. The closest chair was empty, the others occupied by five or six men dressed as I was, already strapped in, waiting patiently.

A technician came over and fussed with my halo. "You shouldn't have activated it so soon," he scolded Mick, who shrugged. "Still ... it seems to be functioning normally. No damage done. Okay, Soldier, have a seat."

I sat in the empty chair. The technician strapped me down, inserted the ear buds, and tinkered with the halo, attaching something near the back. "Okay, that's got you, big fella," he said to me. He checked the halo again, pulled out a device like Mick's and touched a series of buttons quickly. "We'll start downloading now."

Training mode, the voice in my head said. I felt my arms and legs go limp. I looked straight ahead, feeling a new eagerness to pay attention and learn, as the spot in the back of my head burned and I felt information flowing into my mind--images and sounds, all going too fast to grasp. Lots of random words and images in my head, most faster than I could make them out. *Relax. Focus. Obey. Belong*. Whispers in my ears. *Relax*. My body felt heavy. My scalp tingled. *Focus*. My head was whirling, disoriented. *Obey*. I was drifting, slipping away, sucked into the maelstrom of whirling in my head. *Belong*. Nothing else mattered.

Active mode.

I blinked. How much time had passed while I'd stared into space?

The technicians moved down the row, disconnecting, unstrapping, and the men stood up. I stood up too and looked at them. I recognized two. But I could ... hear all six of them somehow--not with my ears, but in the back of my head, like a low murmur of voices.

"Fall in!" Mick yelled. The other six men in camouflage quickly formed two rows of three, standing at attention. "Not you, Soldier," he said as I rushed to join the line up too. "Come here. Look at them, Soldier. We don't follow traditional command structure. We don't answer to any government. But we need a small military strike force for certain specialized tasks. That's where these men come in; that's where *you* come in. Some men cannot be trained the traditional way. For them, we use the haloes, as you yourself are discovering. This is their last stop before ... Well, these men are viewed as expendable, perfect for a military task squad. If something happens to them in the field, there's no link back to us. Military discipline can take away the pain, the fear, the shame. The haloes download the military mindset and special skills needed for special missions directly into their heads. The haloes will ensure these fuck-ups toe the line, and they'll make these men want to fight for whatever we tell them to fight for, but they need guidance--leadership--they need someone to help train them, help them internalize that mindset, and turn them into soldiers. They'll need someone to lead them during field assignments. That someone is you, Soldier. We will give you something to fight for, and you will teach them to fight. These are your men, Soldier. We will mold their minds--your mind too--and you will use your military skills to help us mold their bodies. If you fail ..."

Punishment mode, said the voice in my head when Mick pushed a button on his communicator gizmo.

"... there will be punishments."

Red-hot agony erupted as every nerve roared with every pain I'd even suffered, simultaneously, magnified a hundred times, a thousand fold, roaring louder through my body. My muscles twisted and clenched--I fell--I couldn't see or hear anything except red rushing through and all

around me.

Suddenly, it stopped. I gasped and tried to straighten my limbs, tried to get my bearings.

"On the other hand, if you succeed, there will be privileges."

Reward mode.

Rapture, bliss, ecstasy--until that moment those had been just words. Now I understood them, the brilliant white light of them flowing through me like an orgasm, better than an orgasm, thousands of orgasms, like seeing God, like every good thing in my world all at once. I writhed again, but from the sheer magnitude of beauty that overwhelmed and swallowed me.

As it faded, I looked up. Mick stood over me, grinning down. "Yeah, I bet you'll do anything to get some more of *that*, won't you. And the best part?--You'll never be alone again."

9.

When the haloes went into active mode, I saw what the other six soldiers saw and heard what they were thinking, and vice versa. They were in my head, and vice versa. The haloes did more than just download skills into our heads--they linked our minds. The technicians rambled about "thought transmission radials" and "encephalic vectors" and other shit when they thought we weren't listening. Wouldn't have mattered--I didn't understand any of it. Bottom line: We thought and reacted as one. In active mode, all we thought about was the objective, doing whatever was needed to accomplish the task, and we operated simultaneously. Our individual goals and desires, and even our individual thoughts, ceased to exist.

As a Soldier, I graduated to being housed in barracks conditions with the other six Soldiers. The barracks were basic bunk beds, little more than a frame and a mattress, but it beat sleeping in a metal cage. The room held thirty beds total, so I suspected we were only the first. The other six slept top and bottom on the first three pairs of beds. As their commanding officer, I slept solo, on the bottom bunk, in the fourth unit.

Our days began with the lights coming on. Time meant little, but I estimated we had twenty minutes to shower, shave, dress in whatever gear they brought to us that morning, and eat the meals they brought to us. Then the haloes went *active mode*, and we were marched to the chair room for *training mode* and that day's downloads.

Then, back in *active mode* and fully under their control, we drilled. The haloes downloaded skills, but the drills gave us familiarity using them. Most were things I'd already done a thousand times, but were less

ingrained in the other six Soldiers. Marching and running for miles. Climbing and rappelling. Guns and grenades and hand-to-hand combat. Our handlers were preparing us for something. When my head was in active mode, I didn't care; all that mattered was leading my team through the drills, making sure they got it right. I was an excellent Soldier because I didn't know any other kind to be when the halo was active.

The two Soldiers I had recognized? The new Soldier with his head still shaved and barely stubble grown back was Jason, relegated here after whatever problems prevented him from undergoing the "normal" training that Paul and others apparently went through. The other Soldier I recognized had been haloed longer, judging the way his hair had grown long enough to nearly obscure his halo around the sides and back of his head. I recognized him from that last photograph Paul had sent, where this guy was on the far left, next to my bother--Angel, by name. He never said what he'd done to get haloed; I didn't ask. Justin and Angel were college kids with heads full of downloaded military skills, but they had the basic physical foundations: athletic physiques, plenty of muscle, fit. They picked up quickly, toughened up fast.

The handlers worked us well past sundown. At the end of the day, we were piled into the barracks and stripped--they weren't taking any chances with us and took our uniforms before releasing us the haloes' control. Then we were given about one hour with the haloes in *standby mode* with the "group mind" subservience shut off, which gave us autonomy and our personalities back. We ate another meal, talked, horsed around some, played poker with the deck of cards we were allowed to have, did whatever we wanted as long as we didn't try to leave the barracks room--which we couldn't since, by the way, we were locked in. Most nights ended with the lights dimming, a warning that one minute later the haloes were going into *sleep mode*. When that mode engaged, we fell immediately into a deep sleep, no matter what we were

doing, so we had to be in our racks and ready when that happened.

Most nights means not every night. Our handlers kept us so exhausted during the day, it hardly mattered. Most of us hit the rack before that one hour of free time was up anyway.

But on nights when we weren't zonked out with *sleep mode*, after the lights went completely out and darkness hid everything, I'd sometimes hear bed springs squeak as one of the men jacked off furiously. Sometimes I heard quiet slurping that sounded suspiciously like a cock getting sucked. I didn't care--I was always too tired to stay awake.

One night, after I'd lost count of the days, I slept stretched out on my cot, on my back, covered by a thin sheet pulled up to mid-stomach. I woke when the sheet slid down, exposing my groin to the air in the darkness.

"You awake?" Justin whispered in the darkness. I said nothing.

