



TORCHWOOD

THE MORTAL YEARS

BY HUMAN TALES

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# The Mortal Years

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New Who, Torchwood | PG-13 | Gen with het, slash & multiples (It's Jack.) | 29,000 words

*Jack wasn't always immortal. Jack's life from the invasion until he meets Rose Tyler.*

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Warnings: None

Spoilers: Through Children of Earth and Flesh and Stone

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Jack picked over whatever meal it was he was eating, deep in thought. The Doctor's presence could have been read as either understanding or condemnation, the fact that he didn't even try to speak with Jack implied the latter, but then there was the note. The note introducing him to a beautiful young man, one the Doctor knew and admired (Alonso hadn't said so, but Jack could read between the lines), was pretty good evidence that the Doctor understood and, maybe, even forgave Jack. Jack wasn't anywhere near forgiving himself, but that was an entirely different matter. He wasn't sure he'd ever forgive himself; he still hadn't forgiven himself for letting go of Gray's hand.

Still, in addition to the introduction, with everything that that implied, the note contained another message. It was time, not to stop grieving, but to start living again. And it wasn't that Jack disagreed; he just wasn't sure how.

He remembered a conversation that he and Ianto had had after Toshiko and Owen's deaths. Ianto had been writing in his diary and Jack had asked if it helped.

Ianto had shrugged. "I don't know if it helps, exactly, but, well, I suppose it does. Not immediately, but when I look back at how I was feeling after Lisa," he'd closed his eyes and taken a breath, "I can see that it does get better." Looking up from his diary, he smiled at Jack. "Who knows; it might even help you."

"Don't really think I'm the diary type," Jack had said, coming up behind Ianto and rubbing his shoulders, planning his attack.

"No, you're probably more of a blogger," Ianto had said, looking amused.

Jack had made a face. "No, an autobiography. Sharing my accumulated wisdom with the masses." He had leaned down to nibble on Ianto's ear, moving his hands down Ianto's arms.

"Well," Ianto had said, finally putting his diary down and turning to Jack, "if we're going to wait on your accumulated wisdom, it'll be a while. Right now, it'd fit on a postage stamp."

Jack had growled, and pounced, and later had been treated to an irritated lecture on how difficult it was to get ink out of clothing. For the first time since Ianto's death, his memory brought more than pain. Jack smiled as he thought of the evening, remembering the fun and playfulness of his lover. Jack sighed. Former lover.

Still, there might be some merit in the idea. Not his accumulated wisdom, but writing down what had happened might help him decide where to go. It wouldn't be a diary, or an autobiography; both were too personal, too closed. Jack sat down and started writing, distancing himself by writing it as a biography.

## 1. Refugee



He didn't know how long they'd been sitting by the house. His mother had stopped saying anything a while ago; now, she just cried. When he'd tried to get near her, though, she'd pushed him away. So, now he just sat, where he could do anything she wanted him to do. When she'd pushed him out of her arms, his own sobbing had stopped. He was still crying, but it was soundless.

He heard someone come up behind him. "How is he?" It was Ster Murel, one of Khael's core teachers. "Khael, how is he?" His voice was gentle, but firm.

Jack, then known as Khael, shrugged. "He's dead," he said. His voice didn't sound like his; it was deeper than normal, and rough.

"All right, then. Keres," his teacher said, "we have to evacuate. You need to pack; we have to get out."

"Gray," his mother said. "Khael said, he said he didn't . . ."

"I was holding his hand," Khael said. "I don't know when I let go; he was just gone. I couldn't find him."

"All right. Keres, we have all the, the bodies gathered. Come with me; we'll see if we can find him."

His mother shook her head, but said nothing.

Khael sighed, but then stood. "I'll go, sir. He was my responsibility."

Ster Murel shook his head. "It's no place for a child."

Looking down at his mother and his father's body, Khael said, "I don't think I'm a child anymore."

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For all that they tried to evacuate immediately, it took three days to get everyone off the small colony on the Peninsula. Khael and his mother were in the last group to leave. They'd packed only what they could carry, those things that were most precious to them. Khael had refused to take any of his old toys or any but his most important books. He gave his space to all of Gray's toys and clothing. His mother had packed the pictures of the family, the results of the research she and his father had been working on, and anything they had that was small and valuable.

The refugee camp on Rebme was like nothing Khael had ever seen before. It was housed in underground caverns; to a child of the Peninsula, used to constant bright sunlight, it seemed hopelessly dark. It was noisy as well; too many people crammed into too small a space. Khael and his mother were assigned their own quarters in the family section. It was much better than Khael had expected--it was clean, as free of crime as any group of people could be--but he felt crowded on every side, all the time. Except when he was in their quarters; his mother made sure to stay as

far from him as she could. So that she could sleep in the bed, Khael took to sleeping on the floor in the common area; it was the first time he'd ever slept alone.

The camp wasn't set up to be permanent; the refugees were supposed to find somewhere else to live as quickly as possible. Unfortunately, too many people left homeless in too short a period of time meant that people were staying there longer than anyone had planned. In order to keep the children as settled and calm as possible, the people who ran the camp tried to keep their schedules as normal as possible. Which meant, most importantly, school.

Khael had been happy when he'd first heard he could attend school--he had always had high hopes for his future--until he went the first time. This wasn't a school where they taught high-level science to youngsters planning on becoming the next generation of researchers and innovators; this was a basics school to ensure that all the children could read and write and learn some kind of skill to provide for themselves.

It was also required, Khael discovered when he tried to opt out. He had no choice but to go and to study what they thought he should learn. His real studies, physics and engineering, had to wait until night. His mother quickly found work helping the hospital; she wasn't actually a medic, but her training in biology was more than many of the other workers had. So, for a while, they survived.

The day after Khael's fifteenth birthday, he came home to find his few belongings in front of their door with his mother standing beside them. "I can't look at you anymore," she said, standing straight and tall, her face expressionless. "You can live in the orphan's area; I've already arranged it."

