



a fire in arcadia

Kindling • Warren Ockrossa

A Fire in Arcadia

I: Kindling

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BOOK I:  
JEKTRES

## SECRET LIVES IN TREES

THE BAFFLES WENT FAST, as she knew they would.

Erekka gave a shout that was lost in the sounds of the condensers overloading, exploding before and around them with showers of sparks and molten ectmit. She couldn't hear her voice over the noise, didn't feel the heated globules of polymer as they splashed over her forearm. "They've breached!"

Her warning was unnecessary. The beamguns were crackling all around them now, lances of death crossing the smoky air as the last of the shielding collapsed. The annular particle fields blazed with a hateful violet glow. As a nip she had thought the color pretty. Now it meant copper fear and instant slaughter and she wondered if any colors would ever be the same to her again — red was now blood, blue the damned bruises she and everyone else got from the constant fighting, green the shade of a corpse left to molder among the trees of Arcadia. And purple. Fucking purple everywhere. Death tasted the air with purple tongues, looking for people to eat. Her people.

She kept her head down. The bucket was good for projectiles but would be holed as easily as her skull if one of the beams touched it. She launched the fallback flare (yellow, another color to hate) and instantly saw the motions around her; the fighters were retreating into the thicker trees. They triggered their metacamo and deliquesced into prismatic bark, leaves and ground cover.

The front assault troopers began advancing, keeping their fire low and wide, cutting across the ground, hoping to catch at least a few of them at the ankles before they could make the security of the depths, the tree trunks too thick even for the beamguns to get through easily. She heard a gasp and chuff into the soil nearby and saw Tenette's camo flicker. She had been hit. Erekka paused for the merest beat before catching Tenette's eyes. She had lost both feet midway up her shins; they lay smoking beside her. She had her hands wrapped around an incendiary and nodded to her, a final gesture. Erekka dropped her face field long enough to let her see the recognition of her sacrifice, then tripped it again and shot back with the rest of the party into the depths.

As she retreated she saw five inert forms on the soil. Soldiers both like her and not like her. They were hers but wouldn't speak or breathe again. The beams had lanced them and left them sundered with the bloodless wounds typical of the weapons. Most had died before even hitting the ground.

*Academy mercy, she thought bitterly. Clean kills.*

Still just as dead though.

She ducked her head as one of the troopers approached Tenette, expecting the concussion. But Tenette held on. She was waiting for more. Ereka felt a deep twist in her heart to consider the fem's bravery. She had a mel back home, and would not be seeing him again. And she had decided to wreak as much vengeance as she could.

Ereka wondered, as she continued backing away, how much longer Tenette could hold out. She fired a few silenced rounds at the trooper that was standing over the fem's still form, hoping to draw a few more to his side. Her low-yield autorifle projectiles were nothing against the shielding the troopers had, but could be annoying enough to bring a few. Tenette looked her way and Ereka could see the gratitude in her eyes. She knew what she was trying to do.

Four more men were closer now, close enough, preparing to fire in Ereka's direction, and Tenette closed her eyes. Ereka turned her head and opened her mouth to protect her eardrums.

The concussion was tremendous. Ereka was driven back a meter, knocked off her feet by a huge invisible hand and left sprawled on her back. For a moment she felt like an upended tortug, legs and arms flailing in the air, and then she tucked her knees to her chest and flipped over her shoulders to her feet. The incend was still flaming and all five of the troopers were gone in it, scorched black. Tenette's remains smoked as the incend's field consumed them, shredding all organic matter, slowly guttering as the biochemicals in the charge lost potency. Fuck, those Scintillans could make some bad shit when they wanted to.

She turned her back and loped into the trees with the rest of her detachment, six fewer now than it had been just a few moments before. Somewhere, she hoped, someone on this Buddha-forsaken mudball was having a good day.

“Niko!”

He groaned. Why did she always have to call him that? Especially when he was

playing with other nips?

“Niko! Supper!”

“Coming, May!” he called back, his cheeks crimson, as he began pulling on his togs. (He never wore them when he was swimming unless there were fems around, and then he just wore his clouts. But he preferred to swim bare, like every other mel he knew. Wet togs were awful: They took forever to dry in the humid air, and they chafed.)

Jektres elbowed him and spoke in a falsetto. “Niko-wiko, it’s time for dinny-winnny!”

“Shuddup,” Nikolis said.

“Or what?”

“Or — or you can’t come to the party tomorrow!”

Jektres’s smile faltered, then flared again. “Ooo, no cookie-wookies or cakey-wakey for me?”

“Shuddup,” Nikolis said again, but this time he was laughing. “I gotta go or May’ll be all over me for being late.”

“Yeh,” said Jektres, “and then she won’t put you in your favy-wavy wittwe jam-jams.”

Nikolis threw a gob of mud at him. Jektres dodged most of it but some spattered brown across his skin, rich and dark against his copper. “See you, worm face,” he said.

“Yeh, tomorrow, worm breath,” Jektres said. “Ask your ma to make some of that jellyfruit mold, wouldja?”

“Algood,” Nikolis said, waving as he left.

“Spec. See you then, *Nee-ko*,” Jektres said, and Nikolis turned just long enough to cup his worm at him. Jektres returned the motion, their mocking salute, then decided it was time for him to swim a little more before heading back to his own homestead, rinsing the mud off his body and then floating on his back lazily for a while before getting out, drying languidly and all-skin in the air, pulling on his clouts and leaving.

Unlike Nikolis, he knew there would not be a supper waiting for him, that he would be making his own meal as usual, so he took his time heading back to the homestead. And he had other reasons not to be there often.

Nikolis bustled around the table outside the dwelcap. When the weather was decent (which was usually; it generally only rained late at night) they ate outside since the

dinitchen was too small to fit all four of them easily. He was helping set the table, as always, while Oli and Day were washing from the day's work in the orchards. He was beginning to chafe at the domestic chores. Tomorrow he'd be well into double digits and he wasn't all that comfortable with doing women's work all the time. He was a mel, not a fem.

As May brought out the tuber casserole she gave him an appraising look. "Your clouts are a mess," she said.

"Sorry," he said. He wasn't. She always said that, and he always said sorry.

"You'll be in school again soon," she went on. "Not as much time to play as you used to have."

"Well Jek —" He stopped, wishing he could glue his mouth shut.

May nodded, suspicions confirmed. "I don't like you spending so much time with that nip," she said. "It's not proper for a mel his age to be avoiding his education. And don't you think he's a little old for you?"

"He's just two halfyears older, May, and —"

"Niko, we've talked about this."

"You've talked about it," he said, his face hot. "I've had to listen."

May stared at him. "You're behaving a little sparky for a nip who thinks he's going to have a party tomorrow," she said at last.

Nikolis lowered his head. "Sorry, May," he mumbled. "But Jektres is my friend. And there aren't many nips nearby."

"He's right," Day said, stepping outside just in time to hear the tail of the conversation. He'd heard it before and knew about the conflict that persisted between mother and son, a vein that gave to faults from time to time. "There aren't many nips nearby. So Jek's not doing his schooling as he should. You know Nik's doing well. Give the poor nip a little room." He ruffled Nikolis's hair and winked at him. "Mels will be mels, and he only has a few more halfyears left before it's all behind him forever."

May shook her head. "I don't like that mel," she said. "He's trouble."

"Remember what your ma said about me at first?"

"That was different."

"It ended up differently, yeh — but you didn't exactly get dragged into perdition by me, did you?"

May sighed. "No, I suppose not. Just to another planet." She turned to Nikolis.

“But you watch yourself around that nip,” she said. “If you get into any foolishness with him —”

“I know,” Nikolis said. “I won’t be able to play with him any more.” This was also part of the argument. Family Fight, Page Two.

May nodded at him and they went on with the supper preparations, the mood of the evening not changed in the slightest by their little flare-up. They’d both acted the parts so often by then that it was almost automatic, reflexive, and done with virtually no real feeling any longer. “Niko, get inside and change your togs. I won’t have mud all over the seats.”

“Algood,” Nikolis said, and did as he was told, changing his tunic and clouts and then pausing momentarily in the sani to pass a little water over his hands as well. He studied himself in the mirror and decided he might want to work on his his face too. It was smudged with mud and he scrubbed with a cloth until it was brown and his skin was clear, his hated freckles shining across his cheekbones and over the bridge of his nose.

Of all his features he most wished those would go away, even more than his dumb ears. Everyone stared at the spray of little marks and adults were the worst, always commenting on how *adorable* they looked. As if he wanted the poop-clout things on his face and lived only to have them called attention to. He quickly dried his cheeks and hands and then went back outside to mocking applause from Oli. “At last, the prince deigns to grace us with his presence,” he said.

“Better a prince than a princess,” Nik murmured to him as he sidled past on the way to his own place at the table. Keolit slugged his shoulder with uncanny precision, deadening it for a moment in that strange way he had. He always managed to get it just right. Jelly-armed, he sat down and they all started in.

Keolit kept nudging his leg under the table. It was a goad. Nik nudged back and then his brother upped the ante. The game was to see which of them could *nudge* the hardest without showing any motion above the table, while at the same time accepting the kicks of the other without wincing. Oli was good. Nik was usually the one that got caught.

Day and Oli talked about their work in the orchards while the game went on. Nikolis listened with half an ear. His conversation with May had stuck with him a little this time, especially the part where she said Jek was a little old for him. Jek talked about

fems a lot, and Nikolis understood what that meant. Oli had been the same way when he was about fourteen or fifteen halfyears. Nikolis felt a little tightness in his chest. What if Jek decided he didn't want to play with him any more? What if all he wanted to do was be with fems?

Why did mels have to start talking about fems all the time anyway? He knew that men and women got married and had nips — that was where he and Keolit had come from; after all, he wasn't *stupid* — but there was a vast nebulous time in between that he didn't understand, a time when a mel started thinking about fems and nothing else, before he got married. Something happened in there. Mels changed. They got goofy and acted really strangely when fems were around. Nikolis hated it. It was better with just mels. Then everyone could relax and be natural. When fems were nearby it was like he was dealing with *two* alien species, not just one: Fems, and fem-besotted mels.

Oli's toe suddenly found the nerve just below Nik's kneecap and his leg jumped reflexively. He started as his foot flew out under him and caught Day's shin. Day jumped and glared at him as Nik said, "Ow! Knock it off, worm neck!"

There was a sudden startled silence, and then his father laughed. That was the signal for everyone else to unbend. May shook her head at him reprovably, but not really angry, and Oli lobbed a biscuit at him. Nik caught it and took a triumphant bite, then stuck his tongue out at his brother. "Quite a leg you've got on you," Day said. "Must be all that kickball you play."

"And quite a mouth," May said. "I've half a mind to scrub it with degreaser just to knock out the sludge."

"Don't," Oli advised. "If he swallowed it it would get into his skull, and then all the sludge would run out his ears and he'd have to put insulation in there instead to keep his head from caving in."

"Keli," May said, "don't ask for fights."

Oli turned bright red at his mother's pet name for him. Nik made a face at him, smirking. *Niko* was bad, but *Keli* was hideous. At least his brother had *something* worse than he did.

"Just like gravy, all brown and gooey," Oli said, then kicked his voice up a couple octaves. "Ooo, May! Help me! My brains are running out!"

"Yeh," Nikolis said, using the same tone. "Soon I'll start sounding just like my brother!"

“Good one,” Day said.

“That is *enough*,” May said, and tried to glare at her husband for encouraging them, but underneath it she was smiling. Niko and Keli traded broadsides regularly, but she knew there wasn’t real malice behind it. It was just the way brothers could be. And anyway they were more like friends than siblings most of the time.

“I suppose I’ll toddle inside,” Day said, stretching. “Superb meal, love.” He kissed May on the cheek and then went in to watch the news 3cast. This was the sign that supertime was over, and Oli went in to join their father as Nik (*sigh*) remained outside to help clear the table.

He got a huge armload of dishes from May and brought them into the dinitchen, sorting them into the washer. May appeared in a few moments with the leftovers — not much, as usual. She liked to say that feeding three hungry mels was like throwing her cooking into the sani bowl. No matter how much she put in, there was always room for more.

She pulled him over to give him a quick hug and peck on the forehead, then considered him a moment, smoothing his black hair back as he stared up solemnly into her face. He had her eyes, green. Not like Keli’s, which were blue like his father’s. Her mix ‘n’ match mels, she called them sometimes; when they had been younger they used to get into arguments over who was Mix and who Match. Keli thought he should be Mix because he came first; Niko thought he was Mix because it almost rhymed with Nik. “You’re getting tall,” she said.

“I am?”

“You are. Are you looking forward to your party?”

“Yeh,” he said.

“Thirteen halfyears,” she said thoughtfully. “I guess that’s a waypost to a mel, isn’t it? But to fems too. I remember turning thirteen when I was a fem. I expected everything to be different the next day.”

“Was it?”

She ran her fingers through his hair, grooming it a little, liking its heft and smoothness, enjoying the solid shape of his skull underneath, wondering at how a head that large had ever made it out of her own body a decade and not quite a third prior. Her mel, her sweet child, moving into manhood like his older brother. He smiled at the gesture and she remembered how he had been, a fat-faced infant with no teeth, how his

smile had been exactly the same. “No,” she said, “and yes. I still felt the same, but folks did treat me a little differently.”

“Yeh?”

“Yeh,” she said, and bent his head forward to kiss him on the crown. “Like now. Why don’t you join your father and brother in the family room. I’ll finish the washing. Algood?”

“Can I?”

“I just said you could, didn’t I? Maybe sludge *is* running out your ears after all. Or you’ve got mud plugs in them.” She turned his head to the side and peered in, then pretended to gasp in shock. “*That’s* where all the topsoil went! You growing tubers in there?”

“Aw, May, stop it,” he fussed.

“Get,” she said, scooting him from the dinitchen and giving his rump a little swat. He giggled and went.

She watched his retreating back. There was a shadow of his older brother in the carriage of his shoulders already, she reflected, a little like their father, both of them. He hadn’t sprung in height as much as Keli had by this age, and was a little on the slender side as well, but what Niko might have lacked in physical stature he made up for in spirit and wit. Both of her sons were delightful in their own ways. Mix and match.

Of course she was a little biased, she conceded to herself. But that didn’t mean she was wrong.

Erekka slumped onto a gun crate, unstrapping her bucket and looking about at her compatriots. They were all dispirited, sweaty, and grimed with soot and soil. She knew her own face was similarly smudged, almost a mask of filth that ended abruptly just above her browline where the bucket had covered her head. She passed around a bowl and cloth, letting her soldiers wash first. She was the captain, the detachment leader, and knew they knew this was one of her many little gestures of respect for them.

“Fuckin Academy,” Alissa said as she scrubbed at the dirt on her face. She looked around, counting. “They got six.”

“Five,” Erekka said. “Wounded Tenette, but she took five of them. And we got six others before the baffles went.”

“Tenette?” It was Melitto. She and Tenette had — they were close. Had been

close. Tenette liked fems as well as mels.

*Had* liked fems.

Shit.

Erekka nodded slowly. “She used an incend. Beamgun got her but she wasn’t going down that easy.” She softened her voice as tears began to leave clean tracks on Melitto’s cheeks. “I’m sorry,” she said. “But she was — it was courage. Right up until she ... got ’em.”

Melitto sobbed and leaned against Balia’s shoulder. Balia soothed her and then cleaned her face for her when the bowl made it their way.

“This is a bunk fuck,” Alissa scowled. “We can’t keep up like this.”

“We got more of them than they got of us,” said Roni.

“But there *are* more of them than there are of us.”

“Still —”

“Algood,” Erekka said. “Alissa’s right. We need to change strategy. It’s no good trying to take on one of their posts outright. They’re defended too well. Our portable baffles don’t have the rocks to face concerted fire for very long. They were never meant to handle assault tactics; they’re just for covering our sweet asses when we scuttle away.” She looked around at the circle of faces, took the bowl and began cleaning her features. “I’ve got another idea. I think a better one.”

“Anything’s better than being clusterfucked like this.”

Erekka winced as her arm flexed, looked down at it. Her metacamo was burned where it had been struck by the molten ectmit. She knew without pulling back the sleeve that there were welts and blisters on her skin. “They have portable shields,” she said, idly scraping off the charred polymer. “We can’t get those for ourselves. We can only sneak in the biotech from Scintilla. And they’re starting to say that —” she stopped.

“Say what?” Roni said. Suddenly everyone was paying attention, even Melitto.

*Shit*, Erekka thought. *Well, they deserve to know*. “Algood, this is what I heard down the pipe. Scintilla is under some heat from Interplan Council now. They don’t want the Scintillans *abetting a terrorist movement*.”

Everyone groaned.

“Fuck the IC,” Alissa said. “They can lick my ass.”

“That’s a fine sentiment,” Erekka said, “but it doesn’t help us much tactically. So there’s a possibility Scintilla might not be sending us much more biotech.”

“Then what the fuck do we do?”

“We grow the fuck our own,” Erecca said. “We’ll get some volunteers to go there and learn the shit, then come back here and help us set it up. But that’s for later, long-term. It’s covered. We need something new, and now, to handle the Academy worms.”

“I wouldn’t handle one of their worms if it was the last one left,” Balia said.

“Join the club,” Roni grinned, but there was no mirth behind it.

“I think we all joined that club a while back,” Erecca said, and the others laughed. “Well here’s what I’m thinking. We have two weapons they don’t. One is our metacamo. We can use that for guerilla tactics. Get ’em outside. One or two of us in the trees where they can’t see us. And silent low-yields can do the rest.”

“What else?”

Erecca winked at Roni. “Our tits and nooky. That’s the other thing they don’t have, and they sure as hell want it.”

“No shit,” Alissa smirked.

“So here’s what we do...” And she began to sketch the idea.

## INTIMACIES AND THEIR RISKS

NIK WOKE WITH HIS CHEST CONSTRICTED and felt a moment's panic when he couldn't move his arms either. He thrashed and then became aware of what was happening. Oli was crouching over him, pinning him to the bed, the covers drawn tight over his body. He was holding them down. "Leave off, worm face," Nik said.

"Good morning to you too, little bro," Keolit smirked. "And happy birthday." He rolled off Nikolis to his side of the mattress.

Nik sat up, scrubbing his hair idly where it stood up. He had this one tuft that never seemed to lay down. "Oh yeh," he said.

"Thirteen halfyears," Oli said. He looked a little thoughtful. "The big one three. I remember that myself. I really felt like I was growing up." His eyes focused on Nik. "And you were eight then, still just a little nip."

"Yeh, yeh," Nik scowled. He was well aware that Keolit was much older. And bigger. And taller. And stronger. And everytinger. And a real pain in the clouts sometimes.

"You're not so little as you used to be any more," Oli said, surprising him. "You'll be —" He smiled.

"What?" Nik said.

"Oh, lots of things. Changing, inside and outside. Discovering what's so great about fems, and you're going to start really getting taller, and your voice might even drop soon."

"Really?" Nik's eyes were wide.

"Yeh, probably before your next birthday. Maybe you'll even want a femfriend."

Nik scowled and Oli laughed. "You won't always feel that way about 'em, bro," he said. "And pretty soon you'll be big enough to work in the orchards with Day all the time. That's good, because..."

The unspoken thought hung between them. Because Keolit would be going to the Academy soon. Nik wasn't sure how to feel about that. He knew it meant he'd have the

room — and the bed! — all to himself at last, but he also felt a funny tight feeling in his stomach whenever he thought of Oli leaving. For the first time it occurred to him that maybe Oli was unsure about it himself. “So,” he said, “what’d you get me for my birthday?”

Oli smiled and bopped him with his pillow. “Get your skinny little rear up and see,” he said. “You’re not having your party while you lay around like a lizard in the sun.”

Nik gave Keolit a whack with his own pillow, and they traded blows for a few moments before Oli tickled him and made him tumble, wriggling, onto the floor.

Breakfast was all Nikolis’s favorite morning fare. May made hot grainmeal with fruit jelly on it, served with thick slices of good yellow toast with plenten chunks in it. It was the best plenten bread in the area. Everyone thought so. Each halfyear she won awards for it at the fair. And there was citron juice with lots of pulp. Oli scowled at the beverage; he hated it when it had pulp in it. Juice is for drinking, not chewing, he always said. But it was his brother’s day so he kept his opinions to himself for once.

After breakfast they got the yard ready. Nikolis had invited several nips to celebrate with him, mels (and a few fems) from nearby homesteads. The closest one to theirs that had any nips was three kilometers away, and Jektres lived about two kilometers farther out than that. Nevertheless he was the first to arrive, on foot, his bare toes splayed with their freedom from footwear. As far as Nik knew, Jek had never worn shoes, not even sandals, not even when he was in town. Which wasn’t very often.

May tutted over Jek’s bare feet, insisting they were too filthy to be allowed inside without a good washing first. “Clean ’em off or take ’em off,” she said. Nik shrugged at him helplessly.

Jek dutifully sat a moment and ran some water from the outside spigot over his soles, then shyly handed a crudely-wrapped little package to Nikolis. “Happy birthday,” he said. “It’s not much.”

“Thanks, Jek,” Nik said. “You didn’t have to bring anything.”

Jek shrugged and looked at his toes.

“Wanna go in and play 3cast?”

“Yeh,” Jek said.

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After a while longer all the guests had arrived and the family room was filled with the tumult of nips jockeying for position at the 3cast console. May and Oli took turns supervising. Day said he had to be in the orchards and seemed glad to be able to escape the din. When it got to be too much for everyone, May shooed them all outside with a kickball. “Get a game going for a while,” she said.

They chose teams quickly, three on three. Nik and Jek were on one side, along with a fem named Renetta who was pretty spec, even though she was a fem. The other side was the other two mels and the fem Nik knew from his gradation. All of them were of about the same age and in the same school level except Jektres, who never went. He was older and the outsider, and all the other nips idolized him for his independence.

They played against each other for a seven-point match (“One for each full year,” Keolit said, rounding up), setting up impromptu goals using disposable plates rolled up into cylinders and stuffed into the ground. Oli was scorekeeper and referee. Nik and Jek had several strategies between them; Renetta seemed to catch on to them fast and played well too, really playing almost like a mel. Nik was impressed. They were able to just eke a victory and then it was time for the treats.

May had baked a *big* cake, frosted with her special glaze, and had remembered to make a large jellyfruit mold for Jektres. She softened at him when she saw his obvious delight. He could be annoying, Nik knew, but he charmed her as well. Most adults, really. Jek just had a way about him.

Next was time for him to open his presents. Most were practical and greatly appreciated. He got several new changes of togs, sandals, and even a backpack from Renetta. She smiled and blushed at his thanks. “I thought you might want to put things in it,” she said. “You know, like if you’re walking and you see something interesting.”

“Nikky and Netta, sitting in a tree...” began Jektres mockingly. Nik punched him. But he smiled too. He sort of liked Renetta, but would never have said so out loud.

Jek had given him a 3cast game, one of his own that he knew Nik coveted. “Wow,” he said. “Thanks, Jek.”

“It’s algood,” Jek shrugged. “You like it?”

“Yeh!” Nik said. “It’s spec!” Jek beamed.

“Here, bro,” Oli said, passing him a small flat package. “This is from me and May and Day.” It was heavy.

Nik opened it and gasped.

“So you don’t have to keep using mine all the time,” Keolit said.

“Thanks, Oli.” He held it up so the other nips could see. It was a pad, and a good one. Solid and well-shrouded in padding and sealing. One of the Academy-standard types that could be dropped without breaking, sat upon, even taken underwater.

“That’s spec,” Jek said. “Whatcha gonna do with it?”

“Uh,” Nikolis said. He wasn’t sure.

“Classwork?” May said hopefully, taking some empty platters back inside.

Nik rolled his eyes. “Oh — maybe I can keep a journal, like Oli does.”

“I knew you were snooping,” Keolit said, and boxed his shoulder.

“No,” Nik said. “But I see you writing in it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Really...” And then he saw the smile on his brother’s face. “Oh, you’re a bearded worm,” he said without rancor.

“At least my worm has a beard,” Oli smirked.

“At least I can find my worm without a microscope,” Nikolis shot back.

“Hey, you want to spend all your time looking at your worm, that’s your problem, bro. But keep it to yourself, algood? I don’t want to know about your hobbies.”

Jek laughed. That was a pretty good one.

They went into town and watched a 3cast, then stopped for supper and ice treats. Oli was the one who went with them; May claimed she had work to do at the dwelcap. Keolit knew what she was doing — so many nips, so young, were a bit much for almost anyone — and he took it on only a little grudgingly. He was tall and solid, two meters at least and covered in muscles from his work in the orchards, and had a deep commanding voice that well matched his imposing presence. He had no trouble keeping the nips under control.

On the way to town he got them all lined up in a row and then called out Academy marching cadences. All the nips, even the fems, fell in line, playing trooper and enjoying the game. When they were well out of earshot of any adults Oli let the cadences get a little risqué.

*All the fems of Arcady  
Are double-jointed at the knee  
They can bend in lots of ways  
That is why they're such good lays*

*Push in  
Pull out  
Push in, pull out, make the fems all give a shout!*

Nik and Jek and the other mels laughed while the fems made faces at the words. (Except for Renetta, who didn't seem to care, singing along as lustily as the mels.) Jek laughed harder than Nikolis, who didn't really grasp the whole meaning, but didn't want to let on.

After the 3cast and feast the little group broke up as the nips went along their individual routes to their homesteads until it was just Nik, Jek and Oli at Nikolis's dwelling. "Wanna go to my place?" Jek said.

"Yeh," Nik said. "You bet. Let me ask May first though." He left Jek outside while he went in to plead for release. Jek heard enough to know Nikolis's mother was giving her token remonstrances of resistance, but also knew by her tone that the invitation would be accepted.

He was glad. When Nik was around his ma seemed to pay a little more attention to him. The right kind. And he liked it when Nik stayed overnight. It was better than when he was alone. He didn't have any sibs and envied his friend; he wouldn't have minded having a brother, especially one like Keolit, who was spec.

Nikolis was pretty spec himself, though, even if he was only just thirteen today, and sometimes he wondered why his friend liked spending time with him so much. Jek-tres didn't think of himself as anything special, but Nik seemed to really enjoy his company. Maybe because they could cut loose and really hang. Without adults around all the time to always be asking stupid questions, they were free to do whatever they pleased.

It didn't really matter why Nik liked him. He was just glad he did. Most of the nips kept away from him. He knew their folks were the reason. Adults were a little

afraid of him.

*Some adults.*

Soon enough they were trotting off together, Nikolis toting a change of clouts and his new pad in his new backpack. (“Renetta likes you,” Jek needled him. “Maybe you should’ve asked for a birthday kiss.” Nik punched his arm, not wanting to admit he sort of liked the idea.) Jektres was carrying an ectmit bowl of jellyfruit mold, an extra that Nik’s ma had made for him because she knew he liked it so much. Jek thought, not for the first time, that he would have traded places with Nik in a second. He also knew his friend felt the same way about him. It was strange how they seemed to envy each other that way. Each wanted the other’s life.

*Well, he thought, if Nik really knew, he wouldn’t want my life at all. And not even my friendship.*

On the way they stopped at their best swimming pond, dropped their togs on the bank, and played and splashed for a while until it was dusk, then put on their clouts and hiked barechested the rest of the way to Jektres’s dwelcap, their tunics in Nik’s pack.

Jek’s ma wasn’t in when they got to the homestead by their overland route, a common enough event that neither mel remarked on it. They played 3cast for a while and then Jek pulled up his collection of pictures. He knew Nikolis liked looking at them, and he did as well of course. “I got some new ones,” he said, paging the display. “Here.”

The fems were pretty, Nik supposed, but he knew he probably wasn’t much of a judge. And anyway he didn’t care about their faces, because none of them had any togs on, and he was always fascinated by their bare bodies. He loved to look at their globes and the place where hair grew on them.

He wondered why fems grew hair at all. He knew it was good for a mel because then his worm and sack stopped sticking to his legs; he had been pleased by the advent of his own sprouting for that reason (plus it had meant he was maturing). It had been awful the way everything stuck together down there sometimes, especially on really humid days. Jek had some pretty thick hair going too, more than Nik’s, but it wasn’t as complete as the growth around Oli’s worm. And Oli’s worm was lots bigger than his own, or even than Jektres’s, and Jek wasn’t exactly small.

Some of Jek’s new pictures had mels in them too, putting their worms inside the fems. He could actually see them going in and it made his own worm throb up with an urgency he still didn’t quite understand, even though he knew it had to do with Doing It.

It was one of those mysteries he knew he wasn't supposed to grasp until he got older, but sometimes he wondered what all the fuss was about, why it was such a big deal if people Did It together (especially if they weren't married), and even why his own body reacted as it did to the pictures.

Jek's worm was standing up too, and after a while he switched off the 3cast, doused the lights and dropped his clouts on the floor, climbing nude onto the bed. Nik followed suit and listened for a moment to the sounds of Jek as he played with his worm. There was a little rhythmic hiss of his hand on his skin, and then Nik began playing on himself as well, sneaking looks at Jek's body in the starlight that filtered in through the window. In a little while Jek gasped and Nik saw the melstuf come out of him, and that made him have the feeling too, though he didn't make as much stuff as Jek did. He knew he would when he was older, and that was another thing he was looking forward to.

After they were done Jek dozed off, lying on top of the covers and letting his stuff dry on himself, and Nik waited for his worm to relax. It always took it a while after he had the feeling. Jek told him once that after he started making lots of melstuf his worm would relax quicker when he was finished. He didn't know why but he guessed it was because all that stuff was how his body knew he was done.

He felt the twinges of guilt that always came after one of these sessions. He knew it was bad for him to look at pictures of naked fems. And it was even worse to look at pictures of naked mels putting their worms in the fems. Only married men and women were supposed to do things like that, and only in secret, where no one could see them. And he also knew he wasn't supposed to play with his worm, ever.

But it felt so good when he did it.

And what was really bad, he knew — really, really bad — was how good he felt when he looked at Jek, when he was naked and standing and playing with his worm, and especially how good it made him feel to watch the stuff come out of him. Mels were *never* supposed to feel like that about other mels. If anyone ever found out he felt that way, he would have to go to Retraining. That was what happened to mels who got dirty with other mels, who even *wanted* to get dirty with them. *Benders*, they were called. Mels who liked mels were called benders, but he didn't know why.

He closed his eyes and tried to think about other things. But the vision of Jek's bare body alongside his own was what surfaced in his dreams, dreams in which he did

things with Jek that would have landed him in more trouble than he could imagine, if he actually were to do any of them.

Erekka readied her rifle, the butt nestling against her shoulder. She propped its barrel on a tree limb and settled against the trunk, then began her deep breathing, the sniper's relaxing motions, steadying her whole body with a mix of tension and calm so her aim would not waver. It had been twenty minutes by her chrono since Alissa and Balia had approached the post's perimeter and been quietly let inside. She was fairly sure they'd be emerging soon and she had to be ready.

She tripped her metacamo, Roni doing the same the next tree over, and they disappeared against the foliage. They couldn't keep the fields on too long; the batteries wore down quickly. Fucking fourthhand surplus. Still it was better than nothing.

She was right. In a few more minutes the two fems reappeared, eight mels in tow. *Shit*, she thought. *Four each. Good on you, fems. And fuck you, you selfish bastards.*

It wasn't uncommon for fems to visit the posts and draw some troopers into the woods for a little midnight play. That knowledge was her power. And these mels were about to be a lot more thoroughly fucked than they could have dreamed.

The fems led the mels beyond the lights at the post's perimeter, into the trees, toward the ambush. The mels laughed at each other's jokes, making lewd gestures toward the fems, who were playing their parts perfectly, appearing to want the attention. Both Alissa and Balia, she knew, had bodies that mels could not get enough of, beautiful faces and lovely forms, lithe and graceful, athletic and healthy. Only their short haircuts gave them away as being soldiers, and those were covered now by wigs.

They wagged their hips suggestively and blew little kisses to the mels, luring them farther away from their lives. The mels cupped their worms at the fems, a gesture she hated. It was so fucking pubescent. *Real* men outgrew the gesture about a week after their voices changed.

*Well enjoy, nips*, she thought grimly. *What you see tonight will be the last you ever see.*

The little group halted in the clearing near her tree. Subliminally she heard a light rustle, very quiet and gradual, from the perch alongside hers as Roni drew her weapon to a better firing angle. Erekka sighted down her own rifle, getting a bead on one cluster of mels. She was to take the ones that went with Balia; Roni was to focus on

the ones with Alissa. She felt her world close around her, her intent and will centered only on the field in her scope. In the channel, yeh.

The group split up into two clusters of five and the fems began undressing as the mels looked on, making little whoops and catcalls as they watched. Their attentions were fully focused on the fems as they slowly bared themselves, and that was the signal, and Ereka sighted on the first and squeezed gently. The rifle went *fet* and she saw the first mel die, his skull flying apart in wet pieces, drawing a bead on the second and firing before the first could even drop. She got three that way by the time the fourth had realized what was happening, but it was too late for him as well. Balia had drawn her blade and slit his throat before he had any opportunity to cry out.

Meanwhile Roni had silently dispatched three others from her hide, but the fourth just managed to break away from Alissa. Ereka swore silently and got a workable sight on him, sinking a pellet between his shoulderblades just before he could raise an alarm. He jerked and pitched forward and twitched and she sent three more slugs into him, *fet fet fet*, and then he stopped moving completely.

Balia and Alissa, meanwhile, were rapidly drawing their metacamos on, triggering the fields before the garments were even fully in place. Ereka began climbing down from her perch and knew by the rustling of the tree near hers that Roni was doing the same. In the metacamo her progress was marked only by a shimmering silhouette on the bark. Close watching would show the profile of a human, but there was no one left alive to watch except her own soldiers.

Alissa closed her camo over her torso and Ereka was given a single surreal glimpse of her disembodied head hovering in empty air before she drew the hood over her bucket and that, too, faded from sight. Balia was already invisible and the four fems quickly stole away into the night, leaving the dead mels to lay where they had fallen.

Ereka permitted herself a moment of elation. Despite the near escape of the one mel, she knew she could count this new strategy as a wild success. And she knew her detachment's morale would soar.

That, more than anything else, was what mattered to her.

## RELATIONSHIPS AND POLITICS

NIKOLIS AND JEKTRES PASSED A LAZY MORNING, playing some 3cast together for a while and swimming in one of the ponds near Jek's homestead. They played Academy, Jek as always appointing himself General Orekkio, leaving Nik to do the grunt work like stockpiling mudball ammunition. Then they set up small stone markers ("Resistance soldiers," Jek said) and lobbed the mud, imagining the wet splats to be the concussions of grenades or, if they hit one of the soldiers square, flying guts.

Jek accused Nik of being a traitor to the Academy, a Resistance defector. Nikolis denied it but Jek pinned him and bound his hands behind him with his own clouts, then stood him against a tree and heaved mudballs at him until he was covered scalp to heel in the brown glop: Firing squad. Nik worked his hands free and chased Jek, finally tackling him and wrestling with him, getting them both well covered in the mud by the pond's bank. They broke and stared at each other and then began laughing; they were barely recognizable as human any longer. "It's near midday," Nik said at last. "I should get back."

"Algood," Jek said, ignoring his gut's twinge. "Don't forget the backpack your *femfriend* gave you."

"Shuddup," Nik said, glad the mud was covering his face enough that his blush didn't show. They put on their clouts and started back to Jek's dwellcap.

"You like Renetta?" Jek said.

Nik shrugged.

"I think she's pretty spec. For a fem, I mean," Jek added.

"Then why don't *you* ask her for a kiss?"

"Cause she's still a nip," Jek said. "She's only twelve! Doesn't even have any globes yet."

"Well *I* was twelve until yesterday but you hang with me."

"Yeh, but I'm not asking you for a kiss."

"Good thing too," Nik said. "I'd —"

“What?”

“I dunno. Fart on you or something.”

“Oh, big threat.”

“You haven’t smelled one of my tuber casserole farts. Oli says it’ll strip lacquer at fifty meters.”

Jek made a disparaging sound. “I can clear an entire field with one of mine. Plants all just turn brown and shrivel.”

“That’s not farts,” Nik said. “It’s your armpits.”

Jek boxed him. “Worm neck.”

Nik punched back. “Worm face.”

Jek punched again. “Worm breath.”

Nik shoved him. “Go gargle with melstuf.”

Jek broke into a run. “Naw, can’t, you drank it all,” he called over his shoulder.

Nik chased after him as he ran to the dwelcap. “I’ll show you what to drink!” he said. “I’ll pee in a cup and make you drink that!”

“Well I’ll pee right in your —” Face, probably, but Nik never found out. Jek had stopped short at the main portal.

Jek’s mother was there, looking a little irritated with her son. She got even more angry when she saw Nik, and then *really* angry when she fully saw how muddy they were. “Jektres Ellet, you march yourself right into the sani and wash, and I mean now. And you, *Mister* Tekkru,” she said, rounding on Nik, “you better damn well do the same. I’ll not have everyone saying my mel is filthy or that I let him play with dirty friends.” She scratched the back of her head and scowled. “*Now!*”

Jek and Nik retreated to Jektres’s bedroom. Jek rolled his eyes and Nik nodded in silent sympathy. His mother was in one of her moods. Some days she could be very nice, almost like any ma, and other days she was — well, like today. It always seemed to happen after she had left for a while.

Nikolis didn’t know where she went when she disappeared. He thought Jek had some ideas, but his friend never wanted to talk about it. Nik didn’t press it. The one time he had, Jek had become angry with him, even cried a little (which had frightened Nik quite badly), and told him to go home.

They dropped their clouts and scuttled into the sani, taking turns standing under the shower spray and washing each other’s backs, then dried themselves quickly and

went back into Jek's room. Nik dressed rapidly, his clouts still crusted with mud but serviceable, then let Jek lead him out the dwelcap's portal. They paused a few moments when they heard his mother's voice call from inside. "Jeki, sweetie, mama's going to have some guests tonight."

Nikolis saw Jektres's body tense, like his muscles all locked together at once. He'd seen this before as well, and also didn't really know why Jek acted like this. What was wrong with guests?

This was another thing Jek refused to talk about.

"Algood," he said quietly. "Look, Nik, you can't come by for a couple days. The guests will be here a while." His lips were thin and white.

"I know," Nik nodded. "Stop by when they leave, algood?"

"Yeh," Jek said softly, and Nik shouldered his pack, wondering why his friend stared after him as he left. Jek's eyes were hooded and he had an almost lost look on his face. Like he was wandering among the trees and watching his last hope for getting out, getting back home and safe, just walk away from him.

"So what did you and your *melfriend* do?" Oli said while Nik got the supper table set.

"Looked at naked pictures and played with our worms," Nik shot back.

"Hey, bro, go easy."

"Yeh, well," Nik said, setting the cups down harder than he needed to.

"What's wrong?"

Nik paused. Keolit meant it, he could tell. He was really asking, not just talking. "Well, his ma's having guests again."

Oli nodded. He and Nikolis had talked about this before.

"Why do you think Jek gets upset when she has guests? And why does he make me stay away for a while?"

Keolit sighed. "I don't know, bro," he said.

And Nik could see it. Suddenly he could see it. Oli *did* know. He knew something that Nikolis didn't, but he didn't want to tell him what it was.

"Oli —"

Keolit put his hand on Nik's arm, gently, and Nikolis felt a deep stab of fear in his

chest. For just a second he thought Oli *was* going to tell him, and in that same second he was certain he didn't want to know. He never wanted to know. Because he could see a sorrow in his brother's eyes, and it was a sorrow for Jek, and that sorrow frightened him in ways he could not name. "She ... she just wants to be alone with her guests, that's all."

Nik felt the moment slip past but that didn't slow his frantically lunging heart. "Then why doesn't she send Jek away too? Like over here? He could sleep in the family room with me..."

Keolit shrugged and let his hand fall away from Nik's arm. "I guess because he's family," he said, and Nik could see the secrets rolling in his brother's eyes.

"Oh."

They were silent for several bad heartbeats. Keolit kept seeming like he was about to say something else. And then he did, but it didn't make any sense to Nik. "Some guests you don't want to have."

"Then why does she have them?"

Oli looked into the distance. "Sometimes that can happen," he said at last. Then he focused on his brother again. "Have you ever talked to May or Day about this?"

Nik finished setting the table, wondering why his fingers kept shaking. Why he was so terrified. Why this conversation was so bad. Why it kept making less and less sense to him as it went on. "No."

"Don't. Algood?"

"Why?"

"Because if you do, they'll never let you see Jek again," Oli said. "And if Jek's mother ever asks you to stay when she's having guests, you leave."

Nik nodded.

"I mean it, Nikolis," Oli said. "Promise me. If she's having guests and she asks you to stay —"

"Algood, I'll go. I *will*, Oli." His heart was hammering faster than he ever knew it could and he wanted, oh how he wanted, for the discussion to close. He felt like he was walking in a bog full of quickmud, that if he stepped the wrong way just once, just a little, something awful would happen to him. Like the whole world was suddenly full of hidden traps, traps he couldn't see, wouldn't be able to see until it was too late.

"Good, bro," Oli said, and then went inside to wash up for supper.

Nikolis thought he'd be relieved when his brother finally left, but the silence was worse. All he had for company now was his own feelings. And that wasn't good.

Erekka reclined on her bunk, drawing Alissa against her with a contented sigh. After the success of their first attack all her detachment had celebrated. They had forbidden means for doing so. What she and her lieutenant had done was only one of the ways.

The fems had cracked a barrel of malts, smuggled to Arcadia with the last shipment of Scintillan arms. It was part of their reserves, something saved aside for their victories. They had damned little opportunity to use them.

The Scintillan malted brew was not at all like the stuff they distilled (illegally) here. It had less kick to it but didn't leave their heads full of boulders. Somehow the engineers on Scintilla had worked up a way to make a brew without the punishment the following morning. They could consume all night without being wrecked the next day. And they had done so with abandon, and then they had shared some nicotine leaf and a little ganj — more forbidden pleasures — and then the detachment had split into partner pairs for sweaty, blissful delights. Delights of skin and mouth and body.

Alissa kissed her gently. Erekka regarded her. "You were brilliant, lover," she said at last.

"Thanks. You were too."

"No — I meant before. At the ambush." She thought a moment. "Well, you were also brilliant just now of course."

Alissa pretended to be insulted. "As an afterthought, she said."

Erekka chuckled easily. "I have several more afterthoughts in mind for you. But that's not what's important right now. I think we've got a way."

"They'll stop the mels socializing," Alissa said.

"Yeh, they'll try," Erekka conceded. "But they won't be able to stop them all, completely. And even if they do — think about it. Those mels will go bugshit. They want to get laid, you know that. And if they're forbidden fems..."

Alissa laughed aloud at the thought. She affected the voice of a 3cast shock-story commentator. "Moral decay in the Academy ranks! Post commandants left helpless as mels turn to mels in corrupt perversion!"

"Yeh," Erekka laughed with her.

“Gutted from the inside, fucked from the outside,” Alissa said, then kissed her left breast. “I’m *very* proud of you.”

“Why?”

“Because it works. We all know it does now. And you heard how the brigade leader reacted. She was pretty damned happy. This is gonna spread, lover — and when it does, look out Academy.”

“You may be right about that,” Erecca said.

“I am,” Alissa said. “And you know it. You’re a walking talking breathing honest to shit fucking genius, fem. Talk about getting the mels by their rocks.”

“You’re sweet,” Erecca said, and kissed her. Alissa responded in kind and their bodies began to heat again. Erecca felt the warming happening in her, felt the moisture begin to gather as her nipples firmed, knowing her lieutenant’s body was beginning to do the same. Again.

“Hm,” Alissa said, her hand coasting along Erecca’s belly to the curls at her hips, then a little lower, feeling her readiness, as their kisses increased in feeling, depth and flavor. “About those afterthoughts...”

“Yeh?” Erecca breathed against her lips.

“I think I have a few in mind for you as well.” And her fingertips found that place, that one greatest place on Erecca’s body, and for a little while they weren’t soldiers camped in a bivouac, engaged in a desperate and slowly failing cause; they were two beings of light and joy that interwove into one as they floated on a river of warm clear energy and the breeze sighed among the trees.

Jektres came by after three days. Nik was working with his pad, writing some journal notes. He had decided to try to keep the journal going, because Keolit did, and he said it was worth doing. Day agreed. May had smiled, saying that as long as he was doing something to work his brain she was happy.

Jek looked pallid, a little fatigued. Like he had lost some weight or hadn’t slept, or maybe like he’d been sick. There were dark moons under his eyes. Nik pretended not to notice. He’d seen this before in his friend. After the guests. “Hey,” he said.

“Yeh,” Jektres said.

“The guests gone?”

Jek looked haunted for a moment. “Yeh,” he said.

“Algood. Wanna go to the orchard?”

“Sure,” Jek said, and his smile was real, but it was hurt too.

Nik wondered, but was afraid to know, and knew not to ask.

They worked among the trees, donning stilts to make their patrol easier. They were helping Day and Oli by finding leafworms on the branches and pulling them off, casting them (at first) onto the ground. Their fat green bodies burst when they struck the soil.

“Look out!” Nik said. “Resistance at three!” He lobbed a worm toward Jek, who ducked it easily as it sailed in an arc over his head and splattered against a trunk several meters behind him.

“Yeh?” he said. “Well, that’s what you think!” And he shot a fast salvo at Nik. He managed to dodge the worst of it but several of the leafworms splashed over his chest and shoulders.

“Oh, suck that,” he said, and threw even more at Jek, who retreated rapidly under the hail of larvae, then came up laughing and sputtering, his face sprayed with the green and yellow guts of the bugs.

“Eat these worms,” Jek called back and returned fire as the battle was well and truly joined, and by the time evening had settled they were both soaked with bug parts, their bare chests slick and slimy, their clouts sopping with wet entrails. It was even in their hair. They were called in to supper by May, who looked on them with a combination of mirth and disgust.

“At least you’re doing something useful,” she said. “Barely. Inside. Shower. You staying for supper, Jek?”

“May I?” he said, his eyes wide and clear. Nik shook his head. Jektres really had it down.

“I suppose I can’t send you home on an empty belly,” May said. “And your clouts really need a good washing.”

Nik knew that meant Jek would be staying the night.

Spec.

“C’mon,” Nikolis said. “We need to clean off.”

Jek nodded and followed him inside to the shower as May shook her head after them and sighed. “I don’t know what to do with those mels, Tom,” she said.

“Feed ’em,” her husband said, watching them also. “They got bedamned messy, but they also disinfested about thirty trees between ’em. That’s good work by any measure.”

May smiled and kissed him.

Jek borrowed some clouts from Nik. They were a little tight on him, he said, but they would do. Nik smirked at the way Jek’s worm filled them out. It looked like he had a tuber stuffed in there or something. Jek saw the look and socked him.

They sat around the table outside and ate and laughed together, and Jek kept watching Nik and Oli as they bantered. Brothers. That was so spec.

It was so easy for them.

He looked at Nik’s folks and wondered what it would be like, to have a ma and da right there all the time, always caring and paying attention, and always paying attention in the *right* way. Just a ma and a da and no one else. No guests. And maybe a spec bro too.

When he was here, with them, he felt almost normal. Like he really fit in someplace. Just a regular mel with regular friends who liked him, adults who didn’t give him those awful suspicious looks, who didn’t avert their eyes when they saw him coming or say to their nips *Don’t go near that mel, he’s nothing but trouble*. People who took him for what he was, or what he wanted to be: A mel. Just a mel.

He studied Nikolis. He wondered if his friend had any idea. How lucky he was, and how much Jek wanted his life, and how bad his own life was by comparison.

Keolit nudged his arm. “If you don’t want that polt, just say the word.”

Jek came back to himself. “Right, yeh,” he said. “Like I’ll give up these good vics.” Actually he almost wanted to give his food to Keolit because — just because. Because he was Nik’s bro, and he was a good mel.

When Nik had first brought Jek to his homestead, just a few months ago, and said *May, Day, this is Jektres, and he’s my friend*, Jek had waited. Waited for the looks, for the questions, for the problems. They hadn’t happened. Nik’s ma had just said, “Hello, Jektres, it’s good to meet you.”

And then Jek had seen Oli, and he got fairly worried fairly fast. Because Oli was not stupid, Jek could see that right away, and he was very large, and he imagined that the first thing he’d hear from him would be *You stay away from my little brother or I’ll*

*turn your ass to paste*, but what Oli had said instead was, “Hey. You staying the night?” And when Jek had stammered that he didn’t know, Oli had said, “Well if you are you’d better get inside and clean up, because May hates mud in the bedroll,” and Jek had looked between Oli and May and Day and Nik and had understood that if he wanted to stay that night, he was welcome to.

Nik and he had known each other for maybe four hours stretched across two days by then, and Keolit’s open acceptance of him had given him a feeling he’d never had before. He’d never felt *welcome* at anyone’s dwelcap until that afternoon, and he did end up staying the night. The first of many, as it turned out.

But now, instead of giving up his food to Nik’s unbelievably spec brother, he lifted the joint to his mouth and took a bite and was glad he did, because May’s cooking was always amazing. It crackled between his teeth, crispy outside and soft and warm and tender inside, full of very good, very fresh flavor. Not like the soggy, packaged stuff he usually ate. This was made just a few minutes ago in the dinitchen inside, rolled in crumbs and spices and fried in a pan full of popping hot oil, not months ago in some factory someplace to be frozen and carried in a truck and reheated wetly in the micro.

“You cook the best polt on Arcadia, Missus Tekkru,” he said to May.

Nik rolled his eyes helplessly as May beamed. “Thank you, Jektres,” she said. “I think I have a little jellyfruit left if you’re hungry for dessert.”

“You’re real spec,” Jek said around a mouthful of cooked bird.

*Oh come on*, Nik thought. *What a wet brown load in the clouts*. But he admired Jek a little as well.

It was so easy for him.

They made a little nest of bedrolls in the family room before the 3cast. Everyone sat around a while and watched some crystals together, and then May and Day left, cautioning them to be good and not stay up too late. Nik and Jek and Oli nodded.

They played some games for a bit, Oli matching against Nik and Jek in one of his favorites, a heavy dropship sim. He played the Resistance soldiers on the ground (a severe handicap) while they played the Academy dropship pilots, Nik flying as Jek manned the weapons. Oli won, but not by much, and then stretched. “It’s late, mels,” he said. “Can I trust you two to turn in before daybreak?”

“Yeh,” Nik said. *Probably not*.

“Algood. Sleep tight, troopers.” He went down the little passage to the bedroom, leaving the two friends alone.

Jektres slipped out of his clouts and wriggled into the bedroll next to his friend. “Wanna play again, or just talk, or what?”

Nik set the console aside and tripped off the 3cast, then removed his own togs. “I’m tired of games right now,” he said. “We can talk or whatever.”

“Algood,” Jek said.

Nik felt his stare on him.

“Nikolis...”

“Yeh?” Suddenly his heart was doing it again, like it had the other day when he and Oli had had their bizarre conversation. It was the sound of Jek’s voice. Something in it was ... dangerous, almost.

“Look. Nik. Someday I might leave the homestead.” Jek shook himself. “I *will* leave it.”

“Yeh, course.”

“No, I mean soon. Like in another halfyear, when I’m sixteen. Or maybe even before then.”

“Oh.” The silent dwelcap was suddenly too silent. The shadows were all listening.

“So if I do could I maybe come here and get work in your orchard?”

Nik considered. “Well you’d have to ask Day. But why would you leave?” He wished he hadn’t asked. What if Jek actually told him why?

“You don’t know,” Jek said.

“I’m not a dumb little nip,” Nik said.

“No — I know you’re not. I mean, oh shit. Nik, I —” and he stopped. And he shook. And Nikolis realized Jektres was crying.

“Hey,” he said, reaching out and patting Jek’s shoulder awkwardly. “Hey.” He felt stupid saying that. But he didn’t know what else to say. “Hey.”

Jek wiped his eyes. “It might not happen,” he said. “But if it does will you stick up for me?”

“Yeh,” Nikolis said. “Course. We’re friends.”

“You’re my best friend ever,” Jek said. “Ever.” And he pressed himself close to Nikolis, so close he could feel Jek’s heart beating in his chest, and it was beating very fast, as fast as his own.

“You’re my best friend too,” Nik said, not sure what to add. It seemed weak next to Jek’s open feelings. He didn’t know what else to say, but he could say something that sounded almost right, and he did. “It’d be spec if you were my brother.”

Jektres sobbed suddenly. “Yeh,” he said. “If I could be your brother I’d do it in a second. Even if it meant my ma had to die.”

Nikolis whirled inside. What had he meant by that? His ma *dead*? “Uh. Yeh,” he said, around the clench he felt deep through his middle. “Oli’s a good bro but if you could be my bro too I’d like that.”

Jektres sobbed a while longer, then finally pulled away and smiled weakly. “Worm kisser,” he said.

Nik laughed, mostly from relief. They were back on ground he knew. “Worm rancher,” he said.

Jek slugged him. “Worm.”

“Worm,” Nik said back.

“If you ever tell about this I’ll smother you,” Jek said.

“You’re a cloutload of poop,” Nik said.

Jek was up again, suddenly energetic. He pinned Nik’s shoulders, straddling him. “I mean it,” he said.

“Eat my worm,” Nik said, squirming. “I won’t tell. I won’t tell that you love a *mel*.”

Jektres studied him in the gloom. “Better not,” he said at last, letting Nik go and settling once more into the covers beside him.

“Algood,” Nik said, wondering why he was so exhausted after this talk, and why his worm was standing up. And why he was so scared to know that Jek’s was standing too. He had felt it there, pressing against him as he lay helpless, pinned under Jek’s hips. The word *bender* floated across his mind and he shoved it aside frantically. *Not me, no way. I’m not a bender. And neither is Jek.*

“Hey Nik.”

“Yeh?”

“You ever think about ... dying?”

Nik shifted a little. “Sometimes.”

“Yeh?”

“Yeh.”

“Like when?”

“Uh. There was this mel I knew named Farrak, about two halfyears back. From school.”

“Yeh?”

“Yeh. And anyway, he was swimming one day alone, and something happened. No one really knows what or how. They think maybe he was playing around some of the tree roots, you know how they can stick out where the mud’s soft? And he got stuck under them or something, and he couldn’t get out, and he drowned.”

“Oh. Was he your friend?”

“Sort of,” Nik said. “I mean, we never really did much together, but I knew him.” He didn’t like thinking of Farrak. Any time he did, he got a tight, frightened feeling in his chest. The idea of it — never seeing his family again, just going away, ending — it was terrifying. And lonesome. To die there, under the water, just a meter away from the surface and the air, to be trapped and know he couldn’t get out. It made him want to cry, just thinking about it.

He wondered if Farrak had cried, or if it had been over too quickly for that, and somehow the thought of him crying was worse, the thought that he had time to know that he was dying, time to feel sad about everything he would miss and to cry there under the water, and die all alone with no one to help him or save him, was — terrible. Unfair.

“I think about it sometimes,” Jek said quietly.

“Yeh?”

“Yeh. Like, you know, doing it on purpose.”

Nik’s chest got tighter. “What do you mean?”