The mattress sank as he leaned over me. I felt his lips on my stomach, the lightest touch that made my muscles flutter. Fingers slid along my hip, mapping where my body lay in the blackness. Lips traced my treasure trail down to my pubes. My cock was hardening. I was glad the lights were out and he couldn't see, but he felt it when he moved his mouth down still further and brushed the root of my boner. It felt good. I hadn't been with a woman in a long time. I hadn't masturbated in a while. My body responded to the warmth of his breath, his mouth. He couldn't see my embarrassment or my need in the dark. Good.

Justin's mouth found the head and swallowed my boner. I'm big but he knew how to suck, and he managed after a few tries to take it all. I found myself enjoying the simple human contact. His mouth pulled away. I felt the mattress sag as he climbed on. His legs straddled me, butt riding

lightly on my stomach. I felt him reach back and find my stiff cock with his hand. I froze. But in a moment of weakness, I didn't tell him to stop. His ass lifted. He pulled my dick head to his ass and sat back. His ass sank around my cock as if spit-lube was all he needed.

He needed a minute to get used to it in his ass. I didn't move. His ass gripped my shaft, nursed at it as his hips rode up and down, slow and sweet. I had never stuck my cock in a man's ass before. Justin did all the work. I felt his palms on my chest. I reached up to where a woman's tits would be and found his nipples after a moment of fumbling in the dark. His were small and hard and had a few hairs around them, but I stroked at them and pinched them gently like I would a woman's, which he seemed to like judging from his trying-to-be-quiet groans.

"Shit, you're big," he whisper-sighed. "So fucking big." I do have a big cock. His appreciation made me proud.

He kept sliding up and down, going slowly. Long, even strokes. A couple of times I felt his stiff cock bounce against my abdomen. Felt like he had a good-sized one himself, but I didn't touch it. I felt his ass clamp around my cock. He sighed. Something hot and liquid hit my chest. His cum.

Too late to worry about that. My own balls were ready. "I'm--"

"Shh."

I bit my lip to make sure I came silently. His ass sank to the base of my cock, and my load exploded into him. My body bucked up from the narrow cot as the sensation exploded all through me. It had been a long time. My orgasm was intense.

When it was over, my cock softening and still up his ass, he bent forward. I felt his lips brush mine in the darkness. I turned my face away.

He pulled himself off me. I rolled on my side, hoping he'd take the hint. Instead, he settled in behind me on the cot, fitting his body along mine. Okay. I was too sleepy in the afterglow to say no. He slung his arm across me to keep from falling off the narrow cot. The simple warmth of his skin against mine felt good, better than I'd imagined. His still-hard cock poked the back of my thigh. I lifted my knee, and his cock settled into the space between my legs, under my balls. His hips moved, just a little, barely perceivable, not quite fucking his cock between my thighs, but not quite just holding it there either. His hand on my stomach inched downward, found my cock, half-hard too again, and wrapped around it. I didn't push his hand away. He started stroking, the lightest of grips. My balls tingled. His body alongside mine felt unexpectedly comfortable, and I half-dozed as he worked at my cock and thighs. He bit my shoulder gently as he came. I felt his cum run down the front of my thigh. I was surprised by how warm it was, warmer than I'd expected. I came too, a minute later, and I fell asleep with his cock still between my thighs and his hand still around my dick.

10.

I came to realize these nights where we weren't knocked out with sleep mode were intended for such sexual activities in the dark. A relief mechanism, a bonding approach, built in to our schedule.

Justin began giving me small favors, some item of food from a meal sometimes, half his candy bar when we were allowed small luxuries. A commanding officer deserves respect, so I accepted such tributes and acknowledged them as my due with just a solemn nod of thanks. The other men seemed to understand this. Sometimes one of the others would do the same. In the field, though, I gave no special treatment in return, and they respected that.

Most nights when we were allowed to sleep on our own, Justin would come to my cot and offer his body--his hands, his mouth, his ass. I accepted these tributes too, and allowed my body to be used for his pleasure as well as mine. I allowed myself to be fondled, sucked, my thighs to be fucked. I never allowed myself to be kissed, my hands to touch cock, or my ass to be penetrated. Sometimes someone other than Justin came to me: a hand impressed by my muscles or the thickness of my shaft, a mouth unaccustomed to my size.

I came to expect the nighttime comforts, the furtive orgasms. The other men were forming bonds of their own. Justin made his attachment to me clear. Angel and two other Soldiers seemed to connect. The final two, a pair themselves. I could see it in their interactions during our free hour each night. The groupings were primary, but not exclusive--they flowed and recombined, the fluid mechanics of affection, free of jealousy.

We didn't talk about it. Our handlers must have wanted us to bond in this

way. The daily programming in the chair room, as I thought of it, was changing us gradually. I felt the change happening in myself, the way I came to allow my fingertips to graze a nut sack other than my own in the dark, or my hand to slide along the cock indirectly attached to the mouth pleasuring me that night.

Sometimes more than just Justin joined me. I'd be lying on my back. Justin's familiar hand would be stroking my cock standing proudly in the darkness, or his mouth swallowing it into a different kind of darkness, and another hand would touch me, would find the point where my cock met Justin's body, perhaps a moment of frozen surprise at finding my cock already engaged. Sometimes that new hand would join Justin's. Sometimes the new hands would move to my balls or chest, supplementing, complementing, both of them collaborating on my pleasure and maybe taking pleasure between themselves too.

One night, Justin and another touched me. I lay on my side. Justin sucked at my cock, the other massaged the dense muscles of my chest. They swapped. The other was an adequate cocksucker, not as talented as Justin. I felt Justin stumble in the dark, come around my cot. He lifted my leg. I expected him to fit his cock between my thighs, as I usually allowed, but he buried his tongue in the crack of my ass instead. No one had ever done that to me before. The way his tongue swirled and lapped and poked--I hadn't expected my ass to be so full of nerve endings, so ready to fire sensations that made my body tense and shiver.

Justin pushed at my hips. I got the idea and got up on my hands and knees, so the other man stroking my cock, a firm and enjoyable grip, could still reach me. Justin's confident hands parted my ass cheeks; his tongue became familiar with my ass again. When Justin pulled away, when I heard him hawk up a ball of spit, I suspected what would happen. I surprised myself by not moving away. He pressed his cockhead to my

hole. I allowed it. He pressed his cockhead slowly forward into my hole. I allowed it too. He entered me slowly. My hole was tight. It hurt, but there was a *rightness* feeling too, in my ass and in my head. I was supposed to allow this; I was supposed to want this. I had taken worst; I could take this. I allowed Justin to enter me and use my ass for his pleasure. Truth is, after a few minutes of pain, it began to be my pleasure too. Underneath me, the other's hand stroked me slow and firm, and his second hand rubbed my nipple. It didn't last long--a thing like that never does--and then Justin's hips behind me pushed forward into my ass and held there. I felt him convulse, his hands squeezing on my hips, as he orgasmed in my ass. My balls chose that moment to catch fire and my cock erupted in that milking hand. I bit my lip to prevent myself from crying out. My body crumpled to my cot. I felt Justin climb off the mattress, heading for the other's body, followed by the sound of Justin's familiar cock-sucking slurping and the other's final groan as he came.

"Damn," someone nearby whispered, "that sounded hot."

11.

You see movies where the hero puts on all this cool-guy military stuff, and you think, *Wow, yeah, I wanna be that guy.* Then you put on all that gear, and it's like, *Whoa, that's intense.*

Our morning mission gear changed to wetsuits. Our handlers had a specific mission in mind. After our daily programming, when we shifted to active mode and hit the field, we were given specialized closed circuit scuba equipment. I was familiar with this--rebreather equipment meant no bubbles, making divers harder to detect. For special ops missions, stealth is everything.