Khael stared. He could feel his eyes burning, but he refused to give into the tears. She'd forgiven him for not holding onto Gray's hand, she'd said so, but Khael knew she would never forgive him for surviving. "Will I ever see you again?" he asked anyway, hoping that there was some hope.

Keres shrugged and turned to go inside, but turned back for a minute. "Be well. Please, Khael, be well." She went inside, her shoulders hunched and head bowed. She seemed faded, a ghost of the vibrant woman he had known. The woman he had killed when he let go of his little brother's hand.

The orphan's area wasn't as well-policed as the family quarters had been. If Khael had had anything the other children considered valuable, it would have been stolen the first night. Books, however, especially textbooks, none of them wanted. So, he kept trying to study, kept trying to learn, for another six months.

It was then that he discovered sex. Oh, he'd known about the theory for years, but the Peninsula had been settled by people who had rejected the commonly-held opinion about humans. "For whatever reason," his father had told him one lazy afternoon, "most of the universe thinks that humans will have sex with any sentient, just because they're there. One of the reasons your mother and I came here to Boeshane was to reject that. To open your body to that extent should only be with someone special."

"Rahel says her parents say you should be married," Khael'd said.

His father smiled. "Well, your mother and I aren't quite as strict as that, but we do believe that intimacy of the body and intimacy of the heart go hand in hand. We also believe that one of the reasons humans have the reputation we do is because we need touch. So, we hold our families tight and keep those we love touched."

Khael knew that one of the things that meant was that, when they went visiting or had visitors over, the adults shared their beds. The children did as well, which meant that they all looked forward to visiting, and falling to sleep cuddled up together, the more the merrier.

The people running the camp weren't from the Ukanan Sector; most of them were from Earth, or close to it. To them, sleeping together in a bed meant sex. So, at first they tried to keep the youngsters out of each other's beds, but they quickly gave up on that. They didn't have enough people to keep watch. Instead, they concentrated on ensuring that everything stayed consensual.

The first night in the orphan's area, Khael's head was still spinning; little of what he was being told was really sinking in. When he was told it was "Lights Out", he went and lay down on his bed. As he lay there trying to convince his mind to quiet long enough to go to sleep, he heard some noises from the bed next to him. He opened his eyes a little to see Jamin, a boy he knew distantly from the Peninsula, in the next bed with a girl Khael hadn't seen before. Instantly hard, Khael tried to keep his watching discreet; he had to stuff his fist in his mouth to keep from panting out loud. He must not have been quiet enough, because the girl turned and saw him. She leaned down and whispered something to Jamin under her; a minute later she leaned toward Khael and said quietly, "D'you want to join us?"

The simple fact of not sleeping alone for the first time since the invasion was reason enough for Khael; the pleasures of sex were, almost, secondary. After that first night with Jamin and the girl, Dori, he didn't sleep alone again. Jamin and Dori took him under their wing as well and helped him adjust to the unspoken rules of the orphans' community. Dori was a little younger, small and pale, but very tough physically and mentally. She was one of the long-term residents of the camp; her family had been killed in the first attacks and no one had been willing to take her in.

Jamin became Khael's best friend. They were nearly opposite in personality: where Khael was focused on learning as much as he could, Jamin didn't care about "book learning".

"I'm an artist," he said, "not someone who barfs up what he reads for others." He was tall and thin, with red, almost orange, hair, bright, blue eyes, and thin, sure hands.

Khael had been told he was a handsome boy, but it hadn't seemed as important as the fact that he was a bright boy, top of his classes. Now, he discovered that it meant he had his choice of partners, and the world got warmer again. Boys or girls, one or more, top or bottom, it didn't matter; it was touch, skin on skin, and wonderful. He even found himself more motivated to continue his studying, although he was much easier to distract these days.

At first, Khael was able to continue to shut out everything during the day but his studies. As the months wore on, he began to pay more and more attention to the news. He'd been told that, even though they never found Gray's body, he must be dead. Now, he was hearing other stories, where people thought dead in the attacks were found later, after being tortured. He started asking about

Gray, but the authorities kept repeating that, if no body was found, he was dead. Those other stories, though, kept him awake at night.

It was six months after his fifteenth birthday that a recruiter from the army, a Major Rico, came to the school. After determining from the teacher that everyone in the class was underage, he gave a talk on all the ways they could help from behind the lines. Something about the way he talked, though, made Khael wonder. After class, he went up and asked to speak with the recruiter privately.

After introducing himself, Khael said, "Sir, have you heard anything about the people who go missing after the attacks?"

Rico's expression went almost blank. Khael's gut clenched. "Did you lose someone?"

"My little brother, sir," Khael answered.

Rico looked at Khael for a moment and finally said, "We know the enemy take them. We've never been able to find out where. Every once in a while, well, it's not good." After another minute, in which Khael tried to think of something, anything, to say, Rico said, "Were you held back or something?"

His pride hurt, Khael pulled himself to stand as tall as he could. "Not in the least, I'm in the front of the class."

"Oh." Rico didn't say anything else; he just looked thoughtful.

After another moment of quiet, Khael asked, "Why?"

"You just look older than the rest of these kids," Rico said, "more mature. I thought you might be old enough . . . Well, I suppose not."

It took Khael a minute to realize what Rico was implying. He thought it through. "How carefully does the army check ages?" he asked. He couldn't enlist through Rico, but there were always recruiters around.

Khael didn't understand Rico's smirk. "They don't, not unless the recruit is obviously lying. You, they wouldn't check."

Rico's tone of voice made Khael realise, "You're telling me to lie, aren't you?"

"I'd never tell anyone to lie to the army," Rico said in the most sanctimonious voice Khael had ever heard. "However, they want recruits that are of age. There are many different scales of maturity; calendar age is only one of them."

Khael knew his expression was sceptical. Rico laughed. "We never had this conversation, right, kid?"

"No, sir."

Rico turned to leave, but turned back before he left. "I'm sorry about your brother."

Khael headed straight back to the orphan's area and told Jamin and Dori about the conversation. "What about all your plans?" Dori asked. "Becoming a scientist and making everything better that way?"