“You know, like shooting myself, or maybe putting a rope in a tree, and putting my neck in it and jumping out.” He was silent for a moment. “Sometimes I do that, put a rope around my neck. You know, just to see what it’s like.”

“Uh.” He thought of that, of Jek climbing a tree with a rope around his neck and jumping off. “You’re not gonna, right?”

“No,” Jek said, but he sounded almost like he was thinking about it just the same. Like *no* meant *maybe someday*. “They say when you do that, when you hang like that, your worm gets really hard and stuff comes out at the end.”

“No way. Why?”

Jek shrugged. “Maybe it’s just, you know, your body doing it for the last time or something.”

“That’s — sick,” Nik said.

“Yeh,” Jek said, but he sounded a little thrilled at the idea. “D’you think that happened with your friend?”

Nik swallowed. “Dunno,” he said. Had it? Had Farrak drowned with his worm standing? That was worse than thinking of him crying. More frightening, but he wasn’t sure why. He felt queasy. “Don’t, Jek,” he said. “Don’t do it.”

But Jek was asleep, taken that fast. He was always so tired after the guests left.

It didn’t come as easily for Nik. He worried, tossing restlessly on the floor of the family room. Was Jek trying to tell him something? Was he trying to say that he was thinking about ... that he wanted to make himself die?

Why?

And what the hump was Nik supposed to do about it?

Why was life suddenly so cloutload humping hard? Just because he was thirteen?

He hoped not. If this was how May and Day and Oli and Jek lived all the time, he didn’t want any part of it.

## ACTIONS

THIS TIME IT WAS MELITTO AND BALIA, not Alissa. If they kept using the same two fems every time, Erecca knew, they'd be recognized. Well, probably. Lots of fems *visited* the Academy troopers. But she didn't want to take the chance.

There were only six mels this time that came outside the post, and she wondered if they were being cagey. Probably they were. But she also knew they were mels and couldn't resist the lure of cheap, easy sex.

As they drew into the clearing she saw they *were* being cautious. Two of the mels took point position, keeping uneasy watch over the surrounding trees, while the others turned their attention to the fems. Fuck. They'd have to take the guards before anything else could happen, then.

Roni's rifle went first, catching one of the watchmen, and Erecca's own weapon went a heartbeat after. The headless corpses slumped to the ground as the other four mels — already half spooked — pulled their sidearms and turned outward, looking for their attackers. They didn't have much imagination. They were peering along the ground plane, amid the trunks, and three didn't see where the other slugs came from as they were killed silently. Melitto buried her blade in the spine of the fourth, the mel closest to her, and gave it a vicious twist, her hand over the trooper's mouth to stop him crying out. He dropped and twitched, paralyzed below his gut but still alive, as she climbed on top of him.

Erecca felt a little sickened as she raced down the tree, but wasn't able to get there in time to stop what happened next. Melitto castrated the mel and stuffed his organ into his mouth. His eyes were wide with horror as she ran the blade up into his head, through his lower jaw, into his palate, and then his brain. He jerked once and died with his own penis nailed to his tongue.

Balia already had her camos on and pulled Melitto away. "Fucking wormsucker." She spat on the face of the mel she'd dispatched.

"That is enough, soldier," Erecca hissed at her. "Put your fucking camos on and

get moving.”

Melitto scowled but did as she was ordered.

Back at the bivouac Ereka let her full fury rage. “What the fuck were you thinking, you dumb twat?”

“I was *thinking* that fucking mel needed to die.”

“And that was the way you *thought* it needed to happen?”

Melitto shrugged. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

Ereka took several breaths. Melitto didn’t get it. “Look. You mutilated him. And you did it in a way that’s really gonna piss off the other mels.”

“So what? Let ’em get pissed.” Several of the other fems nodded.

“Shit, fem. It’s one thing to blow their stupid heads away. But you do that shit to a mel and the others are not going to let it go by very easy. They’re gonna ramp up their watches now, they aren’t gonna trust any fems for a while, and they’re probably gonna start heavy patrols. You got any idea what that will mean?” She looked around herself at her gathered detachment. “It’ll mean they’re gonna *try* to find us, try a lot harder than they have till now. And if they get one of us it’s not gonna be easy.”

“So we’ll make sure they don’t get any of us,” Melitto said, but she was cowed now.

“It’s too late to undo it,” Ereka said. “You landed us in the fire. We’re just gonna have to be ready for them. I want double guards from now on.”

The fems groaned.

“Stow it. Double guards. Melitto, you take the first watch.”

“I’ll do it too,” Balia said.

“Good. The rest of you stay in your metacamos. Never take them off. I mean it. Not even to take a shit. Just drop the flaps. And no more hot meals for a while.”

“Fuck,” Melitto said.

“Don’t you give me any mouth at all, soldier. We can’t heat anything. They’ve got IR and they’ll fucking use it. Cold rats until I say otherwise. No more showers, no more hot water, no hot fucking anything.

“You got a problem with it, you’re free to leave any time and go back to the farm.”

Melitto mumbled something as she turned away.

“What was that?”

She paused. "I said yes, Captain," she said, and gave a sharp salute.

"Fucking right," Ereka growled, returning it. "Get your ass out there and keep your eyes open."

"Sir," Melitto said, and stomped outside.

Balia glanced at her, part apology and part support. Ereka nodded, tightly, then softened and nodded again, and watched her as she went to her duty with Melitto.

*Fuck it all, she thought. Fuck it all twice with spikes on. This may get pretty bad.*

Jek's clouts got mostly clean, but there were some traces of green on them still. He shrugged. "Most of my clouts got stains," he said to May, accepting them and drawing them on himself, modestly keeping covered in the bedroll as he did so.

She sent a quick look to Day, who nodded just a little. "Yeh, well. I'm taking Niko to town today to get him some school togs."

*That's not true,* Nik thought. He already had enough togs, especially after his birthday party. He pulled his own clouts on, then stood up beside his friend.

"So I was thinking maybe you'd come along and I could get you some too."

"You don't have to do that," Jek said.

"It's algood, Jektres. You should have some decent togs if you're going to be starting classes."

Jek almost said something but bit it back as May watched him shrewdly. Nik had to admit his friend could be pretty smart when he wanted to be. "Yeh," he said at last, "well, maybe I could use some clouts."

"And tunics," Nik needled. Jek rarely wore anything on his upper body.

"Yeh, tunics," he said. When May turned away he scowled at Nik and slugged him, but he wasn't angry. Nik rubbed his arm and grinned. Jek was about to discover what clothes shopping with May was like, and then he'd be *really* peed.

"How do they fit you?" May said as Jek stepped out of the changing booth.

"Algood, I guess," he said, looking down at himself.

She pulled him over, turned him around and stuffed a hand under the waistband over his rear, shifting the clouts back and forth, up and down a few times. Jek looked shocked and turned pale and Nik wondered why. May didn't notice, intent on her sizing

of the clouts. “They’re a little loose and a little long,” she said, “just past your knees. But that’s good. You’ll grow into them.”

“Yeh,” Jek said, looking obviously relieved as May withdrew her hand. Nik sort of understood — he also hated it when she did that because it was *so* embarrassing — but Jektres looked like he was about to mack his lunch all over the floor. His hands were shaking. He almost looked like he wanted to run away.

May was already handing him several more pairs of clouts. “These are the same size, but try them on anyway.”

“Why?” Jek said.

“Because we can’t be sure unless you try them all.”

Jek looked over to Nik for help, but he just shrugged and rolled his eyes. He didn’t understand the logic of it either, but that was how May was when they were buying togs, and she wasn’t to be argued with. Nik watched his friend sigh in surrender and turn back to the booth, but didn’t have much time to be amused at his discomfort as his mother turned to him next with another armload of clothing. “As for you, Niko — stop acting like a tree. Get these clouts on and let me see how they fit you.”

“Yeh, yeh,” he said, retreating into his own booth.

“You dress up pretty well,” May said to Jek over supper. The mel flushed.

“Yeh,” Day said. “Gotta beat the fems away with a stick I bet.” Keolit snorted.

Jek smiled in embarrassment, fingering the cloth over his chest. He had come away from the shopping with eight tunics, six pairs of clouts and *sandals*. Nik knew this was probably the greatest quantity of new clothing his friend had ever had before in his life, and was pretty sure that whatever he usually wore was second- or thirdhand. It looked like it anyway.

He did look different in the new togs and his mood had changed when the shopping had mercifully come to an end. He seemed to stand a little taller and look happier, and had decided to wear some of them for the rest of the day, even putting on the sandals. May had noticed it as well and, as they walked back to the homestead, had laid an arm across Jek’s shoulders for a few moments, telling him that he was a handsome mel and that he’d surely have a femfriend before he knew it. He had tensed at first, looking green again for a few seconds, but relaxed bit by bit, then sighed with clear relief when May let him go.

Why did it bug him when May touched him like that? (As he walked, her other arm was gathered about Nik's shoulders, and he had learned long ago that it wasn't worth shrugging it off. Besides, Jek didn't seem to think it looked weird; he glanced at them from time to time with what appeared to be envy.) Nik wasn't sure he wanted to know the answer, but also wasn't sure why he wasn't sure.

Something was going on with Jek. And he was becoming increasingly certain, the more he wondered about it, that it was something very bad, maybe not even something he could imagine. He tried to think of terrible things that could happen to people, like drowning or burning or crushing, or being crushed by a tree that was on fire and drowned in mud under it, but the worst he could think of was being eaten by something bigger, and that wasn't what was happening to Jek.

*Maybe that's exactly what's happening, his mind whispered, but you can't see it because what's eating him is invisible,* and he shivered with a supernatural chill.

By the time they got back to the dwelcap Jek had learned that May wasn't going to bite him, and offered to help Nik set the table for supper. May rewarded him with a peck on the cheek and he turned pink as Nik smirked at him. He made a face after May left and gave him a good box on the shoulder. "Why didn't you warn me?"

"About what?"

"About how your ma is with togs."

Nik laughed. "It was more fun watching you find out for yourself."

"You are a total worm face," Jek said.

"Oh, suck a worm and swallow, you bender," Nik answered.

Jek got very quiet and finished setting the table without another word.

What the hump was going on with him?

Nik walked Jek back to his dwelcap. It was late and Jek didn't suggest that they stop for a swim, but Nik thought maybe it was really because Jektres didn't want to get his new togs dirty.

Jek turned to him at the portal. "I guess it didn't totally suck," he said, referring to the trip to town.

"Yeh," Nik said.

"Tell your ma thanks again for the togs. That was pretty spec of her."

"Sure," Nik said.

“Well.” Jek looked lost for a moment, then shocked Nik by putting his hand on his shoulder. “See you.”

“Uh,” Nik said.

“You can’t stay tonight. Sorry. Ma wants me around, but just me.”

“Oh. Are you having ... guests?”

Jek dropped his arm to his side. “No,” he said. “She just wants *us* time, that’s all.”

“Oh.” *So maybe she’s in a better mood tonight*, he thought. “Well, see you then.”

“Yeh.”

Nik turned to go, then stopped and turned back. “I’ll be enrolling at school end of next duoweek. You should come too.”

Jek hesitated. “Dunno.”

“C’mon,” Nik said. “School’s not so bad. Sometimes it’s pretty dumb but there’s spec stuff about it too.”

“Like what?”

“Well,” Nik said slowly, thinking, “some of the mels are pretty spec.” Inspiration hit. “And there’s fems too. You might like one of them.”

“Maybe,” Jek said.

“And it’s not all day, there’s time to play and swim after. And you could be on the kickball team.”

“I don’t think so, Nik,” Jek sighed.

“Why the hump not?”

Jek lowered his head. “Well ... promise you won’t tell.”

“Algood.”

“I ... I don’t read too good.”

Nik felt relieved. He had been afraid Jek was going to say — he didn’t know what, but something he might not have wanted to hear. *Because the invisible thing that’s eating me won’t let me go*. “That’s all? So what? Not every nip reads great, Jek.”

“I’m pretty bad at it,” he said.

Nik shrugged. “So I could help you.”

Jek brightened a little. “Yeh? You’d do that?”

“Course. We’re friends, right? And friends help each other.”

“Yeh,” Jek said softly. Then he nodded. “Yeh. Algood. I’ll try it.”

“Spec,” Nik said, smiling hugely. “Well, night, worm neck.”

Jek smiled back. "Night, worm face. See you."

"Yeh."

As Nikolis walked the five kilometers back to his own homestead he felt light. Something good had passed between them. He wasn't sure what or what it meant, but Jek seemed happy, and so he was as well.

*It was bad.*

There were low flights all night over their bivouac. It was deep in the trees and well covered, and had enough IR shielding to keep their body heat from being detected, but the noise of the craft coasting overhead in search patterns had made them all jumpy, punchy. The craft came often enough that they couldn't risk bugging out. They were stuck for the duration. No one had slept very soundly, and Erekkka had not slept at all. She knew she was not alone in that.

This was no good. It couldn't keep on like this. If they didn't sleep they'd start getting sloppy, and then they'd get dead.

When daylight finally broke she passed around some seds, dopping a third of her fems. They'd sleep in shifts, enough left awake to defend them if it should be necessary and help evac the sleepers, who would be dazed if they had to be wakened.

It looked as though they were going to be nocturnal creatures for a while.

Melitto was sullen and withdrawn. She had finally seen the full consequences of her actions, how they had made her fellow soldiers suffer, and was very displeased with herself. Erekkka didn't lean on her. She didn't need any more shit on her plate right now.

Midday she watched the first group of sleepers surface, then dopped another third. She wasn't going to take any of the drugs if she could avoid it. She'd have to get by on catnaps. She wanted to keep lean in case they needed her, and she was certain they would within the next few days. She could make it that far, she knew; she had techniques for altering her mind processes, learned a few halfyears ago when she had met an itinerant monk from Pollux. (He had later been detained by the Academy, accused of spreading enemy propaganda, and that had been the last she had ever heard of him.) If she could hold out, keep them all together for maybe a week or a duoweek, much of the heat would be past and they could return to something like a more regular schedule.

Or so she devoutly hoped.

Sleepless nights and days of frustration ground on as they all huddled.

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“Hm,” the administrator said, looking over Jek’s enrollment form.

“He’s new,” Nik said. Jek elbowed him but he went on. “He moved here from, uh, Taliesin, I think.”

The administrator looked Jek over carefully. Poop. Why did he have to say Taliesin? Jek didn’t look even remotely Talec. It wasn’t true, of course, or he thought not; Nik didn’t know when Jek had come to Arcadia, or from where. He might even have been born here, as he and Keolit had been. He’d met Jek only a few months earlier, bumping into him at a pond neither one of them had ever visited before. They’d played Academy together and swum a while, and even that quickly knew they were going to be friends.

Jek had secured his mother’s permission for him to enroll, but it had apparently been quite a fight. Nik was surprised at that. He thought Jektres’s mother would be *happy* that he wanted to go to school. Instead they had shouted at each other for days. Nik had overheard some of the arguments and was shocked, not just at the fighting, but at the language they used at each other as well. Jek knew a *lot* of words Nik didn’t.

“It’s because of that snotnose nip, isn’t it?” she had been saying when Nik was close enough to hear one afternoon, preparing to drop by and ask Jek to play.

“Don’t call him that,” Jek said.

“Ooh, you don’t want your little *melfriend* insulted?”

“Knock it off, you bullock-rimming bitch. Go and suck some strem.”

“Don’t you ever talk to me that way, Jektres Ellet, or I’ll —”

“You’ll what?” Jek’s voice had been low and it scared Nik worse than the shouting. It sounded dangerous.

“I’ll have you in Retraining,” Jek’s ma said.

“And then how would you make your fucking gelt? Get some other fucking brat to take my place?”

“Don’t try me,” she said.

“Fuck,” he said. “Every cunt-gobbling mel in five hundred clicks already has.”

There was a slapping sound and Nik had retreated to the trees at the yard’s perimeter, waiting for something to change. In a few minutes the portal slammed and Jek

stalked into the forest. Nik popped up behind him. “Resistance on your six!”

Jek jumped and spun around, his eyes huge, then slugged him. “Don’t *do* that shit,” he said. There were red streaks across his cheek but Nik pretended they weren’t there.

“Leave a skid in your clouts?” Nik taunted, scooting away. He was filled with nervous energy and a sick feeling, but he wasn’t going to let Jek see it. If he did he’d know that Nik had overheard the fight.

“I’m gonna leave a skid on your face,” Jek said, and chased him all the way to the pond.

Two days later Jektres had shown up at Nik’s dwelcap. He was sporting a large shiner. May gasped when she saw it and began fussing over him. “How in the world did you get that?” she said.

“I was jumping off a tree and slipped. Hit the ground pretty hard.” He didn’t look her in the eyes as he said that.

“You be careful, Jektres. I don’t need Niko picking up bad habits from you.”

“Yeh, you don’t,” he said quietly.

As May went inside to get some ice, Nik studied his friend. He and Keolit traded a look, and Nikolis could see that his brother was thinking the same thing. Jek had not fallen out of a tree. He’d not fallen out of anything. His black eye was not an accident. “Must have been a pretty tall tree,” Oli said musingly.

Jek flushed. “Yeh, well, I guess it was,” he said. “I was lucky. Could’ve busted my head open.”

The space around the table was awkward. Nik tried to banish the pall. “Not *your* head. It’s too solid.”

“Worm neck,” Jek said, but it was more of a reflex than anything else. Then he seemed to perk up a bit. “Well, ma says I can enroll, anyway.”

“Oh, that’s good,” Nik said.

“Yeh,” Oli agreed. “Spec. Way to go, mel.”

“Thanks,” Jek said, fingering his shiner absently, and suddenly, completely, Nik knew how it had got there, that his mother had struck him while he had been fighting for the opportunity to go to school with Nikolis, with his friend, and it ruined his appetite because he felt like it was all his fault.

Now the enrollment seemed to be stalling. “Ellet, Jektres,” the administrator

said.

“Yeh.” Nik nudged him with his foot. “I mean *yes*.” He shifted uncomfortably. He was in more of the togs May had bought him, and he looked like they made him itch everywhere.

“But under mother you’ve listed Kaletta Festren.”

This was the first of this that Nik had heard. Jek’s ma had helped him fill out the form, since Jek had trouble with writing as well as reading, so he hadn’t known the information on it.

“Uh. Well. She’s not my ma.” The administrator shot Jek a look. “I mean, she is, but I’m...”

Nik’s eyes got wide. Jek was fostered?

He’d never known that until this moment.

“I see,” the administrator said. He was looking over the bruise on Jek’s face. It had turned a really scary-looking black and purple with yellow at the edges, but Jek said it didn’t hurt much any more. Jek saw the look and reddened.

“Kickball,” he said. “I was blocking the goal, and — well, I sort of blocked it with my eye. Uh, didn’t get my arms up in time.”

Nik very carefully kept his face neutral.

“Ah.” The administrator seemed like he was about to say something else, then glanced quickly at Nik and just nodded instead. “Well, we’ll have to test you for aptitude in arithmetic, reading, writing and a few other things.”

Jek rolled his eyes but Nik nudged him again.

“That way we’ll know what gradation you’re ready to start in.”

“Algood. Uh, I mean, yes. Sir.”

“Good.” The administrator stood. “Come with me, Mister Ellet. There’s a kiosk through this portal. You’ll be testing with several other children. Listen to what the teaching software says, and follow the instructions, and I’m sure you’ll do well.”

Nikolis watched as Jek went to his tasks, wondering again about him, about what he had just heard, and why he kept coming back to the shiner, and to Jek’s ma, and to what he had said to her about being replaced.

“Missus Tekkru?”

May stood as the administrator came over to her. “Yes,” she said.

“Jektres has completed his testing.” In a moment Jek appeared. “Good, go and sit by Nikolis,” he said to him. “I’m going to have a word with his mother.”

Jek’s ma had not come; Nik didn’t know why, but May had said that was algood, as long as Jek had his papes and everything was ready to go. But she looked angry when she had said that, not because she was going along, but because Jek’s ma wasn’t.

“Algood,” Jek said, and slumped into the seat beside his friend. He looked crushed.

Nik was torn between his worry for Jek and what was passing between May and the administrator. The adults’ conversation was very low and they both kept glancing toward the two mels, and as it went on May looked more and more upset.

Jek was in a foul mood. “How’d it go?” Nik said, but mostly to break the silence. He thought he knew.

“I sucked poop,” Jek said. “I don’t know how you do this stuff.” He looked at Nikolis appraisingly. “You must be real smart.”

Nik shrugged uneasily. “You get used to it,” he said.

Jek laughed and it was hollow. “Right.”

“You *do* —” He stopped as May and the administrator broke their conference and May came back up the corridor toward them. There was a look on her face he’d never seen before and he wasn’t sure what it was. It looked like a mixture of anger and sadness.

“Come on, mels, let’s go,” she said.

“Am I in?”

“Yeh, Jek, of course you’re in. We’ll go and get some lunch and an ice treat and we’ll talk more after that, algood?”

“Yeh,” Jek said, and Nik didn’t know if he sounded relieved or afraid. Or both.

“Jektres,” May began as they walked back to the homestead, “is there anything you feel you want to tell me? About what’s happening at home?”

Nik felt his gut clench. *Oh no*. He tried to catch May’s eye, tried to tell her with his expression not to ask this, but she was choosing not to look his way.

“Uh. No,” Jek said.

“Like how you got that mark on your eye?”

“I told you,” Jek said. “I was playing kickball and got hit.”

*Poop*, Nik thought with a silent groan.

They walked on in silence for a few moments. “Actually,” May said, “what you told me was that you had fallen out of a tree. You told the *administrator* you got it playing kickball.”

*Poop all over it.*

Jek turned white, then red. “Uh, yeh, that’s what I meant. I mean I fell out of a tree. I don’t know why he told you what he did.”

May stopped and put a hand on his arm. “Jektres, I know what happened.”

Jek lowered his head and his shoulders began to shake. Nik stared at the ground and got very interested in some pebbles as May pulled Jek against her and put her arms around him.

“How often does she hit you?”

“Never,” Jek said through his tears. “Well, not much.”

“Once is too often,” May said, smoothing his hair. She glanced over to her son and opened an arm to him. “Come here, Niko,” she said softly.

Nik moved into the hug and put one arm around May, then tentatively put the other around Jek. His friend shook again, and then really started to cry. Hard.

“How long have you been living with her?”

Jek snuffled and wiped his eyes. “About eight halfyears now,” he said.

“And you’ve been putting up with it all that time?”

“I have to,” he said sadly. “No one else can take care of her. And who would want me anyway?”

“Jektres. It is not your job to look after her. She’s an adult and you’re a mel. It’s her responsibility to be taking care of you.” She kissed his head. “And as for your question, I can think of a few people who like having you around.”

Jek’s arm was now tight around Nik’s waist and he just stood there, not knowing what to say, letting May do the talking, hoping Jek would know he had the same feelings. He patted Jek’s back and his friend sobbed even harder.

“We love you, Jek,” May said. “I do, and Tomis, and Keli and Niko.”

*They wouldn’t if they really knew*, Jek thought bitterly to himself. But he nodded.

“I’d like you to stay with us tonight. Tom and I will go and have a word with your — with Kaletta.”

“Don’t!” Jek was suddenly urgent. “Don’t! Please! It’s not — I’m algood, it was just a fight, I know she didn’t mean it. We yell sometimes but she — please, don’t talk to her.”

“Jektres, I’m not so sure...”

“Please,” he said again. “Please don’t say anything.”

May was quiet for a few moments. Nik could almost feel her wavering. “If we keep out of it for now, you have to promise me something.”

“Uh, yeh.”

“Promise me that if she ever hits you again, for *any* reason, you will leave that place. For good. You’ll come and live with us, and if there’s a problem we’ll get the Academy in to clear things up.” She caught Jek’s face in her hands and tilted it up to hers. Nik looked up and was surprised to see that May was crying too. “She is never to lay a hand in anger on you again. Algood?”

“Yeh,” Jek sniffed. “Yeh, algood.”

“Is that a promise?”

“Yeh, I promise,” he said, and let May draw him close again, into the circle of their arms, and they stood like that a while on the lane, the three of them, silent, and then turned back to their journey.

As they walked May said, “And I expect you to stay tonight in any event.”

“Thanks,” Jek said. It was only one word but it carried much more feeling than Nik would have thought possible.

“I dunno, Tom,” Eleisa sighed. “Some days...”

Her husband drew her closer. After she had come back from enrolling Nikolis and Jektres she had been very quiet. The air about the supper table had been subdued, the mels not engaging in their usual attempts to irritate each other to death. He had been ready to ask her what was going on but caught the look in her eyes and the little shake of her head. After twenty halfyears of marriage he well knew what the gesture meant. She had told him everything after they had gone to bed, leaving Oli to look after the two younger mels. “Yeh,” he said. “I know. I can’t really believe it.”

“I couldn’t either. But you know Jektres has problems.”

“Sure. I just didn’t know they were that bad. It explains a lot though.”

“Yeh, it does. He hides it pretty well. He said that was the only time that woman

ever hit him, but I'm not sure I should believe it."

"Yeh," he said. He had no reason to doubt his wife's intuition.

"I told him if he needs a place to stay..."

"Of course," Tomis said. "You know I'm behind you on this."

"Wanna help me deal with that woman?"

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"You don't think I can take her?" She wasn't serious. Not really. Maybe. But she had very powerful maternal instincts, and they were beginning to extend now to Jek-tres.

"No, I know you could. But Jek is pretty tightly wound up in her life, and Nik's wrapped up in Jek. If we do anything that hurts Jektres..."

"Yeh, I know," Eleisa said. "We'd be hurting Niko too." She drew a breath and blew it out in disgust. "Ah, what a load of crap. We came here to get away from this kind of ... fertilizer."

"I guess people are the same everywhere," her husband sighed.

"I thought it would be different here. Not like Dog End. Arcadia's still so unsettled. You know, less tension. Fewer crowds, honest work, honest people. *Good* people. And the Academy."

"The Academy can't keep everything in check."

"Yeh. But still. This is what I get for believing adverts. *Pastoral splendor* my back end."

"Be fair, Elli. For the most part Arcadia has been good. Life here has been good. The trees are thriving as long as they stay debugged, Keolit is a fine young man, and Nikolis is already well on the way down that road himself." He propped on an elbow to look into the face of the woman with whom he had shared half his existence. "Of course that's not Arcadia. It's you."

"And you," she said.

He shrugged. "I had input, sure, but nips are raised by their mothers in the first few halfyears. That's when they get the lessons they'll carry through their lives. Oli and Nik have your mark all over them and you should damn well be proud, both of them and of yourself.

"D'you think Nik would have taken up with Jek if he didn't have your heart in him? He must have known something was wrong. They spend so much time together

he's got to have all kinds of windows into that mel's world we can't even guess at. And he stuck with him.

"The other nips don't have much to do with Jek. Some of the other folks around here have asked me why I let my son play with him. You too, I know they've asked you too. But Nik wasn't gonna give up. And he was the one that convinced Jek to enroll in school. You gotta admit that's damn close to being a miracle."

"Yeh," she said after a moment of consideration. "He is a pretty good mel, isn't he?"

"The plenten doesn't fall far from the tree, love."

She kissed him, feeling better at the support she got from him, loving him for the way he had always loved her. A good husband, a good father, a good man.

"It'll work out," he said, laying himself down again. "You'll see. You're on the job now and that means look out trouble."

"Trouble?" she said, drawing near.

"Yeh," he said. "It goes away when you show up." And he kissed her. "It always has. One look from you and all my troubles vanish, anyway."

She nestled closer. "Mine too," she said.

"I love you, Elli."

"Mm," she said, settling her head onto his chest. "And I find you acceptable as well."

He smiled at her. "That's an improvement. Last halfyear it was just tolerable."

"Yeh, well, maybe someday it'll get all the way up to likable." She reached under the covers, her fingers light on him. "Speaking of plentens, I think I've found a ripe one."

He laughed and moved closer to her, and they kissed, and they touched, and they whispered, and he gave her the kind of input she always enjoyed best.

"You gonna be algood?" Oli said quietly.

Jek glanced over to him, then away. "Yeh," he said.

Nikolis was breathing softly in sleep beside him where they had camped in the family room. Oli was sitting on the couch and looking at both of them.

"Guess you all know now, huh?"

"I had an idea," Keolit shrugged. He had a few others, but chose not to elaborate

on them. "I don't think May or Day knew before today. Nik might have had his suspicions."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

Oli thought a moment. He didn't know if Jek was simply asking, or if it had been a kind of accusation. Looking into the face of the younger mel, he saw Jektres wasn't sure himself. He shrugged again. "I guess I thought if you thought it was bad enough you'd say something."

"I never had anyone to talk to before," Jek said. "Nik's about my only real friend."

"Well, that's not true any more."

Jek swallowed. "Thanks."

Keolit nodded. "Look, Jek, if there's more..."

The mel's expression became guarded. "No," he said.

Oli was pretty sure there was more. He'd heard things in town. Things about Jektres's foster mother that he didn't want to believe. But he'd heard them consistently and now wasn't so willing to doubt. But he couldn't see how any of it could be true. People didn't really act like that. He couldn't believe it; it didn't make sense. "You sure?"

"I said no, didn't I?" He looked away again. "Sorry," he said.

"Don't be," Oli said. "It's been a pretty fucked up day for you I think. Fucked up week."

Jektres looked at him again, startled by the language, but feeling a little more intimacy with Keolit because of it. Mel, what a spec bro. Nik was so lucky. "Yeh," he said. "Pretty ... fucked up, I guess."

Nik rolled over and gave a rasping snort that made the other mels jump, then began snoring. Oli and Jek looked at each other a moment and began giggling behind their hands like a couple of schoolfems. "Well," Oli said, standing, "I'm turning in. Sleep as well as you can."

"Thanks. You too," Jek said, then settled under the covers next to Nik. He kept snoring and Jek shoved him a little, and he turned on his side and the room was quiet again, and he kept his hand on Nik's shoulder so he could feel him nearby and let sleep take him as well.

## REACTIONS

“EREKKA.”

She came to herself. Brought her full consciousness back from the place inside where it had been coasting, idle. One of the Pollucan practices. She was instantly alert as she looked at Alissa. “Yeh.”

“It’s Melitto. She’s gone.”

“Gone?” *Fuck. Did she decide to leave? Desert?*

“Yeh,” she said. “I think she went to the Academy post.”

*Oh shit. Worse. What could that mean?* “Algood. Who else knows?”

“Everyone, I think.”

*Shit in a canteen.* “Get ’em all gathered. We’ll have a *tete a tete*.”

Alissa nodded and slipped away as Ereka stood and stretched her muscles back into readiness, her spine popping in muffled staccato. The searches had gone on for nights in a row, relentless, and twice they had had to bug out in daylight.

And it wasn’t just ships. There were sniffers that had been deployed to look for them, smart probes that didn’t use IR to detect targets. They smelled instead for traces of humans, the distinctive molecular wisps that emanated from them constantly on their breaths and in their perspiration. And the sniffers were organic constructs, not made of metal or shrouded in ectmit, very expensive, very hard to detect with counter-surveillance equipment. Each one lived about a day, and each one cost about the same as an Academy private’s annual pay. The Academy was seriously looking for them, and everyone in the bivouac knew it.

Had Melitto snapped under the strain?

Fuck. Had she *defected*?

Jek and Nik watched the morning news 3cast with May, Day and Oli. Nikolis felt like it was a privilege as well as a duty, something he needed to do now that he was thirteen and moving into higher classes at school, something he was expected to do.

They caught a report about Resistance cells that were using fems as bait to get Academy troopers to leave their posts unarmed, who then were killed in cowardly ways. All Arcadians were advised to be on the lookout for suspicious activity and report anything they saw.

“Why would they do that?” Nik said as some adverts came on between reports. “They know they’re not supposed to leave.”

May and Day traded a look, but it was Jek who spoke. “They want to hump the fems.” May glowered at him and he turned pink. “Scuse me,” he said.

“What? But they know they’re Resistance —”

“No,” Jek said. “They dress in disguise to look like regular fems.” He glanced about at everyone’s faces. “I heard other reports before,” he said.

*Reports from where?* Nik wondered. This was the first he had heard of it, and he’d been paying attention to the news for a couple duoweeks now. Oli and Day seemed surprised as well. “Well, why do they do it? It’s wrong,” he said.

“Yeh,” Oli said. “It is, bro. But some do.”

“Why?”

“They just do, algood?” It was Jek again. “It doesn’t fu — it doesn’t matter why they do. They just do and they don’t care if it’s wrong.” He got up. “I need some air.”

Nik stared after his friend as he stalked out of the dwelcap. Oli looked after him too, as surprised as his brother, but thoughtful as well. May frowned. But she wasn’t frowning because she was mad at Jek, Nik was sure. She seemed to be trying to work something out in her head.

“I’ll go get him,” Nik said, but Keolit stopped him.

“He’s angry right now, bro,” he said. “Let him work it off a while.”

“But...”

“Trust me.” There was something in his eyes. That same scary something that had been there before, secrets and sadness. Nik gave in and nodded, and wished his insides would settle down.

They watched more of the 3cast together in silence. Then he remembered something. “Hey, Day?”

“Yeh?”

“What’s strem?”

Day looked at him carefully. “Where did you hear of that?”

“Uh, on the news I think.”

“Oh.” Day looked over at May and she shrugged a little, then nodded to him.

“Well, Nik — strem is a drug. A dangerous drug, and very addictive.”

“Oh.” Nikolis knew drugs were forbidden. “What does it do?”

“I don’t really know,” Day said. “I think it...”

“It fucks you up so bad you don’t care about anything at all.”

Everyone turned and stared. It was Jek. He was standing in the portal. He had come back quietly, had heard what they were talking about, and had said what he said.

And then he turned and ran away, slamming the portal in his wake.

Oli gave a little gasp.

Nik knew the sound. He had heard it before from him whenever he was playing a really challenging 3cast, a strategy game that made him think as well as play. It meant his brother had just figured something out. Usually he looked really happy when he gasped like that. But not this time.

This time he looked like he was about to mack.

The fems were all grim-faced as they squatted about the cold stove in the center of their shelter.

Yeh, they knew.

Erekka waited for everyone to gather. “So you’re all aware that Melitto’s gone,” she said.

The fems nodded. Roni spat. Balia looked weepy. After Tenette had cashed in, she and Melitto had got close.

“What do we know about where she might have gone to?”

“She kept saying she wanted to get the mels,” Roni said.

“You think she went to the post?”

“Yeh,” Roni said.

“With what objective?”

Roni shrugged. “No fuckin idea.”

“Shit. Algood. Let’s do a spot inventory. See if she took anything with her.”

The fems fell to the task, the distraction welcome. In about a quarter hour they had determined that in addition to Melitto, her bucket and her metacamo, ten incends, two blades, a heavy sidearm and an autorifle were missing along with four clips for the

pistol and three drums for the auto. Typical assault gear. Minus some important details.

“She think she’s gonna take on the post all by her lonesome?” Alissa said.

“She’s kitted out,” Erecca said. “But without provisions. That is not good.”

“You don’t think she’s planning to come back,” Roni said, and Balia got teary again.

*Rocks. Fucking rocks.*

“We better go after her,” Erecca said.

She chose five fems, including Balia and Roni. Roni was a brilliant sharpshooter and not too damn bad at close quarter combat, and Balia’s connection with Melitto might be just the thing to get her to change her mind.

Alissa was to remain at the bivouac, and didn’t have to be told why. As Number Two, if Erecca didn’t make it back, she would be in charge.

She kissed her before the party left. “I don’t want your post,” she said.

“You’re not gonna get it if I have any say in it,” Erecca said.

“Yeh. Keep your bucket down, fem.”

“And you keep your camos on.”

“Yes, Captain.” She watched the team disappear into the trees.

They stalked close to the post and waited for darkness to descend. They did a quick check of the perimeter as afternoon sank to dusk, but were unable to find any traces of Melitto.

“Maybe that means she didn’t get here yet,” Balia said.

“Yeh,” Erecca nodded, wanting that to be true but fearing otherwise.

“Or maybe she turned back,” Balia went on, but it was clear from her tone that even she didn’t believe that. “Or she went somewhere else...”

“Stow it,” Roni said.

Balia fell silent and chewed her lower lip.

As the lights around the post came on in the gloom Erecca heard something that she hoped Balia hadn’t. Thinly, in the distance, a voice. A fem. Screaming.

Or maybe it was just rusty equipment?

She glanced around to the fems in her sortie. They all looked alert and pale.

“Fuck,” Roni said, very quietly.

They watched as the day died in blood across the horizon.

There was activity at the post gate and the fems tripped their camos, fading into the undergrowth without having to move. A group of mels was wheeling a small construction barrow past the guardpost. They all had beamguns drawn and ready, whining as their condensers kept them charged and ready to fire, except the one who was pushing the load, and a blue haze around their bodies meant they were all shielded. They were not taking any chances. They traded low comments with the guards at the gate, who suddenly laughed, and Erecca felt her veins fill with icemelt at the sound.

She had a hunch about that barrow and did not want to be right.

The mels progressed into the perimeter around the post, stopping just inside the treeline about two hundred meters from where the fems lay watching them, then upended the barrow. A dark, confused mass tumbled out. They stood over the jumbled shape and several spat on it and cupped their worms. Then they turned and went back into the post, their rears well guarded by their weapons-slinging cohorts.

*Fuck, fem,* Erecca thought hopelessly, *if you're ever going to be wrong about anything let it be this time.*

After the activity at the post settled Erecca rose very softly. "Stay," she said to the invisible soldiers around her.

Swallowing, she moved through the trees toward where the Academy mels had dumped their amorphous burden. As she drew closer she began to see it more distinctly, see that it was wet and glistening, black in places where the sheen of fluid was strongest, and then she saw that there were joints in the pile, but they were in the wrong places for joints to be, and then she got close enough to understand what she was looking at and wished she hadn't.

They doubletimed back to the bivouac, a distorted bag slung between two of them, wanting to get under cover before the Academy started their patrols again.

Erecca had kept Balia well clear, Roni helping to collect the — to pick up the — Roni was a true soldier. She didn't vomit until they were far enough away from the post for her not to be heard, and had not broken stride while she did so.

Balia knew what — who — was in the bag, but didn't look at it closely as it swung between the fems. The shape wasn't right for what she knew was inside.

At the bivvy they cleared a mess table and set up a screen around it, and then Erecca and Alissa turned to the task that lay before them.

“Steady, soldier,” Erecca said as she opened the bag. The reek of blood that rose from it was cloying, wet, almost a fluid that flowed over them both. Alissa hitched a breath, swallowed, nodded. Erecca reached inside with a grimace and pulled out one of the shapes in it. An arm. A right arm.

She lay it on the table.

She reached in again and found the other arm (*slippery slick, and there’s the elbow, and there’s the hand*) and placed that on the table as well, wide enough apart to fit shoulders.

Back into the bag and a (*knee, ankle, foot*) left leg.

And then the right.

And there was only one piece left. It wasn’t the head. The mels had not left the head behind. Erecca refused to speculate about what that could mean.

She drew the last part forth, and she had to gasp when she placed it amid the limbs that used to be connected to it, because in the dark before she had not had time to see what had happened to it.

Melitto’s breasts had been cut off her torso and by the blood patterns Erecca had the sick certainty she had still been alive when it happened.

But that wasn’t the worst.

Across the torso’s bare belly were marks cut into the skin. Erecca rinsed the blood away and made out words, etched crudely in flesh. They sprawled below Melitto’s solar plexus and ended just above her navel.

*DIE*  
*RESISTANCE*  
*CLUTS*

But that wasn’t the worst either.

There was a shredded pair of clouts on the torso’s waist and Erecca pulled them away.

“Fuck,” Alissa said, seeing it at the same time Erecca did. “Oh fuck. They —”

“Yeh,” Erecca said.

“They put —”

“Yeh.”

“Inside her. Inside her. They put the knife *inside her*.”

“Yeh.”

It was still there, the hilt protruding in a sick mockery of a male organ.

Nik fidgeted outside the dwelcap, looking up the lane from time to time. It was getting close to when he would have to leave and Jektres still hadn't shown up.

There had been a brittle tension around everyone in the last week after his comments about strem. May was still sort of angry with him about the language he had used, but she was worried as well. She'd asked Jek (via Nik) to come over and stay the night several times, but he had always refused, saying he needed to stick close to his ma.

That Woman, May called her. “That Woman isn't letting him leave,” or “That Woman isn't fit to be taking care of a mel,” or “I wish That Woman would...” He never found out what May wished That Woman would do, because she never completed the thought. At least not out loud.

Just as Nik was surrendering all hope he saw Jek bob into view in the distance. He breathed a deep sigh of relief, feeling his chest and stomach unclench. After everything Jek had to go through to get enrolled it wouldn't have been fair for him to miss his first day.

May looked like she was thinking the same kinds of things as they watched Jek approach, and then she sent Nik off to meet him with a kiss and an extra lunch sack. Nik ran up to his friend and handed him his lunch but didn't pass the kiss along. “Hey,” he said.

“Yeh,” Jek said. He nodded at May, who took the change of togs he was carrying from his hand. Jek wasn't going back to his dwelcap tonight.

His eye was a lot better now, Nik noticed. He had to really look to see where the bruise had been.

“You have a good day,” May said to him and kissed his cheek. Jek didn't blush this time; he was getting used to this behavior from her.

“Yeh,” he said. “Thanks.” He waved to her and she waved back and Jek started walking again, looking to see if Nik was coming.

“Where've you been all morning?” Nik said.

Jek shrugged. “Ma needed some breakfast before I left.”

Nik nodded and fell into step alongside him, glancing over a couple times. Jek didn't seem to be too upset about anything, so Nik figured there hadn't been any guests, but he kept working his mouth like he was chewing on the insides of his cheeks.

"So," Nik said.

Jek plodded along, not really looking about him, just keeping his eyes a few meters ahead. He was wearing more of the new togs and the sandals May had bought for him. (*That* had been one humping big fight. His ma had told him to take them back into town at first, saying she wasn't going to let some uppity bitch dress her mel like she had no gelt of her own, but Jek had stood firm. Not only were they the nicest togs he'd owned in halfyears, but Nik's ma had given them to him, and that made them even more important somehow.

(He hadn't told anyone in Nik's family about that, though.)

"Well," Nik said.

Jek closed his eyes a moment and shook his head. "Yeh?"

"Uh," Nik said.

Jek stopped. "What?"

"Well, I was just wondering if you're ... you know, nervous or anything."

Jek studied him.

"Because, you know, you haven't been at school in a while, and..."

Jek started walking again and Nik moved beside him once more. He shrugged. "Maybe a little," he said.

"Yeh," Nik said. "Well, it'll be spec. Don't worry. You know some of the nips already from the party."

"You sayin I can't make friends on my own?"

"No! No, of course not. Just ... it's easier when you know a few nips." Poop. Why did he feel so stupid all of a sudden?

"Eight halfyears," Jek said after a fairly lengthy silence.

"Huh?"

"I haven't been in eight halfyears." He gave his friend a glance that was half challenge, half something else Nik didn't get, because he had never seen fear on Jek's face before. Dread, yes, when the guests were visiting, but not this quiet, deep worry.

"So your ma never —"

"Nope."

“Oh.” He wanted to say something else. “Sorry.”

“Stop bein so fuckin sorry for me,” Jek said.

Nik stopped dead and watched Jektres walk a little farther. Jek halted after about a dozen meters and turned around to look at him. He sighed. “Aw shit, Nik, I didn’t mean it like that.”

Nik began walking again slowly.

“It’s just — I dunno. Seems like all of you spend all your time feeling bad for me now.”

“Well, you’ve had some bad —”

“Yeh, I know, but it’s been like that a while now for me. And it’s not so bad as it could be.” Actually it was about as bad as he could imagine, but he had realized, a little over a halfyear earlier, that he had got used to it. Or maybe that he just stopped caring. It was like something inside him had just switched off, and he had been glad for that. Because he didn’t really feel anything any more after that. And not feeling was a hell-born cluster-hump better than the crap he *had* been feeling.

But Nikolis and Keolit, and their ma and da, had turned the switch back on.

And it had hurt, having to feel again, it had hurt terribly, and then he started feeling something else, something that was even worse than just feeling what he was, because it frightened him.

He had begun to feel hope.

Hope that maybe it wouldn’t go on like this until he left the homestead, or until he shot his ma in the face with a scattergun, or maybe just himself (what the fuck, it would be pretty easy, and pretty fucking quick too), hope that maybe he could escape with his head and his heart almost algood.

And it frightened him because he knew that if that hope was taken away from him, he would bleed to death on the inside.

Nikolis bumped his shoulder against him. It wasn’t a jab or anything, and it took Jek a moment to realize that Nik was trying to touch him in a way that wasn’t weird, like hugging him or holding his hand would be. He just wanted Jek to know he was there, beside him.

Like he was always willing to be.

Oh shit. He wiped his eyes quickly, hoping Nikolis hadn’t seen the tears, but knowing that if he had he wouldn’t say anything or give him any crap for them, wouldn’t

think he was some kind of dumb-rear weepy fem, and that made it even worse.

It felt like his heart was tearing open, like his chest was being ripped in half and filled with fire. It wasn't anger, it wasn't sadness, but the way the feeling touched him to his core made him sad because he could barely remember what it had been like to feel that way, long ago, when he had been a little nip and his real ma and da had still been alive, it was the same feeling he got sometimes when he was at Nik's place and his family was all around and happy (fuck, even when they *argued* they were happy, there was still that feeling there underneath that they'd be together no matter what), the same feeling he had when Nik's ma had hugged him after he enrolled, Nik too, all three of them standing there and crying together and somehow it was all right.

It had been so long since his chest had that fire in it. So long since he had felt sheltered and safe and ... loved.

And now here it was again in him, just because Nik had brushed his shoulder against him for a moment.

Oh, his best friend. *His. Best. Friend.*

They continued in silence and he glowed throughout and then they were in the town and then the schooling began.

"I must be a tard," Jek said at the end of the day, walking with his shoulders hunched and his hands stuffed deep in the pockets of his clouts.

"Nah," Nik said.

"Oh yeh," Jek said. He kicked a pebble and watched it scut across the lane, then tumble and skip back into his path. Hump. He couldn't even do that right. He'd been aiming for the trees.

It had been pretty algood at first. He sat in one of the kiosks like the other nips, some of whom he recognized from Nik's birthday (and many of whom were giving him surprised looks; Jek was the *last* person they ever expected to see in school), and the instruction software had begun, the AI guiding him into his lessons.

He had focused on them heavily all morning and at lunch break felt like his head was stuffed with all sorts of new things. And Nik had been right; it wasn't too bad.

He ate his lunch with Nik and a few other nips (Renetta, Jek noticed, had sat down on the other side of Nik and seemed to hang on every word — yeh, she liked him for sure) and they talked and joked a while and Jek almost felt like he could fit in. But as

they rose to resume their instruction he saw some other nips, nips his age, looking at him and shaking their heads.

“Yeh? You got a problem?”

“Not us,” one of them said. “We’re not the ones studying lessons for six-half-year-olds and hanging with pre-pubes.”

Jek felt a little uneasy. “Eat my worm,” he said, but they laughed at him and walked away.

As he settled back into his kiosk he looked about himself surreptitiously. And he saw. Yeh, he saw algood.

They had been right. The other nips his age were into some *serious* crap, like reading page after page of text with no pictures in it, written very small and close together, and these numbers that didn’t even look like numbers, that had strange symbols mixed in and even lines on grids in curves and swoops and other shapes:

$$\sum 1/k^2$$

And he looked over to where the little nips were studying and he saw their screens looked just like his. Really big letters, lots of pictures and short simple words, and numbers that were just numbers like

$$3 + 3 = ?$$

He got up to use the sani, feeling shame at being so stupid, and on the way back saw that even Nik was doing harder stuff:

$$5x^2 + 22x + 41$$

After that he had just stared at his display for a long time. He didn’t know what any of those other screens were saying, what any of them meant, and he knew what that meant about him. He was as dumb as nips less than half his age.

“You just need to catch up a little,” Nik was saying now. They were heading back to Nik’s dwelcap, where Jek would be eating a good home-made meal with a really spec family, then sleeping right next to the best friend he’d ever known. He was too dispir-

ited to be looking forward to any of it.

“A *little*? Nik —” He shook his head and kicked the pebble again. “There’s nips there younger than you that know more than I do.” It landed in his path again. Fuck.

“So we’ll work on it,” Nik shrugged. “I know it gets tough sometimes. Some days I have to back up and take lessons over again. So what? And it’s also spec, isn’t it? I mean, knowing you’re learning things.”

Jek pondered that as they kept walking. Nikolis did have a point. In the morning, at least, he had been working pretty hard, or he thought he had. But it had almost been fun as well. Sort of like when they were in Nik’s orchard and throwing leafworms at each other. Yeh, it was playing, but it was work too, and it felt good. And Nik would help him. He kicked the pebble a third time. There. Right into a trunk. Yeh. Stupid rock anyway.

“Don’t worry,” Nik said. “It’ll be algood. You’ll pick it up fast.”

“I hope so,” Jek said.

“Don’t quit, mel,” Nik said quietly.

Jektres felt a stab. He had been considering doing exactly that, just not showing up again tomorrow, or the next day, or ever again. “Why shouldn’t I?”

Nik stopped and stared at him. “Because I don’t want you to,” he said.

And somehow, for a reason Jek couldn’t understand, but which had to do with the warm flow he felt in his chest all of a sudden, that was a good enough answer.

He nodded, and Nik beamed, and then slugged him. “Worm neck,” he said, running off the lane and over to their favorite pond, and Jek followed and they shucked their togs and swam a while, then put their clouts back on and went to Nik’s.

May kissed them both when they arrived, their hair still damp from the swim. “How was school, mels?” she said.

“Algood,” Nik said.

“Yeh,” Jek said, a little more subdued. May looked at him and he almost didn’t meet her eyes but he saw she wasn’t feeling bad for him; she understood in a way that was simple, that didn’t have any secret pity, that was calm. And it made him calm as well.

“Good,” she said, still looking at Jek. “Keep at it, Niko.” But he could see she was talking to him. She smiled. “Tomis and Keli are in the orchard. If you want to go on a bug patrol I’m sure they’d appreciate the help. You can go over your homework later.”

“Uh, yeh, sure,” Jek said. He and Nik turned to go but Jek stopped.

“Something wrong, Jektres?”

“Well, I shouldn’t be wearing these clouts if...”

May smiled again. “You’re right,” she said. “Nik, get some work togs for yourself and Jek, algood?”

“Yeh, sure May.” He gestured his friend inside and they changed into some fairly well-beaten-up clouts, Jek as usual having a hard time stuffing himself into them (Nik’s were a little too small for him, but Oli’s were way too big; he’d tried on a pair once and they’d simply slid right back down, leaving him standing there naked, blinking, while Nik just about ruptured himself laughing), then went to work.

As they stalked among the trees on the two-meter stilts Jek said, “Hey, Nik, what’s homework?”

Nik glanced over to him. “Oh yeh. I guess you didn’t get any yet. It’s extra stuff you do after school.”

“They send work home with you to do?”

“Yeh,” Nik said. “It sucks kinda but it helps with the learning.”

“Oh.” Jek was quiet for a while. “And you got some?”

“Yeh,” Nik said, and lobbed a worm at him.

Jek dodged it and then halfheartedly returned fire. Mel. Nikolis had homework to do, but he was still willing to help him with his own learning. He was taking on a double load, doing his own stuff and then working with Jek.

*What a spec friend*, he thought, and then a *very* fat leafworm splashed across his cheek and he laughed really hard and began seriously fighting back.

After they scraped the worst of the bug parts off of each other and took a quick shower, they had another one of May’s great suppers. There was mashed tubers with good brown gravy (and it even had lumps, which meant it was the real thing), buttered green beans, lots of crispy polt and a jellyfruit mold. All of Jek’s favorites. He felt the heat in his breast again when he thought of it. She’d done that just for him, because it was his first day in school for a long time; it was a little celebration.

Nik’s ma was so spec.

They *all* were.

When everyone had had enough they sat around and digested for a while and

talked in the cooling evening. The ultrasonic field whined up to keep the paparrats away. Day set a measuring eye skyward. “Rain, I bet,” he said.

“Yeh,” Oli agreed languidly.

“Feel it in the air,” Day elaborated.

“Mm,” May said.

“Rain rain come on by, make the trees grow to the sky,” Nik murmured in a sing-song. He and Keolit shared a smile, some memory they had between them because they were brothers and both knew the rhyme.

Jek felt a little woozy. All that good food was settling nicely in him and he drifted a while. It felt so good. To just be able to sit and talk, or not say anything and listen to everyone else, even if all they were doing was the same, sitting and listening, and not have to feel like he had to watch out all the time, not to have to be afraid he’d hear an engine coming up the lane and a knock on the portal.

He seriously never wanted to leave. He wanted this moment to go on forever. *Whenever I die*, he thought, *I want it to be at a time like this.*

A huge belch suddenly erupted from him and everyone laughed. May gave him a look, not angry, but he knew what it meant. “Pardon me,” he said, and then chuckled at himself with everyone else.

Nik yawned, then stood and stretched. “I gotta get to the homework,” he said to May. “Thanks for the supper. It was spec.” He kissed her cheek.

May smiled and nodded, looking surprised, staring after him thoughtfully as he went back inside. Jek looked around and saw they were all watching his friend, and then their heads all turned his way at once and he felt really strange for a moment.

Oli glanced aside. “So, Day, how about some 3cast?”

“Yeh,” Day said, and the father and older son went in as well, leaving Jek with May.

“I don’t have homework yet,” he said.

May nodded. She knew. But she knew it like she had known before about how school had *really* been for him, calmly, and he felt algood about it. Not dumb, not lacking. Just — well, something good.

If someone had whispered the word *accepted* into his ear right then he’d have had a name for the unknown, forgotten feeling.

“You want help clearing the table?”

She smiled. "I'd love it, Jektres. Thank you."

Mel, that smile made him feel good.

He took the dishes inside while May collected the serving platters. This time there weren't any leftovers at all; Jek had shoveled huge quantities into himself. "Growing mels," May had said, a little laugh in her voice, sunlight through leaves.

Jek shuffled the various dishes into the washing unit while May finished the cleanup in the dinitchen. She actually *used* the stove, and several times each day too. The one at his own dwelcap was still sparkling clean (well, it was dusty now, but still untried, virginal, a sort of spinster of stoves he guessed), as new as the day the capsule had been manufactured, loaded with household needs and dropped from orbit onto an unlocated parcel of land on Arcadia. He wasn't sure but he thought maybe it still had packing foam inside the oven.

Everything about this dwelcap was different from his. It smelled different, like it was well-used but in a fresh way, not sour and musty but saturated with the aromas of cooking and cleaning and many halfyears of washed bodies living and growing and changing in it; it looked different, really lived in by a real family, the maglocked furniture moved around and changed from the factory defaults, to make it more comfortable, to make the spaces suit better, and holos everywhere of Nik's family, and drawings by Nik and Oli stuck on the walls in the dinitchen from when they were little nips, drawings of stick-figure Mays and Days and Keolits and, when Nik had come along, him too; and it felt different. Warm. Like a real home, not just a metal and ectmit IC Industries Standard Colonial Dwelling Capsule, Version Five, designed by a computer and produced by an automated factory and shipped across lightyears of frozen vacuum, impersonal, just another machine crapped out of a larger machine from orbit to fall ground-side, a glowing turd surrounded by ablative cushions, a machine that people lived inside of, almost by mistake it seemed sometimes.

"I wish I knew how to cook like you do," Jek said.

May looked at him. "You mean that wom — uh, your ma doesn't cook very well?"

Jektres snorted. "She doesn't cook at *all*."

"Oh." She seemed about to say something, but then Jek could see her pick something else to say instead. "Well, I can show you how to make that jellyfruit you like sometime, if you want me to. It's a lot easier than it looks."

"Yeh?"

She ruffled his hair. “Yeh.”

Jek’s eyes filled and he was stunned momentarily at how close to the surface his feelings were all of a sudden. So many of them, rolling and tumbling in him. The last time anyone had ever ruffled his hair he had been seven halfyears old, and it had been his real ma as she kissed him goodbye and said *I love you, honey* and went to town while he went to play with some friends, and that was the day she and his da had been killed, caught in some crossfire between Resistance and Academy factions.

May saw him start to cry and made a soft sound and he lunged forward, throwing himself against her, and she held him and let his feelings do what they had to do.

Eleisa looked down at the top of Jektres’s head, smoothing his hair a little and wondering about him. There was still a piece missing from the puzzle and she couldn’t quite see what it was. She thought maybe Keli knew, but he didn’t seem to want to talk about it. And she thought about Niko and how he simply took up with Jek, how he had let him into his heart with an ease that was so complete it was as though it had always been that way, and she felt happy. Proud of Niko. He really was a good mel, and he had chosen a good friend, one who was much deeper than his surface and one who needed friendship in a way that was almost frightening, it was so visibly desperate.

But it hadn’t scared her son away from Jektres, and holding him now as he wept at some unnamed feeling, she was glad.

Keolit nudged Nik’s foot aside. “Make some room, mel.”

Nik turned around and stuck his tongue out, but moved his leg so Oli could stretch properly, sprawled half off the sofa. The two younger mels were taking up a lot of the scant available floor in the family space, lying shoulder to shoulder and propped on elbows, their heads together as Nik helped Jek with reading and writing. He was using the pad he’d been given for his birthday and Jek seemed to be following along fairly well. Jek’s right shin was hooked unselfconsciously over Nik’s left and their feet, bare, paddled at the air from time to time, both of them focusing together on a particular task.

Nikolis had worked on his own assignments for nearly an hour, then moved on to tutoring Jektres. Oli and Day and May traded silent smiles at his industry. He was good for Jek, and he was being good to Jek, and they all felt more than a little proud.

The late news began just as the mels were wrapping up. There was a report that

one of the Academy Assassins had been caught. Those were the Resistance fems that had been luring troopers outside their posts. “The Academy states that she confessed immediately to being one of the assassins,” the newsreader was saying, “and that she is now being held in detention pending trial.”

The 3cast image cut to General Orekkio. “I’m pleased to announce,” he said, “that she has been fully compliant with our Academy officers and has been very willing to cooperate with us in our investigations.” The visual cut to a still holo of the fem’s face; she looked tired, bedraggled, almost lifeless, like all the Resistance soldiers did when they were finally captured by the Academy.

“Little bit of food, a shower and some sleep and I bet she’d forget all about the Resistance,” Oli said.

“Sh,” Day said.

“How long has she been in custody?” the offcamera reporter asked.

“A little over a week,” the General said. “We’re hoping her testimony will help us to find her cowardly associates and bring them all to trial.”

The 3cast went back to the newsreader. “In further favorable developments,” she said, “the Academy reports that smuggling of strem, alcohol, nicotine leaf and other illegal substances has fallen off by twelve percent. Academy spokesmen credit the continuing vigilance of the citizenry of Arcadia. We’ll be back with today’s kickball highlights after these brief...”

“Huh,” Oli said. “It didn’t take ’em long to get one of ’em.”

“Yeh, well,” Day said, “you know how the Resistance is. Half-crazy.”

Oli nodded. “Yeh, but a little danger —” He stopped and glanced over at May. “Uh.”

She smiled, a little weakly. “I know, Keli. You’ll be fine, I’m sure. You won’t let yourself be lured outside by any of those fems.”

“Of course not,” he said, and Nik had to suppress a snort. Keolit had a femfriend from town that he visited regularly, and he was pretty sure they were Doing It. That was bad, he knew, but he wasn’t going to tell on him. It wasn’t worth the misery Oli would have rained upon him, and besides, he knew mels and fems Did It without being married anyway. And he didn’t really care much *where* Oli put his worm.

*Speaking of rain*, he thought, glancing up at the roof of the dwelcap, which was now beginning to rattle tinnily as large drops fell on it in a growing hammer. Day had

been right. In a few minutes it was clearly a downpour and he was glad Jek was staying over; walking outside on a night like this would be little different from swimming. When it decided to rain on Arcadia, it wasn't fooling around.

Day flipped off the 3cast. "School night," he said to his son and Jektres. "Get ready for bed, mels."

"Huh?" Jek said.

Nik nudged him with his elbow. "We have to turn in earlier so we can get up in time and be ready," he said.

"Oh. Algood."

May stood. "I'll get the bedrolls."

"Nah, don't bother, May," Keolit said. "They can sleep in our room."

"You sure, Keli?"

"Yeh, it'll be a little crowded but if we all turn over at the same time I think it'll be algood."

She shrugged. "Well, if that's algood with you, fine."

"C'mon, Jek," Nik said. "Let's hit it."

"Uh, sure," Jek answered and followed Nikolis to the bedroom. Nik dropped his clouts on the floor and climbed under the covers, looking at Jek expectantly. "Is Oli coming?"

"Yeh, in a while," Nik said.

"Is he gonna —"

"What?"

Jek fidgeted and made a vague motion with his hand. "Uh, well, you know. Sleep like you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well ... naked?"

Nik laughed. "Fuh, yeh!" What was *this* about? He and Jek always slept naked together, and Nik and Oli never wore anything in bed either. He knew that Jek slept the same way at his own dwelcap. That was the way *all* mels slept. Why was he getting weird about it now? "Don't worry," he said. "We don't Do It together or anything."

Jek made a face. "I didn't think you did," he said, flushing a little, then shucked his clouts hurriedly and slipped under the sheets alongside his friend. "It's just — well, he's almost a man, and..."

“Don’t worry, he’s not gonna make fun of you or anything.”

“No, that’s not it. I just —”

“What?”

“Oh, forget it,” Jek said.

In a few more minutes Oli appeared, dropped his own clouts and climbed in on the other side of Nik, farthest from Jektres. Nikolis wasn’t sure but he thought he heard Jek sigh with relief. He glanced over and saw that Jek’s eyes were squeezed shut, really tight. Like he was afraid of seeing something.

Or maybe of being seen.

## EXPLORATIONS

IT WASN'T UNTIL THE NIGHT AFTER they had retrieved Melitto's remains that Erecca realized the Academy search patrols had stopped, at least for a short while, and she knew why. They wanted to make sure the fems had plenty of opportunity to discover what had happened.

What had been done to her.

And now they were proceeding again, as severe as they had been before.

She wondered if Melitto had said anything before she had been — before the end. Closer examination of her body (her body *parts*) had confirmed her worst fears; Melitto had been bound and tortured with electrodes, had been raped both vaginally and anally (and probably orally but they had no way, of course, of course, to know), and had indeed been alive when her breasts were cut away, alive as the vile message had been carved into her skin, alive as the knife had been ... inserted into her, and then she had been dismembered, and she had been alive for that as well, and then her head had been cut off.

That would have been enough, she feared, to make almost any fem crack, to give away locations and names and numbers of Resistance fighters, anything to stop the horror.

Or to just die more quickly.

She knew the Academy troopers could be vicious, but she had not suspected that level of depravity even in them.

And the 3casts — they were keeping up the lie that Melitto was still alive, was cooperating and would face, at worst, life in prison for her “ghastly misdeeds.” And she finally learned why they had kept her head. They had needed it for their mug shots.

According to the reports Melitto had been captured while trying to “lure brave Academy mels into debauchery.” She doubted she would ever know how the fem had actually been taken, but she was sure that it had been while she was directly attacking the post.

Not a single whisper of the castrated Academy mel had hit the 3casts. Erekkka at first wondered why; it certainly would have made excellent anti-Resistance propaganda, the kind of thing that fuckstick Orekkio probably jerked off thinking about. But then she realized that if news got out that the mel had been taken outside the post, it would have been clear — or at least it would have been a little sign — that the Academy was nowhere near as *morally upright* as it liked to present itself as being.

Erekkka sighed and scrubbed her face with her hands. She was getting a little tired of having this shit turn over and over in her mind. Every. Fuckall. Minute.

Alissa slumbered uneasily beside her in the morning's light. They'd remained nocturnal and had continued to stay away from cooking heat or showers, and were all beginning to feel, look and smell very raunchy. Erekkka had had to resort to seds herself a few times, the Pollucan techniques unequal to the task of maintaining full consciousness for such a protracted period.

Morale was sagging lower than she'd seen it drop since before she had taken over leadership of the detachment, after the previous captain had been killed in an assault action six halfyears earlier near some assfuck little town a couple hundred clicks away. That one had been bad; Academy troopers had slaughtered some civilians — she still wasn't sure if that had been deliberate or not — and then blamed the Resistance. Since they controlled the 3casts, no one knew any differently.

She had only been seventeen halfyears old.

Now she was the Old Woman; most of her soldiers were at least five or six halfyears younger than she was. A couple had joined up before their bodies had even fully developed. All fems like herself, all equally sick of the depredations they and their families had suffered at the hands (or more accurately the worms) of the Academy troopers.

The Academy was the law on Arcadia, every trooper its executor, and the mels could have their way, any way they wanted it.

It hadn't always been like that. She knew that as recently as a hundred halfyears ago there had been no martial presence here. Arcadia had been a frontier world, very free from law, parcels of land opened, free for the farming, to settlers from Dog End and a few other worlds. Taliesin. Eridani. Castor, Pollux — not that the Castorans were eager to go anyplace. Even ancient, bedraggled, mortally-ill Earth and its overworked home planets, Merz, Tritia, Lun, Galilea. Come one, come any.

And that had been most of the problem. The majority of the settlers had been honest and decent folk and they were tired of being terrorized by roaming brigands. They had formed a caucus and agreed that they needed an Academy of Protection with a charter that, in retrospect, had been too broad in its authorization of use of any force necessary to quell any detectable lawlessness.

No one had thought who would join the Academy. It came as a great surprise, therefore, that the roaming brigands all seemed to vanish into mist while the Academy found its ranks immediately filled with eager volunteers, all apparently very skilled with weapons, fighting tactics and so on.

Erekka knew it was her historical distance from the events that made her see those previous generations of settlers as being hopelessly naive.

Still, she liked to think that had she been alive back then, she would have seen it coming.

And now she and her fellow soldiers were living — and dying — with the results.

There was no way they could win by popular support. Not while the Academy controlled all the news. So they did the only thing they could: Make life in the Academy just dangerous enough that many mels would choose not to join, preferring to keep their skins intact.

But she felt the downhill slide of the fight and knew it was only a matter of time before there wasn't any Resistance on Arcadia at all, before it became a planet entirely under the control of a corrupt, inhumane military dictatorship.

*Oh, fuck, fem,* she thought. *Don't you dare think that for even one second. Your soldiers get a glimpse of that on your face and you might as well just open a fuckin whorehouse right here in the bivvy.*

In her better moods she realized that most Academy troopers had joined for good reasons, or at least sensible ones. They wanted to try to keep the settlers of Arcadia safe, believing the 3cast propaganda about the “villainy” of the Resistance; or they wanted a good career or pension track; or they wanted experience handling flying craft or offplanet shuttleboats so they could eventually find a solid career in the private sector. Those weren't the mels that were causing the problems, and sometimes, not very often but sometimes, she just barely let herself hope that those mels would make the difference, that they would fix the Academy from the inside, make it into what it had originally been intended to be: A force for protection, a fair and impartial authority for the

administration of justice, a means for disaster relief to be distributed. As it was now most disasters were perpetrated by the Academy itself.

She wasn't sure how that could happen, though, as long as corrupt melstuf-garglers like Orekkio were still in charge. If only there was a way to expose his hidden side. She was sure it was considerably more twisted than the face he always showed to the 3cast cameras.

Nik surfaced to awareness with Jek's arm across his chest and looked over at him. He was still asleep. He heard the shower splashing in the sani and knew Oli was in there. Poop. He hoped he hadn't seen the way Jektres was lying now because if he had, he was sure, he'd be getting jokes about his *melfriend* for weeks.

But he hesitated, not wanting to shove Jek's arm away. It didn't matter how wrong it was. Right now it felt pretty good to be so near Jek. *Bender*, his mind mocked. *Shuddup.*

Jek stirred and his arm moved aside on its own and Nik felt a mixture of relief and disappointment. Jek rubbed his eyes, his palm smearing across them with splayed fingers, and then woke fully, blinking at Nik in a way that was dopey and just a little cute. "Hey," he said.

"Yeh," Nik said.

Jek propped on his elbow and looked across him. "Where's your bro?"

"Shower," Nik said with a tilt of his head toward the closed sani portal.

"Oh." Jek lay back down and stretched lazily, a jaw-cracking yawn escaping him as his back arched under the sheets. Nik noted with some amusement (and some other feelings he didn't want to think about too much) that his friend's worm was standing. He didn't say anything, because his own was too. Mels always woke up hard. No one seemed to know why.

"Sleep good?"

"Yeh," Jek said, settling back onto the mattress. It had been a tight fit, as Oli had predicted, but he hadn't minded having his flank pressed against Nik's all night long. "You?"

"Yeh, great," Nik said.

"You snored a little."

"Huh?"

“You snored.”

Nik made a face. “I don’t snore,” he said.

“Wanna bet? Sounded like you had a tractor in your nose.”

“Oh, bite my worm,” he said.

“Yeh, suck poop.”

Nik cupped his worm at him through the sheets and Jek returned the gesture.

“Why’s your bro taking so long in the shower?” he said after a while.

Nik shrugged and made his hand into an open fist over his worm, then moved it up and down a few times.

“No way.”

“Yeh. He does it in the shower.”

“How do you know?”

“I walked in on him once.”

Jek stared a moment and then began laughing.

“Yeh,” Nik said. “It was pretty funny. He got really peed.”

“I bet!”

“He didn’t always in the shower though. He used to do it in bed, late at night.”

“Really? With — with you right next to him?”

“Yeh — until I woke up one night and asked him what he was doing.” He saw Jek’s expression. “Well, I was only like seven or eight. I didn’t know about it then.”

Jek laughed again. “Mel.”

“Yeh, it musta been pretty bad for him.”

“Uh-huh. Having your eight-half-year-old brother seeing you play with your worm and then asking what was going on!”

“Yeh.” Nik started chuckling. “I asked him if it hurt.” Jek stared, then began braying laughter, and Nik lost it too. “Because,” he said through his wheezing, “he kept moaning.”

“Stop,” Jek said. “I can’t breathe.”

“Yeh,” Nik said, “neither could he...”

“Oh,” Jek gasped, “oh crap...”

“He said,” Nik managed.

“No! Stop!”

But Nik couldn’t go on, and they buckled with cramps, tears streaming from their

eyes.

They were still chortling together when Oli appeared a couple minutes later, a towel around his hips. "I'm done now, nips," he said, "all squeaky clean," and that set them off again.

"Squeaky!" Nik hooted.

"Clean!" Jek choked. "*Done! BANG!*"

"Eek-eek-eek," Nik said, and Jek started laughing so hard he was sure he was about to pee. They rolled back and forth on the bed, doubled up and clutching their midriffs, lost in the spasms that rocked them.

Keolit scowled at them, puzzled, and then unwrapped the towel to put on his work togs.

Jek's laughter faded rapidly as he looked at Oli's body.

Crap, he was built. Like he was made of nothing but muscle. He got a glimpse of the older mel's worm and it took him by surprise; it was pretty damn impressive. Much bigger than his own (which he knew wasn't sub-par), his sack full under it and looking like some kind of huge ripe fruit, his hair thick and curly.

He glanced over at Nik, and was shocked to see Nik was studying him with a strange look on his face. All his insides turned to liquid for a moment.

After Keolit left his friend smiled at him. "Yeh, Oli says he has to wrap it around his leg to keep from tripping over it."

Jek's heartbeat settled a little and he smirked. "So that's really why you need stilts in the orchard," he said. "Or why he does anyway."

Nik laughed. "Yeh," he said, then sat up and pulled the sheets aside, baring them both. "C'mon. We gotta shower too and then get dressed so we'll be in time for breakfast."

As they stood under the spray, soaping up, Jek said, "When do you do it?"

"Huh?"

Jek emulated Nik's earlier stroking pantomime.

"Oh. Well, usually in the shower too."

"Yeh?"

"Yeh." And Nik's heartbeat increased because he was pretty sure what would happen next, and he liked it when he and Jektres did it in front of each other, even if it was a dirty thing for them to do and a dirty way for him to feel.

Maybe *bender* meant two mels doing like that, their elbows bent.

Jek's worm was already filling and he rubbed soap over it with his hand, first casually and then with longer, more deliberate motions. "I didn't get a chance last night," he said.

"Yeh," Nik said, bringing his attention to his own worm.

"You don't mind, do you? If I do it now?" Jek said.

"Nah."

"Spec. You can too if you want."

"Already am," Nik said.

Jek chuckled. "Yeh, I see that. Hey, let's have a race."

"A race?"

"Yeh. The one who finishes first is the winner."

"Uh, algood, sure. But don't we need a prize or something?"

Jek shrugged. "Like what?"

Nik thought for a moment and then made a suggestion. Jek nodded agreement.

The spray rolled down them as they began the contest.

At breakfast May said, "Niko, honey, aren't you having any plenten toast?"

Nik flushed. "Uh. No, I thought I'd let Jek have mine. Because he likes it so much."

"Oh. Well, algood. Eat up, mels. You need to get moving."

"Bet I can finish my breakfast faster too," Jek said under his breath, and Nik slugged him.

Oli eyed them both but kept his thoughts to himself.

Renetta buttonholed Nik as he headed into the school. "Hey," she said.

"Uh, yeh, hey," he said.

Jek came to a halt behind Renetta and seemed to want to get Nik's attention. Nik didn't look at him, sure he'd be making dumb faces.

"So," she said.

"Yeh."

“Uh. How’s school so far?”

Jek was waving frantically. “Algood, I guess.”

She nodded.

“Uh, how about you?” His eyes finally cut to his friend’s gesticulations. He was pointing to his own shoulders with both hands and Nik wondered what the hump that was supposed to mean.

“Yeh, algood. Where are you in reading?”

“I’m reading *The Fire of Arcadia* right now.” He looked at Jek again, who clearly mouthed the word *backpack* at him. Nik almost slapped his forehead. Of course.

“Oh yeh,” Renetta said. “That’s about how the settlers formed the Academy, right?”

“Yeh, it’s pretty good. Uh. Thanks again for the pack.” He shrugged a little to call attention to where its strap hung over his shoulder. “It’s really spec. I’ve been using it a lot.” He caught Jek’s eyes again briefly and something telegraphed between them. “I carry it with me everywhere.” Jek grinned. *Perfect.*

Renetta smiled brightly. Mel. She was *pretty*, he realized. He’d never really noticed before. But now — *mel*. “You’re welcome,” she said. “I’m glad you like it.”

“Yeh. I do.” Now Jek was making another gesture. His hand and forearm were flat at shoulder height, and with his other hand he made a fist, fore and index fingers sticking down and scissoring back and forth as they moved along his arm. He wagged his eyebrows.

*What? Oh. Walking.*

“Uh, you want me to wait for you after school? Like walk you home maybe?”

Renetta glowed. “Yeh, sure,” she said.

The horn blew, last warning for the students to get inside to their courses. “Spec,” Nik said. “See you then.”

“See you at lunch?” Renetta said.

“Oh! Yeh, of course! I was just — you know.”

“Yeh,” Renetta smiled, then spun away and up the corridor.

Nik and Jek walked more slowly. “Thanks, mel,” Nik said.

Jek gave him a little bump with his elbow. “No prob,” he said. “She likes you, mel.”

“You really think so?”

“If she doesn’t,” Jek said, “then your brother’s a fem.”

They stared at each other a moment and then broke up again. There was no chance that could be true. No chance at *all*.

Jek hung back a dozen paces while Nikolis and Renetta walked along and talked. Nik was glad his friend was giving them a little space, because the conversation they were having was almost too stupid to be humanly possible. *In the entire history of the universe*, he thought desperately, *this will go down as the number one most dumb-rear set of words ever spoken by anyone*.

It was mostly Nik, blathering on about — anything. Everything. Any thought that crossed his head popped right out his mouth, and he felt a sinking kind of horror as he realized he couldn’t quell the flow. *Shuddup, shuddup, please shuddup*.

Still his mouth kept making noises.

*Oh hump, please shuddup*.

Renetta mostly nodded under the onslaught and Nik, in his terror, failed to notice they were at the lane that went to her homestead until she stopped and stared at him as he kept walking on and blabbing about kickball or birds or clouds or some dumb poop-clout thing.

He stopped finally, looked at her blankly and then figured out where they were. “Uh, sorry,” he said.

She shrugged. “It’s algood,” she said.

From the corner of his eye Nik caught Jek tilting his head rapidly to the side, over and over. *Go up to her*. He did.

“Thanks for walking me home,” Renetta said.

“Uh, sure,” he said. “I mean, thanks for letting me walk with you.” Inside he curled up. *Thanks for letting me walk with you?* Mel. What the hump was that? What the hump had happened to his brain?

Renetta smiled at him, then leaned forward and gave him a very light, very quick kiss. “See you tomorrow,” she said, pink to the roots of her hair, which Nik suddenly noticed was long and soft and very shiny, and headed up the lane to her dwelcap, leaving Nik to stand and stare after her, his jaw hanging loose and his whole body tingling.

She had kissed him on the *lips*.

When she was far enough out of range Jek slapped him heartily on the back,

nearly knocking him sprawling, and cheered. “Way, nip!” he said. “She *kissed* you, mel! She *really likes* you!”

Nik was still dazed. “Yeh,” he said. “I guess she does...” He touched his lips, gently, with his fingertips. He hadn’t known kissing felt like that. Soft. And warm. And *really good*.

He wondered what it would feel like if it went on for more than just a second. Maybe his head would explode. Or his worm, he considered. It was powerfully, implacably stiffened in his clouts.

“I bet she’d be your femfriend if you asked her,” Jek said as they resumed their course to Nik’s place.

“You think?” Nik felt a hopeful little flare inside his chest even as his stomach tied itself up. *Yeh! Oh no. Oh ... crap.*

“Yeh, mel, you bet. Fems don’t just run around kissing any old nip, you know.”

Nik felt his face turn red. More red. “Huh,” he said.

“C’mon,” Jek said. “Let’s hit the pond a while.”

“Uh. Yeh, sure.” In this sudden new state of feeling he had, he would have agreed had Jek suggested they dive headfirst into a manure heap. He even forgot to take off his togs before he jumped into the water, and flushed even more hotly as Jek almost drowned himself laughing at him.

*Huh*, he thought as he stripped and wrung out his tunic and clouts, draping them over some shrubs to air a little before getting back into the water again. *Maybe fems aren’t so bad after all. Some fems.*

At least Jek didn’t make fun of the way Nik’s worm continued to stand up.

May looked him over with clear disapproval as they arrived at his dwelcap. “What happened to your togs? They’re *soaked*.”

“Uh —”

“That’s sort of my fault,” Jek said. “We, well, we were at the pond and getting ready to go for a swim and while I was taking off my sandals I fell over. I knocked Nik into the water.” He hung his head, and even Nikolis was almost convinced of his penitence. “I’m sorry,” he said.

May pursed her lips at him, then rolled her eyes. “Oh, forget about it. It’s just a little water. No harm done.”

“Thanks,” Jek said.

“I’m gonna get changed,” Nik said.

“Algood.”

“C’mon. We’ll talk — about school.”

“Yeh, sure,” Jek said, following him in.

Nik hung his still-damp togs over the towel racks in the sani and drew on a dry pair of clouts as Jek eyed him unabashedly, looking over his friend’s naked body. Nik caught the look and blushed. “What?” he said, slipping the waistband up over his hips.

Jek studied his face a moment. “I was ... just thinking.”

“About what?” Nik’s heart had accelerated suddenly and his worm was back to its tricks, seemingly trying to jump right off his body and run away.

Jek looked aside. “Just that it’s no wonder Renetta likes you. You got — you got a good body.”

“Me?” Nik looked along himself and shook his head. “No way. I’m skinny.”

“No you’re not,” Jek said, still not looking at him. “You just don’t got any fat.” He looked back again and his eyes moved over Nik’s bare torso. “But you do got muscles, on your chest and your legs. Like your bro, kinda.”

Nik’s face was heated again. Jek was red too. It was weird. Like they both — like they both were thinking almost the same thing about each other but didn’t know how to bring words to the thoughts. “You’re not gonna kiss me now too, are you?” Nik tried to make it a joke, but when he said it his voice was almost croaky. His heart was *thumping* in him and he could feel his fingers go cold.

Jek laughed but it didn’t sound like he was laughing at something funny. He sounded almost like it hurt. “Nah,” he said. And he hesitated just a beat too long before adding, “You’re a mel.” He shifted a little and Nik saw, very clearly, that Jek’s worm was rock-solid in his clouts.

Oli popped his head into the room. “Supper, mels,” he said. They both jumped. After he left they looked at each other and then laughed together, but it was high-pitched and breathy, and Nik’s stomach was flipping around inside him, and Jek spent the evening being — *feely* with him. Just near him, just barely letting his body touch Nik’s, letting his knee brush against him while they sat at dinner, his elbow rubbing Nik’s arm while they worked over more of Jek’s extra lessons, leaning slightly against him while they watched the late news on the 3cast, and as Nik walked him home their

bare shoulders kept touching.

Or was it truly like that? Was Jek really acting differently, or was he being the same as ever and Nik was noticing it in a different way now? And if Jek was really behaving in a more *touchy* way, what did it mean? Or — if he wasn't, what did it mean that Nik thought he was?

Clouts. Pain in the *clouts*. Being thirteen *sucked*.

Jek had asked May if Nik could spend the night, and she had agreed that he could if he were to visit and decide he wanted to. Nik knew what that meant: Only if That Woman wasn't there. It was sort of funny, both in the sense of being amusing and being strange. Just a month ago she would have said he *shouldn't* stay unless she *was* home.

They stopped at Jek's portal. "So. Wanna stay over?" he said.

Nik glanced at the dwelcap. It was dark; there were no lights showing in the windows. Jek's ma was gone again. His heart was thudding once more. He didn't know if he was full of fear about what could happen if he went inside now with Jek, alone, just the two of them — or if it was hope that something *would* happen, something like maybe — like —

He caught a flash in his head of Jek's face very close to his own, Jek's lips brushing against his as Renetta's had done earlier.

*Bender. Sick little bender.*

He *was* afraid, he realized, both of being alone with Jek and of not being alone with him. If he left it would hurt Jek's feelings. Maybe badly. He wasn't sure how he knew, but he knew it all the same. "Uh," he said, and his voice wasn't steady. "Sure." He was full of a jumpy energy that surged from his worm into his gut, or maybe from gut to worm, he couldn't tell, making it feel fluttery way down inside.

"Spec," Jek said. He opened the portal and they went down the tiny hall to his room, shaped and dimensioned exactly like the one Nik and Keolit shared, but seemingly larger because it was just Jek in this one.

Well, just Jek and himself tonight.

And no one else at all.

Jek switched on his 3cast but didn't load any games. "It's late," he said, and smiled as he added, "and we have school tomorrow."

"Yeh," Nik said. So why had Jek turned on the — oh.

Jek pulled up his collection of pictures and shifted over on the mattress, making room for Nik. Nik sat down next to him, close enough that their arms were touching, and Jek's hair tickled him and made him shiver. His mouth was dry. "Did you really mean what you said before?"

"What I said about what?" Jek said, carefully not looking over at him.

"About — you know, about how I have a good body."

"Oh." Jek paged ahead in his picture collection to some new ones Nik hadn't seen. "Yeh."

"You too," Nik said.

"Thanks."

They looked at the pictures for a while, and this time they were more interesting to Nik because he could almost imagine how it would be if Renetta had globes like that, if she would maybe one day take off her togs and let him look at her, like she was posing for pictures like these.

And he wondered what it would be like for his worm to be in her, like the mels were doing with some of the fems.

And he wondered how it would be for him and Jek to...

"Hey Jek?"

"Yeh?"

"You ever — you know, Do It?"

Jek nodded.

"Uh, what's it, you know, feel like?"

Jek considered his words carefully. He had an idea of what he was expected to say, and went ahead slowly at first. "Well ... it's a little like when you're in the shower and you use soap. It's warm, and slippery kind of, and smooth." And an afterthought: "But better, too, you know, than just being alone and doing it to yourself."

"Oh."

They stared at the images some more, and then Jek lifted his rear away from the bed and slipped his clouts off. His worm popped free, springing slightly and pointing directly up along his belly. He *did* have a good body, Nik thought. His stomach was flat and rippled with muscle in ridges, and his chest had good definition. Cleft and trim, like the swimmers he admired. And his worm was — it was spec.

Jek looked at Nik, waiting.

Nik swallowed, then took off his own clouts. His worm, bared, pulsed visibly in the air. He watched, entranced, as Jek began slipping his hand up and down over his larger flesh, the skin at the tip gliding back and forth. Nik's had begun to do the same thing a while back, unsticking from him and sliding free when he played with his worm. It had frightened him at first — he was worried there was something wrong with him, that maybe he'd damaged himself, but when he'd worked up the courage to tell Oli his brother had said that it was normal for a mel's skin to do that as he got older — and it felt better to play with his worm after the skin had come completely loose. It didn't pull on the tip any more, and the feeling of the shroud of flesh slipping over him was exciting, adding to the friction, increasing the warm pulses the strokes gave him.

Jek saw him staring as his hand continued in its slow motions, moving over the length of flesh. "You like how it looks?"

"No," Nik said promptly. "I'm not a bender."

"Didn't mean you were."

"Oh."

"Just that, you know, like in the pictures it looks good when you see a mel's worm in a fem. And with hands, it's sort of the same, you know?"

"Uh," Nik said, glancing up at Jek's eyes. "Yeh."

"You look real good," Jek said.

Nik shuddered and felt himself get even harder. "Yeh. You too." He couldn't take his eyes away from Jek's worm, from his hand sliding easily over it, and brought his own hand to himself, letting Jek see while he began to do the same.

*Bender. Bender bender bender.*

"I bet Renetta would love to see it someday."

"You think?"

"Yeh. I bet if you two keep hanging out, you know, doing things together, you might get pretty far with her."

"Huh." That would be *very* spec. He went fully firm at even the thought of it and nearly finished right then, but slowed down and just played with his sack.

Jek switched off the 3cast and turned to him, pushing him back on the bed, and they lay side by side and played. His silhouette was lean and Nik could see how he was standing out from where his legs joined. He thought of Jek and a fem, some fem, any fem, the two of them Doing It right there in front of him, and then maybe the fem get-

ting on top of him and Doing It with him while Jek watched. His hand continued its slow motions over his body.

Jek stirred and turned on his side, facing Nik. This was new; he had always lay on his back before when they played. Nik turned toward his friend and they watched each other frankly, playing on themselves, displaying themselves in the play. Jek moved his hips closer to Nik's, then bent his knee and let his leg lie across his friend's hip, his shin hooked over and brushing his rear. The warmth of Jek's skin startled him but the hairs tickled and his muscles were firm and taut under the flesh, and he felt his worm jump in his hand at the contact. Nik saw that when they finished they'd end up getting their stuff all over each other and he didn't pull away, hoped Jek wouldn't either.

Jek's forehead pressed Nik's as they lay, playing, watching along their bared bodies, their breath misting the air between them, their chests slickening with condensation.

*Bender.*

Their knuckles brushed each other from time to time.

*Shuddup.*

They took it slow and easy, made it last a while, because it was nice, *very* nice, to be alone together in the dark, naked, two good friends and no one to hear or see or walk in on them, to be touching themselves like this, to have nothing, not even clothes, to hide them, just a few centimeters of space between them, so much of them already in contact. Just them, bodies and warmth, skin and hardness. And secrets. Secrets unspoken, of fingers, of caress, of readiness.

This time they tied for the finish.

## CONSEQUENCES

THEY FINALLY GOT SNIFFED.

Erekka had known it would be inevitable, but part of her had carried the hope that they would be impossibly lucky.

No. Their luck was proving to be maddeningly consistently fuck-oh for ten.

They didn't even hear the little probe as it locked into their bivouac from fifteen meters away, downwind, and began transmitting coordinates, and only got the first hint they were sodomized when a salvo of beamgun rays shafted through the camo roof.

Erekka raised the superfluous alarm and stood low in the midst of the tent, trying to make sure her soldiers were going to get out of the rapidly-disintegrating shelter with their asses still attached.

They triggered their camos and began slipping out into the darkness as the Academy troopers dropped around them from the assault dropship overhead, dressed in black and firing their beamguns at anything that moved that *wasn't* black.

Things suddenly seemed to go too slowly. Time stretched like chewcandy. She saw Roni take a hit right between her shoulderblades and drop, twitching, her meta-camo kicking off. The mels instantly converged on her and sliced her into small pieces with their beamguns, wanting to make sure she couldn't use an incend on them.

Another fem, maybe Balia or maybe another, was similarly scrapped as she tried to duck out a flap.

She knew most of her soldiers had made it out algood and tried to slip over to the munitions box, the one that was full of incends. *Fuck*, she thought. *Stupid cunt. Why didn't you order them all to stay fully armed while you were making them go without showers, hot food or good long comfortable crap sessions in the jakes?*

One of the Academy mels reached the box first and grinned nastily at his comrades. She heard everything, standing just a couple meters away from them, hoping the batteries in her camo would hold out long enough for them to just get the fuck out. "Let's set off some fireworks," the mel said.

“Oh yeh,” said his buddy. “That’ll clear ’em out.”

*Ah, shit.*

The first mel brought a little transceiver to his mouth. “Recovery,” he said. More ropes descended from above and the Academy mels — zero casualties on their side this time — harnessed themselves. The first mel spoke into his radio again. “Extract.”

They all lifted into the air at once, surreal marionettes of death.

As they rose the first mel dropped the incendiary he had been holding into the middle of the bivouac, or what was left of it, and it bounced beside the long-cold food stove, and Ereka had just enough time to think *get the fuck moving now* before it went off and she felt her skin catch fire on the inside.

Nikolis let himself wake slowly. He glanced at the clock in Jek’s wall and saw it was still very early. They had an hour and a half before they needed to be at his dwelling to get breakfast and pick up his school things.

He lay easy, Jek’s leg still wrapping his, and thought about the night before. He — they — had slept lightly, and it was good, because when one of them stirred in his sleep the other knew it and they kept close together all through the night. Skin, arms, bodies.

*Bender.*

*Shuddup.*

Yeh, he’d felt guilty afterward, for watching Jek, for letting Jek watch him, for the way he felt about it all. But while it was happening — *mel*. And when they had finished, their melstuf had got all over the place, most — almost all — of it landing on their matched chests and bellies, startling and thick and warm, and they had lay still afterward, both letting it dry on them, the scent of it rich and heady in their close-shared warmth. (Nik always washed it away when he was alone, but he and Jek never did when they were together. Sometimes they had distance contests, seeing how far along their bodies they could shoot, and Jek nearly always won; it went as far as his forehead more than once, while Nik never made it much past his nipples. They just left it where it landed afterward, almost like it was a badge of achievement or something, and when they woke in the mornings there were rimes of it on their skin, a little like sugar glaze. Nik had wondered sometimes what it tasted like, but hadn’t tried it, not even his own. That was a little *too benderish* for him.)

“That was a lot this time,” Nik had said appreciatively.

“Yeh,” Jek said. “A fountain.”

“You got it all over me.”

“Oh. Uh, sorry.”

“It’s algood. It happens.” It had, fairly often actually, though not to this extent. Jek sort of shot everywhere sometimes. “Bet you hit the ceiling too.”

Jek laughed, then tilted his head back and opened his mouth.

“What’re you doing?”

“Waiting for the drops.”

Nik giggled. “That’s *disgusting!*”

Jek laughed again, and they had drifted off.

He sure as hump didn’t feel very guilty right now. His worm was ready to go again, and for once he and it were in complete agreement.

Jek stirred beside him and opened his eyes. “Hey,” he said.

“Yeh,” Nik said.

Jektres lay quietly as his heart began to thump like it had the night before, when he had almost taken a chance, hoping he was right about Nik but not sure, and not even sure that, if he *was* right, he should do ... what he was thinking of doing.

So he had let it play out in a fantasy instead: *I’ll show you what it feels like, if you want, but I have to put my mouth down there to do it.* And Nik: *Algood, yeh.* And then ... his fountain had gushed.

He felt — he didn’t know. At first, after they were done, he had been afraid, like he always was after they played in front of each other. Worried. That maybe Nik would decide it had been a really bad idea. That maybe he would leave and never want to see him again. But Nik had just lain there beside him, and Jek heard his breathing get even and deep and understood Nik had fallen asleep, and the warm feeling in his heart had swelled and flowed until it was all through him.

It was still there.

Nik began rocking his hips a little, moving his hand up and down, his eyes closed and a little smile playing at the corners of his mouth. Jek’s body throbbed, demanded, and he started moving as well, fingers shifting along his favorite skin. They kept it up until they didn’t need to any more, and then lay still again, face to face. “Mel,” Nik said, backing off a little to look him over, studying the results. “That was good.”

“That’s what you said last night.”

“That was good too.”

“You got up to my chest again.”

“Yeh. And I think you got some on my shoulder.”

“Yeh.” Jek sat up, absently wiping at the drops. “I did.”

He never made it that far when he was alone, or any other time. Only when he was with Nik.

Nik smiled at him and stretched, and — amazing — Jek felt himself react at the sight, even though he’d *just finished*. His friend’s skin was gleaming with pearly streaks — their shared marks — and he wanted to lick the stuff off his body, just lean in and run his tongue around, all over, until he was clean everywhere.

Nik pointed at him and giggled. “Your worm’s outta control, mel,” he said. “You need a leash for it or something.”

He shook himself and looked down at his half-reawakened flesh. He glistened with his own stuff where it had come out of him, thick and nearly opaque white like paint, and with Nik’s where it lay near his solar plexus, more thin, more transparent, and he gestured to it with a smirk. “We should shower before we get all crusty, get to your place so we can have some breakfast,” he said.

“Crustier,” Nik reminded him.

“Yeh,” Jek said. “Crunch crunch.”

“Crackle,” Nik said. “It’ll be better today. We both get plenten toast.”

Jek laughed and pulled him into the sani and they washed all over, covered in soap, playful and bold, their hands moving everywhere on themselves.

Nik scrubbed absently when Jek handed him the cloth. Why weren’t mels supposed to like being naked with other mels? It felt too *good* to be wrong.

*Bender.*

He openly studied Jek as he shampooed his hair, his arms up and his elbows bent, his back arched and his chest rippling with his motions, dark skirls at the dips of his pits and his nipples rich and brown, the suds creaming down his skin, some of them running along his worm and dripping off it like — like he was just *oozing* stuff because he was too full of it to keep it inside.

*Bender.*

The word still frightened him, the thought of it. But he didn’t really know what it

meant. He didn't even know what benders did together. Mels didn't have the same kinds of bodies as fems, so did they just play with their worms together, like he and Jek did?

Was he a bender already?

He wondered if he could live with that, that word, that name hung around his neck. The fear of it, the shame if he was caught, if they were caught. *Bender. Maybe I'm a bender, and maybe Jek is too.*

He washed his hair next, his own body being studied, and he let Jek look wherever he pleased. He liked being looked at. *And maybe if we both were together it'd be algood.*

They washed each other's backs last, then got out, dried and dressed, and were on their way together.

As they walked to Nik's Jek said, "Are you — algood?"

Nik looked over at him. "Yeh," he said. "Course."

"I mean about last night. And this morning."

"Oh." The question surprised him a little. "Yeh, I'm algood. It was — spec. Why wouldn't I be algood?"

"So you're not ... mad at me?"

Nik stared at him a moment. "Why would I be mad?"

"Well," Jek said, but then didn't go on. He didn't know how to say it. What he was afraid of. That Nik maybe felt like he had *made* him do it somehow each time, that if Nik had a chance to make up his mind on his own he never would have done it, any of it. After all Jek had been the one to show him the pictures that first night so many months ago, had ... touched himself first, had by his actions encouraged Nik to do the same. And Nik had only been twelve, and that was pretty young even though he was nearly thirteen and Jek had only just turned fifteen, and he worried about that also. Like maybe he was showing him things too soon, before he was really ready for it.

And worst, worst of all, Jek was worried that he had — that the way things had happened to him were now being played out somehow in his friendship with Nik. That he had some kind of sickness in his head or his heart and was passing it along. Hurting Nik in hidden, secret ways, ways that might — that might make him lose all his feelings, as Jek had done for a while until Nik and his family had brought them back to life in

him. That maybe he was ... infecting Nik, and through him, his entire family. A walking force of destruction, dressed up as a friend.

He worried that he was somehow killing Nik's innocence.

Yeh, all they ever did was look at pictures of fems and play with their worms together, but he ... wanted to do more with Nik.

He wanted to do *everything* with Nik.

And he knew exactly how to do it all.

Nik was still staring at him, expecting more from him than just a *well*. "Forget it," he said.

"You are such a worm neck," Nik said.

Jek smiled and shoved Nik a little. "You're a worm face."

"Yeh, well, you're a — a — worm herder."

"Bearded worm."

"Worm shaver."

"Worm climber..."

"Worm whacker!"

They kept trading insults as they went along, and Jek's chest loosened as he saw that Nik really was a good, that he was still his friend, and to him the early morning Arcadian air became glorious, cool and fragrant and clean, and his flesh was still tingling with how they had lain side-by-side before, almost like he could still feel Nik's bare skin pressed against his own, and he allowed himself to feel happy to be alive as he walked beside his greatest friend in the great beautiful world and they called each other every degrading name they could imagine.

"Designer of custom lip harnesses for worms."

"Sculptor of worm statues."

"Worm student."

"Worm expert!"

Yeh. Some days, life, even his, could be pretty humpin spec.

Nikolis walked Renetta home again, Jek as before keeping a few meters back while they talked. Today wasn't such a disaster. On the way to school Jek had given him some suggestions for things to discuss with her, such as finding out what casts or books she liked, or giving her specific compliments about her togs, instead of trying to

invent things to say to her. It was easiest, he'd told him, to ask her questions about herself and let her do the talking, because then he would seem interested in what she thought about different things, which would make her more interested in him without him having to come up with new topics every moment. That way he could relax a little and feel less brain-dead.

Nik was dubious at first, but he tried it, because anything would be better than yesterday's shipwreck had been. And it worked beautifully.

So he learned she loved kickball as much as he did and knew all the major teams throughout, liked to read adventure stories about early Arcadian settlers (like *The Fire of Arcadia*), and that she beamed and blushed in a really spec way when he told her he liked her tunic and clouts. They were a light tan color that he said went with her eyes, made them more shiny and pretty-looking like the trees after a good rain. (He didn't know *where* that one came from; it was a gift from nowhere that earned him a huge smile as a reward.) And his hands weren't shaking as much this time, and his heart wasn't jumping — it was still beating fast, yeh, but not like it wanted to leap right out his throat — and his brain hadn't felt *completely* frozen, and after a while he even felt himself relax, just as Jek had said he would, and realized they were having a genuine conversation.

And again, at the branch off to her lane, she kissed him, and this time the kiss lasted more than just a second and they stood there with their lips touching and then she gave him a little hug and he stole another quick kiss (he almost didn't do that, but he felt a little emboldened by his successful compliment), and she smiled and said she'd see him tomorrow, and he said yeh, and Jek gave him a good bump on the arm after she was gone.

"Now you know, mel," he said.

"Know what?"

"How to talk to fems."

"But I didn't really say much..."

"Yeh," Jek chuckled. "That's it. That's the trick, all there is to it. Ask them the questions, let them do the talking. They love it. Renetta probably thinks you're the most spec mel she's ever met now."

"Oh." He walked along a bit. "Thanks, Jek."

"No prob."

At their favorite pond he floated on his back a while and looked Jek over thoughtfully. In the morning they'd stopped at his homestead for breakfast and so Nik could get some clean togs to wear to school. The breakfast had been good, but Jek was ... different. Uneasy at first, almost, and then he had relaxed, but still he was different. It was like his feelings were closer to showing in him, like his eyes were — softer, or more open, or ... something. He wasn't sure what. But in the afternoon, when Nik was waiting for Renetta by the school's main portal, Jek had become quiet again.

He thought of how he had worried before about his other friends starting to like fems, how he hadn't wanted to be left behind or left out. Maybe Jek was starting to worry about the same things.

Nik swam to the bank and climbed out of the water, sitting down next to Jek, whose eyes were closed as he lay naked, letting himself dry, chewing some leaves from a nearby shrub. They had a tangy flavor that both mels liked. Nik stared at him for a while and Jek must have felt it. "Yeh?" he said.

"Jek — uh, you algood?"

His friend's eyes opened as he looked over at him a moment, then closed again. "Course," he said.

"I mean about Renetta and me."

Jek smiled. "Why wouldn't I be algood about that?"

"Well, because we — I mean, you and I, we're friends, and..."

Jek shrugged. "Yeh," he said, "but it's different with mels and fems."

"So you don't get, I mean, when she kissed me before, you —"

Jek looked at him again. "Jealous. I think that's the word you're thinking of."

"Is it?"

"Yeh. Like how would you feel if you knew Renetta was kissing some other nip?"

Nik reddened. "Is she?"

"No, mel, I don't think so. She likes *you*. But look how mad you just got, thinking about it. That's jealous."

Nik settled down. "Oh."

"And no, I don't feel that way when you kiss her."

"Why?"

"Do you want me to?"

"I — I don't want you to feel bad," Nik said.

“I don’t.”

“Well, why?”

Jek drew a breath and stretched, then blinked at him. “I don’t really know, Nik. Uh. Well, what if you knew I was kissing a fem? Would that make you mad?”

Nik thought about it. “No,” he said slowly. And then he thought he got it. “Oh.”

“Yeh,” Jek said. “That’s how it is with me. About you, I mean. We’re friends, but not like you and Renetta. She’s a fem. And mels and fems do different things when they’re together, you know, hold hands and kiss, but mels and mels don’t do that because they’re, you know, mels. Friends.”

“Yeh, I see.”

“Unless they’re benders,” Jek added.

Nik slugged him and they both laughed. He settled back on the bank, relaxing, his hands behind his head, and let the silence stretch between them. It was good. They didn’t have to always talk. “Do you think she’s pretty?”

“Yeh,” Jek said.

“Me too.” Then he swallowed. “Do you think I’m...”

“What? Pretty?” Jek smirked.

“No, fuh. Course not. But, you know...”

Jek slugged him. “Yeh,” he said. “You got a nice face. And a good body. Just don’t let it go to your head, mel.”

“Lick my worm.”

“You’d like it,” Jek said.

“No,” Nik said after a pause.

*Uh. Oh. Something, fast.* “Oo, Niko-wiko gonna put on the make-up? Make him wittwe self all pwetty for him femmy fwiend?”

Nik boxed him. “Suck worm chowder,” he said, but he was laughing, and it sounded a little relieved.

Jek sat up beside him and pushed him back, then started tickling at him. “Oo, wittwe Niky not wike it wifout hims make-up? Make hims feel aww naked?” Nik squirmed as Jek straddled him and caught his wrists, pushing them to the soil alongside Nik’s head, and they both froze, Jek above and Nik below, their eyes caught and their smiles fading and their chests moving as they breathed, and there was another silence between them and it grew, and Jek leaned in just a little bit and Nik’s heart almost

stopped dead and then began *driving* against his ribs, shooting blood through his ears so fast it was all he could hear for a few breathless seconds.

“Niko! Jektres! Supper!”

They jumped at the sound of May’s distant voice. The moment cracked and Jek slugged Nik again. They laughed but there was that fluttery feel to it like there had been yesterday, when they had been in Nik’s room and Jek had told him he had a good body and it seemed like they were about to say something to each other that was wrong to say aloud but that was so right in Nik’s heart, and they dressed quickly, both ignoring the unexpected solidity of their bodies, and headed to the dwelcap to join the family about the table and eat and talk about the day and laugh and be happy with each other.

“Teeny worm.”

Jek shoved him. “My worm’s so big...”

“Yeh?”

“You’re walking on it.”

“Yeh, well, my worm’s so big it eclipses the suns.”

“My worm’s so big they’ve charted it in other galaxies.”

“My worm’s so big when it gets hard it turns into a black hole.”

“My worm’s so big it’s measured in parsecs.”

“Yeh, in the microdimensions maybe.”

Jek laughed. “Good one.”

“I know.”

“But my worm’s still bigger.”

Nik slugged him.

Nik saw the lights at Jek’s place while they were still fairly far away from it and felt his breast sink in disappointment. Jek’s ma was there and that meant he wouldn’t be staying over. They stopped inside the portal and Jek’s ma nodded at Nik. “Good evening,” he said to her, ignoring Jek’s derisive snort.

She seemed almost to smile a little. “Good evening, Mister Tekkru,” she said. “Will you be staying this evening at our fine establishment?”

“Uh, I probably shouldn’t.” He thought of something fast. “I have a little more homework to do.”

Jek was studying him closely and Nik couldn’t read his expression.

“And are you mels doing well in school?” she said.

Nik shrugged. “Yeh, I guess. Jek’s doing algood.”

She scratched the back of her head. “It’s too bad I have to get reports on my son’s progress from someone other than him,” she said, and her tone had turned just a little brittle.

“Uh, wanna play some 3cast?” Jek said.

“Sure, yeh,” Nik said, and they moved toward the bedroom.

“Jektres,” his ma said, “I’d like to speak with you.”

“Uh, algood, ma.” He nodded Nik off.

Nikolis closed the portal as he heard murmurs from them, sometimes rising to hisses that indicated a heat of some kind, and for want of anything better to do tripped Jek’s console. His crystal of pictures was still in there and Nik flicked through them distractedly, all those naked fems alone or Doing It with mels, trying and not trying to hear what was going on between Jek and his ma.

*... snotnose ... like school ... think you’re too good to live here ... strem ... worm-sucking bender ... whore ...*

The sounds snapped off around him when he realized what he was seeing before him.

It was mels, naked mels.

*Just naked mels.*

With other mels.

*Oh hump, oh my humping fuck.*

He flicked around, his chest cold, his fingers chilled, shaking.

Mels kissing each other. And not just on the lips, either. And touching. And —

*oh hump oh hump*

— melstuf, and licking, and a worm in —

*hump hump hump*

— a mel’s mouth.

*Oh hump, oh my hump, what the hump? Why does Jek have these pictures? Oh hump oh hump oh fuck oh hump —*

The portal to the room opened and Nik nearly screamed as he killed the 3cast, slapping its panel hard.

Jek smirked at him as he shut the portal, but he looked like he only half meant it.

“Thought I was her?”

“Uh, yeh.”

“She doesn’t care. She knows I have the pictures.”

“Oh.”

“But maybe it’d be better if she didn’t know you knew about them.”

“Yeh. Probably.” He felt like a tunnel had wrapped around him, like a distant rush of wind was playing at his ears. “Uh, you algood?”

Jek shrugged. “Usual stuff.”

“Oh.”

His friend sat next to him on the bed and Nik fought a sudden urge to lean away. Jek was still distracted and flicked the 3cast back on, stared at it a moment and blinked, slowly, and then shut it off again.

*Some silences between friends, Nik thought, are not good.*

He could hear the click of Jek’s throat as he swallowed. “Nik.”

“Yeh.”

“I ... didn’t know those were there.”

“Uh?”

Jek was talking fast. “I get these picture collections, you know, just grab a bunch of them at a time, and I don’t always know what’s in them, and later I go through and sort them and erase the ones I don’t want, you know, like those.”

“Oh.” *But they looked pretty humping sorted to me.*

“You believe me, don’t you?” It sounded like more of a plea than a question.

“Uh. Yeh.”

“I mean, I don’t always sort everything, and sometimes stuff gets left.”

*Stuff gets left. And then ... magically sorts itself?* “Well, yeh, I guess that makes sense. I mean why would you have ... those pictures?”

“Yeh,” Jek said. “I mean, mels and mels ... sick.”

“Yeh.” *But two or three times the number of pictures of fems?*

*But isn’t this what I knew anyway?*

*Isn’t this sort of why I like Jek?*

More of that not at all good silence reeled itself out.

“So I guess I should erase them.”

“Yeh.”

Jek did not turn the machine back on, did not begin erasing anything.

“I ... gotta go to the sani,” Nik said. He didn’t need to, but he went anyway, and spent several moments in there trying to untatter his thoughts. He splashed a little cool water on his face and studied himself in the mirror. In Jek’s mirror. In Jek’s sani. Where he and Jek had been naked together just that morning. And many times before.

He drew a shaky breath, then another, and with the third he wasn’t trembling so badly. *Well*, Nik thought as he turned the latch, *at least I know what benders do together now*.

When he emerged Jek wasn’t in his room, so he wandered into the family space. Jek’s ma gestured with her head to the dwelcap portal, and Nik went outside to find his friend staring up at the sky, his hands in his pockets. He walked quietly up beside him.

“Well,” Jek said, “I guess you better head home.”

“Uh, yeh,” Nik said. “You ... wanna come too?”

Jek looked at him and for a moment it seemed like he didn’t even recognize Nik, he was so surprised. “You want me to?”

Nik shrugged and toed the soil. “Well yeh.”

Jek looked almost like he wanted to hug him, seemed to not be able to find any words for a moment. *Mel.* It was low, quiet, like a sigh of relief. They went back in. “Ma, can I go to Nik’s?”

“We’re having guests tonight, sweetie,” she said, still reclining on the sofa, “but your little friend can stay here instead if he wants to, with us.”

Jek blanched, actually turned white as the blood drained from his face, and looked like he had that day buying togs with Nik and May, like he wanted to toss his vics all over the floor and run away. “Don’t think he can.” He swallowed hard. “You got homework, right?” he said to Nik, his eyes pleading. *Yes. Yes you do. You have homework.*

“Uh ... yeh.”

His face relaxed a little, just around the eyes, but everything else stayed tight. “So no, he can’t stay, ma.”

She scratched at the back of her head. “Oh, that’s too bad. I’m sure the guests would love to meet him sometime.”

“Uh, thanks anyway,” Nik said, still looking at Jek.

“Any time, sweetie.”

Jek walked him back outside, *led* him outside, his hand around Nik's biceps. "I gotta stay. And you gotta go."

"Jek," Nik said softly, "will you please tell me —"

"No," Jek said, very sharply, squeezing hard, it hurt, and then he softened a little and his hand dropped. "Sorry, mel. But don't ask, algood? You don't want to know."

"Maybe I don't," Nik said. Images flashed in his head, images from Jek's 3cast. Images Jek claimed he didn't know were there, but that had been sorted in exactly the same kind of way he sorted his other pictures. "But I — well, sometimes I get worried. About you."

"I can take care of myself."

The near hostility stung a little. "No poop, nip," Nik said. "I'm not a humping tard or anything."

Jek relented again. "I just don't wanna talk about it."

"Does she ... hit you? When you have guests?" He had heard that some folks, when company was over, didn't put up with anything from their nips, that they were a lot quicker to discipline them if they got too rowdy.

Jek shook his head and Nik saw his mouth working again, like he was chewing his lips. There was a distant anger in Jek's eyes that scared him a little. He'd never seen that look on his friend's face before. It didn't look like Jek at all, all of a sudden. "Some things are worse then being hit," he said softly.

Nik stared. Again images flashed in his eyes. Mels with mels. "Like what?"

Jek blinked rapidly and shook his head. "Just — never mind. Forget about it."

*No. Fuck and shit, Jek, tell me. I'm your friend. Tell me.*

*Those pictures, Jek. Why do you have those pictures?*

*Jek, it's algood, the pictures don't matter. We're still friends.*

Guests. Can't stay. Pictures.

What about those pictures? *What was it about those pictures?*

A horrifying thing loomed in him, a thought huge and awful, something maybe big enough to be eating Jek alive, and he pushed it aside before he could see it, before it could form in his mind, more terrified in that moment than he had ever been in his life. *If I see that, if I think it, I might ... go mad.*

He summoned his voice from somewhere. "Uh, well, well, will you come to school tomorrow?"

Jek shrugged. "I might have to stay around here a couple days," he said.

*No. Come with me, now.* "Jek — you've gotta keep on top of it. The more you go the faster you learn."

*Oh, what's the humping point,* Jek almost said, but he saw Nik's eyes and couldn't. "Yeh," he said. "Well, I'll try. We'll see."

*Oh please stop thinking.* "School matters. Your ma's guests should know that."

Jek laughed, and it was horrible. It was so cold, so lonesome. Like —

— a few halfyears earlier, a puffkitten had fallen into one of Day's old wells, one he'd forgotten to seal. It had cried and cried from twenty meters down, cried for two days while its mother walked around the edge of the well and called down to it, and it was terrible because he could hear that they wanted to be together but they couldn't and there was nothing anyone could do to help, and then the puffkitten had fallen silent, had died, all alone in the darkness, and the mother had left and never came back, and Nik had been so upset by it that he couldn't go outside for a long time and still kept away from wells wherever he found them —

— and Jek's laugh had that same kind of hopeless, lost sound to it. Like he was at the bottom of a well and couldn't get out and he was dying there, cold and frightened and doomed and alone, alone, where Nik could hear him but not reach him.

"Yeh," he said. "They should know that, huh?"

Nikolis shivered. "Jek..."

His friend gave him a little shove. Not hard, just a message. "Get home, mel," he said. He looked everywhere but at Nik's eyes. "Now. Go. I'll be algood." And he turned and went back inside and shut the portal.

Nik woke with a start from uneasy dreams about drowned mels and hanged mels and distant laughter in large empty places and looked around himself, needing a moment to get his bearings. He was surrounded by trees, and he remembered.

He hadn't actually left. He was just a few meters away from the clearing around Jek's dwelcap. He had decided to try to discover what was happening with his friend, what he thought was so bad that he couldn't even tell Nik, the one person on Arcadia he knew he could trust with anything. He had hidden himself here amid the trees and then, it seemed, dozed off.

Now there was a vehicle near the dwelcap's portal, and Nik didn't have to see the

insignia on its side to know by its silhouette that it was a small Academy troop ground transport, a general purpose machine that seated four.

What the hump? Jek's ma knew Academy troopers? That would be pretty spec, right?

He crept forward a little and saw movement in a window and froze, then side-stepped slowly around so the window would be in better view. It was Jek's ma's bedroom window. It was open to let in cool night air and she hadn't closed the dwelcap's shutters. Two Academy troopers stood just outside it, silhouetted, looking in and nudging each other from time to time, sometimes laughing a little. That must have been what he had heard in his dreams, and he shivered. The laughs sounded ... greasy, somehow. Like how his butt felt if he didn't clean it for a day. Sweaty, smelly, dirty.

Nik couldn't see what they were looking in at from the ground so he climbed up a tree a little, quietly as he could. The leaves rustled but the troopers were paying too much attention to the window to notice.

At a higher angle he could make out the bed, and Jek's ma was on it, and she was naked, and there was a man in the room with her and he was naked too, but his togs were scattered all around, black. He was looking at her, playing with his worm, and he knew they were getting ready to Do It.

Nik stared, unable to believe it. Jek's ma. And a mel. An Academy mel. He tried to be as silent as he could, even slowing his breath, watching them. This wasn't like in the pictures. It — it was real. And it made all his guts turn tight. "Fifty," the mel said.

"Oh," she said. She sounded a little disappointed. "But there's so much for you to play with." And one of her hands moved over her globes, and the other moved down to the place where she had hair. "You can play all night, you and your friends."

She knew. She knew she was being watched by the troopers outside.

"And strem," the trooper said. And he sounded like he might have if he was speaking to a vending AI, his voice flat, no feeling in it. "Two hundred micrograms. Strem and fifty, but I'll make it two fifty and a hundred. If."

Her hands paused. "If what?"

"If you bring in the nip." He tilted his head to the portal and Nik knew he meant Jek.

He didn't want to know that.

He wanted to know anything but that.

Jek's ma squirmed a little on the bed. "If I..."

"Yeh. I know you do. I've heard. Strem and gelt if you bring in the nip." And his voice was still flat, still without feeling.

He didn't care. Nik could tell. He did not care at all.

She nodded distantly. "Jeki, sweetie, come in here."

Jektres entered the room, his head low. He was naked too. "Yeh, ma?"

"Come here and help mama earn, sweetie," she said.

He nodded and moved onto the bed, then knelt before the Academy trooper.

And he did something.

With his mouth.

And his head was bent down and Nik thought of the word *bender*.

And the Academy troopers outside watched it happen and nudged each other some more.

Nik felt everything in him turn to nothing. They weren't supposed to do things like this. They were supposed to stop things like this from happening.

The trooper sighed and leaned his head back, his eyes closed.

Jek's eyes were closed too.

Nik wished his would.

And he wished he didn't have to hear the sounds.

The sucking sounds.

The trooper pulled Jek's head away. "I'll give you a thousand mikes and make it three hundred," he said to Jek's ma. He was breathing hard.

"A thousand?" She sounded hungry.

"Yeh. You know what to do." He pushed Jek toward her.

She nodded, reaching to him, and then Nik couldn't watch any more, couldn't watch as Jek climbed on top of her, nude, while the Academy troopers outside looked on as the one inside moved to another position, behind Jek, grabbing his rear with both hands and opening it, and he fell out of the tree and jumped up and ran, he ran a long time, he ran into the forest, he ran as the branches slapped his face and he didn't feel them, and came to himself as he retched in a pool, splattered with mud and sobbing, his reflection shattered by ripples of his own bile, and felt the rich horror take him as he finally understood, understood everything, and wished dismally that he *would* go mad, that he could still be just a nip, too young and stupid to understand anything.

But it was too late for that. Too late for him. And for Jektres.  
It had always been too late for Jektres.

## SURVIVING

THE SPARKS OF PAIN STAYED WITH HER, moving over her in sheets that dragged her to a reddish, hazy consciousness. Her instincts kept her from groaning. She didn't want to give away her position if the troopers were still around. It would be better to just lie here and die than be captured by them.

She silently cast her senses into the world around her. There was a slight rustling of the ground cover, but she wasn't going to open her eyes just yet. And there wasn't a high hum in her ears, which meant her metacamo's batteries had died.

Like she should have.

The incend should have killed her, but it hadn't. She wondered why and then the image of the cookstove surfaced in her mind and she thought she understood. It had deflected part of the incend's scatter, enough to keep her from being fried.

"Shit," she heard a voice say. It was a fem's voice. "I think it's the captain. Get the lieutenant."

There was some more rustling.

"Erekka?"

She opened her eyes and they were blurry but she could make out Alissa's features nonetheless.

"She's alive," Alissa said. "Get some skingel over here now."

"You gotta be kidding," the other fem said. "Look at her —"

"I gave you an order, soldier, and you'll follow it or I'll fucking well take your commission from you right now."

"Yes, Lieutenant," the fem said, and scuttled away.

Erekka smiled, even though it hurt. Alissa had the knack for command, it seemed. Good. The way she was feeling right now, she might need to be using it all the time pretty fucking soon.

"You hang in there, you crazy bitch," Alissa said. "You cash in on me now and I fucking guarantee I'll never speak to you again."

Erekka mumbled something.

“What?” Alissa leaned closer, bringing her ear to Erekka’s lips.

“I said what a dumbass old fucking joke. Get some new writers.”

Alissa leaned back and smiled with relief as Erekka slipped off into the dark again, away from her dead soldiers, away from the pain.

“Hey, Nik,” Renetta said at the school portal.

He looked at her from a thousand kilometers away.

“Where’s Jek?”

*Where’s Jek. Yeh.* He had a pretty humping good idea where Jek was. A vision he did not want floated across his mind, an image of Jek on his knees in front of a trooper. *He’s off bending.* He shook his head.

“Is he algood? Is he sick?”

He looked at her again, from that big distance, and saw that she was worried, and saw that it was because he had not said anything to her, and he nodded. “Uh. Yeh. He’s sick.”

“Oh.” Renetta looked worried. “Is it serious?”

“Yeh,” Nik said, moving past her absently, “it’s real fucking serious. Most fucking serious fucking shit in the fucking world.”

Renetta stared after him as he walked up the corridor, shocked past speech, unsure she had even heard him correctly. She had never heard Nik talk like that before.

They walked along the lane silently. Every step Nik felt the absence of Jek. Capering, jibing, playing, mocking. There he wasn’t. Renetta continued studying him but after a few attempts to speak with him let him keep to his wordless thoughts, and had kissed him goodbye at her lane and walked the rest of the way to her dwelcap worrying about him, about Jek.

He had done nothing at all in school today. Just stared at the kiosk screen as the AI waited for him to show readiness to begin instruction. The kiosk might as well have been empty. Empty like Jek’s was. Empty like Nik was, on the inside, hollowed and torn. *Filled with emptiness*, he thought. Yeh, that was it.

And now he was at his dwelcap again, at his safe dwelcap with his safe family and no ... guests, listlessly noodling at his food, and he noticed the table had fallen silent and

everyone was staring at him. “Huh?”

May looked into his face, her worry all over her. “I said, what’s wrong, honey? You’ve been quiet all day. Did you and Jektres have a fight?”

“No,” Nik said. Then, more quietly, “I wish that was it.”

May looked over to Day, her eyes saying a lot of things, and Day looked at Nik. He was about to say something when Nik stood, pushing his untouched food away. “I think I’m gonna mack,” he said, and ran inside.

Keolit found him in the sani, leaning over the bowl and retching. Nothing had come up because he hadn’t eaten anything since last night. Oli cupped Nik’s forehead with his palm, holding his head up for him, and Nik let himself sink into the contact. Oh, he felt so tired. Oli’s other hand rested easily on Nik’s back between his shoulder-blades and the warmth somehow penetrated and he was grateful that his brother was there for him. “You done for now, bro?” he said after a while.

Nik leaned back and stared at the wall in front of him. “Yeh,” he said.

“This is about Jek, isn’t it?”

Nik looked over at Oli, at first a little peed. He was tired of everyone asking about Jek. He was glad they cared, but what was happening was — every time he had to think of it he felt like everything inside him was being crushed flat. But he saw something in his brother’s face and remembered how he had gasped that day. “You know about it,” he said simply. “About what’s happening to him.”

Keolit hesitated, then nodded. “Yeh, I’ve got a pretty good idea.” Then his face got a sickened look. “Did his ma make you stay? Or ... do things?”

Nik shook his head. “She asked me to stay but I said I had homework. Jek told me to say I had homework.” And then he fell against Keolit, and it all flowed out of him, everything but the part about the pictures, how he had spied on Jek’s ma, how he had seen her with the Academy trooper, what the trooper had said and done and made her do and made Jek do, and how he had run away, run like a coward, leaving his best friend all alone.

When he was done and sobbing Keolit sighed, holding him. “That’s pretty much what I figured was happening,” he said. “But I really wanted to be wrong.” He leaned Nik back a little, wiped away his tears and looked him in the eyes. “I’m so sorry, bro. Sorry you had to see any of that. And sorry it ever happened to Jek even once. But don’t feel like a coward because you left; there wasn’t anything you could have done.” If he

had tried, Oli feared, things might have gone very badly indeed, and instead of a brokenhearted brother he might now have been holding a raped one.

*Would they really?*

*Yeh. Yeh, they probably would.*

Nik snuffled. “What can we do about it?”

“That’s ... a problem,” Oli said. “Since there are Academy troopers involved, things could get — complicated. The Academy has its own internal disciplinary system. But ... Nik, prostitution is forbidden. If we report it, Jek and his mo — Kaletta will be prosecuted. Punished.”

“That’s not fair,” Nik said. “It’s not Jek’s fault. He can’t help it.”

“I know, bro, I know,” Oli said, pulling Nik’s quivering body against his good strong chest again and wishing someone would do the same for him. “But that’s how the law is.”

“We gotta help him, Oli, we gotta.” Nik’s voice went very high with his emotions, nearly a squeak as his throat constricted in the hot sorrow that burned deep in his core. “He’s my very best friend and we gotta help. We can’t just leave him —” *down in the well*, he almost said, and that broke open in him and more tears rolled.

Keolit smoothed his hair. “Yeh, we do, Nik, you’re right.” Because he knew that if they tried to report this, there would be an investigation but nothing might come of it, and even if anything did it would take weeks, maybe months, and in even the *best* possible — and least likely — outcome Jektres would be humiliated, and Kaletta — she might just be crazy enough to decide Jek was no longer worth the effort. And though it didn’t happen often, nips did occasionally get killed in farming accidents. Would she?

*Yeh. Yeh, she probably would.*

“Tonight,” Nik said. “Right now.”

Oli looked into his face again. Nik meant it. If he didn’t go along, his brother would go out on his own, he knew. He couldn’t let him do that. “Yeh,” he said. “Yeh, al-good, now. Wash your face.” He helped his brother to his feet and looked on while Nik scrubbed, the cool water taking away the salt and heat in his cheeks, and felt like weeping himself. Nikolis was so young. So young to have to face something like this. And he was so open, so pure and loving with Jektres, so accepting of him, so natural, never judging him.

He had never really been hurt before, and it broke Keolit’s heart that his first true

experience with pain had to be something so huge as this. So monumentally fucked up.

*What some people do, he thought to himself. When I get in the Academy I'll make it my personal mission to bring an end to strem trade here forever. No more lives wrecked because of it. No more tears from young mels watching their friends die over and over again every second they're alive.*

Nik blotted his face dry and looked up at him. "You gonna tell May and Day?"

"About..."

"About what she's making him do."

Oli tilted his head and stared at Nik a while. "I ... I think they should know."

Nik's face turned white.

"But I won't tell them. It'll be — you and Jek will have to decide on that yourselves. I think they should know, but Jek will need ... time, and help. And he'll need you, and you might need me, you both might, and ... and I want you to know that no matter what, I am always your brother, and I love you and I'll stick by you, and that goes for Jek as well."

Nik wrapped his arms around Oli and held on for a few moments. "Thanks, bro. You're — spec, the best. Ever."

"Yeh," Oli said, smiling faintly and hugging him back. "I know."

Nik chuckled but it was more desperate than anything else, and his arms tightened around him. "I love you, Oli."

"I know, Nik. I love you too." He stood Nik back and studied him seriously for a moment. His little brother, so small next to him, and so willing, so willing, to carry such a great thing. He was almost in awe of Nikolis at that moment. He had a courage in him almost too large for Keolit to really understand, a courage born of raw, white-hot love, and he wondered if any of his own friends would have had that kind of strength for him if he had ever needed it, or if he would for them. He hoped he would never have to find out. "Now let's go get Jek."

As they walked up the lane they discussed how they would actually make it happen. They had to have a strategy and eventually settled on Oli simply being direct with Kaletta while Nik helped Jek pack his things, and then they'd leave.

"What'll I tell Jek?" Nik said. "If he knew I saw..." The pictures had been bad enough. This would destroy him.

*Sometimes I put a rope around my neck, just to see what it feels like.*

Oh Jek. Oh Jek.

“Yeh,” Oli said. “Uh, just tell him that...” Inspiration struck him. “Tell him that May told you to go get him no matter what.” Jek was still just young enough, he suspected, hoped, for the voice of adult authority to work.

Nik nodded. “Yeh,” he said. “Algood.”

They walked a little more. “Hey, Oli?”

“Yeh, bro?”

“What if — what if there’s troopers there?”

Keolit strode a few more steps, then sighed. “If there are, we’ll deal with it.”

“But ... how?”

“However we have to, bro.”

“Oh.” He wasn’t sure what that meant, and it didn’t help him feel less afraid.

Oli put his arm across Nik’s shoulders and Nik put his arm around Oli’s waist and they walked the rest of the way like that in silence, the younger mel drawing strength from his big brother’s certain presence.

Kaletta looked Oli over with frank appraisal when she answered his rap at her portal. “Well,” she said. “A mel. And a fine one too.” She didn’t see Nik standing behind him until it was too late, until she had opened the portal and let them both inside. She looked back and forth between them. “What’s this all about, nips?” she said, and smiled, and the smile was, to Nik, almost slimy. Cold and rotted and without any feeling, like how a dead person would smile. Her fingers moved to the back of her head and scritchd a moment.

She studied Nik, almost like she was contemplating a particularly juicy piece of fried polt, like she was wondering how he would taste and was looking forward to finding out. She had always had some suspicions about this nip, about what he and her foster son got up to whenever they were *playing* alone together (she knew what the stiffened stains on the sheets meant when she remembered to launder them), and it looked like maybe she had been right. Like maybe he was into mels. Bigger, *older* mels.

She glanced from him to his companion. Not bad; the brat had some taste. This mel was large, broad and solid, and had a very handsome face and a *fine* body. And from the way his clouts rode him, his muscles weren’t the only thing about him that was

plus-sized. As she stepped aside she caught his profile.

Very nice ass.

And hey, the brat had a good chest too. And a tight little butt. And smooth skin and the *cutest* freckles, and he was starting to get bigger up front too. And those pretty, bright green eyes.

She licked her lips. It would be a *lot* of fun to see these two with each other, and maybe even to have Jektres along for the ride, hell, she'd throw him in for free, as a bonus, you could say. She had no qualms at all about making it with a mel whose voice hadn't even changed, and she bet his big buddy here was the same. "So," she said, starting to undo her tunic, "Here to show your little *friend* how it's done?"

Keolit's face went hard and he nodded to Nik. The nip moved quickly down the short hall to Jek's room as Oli drew Kaletta aside and began speaking to her, his voice very low, his tone flat and dangerous and angry.

Nik popped through the portal and closed it behind himself as Jek sat up with a gasp. He had been lying naked on his bed, staring at the ceiling, because he had heard the knock at the portal and his ma's voice and he knew what would be happening next, and he was trying to choose between going in there like he always did or this time getting a knife from the dinitchen and stabbing his ma and the mel with her, or maybe just slitting his wrists and letting it all end. The last, the very last thing he expected or *wanted* to see was Nik, here, now. "No. *No!* What are you *doing* here? You can't *be* here!"

"May sent me," Nik said. "She says she wants you to come over right now."

"Nik — ma's having guests. *You can't be here!*" He was horrified. Terrified. If one of the guests arrived while Nik was here, he was sure he'd have to — to join in. That his ma would make him, like she had made Jek do since he had been eight halfyears old, telling him that if he didn't she'd put him in Retraining. She could threaten Nik the same way. She *would*. He was sure of it. She had already used Nik against Jektres, telling him that if he didn't go along with what she wanted, she'd say he and Nik were fucking each other, that they were a couple of perverted little wormsucking bender mels, and then Nik would be in the shit. And he couldn't let that happen.

Oh, why had he let himself make friends with Nik? She had leverage. And if she had a chance, she'd fuck Nik up as bad as he was, and Nik did not deserve that.

Why hadn't he hanged himself when he had the chance? Just got it over with?

But no, no, that day — that day he'd gone to the strange pond, he had been ready, he was going to, even had the tree picked out; but there was that new mel, and they had looked at each other and he had needed to play innocent and he had swum and he had learned the mel's name and he hadn't had a chance to die that day and now, now — that same mel was here and he was in more danger than he could possibly imagine.

*Nik — Nik, just go now, go away, I'll do it tonight, I promise, I'll do it and then it will all be over and you can forget about me, and you won't be in danger, oh Nik, I'm so sorry, sorry I ever talked to you that day, Nik, run, please run, please run now before anything happens to you. Go, Nik, go. Run. Run away now.*

"Oli's here," Nik said. "He's talking to your ma."

Jek's thoughts skidded, halted. "Talking?"

"Yeh."

Nikolis couldn't mean that his brother and his ma were — no. He wouldn't think that. Not that. Keolit wasn't like that. He was sure. He knew how — how *they* were. He could tell. They had a feel about them, dangerous and strange, and when they looked at him he could tell what they were thinking, that they wanted him to do things to them, things he maybe wouldn't have minded doing if he had been *asked*, but when he was *forced*, it turned into something else completely. Keolit wasn't like that at all. Whenever he looked at Jek he always just looked friendly. "Uh. Where?"

*What the hump does it matter where?* "In the family room." Nik unlimbered his backpack, the pack Renetta had given him (*In case you find anything interesting*, she had said, and oh yeh, he had algood, more *interesting* than anyone could ever have guessed under the bright sky on that innocent happy day, the anniversary of his birth), and began shoving Jek's togs into it. He tossed a pair of clouts over to his friend. "Put 'em on. And get your stuff."

Jek stared blankly. "My stuff?"

"Yeh. Whatever you want to bring. Whatever you can carry. I can help."

Something dawned in Jektres. That same thing that had been there a few times before, whenever he was with Nik or Nik's folks.

Hope.

"I'm —"

Nik looked at him.

"I'm not coming back here, am I?"

“No,” Nik said, continuing to put Jek’s togs into his pack. “You’re not.”

“But...”

“What?”

“The pictures. You saw.”

*Pictures! The fucking pictures! Like that matters any more!* “Jek, I don’t give a fusion-driven shit in a black hole about your pictures. You think I’d stop being your friend just cause you’re a bender? Now *pack*.”

And Nik became Niks, two and then four, through the salt flood in Jek’s eyes.

Numbly, moving slowly at first, he drew on his clouts and began gathering his things. He started moving faster as energy flowed in his arms and legs, from that rising heat in his chest, the hope that burgeoned, the gratitude he felt to Nik for accepting him, being his friend, and within what seemed like only a few heartbeats he was ready. Ready to go. To turn his back on this fucking dwelcap and never return to it as long as he lived.

Nik looked over to him where he stood, a bag over his shoulder. It wasn’t very full. He had never had much of his own, just a few 3cast crystals, some games, and some ratty old togs his ma bought for him when she remembered to, when the strem hadn’t completely fucked her head inside out.

And a stuffed toy puffcat his real ma had given him when he was just a little nip. He had kept it hidden most of the time because his ma now always made fun of it when she saw it (*sad sucky little bender fem-nip playing with his dolls*), and now it was tucked away in his bag, safe. A part of his life he cherished, and it would be leaving this room with everything else he cared about, Nik most of all.

He took a breath, wiped his eyes (*I will not let her see me cry, never, ever again*) and nodded, straightening, and Nik opened the portal and they stepped into the family room.

Kaletta was ash pale and sitting on the sofa. Keolit was standing in the middle of the floor, facing her with his arms crossed and his feet spread and his back and shoulders so wide and powerful, and Jektres saw there was no way Kaletta was going to get past, no way she was going to be able to get anywhere near him, and Jek saw how tall Oli was, how big and broad and strong, so big it seemed impossible he could be contained inside the tiny dwelcap’s space, so big his head must have been brushing the ceiling and his shoulders pushing out the walls, and to him it seemed like Oli was glowing, like he was made of stars, filled with the light of a billion shining suns, like he was some

sort of — of a god sent down from somewhere to rescue him, and he loved him then, oh he loved him so much.

Keolit turned to them. So big, so sure. “Algood, mels?” he said. His voice was deep and solid, as solid as earth, as real as a heartbeat, as certain as pure love.

Nik and Jek nodded as though they were one being.

“Out,” he directed them, and they went toward the portal.

“You’ll be sorry,” Kaletta said weakly.

“You know better,” Oli said. “You remember what we talked about.” Command. Definite, unshakable. With one sentence he made a wall that could not be bested. She shriveled.

And Jek was outside, and the air was cool on his face, and he began walking.

Away.

He began walking away.

Purple, lancing, twisting. Knots. Knots of purple, a lasso, a noose, puffcat’s cradle, and soldiers caught in the gyrations and not soldiers any more, just so much decomposing mass, life unrendered in a ghastly skein, smoke and silence, not enough time even for a scream to escape, and Orekkio, Orekkio, standing tall over all of them, dispassionate, sneering, playing as a child might with toy soldiers. Columnar legs and feet massive, wrapped in patent boots, and in those boots a distorted face mirrored, *kiss my boot resistance cunt*, and teeth not lips and the patent tears and underneath, within, clay, and over her now not Orekkio. “Hey, Cap.”

Alissa.

She shook herself or didn’t. Drugs. Yeh. To keep away the —

— and there it was, crashing inside, throbbing and willing itself free to swamp her, overwhelm her, but the pain was shored by the wall of Scintillan narcotics, and the wall did scintillate, isolate stars and thick eddies of gravity-strung currents, washing in a band overhead and two moons in it also.

Outside, then, and night, not in a tent, not in a bivouac.

Casualties? Did she ask that or think she did?

One sense said don’t worry about that now and another said we lost half the detachment, and which voice came from within and which from without? Or was it both or neither or some other choice? Voices within and without and elsewhere also, time per-

haps, history or herstory or ourstory or yet-to-be-story —

*clay clay in the boots*

— and blinking at the blue canopy tinted with haze as ever on Arcadia, Arcadia now in day, and she had slipped along time a long time with the voices tumbling and Alissa was near again and no more drugs but you need i said no more drugs soldier thats an order and a reluctant nod and withdrawal and then dark again, and the wall had collapsed and the sea was surging over her, rolling, an epic disaster of elemental agony, but things resolved in it: A cot, she upon it, a mass of fried but still living meat, skingels pulling and tugging everywhere as they flexed over her torso and face. *That'll scar*, she thought through the pain, but the thought was clear, substantial, and it came from her own mind, not some floating disembodied whatever.

She groaned and Alissa was there, but not as an apparition; she was aware of the sound of her rising from the cot next to hers, the rustle of her fatigues as she knelt alongside, the light eddy of air across what was left of her skin as she moved. “Captain?”

“How long have I been out?”

“Nearly two days.”

She nodded and wished she hadn't as skin on her throat reminded her it was still there and still damaged. Well, at least it *was* still there. “How far are we from the post?”

“Two hundred kays. We got some more goodies from our favorite abettors of terrorism.” Alissa gestured at a small hemispherical lump above her belt. “You've got one too. Sniffer countermeasures.”

The Scintillans had — she jumped as the hemisphere at Alissa's waist rustled, shifted, settled. Legs? Were those *legs*? Or was it more hallucination?

“Yeh,” Alissa nodded. “They're alive. Some kind of super-beetle. Emits molecules on just the right chemical range to throw the sniffers off. They can still smell us but they don't know they do any more.”

Erekka sensed a shifting near her own midriff and wanted to scoot away as she felt the hard legs scabbling on her for purchase. Bugs. Why bugs? Why not lizards or snakes? Bacteria? Pyramid shitting dungungules? Those she could handle. But bugs?

FUCK.

“Worst case of crabs I ever had,” she said, and Alissa chuckled appreciatively. She knew how much Erekka hated anything with chitin. “Uh. What do they ... eat?”

Alissa shrugged. “Skin flakes. Sweat.”

“Oh Buddha,” Erecca said. “Whose mother is this in rebirth?”

“Reinforcements are slated to arrive soon,” Alissa said, bustling around the infusion slug that rested on the crook of Erecca’s arm, pulsing slightly as it pumped nutrients and fluids into her. It needed a little more water and she poured it gently onto its dorsal groove, which slumped and absorbed. “Nine soldiers and hardware.”

“Good,” Erecca said, watching the IS gurgle contentedly. In a way it was worse than bugs, she thought.

Oh no fucking way it was. Slugs and bugs. Hey nonny no, the Resistance.

“And a blood medal for you,” Alissa added softly.

“Me? Fuck. All I did was stand there and watch.” *Watch soldiers get shot down and cut to pieces. Watch an incend drop and bounce and explode.* “Better to give it to the ones that cashed in.”

“They’re getting ’em too,” Alissa said.

“Oh.” Damn, the pain was bad. But concrete, tangible. She needed to be sharp. She just wished there weren’t sharp things digging into her from everywhere at once.

“We’ll make it, Captain, and we’ll come back.”

Erecca nodded. “I know. Tomorrow I want to address the soldiers” *what’s left of them* “and then we’ll work out what to do next.”

“I don’t know if you’re ready...”

“I will be, babe,” Erecca said with soft conviction. “But now, I need more sleep, and regular sleep, not that doped up shit from one of the ninety-nine hells, algood?”

Alissa nodded.

“And you sleep too, soldier. That’s an order.”

Alissa moved quietly away and Erecca borrowed more Pollucan teachings, retreating as her body worked to survive, the IS burbling, and the beetle shifted on her again but this time, she was asleep.

“Morning, honey,” May said, kissing Nik’s forehead as he went to breakfast.

“Morning, Jek hon.” She kissed him also.

“Yeh,” Nik said.

“Morning,” Jek said.

“There’s lots of good plenten toast, I know how you like it, Jek honey —” Nik and Jek traded a smirk — “and fresh polt eggs and stackcakes and citron juice. Eat up,

mels.”

Jek settled in to the spread before him, intending to do significant damage to it. Mel, it was spec. It smelled so good, hot and fresh and just made; it looked so good, the cakes tan and pocketed inside and ivory at the edges and the eggs yellow and solid and ready to be forked and the toast, the toast, fragrant and sopping with butter, crisped outside and salty-sweet inside and just the right kind of crunch, and he actually had an appetite and began shoveling the food in while everyone else looked over at him from time to time and smiled, and he smiled back at them and floated because —

Oh —

Because he was out, he was *out* and he was *free* and it had only just been last night and he still couldn't really believe it had happened, didn't know how it could have happened.

He and Nik and Oli had walked back to Nik's place the night before, no one really saying much at first. Jek's heart had been hammering, standing in his throat, and he felt like he wanted to mack and laugh at the same time. He had wanted to run, in case his ma came outside and started shouting at him about how he was a dirty little worm-sucker, that he was going to go to Retraining, or — or before one of the Academy GPs showed up on the lane, motoring along with dust rising behind its wheels, flat black and full of horror for him. Dust behind, ash inside, and dark like the death he feared and wanted.

*Run. Run, run fast.*

But Keolit had just walked along, standing so tall, his strides long and even, his chest so broad and his big, powerful arms swinging freely by his sides, and he was made silver under the stars and moons, and Jek had thought *my god*, and it wasn't abstract, and after a few minutes he had begun calling out marching cadences in his deep voice that had no fear in it, and the mels fell in step behind him and marched and sang along in counterpoint, and he wasn't afraid any more, he wasn't going to mack, and he had to keep looking down at his feet to see that they still were touching the ground, because he felt so light in his chest he wasn't sure any more.

*I'll fly*, he wanted to say to Oli and Nik. *Come here, take my hands. We'll fly, we'll be in the sky with the stars, and we can all fly home, fly forever.*

But they walked. He walked. With Keolit.

Away.

And with every step he had breathed, and the air had filled his lungs, and his heart beat and his blood pumped and his heels crunched on the lane in the sandals that Nik's ma had bought for him and he was so, he was so alive.

And they came to Nik's and Oli's place, and May was there and glad to see him. Calm, like she always was, just there, real. "Hey, Jektres," she smiled, and the smile covered him like a good thick warm blanket. "Good to see you again." She gave him a quick kiss and he ducked his head fast so no one would see his tears.

Oli pulled May away for a talk and Jek worried, but it was a distant worry because he still felt so good. May came back, looking concerned. "Jek," she said, "Keli says That Woman hit you?"

And he caught Oli's eye and saw that he had an out, that yeh, *this really was starting to happen*, and he nodded. "Uh, yeh, there was an argument." That wasn't a lie. There had been many arguments, and she had struck him many times, since his talk with Nik's ma that day. He had kept quiet because — well, what else could he do?

"Remember your promise to me?" Still calm. Somewhere inside, somewhere deep and beyond his vision, she was solid, steady, and it filled him as well. She would fight for him. She would be there. She would not let him be taken back.

"Yeh." How could one word feel so good? Oh he wanted to dance.

"We've got all his stuff," Nik said.

She nodded at her younger son. "Good. Nik, take Jek into the bedroom and help him unpack. It'll be tight but you'll manage."

And it had just been that easy. He had a new place to stay.

Jek followed his very best friend, oh his spec best friend ever, and as he passed Keolit (*my. god.*) the older mel gave his arm a quick squeeze and smiled and nodded at him, and this time Jek didn't bother trying to hide his tears, because he knew they'd all understand. They wouldn't tell him he was a whiny stupid little nip, and shuddup, and fuck what a pain in the ass he was; they wouldn't slap him or punch him or, worst of all, threaten to send him to Retraining.

He had unpacked his togs into Nik's and Oli's little wardrobe. It *was* a tight fit, but they did manage, and he looked at the result in awe. His stuff, and Nik's, and Oli's, all hanging there together, like they had always been there, like he had always belonged there. And Nik helped him sort his crystals and games into the storage sockets under the 3cast, and had exclaimed over the stuffed animal, but he didn't make fun of it be-

cause he knew somehow, Jek could see it in his eyes, that it was special to him, that his real ma had given it to him, and he set it on the bed carefully and looked at it a long time and then looked at Jek and then Nik shocked them both by hugging him, really grabbing on and holding tight for a minute, and he felt the bewildered tumble of his feelings in him, but they were all such good feelings, no sharp corners to leap out and pierce him and leave him bleeding. Feelings he could trust.

Oh, he could feel and not be hurt by it.

“Welcome home,” Nikolis had said, and then had held him a little while longer as Jek wept some more against Nik’s shoulder, as they clung to each other and wept together.

*Home. Welcome home.*

And they had a spec dinner, and Day was algood with Jek being there just like May was, and they went to bed together like they had been doing it all their lives, and Jek had fallen asleep right next to Nik, who had hugged him, actually hugged him again as he got into bed, with Oli right there, but Keolit didn’t make any mean comments at them, and then they lay three across and Jek’s head was still spinning, and then he felt Nik’s hand on his own under the covers and he grabbed on.

“You’re my brother now,” Nik had said then, and Jek’s eyes were streaming, and Nik saw, and he brushed his fingers against his cheek and took the tears away, and that made more flow.

*Oh. Oh Nik. Oh Nik. Oh I love you so much.*

And they fell asleep like that, holding hands, and it was the best night of his life.

And now he was having the best breakfast of his life on the best morning of his life and the best friend he had ever had was right next to him still, and Keolit was there across from him, still big, still so strong and brave, and they all three played the nudge game, and Day and May and Oli talked about what they’d be doing all day long, just like it was another normal day for all of them and he was part of it, and he could not understand how it could be so easy for him and them but oh it was good, he had a family, a real family full of people he loved, and then Jek and Nik left for school and May kissed them goodbye and gave them both their lunches, and Jek knew that at the end of the day Nik would walk Renetta home, and then they would swim a while, and maybe get more leafworms in the orchard, and have dinner again, and Nik would do his homework and then help Jek with his learning and then they’d go to bed together again and wake

up together again and have breakfast again and go to school again and it would go on and on like that, and that was why he was still floating, because he could, because he was free.

*Now, he thought. It will never be better than this. So let me die now.*

## RECOVERING

THE REINFORCEMENTS CAME after another two days and Erekkka sighed inwardly. They were soldiers, and they were trained, but fuck if they didn't look like children. They belonged in school, going on dates and getting moisties with their mel-friends, not out here in the trees with death's jaws around them.

But any childhood these fighters might have had had been taken from them long ago, she knew, by Academy troopers.

Though many fems got involved with the Resistance around fourteen or fifteen, and some even younger, few of them joined up as virgins in the strict sense of the term, their bodies having been used by troopers for sport. Few had ever known the gentler ways of love with a mel who actually cared. It was not fair, and that was one of the things the Resistance was working to change.

There were almost no mels at all in the Resistance, and the few that were found themselves treated with mistrust or even hostility. Most of them were actually benders, preferred their own gender, and signed on after losing a melfriend to Retraining or worse. (The troopers didn't always take bender mels into detention; some of them, she knew, the prettier ones, came to much more foul ends, raped and bleeding, under bootheels and fists. Fullblacks seemed to see beauty in a mel as being an aberration that could only be dealt with by abuse and murder.) But that didn't matter to the fems around them, who had been subjected to the control of worm-bearers in one way or another for most of their lives. Benders or not, they had worms, and were therefore, on some emotional level, the enemy.

And it wasn't always an unfair suspicion. Some mels seemed to be of the notion that a detachment full of fems was just waiting for a Bull Stud to put in an appearance and expected more or less endless fucking, and were quickly disabused of those ideas. Some of them were decent enough and some even found a companion from among the soldiers. But most were like the fems, hunted, haunted, eyes distant with sorrows that could not be reclaimed, would never fully heal, and weren't interested in fems in the

least as anything except friends and comrades-at-arms.

This group of reinforcements had such a mel, Pretten. Seventeen, he had watched his melfriend get hustled off by PIRD and had been incarcerated himself briefly. Pretten had refused to denounce his lover and still bore scars on his shoulders for it, where the troopers, in their search after the righteous truth, had flogged him daily.

His melfriend had been turned in by his own family. They really believed Re-training would be good for him, that they were doing him a favor, and had watched as their son was taken, weeping and shaking in terror.

Three months later the melfriend had returned, and he wasn't ... there any more. Whatever had been in his eyes, whatever spark of love or joy that might have existed, was gone, and he and Pretten were not allowed near each other any longer, and a few weeks after that Pretten had begun dogging Resistance soldiers until confronted. He'd said he wanted to join up, explained why, and was taken in and trained.

And now here he was, the only mel in a detachment of twenty, and he was not looking at any of the fems. He was studiously preparing his gear. That was about all he ever did: Oil his rifle, check his incends, look after his beetle, pack and repack padding in his bucket, check his metacamo battery charge, clean his boots, meticulously fold his uniform and fatigues. It got to be a little annoying, but Ereka thought she understood. He was making himself busy to keep away his fear of the future and his sorrow for the past.

Every — *every* — Resistance soldier was wounded long before seeing any combat.

Her address to the detachment had been brief, mostly commendation for their bravery and acknowledgment of their rescue of her, and then a quick few sentences to the new soldiers.

They were all staring at her with fear, horror and shock, but at least there was no pity. She knew she looked like hell's vomit with maggots on the side and wondered if maybe she shouldn't have kept hidden for a while. She was a living preview of what any of them might face as soon as immediately. But the sooner they got used to the sight of her, scarred and slapped around with skingels and slowly, slowly mending, the sooner everyone could get on with soldiering.

For the moment their orders were to reconnoiter Academy movements, nothing else. They were bivvied about three dozen clicks from what passed for a highway in the

rural areas of Arcadia, an old cracked route that carried produce and magbus traffic mostly. They weren't too far from that little town where Ereka had become captain all those halfyears ago, a hundred clicks off maybe, but she hadn't consciously remarked the fact. All the trees looked the same anyway, and there were trees any direction she chose to gaze, a whole invisible forest there beyond them.

The duty wasn't especially hard or dangerous, and she knew the orders were meant to give her detachment survivors a breather. That was good, but what was not good was that soldiers are creatures of action, and tend to get restless easily, so she sometimes was hard put to find new things for them to keep themselves active. She couldn't keep them busy digging jakes-pit after jakes-pit.

Maybe Pretten's example wasn't the worst after all.

Alissa and her little recon party returned after their relief showed up. Pretten was one of the soldiers sent out. He still had the green look about him, a combination of courage (*I can face anything*) and fear (*I hope to fuck I don't have to face anything*), and seemed to take some solace from the near-swagger of Balia — she had not been hit after all in the Academy raid — and the other fems that were sent out, all of them still eyeing him with a little trepidation, keeping some physical distance from him.

Ereka decided she'd try to keep him in an active detail for a while, probably with Balia and a few other fems, often enough that they, at least, would unkink around him a bit after determining he could be trusted. From there she knew he'd be more likely to find acceptance with the others. She watched as the five-soldier party left, then waited for Alissa and the others to return.

The recon was almost deadly in its boredom. So damned little traffic went along that road it was barely worth mentioning, but three Academy GPs had rolled by that morning, heading toward, and a larger transport had been sighted going the other way, to the post. Not much, really, certainly not enough to indicate anything but standard Academy troop shuttling. No tanks, no artillery. That was good.

In the afternoon the second party came back after getting its relief. A small Academy work lorry had paused for a while, patching some of the worst of the holes in the road. Ereka almost ignored that, but her ears tingled and she decided maybe it was a detail worth noting. Yeh, probably it was just routine maintenance; the road was pretty rough. But patches on a highway that hadn't seen a road crew in a while could also mean the polycrrete was being resurfaced for other than innocent reasons. She fired off a

report in code to the division HQ, just in case, and then went back to watching Pretten.

He was still at his gear, going over it a thread at a time it seemed, and Balia eventually walked over to him. "Give it a rest, mel," she said.

Pretten shrugged and set a pair tighties atop a fairly substantial pile of the same. Though he wore half as many undergarments as the fems around him, he seemed to have three times the quantity.

"We're getting up a draw match," Balia said, gesturing to where the players had begun to gather, cards spattering as they shuffled. "Try a hand or two?"

Pretten hesitated, then nodded, and there might even have been the faintest trace of a smile.

*Not bad, Erecca thought at Balia. Not bad at all.*

Her beetle shifted and she shuddered, fighting the urge to squash the damned thing. *Someone's mother, someone's mother.*

The bliss sank and he began to have some worries.

It was ... strange. Why had May said he should come over here? And sent Oli along to come get him, not just Nik?

And he felt really icy when he began to think that maybe they knew. That his secret was out and they knew all about it, all about the stuff he did, and he lay there awake and terrified, his guts churning each morning, Nik beside him and still asleep, Keolit beside Nik and also still asleep, and he felt sick for a while.

But no. How *could* they know? They still liked him. Still wanted him here. Nik still liked him. So they must not know about it.

He looked at Nik's sleeping face. They had swum together the day before like always, had played and joked and talked like always. But Nik had seemed ... detached, almost like he was studying him a little.

Like always, lately.

Was he thinking about the pictures?

Or was he just worried that his ma had been beating on him?

Or was he thinking about ... something else?

Or was he just making it all up?

Nik had been very happy. And Jek was pretty sure he was the reason, and that

thought sang through him. He was even so happy that he managed to make Renetta laugh as he walked her to her lane, joking and capering for her until she giggled, her hand over her mouth, and when they parted she kissed him many times, and Nik had been even happier then.

It made Jek feel good to see Nik like that. With Renetta. A fem, and a pretty fem, and a spec one too. Not with — not with someone like himself.

But he *had* felt a little jealous, at first, until Nik was walking with him again and it was just the two of them and Jek could see how happy Nik still was. He was glad to be with him.

And he worried again that maybe he was ... *damaging* Nik. That maybe he was — was turning him bad somehow. But Nik didn't seem like a nip who was being hurt. He seemed like a nip who was glad about everything, him most of all, maybe even more than Renetta.

Oli turned a little and yawned, then sat up and looked over at them. "Hey," he said to Jek.

"Yeh," Jek said.

"Sleep well?"

Jek smiled and nodded.

"Good. I'm gonna hit the sani," he said, and Jek smirked when Oli wasn't looking because he knew what that meant, and watched him as he walked into the little room and shut the portal and then he heard the water start.

He was tumbling inside again.

Nik stirred and rolled over, ending up lying partly on Jek, and woke. "Uh," he said, propping up on his arm. His fist rubbed his eye and he said *mmf*, and then both green jewels focused. "Hey." He flicked a lock of Jek's hair away, casually, then let his palm rest on his shoulder for a moment, and for just a few breaths they were almost, almost, holding each other.

"Hey, Nik."

"Oli doing it again?"

Jek laughed. "Yeh, I guess so."

"Mm." Nik stretched slowly and yawned, then lay back by Jek's side.

No problems. No worries. His body was right beside Jek's, skin to skin, as though none of the pictures had mattered. Nik was naked in bed beside a naked mel he knew

was a bender, and still he let the warmth of flesh be to flesh.

“Nik —”

“Yeh?”

*Why did you come to get me? Why am I here right now? Do your folks know?*

*Does Oli?*

*Do you?*

“Uh. When they gonna be putting together the kickball team?”

Nik gave him a funny look and shrugged. “In a few weeks.”

“Algood.”

“Are you gonna try out for it?”

“Think so, yeh.”

“Spec.”

They lay in silence a while and then Oli emerged, dressed and left, and they got into the sani themselves.

They hadn't *played* together since he moved in, and a part of Jek was feeling pretty ready for it. He had been through a bad few days, yeh, but he *was* fifteen after all, and he needed a little release sometimes just like any other mel. They soaped up and Jek looked at Nik's body, lean and with his skin shining where the water rolled down it, and his worm filled and he began working it, expecting Nik to do the same at any moment. But Nik wasn't looking at him. He was looking down, at his toes, like he felt bad or sad.

“What's wrong?” Jek said.

“I just —”

“You can look at me, Nik.”

“I ... no. I don't want to.”

“Why? What do you mean?” Jek's chest went cold and his fingers were shaking. His worm withdrew, retracting in his sudden fear. “Is it because of the ... pictures?”

“No ... it's ... it's not the pictures, I don't care about that. Just ... I mean...”

He had to ask. He just had to. “Nik, why did you and Oli come for me?”

He saw the guilty look in his friend's eyes then (*he knows, oh no, he knows everything*) and slumped back against the wall, his hands over his face, his knees gone weak, all his insides falling in on themselves. “Oh fuck,” he said, and slid down the slick metal until he was hunkered on the floor of the shower, his butt in the thin sheet of wa-

ter, and crossed his arms over his knees and put his face down.

Nik didn't know what to do next. In bed earlier it had just been regular, like they always were, close. But here, in the sani — when Jek had ... had looked at him all he could think of was how the Academy troopers had been, how they had stared at Jek, and it had cemented his heart, and he didn't want to be like that. He didn't want to be someone who used Jek like that, even in his imagination. He would rather have his worm fall off than ever do anything to hurt Jek, especially in that way. And now Jek was curled up on the floor of the shower before him, and he was crying, and Nik was sure it was his fault.

He knelt in front of him and reached out and touched Jek's arm. Jek looked up at him. "Hey," he said. "It's algood."

"What — what did you — how did you find out?"

Nik took a deep breath. It was time to confess. "Please don't be peed with me," he said. "That day when you said your ma was having guests again I ... I didn't really leave."

Jek blanched. "What ... did you see anything?"

"Yeh," Nik said, looking down at Jek's crossed wrists because he didn't want to look in his eyes. He felt so ashamed. "I saw — a mel with your ma, in her room." Jek's forearms, he saw, had veins on them, tracks over his muscles.

"Anything else?"

Nik hesitated and Jek knew.

"I'm sorry, Jek. I shouldn't have spied on you. And then I ran away and left you there. I feel so bad."

Jek's face seemed to fold in on itself and his mouth opened in a wide frown and he breathed in and there was a wrenching sound from him, like an animal's cry, and then he breathed out and it was another cry, keening, and then he inhaled and made the other sound again, and it went on and Nik gathered him against himself, forgetting his own remorseful tears because he knew Jek needed it, and held him while Jek's face was pressed against his shoulder and he kept on with those huge, terrible sobs, his whole body shaking every time, shuddering, and he was afraid for him. It sounded like everything in him was tearing loose, and it didn't stop. It just went on and on.

Jek collapsed. He was limp everywhere, arms and legs slipping, all his energy falling into those awful sounds, and Nik was all that kept him from rolling sideways and maybe drowning in the shower.

Nik didn't know what else to do so he went on in a moment. "I know I shouldn't have watched. And today — I mean, just now, when you ... Jek, I know your ma made you with those troopers. And ... with her. But you don't have to do anything with me. You can just be my friend, we don't have to — to play together like that."

Jek's wailing had subsided, but his chest was still hitching fiercely. "You know. You know all about it," he choked. "You know I'm a bender and that I ... did things."

"Yeh," Nik said miserably.

"And ... and you still want to be my friend?"

Nik leaned back and stared at him. How could he possibly wonder about that? "Of *course*, Jek. You're my best friend ever." Jek blinked and Nik couldn't tell any more if it was the shower or something else that rolled over his cheeks. "Of course I want to be your friend. That stuff ... it doesn't matter to me. I don't care if you're a bender or anything else."

"Oh, Nik —" Jek clutched at him. "Nik, Nik ... I was so scared. So scared that if anyone ever found out they'd hate me, and maybe that would be algood because — well — and I was scared that if you knew you'd never want to be near me again, that you'd think I was ... bad, really bad."

"No," Nik said.

"You don't think I'm ... bad?"

"No."

"You don't hate me?"

"No way, mel."

"Oh..."

"You'll always be my friend."

"Oh."

"Get up, Jek." Nik helped him back to his feet. Jek hung his head as he stood before him.

"I'm sorry I ... ever showed you any pictures," Jek said.

Nik gaped. "Why?"

"Well ... well because I don't want to hurt you."

"Hurt me?" What did that mean? "It — it was — you didn't hurt me."

Jek nodded silently, his head still down. "But then why didn't you want to play this time?"

“I said. Because I don’t want to be like ... them.”

Jek finally looked up. “You’re not,” he said. “You’re — you’re you, and you’re good. Spec. It’s good when it’s with you, Nik. Not like with ... them.”

Nik blinked, flooding with relief. “You really ... I mean, you didn’t mind it?”

“No way. Do you still ... like it?”

“Well, yeh,” Nik said, and they shared a little laugh.

There was a knock at the sani’s portal. “You two algood in there?” It was Oli. He sounded worried.

“Uh, yeh, we’re fine,” Nik called.

There was a pause. “Breakfast is ready.”

“We’ll be out in a minute, bro.”

Another pause. “Algood.”

Jektres stared at Nik. “Oli ... He knows, doesn’t he?”

Nik got the guilty look again and nodded. “I’m sorry, Jek,” he said. “I had to tell him. I couldn’t just keep it all inside, and I needed him to help me. To come and get you. I think he sort of knew before anyway. I think he figured it out, but I don’t know how. But I didn’t tell about the pictures.”

“Oh,” Jek said. “Uh, Nik, do your folks know?”

Nik shook his head. “Oli thinks you should tell them, though.”

Jek felt fear pierce him at even the thought of it. “No! I ... can’t.”

“Not right away,” Nik said. “After a while, maybe. Jek, it won’t make any difference. You’re living with us now and — and we want you here. We all do.”

Jek’s fear was replaced once more by that light warmth as his friend’s words registered. *Living with us now. We want you here.* “I dunno,” he said.

“Think about it,” Nik said.

“Yeh, algood.” Jek looked at his fingertips. They were wrinkled, saturated with water. “Oh mel,” he said. “How long we been in here?”

Nik looked worried as well. “Dunno,” he said. “We better get out.”

“Yeh,” Jek said, and Nik shut off the spray and they dried and dressed quickly.

After their hurried breakfast May said quietly to Jek, “You can take a day off school if you want.” She had heard the agonized wailing coming from the sani — the en-

tire family had; something had come loose inside Jek and they knew that was a good sign, but it had been terrible to hear the anguish in his voice — and she thought he might want a little time to recover. “Both of you can. You and Nik can spend the day together.”

Nikolis and Jek traded a look, and Jek shook his head. “Thanks,” he said, “but I shouldn’t miss too many days.” He felt the heat in his heart again, though, felt gratitude that Nik’s ma understood that he was hurt, even if she didn’t know the real reason. “I got a lot of catching up to do already.”

“You sure?”

“Yeh,” he said. “But thanks again.”

She smiled and gave him a little hug. “Algood. If you need anyone to talk to, if you have anything you want to talk about, you can come to me, or Tom or Keli, and Niko, of course.”

Jek felt his eyes water. He knew, somehow, that it was a good sign that he was feeling again, that he could cry. Every time he did it was as though a little more of the horror and pain left him, like it was a poison inside him that was leaking out slowly when he cried, washing out of him with his tears. Before, when he had been living with ... when he had been trapped, he couldn’t cry at all, he had to keep it all inside, and that had deadened him, made him numb. Feeling all of it again hurt, but it was good to know it was over, and there were other feelings he was having now, good ones that took the place of the bad as he made room for them in his heart. The more of the bad feelings he got rid of, the more space there was for the good ones. “Yeh, algood,” he said.

She gave him his lunch and kissed his forehead. “Have a good day,” she said, and then sent Nik off in the same way. Just like Jek was her own nip.

Over time the Academy movements on the road had not changed significantly, and the Resistance soldiers now saw a fairly regular pattern. Three GPs to town and a larger transport to the post in the morning, then three more GPs back to the post and another transport townward after dusk. Every two days a larger vehicle — provisions — to the post, eventually returning to the town. Random GPs from time to time, not in convoy, probably carrying troopers to or from a party in the town, one- or two-day rec passes. Buddha help its inhabitants then. The repair lorry occasionally put in an appear-

ance, moving to some spot or other on the road that needed attention. Usually it was a fallen branch that was too large to shift easily, too large even for one of the GPs. Sometimes it patched a larger hole. Probably just busywork, then.

Pretten was warming up a little under Balia's wing. She seemed to look on him as a kid brother or something, which was funny because she was only a halfyear older. Still she had had considerably more field experience than he, and she seemed to like him. Not in *that* way; and even if she had, Pretten seemed to be a full-on bender. It got to the point that some of the rest of the detachment stopped bothering too hard about covering themselves in the showers or in sleep, as they slowly began to realize he obviously bore no sexual attraction to them.

In a way Pretten was becoming a mascot. He was a Good Mel, a few of the fems had decided, not one to slaver after their charms. He was buddying up with Balia, he was beginning to get along fairly well with the other fems, and he had at last given up some of his obsessive gear checking, taking part in card games, informal kickball matches (he sucked at the sport but bore the others' ribbing with good nature) and evening banter sessions after supper.

He was good for other things as well; being a mel, and a young one, he tended to be fairly physically strong and could always be counted on to work well and fast when it came to any tasks involving digging, building or lifting. Maybe that was what brought some of the fems around to his side; he usually work barechested and not *all* of them had decided they hated mels. (Some of these soldiers, she had noticed, also just *happened* to need a shower whenever he decided to take one. And he was clean; he showered twice daily at least.) Ereka herself was able to admire his physique, though she knew there'd be no play between them. Their ranks were far too disparate, he was a bender, she really preferred fems and had Alissa, and besides, she was pretty substantially scarred. It occurred to her bitterly that she was definitely safe from Academy troopers now. They liked their mounts to be young (ideally) or at least smooth of skin. She was no longer the latter and, some days, wondered about the former, even though she was still in her early twenties.

She overheard Pretten and Balia talking about her one evening a few days after they started getting tight. She listened carefully; Pretten was usually very taciturn. At first she had thought he was withdrawn, but after a while had begun to suspect he just didn't talk as much as he watched and listened.

“How’d it happen?” he said quietly. A shifting of cloth meant he had gestured in her direction. She was inside her command tent but the ectmit sheet walls were thin. She heard pretty much everything that went on outside them, and had learned very early not to mention anything about that. It wasn’t spying, not really; it was more a direct line to her detachment’s morale.

“Academy raid,” Balia said. “The one you and the others got sent out after. We lost half the detachment. Captain was in the bivvy when one of the troopers dropped an incend.”

She heard Pretten draw a breath. “Heck,” he said. Ereka had to suppress a snort. For all his determination to be a soldier, he had a very innocent aw-shucks farm-boy way of talking.

“Yeh,” Balia said. “We lost a lot of good soldiers that day.”

He must have seen something in her expression. “You lost someone too, didn’t you?” Not bad for seventeen; most mels that age weren’t into reading emotions on fems’ faces. Their eyes were usually too busy a little lower down.

Balia sighed. “Yeh. Her name was Roni. She was a sniper, like you.”

“I’m sorry,” Pretten said.

“It’s no worse than what happened to you,” Balia said.

Now it was Pretten’s turn to sigh. “Maybe,” he said, “maybe not. Teggy’s still alive.”

“Is he?” Balia said. “Really, I mean?”

Pretten was silent for some time. “Well, maybe not.”

And then there were sounds of sorrow, from both of them. After a few moments Pretten said, “Look at us. Blubbering on like ... like...”

“Like a couple fems,” Balia said, and they both laughed a little. “You’re algood, Pretten. If I liked mels I’d be all over you.”

“Thanks,” he said. “And if you were a mel...”

“Yeh,” Balia said. “Let’s see if anyone wants to do some cardplay.”

“Algood.” And the footsteps retreated as Ereka wondered about why it really made much of a difference, to anyone, whether someone else had a worm or a nooky. Really, so fucking much fuss over plumbing. In a way many of the Resistance soldiers, she thought, were as prejudiced as the Academy, and the thought surprised her in its novelty. One side made laws forbidding the existence of benders (but was happy to flout

them secretly); the other side had a deep mistrust of virtually all mels and hated them based on gender alone (at least superficially). What was the real difference? Even arguing that the Resistance had good reason to keep away from troopers was a little hollow; there was still that distance from *all* worm-bearers, and she saw that in a way the term *worm-bearer* was every bit as much an epithet as *bender*.

She sighed and shook her head. Maybe she needed to stop listening to what her soldiers talked about after all. Besides, if the Resistance ever actually did win, these finer philosophical points would hopefully fade as fems were allowed to be free from systematic rape and benders could do whatever they felt like as well. As for handling the prejudice in her own detachment — there really wasn't anything she could do. She couldn't order it out of her soldiers. They'd just have to learn that not all mels were bad, that some, like Pretten, could be fairly decent, maybe even trusted.

Jek was in the orchard again, spending a little time with Oli, just the two of them, while Nikolis did his homework. Jek was becoming familiar with the tasks of working among the citron groves, and was discovering that he liked the labor.

It was a week since his wrenching weeping in the sani with Nik, when everything had come loose at once inside him, and he was beginning to feel that maybe, just maybe, he could put some things away. Could let them go, their power over him broken now.

Keolit was spreading manure around some new trees, saplings not even a meter tall that one day would be as large as all the others, yielding the bright yellow, orange and green varieties of citrons his folks farmed. Jektres helped him, partly because he wanted to be near Nik's brother but didn't want to just stand around while Oli worked, partly because he felt like he needed to pull his weight, and partly because there was something good about the work. It was physically demanding, repetitive, boring: Shoveling, loading in a barrow, wheeling the barrow about, shoveling again, but it was also soothing because of that, had a kind of warm bathing reality he relished. Just him and Keolit, working side by side and barebacked and barefoot, clouts soaked with sweat and both of them stinking by the time they were done, and the way Nik's ma smiled at him when the day's work was complete and made sure he had extra helpings of tubers or polt or biscuits, and how good they tasted after all that labor. The dust and grit that got

on him, the smell of the shit as he turned it, the strain on his joints, the way his sweat rolled off his body — it was saturating, filling his mind and his limbs, letting him do nothing but be aware of his flesh, his sinew and bone and muscle, the simple facts and odors of the organic world that held no secrets, told no lies, of which he was a part. He worked, and in the work he found a kind of solace of truth.

He was exploding with life for the first time.

In his lunch sack at midday he had found a little note from Nik's ma written on the napkin she had packed for him.

*We love you, Jektres. I am so glad you're with us.*

He had almost cried reading it, and had folded it carefully and put it into the pocket of his clouts (he would take it home with him and put it with the others in the dresser drawer that had been given to him for his private use), then paid attention to Nik and Renetta as they talked about books they liked, to take his mind off crying.

They were getting along pretty well, he saw. That was good. He could tell they were really starting to like each other, but he didn't feel left out because of it. However much time Nikolis and Renetta might spend with one another, he and Jek were still friends, and now they lived together and slept side by side.

He was called back from his ruminations by Keolit. "Huh?"

"I said, bring the barrow over to the next one."

"Uh, algood," Jek said, doing so. He studied Keolit a moment as he worked, his back curving knobbed and graceful while he spread the manure, his skin shining with perspiration and his shoulders (ripple ripple flex) wide cast in intricate textured bronze, the muscles there and in his arms moving together like they were flowing in oil.

No wonder he had it so bad for Nik, who was Keolit scaled down and nudged back a few halfyears. "Oli?"

Keolit paused to look at him, then bent back to his task. "Yeh?"

"Thanks. For coming to get me."

It was the first time he had mentioned that evening to anyone but Nik.

Oli looked at him again, then clapped his shoulder briefly, the calluses on his hands hard, but the touch warm and gentle. "You're welcome," he said, then turned

once more to his work. "You mean a lot to my brother," he said after a few more shovelfuls. "And I guess he means a lot to you."

Jek started spreading manure by the next tree, awkwardly straightarming the shovel instead of curling his body about it like Oli did. He still didn't have the knack of handling a spade, hands at points on a triangle and his back the apex. "Yeh," he said. "I wish he could be my bro."

"In a way he is," Oli said. "Sometimes two mels can get really tight together, so close it's as though there's a lot more than just friendship. That's how you and Nik are." He looked over what Jek was doing. "Spread it a little more evenly around the base. Yeh, that's it, good." He moved the barrow over to another sapling. "You need each other, I think," he went on. "Mels need friends, good friends. Friends they can trust, friends they can talk to."

"Yeh?"

"Of course." Keolit smiled a little. "May thought you were trouble at first, but Nik stuck up for you."

"She did?" That didn't surprise him. Most adults were like that with him. But she had never *really* let it show, and lately she had been very different. Like how he thought his own ma would have been, if she were still alive.

"Yeh, they got in a few pretty good arguments over it." He saw Jektres's crushed expression. "But don't worry about that. Nik's always had his own mind, his own thoughts on everything, and it all worked out in the end, didn't it?"

Jek thought of the note on the napkin, thought of how Nik held his hand each night as they went to sleep. "Yeh," he said. "Oli ... how did you know what was ... I mean, Nik said you figured it out."

Keolit studied him, then turned back to the last new tree. He shrugged. "You hear things sometimes."

"In town?"

"Yeh." He finished the work and they put the shovels into the barrow, then shared the load as they wheeled it back to the manure pile. "Sometimes I hang with some of the new Academy fullblacks. They hear about things, and they talk a little."

Jek felt his face turn bright red. "Oh."

Oli sighed as they dumped the rest of the manure back onto the pile, leaving the barrow upended so rain wouldn't gather in it and rust it out or provide a breeding

ground for paparrats. “It’s a small town, Jek, and on a planet where not much happens for folks to talk about. But they weren’t saying bad things about you. They thought it was wrong. Disgusting.” He saw Jek’s face and read it very well. “Not that *you* were disgusting, Jek. They knew it was Kaletta making you do those things. But there’s not much anyone can do to stop something like that unless someone makes a formal complaint, and for that you need witnesses, adult witnesses. Sixteen halfyears. And even with a complaint, you would have ended up punished. That’s Academy law — prost ... um, I mean, people who, well, they’re punished, even if they didn’t want to be part of it.”

“It’s a stupid law,” Jek said bitterly.

Oli dusted his hands and nodded. “It is. You got caught in it and I’m sorry.” They began walking among the trees, back to the dwelcap. “The Academy isn’t perfect, Jek.”

“I know,” he said, thinking of his dead ma and da, of how they had died, perimeter accidents when the Academy and Resistance had faced each other off one afternoon, victims of random circumstance in a skirmish that had been minor to both sides but devastating to him.

“That’s something I hope I can help change when I’m accepted,” Oli said.

“I think you can,” Jek said. And then he said, “I think you can do anything.”

Keolit smiled. “Thanks, mel,” he said. “Hey, want a citron?”

“Yeh,” Jek said.

“Then get us one.”

And suddenly Jek felt himself lifted off the ground. Oli perched him with his rear on one shoulder and he laughed with it, feeling a little tipsy as the older mel walked along, his huge arms wrapped around Jek’s shins to keep him from falling over backwards, his shoulders moving in a strange rolling shift of balance that he’d never experienced before, because no one had ever carried him on his shoulders before.

They walked up to a tree and Jek plucked a ripe fat orange fruit, peeling it and feeding himself and Oli slices while he continued carrying his rider back to the dwelcap. He felt like a prince.

At the portal Oli set him down and said, “We smell like shit.”

Jek laughed. “Yeh.”

“Get inside and get showered, bro. It’s almost suppertime. I’ll go after you.”

Jek’s breath caught. “Algood,” he said, and went in.

Standing alone in the spray (Nik was still doing homework), the warm water roll-

ing over him, all Jek could think, over and over, was *He called me bro. He called me bro.*

And the tears this time didn't hurt and that surprised him, because he had never known before that anyone could *really* cry just from being happy.

*He called me bro.*

## HISTORY AND BIOLOGY

NIKOLIS AND RENETTA HAD BEGUN holding hands regularly as they walked along in the afternoons, their heads sometimes together as they talked quietly, Rena occasionally resting her head on Nik's shoulder, which looked funny to Jek because she was a little taller than her melfriend, but he didn't make fun of Nik for it.

Word had begun to spread about them at school; they were now more or less officially A Couple. Nik had asked her one afternoon, partly to stop Jek's incessant promptings, stammering and hemming, finally getting out the words *Will you be my fem-friend?* and she had accepted happily, hugging him a long time and kissing with him for a while while Jek sat some distance away, his back to them so they could have privacy, studying the trees and thinking how lucky Nik was, and Rena, and himself.

He had been living with Nik's family now for almost two months, and it had been beyond spec. His friend had helped him nightly with his learning and Jek had been leaping ahead, was now handling instruction material most commonly given to nips aged around eight. He had jumped almost two halfyears in less than two months, and was beginning to think that maybe school was algood after all.

He was doing well enough with reading that he sometimes did it for enjoyment, because he wanted to, not because it was something he had to do for school. (Once he had advanced far enough he had begun to get homework as well, and even though it was annoying he was proud of it, proud of himself, because it meant he was moving ahead.)

He was beginning to discover books, and had taken up reading some of the settler stories Nik and Rena always talked about. They were full of adventures: Exciting tales about how the settlers had to face mechanical failures and near-starvation, sometimes hostile weather that burned down their homesteads with lightning or flooded them out with Arcadia's insane rainfalls, devastating attacks by lawless wanderers, and personal problems like babies that seemed to come *only* at the wrong times; and how they used to live, the first ones not even having dwelcaps. They had had to make log houses out of the trees themselves, cutting them down and stacking the trunks one atop

another. They only had solar collectors for power and had no 3cast, because there was nothing on Arcadia to transmit the signals and because the deepboats didn't come by often enough back then to carry crystals they could watch; they only brought provisions and personal correspondence.

Jek sometimes thought that would be pretty spec — living in a house made of logs, out in the middle of the forest all by himself with no one else around, even if there wouldn't be any 3cast or anything else like that. Total freedom, and living only by his own work every day, and not even having to bother with togs if he didn't want to. (Some of the settlers had not.)

For entertainment the settlers had begun telling each other stories, some writing them down or even *printing* them on actual paper made from the trees instead of pads or the papes everyone used now, made of algae. Examples of some of these bound books still existed at museums in the main city, Delfia, which was also the location of Arcadia's only starport. It was about a thousand kilometers to the east, and no one he knew had ever gone there. He hoped to be able to someday.

Delfia was also where the Academy's headquarters were, though there were posts all over Arcadia, and recruitment offices in every town, no matter how small.

Jek had also learned that the early settlers had carved things out of wood for their nips, little toys for them to play with, and had begun trying his skill at that. At first it was very slow and he had almost given up. Would have given up, but Oli kept encouraging him. "That's a good one," he'd say, turning over a crudely-fashioned shuttleboat or light duty assault rig in his large, strong hands (both fairly easy to shape because of their streamlined profiles). "Keep it up, bro. One of these days you'll be carving statues." And Jek would just glow inside. People were hard to carve. He had tried to make some troopers once and discovered very quickly that his skills were not up to the task. But Keolit seemed to think they might be one day, so he kept at it.

He also kept working in the orchards, doing his share and enjoying it, sometimes on stilts patrolling for leafworms with with Nik, sometimes working with Oli or Day. The effort had paid off in more than just the feeling of satisfaction he always got; his chest had begun to swell and deepen with new muscles, his arms bunching with them, and Oli liked to tell him that he only barely won at arm-wrestling with him. (Jek knew that wasn't even remotely true, but it made him feel good anyway when Oli said it.)

He would sometimes secretly compare himself with Keolit, gradually becoming

aware that the new solidity of his body was beginning to resemble the older mel's. He liked the changes, even though he usually woke up sore each morning with the efforts of his labors. It felt good in a strange way and he had mentioned this to Oli one afternoon. He had nodded and said that honest hard work was good for a mel's body, that the soreness meant he was getting stronger and that his muscles knew it.

Jek welcomed the aches after that. He worshipped Keolit and wanted to be exactly like him someday (after all, he was his personal hero, his savior; he could not forget how he had looked the day he and Nik had come to rescue him, tall and strong and good, so good, so decent), and Oli was aware of Jek's feelings and was happy to take him into his care. They called each other bro a lot, and it made Jek feel like he really was Keolit's brother.

He, Nik and Rena were on the *Dragonflies*, the school's kickball team, and sometimes over lunch talked strategy. He and Nik had always been pretty good at the sport — both mels watched and studied the professional teams and the way they played — and Rena was no slouch. She could remember plays from the pro games, plays neither Nik nor Jek had noticed, and was good at demonstrating them to the team. The more they practiced, the better they got, and they were well coordinated, on the way to being Finely Tuned Agents of Obliteration (as Renetta said) against the other teams in the area.

She was a fem, yeh, but she was a damn spec one.

The mels had, by mutual agreement, shown her to their favorite pond one day. Rena had been delighted, both at its size, clarity and depth (it got to five meters in some places), and at what she knew it meant to her personally for them to share it with her. By their doing so it was becoming her place as well; she was being accepted fully into the inner circle of their friendship. It meant they truly liked and respected her.

It had been a little awkward at first, because the mels had taken off their tunics and were dropping their clouts as well, and Renetta had said "Eherm."

They remembered she was a fem and both blushed brightly, tugging their clouts back up from half mast, glad they had been facing away at least. Worm-to on a fem was more embarrassment than either felt he could handle right then.

She smiled and then stunned both of them by taking off her own tunic. She was still too young to have globes, both mels knew that, but still, fems didn't take off their tunics when there were mels around no matter what. With a little smile at them she had

run past and leapt into the water with a wild yell, her arms and legs flailing crazily in the air and her long hair flying out all around her, then come up sputtering and waving them in, and Nik and Jek had looked at each other a moment, then shrugged and jumped in after her, laughing, playing and splashing together, and discovered that Renetta was also a very good swimmer.

After, they had lain on the bank a while, and then Nik and Rena got busy with each other a little and Jek headed back to Nik's place, whistling and cheerful, leaving them some time to be together.

From then on Renetta dropped by for a dip every once in a while, but always warned them in advance so she wouldn't surprise them, because she knew that they swam naked. Jek had ribbed Nik a few times, saying she probably wouldn't have minded seeing *him* naked, at least, and Nik always got really red when he did, but his worm also stood up.

Jek figured it was just a matter of time.

Gradually Jek was able to relax his fear that Kaletta would come after him, would show up one day and demand that he go back to her homestead. He didn't know why she hadn't pursued him, but remembered the last thing Keolit had said to her and wondered what exactly they had discussed while he and Nik packed his few possessions. Whatever it was, it must have been effective; he'd heard nothing from her since leaving that evening, and was at last beginning to see that her hold over him had either slipped radically or been broken completely. Still he felt the odd twinge of worry from time to time; Kaletta, he was sure, wouldn't give up that easily, and there might be a battle yet over the horizon. Even if Nik's folks did call in the Academy to adjudicate the conflict, he worried about outcomes.

But most of the time he wasn't worried. Most of the time.

"How's your femfriend?" Oli asked over supper, tipping Jek a wink.

"Uh, she's algood," Nik said. Everyone knew; Rena had been over to visit a few times by then, and there was no way they could hide what was happening between them. Nor did they particularly try to any longer.

"Good." He turned to Jek. "What about you?"

"Me?"

"Yeh. Any fems you like?"

Jek shrugged. “Uh, well, a few I guess.”

“A *few*, huh? Well, you need to go one at a time. They don’t like it when you stack ’em all together. Make up your mind, or at least pretend to.”

“Keli,” May said.

Keolit affected an innocent look. “What? Hey, that’s the way it is. If a mel could have a dozen femfriends, you think he wouldn’t? Keep him busy. Out of trouble.” He nudged Nik under the table, and he flushed.

“*In* trouble, more likely,” May said.

“Yeh,” Day said, smiling. “That kind of trouble you don’t need. One woman’s almost more than a man can take.”

“Tomis!”

“Well,” Day added, “if she’s the *right* woman.”

“Angling to sleep on the sofa?”

“Would it mean I could watch kickball without you flipping the receiver every five seconds?”

“Oh — you are impossible,” May said, but she was laughing, and Day was as well.

“No,” he said, “just pretty unlikely.”

May scowled at him, but her smile showed through it. She stood and began collecting platters. “I’ll show you how to tell from unlikely,” she said. “I can think of something that’s very unlikely to be happening with you for a while.”

Day slipped his arm about her waist before she could get away. “Now, love, you know that would kill me.”

“Promises, promises,” May laughed, and he laughed also and let her go, then sent the younger mels in to do their homework, staying outside with Keolit to help with cleanup.

They did their respective assignments and then Nik helped Jek a little more, like always, working with him in mathematics and reading, writing and spelling, then caught the evening news. Jek was a little thoughtful through the ’cast, pondering how Nik’s folks were with each other. They never really fought; today was just them playing together, and it was happy and fun, and Jek liked watching their little games with each other. He knew that sometimes they disagreed over things (such as how late the younger mels could stay up on a school night, or how many chores were expected of them before they could run off and play), but they worked them out without shouting,

usually not in earshot of the rest but just often enough Jek understood they ... *respected* each other. Yeh, they loved each other too, of course, and liked each other as well, but there wasn't a feeling that one or the other of them had to always make the decisions. In a way they were almost like he, Nik and Rena were on the kickball team, a group focused on making plays that worked for them and everyone else at the same time.

He'd never really thought of a family in that way before. A team, with each person having a role or position to play, but with support from the others. In this family May and Day acted sort of as referees and coaches, but Oli did as well with him and Nik. But they were still Keolit's parents and they dealt with him from that place also. And the way they did it was different from how they handled Nik or Jek; they gave him a lot more latitude, but he also didn't push at the edges as hard as Nik did (or himself, he admitted). He supposed it was not because he was older, but because he had changed with time and was closer to being an adult (not physically, but on the inside) than his brother or bro were. Jek wondered if he'd be like that himself one day, really trusted and trustworthy, mature and basically good.

*Well, not if I keep it up with Nik*, he thought, and a sudden gulf of guilt opened in him. What was he doing to his friend, really? What was he really about? Nik said it felt good when they played, and Jek agreed, but he also knew that, given a chance, he would do a lot more with Nik than just watch him rub himself in the shower. And the worry came again that he was somehow nudging his friend into something that wasn't right, that would cause him harm. *Am I so fucked up that I want him to be fucked up also, down here with me too in some kind of ... of pit of guilt?*

But Nik never seemed to want it to stop. Apart from that one morning, after Jek's rescue, he had shown no reluctance at all to play with him, had never said *don't do that*, had even started about as many games as he agreed to. So was he already partly a bender, was he ... *broken* somehow? And getting worse all the time because of Jek?

And anyway, was being a bender something that automatically meant a mel was broken inside? Or was it just something that happened sometimes, like a mel and a fem discovering one day that they cared about each other enough to want to move to another world and have nips? Were mels made into benders by being forced to — to be with troopers, as he had been, or was it something that happened in them naturally?

In a way the thought was comforting. It almost made the things that had happened to him less ... terrible. If mels were born benders, or became benders somehow

on their own, then he didn't have to feel so torn about the fact that sometimes he'd liked it with certain troopers, or that he wanted only to be with Nik and no one else, or even that Nik seemed to have some of the same feelings of his own. Maybe Jek had not put them there in him after all. Maybe they were there already, and Jek had just been the right one for him to ... to act on them with.

The 3cast ended and Jek started when Oli nudged him, then did the same to Nik and gestured them outside with a little smile and a nod to Day, who nodded back.

They wanted to know what was happening but he didn't say anything, leading them quietly out back and into the orchard and keeping his mysterious little smile. "It's time," he said at last, halting them some distance from the dwellcap.

"Time for what?" Nik said. He sounded nervous. Jek was also.

Oli looked at him seriously. "Time for The Talk."

"What talk?"

"Look, little bro, I know you like Renetta, and she likes you. And that means there are some things you need to know about." He sat down on the soil and the other two mels did as well, trading looks of uncertainty. Oli settled himself, then thought a moment and began speaking again. "When a mel and a fem like each other, they might want to do more than just hold hands and kiss."

Nik turned a deep shade of red.

"That's true," Jek said.

Oli nodded at him. "And you know, Nik, there are differences between mels and fems."

"Yeh," Nik said, becoming fascinated with the gravel around him.

"You probably know already that mels and fems who really like each other in the right way — well, they want to be close. *Very* close."

Nik thought of the pictures of Jek's that he had seen, pictures of mels putting their worms into fems. He nodded.

"On Arcadia you aren't really supposed to do that until you're married. But sometimes it happens anyway, before a mel and a fem get married." He looked directly at the two younger mels. "And it's pretty fucking nice when it does," he said.

Both of them stared, not just at the language, but at what Keolit was suggesting. "You mean you —" Nik was stunned and couldn't continue. He'd suspected it, of course, was pretty sure of it, but he hadn't thought Keolit would ever actually *admit* to it.

Oli nodded again.

“What’s it like?”

“Amazing,” Oli said. “Not just because it feels good — it does, bro — but because it’s nice to be that close to someone you really care about. It’s a sharing, a way of saying *I trust you* and *I love you*, and it’s good because having someone else’s body that close to your own is — it’s spec.”

Nik and Jek glanced at each other. They had been fairly close themselves in the shower in the mornings (well, algood, they hadn’t touched or anything, but sometimes Nik wondered if it was on Jek’s mind, just as sometimes it was on his mind), and had an idea what Oli meant. Their play had resumed not too long after Jek began living there, and it had got to the point that it just happened with them fairly regularly, spontaneously. Each could tell when the other was in the mood for a little fun, and they enjoyed it with vigor. Nik still worried, sometimes, that maybe he was turning into a bender, but he and Jek had never taken it past self-play, and he wondered if Jek was feeling the same worries, or ... or if he even had the same feelings at all.

But he also felt twinges of guilt when the thought occurred to him of just reaching out and grabbing Jek where he stood, pushing the other mel’s hand aside with his own. Because of the troopers and what they had done to his friend. He couldn’t feel right about ... starting anything, because he did not want all of Jek’s worst memories to return to him in new form. He’d been through enough already without being used further by a mel who was supposed to be his best friend.

Yet in Nik’s dreams, they did a lot more than just touch themselves.

And over time Nik had begun to wonder what it would be like to play that way with Renetta watching, and sometimes had thought of her when he and Jektres were at their games. Though Jek’s body was unmistakable; his friend was not the only one who had noticed the way it was developing. His muscles looked very good to him when they were playing in front of each other like that, hard and distinctly male and fairly large, like his worm.

“Well,” Oli was saying, “when that goes on you have to be careful. You have to make sure nothing happens that causes babies.”

Nik blinked. “How?”

“You can pull it out before the melstuf comes,” Jek said.

“Yeh,” Oli nodded, “but that’s not always ... dependable. It’s hard to pull out at

the last moment. You want to stay inside.”

Jek nodded. That made sense. Though his only extensive experience with a woman had been with Kaletta, there were times he had enjoyed it (even if he still didn’t want to admit it to himself; but after all, sex was sex, and even if it was awful it wasn’t really all that bad, not as bad as having his rocks ripped off would have been, for instance), and he suspected that pulling out at the end would be difficult.

“Now many women take a pill,” Oli went on. “But fems can’t buy them until they turn sixteen. The pills stop the women producing eggs, so your stuff doesn’t cause problems. You don’t have to worry with them.”

“What if lots of stuff doesn’t come out at the end?” Nik said.

“Even a little’s risky,” Oli said. Nik nodded. “I don’t know if you and Renetta are doing it yet, and I don’t want to know. It’s your business. But you’ve got to know that your femfriend can’t buy the pills.”

Nik and Rena had not Done It, but Nik was beginning to wonder. Sometimes when they kissed, things got pretty warm between them, Rena putting her hands on his chest, feeling it in ways that sent little thrills all through him, or even on his rear, pulling him up against her so their hips were jammed close. At first he didn’t want her to because his worm would be standing when she did that, but he had gradually begun to realize she *liked* it, wanted to feel him hard against her like that. “So — what do you do?”

“You use these,” Oli said, pulling out an ectmit square. “Inside is a sheath. You put that on when you’re ready to do it with a fem.”

“And you — what? Just wear it?”

“Yeh,” Oli said.

“But ... I mean, what if you don’t do it? You just leave it on after that? And do you change it every day or what?”

Keolit stared at him a moment and then began laughing. “I’m sorry,” he said. “I didn’t explain it right. No, you don’t just put one on every day when you get up in the morning, like putting on clouts. You put it on when you’re with the fem, just before.”

“Oh,” Nik said.

Keolit pulled a plenten out of his pocket. “Pretend this is your worm,” he said. “You’re with a fem and you’re going to, you’re both ready to go.” He tore open the little ectmit square. “You take out the sheath,” he said, doing so, “and just roll it on like this.

Your femfriend can put it on you instead, if you want — it's better if she does. It feels better, because you both know you're getting ready. But make sure to leave a little pinched at the end, like this."

"Why?" Jek said.

"To make extra room for your stuff when it comes out," Oli said. "Otherwise it might get pushed out the sides."

"Oh."

"And once it's on, you can go ahead with your femfriend, and when you finish, your stuff won't get in her. Then you pull your worm out and take it back off."

"Just roll it off again?" Nik said. "Like how you put it on?" It looked pretty easy.

Oli shook his head. "You don't want to unroll it," he said. "Your hair can get stuck in it if you do that."

"Ouch," said Jek, laughing.

"Yeh," Oli said.

"Not a problem for Nik," Jek smirked, and got a good box on his arm for it. Nik had sprouted, but comparatively recently. He didn't have the abundant growth of either older mel just yet.

Oli coughed. "You wait to get a little soft, and then you pull it off, just kind of work it loose, and it's best to tie the end unless you're inside somewhere, and then you can flush it down the sani. And wash your worm when you're done, and make sure not to take it off when you're close to the fem. And never use the same sheath again twice."

"Why?"

"Well," Oli said, "melstuf is pretty potent. Even a little bit can be enough to make a fem pregnant, even if it gets onto the outside of her instead of inside. Not on her body, but down there, where your worm goes in. And all it takes is one mistake." Oli rolled the sheath back off of the plenten, then stuffed everything into his pocket. "Any questions?"

"Yeh," Jek said. "They make 'em small enough for Nik?"

"Shuddup," Nikolis said, bright red.

"Ha ha," Keolit said. "They stretch. One size fits all."

"Even you?"

"Oh," Oli said with a smirk, "I have to order special."

All three laughed for a few moments. "So that's it," Oli said, and sighed. "Wasn't so bad, was it?"

“Nah,” said Jek.

“Uh.” Nik was still pretty red.

“Yeh, well, be glad you aren’t me,” Oli said. “When I was your age it was Day who had The Talk with me.”

“Oh crap on a *cake*,” Nik said.

“Yeh, it was pretty bad.” He shook his head at the memory of his father, a little awkward but needing to make sure the message got across, and himself, wishing he could just melt into the ground, the embarrassment in him hot and rich. Coming back to the present, he handed each of the other mels some more of the ectmit squares. “Carry these with you,” he said. “Just in case.”

“Algood,” Nik said, fingering the packets before stuffing them into his clouts. He didn’t know that he’d need them any time soon, but a pretty insistent part of him was hoping so.

“Yeh,” Jek said. “Thanks, bro.”

“No trouble,” Oli said. “And if you need more you make sure you tell me. Never do it with a fem unless you have one on, unless you’re sure she’s taking her pills.”

“Algood,” both mels said.

“I mean it,” Keolit said. “This is important. Promise me. A fem who gets pregnant without being married can get in a lot of trouble, and her melfriend might end up having to marry her.”

“Yeh,” Nik said, and Jek echoed him. “We promise.”

“Hey,” Jek said.

“Yeh?”

“What if — you know, what if she uses her hand instead?”

“Oh. Well, as long as your stuff doesn’t get on her near her — you know, her nooky — you’re algood.”

“What if it’s in her mouth?” Nik stared at his friend. *In her mouth? Fems actually do that?* He thought it was just for the pictures, not that they would do it on their own.

“That’s algood too,” Oli said. “It’s not the same as when it’s down there.”

“Even if she swallows it?”

“Yeh,” Oli said. “It’s not the same thing at all. It’s in her, yeh, but in her stomach then, not where she gets pregnant.”

Jek nodded silently. Nik emulated the motion, feeling left out but wanting to hide it. His brother and his friend were *much* more experienced than he was about this and he didn't want to let it show, even though they both knew.

"Here," Oli elaborated, drawing a little diagram in the soil with a twig. "This is sort of how a fem's insides look, the parts where she gets pregnant, has sex. This is her — vagina, her nooky. And this is the uterus or womb. Your worm would go in here. This is where the fetus develops when a fem gets pregnant.

"Your stuff has to be in here in order for that to happen, though. The uterus isn't connected to her stomach, so there's no way she can get pregnant if she — swallows. But if you get some inside here or even close, on the outside, where her hair grows — well, that's risky because the sperm cells in your stuff can swim pretty far, and all it takes is one of 'em to find the egg in her."

Nik stared, a little awestruck at the differences — mels had no such parts, of course — a little surprised at how much Oli knew, a little hopeful that soon he might be able to explore some of this terrain himself, and then a little afraid that he would.

"So that's all," Keolit said, standing, scuffing the picture with his foot. "And don't say anything to May about the sheaths; she'd probably think you're still too young to have any."

"We're not tards," Nik said, and they shared another laugh and went back inside.

On the way Jek handed Nik his sheaths. "Here, mel," he said quietly. "I think you'll need these more than me. Uh, and sooner too."

"You sure?"

"Yeh," Jek said. "Go ahead. Take 'em."

"Don't you want to keep even one?"

"Nah," Jek said. "Uh, if I need one I guess I can just ask you."

"Algood." Nik pocketed them, devoutly hoping Jek was right and wishing it was easier to walk with a hardened worm.

The soldiers sat in a circle around a small 3cast, awaiting the evening propaganda in the form of news. There had been a buildup of several days during which it was promised that an important announcement from General Orekkio would be aired. Whatever it was, it was something the Resistance would have to watch, because it was certain to concern them, probably directly.

The banter faded as a visage in the 3cast coalesced, martial music playing behind it. In a moment lights came up to fill in the silhouette, and there was General Orekkio himself, a thick black mustache curtaining over his solemn mouth. By the grey at his temples, the mustache must have been dyed.

“Oo, goody,” Alissa said under her breath. “Pearls of shit from the anus of a swine.” Erekkia shushed her.

“Men of Arcadia,” he began seriously, and Erekkia almost laughed. It was so fucking pompous, so very much *him*. “There is a new blight among us.” His grandfatherly visage pulled in a semblance of human concern.

“Hey, Blight, how’s tricks?” Pretten said to Balia, *sotto voce*.

“It comes in the form of fems,” the general went on, magisterially oblivious. “And they are drawing our mels to death. With the lures of their own bodies.”

“Works for me,” Alissa said.

“It is forbidden for a mel to enjoy congress with a fem to whom he is not married,” the general’s bust grated.

“Here it comes,” Balia said. “Goodbye Academy infrastructure.”

Orekkio managed to look both pained and stern, almost as though he really gave a damn. “Thus any trooper who secretly meets with a fem and is killed by her will not be regarded as a combat loss and will be buried in a grave of dishonor.”

All the soldiers sat up. *What the fuck?*

“We of the Academy all know that purity is our shield, that we are guided by cleanliness.”

*Oh shit*, Erekkia thought.

“So no mel who meets his end in this wise can possibly be of true Academy mettle. We are tested on all sides, and sometimes it is our enemy which most tries our readiness.”

They all stared at each other.

“That is all,” Orekkio said. His bust faded as the news ’cast proper began.

“That fucker,” Alissa said, almost in awe. “He’s writing off his own troopers.”

“Some of them,” Balia corrected.

“Like I give a stuff-dripping assfuck what some or all means,” Alissa said.

Erekkia held up her hand. “Fems,” she said. “Uh, and Pretten. It could be worse. We can still get some.” *Well not us, but other Resistance detachments anyway.*

“And when we do, they’ll be diseased, and the rest of the Academy will have a more holy cause,” Alissa whispered to her. “We are fucked, fem.”

Erekka nodded. Alissa was right. Oreckio’s announcement had changed the landscape of the battle.

*Well, she sighed to herself, we’ll just have to adapt.*

*Again.*

“Jek,” Nik said.

“Yeh?”

“What are these?”

He had been looking over the crystals his friend had brought with him when he had moved in. Most were entertainments, not bad, the kinds of 3casts both he and Jek liked. Some were adventures about colonization, some were drawn in a computer, and some were just silly family kinds of things. But there was a whole row of them that Jek had never taken out for them to watch.

“Oh,” Jek said. “Uh. They’re from — before, when my real ma and da were ... around.”

“You watched them together?”

Jek squirmed a little. “No,” he said. “They made them. They’re of — of them, and of me.”

“Oh.” Nik nodded. “You ever watch them?”

Jek shrugged uneasily. “Sometimes,” he said. He hadn’t, not for halfyears. Kaletta had said she didn’t want him to, and it hurt too much anyway. He was reminded by them of what he had lost.

“You want to watch one?”

“Uh —”

“Come on,” Nik said. “I’d like to see.”

Jek resisted a moment, then gave in. He couldn’t deny Nik. “Algood,” he said, and picked the first one, the one most distant from him, because he knew it would hurt least to see. Many of the later ones had events on them he could actually remember living. “This is from my first birthday.” He slotted the crystal and the 3cast lit up.

The display showed Nik a man and woman, young, maybe a little older than Oli. Each of them was familiar to him and not, and that was because Jek’s features were a

combination of theirs. The woman had his eyes, dark grey, almost black with lighter flecks in them; she also had his nose and mouth. The man's face had about the same shape as Jek's, and their hair matched, thick and black and a little curly.

The camera followed them around as they shushed each other, preparing a cake at a table inside a dwelcap. Nik smiled. It was cute. The cake was small and it had a candle on it, and they lit it and then went down the small dwelcap hallway to the other bedroom and opened the portal.

Inside was a crib, and a baby in it. Nik glanced over at his friend. That had been Jektres, a long time ago.

They gently lifted the baby from the crib. His little arms flailed, hands bunched into tiny fists. Nik looked at Jek's hands now, so much larger, and saw that his friend was holding his puffcat, squeezing it a little. Nik put his arm around his shoulders and Jek sighed distantly.

They carried the baby into the dinitchen and set him up in a tallchair, and then sang a birthday song to him, and then blew out the candle as the infant stared about in wonder.

Then there was a jump and a close shot of the baby's fat little face, smeared with frosting and cake, and his mouth was open in a huge toothless smile. The woman, his mother, Jek's mother, came into view as the camera's sensor fields widened, and she kissed his bald head, and said "I love you, sweet little Jektres." And then she began to sing to him. A silly song, a lullaby. Simple, but her voice lilted with it, and even Nik could hear the love as she sang it, a love distant, gone, the voice stilled.

*Trees and stars look from afar  
They sigh on high at my fine guy  
Oh so pretty, oh so sweet  
His little hands, his little feet  
And Mama holds him, loves him so  
And hopes that he will always know.*

The crystal ended, and Nik saw Jek was crying.

He didn't say anything. He just pulled Jek to him and held him a while and soothed him.

He'd got to the point — they both had — that when a well of emotion would suddenly open in Jek, Nik would automatically hold him like this while he cried. At first he had felt a little strange about it, almost like he was doing something bad or even forbidden, but Jek needed it. Needed him. And he couldn't just leave him alone with the feelings, leave him sitting there weeping. Nik wanted him to know that he wasn't all alone any more. He had Nik, he had his family, and they all cared about him.

He thought about May. About how she just loved him no matter what. And what it would be like if she were taken from him one day, for no reason, gone, gone forever, and he held Jek tighter.

In a little while it was time for bed. They nestled in, three across and Nik in the middle like always, holding hands with Jek like always.

It was different with them than it was with him and Renetta. Holding hands with her was almost a little scary at first, like he was traveling in new territory and didn't know what dangers he might have to face. And her hands were smaller than Jek's and softer, not covered in calluses from working. With Jek it had just been a gesture of friendship at first, of solidarity, but over time it had come to be more of an expression of something deeper, of feelings he had but never felt that he could say aloud. Sometimes he'd see Jek's face when he was looking at him, and he thought maybe Jek had the same feelings, and it sent little ripples into him when he considered that.

But it was also strange, because Rena was his femfriend. How was it he could feel the same sort of way about two different people? Especially when one was a fem and the other was a mel? Did it mean there was something wrong with him?

Maybe, he considered, that's what the word *bender* really meant — that feelings got bent around so two people fit in them, not just one.

But the feelings weren't *exactly* the same, either. He liked Rena, and he liked Jek, so much so that he didn't think he would be able to choose between them even if he was forced to, but he liked them in *different* ways and for some different reasons. For instance he could walk anywhere with Rena and hold her hand and no one would think it was bad; there was no way he could openly do anything like that with Jek. And they never actually held hands except in bed at night anyway. And that was another difference — he could share a bed with Jek, and the shower, and they could swim naked together, and no one thought twice about it; he thought his head might just fly off if he

ever were to try to suggest doing the same with Renetta. And if he was caught naked with *her* ... well. But they were all good at kickball, and Jek was starting to read the same books, so they had even more to talk about, and in that way they were alike.

But Renetta, as much as she liked Nik, didn't seem to *need* him in the same way Jek did. It wasn't anything either one of them did or said. It was just a feeling Nik had. Like if he died tomorrow, Rena and Jek would both be very sad for a long time, but Rena would, someday, get past it. He wasn't so sure Jek would.

And he had to keep the secret of his feelings and thoughts, because if anyone knew he liked Jek in the same way that he liked Rena (well, mostly the same), he was sure he'd be in Retraining before he could take another breath. So he had spoken to no one, not Oli, not May or Day, and not Jek. Especially not Jek. What if he didn't feel that way himself? What if it was all just playing for him, just something he did because it felt good? Or — worse — what if Jek started seeing him like he was one of those troopers, one of the mels who had ... had made him do things? He'd hate Nik then, or, worst of all, maybe he'd go along with it just to make Nik happy, but inside, deep inside, he'd be dying the whole time.

Nik had never had a friend like Jek before; the experience was new to him in so many ways. He didn't know if friends did this sort of stuff all the time and he was only just discovering it himself, or if it really was different between the two of them, maybe because of what had been happening to Jek for so long.

He had learned that Jektres's foster mother had begun forcing him to *help her earn* shortly after he turned eight. She would make him Do It with her while an Academy trooper watched. Jek said they liked to watch sometimes. Nik couldn't understand that; it had made him feel ill to see what he had seen. And then she had begun making him do things with the *troopers*, sucking their worms until their melstuf came out. He said that was pretty bad, but that it was worse because in a way he sort of liked it. Nik didn't understand that either, and wondered sometimes if Jek was algood in his head. Jek had said that being forced was the bad part, but that there were times when he got into it, when he could close his eyes and pretend the trooper was a mel from one of his pictures, or maybe from a 3cast, someone he liked in the right way. And their melstuf didn't taste bad, he said. Just different, strange and like nothing else.

Jek liked mels. He was a bender. Nik knew it. But he didn't really understand why. Yeh, mels were algood. But ... fems were too.

Did Jek feel the same way? He'd had those pictures, yeh, but he also had pictures of fems. Still, he didn't seem to want to do much more with fems than just talk to them, although a couple of them at school had begun paying real attention to him and Nik, even with his relative inexperience in that area, knew it meant they liked him. Nik asked him why he didn't start going out with one of them and Jek had shrugged the question aside and changed the subject to kickball.

After that Nik had begun studying Jek when his friend wouldn't notice, and saw that he always looked at mels more than fems, that when they were in the mels' sport room, changing and showering after kickball practice, he kept glancing at the others, at their bodies, their chests and rears and their worms, just little cuts of the eyes that he had to really look for to notice. But once he began noticing, he saw them happening all the time, and he saw that sometimes Jek was looking at *him* in the same way.

He thought about the talk they'd had that one day, about how Jek had said he wasn't jealous about him and Renetta, but he wondered if that was true too. He seemed to mind sometimes if he and Rena spent extra time just with each other. He always said it was algood, but Nik could sense something like resentment in his voice, or maybe frustration.

*Jek likes mels*, he thought. *Maybe he likes me. Really likes me, like the way mels and fems usually are with each other, like how I am with Rena.* The idea, as he turned it over in his mind, had become more certain, and it scared him some because mels were not ever supposed to like mels in that way, but it also made his heartbeat into a rapid thump, because whether he wanted to admit it or not, *he also liked Jek*, as much as he liked Rena. He wondered if *he* was algood in the head himself, and if he would ever know what his friend's feelings really were or even understand his own, and drifted off next to him with those thoughts in his mind, their hands still clasped under the sheets.

Erekka had recovered to the point that she no longer needed skingel patches, and in a way that was both good and bad. It was good because the patches were a little restrictive and irritating; it was bad because now her beetle could trundle all over her and did so with evident delight (particularly when she was trying to sleep), and because her scars weren't covered by anything any longer.

It was also good because she and Alissa could return to their private pleasures,

fully in contact, fully in embrace. It had been a while since they'd been able to love each other to the extent they both wanted to, and the first night of freedom they celebrated several times after Alissa had convinced her that the scars didn't make one damned bit of difference. (That had taken her some doing, and Erecca had been disappointed in herself later; did she really believe Alissa would be so shallow that something like her appearance would mean anything to her? The scars, she mused, were deeper than the surface, perhaps.)

They lay in each other's arms afterward and Erecca's thoughts turned to poor Pretten, out there all alone, no one to share his cot with him. He seemed to be doing all good with it, and she wondered if that was because he was still healing inside. Losing someone close ... well, it tended to leave marks. And not the visible kind like hers.

She thought of her own first real love, how it was different from her first sexual experience. The latter had happened first. She had been orphaned by a bizarre accident on her parents' homestead: The autotractor had taken a ball lightning hit and its guidance systems, shielded well against strikes, had lost all sense of terrain or programming. Ordinarily, she learned later, the tractors were designed with standard lightning hits in mind, but ball lightning, rare as it was, had not been factored in. Apparently it had settled into the tractor's frame and discharged itself along its circuitry rather than through the grounding plates that dragged underneath it. The machine had mindlessly accelerated to its maximum velocity (40 kph) and furrowed along, scattering grain behind itself, and her father had tried to climb into its manual control cab to shut it down, but the tractor had bumped over some rough ground and jarred him loose, into the cultivator. Her mother had jumped onto the furrow rack and tried to pull him free but had lost her footing as well.

She had been five.

After that she was fostered, and shuttled about a few times before being caught in a foster trap. Many Arcadians knew they existed but no one really seemed to be able (or, possibly, willing) to do anything about them. By the time she was twelve she was fully sexually experienced with Academy troopers and a foster mel, Ettren, two halfyears her senior, who had been compelled as much as she into the act.

He wasn't her first fuck but he was her first love. Looking back she supposed it had been camaraderie as much as love, a desperate clinging together between them because, with the two of them at least, there was tenderness and closeness, a sense of

safety when they were in each other's arms. Certainly there had been little time for romance between them, but Ettren had always been good to her, had held her in the night when she would wake with troubled dreams and caress her forehead as she wept.

One night, very late, he had roused her with a small bag of clothing and dehydrated food and they had run away together into the trees. They had lived for a few weeks hand-to-mouth and those were among the greatest days of her life; they could swim, they could frolic, and they could enjoy each other privately, as both felt it was meant to be, and it had been good, a true sharing between them, lovemaking, not fucking for someone else's titillation.

One afternoon Ettren had stolen into a town to lift some food for them and had simply never returned.

Erekka, already too well versed in how the Academy treated runaway foster children, especially those who had been prostitutes, had known what that meant. She would never see Ettren again.

She mourned him and the next day began seeking Resistance soldiers. She wasn't even certain she'd be able to find any, but knew the Academy (or any town) was the last place she needed to be putting in an appearance. She'd be placed right back where she had escaped from, and then Ettren's sacrifice for her would have been wasted. It would have been better to die in the trees than to surrender like that.

For three days she wandered around, looking for any traces of soldiers, living off rainwater. Then, faint with hunger, she heard a rustle to one side of herself and her ears rang with some kind of high-pitched tone that she'd never heard before. Her intuition told her it had to be metacamo, and that meant there had to be a soldier there. She looked off to where she thought the sound had come from, seeing nothing but trunks and ground cover, and said to the empty air, "I want to be a Resistance soldier," and then had fallen to the ground in a faint.

She had woken several hours later with an infusion slug on her arm in the middle of a bivouac.

Now she held Alissa closer, thinking back that decade plus, glad they had accepted her. It was a hard existence and a dangerous one, but compared to what the troopers put fems through, it was a full-on paradise.

And that was why the Resistance took all comers, regardless of age. Young fems were not put into active service; most didn't see action until they were at least fifteen.

She had been no exception. But as she worked among the soldiers, drilling and practicing with them, looking after their things for them, she had grown, had matured, and considered the Resistance to be her real family now, a vast sisterhood bonded to each other by the consistency of their experiences and the commonality of their purpose. She had finally been assigned to a detachment, had worked her way up to Number Two fairly rapidly — just two halfyears — and then captained by fiat when her CO had been killed. They had not been lovers. The CO was in her late twenties and hadn't felt it would be proper for her to carry on with a teen fem. And she had dealt with that, feeling that her Old Woman was a bit like a combination of mother and sister, and had mourned for weeks after she cashed in.

Alissa had been nineteen when she made Number Two, and they had been close ever since. Nearly three halfyears now.

Her thoughts returned to Orekkio's callous announcement and she thought of what the troopers had done to Melitto. Was there a connection? By sublimating their more or less natural urges, were the troopers so full of self-denial that they expressed their frustrations in such a brutal way? Or was it just the old truth about power and corruption?

Did it really matter?

*Maybe, she thought. Maybe it does. I've known a few decent mels, mels who were (or would have been) as shocked as I was on learning of the fuckier side of Academy life.* But those mels weren't that common in the Academy ranks, she knew. It was as though the bad ones gravitated to the all-male posts while the good ones, sensing something awry, tended to keep away.

She wondered what happened to the decent mels who did join up. Did they become corrupted? Or were there simply too few of them to make a difference?

How could anyone see what was happening from the inside and not try to do something? And what really went on in the walls of those posts?

## TARGETS

NIKOLIS FINGERED THE SKINGEL PATCH above his right eyebrow gently. It was still a little sore under there. “Does it hurt?” Jek said urgently.

He had been doting on his friend all evening, because he felt that what happened was his fault.

The day had begun like most of their off days from classes — they didn’t go every day; they were in for eight and out for two, keeping a standard duoweeek/weekend schedule — except that they were going to be playing kickball that afternoon, the first real contest of the school season. They left for it around midday, Nik and Rena hooking up at her lane and walking hand-in-hand as usual. On the way the three of them discussed strategies, last-minute suggestions for taking out the opposing team, and by the time they had arrived felt fairly ready to take it on, even if they were a little nervous.

An actual match. Would they really play well?

They had. The game had been a resounding victory for them. They took an early two-goal lead and kept it through half time, then managed to stretch it farther as play resumed, finally ending the match with the score six to two. Their plays were wildly successful and they ran hard, throwing everything into it. The triumvirate of Jek, Rena and Nik was a potent one.

Then things had gone wrong.

When it was over Jek and Nik hugged each other joyously, and one of the opposing team’s players had said to Nik, “Why don’t you just kiss your melfriend and get it over with?”

Nik turned fligid. “What did you say, wormsucker?”

“Forget it,” Jek said. “It’s not worth it.”

“I’m not the wormsucker,” the other player said. “But I know your ass-buddy is, him and his fucked-up whore of a mother.”

Jek looked crushed and it was too much for Nik to see the pain on his face, and he had felt a sharp tension in him that broke in action and had gone in, swinging.

The fight hadn't lasted very long, and not much damage had been done to either mel. Their teammates had pulled them apart, Nik's opponent's nose fountaining blood, and it took Nik a few moments to realize that the stinging red haze in his vision — which he thought was just because he was still full of rage — was actually blood of his own, streaming from a cut on his eyebrow.

The coach had run up and broken the circled teams apart before it could become a riot. "That's enough, men. *Dragonflies*, hit the showers. Tekkru, get your butt over to the nurse, then you shower off too. You are in deep crap."

He had been patched up and then lectured by the coach, but that wasn't the end of the problems. He would have to speak with the administrator, he knew, and might be in a lot of trouble. He hoped not. He had never been in a fight before. He hadn't even known whether he *could* fight. At the time it didn't matter. Someone had said something vicious about Jek and he wasn't going to let it lie unanswered.

May had been absolutely furious with him and had promised him grounding for some time. Nik bridled at the injustice but kept quiet. If he had told why he'd got in the fight, he'd have to tell about Jek's history, and he didn't want to turn on his friend that way. Keolit had temporized with her, reminding her that Nik wasn't usually in trouble, that he must have had a good reason for what he did. On interrogation Nik had said he just didn't want to talk about it, and that had made May even more angry. "Well, then, you can just sit in your room until you decide you do want to talk, mister," she said, and Nik slouched away.

Now he looked at Jek, who was sharing his exile. Not because he had to, but because he didn't want his friend to endure it all by himself. 3cast was forbidden Nik for the duration so they couldn't play any games or watch crystals, but that didn't mean they couldn't read or talk. "Not really now," he said. "It stopped hurting a while back. But it feels strange. A little numb."

"Nik," Jek began, "I'm —"

"Jek, if you apologize one more time I think I'll mack." He softened. "Don't worry about it, mel. He had it coming. He said stuff that ... that..."

"Well," Jek said, "it wasn't like it was a lie."

"I don't care," Nik said. "No one says things like that about you. I'll kick anyone's ass. I don't care who it is or why they say it, I'll kick all their asses."

"You can't fight everyone."

“Why the hump not?”

Jek put his hand on his friend’s arm. “Nik. Listen. You fought for me. No one ever fought for me before. Thanks for that. Thanks for going to the line for me.

“But I know what people say. I know about the stories. And they’re true, Nik. I did fuck Kaletta, and I did suck trooper worms. And sometimes I even liked it. I’m a ... a wormsucker, a bender, and that’s that.”

“But —”

“*Did* do those things. Not *still am*. And that’s the difference, mel. You made that difference, you and Oli. You already did enough. More than enough. More than anyone ever has before. So let it go, mel. Just get it behind you.”

“How?”

Jek shook his head. “I dunno. For me it was because I got away from it. You and Oli took me away. And now I can feel algood, I think. I mean I still get really mad when I think about it, angry and sick, but there’s nothing I can do to change it. So fuck it. It’s either let it go or — or shoot myself or something. And I don’t want to shoot myself.”

“I don’t want you to either,” Nik said, his heart suddenly clenched. *Not this again. Please not this again.*

“I’m not gonna,” Jek said. “But that’s not the point. Point is that there’ll be stories about me a long time, maybe forever, and I don’t want to see you get into any crap for them.”

Nik sighed bitterly. “It’s not fair,” he said.

“No,” Jek said, taking his hand a moment. “It’s not.” He reached an inner decision. “And it’s not fair you’re grounded for — defending me like that.” He stood. “I’ll be back in a minute, algood?”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m gonna get everyone together. It’s time your folks knew.”

“Jek —”

“It’s time, Nik,” Jek said softly, and left.

“And so that’s it,” Jek said, looking about for a moment at the gathered faces. “That’s why the fight happened, and that’s why Oli and Nik came and got me that day.”

May and Day looked shocked, really stunned. Keolit — well, he had already known. And Nik was sitting right beside him with his arm across his shoulders. Like he

wasn't afraid, wasn't worried they'd think that the two of them had ... were ... were *together*.

It hadn't been as hard as he thought it would be, he realized with something like wonder. Just a few months ago he wouldn't have been able to say anything to anyone, would probably rather have died than had to tell, but now ... now was different. Nik's folks were good. He knew that. And Oli had nodded to him as he went on, letting him know it was still all good, and Nik had been there the whole time.

May looked at her husband and swallowed, and Jek wondered in alarm if she was going to mack. She sure looked like she might. "Uh," she said.

"Yeh," Day said.

"I think Oli had an idea before they came to get me that night," Jek said. "Nik saw what was happening, and he told him, but I think he heard things before. I ... I'm sorry."

"Why are you *sorry*?" May said.

Jek frowned. "Well, because you let me live here, and you trusted me. And I kept it a secret anyway, so I ... I guess I lied to you. And now Nik got into a fight because of it." He lowered his eyes. "I'll understand if you ... if you want me to leave."

"No way," Nik said. "No *way*." He looked to his parents. "You don't want him to go, right?"

May shook her head instantly. "Absolutely not, Jektres," she said, and then moved to sit next to him on the bed, on the other side of Nik. "Jek, honey ... I can't begin to tell you how sorry I am that happened to you. It wasn't right, and there's no way I'll ever forgive That Woman for it."

Jek shrugged.

"Tom, is there a way we can —"

"Uh," he said, looking guilty and sorrowful. "Probably not. Not without two adult witnesses, or one witness and evidence."

"You have got to be kidding."

Oli shook his head. "Day's right," he said sadly. "And even if we had a witness and evidence, Jek would be in as much trouble as Kaletta."

"That has got to be the most fuc — the most stupid thing I've ever heard," May said quietly. "So she just gets away with it?"

Her husband shrugged uneasily.

“Damn the Academy,” May said, and Jek could see Oli let it go. She wasn’t angry with her older son for wanting to join. She was angry at the Academy itself for having the rules it did. “Damn them for doing ... what they did, and damn them for their mindless laws.”

Jek sighed. He’d been through this himself, over and over in his head. May looked at him and saw his expression. “I guess I shouldn’t re-till that ground, should I?”

“It’s — it’s just ... it’s over.” Jek shrugged. “It’s over, and I want to ... get on with life.”

“Of course, honey,” May said, hugging him. In a moment he hugged back. It was still algood. He could tell that it was. He was still welcome, still loved. His last fears crumbled, and with them came more tears, the tension in himself almost physically deflating. She held him a while, understanding at last the distant hurt looks he sometimes had, crushed that he would have such a burden, and let her own tears flow on his behalf. Nik got up, went into the sani, and came back with handfuls of tissues. She laughed a little and took them. “As for you,” she said to him, “what you did today was wrong, you know that. Fighting isn’t the way to handle things.”

“Yeh, I know.”

“But I also understand why you did it. I think if I’d heard what that little shi — what that mel had said, I would have slapped his face for him. Niko, you need not to be getting into fights. I’m sorry I gave you grief for it, and you’re not grounded any more, but there’ll still be troubles at school.”

“Yeh,” Nik said. He knew, of course. He might be suspended for a while, might even be put off the team.

“We’ll try to help with them,” May said. “But you have to understand that actions have consequences, even if sometimes what you do seems right at the time.”

“It still seems right,” Nik said. “I wanted to bash his head in.”

“And it’s good that you didn’t. A bloody nose is bad enough.”

Nik closed his eyes and nodded his head. He was still angry but knew there was no point arguing about it.

“Jek,” May said, “do you want to ... talk to someone about this?”

“Like who?”

“Well, there are people who help other people deal with their problems...”

“An intercessor?”

May nodded.

“I — no, I don’t want to talk to one of those,” Jek said.

“But why?”

*Because I couldn’t trust him, Jek thought. He might report me and then I’d be in Retraining, and if he knew about Nik and me ... playing, I’m sure I’d be in, and Nik too, probably.* “Uh, because I’m — I’m getting over it. I don’t need help.”

May studied him. “Everyone needs help sometimes, Jek, even mels. I know it’s a manly thing to say, ‘No, I’m algood,’ even when your legs are off and lying on the ground next to you. There’s no shame in saying you need someone to talk to.”

“That’s not it, May,” Jek said. “I talk. I do. I talk to Nik, and I’ve talked to Oli, and now you and Day. I have people I can talk to.”

“Well, we’re not trained...”

“So what? You’re here and you ... you care. Because you want to, not because you’re paid to. It’s ... I’d rather just keep it like this.” He thought for a moment. “If it doesn’t seem like I’m getting better, uh, you know, improving or whatever after a while, then yeh, maybe then. But for now...”

May nodded slowly. “Algood,” she said. “But if you change your mind —”

“Yeh,” Jek said. “Thanks.”

She hesitated, then nodded and kissed his forehead. “If you and Nik and Oli want to stay up late tonight, you can,” she said.

“Uh, thanks. Maybe.”

“Algood. We’ll leave you alone for a while then.” And with another brief hug for him, she stood and left with her husband.

Jek looked at Oli and Nik. “You think it’s still algood with them?”

“Yeh,” Keolit said. “No doubts.”

Jek nodded. *Then maybe it really is all over, he thought. Finally.*

Nik nudged him. “Wanna play 3cast?”

Jek smiled. “Yeh,” he said.

Alone with her husband, Eleisa let her feelings go, and Tomis held her as she wept against his shoulder. She shuddered and gasped, feeling her heart break again and again as she thought of what Jek had gone through, what he had had to tolerate, how long it had gone on. More than seven halfyears. It just wasn’t right. None of it was.

And she berated herself to think of how she had judged that poor mel on surface appearances, how she had looked at him the first time Nik brought him home — he was filthy and disheveled, wearing only some draggled clouts, no tunic or shoes, and looked *risky*. Like he had been up to mischief very recently and was worried about being caught for it. She hadn't trusted him. Had judged him instantly.

But Nikolis had not given up, had refused to let her make decisions for him about his friends, and she saw now that her son had been right. He had seen past the appearance, had seen something else in Jek that was obviously there, but that she had let be distorted by her immediate prejudice. Something basically good, basically sweet, covered by his distant surface, a protection he'd put up around himself to keep everyone away from an unspeakable sorrow. A horror that was almost beyond comprehensibility.

*And he feels guilty about it! As though it was all his fault!*

She sobbed more.

And if her son had not fought her — what then? What of Jektres?

*He'd still be there. Being ... used.*

She wept harder at the thought and Tomis held on to her, silent. He knew she just needed to let the tears out right then, that his man's way — *let's go out and fix it* — wasn't right at the moment, when what she needed most was her woman's way: *Let me cry a while, let my feelings run first. We'll talk later.*

Oh, how she loved him. He understood her, wasn't afraid when she showed her feelings as she knew some men were with their wives, and she understood him, and together they had made two beautiful lives, two precious and special mels, and those mels had proved themselves by helping someone who needed it more than she could have ever guessed.

She felt sick to think of the other folks she knew, those who had warned that Jek was bad news for her son. How many of them had known or suspected what was really going on with him? How many of them had heard stories? And then refused to do anything, to try to help?

Why had it been left to a nip of thirteen to do all the hard work? To persist, to remain true, to crack through that shell and let Jek's real self begin to shine out?

Damn and hell with it all, *why had the adults failed?*

"I ... Tom."

"Yeh," he said, and kissed her brow. "I'm right here, love."

“How? How could it happen? And — and how could Niko just ... just take it all on? Cret, Tom. He’s so damned strong.”

“He has your heart, love. Big. And broad, and unbreakable.” Tomis was floundering as well, though; he hadn’t known just how strong his son was. And he was saddened that he’d been tested so severely as he had been.

But oh he was so proud.

“He learned the value of friendship from you, Elli. And he carried that lesson forward.”

“Yeh,” Eleisa said, wiping her eyes, then stopping as her husband kissed at her tears. “But Tom — what Jek had to ... to *endure*...”

“I know. It’s ... huge. Awful. I can’t believe he lived through it.”

“Tom, if That Woman ever ... if I ever see her and you’re around, you keep me off her.”

“I will.”

“I mean it, Tom. I am serious. If she’s around and I have a knife, or a club, or even my bare hands...”

“I know, Elli. I know.”

“I’ll kill her.”

“I know.”

“I’ll do it, Tom. I’ll murder that fucking bitch, and then tell everyone why.”

“I know.”

She sighed, shuddery. “We have good mels, don’t we?”

“The best, Elli, the best.”

“But the Academy ... oh, sometimes I wish it would go away. It was the Academy that got Jek into this, and the Academy that lets it go on.”

“Yeh,” Tomis said. He had been thinking the same. “Keolit knows that. He sees it, recognizes it. I think that ... that once he’s in, he might try to change it.”

“Do you think he can?”

“He’s your son, Elli. If he can’t, no one can.”

She kissed him and gave a watery smile. “You’re a good man,” she said.

“Thank you. And you’re a good woman.”

“Do you think ... I know Jek said he didn’t want to talk to an intercessor, but...”

Tomis considered for several moments. “I think maybe it would be algood to let

him guide himself a while. Yeh, he might need help. But he does have us, like he said, and Keolit and Nikolis, and maybe that's what he needs more than anything.

"You've seen how he's changed already. Just a couple months, and look at him. He's standing taller, he's happier. He's eating well and working, and he's getting stronger all the time, and he doesn't have that pale sick look about him any more. And he smiles so much now, and he laughs."

Eleisa nodded. Jektres, at first, had almost never smiled. Or laughed. And now it bubbled from him, a spring that sometimes couldn't be capped, was infectious. She smiled, even now, to think of it.

"When I first saw him I thought maybe he had cancer, one of the types not even the viruses can stop. He looked that sick. You remember?" His wife nodded. "He had those circles under his eyes, and he was in algood shape but he seemed scrawny anyway. If he had been a sapling I would have thought he wouldn't last the halfyear. It was like he was ... drooping.

"But look at him now. He's — he's flourishing. He's learning, going to school and liking it, he's getting new friends, he's doing well on the kickball team now, and mel can he ever eat."

Eleisa laughed. "Yeh, he does pound the food in."

"Well, your cooking is seductive. But it's more than that and I know you see it."

"Yeh," she said.

"He doesn't look — haunted any more."

"No, he doesn't," she said thoughtfully.

"So maybe give him a little more time, more room. If troubles come up he might want someone professional to talk with. And even if they don't he might decide to do it on his own. But he's doing pretty well right now, I think, and the balance might be fairly delicate."

Eleisa nodded. She understood what Tomis was saying. As a resident of a dwel-cap she had to have some engineering skills to keep the machinery functioning, and she had learned very quickly not to try to adjust something that seemed to be working fine on its own, even if to her it seemed a little out of tune. She had tried that once with the sani recyc system, had tried to make it run a little more quietly, because the gurgles late at night sometimes irritated her. The adjustment had stopped the gurgles, but had also caused a small backflow in the system itself, and one morning about a week later she

had been horrified to turn the tap in the dinitchen, expecting clear water as always, only to be greeted by a foul puslike flow of dinitchen waste, shower drainage, urine and worse, unreclaimed.

Tomis had laughed heartily when she admitted to what she had done and helped her fix it without any rancor, without even lecturing her, as she was sure he might. Her own father would have. But he'd let it go, had just quietly purged the tanks and sterilized the lines, then had taken the refuse out to the orchards for the trees (which had all been saplings then), had never lost his good nature, and she had learned her lesson, and about a halfyear later Keolit had been born.

“So maybe he doesn't need to stop gurgling?” she said.

Tom chuckled. “Let 'im gurgle a little.”

“Yeh,” she said, settling against him. “Gurgles mean things are happening.”

“They do,” her husband said.

“They mean things are — filtering. Getting clear.”

“Sometimes, yeh.” He liked the analogy.

“Algood. Algood.”

“But do watch him, Elli,” Tom said. “You've got a good sense for when things are out of true, and if you have a feeling something's wrong, you might be right about it.”

“Thanks,” she said.

“You're welcome.” He kissed her brow again. “Did you notice?”

“Notice what?”

“Earlier. What Jek called us.”

“I don't ... what do you mean?”

“Before, when you and he were talking about the intercessor, he called you May, and he called me Day. Just like —”

He paused as the realization hit her and she began to cry softly again. “Just like Keli and Niko.”

“Yeh,” Tom said.

“Oh, honey — he really feels it, doesn't he?”

“He does,” her husband said.

Neither spoke for a while. They both knew that in Jektres they had another son now, and they both let that knowledge fill the space about them.

“I love him,” Eleisa said.

“I know,” Tomis said. “I love him too.”

“We’re doing algood, aren’t we?” Eleisa said. “I mean — with him, and with our own, and with each other.”

“Yeh,” Tomis said. “We have a couple good sons. Three now, I guess.”

“I can’t believe it. That we’ve made it so far along. From nothing, nothing but a dwelcap and some scrubby little bushes to today. I always knew it would be a good life with you, Tom, but I didn’t know it would be this good.”

“You don’t think we’d’ve made it this far if you weren’t by my side every minute, do you?”

“Oh, you Manly Men can do anything.”

“No,” Tom said seriously, “we can’t. Not without a helpmate.”

“How is it possible,” Eleisa said, “that after twenty halfyears you still manage to say the sweetest things?”

“It’s a newsletter,” her husband shrugged. “We pass it around and trade notes. Oops — I shouldn’t have said that. Secret’s out. Now I’ll have to bury you in the orchard.”

She chuckled against him and they relaxed into each other’s arms, and then they heard the recyc gurgle, and they stared into each other’s eyes and almost suffocated with laughter. Lightened, relaxed.

Because things were filtering, getting clear, getting algood.

Pretten exhaled slowly, keeping his bead tight, the sight unwavering in his sure grip. The crosshairs locked onto the mel driving the GP, found his center of mass, then crept up to his head. Only a few seconds, really, and he squeezed, stroked, willed his weapon. There was a *tik* from its mechanism and the sight flickered a moment as the image caught in its crystal.

The GP rolled on, the head of trooper at its console still unexploded.

Snipers had to stay sharp all the time, and these mock assaults were the best way for it to happen. The only difference between the target practice and the real thing was that the rifle had not discharged, an image made instead, an image of the hairs drawn black fine and true over the oblivious features of the objective, more specifically painted directly atop his right temple. Proof of his accuracy.

He was good, as good as the Old Woman, and that was saying something. They

had begun really testing against each other, declaring specific targets on each recon mission: The right ear, the tip of the nose, the left eye. Each time they compared results, they found they had both centered their marks precisely, and at a range of a klick that was not an insubstantial accomplishment.

“Got ’im,” he sighed to his throat mike in a distracted way, reporting his progress to the soldiers below. He ignored Balia’s complimentary reply, tinny in his earpiece, as he drew his sight along the second vehicle in the convoy, then the third, *tik flicker, tik flicker*, and two more right temples were marked with the shadow of death.

He leaned back slowly, letting the world come back to him, widening from his total focus on his task. He always felt peaceful after practice, calm and at ease, and he relished the sensation for a few moments before shinnying down the trunk and deactivating his camo. The whine dropped to nothing, leaving a signature ringing, *afterecho*, like the afterimages of his objectives on his right retina.

“All three?” said Balia quietly.

“Yeh,” Pretten said. If this had been a real engagement, all the GPs would have been driverless, plowed into the trunks by the side of the road and pummeled by shoulder-launched incends from the three soldiers closer to the highway.

Those fems appeared now, dodging low amid the trunks to their rendezvous. He repeated his confirmation of success and they nodded at him, impressed. He was connecting now, was connected, actually, not just an outsider any more with a double indemnity because of what he toted around inside his tighties.

He thought of Tegsor, how he had been before the Retraining, the times they had played at Academy and Resistance together as young mels. Pretten had an air rifle and was absolutely brilliant with it, had been since he was a nip of ten. He had never suspected, then, that he’d be using that skill now in the way he was.

But then, that was before he’d known he was a bender, before he knew that Teggy was in love with him. And as their friendship had grown and their bodies had changed over the halfyears, they had discovered together something that neither knew he was missing until ... well, until they’d shared it. Discovered it, and gave it freely to one another, and then...

Well.

He carefully packed the weapon into its ectmit case, making sure the oilfoam nestled around the blue-black metal of the barrel. Arcadia loved to rust rifles. After he

had it stowed properly he nodded to Balia, who nodded back, and they settled in to wait for their relief.

Someday, Pretten knew, he would not be taking images of his targets.

Someday the troopers would begin paying. Paying for Teggy. And for any other bender they Retrained.

But not today.

Dealing with the school's administrator was not as easy for Nik as his family had been, as he expected. He wasn't going to discuss the real reasons for the fight, although Jek was willing to back him up on the account; he didn't want his friend given any more grief. He decided instead that he'd just apologize as profusely and sincerely as he could and accept whatever decision was passed down.

The *Dragonflies'* coach came in on his side. Even though he didn't know all the details, he knew Nikolis to be a good player and, what was more important, not prone to displays of violence. In all the halfyears he had been attending school and playing on any team, from peewees to regulars — his entire educational life — he had never been in so much as a heated tussle, let alone an open fistfight.

The administrator listened to the coach's arguments silently, occasionally glancing over at Nik and Jek and Rena (who had shown up to offer him solidarity). He was also aware that most of the rest of the kickball team was outside his office portal, waiting to hear his decision. He recognized that the gathering was not meant to threaten; rather, Tekkru's teammates *cared* about him, the fem and mel in the office with him caring the most of them all.

It wasn't as bad as it could have been. The maximum penalty for fighting was a semester-long suspension from school with no opportunity to make up the classwork independently (which would have meant a setback on Nik's general educational course). What Nik got instead was a one-duoweek suspension. He could make up that ground with virtually no strain.

He could also have been expelled from the team, but that was more up to the coach than the administrator. Both men agreed that Nik needed to be punished for his actions, but they also agreed that a permanent expulsion from the team would damage both him and his teammates more than the offense warranted. Thus he was given a five-game suspension. He could still attend practice, but when there was a match he had to

stay on the sidelines.

Finally, he was required to deliver a written apology to the mel he had been fighting.

Of all the punishments that one rankled the most. In Nik's mind he had been entirely right from the first swing, had been defending his best friend's reputation. To have to apologize for that — to say, in essence, that he was wrong for fighting on Jek's behalf — was very hard to accept. But he caught Jek's face from the corner of his eye and submitted.

Keolit helped him draft his letter of apology. Nik didn't even know how to begin. Had he had his way it would have said:

Hello. I'm writing to say that I'm sorry.

Sorry I didn't kick your butt so hard it ended up between your shoulder blades. Sorry I didn't make you eat a kilo of infield sod for what you said. Sorry that you're such a tard all you can do is try to make yourself better by knocking other people down. Sorry that you are such a crap head that the only femfriend you'll ever have is your pillow, and I hear it wants to break up with you.

I Am Most Sincerely Sorry,

Nikolis Tekkru

Jerres School *Dragonflies* player #17

Oli read it and laughed for a long time. "That's not what they have in mind, bro," he said at last.

"I know," Nik said.

"But it is pretty damn funny. Especially the part about the pillow. Let's see if we can come up with something a little better, though."

"How?"

Oli considered him. "I understand you don't want to apologize to that nip, and I understand why. So think about apologizing not for socking him good, but for behaving in a way that damaged the team and didn't show sportsmanship."

Nik ruminated the suggestion. "Yeh," he said, "I think I can manage that." In

about half an hour he had something better worked up, and Keolit offered some more ideas. After further polishing May and Day nodded over it, and he got the administrator's and coach's approvals as well before sending the message to the other mel.

Respected Fellow Kickball Player:

In our recent match against each other there were words between us that came to a fight, and I feel I should apologize for my unsportsmanlike conduct.

My behavior was not typical of the Jerres School *Dragonflies* tradition, which is meant to foster a sense of friendly rivalry with neighboring township kickball teams. I am sorry for acting out of line with that tradition.

I regret any negative feeling that might have developed as a result of my action, and accept responsibility for fighting on the field, which is not the way a *'Fly* behaves.

Sincerely,

Nikolis Tekkru  
*Dragonflies #17*

It was a marvel of politics, Nik realized. Nowhere did he directly apologize for bloodying his opponent's nose, but he managed to convey a sense of regret anyway. And that was honest; he *could* feel regretful for acting out of line with the team's charter, and he could feel bad about having done something that might make his teammates look bad — but he didn't have to come out and directly say *I'm sorry I hit you*, and that was good, because he wasn't.

The note was sent and no response was forthcoming. That was also fine with Nik. He didn't want to carry on correspondence with that worm neck anyway. He just wanted to put everything behind him.

He spent his school suspension at the homestead, working in the orchard each day. And he didn't complain about it, because even if things were still stupid and unfair he knew that whining over it would make everything worse. Besides, it wasn't so bad. He liked Oli and liked working among the trees, even if sometimes it got disgusting (like

with the manure) or he ended up with very sore arms (like when he had to wheel barrow after barrow of soil to different trees, then use a shovel to shore up berms around them so their roots would have a catchbasin for water). He'd been doing chores like that regularly for most of his life anyway, and his shoulders and back were equal to the tasks.

He discovered that Jek gave *really* good back-rubs, long slow massages that loosened the bunched masses around his neck and upper arms at the end of the day. He considered asking his friend how he had learned the skill, but decided not to; probably it was another thing he had been made to do sometimes when Kaletta had her *guests* over. He guessed the troopers sometimes were sore as well, and wanted a rubdown or something before they got to the main reason for being there. (Or maybe after they were done.)

Jek taught him some of the basics, showing him how to identify sore spots and tight spots, then how to use his fingertips, palms or even knuckles to work them out. Nik found he liked working over Jek's shoulders that way. His body was getting stronger all the time now and the muscles felt very good under his hands.

And he really was a bender, Nik knew now. They'd discussed it one afternoon at the pond. Nik had thought, off and on, about the looks Jek gave other mels, about how he only *talked* to fems and didn't show any real interest in them beyond conversation, remembered what Jek had said to him the day of the fight. He finally worked up the nerve to broach the subject. "Hey Jek."

"Yeh?"

"Uh ... do you like fems at all?"

Jek got visibly uncomfortable. "Sure. Course." He tossed a small twig into the water and watched it bob and float.

"Oh." They sat a bit. "Only — well, there are some fems at school that like you, and..."

"Yeh," Jek said. "I know."

"So why don't you, you know..."

"What? Ask one out? Fuck her?"

Nik's face got hot. "No, but, you know..."

"Sorry," Jek said. He sighed. "It's just ... well ... yeh, I like fems algood. But I'd rather just be with ... mels."

"Oh."

“I mean it’s more comfortable, you know? Natural. To me anyway.” He shrugged uneasily. “I dunno why. It’s just how I feel.”

“Oh. But if you like fems a little, maybe you could be ... you know, friends with one, like me and Renetta, and then...”

Jek looked over the water for a long time. “I’ve tried, mel.”

“You have?”

“Yeh. Couple times. Only ... it just didn’t work.”

“Why? Did you get in arguments or something?”

“No, we got along algood. But ... uh, when I was, you know, close to them, when we’d be ... having sex, I’d still be thinking of mels.”

“Really?”

Jek smiled at Nik’s disbelieving tone. “Yeh, I know it sounds crazy.” He looked over to his friend. “But it’s true. She’d be ... uh, my worm would be in her mouth, you know, only I’d have my eyes closed and be thinking of a mel doing it, not a fem.”

“Oh. Well...”

“Yeh?”

“Well, d’you think maybe it could be because of ... of her? You know, That Woman?”

Jek thought a while, really thought about it. “I’ve wondered,” he said at last. “But probably not. I mean, I liked being with those fems. It wasn’t like being with her. It was ... fun, you know, felt good. Uh, and...” Jek swallowed. “And, well, sometimes it was algood ... with her, too.” Nik gaped at him and he shrugged helplessly, angrily. “I know how fucked up that sounds. But — well, sex feels *nice*, Nik. Even if sometimes you don’t want to ... be with the one you’re with, it can still feel ... nice.” He shrugged again. “Your body sort of ... gets into it, and you just let it go and sort of go along and wait for it to be over, but if you don’t think about what’s happening, if you just pay attention to the feelings and forget everything else, well, then it’s almost algood.”

“Oh.” Nik didn’t know what else to say.

They sat silently for a while longer.

“Nik?”

“Yeh.”

“You algood? With me, I mean? You know I’m ... a bender.”

That was really the question, wasn’t it? His best friend was a bender; was that al-

good?

And what about the things he thought of doing with Jek? Were those hopes, things it was algood for him to imagine, or were they little betrayals of their trust, their friendship? If they were to do any of those things one day, would Jek really want to be doing them, or would he be ... just *going along*, like he said it had been with That Woman?

He studied Jek for a few moments. Well, it really didn't matter that he was a bender. Whatever had happened to him to ... make him that way, or if he had been born that way, it didn't mean anything. He was still Jek. And whatever thoughts Nik might have had about the two of them, he wasn't going to press it. Jek didn't need that from him. He just needed to know they were still friends. "Yeh, I know. It's algood."

"Thanks."

Nik nodded and they watched the water ripple in the breeze for a while.

"Jek?"

"Yeh."

"What's it like? With a mel, I mean?"

Jek looked surprised. "Uh, well, it's sort of like how it is with a fem, mostly. But mels do it differently. They like things in different ways."

"Oh. So it's not like being with a fem?"

"No. Yeh. Uh. It's more ... I don't know, to me it's like there's more understanding. And no one has to worry about babies or anything."

Nik smiled. "Yeh, I guess that's true."

"And I think mels know what other mels like better than fems do. So it's better, you know, with a mel. For me anyway. Fems don't — you know, they got different ... parts."

"So it ... it feels different for them?" This was a revelation to Nikolis. It had never crossed his mind before to think that for a fem the experience of sex would not be like it was for a mel. But when he thought about it, it made sense. After all, they didn't have a worm to put inside; worms got put inside of them, and that was only the *beginning* of the differences. (The ones of which he was aware. He was sure there were more that he didn't have any clue about at all.)

"Yeh," Jek was saying, "I'm pretty sure it does. They don't suck worm as good as a mel does, anyway. Some think they do, but all they're doing is yanking on it a lot or us-

ing teeth or something. Like they think the only way a mel gets the feeling is if his worm's half ripped off."

"Ouch," Nik said sincerely.

"Yeh," Jek said. "And no stuff comes out of them, so they can get the feeling more often."

"They can?"

"Yeh," Jek said. "If you do it right they get it like five or six times in a row before you have yours."

Nik's eyes widened. "No *way!*"

"Yeh," Jek said. "Remember that. If you ever end up, you know, with Rena, or any other fem, you can really make sure she never forgets it. Your fingers are a good start. Rub her with them, put 'em in a little. Then use your tongue. Give her the feeling that way, just stay down there a while and keep going while it keeps happening to her. Like three or four times. And then put your worm in and go ahead like usual."

"You mean *lick* her? Down there?"

"Yeh," Jek said. "It's not bad or anything, it tastes algood, just a little salty. And smooth and wet, and soft, sort of. And fems *love* it when you do it. And it's really easy to do. I mean you don't get tired like you do humping, because it's just your tongue, you know, not your back and legs and everything, so you can do it a *really* long time, and when you do, they think you're the best hump they ever had."

"But even if you just use your hands, she's gonna love every second of it. Make your fingers like this." Jek demonstrated, index and third a little curved, the middle finger's tip protruding. "And put your hand right on her, and let the middle one move in a little. That's nice because you don't even have to take off her clouts. You can do it in a 3cast or something, you know, while everyone else is watching the entertainment, and no one even knows what's going on."

Nik nodded and digested this new information, understanding even the pitch of Jek's hand. His worm was filling a little (well, algood, a *lot*) as he thought of playing with Renetta's body like that. But they'd never gone past kissing and a little rubbing hips together through their clouts. Mel. If fems could get the feeling that often, they were pretty humping lucky. "Jek?"

"Yeh?"

"Why don't fems just — I mean, with us it's ... we play with our worms, like it's no

big deal.”

“Yeh...”

“So why don’t fems do that?”

“What, you mean play around in front of mels, or each other or something, like ... like we do?”

“Yeh.”

“Some do, mel,” Jek said. “It just takes them a while to decide if they really want to or not.”

“Why?” Nik always knew when he was in the mood. And he never had doubts. If Rena ever asked him to do *anything* with her, he would have in a second. Even the licking part, which was starting to sound intriguing now that he knew it happened. It would be fun for her, he imagined, and maybe even fun for him too, and they wouldn’t have to worry about her getting pregnant.

“I dunno, mel,” Jek sighed. “Maybe because they get babies and mels don’t. Maybe they’re worried about that.”

“Well, sheaths —”

“Yeh,” Jek said. “But ... Algood.” Something had just crossed his mind. In his studies he had read about something called *instinct*, which was what made animals behave in certain ways without their having to be taught. “Maybe it’s an instinct thing,” he went on. “Instincts take a long time to evolve, right?”

“Yeh,” Nik said.

“Well, if the instinct has been there for like a million halfyears, and sheaths have only been around for like fifty or whatever, maybe the instinct is stronger than the ... the *idea* of sheaths.”

“Hm,” Nik said.

“Because, uh, look. Algood. You and me, we got an instinct that makes us like sex, right? So we play with our worms a lot. Only we’re not supposed to, not in front of each other, because the Academy says it’s illegal. But the idea that it’s illegal came around with the Academy. The instinct is older, it’s been around longer, and so it’s stronger than the idea of the law.”

“You mean that mels always ... played?”

“I ... I’m not sure. But we can’t be the only two, right? Or else there wouldn’t even be a law. And we can’t be the first either, for the same reason. So it must have been hap-

pening *before* there was a law against it, and it must have been happening enough for them to notice, and someone decided it was wrong, so they made a law.”

It hadn’t occurred to Nik to think that maybe there were lots of other mels who played in front of their friends like he and Jek did, enough of them to be noticed. That maybe it had been going on for a long time, longer than the Academy had been around.

Other mels that did the same thing...

He wondered what it would be like to be able to talk to other mels like him, who liked fems but sort of liked mels too, and then he wondered if maybe he already knew some like that, only they were keeping it hidden like he was, because they were also afraid of going to Retraining. “But then why make a law about it if it’s an instinct?”

Jek shrugged. “Shit, I dunno. It’s not like killing someone or stealing stuff or anything. I mean it’s just squirting off. Something you do, like eating or crapping.”

“Maybe —”

“What?”

“Well, maybe the law is because of what was happening before. You know, with you. Like mels were being forced to ... to be with other mels.”

“Maybe,” Jek said doubtfully. “But if that’s true, why make a law when no one’s forcing anyone, like with us? And why do the troopers keep doing even more stuff, like what they were doing to me, when they’re the ones who are supposed to be enforcing the laws?”

And for that, neither of them had an answer.

## ATTRACTION

PRETTEN AND BALIA WERE FAIRLY CHUMMY NOW, Ereka saw, getting along like real colleagues. The mel was definitely on the way in with the detachment; he had earned their respect in many ways. His sharpshooting was expert, his demeanor with them was respectful and open, and his dedication to being a good soldier was total.

Ereka wondered if maybe Balia hadn't developed a bit of a crush on him. She didn't act like a schoolfem when he was around, but she did pay a lot of attention to him, and the two of them were regularly together on duty or off, talking or just hanging.

She wasn't particularly concerned. Even if Balia did feel more for Pretten than simple comradeship, he was still a bender. And even if she somehow managed to get past that (it *did* happen from time to time, just as some fems who were more or less exclusively interested in other fems could sometimes develop an uncharacteristic attraction to one specific mel), she was a good soldier — they both were — and she knew that for them the detachment would always come first. They wouldn't desert their posts to shag in the underbrush.

Pretten was as meticulous with his rifle as he was with everything else. Each day he stripped and lubed it, checked its bore, verified that the sight was stable and accurate. Actually he was better with his own piece than she was with hers. Thinking of how some mels equated rifles with worms, this didn't surprise her as much as it might have otherwise. But for him it seemed more than just an expected interest in making sure the tool of his particular trade was kept in tune; it was almost like a ritual, a kind of inner cleansing of himself along with the rifle's works, not that different, perhaps, from the Pollucan meditations she practiced regularly.

He disassembled it in a very specific way, seated crosslegged on the ground with an oiltarp spread before him, laying each element of the gun carefully on the glistening cloth, then picking up every piece, turning it over slowly in his fingers and inspecting it on all sides with a loupe cupped in his shooting eye, then moving on to the next piece before repeating the process, this time without the loupe but with an oiled cleansing

square, going through the parts in exactly the same order. Finally he would examine and clean the bore, peering into it intently with the barrel tilted skyward almost as though it was a telescope and he was looking for some astronomical wonder, moving on to work the patch of cloth in slowly, almost by the millimeter, his fingers peaked light and delicate on the rod, feeling for snags or imperfections. Then he would settle back for a few minutes, staring at the pieces in front of him, his eyes roving over them, a part at a time. At last he would reassemble the rifle and seat it, almost fondly, like a father putting his child to bed, into its oilfoam in the ectmit case.

One of the other soldiers asked, one night, why he did that. Not the inspection and cleaning; they understood that, but the way he would stare at everything for a few minutes before putting the pieces back of a piece. Ereka had listened carefully to his response; she was interested in knowing herself, finding out if her assumption was correct.

Pretten had looked thoughtful for a time while the fems waited for him to speak. By now everyone knew he had a way, often, of pondering a while before saying something. “Well,” he began at last, “it’s because I have to know it.”

“Know what?” a fem said, one of the ones who was still a little sweet on him. (Most, but not all, had given up by then.)

“The mechanism. How every part fits together. How they all connect, and interlock, and work.

“I imagine them nestling into each other, seated together with their tight clearances and precision fits, the way a shell rides in the chamber, the way the trigger trips the firing pin, the way the hammer springs and hits the charge and the powder burns. How the recoil slider flies back and the bolt chambers another round. How the breech pops the casing. How the slug travels down the barrel, spinning in the rifles.

“And how it’s all ready to go again after that, ready to fire again.”

“Why?” Balia said.

Pretten shrugged at her. “It helps me shoot better. It helps me ... *see* better.”

Ereka got it right away. Just as her inward sight stilled her thoughts and exposed her own motivations and feelings to her with complete lucidity, his regular exercises served as a means by which he could focus, find an inner point of stability.

No damn wonder he was a good shot. When he was at the trigger, he *was* the rifle; it was an extension of his consciousness.

After that his cleanings became a bit of a spectacle. The fems, those who were off duty, would gather around and watch him as he worked the weapon, silent to the last, and not a few seemed to find the same kind of inner calm he did, the effect sublimating. Some even began acting in a similar way with their sidearms and autorifles, and damned if they didn't turn out to be better shooters as well after a while. Even Ereka herself had started emulating the procedure with her own piece, and felt she understood it better now as a result. She had always known how it worked, of course, but now she was grasping it on a deeper level, a more whole level.

So apparently one *could* teach the Old Woman some new tricks after all.

Gradually their bivouac moved along in parallel to the highway, heading nearer the town as they watched the Academy movements. They needed to change position from time to time in order to keep the forest canopy from showing the effects of their proximity. After about three to five weeks of a bivvy being in one area, the pH of the soil would change, and within a couple weeks more the leaves in the trees overhead would begin to grow smaller and slower, betraying their location from above, unless they moved before that happened and the soil could be rinsed by Arcadia's regular drenchers. For such a large and fully developed system, the balance of the forest seemed particularly delicate.

They had just bugged out again and were settling in at the new site, half a kay from the last one, far enough that they wouldn't have contamination bleed-over into the old camp. Pretten was at the jakes-digging, doing it all himself, his shoulders bare and rolling, arms swinging in the afternoon light, sweat dripping off him as he kept a steady rhythm. As he dug he sang a work song to keep his timing steady, his spade's tip chuffing into the soil in time with one emphasis, the soil dumped aside with the other, before back into the dirt again. The song was really intended to be sung in counterpoint among a group of workers, but since it was just Pretten at the task he sang both parts himself.

*I dig a hole*

*Oh dig a hole*

*And down it goes*

*Yeh down it goes*

*But don't you know*

*Oh don't you know*

*It's half a hole*  
*Just half a hole*  
*Got more to go*  
*Yeh more to go*  
*Till it's a hole*  
*Not half a hole*  
*I dig a hole...*

Balia watched him thoughtfully, maybe almost a little wistfully, as the muscles in his back bunched and knotted, stretched and smoothed, timed to the risings and lowerings of his torso. He paused with gratitude as she brought a decanter of water to him (*Just half a ... oh, thanks Bal, you're a lifesaver*), drinking half, Adam's apple bobbing as his head tilted back, and then pouring the rest over his hair, face and chest, and she watched with something a little like hunger as the rivulets rolled down his skin, rippling along his abdominal ridges, to be absorbed into the waistband of his fatigues.

Erekka smiled and shook her head. Crazy bitch. Not a chance, but let her have her eye-candy.

It occurred to her that Balia herself might not know what was happening. She didn't seem particularly self-conscious with him as a fem might who was beginning to be drawn to a mel, and it was fairly clear the Pretten was similarly unaware of her, well, possible interest.

Alissa nudged her from her reverie. "Want in?" she said softly.

"Huh?"

Her lieutenant nodded at the pair, still chatting lightly as Pretten caught his wind, leaning on the shovel, forearms crossed over the end of the handle. The muscles there clustered, veins running close to the surface, under the fine black gloss of hair. His biceps were as impressive, drawn and well-developed, and his shoulders were knobs of solid flesh. Balia was looking over this show of healthy young manhood as she talked with him, still apparently oblivious to the way her eyes said a lot more than her mouth did. "The pool. On when they figure it out about each other. Fiver to get in."

Erekka nodded at the words. Because, she saw now, Pretten was peeking at Balia a little, his eyes on her curves, kept under tight control above by her harness and tank, obscured below by her fatigues, but still distinctly there. She had an athletic lean build,

well toned, a little mellish actually, the effect enhanced by her buzzcut. Maybe that was the reason. But he seemed no more aware of what he was doing than Balia was. “Yeh,” she said. “Put me down for, uh.” She looked the pair over again. “Six duoweeks.”

Alissa nodded and jotted a note on her pad. “You’ll be splitting two ways if you’re right,” she said. “Most of us think about half that time.”

Erekka looked around at her. “How many are in on it?”

“Including you?”

“Yeh.”

“Everyone but them.”

Erekka chuckled as Alissa moved on to her duties and Pretten, his break finished, bent back to his work. Balia, she noticed, spent no little time considering his rear before returning to her mess detail.

*Hmm, maybe I guessed a little long at that.*

Being suspended from the games was harder on Nik than he at first thought it would be. Jektres and Renetta still played very well together on the field, but it was clear they were missing his presence. He knew their moves, their feints and offensive tactics, and saw plenty of times when, had he been allowed on the field, he would have been able to be ready to receive one of their passes or trade around, keeping the ball clear of the opposing players. Two of the five matches had been losses for the *Dragonflies*; the other three they had just barely won. They were early season games and so not that important to the team’s overall standing, but still, the losses hurt.

He was being given a direct lesson in the value of teamwork, being shown that just one player (himself) could mean the difference between a decisive victory and a bare one, or even defeat. In one way he felt a little pride; he could see that his presence mattered. But he also felt shame because he knew he was letting his teammates down by his forced absence.

For their part the other *Flies* didn’t seem to hate him for his suspension. Everyone had heard about what had been said to Jek, and an insult to one of them was an insult to all. They were more irritated that the adults around them had handed down the punishment, even though Nik had been the first to throw a punch. As far as they all saw it, he had not *really* begun the fight.

Jektres’s circle of friends was beginning to extend past Nik and Rena. He really

was good at kickball, and that won him respect; and he was progressing fairly well in his studies, so the other nips didn't pick on him so much any more about what his class-work involved. After the fourth match in Nik's suspension — a particularly close one between the *Dragonflies* and the *Green Citrons* — when Jek had saved a goal shot in overtime that would have ended the game with the *'Flies* at one point and the *Citrons* at two, and then managed to parlay it all along the field and turn it into a goal against the opposing team, the respect shot up enormously and all open taunting of him ceased. He was carried, beaming, off the field on the shoulders of his fellow *'Flies* while the watching crowd cheered him lustily (even the *Citron* fans; it had been a simply astonishing play) and from then on was met with general friendliness.

Nik observed several fems — some of them damned attractive ones, with globes and everything — approach Jektres after that, but while he allowed them to speak with him and flirt at him, he never seemed to return their advances. Nik wondered why, despite the conversations he and his friend had before. He was sure Jek could have had any of them that he wanted, possibly more than one, yet he somehow never seemed to want to take any of them on. Even if he was really a bender, could he be so much of a bender that he wasn't interested in fems even slightly? He *had* said they were algood.

Maybe Jek just needed some time off of fems for a while, after Kaletta. (Nik had discovered eventually that for her *us time* meant she wanted to have sex with Jek alone, just the two of them; when she wasn't having *guests*, he'd told Nik, he usually didn't sleep in his room. He was in hers instead, in his words, "Fucking her strem-soaked brains out." Nik had shuddered at the chill hatred in Jek's voice when he'd said that.) Or maybe he was waiting for just the right one to come along, like Rena had been for Nik.

Until he had met Renetta he had simply not understood why mels liked fems so much sometimes. But she had opened his thoughts to a completely new world, a new set of experiences. It was with her that he had discovered what holding hands, snuggling and kissing were like, and it was with her that he hoped to discover what making love was like someday.

She wasn't like any other fem he had ever known. She didn't mind getting muddy (even though it meant her long, beautiful hair would have to be carefully washed) and she was pretty good at wrestling. (Of course Nik didn't try too hard to win, since he liked it when she pinned him, their bare chests pressed together, her hips grinding knowingly against the front of his clouts.) And mel, could she run, and she had a scorching kickball

pass that, if he didn't catch it just right with his chest, was like a cannonball. She pulled absolutely no power back whether they were practicing or playing for real; she was one of the hardest players on the field after Jek and the team captain, whom Nik had once seen kick the ball all the way from midfield to the goal, sailing with spectacular precision in a flat low arc that kept it off the ground, to slam into the goalie's stomach so hard he had macked all over the backfield.

And the times she went to the pond with Nik and Jek were always fun. She would take off her tunic just like the mels did, and would splash and get into water fights and swimming contests and competitions to see who could hold his (or her) breath the longest. She was outmatched if it was the two mels against her in splash fights, but Jek often took her side, both of them pummeling Nik with coordinated waves until he had to retreat, laughing and sputtering. Then it would dissolve into a free-for-all, everyone splashing at everyone else with complete abandon.

Afterward they'd lie on the bank together and talk for a while, and then Rena and Nik would start kissing each other and Jek would quietly leave, letting them do whatever they wanted without feeling like they were being watched. A few times now Rena had almost put her hand on his worm, getting very close to where it stood from the front of his clouts when they were kissing, her fingers either really high on his thigh, almost nestling against where his legs joined, or her thumb riding in close as she put her hand on his hip, moving up and down in parallel to the rise. And recently she had begun reaching under the waist of his clouts to feel his bare rear while they kissed each other.

One afternoon he had finally screwed up enough courage to do the same, and found that her rear was a little like a mel's might be — it was smooth, firm with the muscles she had developed playing kickball, just a little dimpled. He got very close to having a feeling right then, as close as he had ever come without actually finishing. After they were done kissing he had shivered as though caught in a sudden cold rain and he had been baffled, worried he was getting sick. She asked him what was wrong but he didn't have an answer, and she had held him a while until his amazing shaking subsided.

He was beginning to think that soon he might actually see her, not just tunicless, but without her clouts on either, and he definitely liked that idea. He also wondered if she wanted to see him naked. Had she asked, he positively would have complied with her wishes. He was having fantasies about it, fantasies where she would say, quietly, "Let me see your worm," and he would take off his clouts and stand before her probing

gaze, fully bare, letting her look at him *all over* as she wished, and her eyes would get very round and she would say, “Ooh, I like it — what does it feel like? Can I touch it?” And he would say yes and her hand would move, closer ... closer ... and then he’d get his feeling, brought back to himself either in the shower with Jek before him, or by the pond, with Jek beside him.

In other fantasies she stumbled across him and Jek when they were playing together, and threatened to tell everyone if they didn’t both Do It with her immediately, so of course, in his mind, there was nothing else for it but to obey her command and she would take off her togs, lay on the bank, and Nik would put his worm in, and then Jek would, or maybe Nik would be in her and Jek would be in both of their mouths, his worm caught between their kissing lips.

What he didn’t suspect was that the second fantasy wasn’t too different from what Jek occasionally let himself imagine. He was particularly fond of the idea of watching Nik and Rena together, then joining in so they could both kiss his worm while Nik had his feeling in his femfriend’s body, and then, when he was finished with such a fantasy and it was just Nik next to him on the pond’s bank, he would feel that worry again, that fear that he was leading his friend into trouble; and with that worry came a crashing wave of guilt, a sense that he was ungrateful, that he was selfish, maybe even dangerous. That perhaps Nik would be living a ... *safer* life right now if they hadn’t ever met.

Still, the next day, the fantasies would return.

And so it was that, even amid their secret lives together, Jektres and Nikolis had further secrets.

Erekka missed it by one week.

They’d bugged out again, changed locations, and Pretten had, as before, volunteered to dig out the new jakes pit all on his own. None of the fems complained; it was aching, painful work, and Pretten was now more or less relied on to take up the hardest physical tasks.

He was certainly more than equal to any challenge. His build, when he had first joined the detachment, had been wiry and slender, but as the duoweeks had gone on and turned into months, he had definitely enlarged, testosterone rising to the fore and slabbing him all over with rigid flesh. At first Erekka had tried to assign some of the

more sturdy fems to help him, not wanting to turn him into a pack animal of some sort, but he had quietly outworked everyone around him, his physical industry as total as his concentration on his rifle cleaning.

In the evenings he had taken bets for a while on how many fems he could lift at once. They'd range along a cot and he would lay underneath, crosswise, and then put his palms against the cot braces and push.

The fems gave up on gelt bets after a while, after they learned that he could lift any three of them that way. But they still wanted the rides, some of them, pushed up into the air and almost giggling, could you believe that, soldiers and fems who hated mels *giggling*, and he was always obliging. It was a game for him, and a way for him to judge how much he had changed physically over time. And it really was good entertainment.

In the fifth duoweek of their mutual appreciation society, Balia had finally tried for Pretten, and had learned that he was as surprised at his feelings for her as she was in her attraction to him — but the surprise didn't stop them from sharing a cot.

She had simply slipped into his duvet the evening of his latest digging, quiet and nude, offering a back rub *and* a front rub if he wanted it, and within moments was certain of his interest. Their lovemaking had not been silent and, when it was clearly finally over (it went on for some time and was punctuated by frequent low moments as one or the other of them would regroup, then charge up again in rally), the rest of the detachment gave a spontaneous round of whistling applause.

The next morning they both appeared more than a little shocked, but also still very much in the flush of it. The other fems who had been drawn to Pretten, after initial grumbling, had allowed that he and Balia really were good together.

And, as Erekkka had predicted, their soldiering was not compromised.

There was something about Pretten. Something that spoke of real leadership potential. His taciturn ways flickered aside from time to time, showing a sharp mind and a good heart, a constant stable presence that seemed somehow above daily cares, yet still deeply involved in everything. And his corny farmboy swears were charming; he never used harsh invective. Most of the detachment had backed off on their own language over time, at first painfully self-conscious when Pretten was in earshot, eventually dropping into the habit almost naturally.

He wasn't an idol, and he wasn't a sex object. But he was steady, and he was re-

spectable, and that seemed to make a real difference for everyone.

And, it was clear, he and Balia were completely smitten with each other.

Often Ereka would wonder. If all mels were like Pretten, or even most, clearly many of Arcadia's troubles would simply evaporate. So why, in its four-million-half-years-plus of human evolution, had nature not produced more mels like Pret? Why were so many of them so willing to let violence take the place of detente, aggression act as love, contempt take the field over communication?

How had the species even got off the ground all that time ago?

*Well. Buddha laughs for a good reason: Something is cosmically funny.*

As Pretten lay in his duvet, Balia nestling satiated for the moment to his chest, his thoughts ran in similar lines to that of his captain. Balia was his first fem, and, he realized with wonder, his second love. No one would replace Teggy, of course, but he had been sure for a long time he could never love again. He had not once considered that a fem might be on his scopes. And then Balia had come to him and made her amazing offer, and it had seemed to him that a lot of things connected at once. A little like the mechanics of his rifle: Engineered, natural, and entirely foreseeable. Parts, moving together, seating and fitting.

He could never love again, he saw now, in the same way that he had loved Teggy, but he could love in a different way, and it was as true as (and different from) his first.

He wondered if that was what love was like every time. Was it always this new, this unexpected? This slow unfolding of one being into another, this astounding discovery that yeh, life could always be rekindled, its flavor sharpened again by another heart's beat?

Marriage. Benders. The Academy. Certainly the way things were now could not reflect the way they had always been, could they? How could anyone have survived all this time with those kinds of rules omnipresent?

The Academy's laws simply could not have reflected absolute truth, he saw. Not in the same way that two and two made four. (Or one and one made one, if circumstances were right, and his arms drew Balia nearer and she nuzzled him gently.) They were touted as being a kind of absolute compass of correct behavior — but they weren't ... real. Well, they were experientially existent, but they weren't valid. They worked in contravention to feeling, to truth of heart, and that was, on one level at least, a denial of

reality, and denial of reality was just another term for insane.

Was the Academy, as an institution, insane?

What did that word mean? What was insanity? If it meant sense and love going against popular mandate, then he, benders everywhere, and the Resistance were insane.

But what if insane meant denying a deeper truth? Not acting in a way that forced pain onto others (as the Academy troopers did), but one instead that let the body and the heart make decisions?

He saw the fault there. Some hearts were damaged, corrupted. Murderous, controlling, full of rage. Pure license could not be given, then, because some would abuse it.

But abuse, laws or no laws, always happened anyway.

Was there a middle ground? A place where — not laws, but guidelines — where there could be some kind of balance struck? One where mels were free to be benders or not as they chose, where mels and fems could carry on together without having to be married first, a place where respect and friendship were the true measuring factors of sanity, the abiding sources of judgment of good and evil?

A place where he, Balia, Teggy, everyone could find a little peace, a little solace?

He supposed that was what he and the rest of the Resistance was working to bring about.

Balia murmured and he said, “What?” But she didn’t answer, and he realized she had just been making sounds in her sleep, and soon he was down there with her.

## PASSIONS

NIK'S SUSPENSION FROM KICKBALL WAS LIFTED just in time for him to play on their first away game. They boarded the magbus in a chattering gaggle at the end of their school duoweek one afternoon, loading their sport bags and personal items into the overhead racks, and then coasted away from the school, beginning to sing fight songs.

*Dragonflies, Dragonflies  
Sweeping down from open skies  
Dive and play and dart away  
Never catch the Dragonflies!*

Nik and Rena cuddled together in the back while Jek sat beside them, occasionally glancing over at them and smiling. Since townships could be fairly far apart, this was an overnight trip, and he had an idea that maybe his friend would be off on some adventures with Renetta for a time, probably some rather ... delicate ones.

The idea didn't bother him *too* much. He loved Nikolis and didn't begrudge him his explorations with his femfriend. It stung, yeh, but he was good at pushing bad feelings aside, and Nik was happy, and that really mattered most to him.

He was pretty sure that Nik thought about Rena frequently while he and Jek were playing together, and didn't mind that his friend was using his presence as a reinforcement for his fantasies. Truth to tell he had had a few of them himself, involving (among others) the team captain, or sometimes a quarter of the mels' sport room *at once*. (He could just manage it, with one behind, another in front, and both hands occupied.) He was certain it would never happen. He got no signs from anyone else on the team except Nikolis that they were ... open to the idea of playing (or more) with other mels. But he still liked the thought of it, being surrounded by all those naked lean bodies, big and hairy and hard, everyone else watching in a circle and waiting for a chance

to join in, and him in the middle at the end, rising sticky to shower off the melstuf that covered him from ears to ankles while Nik (or maybe the captain) knelt before him and finished him.

As long as Nik was involved somewhere, the fantasy didn't feel like a betrayal, an infidelity, but still there was that concern. His thoughts, he knew, were well outside what most of Arcadia considered acceptable — at least in the open — and he didn't share them with Nik, because ... well, he didn't want to take the chance on hurting him.

Or scaring him off.

But most of the time he wasn't worried. Most of the time, now, he was at ease, and that was novel enough for him that he feared, at first, his emotions had switched off again. He wasn't used to living without a constant constriction of his chest or clench in his stomach, wasn't used to being able to simply relax and be. He was adapting to the feeling but he supposed it would take him some time yet; it was strange to not have something always poking at him from inside. He still had to keep his worst secret, his urgent fantasies (though he did have another in his carryings on with Nik), but at least he didn't have to worry any longer about being made to do things that — well — and sometimes he hadn't been forced. Sometimes he had enjoyed it.

He still wasn't sure what that said about him, whether he was so disrupted inside that he couldn't tell the difference any longer between *having* to do something and *wanting* to. And yet Nik knew about him, knew he was a bender, and Nik's family knew what had happened when he'd been with Kaletta, and still they ... they loved him, and not in a sickly, overwrought compensatory way, but with a simple and quiet presence that was much more profound than any demonstrative gesture could have been. The acceptance he met in spite of the truth being known balmed him even as it baffled him and let some old wounds begin to close.

They drifted along the lane for a time and the fight songs ended as the coach stood and began handing out playsheets. He had been watching their competition, the Odalisso *Tree Spiders*, and had carefully analyzed all their offensive and defensive plays for the season so far. The sheets kept coming and pretty soon everyone on the team had a thick sheaf of papes to study, about forty pages covered with diagrams and closely-written analyses. Some of the team members didn't really pay much mind as the coach began discussing plays, talking and snickering at each other quietly, but the Power Trio (as Nik, Rena and Jek were becoming known) were all attention. They knew away

games were harder to win, and had every intention of disproving the rule.

They sat with their heads close together, the captain joining the huddle, looking over the playsheets and the comments the coach had written, discussing what they would do to block this play or overturn that one, and the journey passed fairly quickly for them. They were mostly through the stack of papers when the bus glided to a stop outside the travelhostel where they'd be staying the night.

They loaded off with less exuberance than when they had boarded; the trip was over two hours in duration and a long journey always left everyone a little dazed. As they were checked in and split off to two-bed rooms (Nik and Jek having decided long before that they'd be sharing one), Jek looked over the clerk at the desk.

They got their passkeys and found the portal behind which they would be sleeping. As they unpacked their light collections of possessions Jek said, "The clerk was one."

"Huh?" Nik said, pausing from his careful tog-sorting. His athletic clothing — jersey, clouts and a supporter to keep his worm and sack from bouncing or being hit — was important to him. He had decided the way to handle it was to lay it out very carefully, fold it with complete precision, and then sort it into three drawers, one for each article. Rena had told them about that. According to her that was the way the captain always did it when they were on away matches, and the captain was more than just a damn good player. He had guided the *'Flies* to more away victories than anyone else before him in fifteen halfyears. Part of him knew it was just a silly superstition, but another part argued that if it boosted everyone's confidence, maybe it was algood.

"The desk clerk. He's a bender — he likes mels too."

"Oh." Nik finished folding his jersey, the 17 showing in large white print on the back of the wispy maroon breathcloth, TEKKRU emblazoned in an arc over it; on the front was a print of a dragonfly. "How do you know?"

Jek tossed his own play togs into the drawer on his side of the room, then sighed and began taking them out again when he saw Nik's scowl at the casual way with which he handled them. What the hump difference did it make how anyone sorted their togs? Well, it mattered to Nik, so what the crap. "I dunno, mel. It's just a feeling."

"So he didn't say so?"

"No," Jek said, folding his jersey (12, ELLET) and looking over at Nik, who nodded his approval. He rolled his eyes and placed it carefully in the top drawer like his

friend had done, then went on to the team clouts. “But he was — *looking* at all of us.”

“Well yeh,” Nik said. “He had to check us all in. And I think maybe we were a little loud.”

Jek shook his head. “It’s not just that he was looking, mel. It was the way he was doing it.” His folded clouts went into the second drawer.

“What do you mean?” Nik sat on his bed.

“Just that — I don’t know how to describe it. It’s a feeling you get. The way a mel looks at you, or the way he is. You just sort of pick it up after a while.” His supporter, ectmit shield at the ready to cup and guard his favorite body parts (and, to him as to all mels, *definitely* the most important, as opposed to trivial organs such as the lungs, heart or brain), went into the third drawer.

“Huh,” Nik said.

Jek sat as well, opposite him. “Hey Nik.”

“Yeh?”

“What do you do if you’re in a travelhostel where you don’t have three drawers?”

Nik looked worried for a second, then caught his friend’s expression and threw a pillow at him. “When you had your tonsillectomy it was by worm, wasn’t it?” he said.

Jek threw the pillow back. “Still got my tonsils, but I hear worm chowder is your favorite way to take care of a sore throat.”

“Ah, suck my worm.”

“Better not. Better save it for Rena.”

Nik turned a color that closely matched the team’s jersey.

Jek smirked. “Thought so. You gonna try for it tonight?”

Nik shrugged shyly. “Dunno.”

“Well, hook up with her and see where it goes. Hey. Let’s go see where she’s staying, see if she’s settled in.”

Nik smiled. “Yeh, algood.”

Renetta, as it happened, was in the room immediately adjacent to theirs, and had it all to herself. She was the only fem on the team, and she was humping *lucky*. The one-bed spaces had a jacuzzi tub in the corner where the other bed would have been. “Yeh,” she said, smiling at their gasps of envy. “I can’t wait to try it out later.”

“Can we too?” Nik said.

“Course,” she said.

“Spec.”

She looked about the little room with approval. She had already unpacked everything, tucking away all her togs and her Feminine Unmentionables (her term, and then she laughed and said they were just clouts and tunics like any mel’s). It looked as theirs had when they first entered, completely bare of any trace of habitation. “Where are you staying?”

“Next room,” Jek said. Then he elbowed Nik.

“Uh. Wanna see?”

She smiled at her melfriend. “Yeh, algood.”

“Spec. This way.” Jek let the two of them leave before him, smiling a little and shaking his head. Nik would have to figure things out pretty soon now. He couldn’t be there to prod him along for *everything*.

She looked the room over and made a clicking sound of disapproval. “I see you’ve already had a pillow fight. And can’t you put your bags away?”

“My bag’s not hanging out,” Jek said, looking carefully at the front of his clouts.

“Yes it is, it’s right over —” And then she got it, made a face and hefted another pillow at Jek, both of them laughing. “I guess I know why you socked him one,” she said to Nik.

“Yeh, he had it coming.”

“Probably did,” Jek said. “Wanna see if there’s decent vics in this sack shack?”

The food was pretty good, they agreed, and then they went back to Rena’s room to enjoy her tub a little. The water was frothy and warm and they all made little groans of happiness as it bubbled about them. There was foam billowing everywhere and soon they were in a panic, frantically shutting off the jets and then laughing guiltily as they watched the suds slop over the side onto the floor.

That was Jek’s fault, mostly. On the way back from their supper at the travelhostel’s diner, Rena had excused herself to the sani, and Jek had noticed the vending kiosk. It was full of toiletries: Soap, shampoos, shaving things. And bath bubbles. He had quietly bought a tube of them and passed it over to Nik. “Give this to her,” he said. “She’ll like it.”

Nik looked a little surprised. “Why?”

Jek cocked an eyebrow. "Cause fems like things like this, mel."

"You sure? I mean, Renetta's not like..."

"No, she's not, and that's why she's spec. But she'll like this."

She had. When she emerged from the sani Nik handed the little tube of thick liquid to her. "Uh, for your tub," he said awkwardly. "I thought —"

She hugged and kissed him right in the middle of the lobby. "Thanks," she said, smiling warmly, and even Jek's breast heated at the sight. "It's spec. I love it."

"Uh, good," Nik said.

"Let's try 'em," she said. "Come on, mels. Bet it's been a long time since you've had a bubble bath."

They traded looks. Neither of them ever had in their lives. "Yeh," Jek said, "that's true."

Now they used towels to sop up the mess. "I guess maybe the bubbles were a bad idea," Nik said.

Rena smiled. "It's algood. It was — sweet."

"Uh."

Jek nudged him. "We're dripping all over your femfriend's carpet. Let's go and get changed into some dry clouts."

"Yeh," Nik said. "Uh, we'll be back in a couple minutes."

In their room Jek said, "Mel, I'm sorry about that. The bubbles, I mean."

Nik shrugged, hanging his wet clouts over the rack in the sani, then toweling off and putting on a change. "It's algood. You were right. She loved 'em."

"Yeh," Jek said, dropping his own clouts but not bothering to put anything else on.

"You coming?"

Jek shook his head. "I think she would rather spend a little time with you alone," he said. "I'm gonna shower, maybe read a little, look over the playsheets some more. Go on back over there."

"You sure?"

"Yeh," Jek said. "Go ahead. Go get her. And Nik — good luck."

Nik turned maroon again, then nodded and left, and Jek smiled and started the spray.

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Rena answered the knock with a towel wrapped around her head, her hair bunched into it, and dry clouts on, and nothing else. Nik swallowed. “Hey, Nik,” she said.

“Yeh,” Nik said.

Her eyes flicked past him. “Where’s Jek?”

“Uh, he’s gonna look over the playsheets some more.”

“Oh,” she said. “So he’s not coming over again?”

“Uh, no,” Nik said. “I don’t think so.”

“Oh.” She nodded. “Algood.” She moved aside. “You gonna come in or just stand there in the hall all night?”

“Uh,” Nik said, and stepped inside, and she shut the portal.

Jek finished his shower and reclined on his bed, a towel about his hips, looking over the pages, then lay back and stared at the ceiling. He sighed, closing his eyes, wondering how he’d get through the next hour or so.

The waiting, the burn in him, Rena being able to do things with Nik that he wanted to do, but couldn’t. What were they doing right now? Talking? Kissing?

More?

*How am I going to keep on? Nik ... Nik, I really want you. I’m sorry. I’m sorry but it’s true. I love you and I want to be the one with you, not her.*

There was a knock at the portal. He glanced at the clock — it was getting late — and got up, wondering who it could be. Nik had a passkey; he wouldn’t have been locked out. He opened the portal a crack. “Yeh?”

It was the desk clerk. “I’ll be off in a few minutes,” he said. “My shift is ... ending...” His voice trailed as he looked down along Jek’s body, bare save the towel. His eyes darted up again. “And I was just — letting you know, in case you needed anything at the ... last minute.”

Jek smiled at him. “I think I’m algood for now,” he said.

“Oh.” The clerk lingered. He was cute, Jek decided. Maybe eighteen or nineteen, trim. Small waist, his shoulders not quite so broad as Jek’s, but his body tight and well-proportioned. Needed a shave but he’d probably been at work all day. “So,” he said.

“Kickball.”

“Yeh,” Jek said, coming to a decision that he didn’t want to look at too closely and opening the portal a little more, waiting to see what would happen. Yeh, the mel edged in a little, looked around.

“Where’s your roommate?”

“He’s out with his femfriend,” Jek said.

“Oh.”

“Probably be gone another hour at least.”

“Oh.”

“Yeh.”

“I used to play a little kickball.”

“Yeh?”

The clerk nodded, his eyes roving over Jek’s naked chest, his definition, the nip-and-tuck landscape of his belly. His lips parted a little and his tongue darted over them.

Jek’s heart picked up its pace.

“I like it,” he said. “It’s spec, you know? Running around, mels everywhere, sweating and grunting, slamming together and body-checking.”

“Yeh.” There was definitely some body checking going on right now.

“And the showers after. The showers are great. All that hot water, and soap, and steam. Warm and slippery. All those naked bodies everywhere.”

“Uh. Yeh.”

“That’s not the only kind of ball I like.”

The clerk’s eyes snapped up to Jek’s again. He swallowed. “No?”

Jek stepped back and let his towel fall away. “No,” he said.

The clerk’s eyes were all over him as he moved inside.

“So,” Rena said, settling onto her bed next to Nik. “Think we should go over the playsheets?”

“Uh,” Nik said. *I’d rather go over you.* “Yeh.”

“Algood.” She pulled out the stack of pages and they began, talking with each other about strategies for blocking and passing, and then Renetta caught Nik’s chin in her hand and turned his face to hers and kissed him.

“Thanks again for the bubbles,” she said. “They were nice.”

“Uh,” Nik said. “Yeh. I mean you’re welcome.”

She kissed him a second time and the playsheets began sliding to the floor, off of Nik’s lap. She caught at them and laughed as they slipped away crazily, leaving her hand clutching at —

At —

She kissed him again as her grip tightened a little and the blood surged in his ears and elsewhere and the rest of the papers settled, forgotten, on the carpet.

“Mel,” Jek said.

“Yeh,” the clerk said.

“Been a while,” Jek said.

“I wouldn’t have known.”

“Since something like that was in me.”

“Oh.”

“Big. And hairy. And — creamy.”

“It *was* pretty good, wasn’t it?”

“Oh yeh. Delicious.” Jek propped on an elbow, his fingertips skating over the older mel’s chest. “So ... you just go room to room? Am I keeping you from work, I mean? Or ... anything else?”

The clerk flushed. “Uh, well ... not really.”

“Ah.” He had suspected as much. “Special visit, then.”

“Well, yeh.”

“Big old mean nasty mel, taking advantage of an innocent nip of fifteen.”

“*What?*” The clerk sat up.

Jek shrugged. “How old you think I was?”

“Uh, seventeen at least, maybe eighteen.”

Jek shook his head, pressed on the clerk’s chest. The clerk lay back down. “No, but thanks anyway. I mean, I’m in *school*. No way I could be that old.”

“Uh. Right. Course.” The clerk sighed. “But fifteen...”

“You really thought I was older?”

“Yeh — you’re built, mel. Tall, deep voice. Not ... small in any way at all. And unbelievable in bed.”

“Thanks,” Jek smiled, then shifted closer. His hand began roaming. “You’re spec

yourself.”

The clerk began to solidify under Jek’s fingers. “Uh...”

“Yeh?”

“Um,” the clerk said.

“Look,” Jek sighed. “You’re not my first, algood? You haven’t ruined my innocence or anything.” He leaned closer and planted a kiss on the clerk’s chest. “Remember I was the one who asked you in.”

The clerk thought about that for a moment and Jek felt him inflate fully.

“That’s better,” he said.

The clerk chuckled and his hands moved over Jek’s back, drawing him nearer.

“Wanna go for a ride?”

“Yeh,” Jek said, and climbed on.

Rena’s fingers probed at his waistband as her lips continued to taste his, drifting along the cloth over him, caressing him, turning his blood to liquid fire. She sighed. With a deft motion of her hand his clouts were open and she reached inside and he gasped at the direct contact as she kept kissing him, making little groans as his own hand moved high where her legs met. She took his hand in hers, slid it up the leg of her clouts, and he found her and she shuddered against him as his fingertips tickled at her lightly. There was moisture there and he understood what that meant.

She backed away a little and looked down his body, at his singular need, at his bared and most personal flesh. “Nice,” she said, smiling. Blushing. And so, so beautiful.

“Yeh?”

“Yeh. I never ... touched one before. I like it. It looks good.”

This was almost like his fantasy, so much it was a little unnerving.

She lifted her arms and unwrapped the towel from her head, letting her hair fall in a soft flow over her shoulders, along her neck, down her chest. “So,” she said. “You gonna sit there like a log all night, or are you gonna undo my clouts too?”

The clerk’s fingers were in Jek’s hair, caressing it. It was peaceful, soothing, not a motion intended as anything but a gesture of — Jek wasn’t sure what, but it wasn’t about sex. It was something else. He studied the older mel’s face; they studied each other. “You’ve got pretty eyes,” the clerk said.

“I do?”

“Yeh — I’ve never seen eyes like yours before. They’re almost black. But they have little bits of grey in them. They’re like ... you ever see snowflake obsidian?”

“No,” Jek said.

“It’s a volcanic stone. Very rare here. Actually it doesn’t exist at all on Arcadia, I think. Shiny, glossy, black with grey flecks. Like your eyes. Really beautiful.”

“Thanks,” Jek said, truly touched.

“You’re handsome as fuck-all too.”

Jek laughed. “So are you, mel.” They shared a long hug. “So you make it with a lot of guests?”

“Uh, well, four or five a month maybe, yeh.”

Jek arched his eyebrows. “Maybe I should consider this as a career.”

The clerk laughed.

“You got a melfriend?”

“Yeh,” the clerk said. “You?”

Jek shook his head.

“That’s too bad,” the clerk said. “Any mel who had you would be lucky.”

“Yours is,” Jek said.

They settled into the embrace, and all the while those soothing fingers were falling over Jek’s brow.

At last the clerk sighed and sat up to look at him. “You’re a pretty fuckin special nip,” he said, squeezing Jek’s hand. “But I need to get going. It’s late, my melfriend is waiting, and we don’t want your roommate walking in on us.”

“Yeh, I guess,” Jek said. He smiled. “I like the room service here.”

The clerk laughed nervously, then seemed to relax a little. “It’s something we only *extend* to certain guests.” He got up and began putting on his dumb travelhostel uniform. Jek studied him, resting on his elbows, remaining naked while the clerk dressed. “What?”

Jek drew him close again and undid the front of his breeches. “You can’t leave without a tip.”

Side by side the two bodies moved, mostly bared, skin to skin and arms reaching to touch, caress. Lips found lips over and over and the intensity of the motions between

them increased, breathing shorter and sharper, a light sheen of dew, salty, slipping over them both.

Nik gasped as it happened, the feeling breaking over him, his worm surging in Renetta's stroking hand. His stuff, pearly and copious, shot out of him and onto her wrist. His own fingers glided on and into her as she watched him have his feeling, and he could tell that she was getting hers. Again. Her third.

Jek had been right. Hands could do marvelous things.

Jek lay on his back, alone, thinking, the seed of another mel in his belly and in other places. Sated, and awash in remorse, and so many things turning inside him he could barely make sense of any of them.

What if Nik had walked in on them? What would he have done? Scream? Mack? Would he have ... would he have been angry? Said something like *I thought you loved me* and stormed off, out of his life forever?

Would he have joined in?

*Nik. I'm sorry, Nik. I ... should have been more ... Nik, I wanted him to be you.*

He thought of their conversation. *Fifteen. Yeh, I'm fifteen. And I'm a bender already, full-on, and can't think about anything but worms, and even when I have the best friend anyone could want, I still ... hump it all, I'm still just like ... her. With her strem. It's not fucking enough. Gotta get another tube in my lips, gotta suck it dry.*

He turned on his side.

*I'm not hurt. I'm not ... there's nothing wrong with me.*

Onto his other side, staring at the wall. In the room immediately on the other side of that wall, he knew, Nik and Rena were together. Fucking? Maybe. Did he hope so?

Maybe.

No.

...Maybe.

*Nik. Am I hurting you?*

*Like I was hurt?*

Onto his back once more and he sat up, went to the sani. He needed to clean up again. And if he lay there too long, he might press his ear to that wall. To try to hear what was happening. Between them, something he wasn't included in. Wasn't *welcome*

in. He wanted to know and didn't.

*Nik, why did I fall in love with you? Why can't I get you out of my mind?*

Fuck, his stomach was chewing itself apart.

He started the spray once more and quickly rinsed, then dried and climbed into the bed on his side of the room, naked, and waited, and thought, the pillow pressed over his head, in case any ... *sounds* happened to filter through the wall that separated him from the mel he adored, who was with a fem that was ... something he could never be.

Why? Why had he done it? Why had he gone to bed with the clerk?

Because ... because he was lonely. And he was hurting. And it was that simple. He wanted Nik, wanted to make love with him, wanted to make him feel good. He knew he could. He knew he could make Nik howl, give him the most intense feeling he'd ever had or, possibly, ever would. But he wasn't able to. Nik was with Renetta, and that was ... how it had to be.

*Yeh. I'm not jealous at all.*

*I just wish I was Rena.*

They lay together for a while, kissing sometimes, being close. "That was — wow," Rena said.

"Yeh," Nik said. "It was ... great. Both times. Thanks, Renetta."

She kissed him. "You're welcome. And thank you. I really needed that."

Nik laughed. "I think we both did." They kissed again.

"You've got a cute butt," she said.

Nik blushed. "Thanks. Uh, so do you."

"And your freckles are real cute."

Nik nodded. He didn't mind them, all of a sudden.

"I love your eyes, too. Green, really bright green."

"Thanks."

"Not plain and brown like mine."

"They're not plain," Nik said. "They're beautiful. And they shine."

"Brown like tree trunks, and yours are green like leaves ... think it means something?"

Nik shrugged, smiling at her.

"And you've got a nice worm. I like it. I like how it looks. How it feels."

“Uh, thanks. Yours is nice too. I mean...”

“My nooky.”

“Yeh,” Nik said.

They settled closer and kissed a little longer.

“Uh ... my stuff...”

“Yeh?”

“It ... it got on you.”

“It’s algood,” Rena said. “I don’t mind. I liked watching it come out.”

“Oh. Uh, yeh, but well...”

“What?”

“Uh, what about ... babies?”

Rena made a face. “You can’t get babies from getting it on the outside of you.”

“Really? You sure?”

“Yeh,” Rena said. “It has to be inside. And anyway it got on my arm and stomach.

You don’t think it just soaks in, do you?”

Nik felt a little foolish. “Well, no, but —”

She kissed him. “Don’t worry. We’re algood. No babies.”

They snuggled a while longer, drifting, warm.

“You gonna ... uh...”

“Mm?”

“You gonna, you know, tell Jek about any of this?”

Nik leaned back a little to study her.

“Only, cause, well, I know mels talk...”

“I won’t, if you don’t...”

“No, uh, actually, it’s algood, Nik. Jek’s ... he’s like your bro, in a way. Not just a friend. I mean, if you and he talk about ... us, you know, you and me, that’s algood.”

“You sure?”

“Yeh, I am, Nik.”

“Thanks, Rena. He might be curious about where I’ve been.”

She started to giggle and in a moment he joined her, and it grew and soon they were rolling together on her bed, laughing, grasping at each other as they calmed down.

“I should get going,” Nik said, “before I fall asleep or something.”

“Don’t you want to sleep with me?”

Nik flushed powerfully. Everywhere. “Uh, I...”

“I was teasing you, Nik. I know what you mean.”

“Oh.” Nik pulled his clouts the rest of the way on again and fastened them. Rena did not, remaining nude, and walked him to the portal. He turned to her. “Well.”

She leaned to him and pulled him against her for a final embrace and kiss, and he glanced around nervously. They were partway into the hall, and...

“What’s the matter?” she smiled at him. “No one’s there to see.”

“Yeh, but ... well, you’re ... not wearing anything, and...”

“Worried someone might think you were having sex with your femfriend?”

Nik, until that moment, had not been aware just how hot his face could get. “Uh. Well, you know, we didn’t, I mean, not really, and...”

Rena laughed, softly, and put her lips next to his ear, whispering something just for him alone. She kissed him goodnight, then gave his chest a little push. He watched the portal close on her smiling face and her naked body and stood there, blinking, in the hall. His heart forgot to work for a couple moments.

*Someday*, she had said.

*Oh mel.*

Nik let himself in quietly. The room was dark and Jek’s body was a lump in his covers. He slipped off his clouts and began to crawl under the sheets in his own bed as Jek sat up. “Hey.”

“Yeh,” Nik said.

“So how’d it go?”

“Uh, algood.”

“Did you...”

“Uh, sorta.” In the dark Jek saw Nik shrug. “I mean, we talked.”

“And?”

“Uh, well, you know, kissed.”

“And...?”

“And ... well.”

“Way, mel,” Jek said.

“No. I mean, we didn’t — uh, we did, sort of. With our hands.”

“Spec.” Jek lay back down. “That’s really spec, Nik. Congratulations.”

“Yeh. Thanks.” Nik lay also, his worm once more solid at the memory of it.

“Did you ... lick her?”

“Uh, no.”

“Oh. Did she, you know...”

“No. Just her hand.”

“Oh. So you saw her? I mean all of her?”

“Mostly,” Nik said. “Well, yeh. I mean I didn’t take off my clouts, not all the way. Just ... pushed them down. But when I left she ... didn’t put anything on. She just walked me out, you know, naked.”

“That’s spec,” Jek said.

“Yeh.”

“Does she...”

“What?”

“Uh, have any hair?”

“Oh. Yeh, a little.” It was not much more than a hint, really, a darkening of her, but it had been there.

“Must have looked pretty good.”

“Yeh.” It had. It was almost a waypost, an indicator to him where to reach. Just below, where her body had been folded in, sort of like how an arm looked bent at the elbow, but inside a surprising pink, intricate and delicate, smooth, slick. She had gasped as his fingertip found her, shuddered, panted: Her first feeling by him.

They lay silently.

“Don’t tell,” Nik said.

“I’m not a fuckin tard,” Jek said.

There was more silence.

“Nik?”

“Yeh?”

“You still — algood? With ... us?”

Nik turned on his side. Jek was sitting up again and studying him in the dark. “Course,” he said. “Why?”

“I’m ... I don’t know if we should any more. You know.”

Nik felt his insides turn cool. “Why?” he said again.

Jek’s shoulders rose and dropped. “I just ... I worry about hurting you or

something.”

“Hurting me?” He had mentioned that before. “What do you mean?”

Jek thought of the conversation he had with the clerk earlier, how the mel had been concerned that he was too young — and Nik was even younger. “Well, you know ... the stuff Kaletta made me do.”

“Yeh?” And then the worries filled him, the old fears returned. “You aren’t — are you saying you ... that when we’re together, it reminds you of ... back then?”

“No,” Jek said quickly. “No way, mel. But ... Algood. Look. Sometimes, with some of the troopers, I ... liked it, you know.”

“Yeh,” Nik said. “But why, if you ... had to?”

He shook his head. “Dunno why. They’d want to be ... alone with me, just me, and we’d go to my room special to do it. Only we didn’t always do it, or not right away. They’d talk to me, you know, friendly. And maybe hold my hand, or put an arm around me, and just talk. Like they ... almost like they just *liked* me. And with those, it was ... it was algood.” He shook his head again. “So, you know, I wonder. If, like, maybe the reason I ... do things ... with you is because they messed me up so bad that I like it now, and now I’m messing you up too.”

Nik thought about that. “But they *made* you.”

“Not ... always.”

“Oh. Uh, right.”

“Nik ... I don’t want to turn you into a bender.”

Nik laughed. “Kinda late to worry about that.”

“I don’t want it to be my fault,” Jek said.

Crap. “Well, you know, I’m only really all bender when I’m with you anyway.” He wanted to punch himself. “Jek — that sounded really humping bad. I just mean that...”

“I know what you meant.”

“...I mean that I don’t want to be with any other mel like I am with you. You know, playing and stuff. Maybe that makes me a bender, maybe it doesn’t. I don’t care, Jek. I just like it when we play together.”

“Yeh,” Jek sighed deeply. “But mels and mels ... you know, it’s not the way most people are. I mean, why would you want to do it? When there’s a fem in the next room that likes you?”

“I just do,” Nik said.

“And that’s it, isn’t it? And I did this to you. I hurt you. Like how they hurt me, hurt me so much I ... liked it.”

Nik thought again. “Uh, Jek, when you stub your toe, do you like it?”

“Huh? No.”

“Well, say you stubbed it every day, three times a day. Do you think that someday you *would* like it?”

“No,” Jek said. “But that’s different.”

“Yeh, it is,” Nik said. “And, well, when they *made* you, maybe it was like stubbing your toe. And when it was algood like you said, maybe it was more like a ... I don’t know, a foot massage or something.”

Jek chuckled and Nik joined in. Then he became serious again. “But I made *you*, Nik.”

“How you figure that?”

“Well, that night, at the — in my room, that first night, with the pictures, you know, and I was the one that started playing in front of you, and...”

“Jek, I was into pictures and stuff long before I met you.”

“You were?” There was surprise in his tone, and perhaps hope as well. Or relief.

“Yeh. Course. I used to look at Oli’s pictures a lot before he figured out I was and started passlocking them. I was like ten then, and already knew about playing with my worm. I did it every once in a while.”

“Oh.”

“So you didn’t get me started, Jek. And you didn’t *make* me do anything. You ... let me know I could, that was all.”

“Oh.”

“And why you think I stand up every time in the shower?”

“Well, I...”

“Don’t tell me you never noticed. And you stand too.”

“Yeh,” Jek said.

“So it’s algood,” Nik said. “It’s — illegal, I know. But we both know the law can be stupid and wrong about things. It shouldn’t be illegal. It’s not wrong. I mean there’s nothing wrong with it. Or with you and me when we do it. Making someone do it, yeh, that’s wrong. But not ... us. You never made me, Jek. And you never hurt me either. And you didn’t turn me into a bender. If I am, then I am. But us playing together, that’s not

why, if I am a bender. Or part bender. Or whatever.”

“You’ve been thinking about this,” Jek said.

“Yeh, for a while I guess.” *Nearly every day.* He wondered who he was trying to convince that it was algood: Himself, or Jek? Or both of them? “So stop worrying.”

Jek sighed deeply and lay back. Still across the room from him.

“Jek?”

“Yeh.”

“Uh, would you — um.”

Jek waited.

“Would you ... I mean, if you want, would you ... come over here?”

Jek stood and crossed the space between them. “Yeh,” he said, nestling under the covers alongside Nik. “Course.” Nik shifted to make room, then stretched and yawned. Jek breathed and half-recoiled. “Fuck,” he said, with a little laugh. “Your pits are starting to reek, mel.”

“Huh?” Nik said. He hadn’t noticed a difference.

“Yeh,” Jek said. “Wash ’em.”

“I do,” Nik protested. He did. He was meticulously clean everywhere.

“Yeh,” Jek said. “I know. I know. But — mel, remind me to tell you about antibacterials later, algood?”

“Uh, yeh,” Nik said. He sounded hurt.

“Oh forget it,” Jek smiled and lay back once more.

“I thought I reeked.”

“You do,” Jek said. “Doesn’t mean I don’t want to be near you.”

“Oh. Algood.”

“Nik?”

“Yeh.”

“Thanks. For ... being my friend.”

“Course,” Nik said. “Uh, you too.”

“Yeh.”

There was a motion under the sheets: One hand finding another. The mels smiled together in the dark, and then the breathing in the little room slowed, the bodies settled, and a sleep of contentment — and exhaustion — stole across them both.

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They woke together, showered and more together, breakfasted together. The clerk was there during checkout and he nodded to Jek, who nodded back, and they shared thin smiles filled with secrets, and then the *Dragonflies* left for their game.

Maybe it was the folded jerseys and clouts and supporters. Or maybe it was the rally the team had before the match. Or maybe it was that some of them cared and tried hard enough.

The *'Flies* bested the *Spiders* in their own web, three to two, and all went back home happy, fatigued and relaxed, some of them for reasons having almost nothing at all to do with the events on the field.

## PLAY, WORK AND ADDICTION

THE RECONS CONTINUED, AND THE SOLDIERS ITCHED.

Erekka kept them occupied as best she could, kept them focused on various tasks, but it was a thin palliative. They were soldiers and they needed action, and not just on the cots.

Several of them had taken, in the evenings, to watching local 3cast highlights of school kickball. Ordinarily the games were insipid, the players inexpert, but there had been a new team noted this school season, a tightly-coordinated victory machine that was, at least locally, worthy of more attention than an addendum to the sports reports.

The detachment had been following their progress as they continued to play, and now they were becoming boosters. Schoolnips, really, nothing significant about them but that this seemed to be their halfyear to shine ... and they had a fem on their team.

That was pretty rare, even for schools, and she was soon the darling of the detachment. Renetta Festul, eleven or twelve or so, and her satellite mels. Two orbited her closely, and there were occasional comments made about that.

“Think they’re doing each other?”

“Nah, not yet, too young.”

“That’s a joke, right?”

“Well, what about the mels?”

“What about ’em?”

“You know how they are. Swimming and wrestling. Think things never happen? Hey Pret, you ever *play* with any of your friends?”

Pretten turned pink. “Uh...”

The fems laughed and in a moment he joined in. “Thought so. Bet you were the the most popular mel in your gradation,” one of the soldiers said, elbowing him.

“Voted ‘most likely to’ five times in a row,” added another.

“Yeh, towel mel and ball mel all in one.”

“Ah, poo,” Pretten said.

“Hey, go easy,” Balia said, and kissed his cheek.

“Bet that’s what they said to him in the sport room too.”

“Nah,” Pretten said, and that got another laugh.

“I cannot believe,” Alissa said, “that you would sully the fine tradition of kickball with such tawdry suggestions.”

There was a chuckle. “Crap! Did you see that pass?”

“What?”

“Thirteen. Festul. Right across the defense to Tekkru. Off her *left*. And — *heck!* Right into the goal!” Everyone cheered at the 3cast.

Erekka had seen it; Festul had bobbed the ball, psyching the defense, letting them think that any second it would come off her right shin, and then amazingly, improbably, it had flown with complete precision from her left instep. Right over to her teammate, seventeen.

And seventeen bounced it handily from his chest to twelve, Ellet. And Ellet had head-butted it directly into the net.

“Dang. Those nips are good together.”

“Yeh. We had them on our side, it’d be over in no time...”

They watched, and Erekka thought about teams and strategies.

Their kickball games were not just good; they were astounding. Even some of the smaller 3cast networks had begun to carry highlights. Week after week the *Dragonflies* got used to seeing their plays mentioned at the end of local sports ’casts, and there was talk that some professional team scouts had begun to pay attention.

The *Flies* won locally, then regionally, and — shockingly, delightfully — had a glimmering of a chance to play at Delfia, where the Arcadia-wide school matches were contested. Jek began to think that maybe he could see those museums after all.

Nik and Jek kept up with their private playing, even while Nik’s advances with Renetta continued. Their hand games had become regular between them when she would join them at the pond (after Jek had left them alone, of course), and Rena, he noticed, had begun to swell. When she doffed her tunic to swim with them, her chest was no longer the flat range it had been, resembling a mel’s; it was now beginning to show discernible traces of growths.

She continued to swim topless, but that was only partly from habit, Jek thought.

He supposed that much of it was the way Nik eyed her when he saw her. He liked what was happening to her body, and he could not keep that secret, and she liked what he was liking and how he liked it. Jek gave it another two months, at most, before they started getting really serious together when they were alone. Nik had begun to carry the sheaths Oli had given him in his backpack, and Jek didn't rib him for it. He had good reason to be optimistic, Jek judged.

She had begun wearing sport support tops. At first they were little more than paired triangles, trainers she said, with straps that rode over her shoulders and connected in a vee to another band just under her shoulderblades. But as her body kept changing, the triangles kept being pushed out, and Nik couldn't keep his eyes away from the way she filled the tight, thin cloth. He had begun to explore those areas of her as well, their softness, how smooth they were, and she had relished his touches, sometimes pressed his hands there and moved them in little circles, willing him along.

Nik was beginning to fill his clothing as well. He noticed it one day when trying on a pair of old work clouts that had fit him just last halfyear. They still rode his hips all good, but he saw his worm and sack didn't quite have enough room any more. Jek had grinned and told him he was well on the way to being Oli-sized, and Nik had flushed, but his face was filled with pride at his growth as well as a bit of embarrassment.

Jek noticed that Nik carefully contrived to wear those clouts — and nothing else — when Rena came by to visit. Whether at the pond or at the dwelcap, he was bare of chest and packed in tightly when she was around. Occasionally Jek and Oli would trade looks over it, smirking; Nik was advertising.

Rena, for her part, did not complain about her melfriend's choice of togs. Her eyes were usually too wide and busy for that anyway.

Nik changed in other ways. His muscles had begun to tighten on him, getting larger and more solid as he continued working in the orchard, swimming and playing kickball, and when he and Jek traded back rubs, Jek noticed that his shoulders were broadening. He was sure Renetta was aware of the differences as well, when they would be alone a while. She had a pretty clear idea of how Nik's body was made by then.

Other things changed.

Jek was still ... of two hearts about them. He wanted Nik happy. That was all that really mattered to him. But when he left Nik alone with Rena he would burn, hot and painful, and he would wonder what was passing between them, would want every little

detail when Nik got back from one of his excursions. Nik seemed happy to talk about it — and why wouldn't he be when he was, by slow degrees, getting closer and closer to The Moment with his femfriend — and Jek felt both good and ashamed, good that he knew what was happening, sort of, but ashamed at himself for asking, for needing to ask. They were friends, he and Nik, and they had their moments of play, and it was always good.

But ... he feared that one day Nik would complete himself with Renetta, and that would be the end of them. He broke out with cold sweat any time he thought of it, his breast chilled and compressed, and he felt sick and wished he could know. Just know. What they would do together, he and she, alone — and know for certain that someday it wouldn't end, that even if they did finally carry it through, he and Nik could still stay friends as well, the way they were now.

But how? Rena would have to find out someday. And there was no way he saw that could be. She wouldn't accept it; Nik would have to choose. Jek dreaded the choice.

Nik sensed it sometimes, when they were alone with each other. He would be reassuring, full of good words, would tell Jek they'd be friends always, but it wasn't a comfort to him. He suspected Nik was refusing to admit it to himself, didn't want to face what they both knew was there.

If only it could be all three of them. He'd be algood with that, knowing Nik and Rena were ... lovers, if he could be there as well, lover to them both. Or actually, he and Rena both lovers to Nik. He and she could devise ways between them to make Nik beg for mercy, could share his body at the same time, could drain him and then smile at each other, snuggled against him on either side, smile together across his chest because they'd both be with the mel they loved.

But no. Not on Arcadia.

And that was what was different — the tension. The foreknowledge of the day when Nik would have to choose at last.

Jek had had several lifetimes' worth of experience with sorrow by then, but nothing like this had ever filled him. He was in love, he was in love with Nik, and when they were together, even just walking and talking, it was perfect. Life was good, the world was beautiful, and he felt such compassion and joy for all things. And when Nik was with Rena, he was scorched, blackened and shrunk, eaten inside by teeth that tasted metal in his mouth, would fidget, would pace restlessly and look at the clock and think

*will they ever finish* and then Nik would appear and Jek would feel remorse for his clinging, possessive, jealous heart.

This wasn't like being hurt, the way Kaletta had hurt him. He wasn't sure if it was worse. All he knew for certain was that he was drawn to Nik by his love, and burned by it as well. He wished he wasn't. Why couldn't he be like regular mels, with friends, just friends, who went out in groups with their femfriends to 3casts and had a great time together, who didn't have this craving, this addiction to one mel above all? It would be so much easier, so much easier, if he wasn't a bender, if he didn't feel tears of frustration sometimes when Nik and Rena would kiss for a long time by her lane, wanting them to get it over with so they, he and Nik, could go off and be together.

Why couldn't he just be like everyone else?

*Because I never was like anyone else. From the day ma and da died I was marked. And then things went bad, and then awful, and then even worse, and then Nik's family was there and things got good. And now they're back to bad again, just because of my fucked up head, and I'm an ungrateful selfish ass-licker for wanting Nik to be with me when I owe him everything, my life, my heart, my ... soul, I guess.*

Sometimes he wished his feelings would switch off again, like they had before. But if they did, then he would also not be able to feel those times when he and Nik would be together, playing or just being friends, frank and bare and alive. He would not trade those brief moments of perfect contentment for anything, would continue to endure the pain, just to share a few minutes of self-pleasure on a slow afternoon with the finest mel he had ever known or could even have guessed existed.

It was all over him, radiating from him, a scent or a cloud or a mist, lovestruck and tortured by the love, and it was just a matter of time before someone noticed it.

"Jek," Oli said to him quietly one afternoon as they gathered citrons.

"Yeh?" Jek, on stilts, handed a filled basket down to the older mel, who dumped it in a barrow and passed it back up.

"Be careful."

Jek paused. Something in Keolit's tone told him he wasn't talking about what he was doing at that moment, picking fruit. "What do you mean?"

Keolit shrugged uncomfortably. "Just — be careful. With Nik."

Jek felt his chest freeze from the inside. "I don't know what you're talking about,"

he said, and there was a tremor in his voice.

“Well,” Oli said, “when I was younger, I had ... friends.”

Jek waited for him to continue.

“Close friends, you know?”

“Oh,” Jek said.

“It’s not — it’s illegal, Jek, but that doesn’t mean it’s ... wrong. Mels play, sometimes.”

“Why’s it illegal?” Jek said, carefully paying attention to his citron harvesting. He glanced quickly at Oli and saw he was considering the question.

“Dunno,” Oli said at last. “I mean, lots of mels ... play. Sometimes it gets a little more serious between them, or sometimes they move on to fems. Usually they do. And there are some mels that — that like mels better, period.”

“Yeh, I guess,” Jek said.

“But it — the law doesn’t make sense. I think it’s because, you know, no one’s supposed to have sex until after they’re married, and mels can’t marry mels, so it’s all just illegal because of that.”

“But why can’t mels get married? If they want to, I mean?”

“Well ... the Academy says it’s unnatural.”

“What?”

“Yeh,” Oli said. “They’re missing the point. Marriage is what’s unnatural.”

Jek stared down in surprise. “It is?”

Oli squinted up at him. “Of course. You don’t see animals getting married, do you? Just people.”

“Well, we’re different,” Jek said.

“Yeh, we are — but in a lot of ways we’re not. Jek — it’s the brain, mostly. I mean, the body feels, the brain reacts to the feelings, that makes the body feel even more. But because our brains are as ... complicated as they are, we react in really different ways. Like passing laws that don’t make sense, or that put my bro and his best friend in danger for no good reason.”

“Yeh,” Jek said. “We talked about —” And he stopped short and nearly fell off the stilts, knowing he had been trapped by his distraction, his admission. Partial admission.

“Don’t worry,” Keolit said. “I’m not telling anyone. It’s been going on a while, though, hasn’t it?”

“Uh,” Jek said weakly. His knees were shaking terribly. Keolit saw his distress and helped him off the stilts. “How ... how did you...”

“It’s pretty obvious,” Oli said. “When you’re looking for it, I mean. You pretty much always shower together, and you take longer to get it done than you really have to. And I see the little jokes you make at each other sometimes. At least you don’t do those when May or Day are around. And you hold hands in bed at night. And I see the way you look at him when you think no one’s watching, and how you are when he’s — out with Renetta. How you miss him.”

“Oh,” Jek said, his head lowered. He felt Oli’s hand on his shoulder.

“Jektres, bro, it’s algood. I know mels can be ... fun for each other. I know you and Nik are close. And if that’s the way your hearts run, well, go to it. Just ... be careful. Don’t do it anywhere where you might get caught. I don’t want the two of you being Re-trained. Make sure there’s no one at your pond.”

Jek’s ears were flaming red. “The pond?”

“I’m not a tard, Jek. I wasn’t spying on you, but where else would you be likely to do it?”

Jek shrugged.

“Does Rena know?”

“No,” Jek said.

“Are Nik and Rena —”

“A little,” Jek said. “Hands. You know.”

Oli nodded. “Are you joining them?”

Jek looked up, shocked, and Keolit saw there were tears rolling down his cheeks. “No,” he said.

Oli drew him into a hug. “Algood, algood. I didn’t think you were. Jek, a fem’s heart is different from a mel’s. If she knew about you and Nik, it could hurt her badly.”

“I know,” Jek said.

“They don’t look at sex in the same way we do.”

“Yeh, I know.”

“So be careful, algood?”

“I will,” Jek said.

Oli stood him back. “Good.”

“We’re not ... doing it. Just playing. With ourselves, that’s all.”

Keolit nodded at him. "I really don't need to know, Jek, but thanks."

"I don't ever want to hurt him."

"I know. That's what makes you such a good friend for him. He can trust you, and that's important." Oli clasped his shoulder for a moment, let go. "Why don't you head back in. Take your time, settle down. Don't worry, I can keep secrets."

Jek nodded and gathered the stilts.

"One more thing."

Jek turned back.

"Watch your heart as well. Nik may decide someday that —"

"Yeh," Jek said. It was sharper than he meant it to be, abrupt because he didn't want to hear Keolit give voice to the thing he dreaded most. He softened. "Thanks." *But how do I watch my heart when it's been in his hands from the beginning?*

*Oh, this is killing me, this love, this dread.*

"No prob, bro," Keolit said, and watched him as he walked away slowly. He shook his head. *How many more burdens is that poor nip gonna have to lift?*

"Jek —"

The mel paused and turned around again.

"I love you, you know."

Jek hesitated, then nodded. "Love you too," he said, and continued his slow progress amid the citron trunks.

Kaletta watched the gcast with a sneer of contempt on her face. Fucking brat. Him and his little bender melfriend. And that cunt they were always with after the games. Yeh, fucking, she bet. All three of 'em, that stuff-gobbling little whore in the middle. A bender sandwich with pre-teen bitchmeat.

Her clientele had fallen off after Jektres had been ... *stolen* from her. She still got mels algood, plenty of Academy worm, kilometers of it waiting to be sucked and fucked. But it wasn't like before. She didn't get as many troopers now, and they didn't pay as much. Any of 'em could get nooky. And she was pushing thirty. She still looked algood, her ass and tits not sagging yet, but the troopers liked their meat a little on the fresh side, tight, not tenderized by halfyears of pounding. Jektres had been the one to make a difference.

The base of her skull itched. She reached back and scratched at it, wincing dis-

tantly at the scabs her fingernails reopened. She was low on strem again and had been trying to ease off on it, because if she went through it too fast she'd get into serious withdrawal, itching everywhere along her spine, a tickle that began somewhere inside her brain and couldn't be reached.

She popped a tube and sucked a little at the pink fluid inside, grimacing at the backtaste (it always reminded her of earwax), then sealed it quickly before she could be tempted to just drain it. She had five hundred mikes left, and that had to last her for a few days, at least.

The itching subsided and a balmy glow spread through her, starting from her nooky and rippling through her nerves.

What the fuck, she didn't need the brat anyway. She was a good lay, she knew it. Hell, even he had enjoyed fucking her, she was sure. He always pretended to hate it, just like he pretended to hate sucking off the troopers, but she was sure.

Fuck, her cunt was getting wet, thinking of it. That hard teen-mel worm. Big and solid, and when he shot his load, she leaked with it, there was so much of it.

She had discovered strem — been introduced to it you could say — when slutting it up for some troopers one evening. Three had approached her with That Look and she was getting ready for the pitch — *whatever you want, mels, one at a time or all three at once, I got enough openings* — and one of them had offered her a hit from a little tube he was carrying.

That had been enough. The fucking they did that night had been incredible. She woke the next morning sore and tired and dripping with their stuff, and was already addicted.

She had been thirteen, living in a run-down section of Delfia. She'd had more worm by then than could be measured in distances less than lightyears, hooking since she was ten and had run away from a foster father who had introduced her to the ways (*It's your own fault*, he had said after the first time and she had cried because it had hurt and she had bled and said she was going to tell, *you're the one that keeps walking around with your tunic off, I know you want it, and now you've had it and you're going to keep having it and you're going to like it, you're going to lick it and suck it and fuck it every day from now on*, and the reason she had left was that he had brought in another fem, a couple halfyears younger, and they started fucking and she had known it was time for her to go before he kicked her out), but she had never experienced it in

quite that way before. A few mels had managed to give her some pretty good fucks, but it was nothing, nothing like what she had experienced on strem. She had nearly screamed with ecstasy when one of them had started sucking her nipples, a silver charge galvanizing her body and leaving her gasping for more, her hips surging in the air with her unmounted climax, begging for worm, and she had got plenty. Nowhere near enough, but still, plenty.

Later she learned (studying with the seriousness of any addict the substance that was so important to her) that strem was not just a disinhibitor; it acted on the brain's pleasure centers directly, particularly those keyed to sexual stimulation and response, and allowed anyone on it to have mind-blasting orgasms. Rogue biotech from Scintilla, its original purpose had been to increase the enjoyment of sex between normally-involved couples or groups (it had been designed under contract from Eridani, a planet pretty free with sex), but it had addictive qualities — apart from the spectacular humping — that had made it unsuitable for use. Interplan Council had outlawed it immediately after reading the research findings. So it had appeared instead on the black market, copied from a smuggled test batch.

And yeh, it *worked*. When she was on strem, it barely even took a touch to her clit and bam *bam BAM*, three in a row and that fast.

Her fingers drifted down now.

But the brain, that inconstant organ, got used to strem after a while. And so it took more to achieve the same results. And more, and more.

But oh was the fucking good.

She had considered dosing Jektres with it more than once, so he'd understand, would be more willing to help her out, but in the end had not, because it would have meant sacrificing her own supply.

And she wasn't going to do that.

She would do anything, with anyone, in order to get more of it into herself, and he had been the way she could, the troopers loving to watch the show she put on. She didn't tell them he was her foster son. They knew it anyway, probably, but she let 'em think (or pretend) it was real incest they were watching. She knew they got off on that, just like they got off on ramming their worms up his ass or spouting their goo on his face.

Troopers were pretty fucking perverted, some of 'em.

She had even considered getting pregnant by him so that if he got older or ran away or whatever she'd have another mel, all ready to go. Backup, you could say. Then the Academy mels would seriously pay. If she was *really* fucking her own son. But the idea of changing diapers and doing all that mother shit until he was old enough had put her off. Now she wished she'd gone through with it.

Her fingers glided in and she sighed at the flood of feelings. Bam *bam BAM*.

Fuck, at least she had an excuse for being so fucked up.

But she needed to figure out exactly how she'd get that brat back here, for a while at least until she could get another young one to take his place, or maybe just get him into the world of shit that he deserved for leaving her like this, see if maybe she could pull a few strings along with worms next time some troopers showed up looking for a party. The other brat's brother had threatened her with exposure and a cutting off of her strem supply and even the possibility of being put off the planet. All he had to do was talk. She knew that. *I'll say you're fucking troopers, and we'll deny you ever did anything with Jek*, he had said, *and there are more of us than there are of you, so it's just you that would be in prison. Not both of you.*

If only someone on her side was willing to do the same.

Her hand kept moving as she watched the 3cast (bam), watched Jektres and his pervert friend (*bam*) and their portable cunt (*BAM*), and then an idea occurred to her.

A plan, you could say.

*Oh stremmy strem strem, that's a good idea, my pink delicious friend. Let's see if you're right.*

She got up and went into Jektres's room to check something.

## MEASURES AND COUNTERMEASURES

THE POWER TRIO'S TACTICS had been noticed by everyone else on the team, and that meant any time they had playsheets to go over there was no longer tittering or whispered conversations. All the players were poring over them and the magbus was almost totally silent save the whisper of pages over pages.

This was a crucial match. They were in the final playoffs and were just three victories shy of Delfia. The *Dragonflies* had never made it this far in the history of the team, and the coach was already considering them all to be winners because of that. They knew it, and the knowledge made them want to go even farther.

All business, they coasted along the route, a four-hour trip that made them all miss the second half of schooling that day, and when they got through the playsheets they set them aside and the captain stood to address them as the coach watched. He looked around himself seriously as the players' faces turned toward him expectantly. "Well," he said. "We all know this is an important game."

Everyone nodded.

"We're getting closer, and we're showing 'em all we have the rocks to win." He caught Rena's eye. "Uh, you know what I mean."

"No prob," one of the players said. "She's been using Nik's."

"Cause I have extras," Nik said.

Everyone laughed a little, and some of their jitters leached.

"Algood," the captain went on in a moment. "The team to beat this week is not the East Treerange *Pondhoppers*." He looked around again at the puzzled stares.

"But I thought we're playing —"

"We are," the captain said. "But they're not the favorites to win."

"The team to beat, as far as half of Arcadia is concerned, is the *Dragonflies*."

There was a silence as the news sank in, and then the bus erupted in cheers.

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Their mood remained high as they checked into their travelhostel and unpacked. Nik and Jek went through their silly folding ritual, but Jek knew that everyone was doing it now. Word had spread and the team was taking it seriously. It still felt stupid to him to be doing it, but he had to admit that it seemed to keep everyone's morale up, and he knew morale and attitude were important to winning.

At least this place had three sets of drawers. When they had finally ended up staying at a travelhostel that lacked a third, the answer (determined by a worried conference in the hall among the players) turned out to be to put the jerseys atop the dressers, so the three-up stacking order wasn't changed.

Jek had groaned at the overt foolishness of it and Nik had flushed in embarrassment — he knew as well as his friend that it was just a superstition — but they had both arranged their play gear as decided, and the next day had had a four to two victory.

*Something* was going on, that was certain.

Rena's room, this time, lacked a jacuzzi, but that didn't keep the three of them from spending some time there in the evening, still going over the playsheets, and after supper Jek and Nik split ways, Jek going off to wander while Nik and Rena went back to her room to practice plays of a somewhat different kind.

The desk clerk, this time, had been a woman, so Jek didn't have a connection there. But that didn't mean he'd have to spend all that time alone. He had learned that he could sit in the lobby of any travelhostel, watching guests arrive and move around to the diner or pool, looking for one that looked at him in just the right way. Usually nothing came of these forays, but a few times he had managed to engage conversations that ended up with him flirting, for an hour or so, with a nearly total stranger, and sometimes doing more. None asked his age and he learned not to volunteer it; it seemed that older mels, particularly men, were uncomfortable at the thought of having racy conversations or casual meaningless sex with a mel aged just fifteen. He wondered why from time to time. Maybe they were afraid they would corrupt him. Or maybe if the issue of his age wasn't tabled they could ignore it, let themselves pretend he was older. Or ignore the fact that he wasn't.

That was what made it possible for him, though. Possible for him to not only enjoy but actively seek these encounters. These guests were not at all like the *guests*

Kaletta used to have. They were not consciously on the make, not out to buy services, were not jaded or decadent enough to want to watch a young mel have sex with his foster mother and then join in. They were surprised and delighted at his willingness to be freely intimate with them, not expecting it at the outset. But Jek would insert innuendo and, when he started getting a positive response, would steer the conversation toward more racy issues. Then he'd say it was getting late and he had to turn in and the conversation would come to an end ... and that was that. Fuel for another sweaty, solitary fantasy.

Or, sometimes, not a fantasy; sometimes things happened.

He kept the knowledge of it from Nik. He knew his friend would be offended, possibly even hurt. It was just a little friction between mels, and Jek enjoyed the acts, but he wasn't sure Nik would see it that way at all.

But it was better than lying alone in the room, thinking about ... them, and what they were doing, and wishing he could be there also, wishing for things that were not possible.

It hurt. That was the thing. It hurt, afterward, because he always felt he had betrayed Nik. But he and Nik hadn't ever done anything but stroke their worms in front of each other, so it wasn't like he was cheating on a melfriend.

Still he felt like he had broken a trust.

But the game, the hunt, his youthful urges and the knowledge that others found him desirable all conspired against him.

He needed it, maybe. Needed to be near a mel, to have a mel inside him, to be inside a mel. Needed the embraces, the entry, the feeling of fullness afterward. He didn't like the occasional sense of desperation he got when it looked like it might not happen, but he hated being alone even more.

He knew what he wanted: Nik, in his arms. But he could not have that.

Was this a way of ... getting even? Of punishing Nik for being with Renetta instead of him?

But how could that be? Nik didn't know, so he couldn't be punished.

*If only*, he thought, and pushed it aside. He'd had his fill of *if onlys*.

This evening he seemed to have a prospect. The man, on check-in, had caught Jek's eyes, and kept looking over to him from time to time as he got his passkey. Jek looked back serenely, smiling at him occasionally, letting him know he was noticing be-

ing noticed and didn't object to the attention, but not being direct about it, just letting glances flicker. Too bold, he had learned, would scare the mels off. The man hefted his travel case and went off to locate his room, and a few minutes later showed back up, looking to see if Jek was still there. He sat across from him and glanced over at the 3cast. Kickball highlights. The *Dragonfly* logo appeared as the commentator's (muted) mouth blabbered silently, and then some recordings ran of one of their more recent games. Jek felt a little jolt to recognize his own face, as well as that of Rena and Nik, caught in plays and then celebrating their victory afterwards.

The man glanced sharply at Jek. "Thought I recognized you from someplace," he said.

"Yeh," Jek said. "You been following the games?"

The man laughed. "I think everyone has. Your team's a rocket."

Jek shrugged. "We've got good players," he said.

"Three, anyway," the man said, looking over at the 'cast again.

Jek was surprised for the second time in as many minutes. It hadn't occurred to him to think, until that moment, that maybe a lot of the reason the *'Flies* were doing well was himself, Nikolis and Renetta. "Uh, maybe," he said.

"Ellet," the man said. "Jektres. Number twelve, right?"

"Yeh," Jek said, a little shaken, but also pleased.

"That's what I remembered, anyway." He extended his hand. "Teleo Grattson."

Jek shook.

"I guess you're getting used to traveling."

Jek nodded. "Yeh, more or less. It's not so bad. I get to meet some interesting people."

"Interesting? How so?"

"Lots of ways."

"Ah."

"So what do you do? I mean, you travel a lot?"

Teleo shrugged. "I suppose. Not all the time, but I do get around."

"So I guess we both get around."

"Yeh." Teleo's eyes flicked to Jek's, then back to the 3cast.

"Though maybe not as much as we'd like."

The eyes came back to his again. "Oh?"

“Yeh,” Jek said. “I like getting around. You know?”

“Meeting new people, like you said?”

Jek nodded. “How long you staying?”

“Just the night. You?”

“Yeh, me too.” He stretched, a theatric presentation of his body, and watched himself being watched. “Too bad, though.”

“About what?”

“That there’s nothing to do right now.” He leaned forward. “I mean we all need to be sacked by fourteen tonight, but that leaves me with over an hour of boredom.”

“That is too bad,” Teleo said.

“How you like your room?”

The man shrugged. “It’s algood, I guess.” And his eyes flicked to Jek’s again. “Little lonely though.”

And that was that.

Jek had just stepped from the shower when Nik showed up, looking flushed and slightly winded. “Good play?” he said.

Nik grinned. “Yeh,” he said. “Always is.”

“Not bad, mel.” Jek nudged him, working hard against the sink he felt inside him. “When do you think you’re gonna do more? Or ... are you already?”

“Not yet,” Nik said. That wasn’t entirely true. A few times now, including tonight, he had ... kissed Rena, low on her body, had left her breathless and cooing with pleasure, had tasted her raw desire for him and felt her pure joy at his motions. (She had yet to return the favor and he wasn’t sure if he should ask her, but her hands were good on him as well, so it didn’t weigh *too* heavily on his mind when he was with her.) But he hedged on telling Jek. There was a brittleness about him, something that said he didn’t really want to know, even though he was asking.

Jek’s insides unclenched and then he felt the shame again. “Soon, I bet.”

Nik looked very hopeful. “You think?”

“Yeh,” Jek said. “No doubts.” There were ashes in his chest.

“Spec,” he said. “Uh, I’m gonna shower a while, algood?”

“Sure,” Jek said.

“Wanna — join me?”

“I just got out,” Jek reminded him, gesturing to his towel.

“Oh yeh,” Nik said, looking disappointed.

And that quickly Jek’s chest swelled with affection again. Nik had just come back from having a *very* good time with his femfriend, but was still willing to be at play with him, and that was something Jek could never deny him. “Though maybe I could do with another wash. I think I forgot to use shampoo.”

Nik’s face brightened. “Algood,” he said, and that was also that.

It was pretty damn clever, Erecca admitted to herself. A good plan, and it worked, it looked like. It involved their beetles. Those Buddha-forsaken bugs had a use beyond blocking sniffers and irritating her right out of her own skeleton.

She had been watching a recording of the schoolnips one evening, had seen how they signaled each other with gestures. It wasn’t obvious; at least half the detachment had been unaware of them completely until Alissa mentioned them. “Look, watch Festul. She’s got the ball in her feet now, but she’s about to chest it over to Ellet.”

She did, kicking it up and back into herself, then sending it over to her teammate, who intercepted it perfectly. The other soldiers (those who hadn’t noticed the semaphore) gasped. Erecca nodded and smiled.

“And now Ellet’s gonna work it up the field a bit, and Tekkru and Festul are gonna play off it. He’ll keep just to the front and she’ll be just behind, about a sixty-degree angle, maybe ten meters off him.”

Yeh, that was what was happening.

“And now a feint to Tekkru but a pass back to Festul, and she’s gonna smack it with her right hip and Tekkru’s gonna pick it up.”

Another gasp. “How the heck do you know all this?” Balia said.

Alissa began explaining the codes that passed among those three players, and scratched at her waist just where her beetle was. In a moment everyone, including Erecca, was scratching as well, as their beetles all shifted slightly against their bodies, and it felt like a fusion bomb had gone off in her head.

She had experimented enough, quietly, to be sure she was right, nudging her bug and watching how the others’ were, and then talked it over with her lieutenant. Alissa was surprised, then her eyes sparked, and the plan went into something like overdrive.

It turned out that the bugs could scent each other’s molecular traces and re-

sponded to them in various ways. If one beetle was nudged, the others nearby flexed their legs a little and settled. If a beetle was nudged repeatedly until it moved to another part of the body, the others nearby did the same, moving to the same place.

Somehow they were able to send little chemical messages to each other, messages that said (for instance) *the right hip's off, move to the left tit.*

They worked out a code, a silent gestural communication, messages with their beetles that could relay up a line. They didn't have to speak at all, didn't have to use RF and worry about triangulation or descramblers. The beetles' range wasn't all that great — at fifteen meters it was spotty and after about thirty it fell off pretty sharply — but for close quarter guerilla tactics it was superb.

And that was key. Once they were engaged in open conflict, they could go to RF anyway, because their positions would be disclosed by the skirmish itself. But for stalking, for watching and hunting and moving in and springing a trap, it was outstanding, because they could have their camos up the whole time, remain fully silent and off all spectra, invisible to IR, sniffers and everything else (including each other) and still communicate intention, motion and plans for attack.

They began practicing their beetle-code and got pretty damn good with it, and then Ereka had transmitted her findings to the brigade leader. In short order the results had been confirmed throughout all the Resistance detachments, and Ereka's bugaphore (as everyone dubbed it) became a standard element of soldier training.

It was combat tested by a few detachments, and they had returned with reports of wild success. Even in engagement, even when giving a fallback signal (nudge to the shoulderblades), the bugaphore worked.

Now Ereka considered her own beetle, almost (but not quite) fondly. It was midafternoon and the bivvy was quiet; those that had duties to oversee were tending them, those that had down time were ... well, not down necessarily, but at least not making a lot of noise right then. Alissa nestled by her on the cot and she contemplated her lieutenant, her lover.

*Can't last. You know that.*

*Yeh, one day I'll be moved somewhere, or she will, or ... or soldier's lull will get one or both of us in an assault.*

She pulled Alissa a little closer and the fem sighed softly, happily.

*Can't last, but it's good while it's happening.*

They both jumped as their bugs started and moved to their shoulders.

“Must be Balia and Pretten at it again,” Alissa said, and Erekkka laughed, because the beetles didn’t like being caught between two moving bodies, and the shoulders were one of the few places where they could retreat from roving lovers’ hands and twining legs. (They had learned that the bugs kept away from hair, on the scalp or otherwise, a fact for which Erekkka had been tremendously grateful.) They sat a while and chuckled from time to time as their beetles continued to shift occasionally, making guesses at what the bugaphore was saying about those two soldiers and what they were up to, but eventually they became distracted with each other instead, and after a rather pleasant while it was time for another kickball 3cast. They had a team to cheer.

In the second half Jek’s attention, ordinarily well focused on playing, wavered at exactly the wrong moment and he ended up catching the ball with his nose. He went down fast, landing hard on his butt with darts of silver shooting across his vision as he felt a warm gout pour over his lips and chin. It was salty, metallic. Not snot. Blood. Fuck.

The coach was there in moments, nudging through the circled *’Flies*. He pressed a towel into Jek’s hand. “Algood,” he said. “Just lean back and pinch high.”

“Ow,” Jek said. He felt something shift. “Dag. I think it’s broked.”

Renetta was near tears. “I’m sorry, Jek,” she said. It had been her pass that had caught him.

“It’s dot your fault,” Jek said. “I was’d payig attedioid. Dab, I soud fuddy.” His nose was swelling rapidly.

“You algood to stand?” the coach said.

Jek put up a hand and was helped to his feet. His head went light again and he swayed a moment, and then Nik and Rena were at his sides, supporting him, and helped him off the field and over to the nurse’s station. Rena kept apologizing, over and over, and Jek kept trying to tell her not to worry about it, but it kept coming out as *dod worry abouddid*, and the more he said it the funnier it started to sound, and he began laughing, and then Nik did, and finally Rena did as well, but she was crying too.

She composed herself as Jek pressed a coldpack to his face, and in a few minutes the game went on as Jek watched from the sidelines, occasionally shooting furtive looks over his shoulder.

The reason he had lost attention was still in the stands. Teleo Grattson was there, sitting high up and away from everyone else. He kept cheering the plays, but his gaze rested mostly on Jek, and for some reason it made him uneasy. He could almost feel the eyes boring into him sometimes.

Renetta's playing was suffering. She was holding back a little, Jek could see, not wanting to hurt anyone else, and for a while their lead faltered and stalled. At ten minutes on the clock they were tied with the *Pondhoppers*, three-up. The coach called a time out and brought them over to the benches. "Let's press this one home," he urged them. "We can do this."

Renetta looked guilty as a glaze-covered nip in a sweet shop. Jek pulled her aside. "Wadd're you doig, Reda?"

Her eyes shifted from his uneasily. "I don't know what you mean."

"Dabbid, yes you do. You're pullig back od your passes. Stop id."

She looked down at the grass.

"It's kickball, dot sobe kide of ballood toss or sobedig. Sobetibes thigs happed. Dow ged oud dere ad stop playig like a *feb*."

She reddened. "I'm not playing like a fem," she said.

"You were juld dow," Jek insisted. "Dock it off. We do'd deed febs that ca'd play. Or baybe you'd be happier back hobe, playig with *dolls*."

"What, you think I don't have what it takes? Just cause I don't got rocks?"

Jek shrugged. "Prove be wrog."

Her eyes slitted, sparking, lightning over earth. "Fine," she said, and stormed away, murmuring something that sounded a lot like *asshole*.

The *Dragonflies* took it four to three, and on the way home she kissed Jek's cheek gently. "Thank you," she said.

"You're welcobe," Jek smiled.

His face looked like hell on a forced march for the better part of a duoweek, angry patches of black and purple gathered around the bridge of his nose and in the wells under his eyes. But despite his delicate injury Jektres refused to be sidelined for too long. He let himself be excluded from practice for a while, but he had an ectmit nose guard to protect his damaged face while it healed, and was soon insisting on participating again. This *mattered*, not just to him, and he wasn't going to let any of his teammates down.

Everyone appreciated his efforts and they kept their rigorous training schedule. Two more games and they would be in the championships at Delfia, and it looked like they might be playing the Delfia Central *Speedsnakes*. On their off moments they would watch recordings of the 'Snakes, paying close attention to their plays. They looked damn near unbeatable, truly well coordinated, presenting a solid wall of offense and defense that no opponents could best. They knew the 'Snakes were doing the same, analyzing their plays, looking for weakness.

Renetta remained a little tentative at first, particularly passing to Jek, but he kept goading her and needling her, pushing her to the limits of her self-control. "I'm not some five-day-old baby," he would say. "And I'm not breakable. Kick the fucking ball, woman. Kick like you mean it."

It worked; she was gradually getting the message that Jek was too tough to fold up the first time a ball nailed him. She was beginning to see that he wasn't angry with her for what had happened earlier, but her faltering now was definitely pissing him off. Her playing revived and they were ready for the next match, this one at their school.

They used the home field advantage to the fullest. When their foes arrived (the Citronville *Leafworms* — as good an omen as Jek or Nik could possibly have hoped for) they were met with massive banners of support for the *Dragonflies* and little placards of welcome for the opponents.

The 'Worms played a damn hard game, though, one that went into overtime for twenty minutes with the score at nothing-all. There were major 3cast crews on hand to record the highlights for their news 'casts that evening, and absolutely everyone on and off the field knew that this match was gathering larger-than-normal attention. Even though it was being played by schoolnips, a significant minority of the planet was interested in the outcome of the game. As Keolit had observed all those months ago, there really wasn't much for most people to do on Arcadia and kickball was a planet-wide passion, even in the school leagues. Especially when a complete underdog team like the *Dragonflies* was beginning to look poised for a coup.

This time it was Nik who took the ball in the wrong place, doing a flying save on a kick that would have gone in and ended the game instantly. Everyone watching gasped and groaned as the ball contacted him in midair and he hit the ground, bouncing on his shoulder, curled protectively around himself. All mels everywhere winced in sympathy; the ball had racked him squarely in the groin.

In a few moments he was up and being led off the field to supportive applause, a bit pale, but not macking. He had been wearing his supporter and it had taken the most severe force of the impact, but its ectmit cup had cracked. As he moved along his gait became more splay-legged. The cup's broken edges were pinching him as he walked, and when he hit the sidelines he thrust his hands, heedless of the spectators, into his clouts and pulled out the two arcs of polymer, tossing them aside in disgust and shaking his head as the crowd began whooping. He hit the mels' sport room for a few moments to change into a new one. Play waited as he did, and he emerged once more to wild cheering from everyone, even his foes. It was not every day a mel could take a shot like that and stay in the game.

At the end the *'Flies* got the goal they needed (Jek, Nik and Rena working the ball up the field by nudges and lunges while the others kept the defense busy, then the captain's blazing left knee sending it home for good), and that afternoon, by instant and total agreement, the whole township treated the *'Worms* to a huge condolence feast, 3casts and ice treats. Their travelhostel lodging fees were waived, and as their magbus drifted away the *'Flies* sang the *'Worms*' school fight song. 3casts everywhere lauded the sportsmanship, not just of the team, but of all Jerres Township.

They signed a few autographs, and Nik was amused and embarrassed when a fragment of his own discarded cup was handed to him for him to write his name across.

"I love you," the fem said as he passed it back.

"Too late," he said, flushing, and put his arm around Renetta's waist. Jek had to hide his face, turning aside for a few moments.

Two down, one to go.

The next game (played on the weekend of Keolit's eighteenth birthday) was every bit as wrenching, the North Delfia *Loggers* being brutally fast, highly skilled opponents, a team that had won the championship several times before. At half the *'Flies* were down four goals and dispirited, but three minutes after play resumed the captain did one of his astounding distance kicks that shot the ball along a freakish hole in the defense and fetched it up in the net, and then the *'Flies* kept the juice flowing, shaming the *Loggers* on their own field by ending the game two up. It was an unbelievable turnaround of fortune and the *'Flies* spent most of the night awake, celebrating joyously, signing their names on admirers' play programs, and generally feeling exactly like conquering heroes. Not a few of the players got *very* lucky that night with fems who were

also fans, even though they were playing away; many sheaths were used. (Nik and Rena still hadn't, but Nik had an intense premonition it was very close.) When they got home, Oli had told Nik the game was the best birthday present he could ever have asked for.

They were on their way. They had beaten every team they faced on the long journey through playoffs, teams that were veterans of regular victory, used to easy successes, leaving behind them the confused and disjointed competition. They had come out of nowhere, in more ways than one, and were now the most serious threat the Delfia Central *Speedsnakes* had faced in halfyears.

Unfortunately, the 'Snakes were equally daunting. Hour after hour the Power Trio watched them play, learning their codes and adapting their own so they wouldn't be readable, trying to fight off hopelessness. Their opponents' machine was flawless. They didn't see any way they could pull it out. They tried to console themselves, knowing that even making it this far was a massive victory for the 'Flies, but the 'Snakes had won the last four Arcadian School Division championships in a row (seven in the last decade), and they desperately wanted to usurp them.

It was almost all they talked about; even when Nik and Rena were enjoying each other at the pond, or when he and Jek would play, the conversation afterward would eventually turn to the 'Snakes. Over supper at home they discussed strategy with Oli, who was a pretty good kickball player himself, and Day, who had watched virtually every pro game for the last twenty halfyears. Even May got into it, studying the sport seriously for the first time in her life.

Everyone was baffled. The playsheets showed a team with no chinks in their armor. But they refused to give up. Something, somewhere, would work. They were sure of it. They had to believe it.

Erekka's soldiers, though distant, were also involved. They had watched the playoffs, watched the *Dragonflies*' progress, and had even adopted their symbol as the detachment mascot. They loved how the team from nowhere (well, not too many clicks from their own bivouac ... so yeh, nowhere) had risen triumphant over every game. It made them feel like anyone, working hard enough, could succeed.

But the *Speedsnakes* were not minor competition. They played hard, as hard as any team any of them had seen, and they had an almost rabid commitment to remaining supreme.

She knew that in her soldiers' minds the contest had come to symbolize *everything*, all they were trying to accomplish, and evidence they took it seriously surfaced with Pretten, who began actually being fairly good in the detachment's kickball games. If he was paying attention and improving because of it, it had to matter.

Again she wondered about that little trio of nips. They were the cement, the ones to whom everyone else looked, and she wished there could be soldiers like that in the Resistance, melded with a common goal and an overarching devotion to winning. But her soldiers had picked up on it themselves and had coalesced in a sudden way. Their maneuvers had always been precise and clean, but lately they had become almost eerie in their coordination. The bugaphore helped, it helped a lot, but there was something else. Spirit, she guessed. For the first time in a long time a lot of her soldiers were *feeling* the fight, remembering why exactly they were fighting. So nips like those could be free one day, wouldn't have to feel the Academy's heel on their throats.

She wondered about Tekkru and Ellet. The older mel seemed to have a thing for his teammate. It wasn't obvious; it was just how they were together sometimes. She had asked Pretten one evening about it. "You think those two are ... you know?"

Pretten had stared at the 3cast for a while, watching them play. Finally he nodded slowly. "If they aren't, they should be."

"Yeh," Ereka said, and then Pretten had surprised her.

"But there's something going on with Tekkru and Festul too."

"Huh? You sure?"

"Yeh," he said. "Next time they win, you watch the three of them. She'll hug Tekkru or kiss him or something, but watch Ellet too. He knows. He and Tekkru have got something algood, but he knows that Tekkru's got something else with Festul."

She considered him. He shrugged.

"Experience."

"Oh." And because that didn't seem like enough, she said, "Sorry."

He shrugged again. "It happens. You kind of get used to it."

"Maybe someday that won't be a problem," she said.

He smiled after a moment. "That's the point, right?"

She nodded automatically, and later thought about the conversation. About what they were fighting for, killing for, dying for. Freedom, yeh. On so many levels. But freedom to love? Was that really what it was all about? Or was it just that freedom to love

was a powerful gut feeling, something anyone could understand? Or was it only that way to Pretten because he was seventeen and brimming with stuff?

How was it, exactly, that the Academy had decided that lovemaking was so important to their social controls, anyway? Why was it that so many institutions, for so much of history, seemed to care most about the simplest, most natural pleasure anyone could enjoy? Why had fucking been so obsessively regulated by so many governments for so very long?

It really didn't make much sense to her. But then again, she considered, she was the outsider, the one who didn't fit in. But she looked back on her life and saw how it had been shaped by sex, both its misuse and its loving expression, and understood it was a personal thing, something she should be able to refuse or grant freely at her discretion to any particular applicant. It wasn't up to a general somewhere to say she was wrong, not any more than it was to say she was right. It was her decision, and if her mate was of the same mind, then what was the point of contest? It was her body, her preference, her choice. Hers and hers alone, whom she would share it with and whom she would refuse. But she had to be *able* to refuse, just as she would have to be able to accept, or she wouldn't really be free, and once that freedom was abrogated, what others might fall?

Maybe that really *was* the point.

Well, many longer and more stupid wars had been fought over things considerably less significant (in the long run) than an individual's right to choose whom to fuck.

The air around the pond was unusually thick and Rena felt the gravity of it keenly. Though Nik and Jek both had tried to keep the tone light and playful, she could see there were things, burdens they were both carrying.

She shook herself. *Fuh. The game's next weekend.*

But, looking between the mels, she got a sense it wasn't just the looming contest that had them ... well, a little distant from each other.

Nik, peevis, was resting on the shore. He had practically stalked over there after she and Jek had teamed up against him in one of their splash fights. His angry retreat had surprised her and, looking at Jek for an explanation, she had a flicker of — well, something, a glimmer of understanding.

They must have had an argument.

Jek sighed and she went over to him, speaking quietly. "You two algood?"

Jek looked surprised — no, shocked. "Huh?"

She gestured to her melfriend. "Nik. He doesn't throw tantrums like that. You mels fight or something?"

Jek relaxed visibly. "Oh. Uh, well, we ... yeh, I guess there was some tension."

There had been. Jek had ... asked his usual questions the day before, after Nik and Rena had been alone for a while, and there had been ... tension.

"What about?"

Jek shrugged. "Just dumb mel stuff, Rena."

She smirked. "Melstuf, huh?"

Jek snorted and shook his head, a little smile playing across his features. She began to move away but he called to her. "Hey, Renetta."

"Yeh?" She came back close.

"Look, I ... you're a really spec fem."

She pinkened and dimpled at him. "Thanks."

"I'm glad you and Nik are together. He's ... the best mel I've ever known, and he deserves a fem who ... that knows it, you know? And treats him like he deserves to be treated."

She nodded, considering Jektres. She knew a few things, that Nik's folks had taken him in, that things had not worked out with his foster mother before; and she had heard ... well, rumors about Jek as well, that he wasn't entirely ... that he knew a few things about what fullblacks toted around inside their uniforms.

She wondered if maybe ... no, not likely. Not the way Nik was when they were alone together. There was no way he could be...

"Yeh, he is a good mel," she said. "A good melfriend. And a good friend too."

Jek nodded mutely, still looking at the mel on the bank.

"Sorry you ... well, I know things weren't algood for you for a while."

Jek shrugged. "Well, they got better." He regarded her. "Have you and Nik talked about it?"

"What?"

"Oh, well, why I'm with him now."

"Oh. No."

Jek nodded. "Well, you know I had a foster ma."

“Yeh.”

“She ... she’s a stremmer.”

Renetta wasn’t sure at first that she’d heard the word, and then it didn’t want to fully register. Strem addicts ... they weren’t just addicts. They were...

And sometimes, she remembered, they weren’t ... they would take in foster nips and then...

She studied Jek’s face and saw it in there, saw that he understood what she was thinking, saw that he was endorsing her line of suppositions, and her eyes swam. “Oh Jek,” she said.

“It’s algood. I mean, it’s over now.” He gestured to Nik, whose eyes were closed, one arm across his face. “He came for me, brought Oli along, and they got me out of there.”

She wiped at her eyes hurriedly. She wasn’t sure why, but she didn’t want Nik to see her crying while she was talking with Jek. “He knew?”

“Yeh, he ... I guess he saw some of it happening.” Jek looked bewildered. “And he came and got me and took me away.”

She bit her lower lip gently. “Oh.” Then she nodded. “You’re right, Jek. He does deserve the best.”

“Cause he is the best.”

“Yeh.”

“So anyway, I’m glad he’s with you.”

She flushed again, more hotly this time. “Thanks.” She saw something else in Jek’s eyes, something like a wound, and squeezed his arm. “I’ll — be the best I can be for him,” she said. “Don’t worry. I won’t hurt him.”

Jek relaxed and nodded, but the wound was still there, hiding behind his smile.

In a little while he left them to be alone together.

## ASCENT

THE PLANS WERE LAID SILENTLY, as surprises often are.

He didn't see it coming.

Nik and Rena were alone a while, and then Nik took him to swim and they played a little, and then he took him home.

His home.

His home.

And they got there and he saw maybe half the school was present. Rena, and all the kickball team, and Oli and May and Day, and Nik was smiling. "Happy birthday, mel," he said, and Jektres almost broke down.

They had remembered.

Nikolis had remembered.

In seven months, Jek was flying along. He was only three halfyears or so behind Nik now in learning. He had caught up, gracefully and strongly, and he was glad that he and his friend could be nearly equals. Even if he was a little older than Nik, he wanted to be on par with him in school.

The mels that had given him trouble before had backed off after the semester tests. "So," one said. "How'd you do?"

Jek had squared his shoulders. "Tenth," he said.

"No way."

"Yeh," he said. That meant he was on the same level as ten-halfyear nips, but he had begun the school season at six. On top of all the time he spent playing kickball, he had shot up the gradation ranks. He had found there was holiday school as well, and he had already enrolled for that, eager to make up even more ground.

"Well," the mel said. "Not too fuckin bad. Good job."

Jek felt hot. "Thanks."

"Yeh." And the mel went off to his lunch with his flock of admiring fems.

That mel was there for his birthday, along with many others, and he looked

around stunned as they sang a song for him, then had a great time playing kickball, punching and joking with each other, and Jek knew he fit in. All the gaps that had been in him, all the things he had missed, all his emptinesses had been filled, by May, Day and Oli, and by Nik, especially Nik. He had friends, good friends; he was learning and growing and well fed and well clothed; he had a place among his peers because of his kickball playing; and he had a family, a ma and a da, a truly spec older bro, and a best friend who was so much more than that.

He was swamped, overwhelmed, lost in it. He belonged. He actually *belonged*.

They stayed up late that night, playing 3cast and talking, and after Oli had gone to bed Nik took him outside into the orchard. There was some — he had to clear some air between them.

“Happy birthday, mel,” he said again.

Jek smiled at him. “Thanks.”

Sixteen. He was old enough now to leave school if he wanted to, but he wouldn't; he intended to finish all the levels. He wanted the background, the education. He wanted to know he could do it. And most of all he wanted Nik to look at him with the respect he did whenever he saw him working, really trying at his studies. Even more than when they were on the field together, he wanted those looks of — of recognition of his effort.

And better still, best of everything, he was now beyond the reach of Kaletta. At sixteen he was emancipated. There was no way she could draw him back to herself by force of Academy law. The process that had begun that day when Keolit and Nikolis had come for him was, at last, over. He was free, truly free, and he had Nik to thank for it. The truest friend he'd ever had, the kindest, the very greatest of them all.

Nik looked at his toes. “Jek — are you algood?”

“Yeh,” he said, not sure what Nik could mean. “Course.”

“Oh. Uh.” Nik looked up at him briefly, then down again. “I mean, with ... with Rena and me. You know.”

“Oh. Yeh, I'm algood.”

“Because ... well, only it seems sometimes like you ... like sometimes you wish we weren't ... together.”

Jek didn't say anything for just long enough. “Nik — I...”

“Jek, wait. I'm ... sorry. Sorry I got so mad at you the other day. I didn't mean to

yell and I'm sorry I said what I did."

"It's algood, Nik, you're right, it wasn't any of my business..."

"Look, Jek — I really care about Rena, a lot." He swallowed, recalling the time with her just this this afternoon. She had done something for him, something like a kiss but much more, something extraordinary that had left him gasping and helpless, letting him be within her as she caught his flavor. It was the first time she had done that for him, the first time she had ever done that for anyone, and it had almost swept his mind from his skull. For just a few moments his entire body had become his worm, the force of the feeling breaking through every nerve in him and leaving his skin tingling and shocked, leaving him utterly drained, unable to move for many breaths as she cradled him with her tongue and let him slowly fall back.

But in that singular moment, when the blinding flash was still flaring in his brain, it was not Rena he had thought of, not her mouth he imagined being within.

"And ... well, I care about you too, and ... oh, crap."

"Nik, I know. You're with her and that's algood, and I shouldn't be asking you about what you do with her. She's your femfriend, you're her melfriend, and..."

"Look, let me ... uh, look, Jek. I ... know you're a bender. And that doesn't matter. I mean we're still friends. But sometimes I think maybe you ... you, you know, sort of — have feelings about me."

Jek couldn't think of anything to say.

Nik nodded after a moment, still looking down.

"I'm sorry, mel," Jek managed.

"No. Don't — Jek, it's algood. Don't be ... sad."

His chest hitched against his will and he felt a hot rush of regret. Caught. Caught in his own trap and now his friend, the closest friend he'd ever had, knew that he was ... that he... "I can't ... Nik, I can't help it and there's nothing that can make it stop. Oh fuck I'm so sorry. Nik, Nik, I don't want to hurt you, don't want to ... I can't help it and I didn't mean for it to happen and..."

Nik looked back up and took all of Jek's words, all his breath away. "I'll stop seeing her, if it would be better for you. If you want me to."

He reeled, caught himself against a trunk, unsure he'd heard properly. "What?"

"I know, Jek. I've known for a while I guess. I mean, I know that you — you say you're not jealous, but I can tell you are." He shrugged. "You're trying not to be, trying

not to let it show, for us. Her and me, I mean.”

“You — she ... does she know?”

Nik shook his head.

“Nik, I...” Jek took a breath, then put his hands on Nik’s shoulders. “I don’t understand you.”

His friend looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

Jek gestured vaguely. “That you’d ... do this, be willing to do this, for me. I mean, everything you and Rena are together, you’d just ... turn from that for me?”

Nik’s eyes sought the soil again. “Yeh, well, you know. You’re my friend, my best friend. And I don’t want you ... hurt any more. It’s already happened too much to you.” He looked up once more. “Maybe I’m a bender too. I dunno. I mean we haven’t ... done it, but when we’re — you know, uh, sometimes, I...” He swallowed and shook himself. “Maybe I’m half bender, half — regular, you know. But ... Jek, what we are, you and me, it means so much to me. You mean so much. You’re my bro, but you’re ... more. And I don’t want to do anything to make you feel bad. It’s not — fair. I mean, that I should be able to be with her, and keep hurting you, and...” He shrugged again. “So — that’s it.”

Yes, Jek wanted to say. *Yes, mine, all mine, mine forever. Oh Nik, my friend, my joy, my ... my heart.* But he didn’t. He pulled Nik against himself instead. All the aching he had done for so many months didn’t seem to matter to him any more. Nik had told him what his choice would be, if he were forced to make that decision, and now that the moment was there he saw he could not make Nik do it. He hugged him fiercely, bewildered, unashamed of the embrace, and realized with even more surprise that he was not hardened. He’d wanted to hold Nik like this for so long and now he was, but the simple, shining love that filled him was not one of lust, had no trace of desire. It was too large for that suddenly. Too great for a physical urge to act.

“No,” he said softly. “No. You’re right I’m jealous sometimes, Nik. But it’s — regular for mels and fems to be together. What we do is ... well, it’s not.” He braced Nik’s shoulders. “I’ll live with it, Nik. All I really wanted to know, I think, was if, you know, if you really ... you know.” *And you do, you love me, more than I thought. Or even let myself hope.* “Don’t break up with her, mel.”

“You sure?” Nik said, and his face was still gathered in concern, and Jek’s heart flooded again to see it.

“Yeh,” Jek said. “Thanks, Nik. I can’t tell you what ... how much that meant.”

“Algood,” Nik said, and they started back inside. He took a breath. “And Jek?”  
“Yeh?”

“Any time. I mean, any time, if you change your mind, you ... tell me. It’s a — a standing offer.”

He’d heard it but Jek still didn’t fully grasp the message.

The next night, the last one before they left for the final match of the season, Jek presented Nik with a wooden shape. “Here, mel,” he said shyly. “For you.”

Nik took it and turned it over in his hands carefully. It was two mels, standing side by side, their arms across each other’s shoulders. The bodies were imperfectly formed, but Jek had spent a lot of time on the faces, and one was Nik’s, the other that of his friend.

“I thought you might like it,” he said. “I know it’s not very good, but —”

“You made this?” Nik stared at it. “For me?”

“Yeh,” Jek said.

“Jek...” and suddenly he couldn’t go on, his bosom filled with a heat he hadn’t expected.

“Do you like it?”

“Oh yeh,” Nik said, grabbing Jek and pulling him close. “Oh yeh. I love it.”

Jek hugged him back, stunned and pleased by the gesture. “Really?”

“Yeh,” Nik said. “It’s us. You and me.”

“Yeh,” Jek said, glad Nik could recognize the features. His hand had been uneven, and he felt the little statuette was full of flaws.

Nik hugged him again, then let him go. “Thanks, mel,” he said. “It’s spec. It’s so good.”

“Happy anniversary,” Jek said.

“Huh?”

“One halfyear ago, this week, we met.”

Nik cast his mind back. That chance journey to a new pond one afternoon, swimming, meeting a new mel, older and larger, a little scary and standoffish at first. But they had played Academy and swum together, and by the time they had parted were fast friends, and had agreed to meet the next day. And now Jek was his bro and his best

friend, and he had made this little wooden remembrance for him with his own hands.

On the base was an etched inscription, carved unevenly in the grain across the pedestal:

*For Nik, my best friend  
always, from Jek*

“Signed by the sculptor himself,” Oli said when Nik showed it to him. “That’s good. Someday this will be worth a lot.”

Jek smiled and ducked his head.

“Imagine,” Oli went on. “We’ll all be able to say, oh yeh, Jek Ellet, we knew him when he was just getting started...”

Jek slugged him, Keolit slugged him back, and Nik carefully enshrined the carving on the dresser in the bedroom before joining the fray, swinging a pillow and shouting a war cry.

Erekka watched the magbus drift along the road. She recognized it by now; her entire detachment did. It was the bus carrying the team of schoolnips, the *Dragonflies*, off to another game. Their last of the season, the decisive one.

Idly she scoped the passengers. Her crosshairs centered over each of them — not a morbid gesture, not a plan to kill any of them. Instead she was firing wishes of good fortune, and she studied their faces even as her darts of hope traveled invisibly into them. There was the team captain, pretty handsome and old enough that this was to be his last play season; there the coach, lacking the gut many of them had, actually athletic himself as he demanded of his charges; and there, at the back, Ellet, Tekkru and Festul.

Tekkru’s arm was around the fem’s shoulders and she was leaning against him. They were going over some kind of pages, playsheets she suspected, and Ellet was right beside them, with them in their studies but also a little apart, because he couldn’t join their closer huddle.

Pretten had been right, she saw distantly, most of her still focused on the practice of aim. Ellet was in love with the mel. It was all over him, his eyes, his face.

She shot a special dart, a special package of good wishes, into that mel's heart.  
*Buddha grant you peace and understanding.*

And then the bus was gone, lost among the trees.

The magbus was quiet, the tension thick. The players studied the sheets again and again, doing nothing but discussing strategy, as the kilometers unrolled past the windows. This was it. Tomorrow would mean victory, or something that no one really wanted to consider.

The Power Trio felt the strain intensely. They had the regard and respect of everyone else on the team — including the captain and coach — and knew they were being looked to as the linchpins of the entire game. They still hadn't worked up a strategy. They couldn't see any holes anywhere. It was almost crushing on them.

The silence in the bus became almost a pall as they passed the demarcation sign outside the largest city on Arcadia, saw its greeting as it faced the road:

ΜΕΤΑΚΙΑΣ ΟΚ ΕΚ ΚΙΩΑ ΔΕΛΦΙΑ

*Metakas ok ek kiwa Delfia*, Nik said to himself. *I hope we'll still feel welcome after tomorrow.* Looking around the bus he saw his teammates were thinking similar things.

They debarked at the travelhostel, and even Jek was solemn in his ritual folding and enclosing of his play gear, making sure all the wrinkles were flattened, all the creases razor clean. Unlike the other away games, Nik and Rena did not spend time alone, Jek didn't cruise, and he and Nik didn't play together either. There was too much on their minds for their bodies' other drives to distract them.

Almost everyone in the travelhostel knew who was staying within, and they saw many stares of curiosity and got lots of good luck wishes. 3cast crews recorded them as they shuffled about nervously.

Eventually Nik and Jek doused the lights in their room and settled under the covers together, sharing a bed in the two-berth space. They took comfort in the closeness, but were restless; neither slept until well after they had hit the sheets, and the sleep was thin, broken often as one or the other of them would shift.

The statuette Jek had made for Nik looked on from where it stood on Nik's

dresser. He had brought it for luck, he said, but his eyes said that he just wanted it nearby, because Jek had made it for him, that it was special to him. The two wooden mels gazed down on their fleshly likenesses, watching over their dreams, their shoulder-to-shoulder embrace mirrored in the night by the real Jek and Nik.

Dawn carried them into the day of their championship game and continued abstinence. At first the *'Flies* didn't want to eat much, but the captain reminded them that they needed the food, the energy, even if they were too fluttery inside to really want to consume anything. Listlessly they took in polt eggs, citron juice, toast and stackcakes.

They went into the small stadium and heard a mocking song from somewhere in the stands, using their own team's melody.

*Dragonflies, Dragonflies*  
*Fems have never touched their thighs*  
*Stroke and yank and fart all day*  
*Flies will never ge-et laid!*

Not everyone in the audience seemed to approve of the taunting. A voice over the PA system warned that anyone caught behaving in unsportsmanlike ways would be ejected from the stands. A sullen silence descended.

And then it was time to hit the field. They cheered in rally before play began, then took the turf, and the contest was on.

Five minutes in a *'Fly* was fouled by a *'Snake*, his leg raked with a cleat. He hobbled off the field and the *'Snakes* took the penalty. A few minutes later a *'Snake* body-checked a *'Fly* from behind, an elbow catching him just over his kidneys, and he went down and was out for a while while he recovered, gasping, then rose to play again. Nik, Renetta and Jek were outraged; it was another foul, but it had been too subtle for anyone to see it. The Trio put their heads together.

"You think there's a pattern?" Nik said.

"If there isn't," Rena said, "then I don't have tits."

"Shit," Jek said.

Jek was fouled next, tripped and taking a knee to the groin as he fell, his opponent going down atop him. His supporter saved him along with fast reflexes; he man-

aged to just get his legs together and slow down the *'Snake's* thrust enough to prevent it driving fully into him. Still he felt the cup give and crack under the assault, and as the penalty was assigned went off the field, his thighs rubbed raw, to change it out.

Next to take it was Rena; a flying shin just *happened* to fall between her legs as she was setting up a shot. Had she been built the same as a mel it would have been a devastating strike. As it was she lost her wind for several minutes.

The captain called a time out and brought the team together. "They're doing it on purpose," he said.

The *'Flies* scowled and spat. Everyone knew by then.

The captain looked at the Trio. "They're aiming for the three of you," he said. "They want to do enough damage to get you off the grass."

"Fuck that," Jek said.

"Yeh," the captain said. He looked around at everyone. "Watch them. Guard them. Don't let 'em get past."

The *'Flies'* heads nodded and the huddle broke.

By half time three *'Flies* were out of the game, too banged up to play any longer, and all the others bore minor injuries, bruises and scuffs. Jek, Nik and Rena looked at each other, faces scrawled with disgust. In all the time they had analyzed the *'Snakes'* moves, trying to see how they kept winning, they had not contemplated dirty playing as being the answer. The score stood at zero for both, so it was still salvageable, but no one wanted to consider stooping to the opposition's tactics. If they weren't going to win honestly, then there wasn't a point in trying.

They took the turf again, playing warily, trying to keep their guard up while still being unwrapped enough to work hard. Two more *'Flies* went down, one with his ankle twisted so badly (but not broken, at least) that he macked helplessly as he was carried off the field.

At seven left on the clock Nik was fouled horribly. He was slammed from two sides by *'Snakes*, hit the ground with his head spinning as a third *'Snake* ran right across him, right across his body as he lay on the grass, and felt a tremendous weight on his belly followed by a searing flash of pain. His abdominals tensed, deflecting the worst of it, but he came up bleeding. The cleats had left eight open wounds on his flesh surrounded by a treaded bruise, a clear mark of a footprint, and a time out was called as he was walked off the field. The nurse clucked over him and applied skingel, and then Nik

insisted on taking the field once more.

“I’m not sure you should,” she said, eyeing him. He was still pale, breathing hard, and his jersey was torn, damp with sweat and blood. She had seen something Nik had not. When he was stomped, his head had flown back for an instant, and that was the only thing that kept his chin from being nicked by the player fouling him. Another fraction of a second and he might have had a broken jaw, or a face scarred forever by the rake of a cleat, maybe even a lost eye.

“Unless you’re gonna tell me I’m suspended from play,” he said, “I’m gonna be out there with my team.”

She considered him again. “Stand up. Stretch backward. Breathe deeply.”

Nik did. He didn’t wince.

“Algood,” she said.

He loped onto the grass to cheers, but play didn’t resume immediately. Rena was missing. In a moment she emerged from the fems’ room. Nik groaned inwardly. What a time to have to pee.

She pulled him close. “Get the ball to their goal,” she said.

He looked at her like he thought she was some kind of tree, and a particularly slow-growing one at that. “Uh-fuh. We’ve been trying,” he said.

She spat. “Just humping do it,” she said. “Do it and I’ll make sure you have an opening, and you can get it in.”

“How?”

She saw his worry. “I’m not gonna hit anyone,” she said. “No fouls. Promise.”

He nodded. “Algood.”

Play started again, the score still aught-aught. The Trio slowly worked the ball up the field, and after five hard minutes they were within ten meters of the goal, as close as they had got the entire game. Rena had the ball and was surrounded by defense in an arc before her and caught Nik’s eye, bobbing the ball over her shins, catching it to roll up along to her knees and then off her chest and then back to her shins, her hair plaited behind her and stuffed down the back of her jersey in her game tie-off, left hand flickering up for one moment, thumb and forefinger extended. *Here it comes.*

Nik saw the signal. She was getting ready to pass to him from her left leg, a hook that most players didn’t see her preparing to do because they kept watching her right, a powerhouse of debilitating speed and accuracy. He shot his right hand up in a cupped

shape. *I'll catch it.* He relayed a nod to Jek, and saw he understood that the ball would be coming his way.

He distantly wondered what was about to happen.

The 'Snakes' goalie was watching her too and she looked directly at him, then let the ball drop, and several things occurred at one time. Her left foot slapped aside and the ball began arcing toward Nik and he got into position to rebound it, sure the goalie would see but figuring it was worth a try, and then Rena lifted her jersey, just a quick flit up of the cloth, and Nik understood.

She had gone to the fems' sport room not to pee, but to remove her support harness.

The 'Snakes' goalie's eyes bugged out of his head as Nik sent the ball to Jek who, without hesitating, took his shot, then tumbled onto the turf and began laughing so hard he was sure he was pissing himself.

The goalie was good, he conceded. He saw, peripherally, what was happening, and dived for a save, but he was *just* too late. His fingers skimmed the ball as it sailed, flat and fast, into the net, deflected only by a half a degree or so by his desperate reach. He came up spitting sod and profaning effusively.

Rena had already lowered her jersey and was jogging along as though nothing had happened, and the crowd went absolutely mad.

She hadn't fouled anyone. She had just understood that on a field that was all mels, a fem could sometimes be a *distraction*. And she had done it just right. The sudden flip of her jersey looked like an accident, something that happened from time to time in play. All of the players had bared nipples occasionally, but Rena's happened to be atop something all the mels lacked.

It was over. They played out the remaining time, but everyone knew what had happened. With the single goal shot that late in the game, the *Dragonflies* had won the Arcadian School Division kickball championship without playing dirty even once.

The coach announced that, as a special treat, they would be spending a second night in Delfia, then tour the city the next day, and there was even more cheering from the 'Flies.

As they left the field Renetta leaned close to Nik. "If you don't fuck my brains out tonight I'll never talk to you again," she said.

He stared, flushed, his heart suddenly crawling up his throat. He didn't know

what scared him more: The thought he was wrong about what she'd said, that he had mistaken her words somehow ... or that he had heard them with complete accuracy.

She nodded and made a hand-signal at him, thumb wrapping into a cupped palm. *Take the goal shot.*

And, later, trembling and anxious but ready, very ready, Rena and Nik helped each other score for a second time that day. She slowly bared herself for him, then took away his togs, and they kissed each other everywhere, and she asked him if he had a sheath and he said yeh, and she said so get it out and he did, and she watched him put it on and then pushed him back on the bed and pressed herself to him as he kissed her lips, her throat, her breasts, and she took him in her hand and guided him and he felt the slow slipping aside of her body to accept his and the space between their hips narrowed and vanished and she was astride him and they were one.

She gasped, then settled against him.

"You algood?" he said, pausing in his motions.

"Yeh," she sighed, and kissed him. "Don't stop." She worked closer. "*Never stop.*"

They continued rocking, slowly, easily, savoring it, drawing it out, and his hands were on her haunches as they shifted over him and on her breasts as they bobbed with her motions and her hands smoothed his chest and made his nipples rise and she leaned to him and they kissed, they sipped, they drank, and then their shared body took on its own nature and it moved, they moved, and then the joining of flesh became a joining of feeling and thought, and they still remained together, coupled, even as their heartbeats subsided and their locked muscles let them relax against each other.

The blood surprised him, but she explained that was the way it sometimes happened when a mel was a fem's first, and he had wept a little at what it meant for her, for him, and she told him to get another sheath and they blossomed into each other fully, making love with their eyes locked together, watching each other in the supreme bliss that swept them off, each seeing the joy in the other's face that this simple, simple, beautiful thing brought them.

He showered with her before they parted, and wherever the water fell, so fell their lips.

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Jek stared all around at the museum's exhibits, thrilled, as he and Nik and Renetta walked together, Rena clearly a little sore. He knew about them, of course; Nik had been so full of the events last night that he'd seen it immediately on his face and had pushed, *hard*, at the ice that swept through him. "Way, mel," he had said. "And a good night to do it."

"Yeh," Nik said. And then he grinned. "Let's play."

From chill to heat that quickly. It was so easy. "Uh, algood." *Of course, Nik. Anything. Anything.*

They tumbled to Nik's mattress, still leaving Jek's bed unruffled. They had woken in the middle of the night in a warm tangle and played again, so close together that they painted each other at the finish.

Nearly, nearly Jek had ... he had almost ... oh it had been such a near thing.

And for just a moment he thought he had seen a ... an invitation in Nik's eyes.

But they hadn't.

And now he was full of good food and good feelings and looking everywhere, delighted at the displays of early settlers' books and clothing and even a full-sized restoration of one of their log homes. They sat inside it a while, almost meditating, considering what it would have been like to live in one, felled trees all about them and living ones standing tall just beyond, the soil of the floor packed and bare, logs burning for heat, drying and cooking in a stone fireberth, and no 3cast and damn little power once the suns set, the charge from the solar accumulators' batteries dwindling rapidly.

"Not even a hot bath," Rena murmured. "Except once a duoweek."

"Or bubble baths," Nik said, and they laughed together.

The team rang with the victory. Everyone signed autographs and there was a happy sense of victorious fatigue among them all as their magbus wended its way home amid the trees and they drifted in and out of easy slumbers. They were greeted by virtually the entire township when they arrived, the local 3cast cameras recording every moment, and that night the stragglers returned to the arms of their femfriends, and a few found their first femfriends. Dawn saw several Jerres Township *Dragonflies* considerably more experienced than they had been the day before.

After they left Nik had given Jek a gift, something he had picked up at the museum's shop. It was a true reproduction of an early book, settlers' bedtime narratives for

nips, letterpressed and the words three-dimensional on the pages because of it, palpably imprinted on the paper. Actual paper, not papes, cream colored and full of texture, not blue-white and slick. It smelled of ink, of binding glue, of leather. It was expensive and precious. Jek loved it and nearly kissed Nik. Inside it was an inscription:

*For Jek, my best friend, the greatest mel I've ever known.  
From Nik.*

He read it avidly. It contained several short works that were written very long ago; his favorite was about a little renardo that wanted to catch some tasty grappa from a suspended trellis, but couldn't leap far enough to pluck them. The renardo in the tale could speak and, on learning he couldn't get the fruit, walked away, angry, saying, "The grappa were probably rotten anyway." He thought it was a delightful story.

Back at the homestead, Nik and Jek were treated like visiting royalty. May made all their favorites for supper, and Day happily declared they were free of orchard chores for a month. Keolit hugged them both fiercely and declared, with complete sincerity, that they were the two finest mels he had ever known, and that he was proud to be able to call them both his brothers. All night long they were doted on, their cups kept filled with citron juice, asked over and over to replay the game in story even though all three of them had been there to see it.

As Nik nestled against him on the couch, just barely putting his weight against him to let him know he was *right there*, Jek wondered if he would burst.

They popped the Scintillan brew again, celebrating with the nips. What the hell, why not. They'd been following them for so long that, when they won, it was a kind of victory for all of them. Not quite the same as a successful full-frontal attack on a post might have been, but still a night worthy of note.

They had all watched the final match and all groaned at the fouls. There were so many of them. It was clear they weren't accidents. And then Festul had made her amazing play, had done something that most of the detachment thought was a bit more than a mistake, and the *Dragonflies* had taken the lead, the game and the championship.

Erekka was glad for them, but she couldn't keep from herself a sense of unease. If

Pretten and the others were right, then Tekkru and Ellet had a thing happening that might get strained — or worse — under the scrutiny that was about to come.

The next morning the interview requests started coming in. May and Day and Oli helped them sort through the communiqués, and they eventually granted requests to the two major Arcadian networks, the four local ones, and the kickball-only band (of course).

Nik had never before seen how interviews were actually done. The 3cast crews hemmed and murmured over the inside of the dwelcap, the outside, the orchard and even the lane going up to the homestead, and even though Nik knew they were trying to set things up for millions of viewers, he didn't really feel it. It was just the little crew, and some portable lights and reflectors, and the make-up woman.

That was strange for him. She fussed over his hair a while, then plastered paint and powder over his cheeks, to smooth his complexion she said. Looking in the mirror Nik felt astonished. There was so much goop on him it didn't even look like him any more — just something shaped with his features, then flattened with a sheen of ectmit wrap and blotted over with khaki colored pigment to bring a semblance of life to the doll's head that was his face. His freckles were missing, he realized, and for only the second time in his life he wanted them to be there.

“Nobody like freckles,” the makeup woman said to his objections.

*Yeh, well, Rena does. And maybe I do too.*

Jek looked just as artificial. An injection-molded Jektres, InjectiJek, vacuformed and fake. Nik thought he could almost see the manufacturing marks on him. They both pissed everyone off by clawing at each other's cheeks, digging deep furrows in the sludge that coated them, laughing. Under the mud colored grease their skin shone, healthy and clear, and was promptly covered again.

The 3cast crews set them up in little folding chairs (which they had brought). Earlier in the day they had invaded his and Jek's and Oli's room, finding both Jek's puffcat and the carving he had given to Nik, and had crowed over them. One woman got almost teary in her distant maunderings. “Two best friends,” she said, “one from nowhere and the other just a farm nip, and a brotherhood that broke past everything.” She twisted the puffcat a little.

Nik took it from her and handed it off to Jek, who tucked it behind him. “What's

that got to do with kickball?” he said.

“Oh, my dear mel — this is about much more than kickball. It’s about how anyone can win, at any odds.”

“Yeh, well, crap on that,” Nik said, and everyone around them gasped. “It was just a game.”

He learned the woman was to interview them, and was regarded as one of the top 3cast reporters on Arcadia in many halfyears. He wondered if he should give a crap, and then decided he didn’t, and said so.

“Delightful!” she said. “Irreverent, cocky, full of stuff and juice.”

*Yeh yeh*, Nik thought. *Let’s just get this done*. One day into his fame and he was already tired of the shallowness of celebrity.

Renetta had it the worst, really. It was her birthday and much noise was made. She was thirteen, all of Arcadia learned, thirteen *just today*, and wasn’t it wonderful that all her teammates showed up to help her celebrate, and wasn’t it sweet that she had two mels who were her close friends, and did she have a *special relationship* with one of them?

She spent most of the day wishing she could be anywhere else, repeatedly refused requests to talk about her love life (“Even if something’s going on it’s none of anyone else’s business”) and had no opportunity at all to celebrate the day as she had hoped, Nik being forced to the side by reporters and cameras, and neither of them willing to put themselves on show for anyone.

The interviews were sweaty and unpleasant, and then they were over, but their lives didn’t settle. They lost privacy. They managed to keep their pond secret, but it was many days before any of them were able to get really near each other in the ways they variously craved. They were followed everywhere by 3cast crews or holotogs, all wanting to get shots of them, permitted or otherwise, in action. Nikolis was reminded of paparats, the humming bloodsuckers that were eaten by his team’s mascot, and wished for people-sized predators to swoop down and finish off the murmuring horde of followers.

Then something else happened in some other part of Arcadia — Nik wasn’t sure what, maybe a dungungule had pooped or something equally unbelievable — and they were at last left in peace. Life resumed.

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The school season coasted to a stop and all the students left it behind with sighs of relief. The schedule was reasonable, but it got monotonous; work on the homestead made a nice change of pace. Nik's fourteenth halfyear approached, just a few weeks off now, and he wondered if the fuss had died in time for him to enjoy it in peace, or if he would be put on display as Renetta had been.

At the end of the season there was an award ceremony. Nikolis had never been to one before as anything but an audience member, and now he, Rena and Jek were seated at the foremost table. Oh mel. More noise? He almost cringed to think of it.

The administrator stood and burred on for roughly five centuries, give or take a decade, about how Jerres Township's school had changed in the last halfyear. Then the agriculture club's sponsor stood and said nearly the same, except he was speaking of trees. Then the *Dragonflies'* coach got up and Nik dredged his attention from down around his toes.

"This has been an important season," he began, and was met with cheers. Lots of them.

"Good things have happened," he said, about three minutes later, and there were more cheers.

"I've been privileged to coach the best team this school has ever seen," he offered, and there was another multi-minute gap.

The Trio all traded looks. At this rate they'd be done about the same time their teeth fell out. Their grandnips would be listening to this. On and on. Why didn't adults ever just get to the point and shuddup?

"Each halfyear we award a Most Valuable Player cup to the *Dragonfly* who has shown the most persistent dedication and mettle, not just to his team, but to his scholastic studies. It's never easy to pick a single MVP. Everyone's a good player, everyone's a good part of the team effort."

There were whistles from the crowd.

"This halfyear we've been hard put to pick. So we haven't." The room fell silent. "Yes," the coach said. "There is no award to be given this season to a single MVP."

Boos and catcalls began to issue from the crowd.

"This time, this time," the coach said, overriding the dissent, "we have decided that there are three MVPs on the *Dragonfly* team —" and there was a burgeon of noise

from the assembly — “three players who have defined team spirit and inspired us all —” the noise grew — “and who helped us all find victory in the Arcadian School Division championships!” The crowd was nearly shrieking. “Jektres Ellet, Renetta Festul and Nikolis Tekkru, come forth and claim your award.”

Amid the shattering noise, the Trio stood.

“And,” the coach went on, “and and, a special notation of superb effort is given to Jektres Ellet, for skilling five gradations in a single school season by his exemplary performance.”

As they moved to the dais they exchanged glances. *Five?* Nik thought. *But that would mean Jek’s at eleven now, not ten.* And then he saw. His friend had jumped another level in the last few weeks. In the middle of all the games. He had kept his school-work going, had got past another hurdle, the AIs putting him up another halfyear.

Jek’s face was shining, they were handed the award, and by unspoken agreement Nik and Rena passed it off to Jek. He stood before the pickup, waiting for the crowd to subside.

“Thanks,” he said, and the cheering began to roll again. He waited. “Thanks, coach, thanks captain, thanks to all my fellow *Dragonflies* —” he had to pause as the cheers drifted away, and then the room fell oddly silent, and Nik saw his friend’s eyes were glimmering. “I’ve never had a halfyear like this,” he went on. “I’ve never — this same time just a halfyear ago I had one friend.” He glanced at Nik. “One friend, one mel who gave a crap. Uh, who cared.” He wiped at his eyes. “And now I’m ... I feel so lucky. So lucky, to be with all of you, and on the *Dragonflies*, and lucky that my best friend is right here too, and I...” He wiped his eyes again. He leaned forward and his shoulders shook. “I’m sorry,” he said, and the coach and Rena helped him aside. Renetta shot Nik a look that told him he was on the spot and better come through.

Nik took the pickup. “Yeh, well,” he said. “Jek’s the best mel anyone could ever know.”

There were some calls and claps from the audience.

“We got the Arcadian School Division championships because he was there to help us along,” he went on, and there was a further rise.

“He’s my best friend,” he said.

There was a crashing wave of cheering.

“He’s my best friend, my brother, and ... and we can all be so proud for him.”

And the noise was solid, a foaming wall of accolades. Nik went over to Rena and Jek, then handed the cup to him and lifted his arm high, and there was more cheering.

Jek bore it back to their table, the trophy that he deserved to have just for *surviving*, his eyes still streaming.

## DAMNATION

THE PLANS WERE LAID SILENTLY, as surprises often are.

He didn't see it coming.

The Academy troopers showed up and bundled him into their special shuttle, the black shuttle with the PIRD logo, and bore him away from his home.

His home.

His home.

Jektres Ellet, Nik's best friend, second brother and the blood of his heart, just sixteen halfyears aged, was printed, DNA scanned, holo'd and taken to prison as a sex offender, a bender, a wormsucker, a pervert, bound for Retraining.

He sat in his bedroom, shattered, torn, empty. Too much to feel for him to have any feelings. In his hands he had a small carved shape. His fingers turned it restlessly, detached. In three days he would be fourteen. He had been looking forward to the day, planning to share it mostly with Jek, but that was over now.

Too much was over now. Too much that had only just, only just begun.

They had been at the pond. At the pond and playing, swimming, having fun, just the two of them, and something had happened, something had become different, and it had been so good. It had been so good, so very good.

It was so much ... more than he thought it could be. He had been ... had been ... made, unmade, turned real.

The looks, the nearness. So much friendship between them, so much ... love. For so long. And it had become real. It had become real and they had paused on the way back home, paused to talk a little more, touch a little more, wanting to linger a little more in it, and their bodies had been so close and warm and their faces were near together and there were words that burned inside and were sweet to say and hear and their hearts were beating so hard.

And it was new, it was all new, and it was pure and it shone. And they both knew

it was wrong but it wasn't, it was so right, it was what had been in them, between them, for so long, what they had been waiting for, and it was perfect, it was natural, it was true.

And then they had gone home.

And then it had ended.

The carving was darkened by little wet pats of moisture where they fell onto the wood from Nikolis's flowing eyes.

*Happy birthday*, he thought, and the feelings came, and he folded in on himself, and didn't unfold for a very long time.