Our training outdoors shifted to water. I drilled the Soldiers harder, because I knew something was coming. Our handlers did not say when, but we were about to be deployed for something that would test everything the Soldiers had learned so far. The haloes gave them the basic skills--I watched them carefully to make sure they gained the familiarity to perform the mission safely.

Three and a half days later, the time came. We were halfway through our day of training on the scuba equipment, focused intently thanks to the active mode haloes. I felt a tingle in the back of my head and froze; my halo was downloading new instructions. I climbed out of the water. The others too. We marched to a section I had not visited before. A helipad. We climbed aboard a waiting transport helicopter. Mick was already on board. We sat and strapped ourselves in.

Part of me wondered if I would recognize landmarks once we got in the air. Would I be able to determine where this place was?

Mick looked at me and grinned as he pressed a few buttons on his

controller.

The blades, the noise--the helicopter began to lift off.

Sleep mode, the little voice in the back of my head said.

My eyes closed, and I slept.

We slept until we arrived. We did not need to know locations.

Active mode.

I blinked and lifted my head, saw the others do the same--saw and felt them come online in the group mind again.

Outside, it was dark. We left in mid-afternoon sometime, and now it was night.

Our haloes had downloaded the mission parameters while we slept. Vessel infiltration and search. We moved by Zodiac transport boat to within two thousand yards of a container ship parked at a pier just off the coast. We would swim one thousand yards, then go subsurface for the final thousand yards to the target. Four Soldiers would pull actions on security. The other three of us would be the search team. The objective was to covertly board the ship and conduct a coordinated search for a piece of precious cargo, a briefcase containing something critical. We would then slip back into the water, recover our gear, and swim back to the Zodiac, two thousand yards away out at sea. All without alerting any other potential combatants onshore.

The mission was a go. We loaded into the Zodiac and headed out to sea.

We geared up. Two thousand yards was as close as the Zodiac could go

without risking being heard or seen. "Enter the water," I ordered quietly, because sound carries, and simultaneously the Soldiers and I rolled backward off the edge of the Zodiac and into the sea. Our mission clock had started, and we had to hit our objective.

We planned to swim on the surface to the halfway point, but no battle plan ever survives the first encounter with the enemy. A helicopter, presumably civilian, entered the area. It could have spotted us and compromised our stealth. All our target needed to do was hear the civilian pilot radio someone about divers in the water and we would lose the element of surprise. I gave the order in my head for an emergency descent. The halo relayed the order to the other Soldiers, and we dove under the water as one. Using the rebreathers, we left no telltale trails of bubbles to give our presence away as we swam below the surface. The difference between planning and execution--that's why our handlers needed my Special Forces skills.

The mission focus imposed by our halos in active mode ensured none of the Soldiers panicked. Adrenaline kept our heart rates up as we swam, but every thought and motion was purposeful, directed at getting us to the target location. No distractions.

We stayed subsurface and out of view from any patrols or guards. In the pitch black, against a fairly stiff current, we followed the compass-man to the edge of the pier where we prepared to covertly board the vessel. This was familiar for me, but the other Soldiers had never done anything like this, especially in the dark. They had only the downloaded skills and whatever experience I'd been able to drill into them. The swim was not easy, but we were fit and dedicated. We made it to the pier.

I surfaced on the dark side of the ship to confirm we were on target. Thanks to the haloes, all of the Soldiers saw what I saw. Enemy were on

board. We definitely would be confronted by good security. I saw at least two guards, both armed. One faced to the stern with his rifle, and another on the aft side of the ladder faced toward the bow with his rifle.

We stashed our rebreathers subsurface. So far, so good. Now it was time to board the ship.

With our rifles, we quietly worked our way up the boarding ladder. As one Soldier climbed, the others covered and looked for threats. This was a critical point in the operation: if we did not get on board quickly, without being detected, it was mission failure.

We successfully boarded the target vessel. So far, we had evaded detection by the enemy on board. Now we had a whole new set of responsibilities in order to complete the mission. First, we had to search the entire ship, stem to stern, looking for the precious cargo which could be concealed anywhere. Second, we had to find the location to plant the explosive charge to disable the ship. Third, we had to get back off the ship with the cargo, back out to sea, and back to our Zodiac, without being compromised.

The four Soldiers on security paired off and moved out to provide cover, while the other two Soldiers and I started a methodical search of the ship for the briefcase. The risk of detection was high. Now, everything hinged on stealth.

Our haloes kept us concentrated on the mission. I could sense all six of them--calm, dedicated, focused.

We found no entry points near the front of the ship. We had to move aft, toward the bridge, where the potential for running into an enemy skyrocketed. We crept slowly to the entry below deck, and at last we were inside. The search for the case began.

A hallway led through the middle of the ship. The first door: A small bathroom--ship-sized shower, toilet, sink, a cabinet underneath. Nothing.

A galley. Styrofoam cups, plastic bowls, more cabinets. More nothing.

An area used as an office. A computer, printer, papers. Clear.

A laundry and storage compartment. Searching this took more time. We came up empty. Time was running out.

When Mick had said Soldiers never talked much while in active mode, that wasn't correct. We talked a lot--just to each other through the shared thought link of our haloes instead of out loud.

We checked the entire floor. No sign of it, Angel sent to me through the halo link.

You checked everywhere?

Yessir, I looked.

We're missing something here.

The search was taking too long, and we were losing the advantage.

They are engaging!

That last came from one of the Soldiers topside, on security detail. Through his eyes I saw several enemy emerge from the bridge and fire on the Soldiers. Seven enemy total, five armed.

Once the shooting starts, any plan goes down the crapper. Then everything is up to the team leader to make on-the-spot decisions to get

the mission accomplished, get overboard, and get back to the rendezvous point. That team leader would be me.

Engage.

Four Soldiers moving as a coordinated unit quickly took out the four of the armed enemy topside. Another two minutes, and they took out the fifth. The two unarmed went down too.

But now our cover was blown. Enemy forces on land would be down the pier and on us in minutes. If we hoped to complete our mission, we had to move fast. We had to adapt as the mission unfolded, and no downloaded skill could teach you how to do that. I decided I couldn't wait any longer and altered the mission plan. I reallocated the team--one Soldier on security, all others on search.

We searched the bridge, the engine area, and again the below-decks spaces.

Through one Soldier's eyes, I saw a false back on one shelf. A quick bash with his rifle butt to break through, and I saw a case. *Found it*, he broadcast.

The plan worked. We had it.

With the case in custody, another Soldier entered to the engine area and set an explosive charge to disable the ship. It would detonate in fifteen minutes.

We assembled at the boarding location. The search team went into the water first with the precious cargo case. Then the security team and I hit the water. In pitch-black water, we located our rebreather gear and rigged up. We could hear voices at the far end of the pier--oncoming enemy--

but they were too late. We slipped away under the water.

Two thousand yards of swimming later, we linked up with the waiting Zodiac, and the mission was a success. We had been able to improvise, adapt, and overcome, and the mission was accomplished.

The Zodiac headed back to meet the transport helicopter. We boarded and strapped ourselves in. "Good work," was all Mick said as the helicopter lifted off.

Reward mode, said that voice in my head.

I was enveloped in the encompassing white fog of ecstasy, swallowed by it, lost in it, reveling in more pleasure than I'd ever known.

12.

The next morning, Mick appeared in the barracks doorway with our daily gear. I'd just finished my shower and shaving. I was still trying to work through my head how we'd gotten from the helicopter back to our barracks and out of our gear because the last thing I'd known I was having one hell of a high, better than a hundred orgasms, in the helicopter as we took off, and then I was waking up in my rack, naked under my sheet like usual.

He yawned, "You, Soldier! In the hallway, now!"

We were all *Soldier*, but Mick was pointing to me. I didn't wait to get dressed. Like I said, I'm not plagued by modesty. I followed him into the hallway.

He opened the door across the hall from the barracks room. "The Leader was impressed with the job you did last night. You earned a special privilege. You got five minutes."

I walked into the room, and he shut the door behind me.

"Petey!" a familiar man said. But who was Petey?

Wait--I was Petey to someone, long ago, in another life. Only one person called me that. "Paul?"

"Yeah, bro, it's me."

He stood off to one side--I hadn't seen him when I first walked in. He approached quickly and hugged me. I knew what I was supposed to do and hugged him back. He was just as naked as I was, but neither of us

seemed to care. At least I didn't.

"They told me you did a good job yesterday. That's why they said I could see you. Look at you!" He touched the gold metal around my forehead. By now, my hair had grown back to its usual military length and obscured the part of the band that ran around the sides and back of my skull.

"Look at you, bro--you got yourself haloed! I thought they only did that to fuck-ups. What'd you do to deserve that?"

I tried to remember. I said, "Tried to escape." I didn't say, *Let your best friend swing on my johnson in a metal cage.*

He walked over to some crates and sat down. I followed him and sat too,

"Why the fuck would you wanna escape, bro? This place is great--I love it here."

"Wanted..." Why had I tried to escape? So hard to remember. "... To find you, get you out of here."

He grinned at me like I was mentally deficient. "But I don't wanna leave. Why would anybody wanna leave? You sound like Justin and Angel. You remember my buds Justin and Angel, don't you?"

Yes, I thought, they're across the hall with haloes implanted in their heads. But I couldn't say it. I nodded.

"Angel tried to escape. Justin too. I heard they got haloed too, right? Is it true what they say, the haloes do a group-mind thing?"

I nodded again, to both parts of what he asked.

"That must be so cool. Can I try it?"

I shook my head. "It doesn't come off. It's permanent."

"Man, all they ever used on me was the subliminals. I fought it some at first, but everything got a lot better when I learned to just let it happen. I can't imagine how much cooler the haloes must be. I'm jealous, bro!"

Don't be, I thought.

"Look at you, bro--you're like some fucking super-soldier now. You're all crazy-ripped and shit. You look damn good."

"You look good too." Which was true; he'd put on some muscle, gotten some definition, and it looked good on him.

"Thanks, bro!" He flexed a bicep. "They started out teaching me all this stuff about sex and how to seduce people. Now they're teaching me all this assassination shit. It's so fucking cool! They want me to be able to get close to people and either get with them or get them out of the way. They tell me I'm just about ready for field assignments--I can't wait! It's been a crazy six months!"

I wasn't sure how I felt about Paul being trained as a seducer or an assassin, but I latched onto the second part. If he had been here six months, that meant I'd been here five months. That seemed concrete, a knowable fact. I turned it over in my head. Five months ago ... Maybe I could use that fact as a wedge to open up more memories of my life before this place, this team of Soldiers. I felt like I should have more memories, that Paul should feel more important to me.

"You got a big dick, bro," he said, apropos of nothing, staring at my crotch. He grinned lopsided at me. "Is it as big as mine? Wanna see which one of us is bigger?" He reached for my cock. "Want me to show you how much I've learned?"

I grabbed his wrist. "No."

"Why not? Get it hard, bro. I wanna see who's bigger. C'mon. I'll make you feel real good. I always get top marks in my group at pleasuring"

Active mode, whispered the voice in my head, and the world dropped away.

I stood up. Our time's up, I wanted to say but couldn't. Paul and any memories of him were drowned in the mission focus and the return of the shared perceptions from the other six Soldiers.

"Oh," Paul said. "The halo thing, right?"

But I was already walking back to the barracks to gear up and begin my day.

13.

After hours, we were halfway through our one free hour at the end of the day.

Active mode, the voice whispered in my head. I straightened up, stood up. Justin and Angel stood up too. I recognized their expressions: the same as mine.

"What's going on, guys?" one of the still-seated Soldiers asked.

"Did they go active?"

"Why didn't we?"

Justin, Angel, and I walked to the door. It was opened for us. We passed through. It shut before the others could follow, if they even tried.

Mick met us in the hallway. He had the controller in his hand and an evil smile on his face. He guided us into a nearby room, a storage room stacked with mattresses. A few had been pulled out onto the floor.

"The guests of honor have arrived," Mick announced with a flourish. We walked in and stood at attention. Mick's buddy Pedro was waiting for us in that room, along with Lucas the waiter-slash-guide. Mick put his hand on my shoulder as if we were pals. "Our recruiters like to take an interest in the men they bring us. I wanted to show them how well you've been tamed. And since you came looking for your brother's friends, I thought it only fitting that the two of them should join us."

Lucas ran his fingers across my chest. "Oh, fuck," he admired. "I remember this one. He's so built. Make him flex for me."

"You heard the man, Soldier," Mick said.

I flexed my arms and chest for Lucas, and he hummed his appreciation. He explored my chest with his hands and teased at my nipples a moment until he decided to explore with his lips. His tongue darted out and he lathered at my muscular chest with his tongue. It felt good, but it would have distracted from my mission focus so I did not respond as he worshipped my body with his lips and tongue.

"You're our toys tonight, Soldiers. Your mission is to make us feel good in whatever ways we can dream up, understand? Of course you do."

"On your knees," Pedro told the Soldier designated Angel. "I order you to suck my cock." The Soldier dropped to his knees and started unfastening Pedro's belt. Pedro reached down and stopped him by pushing his head away. "Not so fast, horn dog. What makes you think it's that easy? Suck my dick through my pants first." The Soldier brought his face to Pedro's crotch and ran his mouth it along the tube in his pants.

"You want it bad, don't you?" Mick hissed at the Soldier designated Justin. "Go on, then. Take out my cock and lick it.

"Is your ass virgin, Soldier?" Lucas asked me.

Words were beyond my mission-focus so I said nothing.

"Do a good job of sucking my cock, and I might fuck your ass for you. On your knees, Soldier. That's an order. Take out my dick and suck it. That's an order too."

I dropped to my knees and pulled at his pants. His cock was already hard and sprang out to meet me when I dropped his pants.

Some hesitancy lingered in my head, but it was easily conquered. I had my orders. I worked my lips around Lucas' cock head and tried to get more of the shaft into my mouth. I nearly gagged and took no more. I sucked and licked on it the way women had sucked and licked on my cock like a nursing calf. I looked up at him for confirmation or approval, and he grinned at me. I suckled at Lucas' cock a long time. Aside from hissing, "Watch your fucking teeth," at me a couple of times, he seemed satisfied with my performance.

Lucas pulled me to my feet, led me to one of the mattresses on the floor, and pushed me face-down on it. He ran his hands over my muscular ass cheek and slid a finger along my crack. "Moan for me--let me hear how bad you want it," he cooed.

The *how bad* part didn't make any sense to me, but I understood the order behind *moan for me*, and I moaned.

He grabbed one of my butt cheeks and ran his cockhead up and down my ass crack. His index finger slid from my butt cheek to my hole and pushed at it.

"Just relax, Soldier. I'll ease it in before I fuck you good and hard."

He slipped that finger into my ass, and the muscle clamped down on it. He fingered my ass, probing as deep as the clenching ring of muscle allowed. "Relax, Soldier," was followed by a second finger poking in. "Relax. When I push in, you push out, and my cock will slip in smooth and easy. I'm going to make you feel better than you ever have before."

He positioned my cock head against my hole. "I'm going to take your cherry, Soldier. You ready?"

"Yes, sir," I breathed. My ass was no longer cherry after Mick's assault

some months ago, a lifetime, or some of our nocturnal gropings in the barracks, but my mission-focus did not involve volunteering that information so I didn't.

"Remember, relax and push out." When Lucas began to press against my tight ass, I did as he told me. The head of his dick slipped into my ass.

"Ooooh," he purred. "Nice, tight ass!"

He slid more of his hard cock up my ass, working his dick in deeper and deeper. He worked it all in and just held it there for a bit before he pulled it mostly out, then pushed it in once more. He worked into a rhythm, poking my hole for his pleasure. I found pleasure in it too--after a few minutes of pain, this tingling pleasure started up in my ass.

"You want it hard now, Soldier? You want me to fuck you like a man?"

A yes-or-no question. Soldiers should always agree with commanding officers, so I said, "Yes."

He fucked me hard and fast, using my body for his pleasure.

At some point he reached around my hips and grasped my erection and stroked it. My mission focus kept me detached. My body responded to the physical stimulation like a clinical experiment, all rising arousal and hardness and a building tension and little jolts of pleasure running through my nerves. I held back my ejaculation, wanting my commanding officers to take their pleasure first.

Over there, the Soldier designated Justin lay on his back, legs in the air, getting fucked by Mick. Over there, the Soldier designated Angel lay on his back, as Pedro straddled him and jacked himself off as he rode the Soldier's dick like a pogo stick. I watched them rut. Mick bellowed and

came, followed by Justin. Angel and Pedro came at virtually the same time.

I felt my impending ejaculation. Lucas pounded my ass with everything he had. I could not withstand his full fuck-force for much longer. His cock felt oddly good inside me, nothing compared to reward mode but pleasant enough, touching something inside that buzzed when his cock rubbed it inside my guts.

I was sweating and breathing hard as Lucas rocked against me. He began to whimper and moan loudly. "Unh!--Cumming!" he yelled. I felt him tense. He whimpered as he shot his load into my ass.

"You too, Soldier," Lucas said. He wasn't fucking me now, but his dick was still up my ass. He concentrated all of his motion on fast-jacking my cock. That took me over the edge. I moaned involuntarily as my nervous system responded to his tight, pistoning grip. My eyes rolled back in my head as I shot my semen.

"That was fucking awesome," Lucas said, and wiped his cum-covered hand on my ass. "Excellent work, Soldier."

"Thank you, sir," I replied automatically.

14.

Our gear that day was pants and boots, nothing else. That made sense later, when I sat up in the chair with a head-full of advanced programming about hand-to-hand combat.

I drilled them hard that day on hand-to-hand. I think the other Soldiers loved the rough-and-tumble shit like that, the pure testosterone and adrenaline rush, but it was hard to tell with the active mode suppressing their personalities. They were bruised black and blue by nightfall, but they'd become familiar enough with the implanted memories to kick the asses of anybody short of a ninja squad--and even against them I thought they could hold their own. Hell, I was bruised too, 'cause they'd held their own against me and most had given as well as they got.

I was already sore when I bedded down for the night. Seems I'd just closed my eyes when--

"Get up."

Mick. Great.

"No time to shower. You got two minutes to piss and get dressed."

I blinked, waking up. Morning already? My body was almost immobile with stiffness from yesterday's nonstop drilling in physical combat. The other Soldiers groaned their way back to painful wakefulness too. Soon enough, the haloes would kick in and active mode would take away the pain. Until then, our haloes still seemed to be in standby mode and they'd just have to deal with the aches.

Mick stood above me. "Get dressed," he repeated as I sat up. He dropped

a bundle in front of me.

We were deviating from the routine--no shower-and-shave. We Soldiers double-timed into the head to piss, since our bladders were about to bust.

Mick was wearing civilian clothes, tee-shirt, jeans, serviceable multi-purpose boots that wasn't military. I hadn't seen him or anyone wearing civilian clothes in a while. That's what he dropped in front of me too: civilian clothes. I picked up something, a pair of jeans, and tried to wrap my sleep-addled head around where I'd seen them previously. The pair was one of mine. I used to wear them all the time, back before ... Before when?

I worked out how to pull the jeans on and did so. No underwear--wasn't there supposed to be underwear? A pair of beat-up multi-purpose boots, also mine, that I remembered I used to love, a hundred lifetimes ago when I used to wear civilian clothes. Why weren't they issuing us the boots they usually gave us?

The tee-shirt was new. It was not mine. Black. Like Mick's, it said *Security* across the front in white block letters. That seemed odd--security was a job for the guards, not us Soldiers.

We stood before Mick. He inspected me with his eyes, pursed lips, evaluating. All he said was, "Come on."

Another deviation--the haloes had not kicked into active mode yet.

Outside. Mick led me outside. Sunshine, clouds, trees, birds, the works. I wasn't in the active mode mission head-space. I hadn't been outside as *me* in forever. The other Soldiers looked at me. I could see the questions in their eyes, but they followed my lead and kept their faces carefully expressionless.

"You've been rented for a job. The Leader thinks you're ready, and what he says goes. I'll be watching you. Got that?"

"Got it," I said, then added, "sir," because respect seemed appropriate.

He led us to a transport helicopter. Pedro was there too, and he was wearing civilian clothing with *Security* emblazoned across his tee-shirt too. He nodded, busy conversing with a guy in a jumpsuit. Our pilot, I assumed. I returned Pedro's nod, as if last night hadn't happened.

No breakfast? No chair programming? And still the haloes were in standby mode? No group mind? I had a thousand questions, but I kept my mouth shut, kept myself and the other Soldiers out of everyone's way, and tried to be as inconspicuous as I could, which isn't easy when you're as tall, wide-shouldered, and generally imposing as I am.

We climbed into the helicopter and strapped ourselves in.

Mick said to me, "Don't bother trying to memorize landmarks or plan escape routes." He pulled out the controller and poked a few buttons. I expected active mode and a mission download, but the halo whispered *Sleep mode*. I closed my eyes and slept.

A couple of hours later, and I knew it was a couple of hours by the position of the sun, our haloes whispered *Standby mode* into our heads and we woke up. We were landing at a small airport. We boarded a waiting plane. A private jet. If these people had the resources to swing the complex and all this head-tech, it made sense they could swing a transport helicopter and a private jet.

Mick parked himself in a chair, picked up some magazine, and said, "Restroom's in the rear." The Soldiers and I staggered back there because our bladders were about at full capacity.

Angel and I crowded the mini-toilet and emptied our piss. When I pushed out and made way for the next one, I picked up a magazine in the pouch behind the door. Nice of them to provide "reading material" for the john, but the magazine was dated September two years ago. I'd get no useful information from it, not even confirmation of what Paul had said about how long I--we--had been held prisoner.

Something crinkled in my back pocket. I pulled out a piece of paper and unfolded it. It was that photo of Paul and his friends, creased and the worse for wear, but he was still recognizable. The Paul I'd met two days ago was someone I didn't know. But here on this piece of paper, smiling at me from the printed photo, he was the same carefree kid I sometimes remembered. No matter what, I had to stay in our handlers' good graces so I could see him again.

Back in the cabin, the photo safely stashed again, I took my seat. "This job is part security and part recruitment," Mick said without looking up from an old news magazine. "Your part is to provide the security. Step out of line just once, and I'll shut down your heads faster'n you can blink. Got that?"

I answered on behalf of all of us Soldiers: "Yes, sir." Then, because the questions were nagging at me, I said, "But what--?"

"Always with the questions." Mick interrupted, rolled his eyes. "I still think you're not ready for clear-head field assignments. I just told you your job. If it's not your job, you don't need to know."

I kept my mouth shut after that. The other Soldiers followed my example.

"Good. Make yourselves comfortable. It's going to be a long flight."

We landed in a major city in the United States. Customs? We bypassed that. These people must have some serious pull. We piled into a carefully nondescript mini-van--"Inconspicuous," Mick said--and were driven to a convention center. Mick seemed to get progressively nervous, worrying we weren't ready for a clear-head assignment. As we pulled up to the center, he appeared to make a decision. "Screw it," he muttered. "We're doing it my way." Mick kicked us into active mode as the van pulled up to the curb.

A controversial techno-geek type of apparently some renown, even though his name was unfamiliar to me, was giving a presentation at some conference of big-shot techno-geek types. The controversial one was a prime target. Trouble was expected; threats had been made, an attempt was expected, and the Leader wanted us there to take advantage of the chaos. Our handlers didn't say how, though. Mick and the other Soldiers would be working general security, but Pedro and I were assigned to work with another agent on the ground as the Techno-Geek Prime's personal bodyguards and security force. If anything got in the way, we were to take it down.

The "recruitment" part Mick had mentioned on the plane was not explained.

When we got out, the embedded agent met us and looked us over. He seemed impressed. Here where other people were milling about, Mick's Russian accent was back. If anybody remembered him, they'd say, "It was the Russian security guard." Great ruse.

I kept my ears open, and I managed to put some pieces together. Techno-Geek Prime worked on a "mind-machine interface," whatever that was. Tests on animals and prisoners had been promising. Animal rights activists and prisoner rights activists hated him. They found

themselves in an uneasy alliance with a bunch of hippies, humanists, and Luddite fringe groups who disliked the technology on "free will" grounds. Prime's research seemed to have united the whacko element. His fellow geeks were just as rabidly whacko, but in the opposite way; they practically worshipped this guy, like he was going to save the world or something by "ushering in the next phase of human and technological evolution." Maybe he was. I didn't care. I stayed focused on getting the job done so I could earn more trust from our handlers.

The embedded agent was Prime's personal bodyguard and had his trust. He introduced Pedro and me as, "Those buddies I told you about, the ones I served with in the war," even though he'd never met us--well, me at least--until twenty minutes earlier. Techno-Geek Prime seemed relieved to have us there. With the three of us guards forming a wedge and Prime tucked safely in the middle, we pushed our way through a pack of people who either wanted to touch Prime's holy vestments or tear him limb from limb. I didn't much give a shit what they wanted. My job was to keep them away from him, and that's what I did.

Techno-Geek Prime lived up to his name. His presentation would have gone--*Whoosh!*--over my head about five seconds after he opened his mouth if I'd been listening to him. Something about a new thought broadcasting technology he had invented. I wondered briefly if the Leader would be interested in that, but that was a distraction. Distractions caused failures. I went mission-focused and sifted through the perceptions I shared with the other Soldiers, looking for threats in the crowd and surrounding area. I could tell who his fans were. They were the ones watching his presentation like it was God Himself handing them the meaning of life. I could tell who his detractors were too. They were the ones hissing about mind control and free will, booing, staring at his presentation like it was the ultimate horror film. I didn't care, as long as they stayed in their seats and didn't make threats of themselves. One

or two tried to rush the stage, but the general security types handled them before they got close enough to be my problem.

Time to hustle Techno-Geek Prime out the back. The hall led maybe one hundred feet along the side of the convention center, and the wall to our left was fifteen feet tall and all glass. Would have been really scenic too, except for, first, the five hippy-type people coming our way from the other side of the hall and, second, the squad of four paramilitary-types rappelling down from the roof and trying to smash their way through the glass.

In the movies, it's always ultimate stealth ninjas bursting in. This crew?-- Not so much on the stealth or the ninja part. The hippy-types in front of us were more like a bunch of mountain-climbing, tree-hugging civilians who somehow got past security and wanted to make a capital-B Big Splash statement for the media. Except there were no media people around--just Prime and his three body guards. I assessed them as a nuisance but not a threat.

Paramilitary types rappelling in always click high on the threat meter. Rappelling down and smashing through fifteen-foot windows is harder than you think. In movies, the window explodes into tiny shards the moment the ninjas kick it. In real life, reinforced glass means most people bounce off. Two or three times, too. Apparently their mission briefing had not included information about the reinforced glass. Finally, one guy who had to be pushing two-seventy pounds, and not all of it muscle either, pulled out a sidearm and fired three shots, and the pane in front of him dissolved into shrapnel. That was noisy, but the screams from the hippy-types were nearly as loud. Paramilitary tubbo managed a not-ungraceful landing inside, considering his size. His friends bounced their way over to the hole he created, which was probably smart.

One of the hippies yelled, "Fuck! I cut my fucking hand!" Well, that's what shattered glass does in the real world, you big baby.

All the drama wasn't wasted on Prime, who collapsed against the far wall, the one that wasn't glass, squealing like the hordes of hell were upon him.

One of the hippies, a woman, tried to seize the moment and started reading a prepared speech. This was useless, since obviously Prime and us bodyguards weren't members of the media with television cameras handy and the four paramilitary types obviously weren't stopping to hear what she had to say. She yammered that her hippy-dippy group was kidnapping Prime to make a public statement and would release him unharmed once the world realized *blah-blah-blah*. That kidnapping part jumped her up to a full threat in my mind. Prime may have converted to a squealing lump of cowardice, but if my mission was to be his bodyguard then no one was taking that squealing lump on my watch.

The professionals though were still the bigger threat. Two steps and I intercepted the first oncoming ninja-wannabe professional. I assessed them as a paramilitary fringe group, trained, but not military-trained. Apparently they thought this would be as easy as just rushing past the security guards, grabbing Techno-Geek Prime, and zipping him off to wherever. They had the intel to know when we were in the hallway, but they hadn't planned on the distraction of speechifying hippies intent on hijacking the moment for their own fifteen minutes of self-righteous fame. One of the hippies tried to rush over to Prime, and Professional number one got distracted by the competition. A quick elbow to the face and a blow to the back of the neck, and Professional went down hard and stayed down.

That's when the six Soldiers arrived through the door behind me. They'd

known the minute this started because they saw what I saw through the group-mind connection.

The hippies had delayed the schedule too long. The professionals weren't expecting to be out-numbered. Two more steps and I was on the next one, the tubby one with the gun. I was faster and taller, which gave me a longer reach. He managed to squeeze off a round, which missed me but caused the hippies and Prime to harmonize on another round of screaming and floor-hugging. Professional number two threw up his arms to guard his face. I slugged him hard in his stomach. He bent forward. I grabbed his head and smashed it against my upcoming knee at a high rate of speed. Number two was unconscious and no longer a problem.

Two Soldiers took care of Professional number three. The embedded guard and Pedro stayed with Prime, though they weren't trying to shut up his wailing. That would probably be a lost cause anyway.

The gunfire had another side effect: All of the hippies had decided to run--except for the speechifying woman. She wasn't smart enough to run, even though she saw me coming. She tried to defend herself. She had some self-defense training, but I was still the mad dog that Special Forces made me. I have no problem hitting a woman when she's the enemy. It was a short fight, and she went down and stayed down.

Two Soldiers were fighting with the last professional, a strong combatant who was nonetheless yielding ground and about to be overpowered. Otherwise it was just us guards and Techno-Geek Prime left standing. Well, cowering in his case.

"I want him conscious," Pedro yelled at the Soldiers on the last professional. "I want to know who sent him."

"Don't worry," the embedded guard was telling Prime. "It'll be all right

soon, you'll see." Then he sprayed Prime in the face with one of those mist bottles, and Prime shut the hell up--finally!--and went limp. The guard looked at Soldier Justin and me and said, "You two--one of you carry him."

I heard something thump against the floor. The three-man fight with the last professional had degenerated into a rolling brawl on the floor.

Mick arrived and surveyed the scene. He raised an eyebrow at the hippy woman on the floor. "Some fringe group, looking to make a big statement for the media," the guard explained as Justin hoisted Prime into a fireman's carry. "Wrong place, wrong time."

"Fuck you! We're ready for you and your tech!" the last professional was yelling. He'd broken free, gotten to his feet, and had backed himself against one of the unbroken glass panes. He waved something in his hand that looked like a silver ink pen. Pedro and four of the Soldiers moved in. This wouldn't take long.

Then I heard a *ping* in my head and the world went all whirly. The halo vomited a bunch of indecipherable shit into my skull, and I went down. Angel and three other Soldiers went dark, suddenly no longer part of the group-mind.

I pushed myself off the floor. Justin and I were farthest away from the professional--we were down but conscious. The other four Soldiers were down and unconscious. Pedro wrestled with the professional's hand, the one holding the silver thingee.

"Weee-ehm-feeeee!" Mick yelled, nearly indecipherable to my compromised hearing. I couldn't focus through all the halo-vomit streaming into my head along with the flickering on-off connection to Justin. He looked at me and his eyes weren't mission-focused. They were

scared, nearly pain-blind.

E.M.P. That's what Mick had said. The professional had used an electromagnetic pulse device to fuck up our halos.

Pedro and Mick had the last professional down. Mick had a spray bottle and squirted the pro twice in the face.

"Fuck," Mick growled, stalking back to me. "What a cluster-fuck. What's your condition, Soldier?"

I thought about it for a second. How did my voice work? How did I make words? The halo was cutting in and out, sometimes there spitting headachy crap, sometimes silent. "I'll live, sir. I'm good," I said. And that was plain old me saying that, not the Soldier part of me.

I looked at Justin. He winced as his halo spit garbage into his head at the same time mine did. Justin looked back at me and figured out my unspoken message, nodded slightly. Good man.

Pedro hauled over the drugged-docile professional.

Mick nodded at the pro. "Who're these clowns? Who knew enough about us to bring an E.M.P.?"

"Don't know. We'll have to check him for tracking devices, but I figure it won't take long for the tech boys to pull who he works for out of his head."

The other four Soldiers groaned and tried to sit up. They still weren't reconnected to the group-mind. That was silent except for occasional bursts from Justin.

Mick scowled. "What a cluster-fuck. Okay, we got four men able, four men compromised, and two drugged-out liabilities to manage. Soldier, see to those four. If they're mobile, get them on their feet. We need to be gone five minutes ago."

The other four Soldiers were already standing up, shaky but ambulatory. They'd make it to the mini-van. I told Mick that.

Mick nodded at the embedded guard. "He's staying behind to tell the story. Make it look like there was a struggle. Knock him out, and let's get outta here."

I looked at the guard, and he nodded curtly. A black eye, bruised jaw, and minor head trauma would be convincing. I hit him with quick one-two pops to the eye and chin, so fast he never saw them coming. He was unconscious before he hit the floor.

15.

The other four Soldiers made it to the mini-van, all right, but collapsed over the course of the next hour, one by one, after the plane took off. They were still unconscious when we transferred them and our liabilities to the helicopter. The technicians had gone ape-shit over us the minute the helicopter landed back at the compound. They attached some sort of sensor to our halos. Full failure for the unconscious four. Sporadic imminent failure for Justin and me. While the medics gurneyed off the four unconscious Soldiers, the technicians berated Mick and Pedro for letting this happen. These halo prototypes were expensive, blah-blah-blah. They'd have to replace them all and didn't have spares, blah-blah-blah. They'd need days to get replacements; they'd need days to get us back to usable condition, and that was assuming there was no permanent organic damage to our brains; days of diagnostics.

Justin and I got marched to sickbay too. We stripped off our clothes and submitted to more tests and poking. Did we feel light-headed? Dizzy? How many fingers did we see? Two, four, six--what number came next? Nauseous? Headachy? Auditory or visual hallucinations? Finally, they forced our malfunctioning haloes to shut down, which immediately lessened my headache, though it also cut off my intermittent connection to Justin. I'd been using that to help keep him calm.

The recruitment angle to the mission made sense now that we had Techno-Geek Prime back here at the base. The professional would likely be interrogated, then liquidated.

Mick was off probably making sure Prime and the professional got taken care of. I suspected he'd come by shortly to collect the clothing. I pulled the photograph of Paul and his buddies out of my pocket and stashed it

under the cot mattress where I lay. I couldn't lose it again. I'd have to find a better hiding place and soon, after Mick and the medics left us alone, someplace I could come back and retrieve it. That would be hard to do in the unfamiliar sickbay. Maybe inside the ventilation grill?

Mick hadn't been able to knock us out with sleep mode. On the way back from the airport by helicopter, I'd seen enough to know generally which way to go and how far it was going to be. And getting to the nearest civilization was going to be a long trek. I lay back with my eyes closed, burning the images into my memory.

Justin and I had to stay in the sickbay that night. It held eight beds--my team and I occupied seven of them. The four unconscious Soldiers were attached to all sorts of monitoring devices that ran squiggles of light across the screen and occasionally made soft beeping sounds. Justin and I weren't attached to anything. Mostly the medics ignored us after they got tired of poking at our haloes. After a while the medics disappeared entirely, the lights were dimmed halfway to mean "nighttime," and we were alone.

I lay on my back under the sheet with my hands behind my head and stared at the ceiling in the semi-darkness.

"What's going to happen to us?" That whisper came from Justin in the next cot.

"I don't know," I murmured back without looking at him. I had an idea forming. This might be my only shot.

I touched the back where the halo went into my skull. I'd felt it a hundred times.

I pushed up on the front of my halo, the part crossing my forehead. It

didn't want to move. I sat up and found a long, slim sensor doohickey on a table and used it to pry at the halo. It moved. Not much, but I could tell it was a fragment of an inch higher on my forehead. I pushed and worked at it. The progress hurt. It had been put in place and was meant to stay there.

"Holy!--What are you doing?" Justin hissed incredulously. "You can't do that."

Probably, like me when the haloes were working, he'd never considered getting it off.

A little further. That sucker was on tightly. A little more and it popped up over the top of my forehead. I wasn't sure how it attached at the back. I pushed it backward. I felt a little pain and pulling at my flesh. Something popped, and it came lose in my hands. Looks like it just ... plugged into something back there. I felt under my hair. No blood. No pain. Maybe a little socket? That kind of made sense--a way to keep the parts that required precision connection into my brain separate if the external, and apparently damageable, parts needed replacement.

Justin stared at the piece of yellow metal in my hands. "Holy fuck."

"Yeah."

"Did it hurt?"

"No ... Just a little when I was working it off, maybe."

"So now what?"

"I don't know."

"Do me!" Justin sat up and tipped his head toward me.

I pried at his halo--"Ow!" he protested when I dug at his forehead to get leverage--and after a couple of minutes I had his loose. I handed it to him. "Cool," he said, turning it over in his hands.

"They're not watching us. We're not locked in. I'm thinking we get the fuck out of here?"

Justin grinned. "That's what I thought you were gonna say. But what about your brother Paul? What about Angel and the others?"

"I saw Paul the other day. I don't think we're going to be able to convince him to escape with us, even if we could find him. As for the others, unfortunately, this is probably the best place for them right now. Nobody knows more about this tech and what happened to them than the people here. I'm thinking we get out and send the police or something back to raid this place. Kidnapping, human experimentation--there's a shitload of criminal charges we can bring to make the police listen."

No one had come by to collect our clothing. I reached for and pulled on my pants, stuffed that photo of Paul in the pocket, and reached for the rest.

I knew what Justin was going to say. I wasn't sure I wanted a Soldier turned back into college student tagging along. But if he still retained the fighting and survival skills, he might be an asset.

Justin watched me dress. Then he reached for his clothes too. "You think we have a shot? Let's do it."

16.

No plan survives the first contact with the real world.

One year later, I sat hidden in the underbrush overlooking a resort hotel on the northeast corner of a backwater village. Below me, through my binoculars, I could see the restaurant's outdoor dining area. It was afternoon. A pair of waiters moved among the few guests still lingering over their lunches.

Justin and I had managed to get out. It wasn't easy. We had to fight. We had to run. We had to hide in the jungle until we found a road, a town, a police station. No one believed our story there. When someone was finally sent to investigate, they found no evidence of the high-tech complex we had described. I suspected they hadn't looked hard or were paid to look the other way, but I didn't want to stick around. If they wanted to dismiss me a crank, so be it as long as I got to walk away.

Justin and I stuck together. If Mick or the Leader or whoever was in charge sent people after us, we thought the best way to protect ourselves was to stay together. We went back to the States. There, we just disappeared. We moved to a different part of the country. We took fake names--Justin became "Jason," and I took the name "Paul," in honor of my lost brother. That was a mistake on my part, because the name and my resemblance to my brother reminded Justin too much of his lost friend, who he loved too but in a different way, constant reminders like a knife in the heart. I got a job in a mom-and-pop restaurant, a place willing to pay me under the table in cash, no questions asked. Justin got a job in a local department store that wasn't too thorough about paperwork. It wasn't much money, but together we made enough to live on, enough to afford a small apartment. Life was different, but for a

while it was good, at least more good than bad.

I stayed in touch with my parents but only occasionally. I didn't want to bring trouble to their doorstep if the Leader's people were watching them. Once a month I bought a different untraceable prepaid phone and called them. I told them I hadn't been able to find Paul. I intimated that I'd run into some trouble myself--I was okay, don't worry, but I needed to lay low for a while. I let them believe I'd been in a bar fight while looking for Paul and there might have been charges pressed and I needed to keep a low profile for a while so the police wouldn't find me. They'd believed that. Each time I called them, I told them I loved them, in case it was the last time.

I dated a few women here and there, mostly no-strings relationships. I'm big, blond, and good-looking; I let my hair grow out a little, enough to cover the tiny plug that was only noticeable if someone touched exactly the right spot, and the slightly longer-than-service haircut just seemed to make the ladies more interested in me. When they asked about my obvious military background, I told them I'd been in the Marines, just gotten back from my final tour. It seemed a plausible substitute for the Army Special Forces. I hinted there might be post-traumatic stress. I let them think that was to blame for the emotional distance and the obvious holes in my history that hid secrets. I made sure the relationships never got too intense or lasted too long. No relationship survived long after the woman started asking questions.

Justin had trouble adjusting. Life seemed grayer, colors and smells and sounds less intense for both of us, compared to the sharpness of being haloed. No pleasure compared to the bliss of those times we'd experienced reward mode. Justin and I depended on each other for safety and stability, and he confused that with love. Sometimes Justin and I had sex, but it was mostly for the comfort of being with someone who

understood. He tried not to be jealous of the women I dated, or at least he said he tried. He found himself a boyfriend briefly too, but it didn't work out. Justin chomped at the bit--he hated the secrets we had to keep, the restricted way we had to live; he wanted to return to his college, to his family and friends, his old life.

One day, six months after we escaped, Justin disappeared. There was no sign of struggle. There was no intrusion of hostiles, as I first feared. I searched his belongings and his computer, an old clunker we'd bought second-hand, and put together the story. No, one day Justin just took his real-name passport and boarded a plane with the ticket he'd bought using money his parents had transferred to an online bank account he set up. He told them he was sorry, had finally outgrown his misspent youth, was ready to come home, settle down, be an adult. He bought a ticket, but not home to his parents like they expected. He erased the flight information.

I suspected Justin went back to South America. Life "outside" seemed colorless, alienated. I knew it was probably the residual mind control talking, but I missed Paul, I missed Justin, I missed the intensity and the connectedness I experienced through the halo. I missed the Soldiers. The halo made life feel more ... I don't want to say predestined, but ordered, uncomplicated. More real. I missed being a Soldier.

After a year, I made my decision. That's how I came to be on this hill above this restaurant in this backwater village.

I checked the dining area again through my binoculars. Another tourist couple had just left. One waiter bussed their table while the other fussed over the last remaining diners. I hadn't expected to see the bussing waiter, not so soon. He looked good; he looked content. There was no flash of gold at his forehead, but maybe the tech had evolved in the last

year, especially now that Techno Geek Prime was probably working for them.

I pulled that last photograph of Paul and his friends out of my pocket. The paper was cracking from being folded and unfolded so many times. In the picture, they're all giddy-grinning for the camera--shirtless, squinting against the sun, thinking they were setting off on a grand summer adventure, not knowing exactly what that adventure would be. Life turned out differently.

I took out my cell phone and snapped a photograph of myself. I made myself smile as if everything were perfect. It wasn't; it never is; it can't ever be perfect. Improvise, adapt, overcome. Compromises had to be made. I was ready to make them.

I wanted to look happy in this picture. I wanted them to look at my smile and think everything would work out, happy endings for everyone on the horizon. I sent the photo to my parents, attached to a text message saying not to worry, I'm all right but I have to be out of touch for a long while, and I want them to know I love them. I pressed the *Send* button and waited while the message transferred.

Then I turned off the phone and flung it as hard as I could out into the ocean. The salt water would make short work of it. I could barely hear the splash amid the surf. No turning back.

I guess, really, I was happy in my own way. I knew what I wanted. Everything hinged on the next few minutes.

I stood up and brushed the debris off my ass and thighs. Now it was time to walk down to the restaurant and talk to the waiters, Lucas and Justin. It was time to apologize, tell them I wanted to come back to the complex. They'd have to see I was sincere. I'd accept the halo, submit to

whatever, if the Leader would take me back. I was ready to be a Soldier again.