"I'll go back to it," Khael said. "For right now, they have Gray. If I can find him, bring him back, things'll be better. We can be a family again. Then, I can go back to my studies."

"I've been thinking about enlisting," Jamin said. "It'd sure be nice to dish out some of what they keep giving us."

Dori huffed. "You won't do anything. I heard one of the teachers talking. Most of the refugee kids who enlist are killed; they're used as cannon fodder."

"So," Khael said, "we'll be smarter and faster and better and survive. C'mon, it'll be an adventure," he said to Jamin. Dori was clearly a lost cause. "We'll find where they're taking our people and rescue them, and look great doing it."

It didn't take very long for Khael to convince Jamin to go down and sign up with him. He could have done it on his own, he would have, but he was so tired of being on his own.

Rico looked surprised when he saw Khael and Jamin walk into the recruiting office. "I didn't expect to see you back with someone else," he said. "How old are you, son?" he asked Jamin.

"Eighteen," Jamin said, sounding completely unconvincing. Khael managed to hide his wince; that would just make matters worse.

Rico didn't really seem to care. He had both boys fill out papers with all their personal information, including their fabricated birth dates. Khael wondered why Jamin made up a whole new date; keeping everything but the year would make it easier to remember.

Once that was done, Rico had them swear that all the information they'd given was accurate to the best of their abilities. To Khael's relief, Jamin didn't have any problems with that. Then, he gave them each a packet. Looking in his, Khael saw a ticket and a credit voucher. "Sir?" he asked.

"We don't run a bus service," Rico said, "so we send recruits on the passenger ships. Steerage class, no amenities to speak of, and we make sure you don't starve on the way. That's what the credits are for. That, and a thank you for signing up."

Khael thought about it for a moment, looking at the voucher. "But it's ours, right?" he asked. "We can do what we want with it?"

"Sure," Rico said as Jamin looked at him in confusion. "What were you thinking of?"

"My mother," Khael said. Although they hadn't spoken, and she'd refused to meet his eyes, he had seen her around the camp. She looked pale and thin, as if she hadn't been eating.

"I thought you were an orphan?" Rico said, staring down at Khael's papers.

"No, sir," Khael said, "but my mother thought it better I be on my own."

"Where are you from?" Rico asked.

"The Boeshane Peninsula."

Rico scowled at the papers, and muttered something under his breath. Khael was pretty sure it was a curse, but it was one he didn't recognize. He shook his head. "You can give it to her, but it'll be a long, hungry trip. They don't really feed the people in steerage much; they assume you'll bring your own." He bit his lip. "Look, kid, don't tell anyone I've done this." He pulled a piece of paper out of the stack and scribbled something. "Take this to the Chief Purser and tell him you're willing to work. It . . . might not be anything you've thought of doing before, but he'll keep you safe. Understand?"

Khael took the note. He suspected that Rico thought he was too innocent to know what he was suggesting, but Khael would have known even before everything came down around him. He'd heard his mother talking about women and men who lived by having sex with anyone who asked. It might be exactly the opposite of how he'd been raised, but that didn't matter anymore. If he could find Gray, he could make everything better.

Rico gave them further instructions, a list of what to bring and the time they were to leave the next morning.

That night, Dori made it clear that it was only Jamin she was saying goodbye to, that she was too angry with Khael to want him near her. Khael was disappointed, but it also suited him. He lay in bed staring at the ceiling. He couldn't be B'shani anymore. If he were to do what had to be done, he would have to use every resource available to him, and he really didn't have many: his intelligence and his body. Blinking back tears, he determined that he would do whatever he had to do to find Gray.

The trip really wasn't anything as bad as Khael had been afraid of. He'd had visions of spending the three-week trip in some horrible cell, with one "customer" after another doing whatever they felt like to him. Instead, as soon as he and Jamin had boarded and been directed to their room, a dark room just large enough for the four beds it contained, Khael went looking for the Chief Purser. He, of course, was busy getting the ship ready to leave. The assistant manning the office finally said, sounding exasperated, "Look, kid, just tell me what you want. Chances are he'll give it back to me to take care of anyway."

Hoping he wasn't getting himself, Major Rico and the Chief Purser in trouble, Khael handed him the note. He'd tried reading it, but he only knew a very little bit of Galactic Standard. The other man read it and nodded. "Yeah, it'd be me taking care of this." He looked up at Khael. "You're Ukanan?"

Khael shrugged. "B'shani, but I don't suppose it matters."

"Not for this. Look, I'm Ger, one of the stewards here. Do you know what this note says?" Now that Khael was talking to him, he looked sympathetic. He was probably about five years older than Khael, with very pale skin and hair.

"Not exactly," Khael admitted. "Major Rico gave it to me when he knew I'd given my credit vouchers to my mother." He'd put the voucher into an envelope and given it to one of the nurses at the hospital, and waited to see his mother get it. Her lips had thinned, but she'd taken it.

"Right," Ger said. "It says that you're willing to trade your ass for food and other luxuries. Do you understand what that means?"

Khael took a deep breath. "It means I have sex with whoever pays you."

Ger's face softened. "It's not like that, I promise. What's your name?" When Khael told him, Ger said, "First, you will always have the right of refusal. If someone feels wrong, for whatever reason, even that his hair is annoying or something, you say 'No' and that's it. Understand?"

Khael knew he failed at keeping his relief hidden. "Yes, sir."

"You don't call me sir," Ger said, "I'm just an Assistant Purser."

Khael frowned. "I was raised to call anyone older than me, 'sir'. Or 'ma'am', as the case might be."

"Just call me Ger. Now, second, we do a certain amount of screening on our end. You're not the only companion we have, and we try to match the patron with their companion. By the way, that's what you're called. Please don't use words like 'whore' or 'prostitute', okay?"

Khael nodded. "But I am, or will be, right?"

Ger shrugged. "If you're being nasty or impolite. There's nicer words though, and that's what you'll use. So, are you a virgin, or do you know what you like?"

"Sex?" Khael asked, hoping he didn't sound as young as he felt.

That got a grin from Ger. "Well, at least that's a good start. Boys? Girls? Human? Alien? Other than sex, what do you like?"

"I've never done anything but human," Khael said, his stomach squirming. "Tentacles . . . They're scary."

"Check," Ger said, scribbling down some notes, "no tentacles. D'you know where your room is?" Khael nodded and gave him the number. Ger shook his head and handed him a comm. "Keep that on you so we can get reach you. And, remember, you're not the only game in town. Yeah?"

"Yeah." Khael left and went back to his room. Jamin had left a note that he and the other two recruits in their room had gone to watch their departure. Khael lay down on his bed and shook, but he refused to cry. By the time Jamin and his other two roommates were back, he was calm and cheerful again.

Khael's fears turned out to be unjustified; Ger had been right. They tried hard to match patron and companion and there was only one time he opted out. There had been something about her that made him uncomfortable. Later, he found out that the woman had left a trail of corpses across four galaxies. But most of his patrons were nice; they were travelling alone, or with someone they

couldn't or wouldn't have sex with, and didn't mind spending a little bit more to have someone in their bed. In the entire three week trip, Khael only spent two nights in his own bed.

And he had fun, which he really hadn't expected. His comm buzzed an hour after they'd departed and Khael had returned to the Purser's Office. This time, the Chief Purser was there.

"Ricky sent you?" the older man asked. He was fit, but older, with a receding hairline and a moustache.

"Er, Major Rico, yes sir," Khael answered.

"Yeah. New at this gig?"

"Yes sir." Khael held his breath.

"Got a lady in first class, wants someone to go to tonight's show with, the one for the money. You'll wear this," the purser held out a fancy suit in white, "take her to the show, escort her around for the evening and do whatever she asks when you get back to her room." He must have noticed Khael's expression, because he continued, "I know her. She mostly wants someone young and pretty paying attention to her; it's even odds whether she'll even want you for sex. Can you handle that?"

"Of course, sir," Khael said, taking the suit. He gulped down his meal, understanding why the army gave vouchers for more, bathed, dressed and was knocking on Odine's door five minutes early.

The door opened to a half-dressed middle-aged woman, trying to do up a back fastening. "Oh, are you who they sent?" Before Khael could answer, she said, "Be a dear and do me up?"

He quickly found out why she'd wanted him an hour and a half early. She wanted his opinion on *everything*. She was nice about it, so Khael gave his opinions and hoped he wasn't making any mistakes. They made it to the show, an opera, just in time.

Later, Khael realized that his honest, open-mouthed enjoyment of the opera had been a key factor in earning his tip, but at the time he was just enthralled. His parents had exposed Gray and him to literature, plays and music, but never everything wrapped up together. He almost forgot that he was supposed to escort Odine during the intermission, but she kindly tapped his shoulder.

"It's so nice," she said with a big smile, "attending with someone who can appreciate the finer things. Now, be a dear and get me a Hypervodka Sunrise and make sure they use real orange juice." Khael had no idea if they did or not, but his careful observation seemed to make her happy.

After the show, she wanted to go dancing. The steps were unfamiliar but easy and Khael had fun whirling her around. After that, she wanted to stop for drinks and a bite and it was only then that she was ready for bed. At the door, she asked, "You'll come in and get me out of this thing, won't you, dear?"

Khael did, and then she helped him out of his, and then he spent the rest of the night in her bed. She didn't want anything fancy--he suspected she didn't really care about the sex--she just wanted someone to pay attention to her. Khael felt he'd found a kindred spirit in that.

In the morning as he was getting ready to leave, he asked, "I won't be hurting your reputation, will I? Leaving in the morning from your quarters in my evening clothes?"

Odine laughed. "Oh, sweetie, you'll make it. Do you have any other engagements this trip?"

"No, ma'am," Khael said, wondering why.

He found out later. "Wish you were doing this full time, kid," the purser said. "You're the first companion Odine hasn't bitched and moaned about. She's on this ship for another week, and she's booked you for all of it." He handed over a credit voucher, three times what they'd agreed on. At Khael's confusion, the purser laughed. "It's called a tip. Her way of saying you did a good job."

Odine was Khael's only long-term patron; all of the others were for a night at the most. They were all older, wanting the attention of someone younger without having to work for it, but otherwise, they were a varied lot. One was even alien, which scared Khael, until zhe patted his cheek and said, "Don't worry. I only bite if you beg me." Khael didn't, but he found that learning an alien body was as much fun as learning a human one was, and that zhe got almost as much pleasure from the teaching as the sex.

And that was mostly what he spent the trip doing: learning and having a great time. Unlike the other recruits he was supposed to be travelling with, he got to attend the premium shows, dance at the nicer clubs and eat at the fanciest restaurants. After the first time he did that, though, he learned not to order the fanciest thing on their menu.

Corin, one of his roommates who had skin so dark it seemed to swallow up all light, told Khael halfway through the trip that she wished she'd followed his example. "My ma always told me that it's the best way to travel," she said sighing, "but I wanted to have fun. Looks like I made the wrong call."

Khael shrugged. "I have the afternoon off, and a few extra credits. Do you want to try the Topside Club?"

At the end of the three weeks, Ger called him back down to the Chief Purser's office. When he handed the comm back, and took his final voucher, Ger leaned forward. "Look, do you have to join the army?" When Khael looked confused, Ger said, "I mean, is it a sentence or something? 'Cause if it's not, you should pay 'em back the price of the ticket and stay here. A companion with no complaints? If you were permanent, we could set you up with a sweet deal."

"My father died in an attack," Khael said with as much dignity as he could manage, "and my brother disappeared. This is personal."

Ger looked shocked. "Sorry, I didn't know. Well, when you get rid of those bastards, you've got a chance at a real career. You wouldn't have to stick with the liners, either; there's all kinds of business that use 'em. If you want to do that, just let me know; I'll help you out."

Three weeks of spending time with businessmen had made Khael a little wiser in the give-and-take of favours, and in tact and grace. "If I survive, I'll consider it. You've been very kind," he said honestly.

"Be well," Ger said as Khael shook his hand. "Safe travels."

"Safe travels," Khael said back, and went to disembark.

## 2. Recruit



After meeting up with Jamin, Corin, and the other recruit, who'd never spoken a word to any of them, they left the liner. Khael's concern that they wouldn't know where to go turned out to be unfounded; there were huge signs with arrows pointing to the training camp.

They'd disembarked early, and discovered that that meant they had hours of waiting. Waiting for the drill sergeant to show up, waiting to be told where to get their supplies, waiting to be told where to sleep, where to eat, where to be examined.

That last surprised Khael and he said as much to the examiner. She was an older woman, a little older than Khael's mother, and she looked tired. "Gotta make sure you lot can handle what we throw at you. Doesn't do us any good to train you if you can't take it?"

Something about the way she said that made Khael nervous. "So, you don't take the ones who don't pass?"

She gave Khael a cool look. "You ask too many questions." She refused to say another word or look at him throughout the exam. Finally, she opened the door to a line of other recruits. "You passed. Go to the next station."

After the exams, they inoculated the recruits against everything possible and dropped Galactic Standard into their head. Khael had heard about the procedure, one in which any language could be given to a person instantly, but hadn't realised how much it would make his head itch. Still, he no longer had trouble understanding anyone.

Khael had expected training to be like what he'd seen in vids, with nasty, unreasonable drill sergeants and lots of unnecessary rote, well, drills. Instead, they were divided into groups of fifteen, and each group was assigned an officer-in-training. Khael and Jamin were in the same group; their OIT was a short, squat man with tan skin, dark eyes and bright red hair named Thal.

Once their group was settled into their new quarters, Thal yelled, "Shut up!" In surprise, everyone did. "Here's how this works," he said, his face blank. "Tomorrow, you start training. You are expected to learn everything you're told immediately. We don't have the time or the personnel to hold your hands, so it's time to stand up and do it."

A tall thin boy, who Khael suspected was even younger than he was, asked, "What if we can't?"

"Then your group will make sure you learn," Thal said. "The instructors don't much care how. I do; if at all possible, you'll learn by regular teaching methods."

"And if you don't?" the other boy asked.

"Then we'll beat it into you," Thal said plainly. "It's not the method I prefer, but we don't have time for anything else."

"Who's we?" Khael asked.

Thal indicated the group. "Us. We're a team and we have to be able to depend on one another. Oh, and if you're found hindering a member of the group, it's the same punishment. Work hard and if you need, get help. Understand?"

Khael could feel Jamin's hand trembling on his shoulder. He turned and looked at his friend. "You'll be fine," he said quietly.

Jamin shook his head. "I hope so. I don't want to let anyone down."

Khael gave Jamin his gentlest smile and kissed him. "We'll work it out."

"Shieldmates?" the largest of their group asked, walking up to them.

The term sounded vaguely familiar. "What's that? Oh, I'm Khael and this is Jamin."

"Wils," the other boy said. "Y'know, lovers and battle partners."

Khael and Jamin exchanged a look. "Works for me," Jamin said, shrugging.

"I'd say that's a yes," Khael said. "Why?"

Wils gave the two of them a look and sighed. "Shame. I was hoping-"

Jamin looked over at Khael who shrugged. "What's wrong with a trio?"

"What's wrong with fifteen?" Khael muttered. He didn't think he could be heard.

Wils must have heard him because he broke out into a laugh. "I like that. The group that loves its way to safety."

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Their group did well for the first week. Khael, to his surprise, discovered that the training came to him easily. The hand-to-hand combat didn't surprise him that much. Although he'd always intended on becoming a scientist, his parents had believed that a well-rounded life was essential and had always insisted on physical exercise and time spent outdoors. His ability with weapons was a little more surprising. His parents forbade violent games, which hadn't stopped him from playing them, but they had encouraged games that emphasized eye-hand coordination. As long as he didn't think of what they were training for, he was having fun.

At the end of the week, the head trainer reviewed everyone's progress. He singled out half a dozen of the recruits as needing extra work. The next morning, all six were at morning exercises, bruised and favouring parts of their body. No one said anything, but it frightened Khael; it had been the people they had to rely on to do that to them.

Jamin, on the other hand, was struggling. He'd planned on becoming an artist, but had never spent any time on physical exercise, so he had trouble with the hand-to-hand training. Those weapons that just involved aiming, he did all right with, but he didn't have the physical strength for the techniques that needed it. He managed to keep up for the first week but, as the second week

started, he began falling behind. Khael did what he could to help him along, but Jamin just couldn't seem to pick it up.

At the end of the second week, when the head instructor reviewed the recruits' progress, Khael held his breath. Unfortunately, the instructor indicated that Jamin was one of the ones who needed extra work, on his hand-to-hand.

After dinner, Thal gathered everyone together in their quarters. Jamin stood at strict attention, his face pale but calm. Thal looked at him and nodded, seeming to approve. "We've been negligent in our assistance of our fellow recruit, haven't we?"

A chorus of "Yes!" answered him.

"Does anyone think they've done everything possible to help?"

No one answered. Khael had no idea what more he could have done, but he'd learned enough to know not to break unity. Arless, one of the few aliens in the camp, spoke up. "Boeshane's gone above and beyond and hasn't taken a single break all week, sir!" he said.

Khael noticed out of the corner of his eye that not only was no one disagreeing, several of the group were nodding their heads agreeing. Thal, his face back to the blank expression he usually wore, looked at Jamin. "Do you agree with that assessment?"

Jamin nodded. "Everything possible."

Thal nodded and looked at Khael. "You can excuse yourself; you've done your job," he said.

Khael really didn't want to be involved in hurting Jamin, but he also knew how important sticking together as a team was. He took a deep breath and said, "Clearly I haven't."

Thal's smile was thin, but genuine. "Good man," he said, while the others stomped their feet in approval. He turned to Jamin and said, "Anything on your person you value that can be broken, take it off now."

Jamin shook his head. "Nothing," he said.

"Job is hand-to-hand," Thal said. "When you've learned it, we'll stop."

Khael had no idea how long the "lesson" lasted. He knew better than to pull his punches, but he tried to keep to things he knew Jamin could defend against. In the small area of the quarters, stray hits landed where they weren't supposed to; all of them were sporting bruises by the time Thal called a halt. "You'll be retested at the end of next week; how will you do?"

Jamin's answer was panted out, but he sounded almost triumphant. "Excellent, sir!"

With a roll of his eyes, Thal said, "See that you pass. You know who to go to for help now, yes?"

"Yes, sir," Jamin said.

"Boeshane!" Thal called.

"Yes, sir!" Khael said, his stomach twisting.

"Ask for help next time, yes?"

Khael nodded, his face burning in shame.

"Good. Take him to the infirmary; I think his ribs need looking at." Thal smiled. "Stay with him if he needs it, yes?"

The infirmary's medic was waiting; Jamin was the last of the group that had been singled out. The others had already been treated and were in beds; they all looked pretty miserable. The medic who was treating Jamin looked bored with the process; to Khael's relief, Jamin didn't seem to be too badly off. With a frown, the medic asked, "Whose group are you in?"

"Thal's," Jamin answered.

The medic nodded. "Thought as much," he muttered. Then he closed up the treatment unit. "You can spend the night here, or you can go back; your choice." Clearly, he was used to his patients choosing to spend the night in the comparative safety of the infirmary.

"Thanks, I'll go back," Jamin said, heading out of the infirmary quickly.

Khael said, "Thanks," quickly and followed his friend out. When he caught up to Jamin, he asked, "Why didn't you spend the night in the infirmary?"

"Because our group really cares," Jamin answered. "You were too busy feeling, well, whatever, but they really were trying to help. Tomorrow during our free time, I'm asking Wils to walk through some of the techniques he was using. He knows what he's doing."

"Oh," Khael said and was quiet the rest of the way back. Jamin didn't seem to mind; he chattered about whatever wandered into his head. When they got back, though, he looked at Khael. "Spend the night in my bunk?" he asked.

Khael nodded, glad he could do something to help.

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Khael woke up, expecting to see one of the ship's rooms; instead, he was in a bunk in quarters that looked a lot like those at the refugee camp but with much less clutter. He sat up, looking around in confusion.

Around him, other boys just like him were sitting up, looking confused as well. Jamin stared at Khael, "What's going on?"

Khael shook his head. "No idea. What happened to the ship?"

A minute later, another boy like them rushed in. "This is the training camp; none of us know how we got here, but there's no one in charge. The instructors and officers and such are gone. Everyone get dressed and meet in the meeting hall; we're discussing what we should do."

It took almost an hour to collect everyone in the main hall. From what Khael could see, they had made it to the training camp, but he didn't know how or when. He noticed that there wasn't anyone in charge in the main hall. Several of the recruits had looked, but they had only found other recruits. Finally, one of the other recruits, a large young man who had been in Khael and Jamin's room, stood up. "Maybe this is a test to see how we react without officers around."

This made a certain amount of sense. "The first thing we need to do then is to find out where we are and what the situation is."

They decided to divide themselves up into the same groups they had woken up in. Khael's group started on the first level under the ground level and started mapping. They'd been at it for almost three hours, enough time to be really thinking about finding some food, when the speakers turned on. "Everyone, get back to the main hall. We have trouble!"

They assembled much more quickly this time. Someone had figured out how to connect the display at the front of the hall into the camp's scanners. They showed a group of eight ships, moving in on the camp. On one pop-up display in the lower right corner was a list of armaments, including how many were active. Khael did a quick calculation; there was enough to destroy the camp if it was all deployed.

He wasn't the only one who was able to figure that out. Everyone began talking at once. Finally, one of the recruits stood up. "My name is Bren Domiden, and we're all in the same situation. We have to work together. I know we haven't started training, but some of us may know how some of this works. If you can work the comps, go over there. If you can work the scanners, over there. Does anybody know how to work weapons?"

"Only in a game," someone said.

The recruit standing shrugged. "Good enough for me. If you can't work any of this, go over there."

There was some shoving, and a couple of the other recruits complained about the one who'd taken charge, but Khael refused to put up with it. "If we don't want to die, we have to work together. His orders make sense; I'll back him up." Once he'd said something, others around him agreed; the complaints began to die down.

Khael didn't know much about weapons, but he did understand the basic physics and engineering behind them. He did understand the comps; he decided to join that group. It, and the one for those who didn't know how to operate any of the essential equipment, were the two largest groups. Bren shook his head and stood in the front. "Can any of you do anything but comps?"

Khael shrugged and raised his hand. "I know some physics and engineering." Others came up with other knowledge. Finally, Bren started sending people to where their abilities could be used.

Khael went to the weapons area. He really didn't know much about how to use the weapons on either side, but he knew enough about the science of them to be able to determine which of their weapons would be the most effective where, and the best way to avoid the invaders. They spent hours at it, trading off breaks as needed. Some of the others brought food, that they'd found somewhere. They also tried to communicate with the invaders; it was possible that they weren't

opponents, that they were trying to help. There was no response, except for an occasional weapon strike. It didn't take many of those to decide that the invaders were the enemy.

Almost two days after they'd first woken, the first of the invading ships landed. A party went out to meet them. Khael was in it; Jamin, to his relief, wasn't. They'd found hand weapons and went to where the enemy had landed. When the invaders came out of their ship, they were armed and looking around, but they didn't seem to think there was much danger. Khael and the other recruits killed the entire landing party within minutes, then boarded the ship and began firing on the aliens that hadn't tried to leave. They were aliens, tall and thin; their skin was covered in a substance that looked something like feathers and something like scales. The landing party had been dressed in what looked like standard coveralls, but those left behind were dressed more simply, in what appeared to be loincloths. They killed them all, and began trying to understand how their ship worked. If they could take the fight to the invaders, it would be better than waiting.

While one team was trying to figure out the ship, another was shooting at the invaders still in range of the camp. They'd been able to shoot several down, but, after losing about half of their force, the remaining ships left. The recruits spent another day waiting for the invaders to return or for help to arrive. That night, they put a skeleton crew on the scanners and went to sleep.

Khael woke up the next morning feeling a little disoriented. On the one hand, he was expecting a strange place, where he was under attack. On the other, he was expecting the training camp. In a flash, he sat up and began to run for the meeting hall. No matter what, they were still under attack!

Bren was already there as were some of the others, but Khael didn't seem to be running too late. As Khael opened his mouth to start asking questions, Bren raised his hand and shook his head. "Let's wait until everyone's here," he said, sounding weary. "I'd prefer not to have to keep repeating myself."

Khael checked the screens, but there were none of the enemy ships in sight. Although no one else seemed to be doing much, Khael found himself regularly checking the screens, and the more specific scanners. His home on the Peninsula had assumed that they weren't in danger. He'd never make that mistake again.

It took almost an hour for everyone to assemble. Once they had, Bren stood from his chair and said, "Our instructors are being treated for the same virus we've been suffering from; they'll be returning within the day. We aren't under attack--apparently, we never really were--but we're being kept in quarantine until the medics are sure this virus isn't contagious. Until then, we're to take it easy, leave the equipment alone and stay out of trouble." He shrugged. "As soon as I answer your questions, you're all dismissed to free time."

"Are we in trouble?" one of the other recruits asked. "We were trying to kill those other ships; what if they were friendly?"

"They weren't," Bren stated calmly. "They're not really enemies, but by attacking us without warning, they may as well have declared war on us. The diplomats are handling things; we were only protecting ourselves."

"What were they doing?" asked someone else.

Bren shook his head. "Testing a new weapon." After giving the hisses and shouts a bit to subside, he said, "It wasn't really intended for us; they just thought it would cause the least trouble here. I don't really understand the details; we'll be given a briefing once the quarantine is lifted."

After a few more questions that weren't really answered, they were dismissed.

Quarantine lasted three more days. Since they weren't feeling ill, Khael and Jamin decided to get all of their group very comfortable with each other in every way. It was a shame that Thal had been taken with all of the other instructors; Khael really wished he could have joined the team building exercises they were creating.

Three days later, the instructors and OITs returned, along with the head of the training camp, who gave the briefing Bren had promised. The explanation for what had happened seemed almost unbelievable, but everything Khael could find confirmed it.

The Sivans were a race that had not been descended from predators and, therefore, had no innate aggressiveness. After they had been invaded and subjected by several different aggressive races, they put their formidable intelligence to developing the ability to fight. Once they had accomplished this, they were able to successfully defend their homeworld and, eventually the colonies they had created.

One of their more distant colonies was on a world that another species was also trying to colonize. Both races had similar backgrounds, but instead of cooperating, had declared war on each other. In the hopes of defeating their enemies, the Sivans had developed a virus that was programmed to suppress all of the victim's memory to a time before any military training had occurred. The intention was to prevent their opponents from fighting back.

Wary of testing the virus on themselves, and having little ability to test it on their opponents, the Sivans decided to test it on a race they had few dealings with. The training camp had been chosen because the recruits would only be losing a little memory, memory that could be easily recreated if necessary. Although the Sivans and humans did interact, neither race knew the other very well. If the humans became upset at the Sivans' actions, they assumed they could just end all interaction without any threat of war.

It hadn't occurred to the Sivans that a race descended from predators, one which was naturally aggressive, would be able to effectively fight back even without military training. Instead of confused, frightened youngsters who could be easily herded and subdued, they found themselves required to fight the untrained human youngsters. In fact, with the exception of one recruit who had been trying to determine why his weapon didn't fire and killed himself, several bumps and bruises from recruits trying to operate machinery they didn't understand, and more severe illness in a few of the older instructors than they had expected, there were no human casualties. On the other hand, the Sivans lost half of the force they'd sent to observe and protect the "defenceless" recruits.

In the end, the Sivans gave an apology to the military that ran the training camp, agreeing that they had been the aggressors. They also withdrew their demand that the recruits be accused of war

crimes for their attacks against the soldiers who had had no intention of fighting; it was pointed out that it was their actions that had produced the situation in the first place.

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A week later, after the head instructor reviewed everyone's progress one last time, they were told they were finished and their assignments would be handed out the next day. Groups were sent out together with their OIT in charge. Khael's group was assigned to a troop carrier that was taking worlds back from the invaders. It was considered one of the more dangerous assignments; the only ones more dangerous were those trying to find the invaders' home world. Khael didn't really care; he just wanted to fight and, if he could, look for survivors taken from the battlefields.

### 3. Soldier



Their first post was on the opposite side on the Ukanan systems. There was a group of three planets that had been fighting the invaders since the beginning; they were starting to make progress and the powers-that-be had decided it would be good to take the planets back. Their group, along with seven others, was placed under the command of a Captain Drewson. She was short, but wide and muscled, and one even shade of brown all over. She'd even had all of her hair inhibited. She explained the mission briefly. "We go in and kill any of the invaders we find. Then we go looking for the ones that are hiding. When we're done, we declare victory. Questions?"

One of the OITs asked, "Why don't we just bomb them instead of fighting them on the ground? We'll lose even more people this way."

"The people living there would like something left when we're done," Drewson said in a tone that said she thought that was obvious. "In a strike like that, we can't target only the invaders; we'll kill as many of the locals as we will of the invaders. More even. No, we do this the hard way."

And hard it was. After landing, Khael's group was given the assignment of clearing the invaders from a housing area. Although Khael's group had lots of cover, so did the invaders. They would start with a building, climb to the top, and search each floor for invaders. Khael personally thought they could have just bombed the buildings they were clearing; not only was no one living there any longer, but the buildings were in disrepair and looked ready to fall down. They'd cleared three buildings and were about a third of the way through the fourth when they found the first nest of invaders.

Ever since his home had been destroyed, Khael had wondered what the creatures looked like. Even in the training camp, no one would, or could, describe them. They were generally humanoid, but they wore full armour at all times. If they died, or were taken captive, the suits would explode, frequently killing one or more of the defenders. They wouldn't discuss terms, they wouldn't even communicate; they just destroyed. Their motives were unknown.

He still didn't have an answer. Even here, even dug in and waiting to fight it out building by building, floor by floor, room by room, the invaders were still all in their armour. Khael's group couldn't just go in and start shooting; the invaders were ready and waiting for them. The fire fight didn't last very long. There'd been only three of the invaders, but they killed six of Khael's group before they died.

Four months later, they almost had the first planet completely cleared out. There was one valley, on the smallest of four continents, which they hadn't been able to clear out. The planet's leaders had refused to allow them to bomb it since it was the also the centre of their religion. The invaders clearly understood this; they had been careful not to destroy the cavern and surrounding forest that was the equivalent of the main temple. Finally, the military came up with a plan that they thought had some hope of succeeding.

"Everyone who goes in will be volunteers," Drewson said, her face drawn. "The main body will go in here," she pointed to a secondary, little known entrance, "while a small group goes in this way," she continued, pointing to the main entrance to the valley. "Their job is to be a distraction, to pull all attention to themselves and to move the hostiles away from the hidden entrance. People, this is a suicide mission. I won't say it's impossible to survive it, but it'll be a shooting miracle if you do. I don't want any of you to say anything now. If you're willing to volunteer for it, write your names on a slip and leave it in this box. I'll draw the number I need in the morning." She looked at the soldiers in front of her.

It didn't matter to Khael that it was a suicide mission; if one planet could be cleared of these monsters, then maybe they all could. He went directly to the box to leave his name. The rest of the evening, he spent with Jamin, the knowledge that he'd never touch his best friend again making everything feel so much better, mean so much more. He fell asleep early, which was rare, and slept the night through with no nightmares, which was even rarer.

In the morning, the entire squadron stood before Drewson, ready to receive their orders. First she drew the two dozen names that would comprise the distraction force. Khael's name was first; Jamin's was last. Khael was forced to stay quiet while Drewson gave the main group their orders and turned to the distraction force. "We couldn't do this without you," she said, her face grim. "Your sacrifice will be remembered." Then she showed them the route they would be taking.

It was the main entrance to the valley. Since it was a sacred site, there was a direct road right into the valley. It had once been well-cared for; even now, there was little damage to it. There was a river on one side that was almost impassable for water traffic. The other side was mostly open, with occasional stands of trees. There was little cover for the last mile into the valley and none once they entered.

Khael stared at the pics she produced from before the invaders; it was beautiful, but there was no way they would survive. He didn't care anymore; there was no way of finding Gray and nothing else that he could find that made living better than dying. But Jamin, Jamin with his lovely face and beautiful voice and kind hands; Jamin who could create beauty out of nothing. Jamin wasn't a soldier, not really. Jamin didn't belong there.

While they waited for their transport, Khael grabbed Jamin. "What are you doing?" he hissed. "You're supposed to live."

"I'm doing what I always do," Jamin said, his voice tired but his face resolute. "Keeping you alive."

"What?" Khael had pulled Jamin out of so many near-deaths he couldn't count them anymore. Khael was the soldier, not Jamin; it had been pure selfishness for Khael to talk him into coming along. If he had to do it over again, Khael would have left Jamin behind.

Jamin shook his head. "You'd have given up and died a long time ago if you didn't have me to protect. If you hadn't been so stupid to put your name straight in, I was going to drug you so you couldn't. Since I couldn't do that, I'm going with you. It's the only way to keep you from throwing yourself straight at Death."

Having nothing to say, Khael just stared. Finally, he blinked to keep his eyes dry. He wouldn't allow his friend's sacrifice to mean nothing. "I don't deserve you," he finally said.

"Yeah, but I'm used to your ugly face, so I plan on keeping it around," Jamin said with a grin.

The transport was supposed to get them as close to the entrance as it could before it was stopped. They thought they might get to within a mile before they were forced to abandon it and walk. Instead, they got nearly to the entrance before a roadblock stopped them. They carefully left the vehicle and began examining the area.

"We're still not finding anything," Bren said, checking his handheld scanner again. "It doesn't make sense; the valley's easy to defend as long as you protect the entrance. Why aren't they?" No one could answer the question, so they went forward.

There was no cover; they were walking in the open. Khael's neck prickled; it felt like there were a million eyes on him, but none of the scanners showed anything. They walked to the entrance and formed a circle around Bren while he scanned again. "Nothing," he said, shaking his head. "There's a group at the other end of the valley, but no one here."

It was a trap. They all knew it; it was why they were all volunteers. Still, even knowing that, they began to walk carefully into the valley.

As soon as the last soldier was all the way into the valley, there was a large "BOOM!" and it felt like Khael's ears popped. Bren moved his scanner and read. "Force field," he said, his voice choked. Then the invaders began to appear everywhere. "And holograms," Bren continued as he exchanged his scanner for his weapon. "Good ones, that disguise all energy displays. It's been good to know you." He started firing at the nearest of the invaders.

The rest of the group was already shooting, trying to stop their attackers, get to cover, and take up as much time and attention as they could. Khael felt a shot hit his left shin and went down; he kept shooting, keeping as close to the ground as he could, trying to inch his way to cover. After a few minutes, Khael gave up on even trying to get to cover; he concentrated on killing as many of the invaders as he could. No matter how many he saw go down, there seemed to be more behind them. He saw one group split off and head to the direction he knew that the main group would be emerging from; they were too far for him to effectively aim at from his position on the ground, so he concentrated on killing as many as he could. He had no idea how long the fight continued, his vision was darkening so quickly that it couldn't be night falling. Finally, there was only the darkness.

Khael woke on a hard bed. Clearly they were in the field somewhere where there weren't any beds. He opened his eyes, groaning. