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I'd been out on a delivery when the call came. Not to my personal comm. An actual person had come to my family's apartment. That's how it worked when you got called. Serving our government was that important, and I was honored to do so.

Stepping into the lift, waiting for it to deliver me to the ninety-seventh floor, I could hardly wait. You see, my father had buzzed my comm the moment the Service Rep had arrived. Now the lift was stopping at the seventh floor, then the sixteenth, then the thirty-third, and twelve more stops until it finally reached mine. It figured. When I was in a hurry, I was always delayed in some way.

The apartment door opened before I had a chance to open it myself. It was as if my father could see me coming. He stood a quarter meter taller than me, looking down into my face, a frown on his forehead, his head tipped toward mine, so that I could see the freckles on his bald head. He had absolutely no facial hair (or any hair on his body at all) due to a rare but benign condition known as alopecia areata. But his physical presence didn't bother me as much as the fact that he didn't want me in this particular branch of the Service.

I stepped into the apartment, smiling at him weakly. My two brothers were sitting in front of the tube playing video games and were so engaged as not to even notice my entrance. Directly behind my father, a tall woman stood and extended her hand toward me. She wore a gray and black Service uniform indicating she worked in the Administrative Branch. In some sense, she was a courier like myself, only she delivered information rather than products. I immediately shook her hand.

"I'm AD Gretchen Too Rub," she said in a deeper voice than I expected.

"Sue Rae Ten," I said, and immediately felt stupid. Of course, she already knew my name. She had all my specs including photos.

"Ms. Ten, I am here to officially inform you of your acceptance into the Communications Interface Corps."

My face must have lit up, because Gretchen produced a kind of half-smile, brief though it was. This was definitely a no-nonsense woman, so I tried to contain my joy. "Thank you, AD Rub," I said in my most serious voice.

"Congratulations, Ms. Ten. I trust you will be ready to leave within the half-hour." She looked at her watch. "I will wait."

My eyes popped open wide. Of course, I already had a bag packed in preparation for this day. But I hadn't really expected to be called this soon, if at all. I wasn't mentally prepared to leave my family right this minute. I glanced at my father, who was sitting in his stuffed chair, still frowning, but looking resigned to the fact that I was leaving. Although I had discussed the implant procedure with him many times, showing him statistics that proved it was ninety-nine percent safe, he was still apprehensive, probably because my mother had disappeared almost three years ago after going into the Service. But we never discussed her—it was too painful for all of us.

"Yes, I can be ready right away, AD," I said. I looked at my brothers again, only fourteen and fifteen years of age. This time, they turned away from the tube and looked at Gretchen and me with curiosity, as if they just realized an important event was about to take place. I rolled my eyes, yet a moment later, I felt tears forming. I dashed into my room, shed my courier uniform, and jumped into the shower. I let the tears fall freely, mixing with the downpouring water, and disappear into the drain.

By the time I was dressed, bag in hand, standing by the front door, I had gained control of my emotions. With steely resolve, I stepped over and gave my father a half-hug. He seemed unaffected and unmoving, though I felt a small squeeze of his hand on my shoulder. Then I looked at my brothers. What the hell. I hugged them simultaneously—an arm around each of them. To my surprise, they both responded affectionately. I let go first and followed Gretchen out the door. If my mother had still

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been alive and standing at the door, I don't know if I would have contained my composure. But I was nineteen—ready to leave home.

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Inside the orbiting medical station, I followed a short male nurse through corridors, winding around offices and clinics until we stopped in a small lobby, where he left me to wait. I found a seat amidst probably twenty other people, who did not look particularly happy to be there. I glanced around the small room and noticed the walls were painted a gunmetal gray and had absolutely no pictures to brighten them. The tiled floor was a shiny cream color, appearing worn in spots and yellowed from time. I wondered how long these people had been waiting and if I would, by fortune, be called in before any of them.

To my surprise, my name was called in less than a minute. I was led into a small room where an intense looking female nurse took my blood pressure, weight, and temperature. The nurses wore Service gray with red trim. The doctors' gray uniforms were distinguished by dark green. I knew my uniform would be Service gray with light blue trim. And those brave souls who dared to fly the fighter-bombers wore cerulean blue uniforms with silver trim. Thoughts of being one of them gave me a chill of excitement, yet, I believed I would never choose to go that route. I was not that courageous.

My thoughts were interrupted by the entrance of a tall male doctor, an anesthesiologist who would explain the risks of the procedure I was to have. Although risk of nerve damage or even death was very low, nevertheless, it was required the patient be informed of those possibilities.

"Now, if you'll sign this release, Ms. Ten, we can take you to the pre-op area."

I looked down at the long paper document with small print, while the doctor waited impatiently for me to sign. Even with my speed reading skills, I couldn't have finished the document as fast as the doctor expected, but I did understand that I could not hold the clinic liable if anything did go wrong with the surgery. But I already knew what I was in for, having studied my chosen profession long before submitting my application. I picked up the pen and scribbled in my John Henry.

"There," I said as I slapped the pen down on the table a bit too hard. The doctor didn't seem to notice.

"This way," he said.

Again, I wove through several hallways, passing nurses' stations along the way, until we reached a desk where I was given more paper forms and asked to fill them out.

In the pre-op room was a row of maybe thirty chairs, all of them occupied. Each patient wore a hospital gown and a helmet over her or his head. Most of them appeared sedated. I had read about this part too. The helmets dispersed a drug cocktail into the pleasure centers of the brain, so the patient would be relaxed when going into surgery.

Just then, an attendant removed the helmet from one young man's head and guided him through an iris door. I felt a pair of hands on my shoulders and was ushered into the vacated chair. My heart was pounding as I realized I was really going to go through with the surgery. I felt a soft cloth wipe the perspiration from my forehead just before the helmet went on.

"You'll be fine," a soft female voice said. The attendant looked me in the eye and gave me a reassuring smile. Whether it was phony or not, it made me feel better. The drug immediately overpowered any residual nervousness I had, and I felt my eyelids close partway as a smile drew itself across my face.

We had the option to watch our surgery, but I chose to be asleep. To be honest, I really didn't want to watch them insert those microchips with artificial

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neurotransmitters into my brain and cranial nerves and the transponder deep within my head. These would be permanent additions to my nervous system. My thoughts soon faded as I sank into the operating table, falling into a deep fog of unconsciousness.

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I woke in a room full of beds and micromonitors. The first thing I noticed was a tingling feeling in my neck. I reached my hand up to touch it, and I heard a deep voice say, "It's only temporary while your body adapts to its enhancements." I looked over to see a long dark arm connected to a towering male body. Before I could ask how long the tingling sensation would last, the dark man answered. "Only be a few hours. Then you'll feel like new." He spoke with a practiced tone as if he'd said the same thing hundreds of times. Probably had.

"Okay," I said and slowly moved my hand back down to my side. "So when do I get out of here?"

"Couple of hours at most," he said. I could tell he was a physician's assistant by the light green trim on his uniform.

I frowned and tried to sit up, but I suddenly felt disoriented. The PA smiled and moved on to the next patient.

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Two hours later, as promised, I was whisked out of the recovery room, placed on a transport, and sent to the outer planets. With the transport's hyperdrive, the trip took less time than I had spent in the recovery room.

Next came the exciting part—what I had been waiting for—boarding the enormous aircraft carrier, *Star Fortress*. A group of us junior commtechs were herded from the transport directly to the vast bridge of the starship before we even had a chance to see our quarters. The communications stations sat just above the bridge and surrounded it on all sides in a ring. There were one hundred twenty stations in all, with helmeted techs sitting at about half of them. The area was a huge saucer, and each station had a real view window to the outside as well as a 3-D monitor.

At once I was taken by the size of the room as well as the ambience created by the soft lighting and the faint whirring and beeping sounds from each station. They must really be desperate for help, I mused, to bring us here directly. I wondered what had happened to some of my predecessors. Had the job become too stressful for them? Had their implants malfunctioned? Or, I hated to imagine, had they been called away to combat duty, never to return again? Why else would there be so many vacant chairs?

"Your station will be here, Tech Tens," our guide said. I sat down between two empty chairs. The guide disappeared to seat others.

Now what do I do? I thought. Immediately, my monitor flicked on, and a light-skinned female instructor appeared. Her hair was pulled back in a bun, and she wore no expression on her stony face.

"Place your helmet on your head and adjust the size to fit. You may do this by touching the two yellow lights on either side of the helmet."

I picked up the gray visored helmet and carefully placed it on my head. It was much too loose. I pressed the small yellow knobs and it immediately shrunk to fit. The instructor continued directing me to place my hands into the glove receptacle and my feet inside the slots on the floor. I did as I was told.

"Ready?" said the instructor.

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"Yes, ma'am," I responded. I mentally braced myself. Then I felt a rush of disorientation and I thought I might become ill. But that sensation was short-lived. What happened next is difficult to describe, but the experience was not unpleasant.

I was now a human interface between the long-range sensors and the monitor. My implants allowed the scanning sensors to enhance their field of surveillance, allowing me to "see" as far as one hundred meters above the planet's surface from a low space orbit! What I saw was signaled back to the monitors on the ship for analysis by the Intelligence Group, a commissioned position composed mostly of ensigns. Mine was a grunt job, but I didn't care. This was fun. It was as if I were cruising the planet in a small aircraft and I could steer the plane wherever I wanted. But I knew the instructor was watching, so I resisted the urge to dive and roll. I was here to gather information about the enemy, so I must behave myself. However, I felt giddy with the sensation.

The planet's surface over which I watched was heavily forested with deep green trees and other thick growth, indicative of a cool, wet climate. This might be a good place for the enemy to hide, I thought. However, my sensors gave me the ability to detect heat signatures, but I found none. I was about to pull out and move on to another area when I was jerked back into the ship, finding myself sitting at the comm station in front of my monitor. I felt my helmet being removed, and I reluctantly pulled my hands from the gloves and my feet from the slots on the floor.

"Your interface is working properly," said another instructor at my side. "You may go rest now."

"But...how long was I in?" I asked.

"Almost an hour. We want to make sure you don't overdo yourself at the beginning. It would cause burnout and you would have to be repaired." I wasn't at all sure that burnout *could* be repaired, but I didn't question her. I would ask around later.

I stood up and rubbed my eyes. Being jerked back into the ship like this was unsettling. I cleared my throat and looked up at the instructor, who was almost a head taller than me. "How long can I go when I'm 'broken in,'" I said for lack of a better term.

"Two hours at a time with at least a half-hour break between."

I frowned. "But the time went so fast while I was in there."

The instructor avoided further conversation and promptly led me to my quarters. Actually my quarters were more like barracks, which I shared with nine other commtechs. And, come to think of it, I couldn't remember how I got there. This ship was a small city.

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Chatting that evening with my bunkmates, I found out all was not as it seemed. At least, that was what the talk was.

Jo Von Seep was sleeping in the bunk on my left. Jay Doe Beet was above me, and the rest of our group was composed of male clones. So there were only three of us females. The clones' names were numbers, and though my last name, Ten, was also a number, I was a unique individual. PX-1, PX-4, and PX-7 had bunks close by, but I didn't trust them, just because they were clones, I guess. So Jo Von, Jay Doe, and I had a bathroom conversation.

"You've probably heard," said Jay Doe, "a lot of the commtechs burned out."

"Is that why there are so many empty stations?" I asked.

Jo Von nodded, and put her finger to her lips, gesturing for me to lower my voice.

"What became of them?" I whispered.

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Jo Von and Jay Doe eyed each other, as if trying to decide whether to tell me or not.

I raised my eyebrows. "Well?" I was eager to know the answer but also afraid of what it would be.

Tilting her head toward me, Jay Doe explained. "Although the burnouts have fried circuits and their artificial neurotransmitters no longer function, they still have primary brain function."

"You mean they go back to the way they were before the implants?"

"No," said Jay Doe, sounding impatient. "Let me explain."

"Sorry," I said.

"If a commtech is left plugged in for too long, not only is the implant fried, some residue damage is also done to the brain cells."

So, the burnouts couldn't be repaired as my instructor had suggested. I was about to ask how much damage was done, but I held my question.

"The amount of damage varies from person to person and depends on how long the person was plugged in before being zapped," said Jay Doe.

I was alarmed, but I was still waiting to find out what happened to the unfortunate commtechs after their usefulness had expired. I could only speculate that our government sent them back to our home planet for rehabilitation, though I'd heard of no such rehab centers.

Jay Doe glanced over to Jo Von again, then back to me. She took my shoulders in her hands and stared into my eyes. "You must not repeat what I'm about to tell you, do you understand?"

Wide-eyed, I nodded then whispered, "Yes, of course."

"They become part of the infantry we drop on the planet from time to time."

"But this ship isn't an infantry carrier," I said. "How do they...?"

"Oh yes it is. Those fighter-bombers we see periodically ejecting from this ship..."

"Aren't all fighter-bombers?" I filled in. They were just blips on a screen to me.

Jay Doe didn't respond, but her silence told me I was correct.

"But how do you know? Who told you this?" I didn't want to believe our government was keeping secrets from us.

Jo Von interjected. "We've heard, that is all we can say."

"So you aren't sure."

"Oh, we're pretty sure, all right," said Jay Doe. "Let's get back now before we're missed."

I would have to be satisfied for the moment that they both could have false information.

We emerged from the bathroom at two-minute intervals, and I stumbled into bed, exhausted from the day. As my head hit the pillow, the day's events streamed through my mind, and I thought I would have difficulty falling asleep, but the opposite was true. I immediately sunk into a deep chasm of unconsciousness, lost in yet another world.

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The commtech sergeant was a tall, athletically built woman. She could have been a clone, as she so closely resembled several other instructors I had seen the day before. Our population had fallen off so steeply in the last war because the enemy had infected our genetic strain by introducing a viral anomaly into our birth labs. At least that was what we were told, but I had no reason to doubt that piece of information. The enemy would go to any lengths to destroy us. This was just one of many tactics they employed to kill us and take over the entire solar system. As a counter measure,

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our government had begun a cloning campaign to repopulate our people. It was not uncommon to find clones in every arena of our society.

"My name is Sergeant Toll-Rue." The room immediately quieted. "I would like to welcome our new recruits. Please stand."

I felt self-conscious but stood with what appeared to be twenty-five to thirty others. I hadn't known there were that many of us new ones. Moderate applause followed, led by Sergeant Toll-Rue, which immediately abated, and we new recruits took our seats.

"I'll get right to the point," she said, pacing and looking at each and every one of us. "You are probably all worried about burnout." That got our attention. "Let me tell you. Our systems malfunctioned a few weeks ago, and the automatic timers failed to alert some of our commtechs when their time had expired. This was an unfortunate occurrence, and we have since repaired that malfunction. In addition, we have assigned personnel to remove you from your stations once your time is up. You will work ten-hour shifts with half-hour breaks every two hours. We have every confidence of your protection."

I quickly glanced around the room as much as possible without moving my head. Everyone looked transfixed by what the sergeant had said.

"Okay, now on to our next topic," said the sergeant. A map of the solar system blossomed into a holo behind her. All ten planets were shown rotating around our sun in real time.

"As you all well know, the enemy began populating the Tenth planet almost two hundred standard years ago. We let that go without a struggle. Though the Tenth is rich in minerals, we had sufficient resources from the other planets and asteroids within our region. But the Tenth was not enough for our sly enemy. In their greed, they rushed in to take the Ninth planet. We didn't expect this, so our forces could not defend the Ninth. But just twelve years ago, they took the Eighth, and now they are occupying the Seventh. We must assume they will continue to advance until they reach the Fourth—our home planet. We must not let them advance any farther. We must not let them have the Seventh."

At first, people were starting to doze, shift in their chairs, and look around the room. We all knew the history. But this was turning into a pep talk, and Sergeant Toll-Rue's voice became commanding, and she regained our attention. I felt a swell of pride in my heart for my government and remembered the reason I joined the Service in the first place. I had been told—we all had—the enemy killed their own citizens for such minor crimes as reproducing more offspring than they were allowed, which was two children now. They also took no prisoners. None of our infantry had returned once captured. These reports had come from returned infantry members, who, by the way, numbered fewer and fewer as time went on. This was why our job was so important.

"Your job as commtechs is to scan for any movement of life. If you happen to come across any of our army, you will report immediately." I already knew they were identifiable by the transponders implanted deep within their heads. The enemy would have to kill them to remove them. Our conclusion was they had killed our people, as we never found any of our missing personnel.

Once the briefing was over, we techs were taken to our respective stations overlooking the bridge. I had not been introduced to the commander of this vessel and wasn't sure the person sitting in the central chair below was the primary captain or someone temporarily filling that position. There seemed to be little time for formalities with this assignment, and I accepted that without thinking any further on the subject.

I sat down at my station, again awed by the view out my window. The blue-green planet filled the bottom portion of my window. We were orbiting in close range, searching for military installations on the surface.

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An instructor clone assisted me with my helmet as I slipped my hands and feet into the proper receptacles. The station was already comfortably familiar, though I'd only sat at it once before. Immediately, I zoomed toward the planet at a magnification so great that I could distinguish different types of plant life and recognize small streams and inlets. What I saw appeared on my screen to the instructor as well as to a larger video feed into Central Systems.

"No apparent military posts here," said the instructor clone. "Pan right and advance two zero three point seven kilometers. There appears to be a group of structures in this area."

I did as I was told. Once I got the hang of searching for clusters of buildings, the instructor showed me how to recognize one of our peoples' transponder signals. However, the buildings appeared to be unoccupied or abandoned. I was getting frustrated at finding neither the military installations nor the transponder signals, when I was interrupted by a signal to disengage, and I was automatically separated from my connection. The instructor checked the switches to make sure I was totally disconnected, and I was told to remove myself from the station.

"Rest for a half hour and then you may return." I felt like I'd been connected no more than fifteen minutes, but the instructor showed me the chrono. I had been engaged for two hours!

In the break room, I sat down at a table with Jay Doe and Jo Von. I was curious if either of them had experienced the sense of time speeding up as I had. I also wondered if either of them had found what we were all searching for.

"I found five human heat signatures," said Jo Von.

"I spotted some farm animals but no people," said Jay Doe. "We don't bother to kill the animals."

I was glad of that. For some reason, killing animals bothered me more than killing people. I had found neither. "Well, the time sure went fast for me," I said, hoping to find some agreement on that point.

"Time distortion," Jay Doe said. "The connection we make with the computers gives us a false sense that time is moving six to eight times faster than we normally experience it." I wondered how she knew this. She was a new recruit, same as me. Perhaps she'd known people who had been commtechs or known commtechs, but I didn't bother to ask.

Just then, an automated trolley rolled next to our table. It contained hot drinks and snacks. The sight of an egg sandwich made my mouth water. That was odd. I'd eaten a pastry roll before my shift. Those usually kept my stomach filled for at least four hours. I reached over and took the sandwich and a cup of steaming coffee. Jay Doe and Jo Von also took some food and drink.

"This job requires a lot of food—burns more calories," Jay Doe said. By this time, I wasn't surprised by her knowledge, as she seemed to know all about the job.

"Well, they sure don't tell us much to prepare for this job," I said. I took a healthy bite from my sandwich. As I was chewing, I glanced around the break room and noticed a few people with their heads down on their tables.

"They're probably toward the end of their shifts," said Jay Doe. "Our shifts should really be shortened. This job takes a lot out of you, and these kids are burning out."

"I feel okay," I said. Actually, I loved the job. I felt as if I were personally flying over the planet, and the sensation was thrilling. When break time had come, I was reluctant to pull myself away.

"Wait until the last segment of our shifts and see if you're not tired," said Jay Doe.

I finally felt fed up with her knowing all the answers. "Jay Doe, isn't this your first day too?"

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She nodded.

"Then how do you know so much about this job?"

She was silent for a moment and became serious. "My brother," she answered. Jo Von and I both waited. "He was a commtech on another ship."

"Was?" I asked.

"Now he's missing in action."

Probably captured and killed by the enemy, I thought.

"His associates, those fortunate enough to not burn out, filled my family in on the details."

"And that's how she knows the Service puts the burnouts into the infantry podships," Jo Von stated somberly.

Jay Doe nodded. "Sorry, you're getting this information so late, Sue Rae, but Jo Von arrived here before you did, and I've told her more than I had the opportunity to tell you."

I was stunned. If I burned out, I too, would be tossed to the wolves. Just then, the buzzer sounded for us to go back to work.

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By the end of my first week, I was beginning to feel drained at the end of my shifts. I told myself I was doing important work for my government and they would bring more techs soon, thus shortening our shifts.

I had found several transponder signals, but all of them had weakened and blinked out within seconds of being spotted. The enemy must have known we had detected our soldiers. The only chance of our soldiers still being alive would be if the enemy possessed technology to disable the transponders without performing surgery on the humans who carried them within their heads. I doubted they would go to the trouble of safely extracting the transponders. According to our government, the enemy was ruthless and gave no quarter. But finding the signals gave us an idea where the prisoners had been taken, or at least, where they had gone down.

By the end of my second week, it was all I could do to drag myself back to my quarters after my ten-hour shift. The ship was three point seven kilometers in diameter and had sixty-four decks—not a small vessel. I was extremely grateful for the maglev that transported us directly from the comm stations two point three kilometers to Yellow Sector and for the lift that dropped us seventeen decks and within a few steps of our quarters. Exhausted, I would stumble into the shower after which I would immediately hit the sack. Before dozing off, an auto-trolley would enter our room and disperse food and drink. At first, I felt too tired to eat, but once I smelled the hot cocoa and sampled the potatoes, my stomach cried out for more. And then, I was out like a spent laser pistol.

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Almost six weeks had gone by when we finally got a batch of forty-nine new commtech recruits. I was relieved. I loved the job, but I desperately needed a day off, just to veg out and catch up on sleep. The new recruits were put to work right away, and our group was rewarded with not one, but two entire days off. We all slept most of the first day, but that evening, a party and celebration took place in our honor. It was a surprise to us all—even to Jay Doe.

I sauntered among tables of food and drink—at least ten different types of sliced cheese, a variety of crackers, small smoked sausages, slices of real beef, baby sandwiches, large bowls of various punches, cookies, cakes, pies, you name it.

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Normally, I would have sampled everything in sight, but I had stuffed myself earlier that day, watching the tube and being an absolute couch potato.

Since I was not the most social, outgoing person, I hung around the tables of food pretending to be interested, but only nibbling here and there. This was the first time since I'd been on the ship that I felt as if time had slowed down. I searched the room for Jay Doe, but she was busy schmoozing with the new recruits, and I wondered what manner of fear she was instilling into their inexperienced minds.

Fortunately, Jo Von rescued me from the food table, and we moved to a corner of the room to chat.

"Nice of them to give us this party," I said, just for something to say.

Jo Von looked bored. "I think I'd be happier back at work," she said.

"I know what you mean. I don't suppose there's any way we could sneak back to our quarters," I stated.

"Don't think so. Jay Doe says the captain is going to speak tonight."

I perked up. I still hadn't met the captain, though I'd finally found out who she was. All I knew was her name, Captain Darnel. I'd noticed her on the bridge a few times when coming to and from my break. Every time I saw her, she was wearing her hair tucked under her hat, so that I couldn't tell if it was very short or just rolled up into a bun. She always had a severe look about her. I'd never been that close to her to see the color of her eyes, and she never appeared on my monitor. Evidently, she didn't associate with commtechs or any enlisted personnel. I told myself I didn't care, but I really thought she should show us some respect by acknowledging us individually.

Jo Von poked me in the arm and pointed. "There she is."

I watched as Captain Darnel strode across the floor and stepped up onto the podium. She was shorter than I had imagined, as I'd never seen her standing. She couldn't have been any more than one point five meters tall, if that. But she had a commanding presence about her.

The room quieted as all turned to face her. She was flanked on both sides by lieutenant commanders who sat when she began to speak.

"Thank you all for attending tonight. This is a special occasion to not only honor our current commtechs, but also to welcome our new recruits."

Her voice was deep and rugged, as if she'd either spent many years at public speech or smoked a slug of tobacco a day or both. I wondered why my group got no reception when we were new recruits, but I figured the brass was too busy at the time, and I gave it no further thought. With this reception, they were likely snagging two fish with one hook.

The captain continued in a more serious tone. "I'll be frank with you all. We are losing people to the enemy. Our fighter-bombers have all been lost. We are left with no choice but to send troops to the planet's surface and destroy the enemy's weapons."

And then the captain shocked us by announcing a call for volunteers to be stationed on the troop transport podships. "Commtechs who volunteer for this chance to serve our government in this greater capacity will not be dropped from the podships; they will merely pinpoint the location of enemy weapons. Infantry troopers will then go in and neutralize those weapons." Immediately, there was a soft rumble of voices throughout the room.

"That doesn't sound so bad," I said to Jo Von. She looked at me questioningly but didn't say anything. I wondered what Jay Doe's opinion on this new turn of events was, but she was in front of the room, closer to the captain. I had to admit, the idea of serving on a podship jumpstarted my heart, and I forgot all about the boredom I had recently experienced.

The captain cleared her throat, and the room again quieted. "Any interested volunteers should report to Lieutenant Cherry's office by zero eight hundred Monday

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morning. If your duty shift falls within that time, you will be excused. All right now, let's enjoy the rest of this celebration."

The captain stepped down from the podium, and soft canned music filled the room. The cacophony of voices surrounding me suddenly made me feel claustrophobic. I was really considering volunteering, but I wanted to separate myself from all these people and the noise. I told Jo Von I was going to the head, and then I slipped out the rear of the room, into the circular hallway, and around the corner. I hopped a lift down to the transit deck, and I caught a maglev back to my quarters.

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I lay awake most of the sleep period but pretended I was asleep when the others returned from the celebration. I didn't get to sleep until around zero four hundred and was grateful when I remembered upon awakening that I didn't have a duty shift again this day. I wanted to sleep in, but my roommates were up and about by zero eight hundred, chattering away, especially the PX clones. They were oblivious to my need for rest even though I reminded them more than once that I needed more sleep. They would whisper for a while, then their voices would increase again as if they'd totally forgotten I was in there. Ah, the life of living in barracks.

Finally, I gave up and got out of bed. Maybe I could catch a nap later. During the "night," I had resolved to volunteer for the troop podship duty, but now I was feeling unsure again. During the morning chatter, I heard Jay Doe telling the PX clones that we were not being told how risky the venture would be. Not that I believed everything she had to say, but she had been right about how much the commtech job drained us of our energy. I also thought she should keep her mouth shut in fear that she would be accused of being unpatriotic and sent back to our planet, or worse, to the ship's brig. But she didn't seem to worry about that in the least, and it was almost as if she wanted her superiors to find a reason to send her back. But I didn't ask. So it was to my surprise that later that morning, Jay Doe announced her intentions to volunteer for the assignment I had so thoroughly questioned. Oh, what the heck, I told myself. I'll go. I was tired of my own indecision, plus, I figured Jay Doe must have believed the assignment was safe enough to go herself.

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The next day, all the volunteers met in the main launch bay at zero eight hundred as the captain had requested. The captain herself was not there, however. I supposed she had better things to do than see us novices off on a planet skimming mission. There were about thirty of us, but I didn't count. What I did know was my whole room volunteered—me, Jay Doe, Jo Von and all the PX clones. We were chattering like mad, but I was really nervous, as we didn't really know exactly what we were in for.

Some green lieutenant stepped upon a loading platform and spoke into his mike. We quieted down. The lieutenant explained that each podship carried twelve troopers plus a pilot and commtech. The first time we went out, we would be accompanied by a commtech experienced on a podship. The next time, we would be on our own. Our numbers can't be too bad, I thought, or they'd send us out alone the first time. It was becoming evident our ship was losing crewmembers, so I knew they'd want to spare our lives.

My heart was settling down until I saw the troopers walk in. They were all decked out in fatigues, helmets, flak jackets, and firearms, ready for battle. They came to attention under their sergeant's watchful eyes. She spouted some hups and hahs, and the troopers separated themselves into about thirty groups of twelve each. Their

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faces looked like stone, though I saw a couple of them glance over at our group. But stone doesn't sweat, and as the sergeant marched them into their respective podships, I witnessed more than a few foreheads that had broken out in beads of perspiration. The tromp-tromp-tromping of the troopers' boots made for a hypnotic syncopated rhythm that beat through my body, and for a moment, I was caught up it.

After the troopers had filed into their respective ships, my fellow commtechs and I were each assigned to a podship with an experienced commtech. I was feeling apprehensive again, but there was nothing to do but follow along. I was sure I would be okay once I was plugged into a monitor, and I was extremely grateful I didn't have to be dropped out of the ship like the troopers. I had looked at the statistics, and over the past year, ninety-seven point three percent of our podships had returned, though that number was much lower for the troopers themselves. Only twenty-three point eight percent of them had returned.

I gave Jay Doe and Jo Von one last look as I was ushered away to my ship. As I climbed aboard the small vessel, I felt warm and fuzzy all over again like I did when I was first sent to space. I was actually going out there. The troopers were all seated, paratrooper style, though they wouldn't be jumping far. We'd hover above the ground in select spots found to be safe by the commtechs and pilots. I found some part of myself yearning to leave the ship, to set my feet on the land, to breath real atmosphere, but that was too dangerous, I knew.

My spot was a small jumpseat to the right rear of the commtech's station. This is where I would be trained, switching places with the experienced commtech from time to time.

I barely had time to contemplate the ship's grainy brown metallic interior and scant flight deck, when we were ejected from the *Star Fortress*. I was jerked up in my seat as we were propelled down toward the planet at a rapid descent. A few minutes later, I could see the yellowish electromagnetic shields that protected certain areas of the planet. We were sure the military installations were under some of these protective bubbles. Our government had recently developed shield-piercing lasers that could rip a tiny hole in the shield and precisely locate its generator beneath. Once the shield was down, we could drop our troops right in. This was the part I was nervous about.

As we came closer to the planet's surface, my instructor beckoned me forward into his chair. "Put this on," he said as he handed me a delicate headset containing two earphones and one eyepiece. I put it on and adjusted it to my head. There was only one small finger clip and nothing for my feet. "Focus on the shield directly under us," he said. Immediately, I was inside it, although I didn't think the pilot could have disabled the shield generator that fast, but maybe she had. Indeed, there were long, rectangular buildings and aircraft hangars. My sensors penetrated the outer walls of the buildings, and I spotted weapons caches, large surface-to-air missile launchers, tanks, and aircraft of varying sizes. But I saw no people.

I went twenty meters to my right, then the same distance to my left, but I found no more structures. My instructor pulled me out. I removed the gear and shook my head. We were still outside the shield. But this was the closest I'd ever been to the surface of enemy territory.

"They must be keeping our people underground somewhere," said our pilot. "I'm going to do more reconnaissance."

We transmitted the military installation data to the *Star Fortress* and moved on. I wished I could have been interfaced to the computer then, as we moved over snowy mountainous areas, frozen lakes, tall evergreen trees, and wide open tundra. No wonder these people wanted to move in closer to our sun—it was downright cold here. And we were in the equatorial regions. But it was beautiful, virgin land, not overrun by cities and industrial sites.

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So far, no transponder signals. I was itching to get back on the comm. I had an idea. "Want me to take over yet?" I asked my instructor. He was annoyed, and merely waved me away.

"But I want to try something," I insisted.

No response.

"Please," I said. Normally, I wouldn't have been so persistent, but I was almost certain my idea would work.

My instructor shook his head, removed the gear, and handed it to me. "Be my guest, Ten. But I don't know how you're going to spot anything none of the rest of us haven't seen."

I ignored his impatient look and quickly donned the gear. I set the sensor range to scan below the surface.

"That's already been tried," I heard him say through my earphones.

Yeah, but this hasn't, I thought to myself. I adjusted the long-range space sensors to accommodate for the atmospheric conditions as well as the composition of the planet's soil. The long-range space sensors were to be used only while in the vacuum of space, and the more refined sensors were to be used in the planet's atmosphere or on the surface. But what the heck, why not give it a shot? Nothing to lose. Well, maybe frying the long-range space sensors, but it was worth a try. Nothing else we tried had been working.

I probed below the surface. At first, I saw nothing but tree roots and rocks. I extended myself as far as I could go but found nothing. And then an idea dawned on me.

"Can we go back to the military installation?" I asked my instructor. He hesitated and looked at me doubtfully. "Please," I said.

My instructor nodded at the pilot, who lifted our transport up and turned back from where we had come.

I was on to something. It was just a hunch, but I was feeling more and more confident the closer we got to the enemy's military installation. Once we arrived, the pilot lowered the transport and pierced the shield once more. I tried the long-range space sensors but ran into solid concrete.

"Can you get any lower?" I asked.

"Any lower and we may not escape if fired upon," said the pilot.

"Just a few more meters," I begged.

The pilot frowned, but she descended. I could imagine the troops' confusion at this back and forth stuff, not to mention the state of their stomachs, but theirs was not to question, only to obey.

We hovered over the base for a few seconds while I fine-tuned the sensors. "There!" I exclaimed. Briefly, a scattering of human heat signatures flashed on the monitor, then quickly faded. But my instructor saw them, thank the universe. They appeared to be located beneath the ground.

"Pilot Simms," my instructor said, "lock on to these coordinates." My instructor tapped in some figures, and the pilot secured the spot. "Okay, try again, Ten," he told me.

I manipulated the sensors until the heat signatures again appeared, but this time, they appeared more clearly—and there were more of them—perhaps hundreds of them. I zoomed in more closely, but I could detect no transponders. This was a disappointment. I would much rather rescue our people than blow the enemy out of the ground.

Just then, the pilot received orders from her commanding officer back on the *Star Fortress* to release the troops. We lowered so we were just hovering over the ground, and I watched the troopers jump out and disperse. Several other troop transports followed suit. The troopers were going to plant plastic explosives

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throughout the military installation, despite the presence of people who were gathered below.

We were now visible and in danger of being fired upon. Troop transports had been shot down before. I silently gave thanks to whatever forces were in play in the universe that I was not a combat soldier.

We circled the compound several times before we saw three of the twelve troopers we had dropped come running out of the building. We were about to pick them up, when a sharp thud rocked our transport.

"Get out of here now!" one of the troopers yelled through her mike and into our comm.

I didn't understand. Where was the rest of our team? Certainly they'd planted the explosives by now, unless....

"Enemy weapons set to fire. We had no way of knowing. Seven troopers of our unit killed. No time to recover bodies. No time to pick us up. Go now!"

Just then, an explosion filled our screen, then the image blinked out. It was from the other side of the complex. "Transport Five just died," said Pilot Simms without much emotion. "We're outta here now." She tried to lift our transport, and I felt us careen to one side.

"Right boosters are damaged. I can't get us off the ground," Simms yelled, this time with fear in her voice.

Suddenly, I felt a sharp jolt. We were tossed about and rolled over onto the ground. I smelled electronic sizzling and watched as sparks flew. Then the flight deck filled with acrid smoke and everything went dark.

* * * *

When I woke, I was on my back, my head was pounding, and I was covered with blood, oil, and shrapnel. The transport was in pieces around me. I wiggled my toes, and pain shot up my right leg. I rolled to my left side and felt a catch in my chest. Broken ribs, I thought, though I wasn't sure.

I forced myself to my feet and inspected myself. I bent my knees and found that both my legs were working. The sharp pain I felt in my leg earlier had dissolved into soreness. I figured I was badly bruised but didn't take the time to roll up my pant leg to find out.

Stumbling across the wreckage, I spotted Pilot Simms slumped across the transport's controls, or what was left of them. I put my fingers to her neck and checked her pulse. I left my fingers there a long time before I could admit to myself that she was dead. Then I turned around and found my commtech instructor buried beneath a fallen bulkhead. After removing debris from his body, I found his head squashed into the monitor.

No one else was around. The troopers had already dispersed, and I started to panic at the thought of being all alone out here with no communication. But I held back my tears and cautiously stepped out of what was left of the transport.

The icy air hit me at once. I pulled my torn leather jacket tighter around me and went searching for shelter. About fifty meters in the distance, I made out what was left of the military complex, mostly rubble now, but it appeared some of the cement structure was still intact. At this point, I was more concerned with getting out of the cold than being found by the enemy. My only hope of being rescued by my people was my implanted transponder, that is, if I wasn't killed first.

I navigated through what appeared to be damaged missile launchers, armored tanks, blown open boxes of ammunition, laser pistols, and air drones. I had heard no explosions since I'd briefly passed out in the transport, so I felt reasonably safe. I saw no one else around, so I ducked under an overhang and squeezed between a still intact

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wooden crate and the remains of a computer workstation. I pried open the crate with a metal fragment I found on the floor and discovered some thick but lightweight body armor. I tried on the vest. I floated in it. I dug deeper into the box and found two thick wool blankets, one olive drab and one navy blue. I pulled them out, unfolded them, and wrapped myself in the blue blanket, then covered myself with the green one. Finally, I stopped shivering enough to relax, but I was still cold, so I pulled out the helmet from the box and placed it over my head. I lay down as much as possible in the cramped space and soon fell asleep.

* * * *

When I awoke, I was sore all over. I was also no longer in the little nest I had made for myself in the enemy's shattered military installation. The walls and ceiling were light gray, and I found myself lying in a bed in a long room full of beds.

"She's awake," I heard a male voice say.

A woman rushed to my side and stared into my eyes. "Do you know your name?" she asked me. She had an odd accent, unfamiliar to me. I tried to think. Was I back home in a hospital? And then I remembered the explosions, the transport crash, and the ruined military installation.

"I was so cold," I squeaked out.

The nurses or doctors or whoever they were wore no identifying uniforms, just modest clothing in subtle browns, blues, and greens. They watched me and waited for me to say more.

"Where am I?" I asked.

"What is your name?" said the woman.

"Umm, Commtech First Class Sue Rae Ten, Union Naval Forces."

The woman put her hand on my bed next to my arm. "Commtech Ten, you are in a hospital, thirty-five meters beneath the ground on the Seventh planet of the Tara System.

I started. I was in enemy hands. At once, I wondered why they hadn't killed me. I was so upset, I couldn't think of what to say. Images of our troopers dispersing, the explosions, and the crash kept running through my mind. And then I had a terrible thought. The enemy kept me alive so they could question me. I loved my government and totally believed in what we were doing here, but I didn't think I could stand up to interrogation and torture. I was weak and would give in.

"Why did you keep me alive?" I managed to ask. "I'm your enemy."

The woman answered. "We'll talk about that when you've had more rest."

The man put a patch on the side of my neck. It must have been some kind of tranquilizer, because as hard as I tried to stay awake and as worried as I was, I quickly slipped into unconsciousness.

* * * *

"Sue Rae," I heard through a foggy awakening. The voice was familiar. I opened my eyes as best I could, though my lids felt heavy. "Sue Rae, it's me," the voice said again. I opened my eyes wider and recognized Jo Von's face. Was I dreaming? I was still in the same hospital bed and still in enemy hands. Jo Von must have been captured as well. I felt a moment of gratitude that she was alive. But it quickly dissipated in light of the fact we were now prisoners.

"Jo Von?" I said, still not quite believing it was she.

"Yes, it's really me, Sue Rae. Jay Doe is here too. And some of our troopers."

I struggled to sit up. "Are you okay?"

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"Yes, I'm fine. Only a few minor cuts and bruises. I was lucky. Jay Doe suffered a broken leg, but she'll be okay too.

"Where is she?" I asked.

Jo Von pointed to my left.

I turned. Indeed it was Jay Doe, sitting up in bed with her leg in a traction device. I waved to her and she waved back, unenthusiastically.

I frowned and turned back to Jo Von. "Do you know what they're going to do with us?" I whispered.

She shrugged, and I wondered why our enemy was allowing her to visit me.

"My transponder has been deactivated," Jo Von said. "I imagine yours has been too."

I reached up and touched the back of my head. "What? But that's not possible without removing it, and removing it would...."

"Kill us?" she interrupted. "No, they've found a way to turn them off without removing them. Don't ask me how, but one of the nurses told me."

I believed Jo Von, but I wasn't so sure the nurse was telling the truth. I frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Not sure, but I'd like to believe it. I mean, maybe they didn't kill all those people who've gone missing from the Union—maybe they just deactivated their transponders."

I wondered what else they deactivated. Parts of our brains? Our moral centers? Perhaps they'd put our people through extensive mindwashing, getting them to turn against our own people. The thought sickened me.

Something else nagged at me. From what I'd seen so far, our enemies didn't appear to be vicious at all. If they were cruel, heartless rebels and were just pretending to be nice, they were even more dangerous than if they'd been straightforward with their hate for us.

Just then, a small man approached Jo Von. "That's enough for now," he said. He walked with a slight limp, and his face was partially covered by a salt and pepper beard. He too, spoke in a strange accent, the same as the other hospital workers.

Jo Von touched my forearm. "Looks like they left that in," she said before being ushered away.

I had completely forgotten about the small photo of my mother that was embedded under the skin of my right forearm. Touching it activated the skin covering it, causing it to turn transparent. I examined the picture of my mother showing her from the shoulders up. The sight of her beautiful light brown face framed by her dark brown hair and punctuated by her brilliant blue eyes brought tears to my eyes. I missed her desperately. We had all assumed she was dead. But if the enemy didn't kill us, she could still be.... I cut off that thought. Having false hope was worse than having no hope at all. No, she is dead, I told myself. My mother is dead, and that's all there is to it.

* * * *

The next day, Jo Von, Jay Doe, some of our troopers and clones, and I were taken to a briefing room. There we were told that our transponders had been deactivated and that it wouldn't do any good for us to try and contact our people.

"We have been trying to communicate with the Union for six years now, and they have blocked all our signals. We turned off your transponders to protect ourselves. We have had to live deep underground so they would not find us. Fortunately, they have left our civilians alone if they are scattered about the countryside and not living within close range of any defense systems. We have erected force fields around our military installations, but your people have recently found a

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way to pierce them. We are no threat to the Union; we don't desire to take over the Tara System; we are just trying to live in peace. But the Union will not listen. They won't even hear us.

Well, that was a load of propaganda if I'd ever heard any. The Union had told us the enemy would go to any extent to lie to us about them, if they kept us alive that long. But the enemy *had* kept us alive that long. And thinking about the communications issue between the two sides, I don't recall any enemy signals coming in at any of the comm stations back on the ship.

For weeks I was plagued by this issue, but the enemy treated us well. By this time, Jay Doe and Jo Von had been indoctrinated into their ranks. Even our clones and troopers were beginning to accept the enemy's "truth." But I just couldn't, even though I saw no evidence of the atrocities the Union had told us about them. I thought about my home planet, my courier job, my father and my brothers. I remembered how proud I was when I was accepted into the Service. I thought about my pledge of honor to my government unto the death. But now it seemed my government was the real enemy. No, it couldn't be.

My associates had been given simple jobs at first, as cleaners and food workers. Those of us who had not suffered severe burnout were put to work in offices of the enemy's underground cities. (I really should have stopped referring to them as the enemy, but it was difficult to let go of that.)

When they found out my implants were intact, I was assigned to the communications center, a large room full of computer stations and blinking lights. This job wasn't fun like my commtech job with the Union had been. There was no virtual reality scanning, no flying through the planet's atmosphere, no zooming in on specific physical points. I was simply plugged into their computers, which interfaced with my brain. I could listen to music, watch videos, or even sleep. And there was no burnout. Day and night we scanned for Union aircraft, Union soldiers, and Union signals. The transmitting station was always in operation, trying to contact the Union. The announcement was broadcast over and over and over again on a secure channel so the Union could not locate us, only hear us.

"We are the Coalition of Outer Planets of the Tara System. We wish you no harm. We seek only peace. We encourage you to pick up our signal, communicate with us, settle your differences with us. We have many of your people, alive and well. Please respond."

* * * *

Several standard months later, I was offered an assignment on the surface. I was told it would be dangerous. The Union, though reduced in personnel and ships, was still out there, hunting and destroying concentrated groups of human heat signatures. Our assignment was to build the tallest transmitter yet in a bold attempt to get through to the Union on a wide communications band. The signal would be so strong, the Union would have a difficult time ignoring it. To protect ourselves, each of us would wear full body armor. Though it would be more difficult to work while wearing the armor, the armor itself was no worse than wearing a vacuum suit in space, though in space you were weightless. The body armor would also protect us from the harsh planetary elements.

At first, I thought I'd stay put in my cushy job, but then I saw some of my co-workers volunteering, and I watched videos of what the work would entail. I decided it could be a great adventure.

Jay Doe and Jo Von signed up as well. I was still a little mad at Jay Doe for not telling me she had been a Coalition spy back on the *Star Fortress*. Evidently, she had been on other Union ships doing the same thing. And she had lied about having a

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brother. But I couldn't blame her—that had been her assignment. However, in time, I forgave her, though I didn't think I could have been a spy myself. I'm not very good at hiding my feelings, plus, I'm just too honest and would have spilled the beans not too far into a career like that.

When we arrived at the site, the wind was really kicking up, and I thought I'd be blown over before I reached the underground shelter. I began to have doubts again about this assignment. After I was introduced to the middle-aged woman who managed the project, I quickly changed my mind.

"Mother? Is that really you?" She looked older than the picture I had. Her face was whiter and she had more lines around her eyes and mouth, but there was a definite resemblance. Her hair was graced by a few strands of gray, but she had the same brilliant blue eyes.

She was just as surprised to see me, and she smiled at me warmly. "Sue Rae!"

An awkward silence followed, then we embraced. I let go first. Anger welled up inside of me, and I asked her why she had not let us, her family, know she was alive. Then I remembered—the Union was blocking all communications from the Coalition.

"I wanted to let you know I was alive, Sue Rae," she said. She looked into my eyes, lovingly, but with a little apprehension as to how I might react. But I was certain she was telling the truth. "We will keep working, and we will eventually get through to the Union and to your father and brothers." I felt a renewed hope.

* * * *

Maybe this war will end one day. Maybe my story will get out. We have made some progress. Our signals have been picked up by some remote radio operators on the Fourth planet—the Union's home planet. I only hope they spread the word that all we want is peace.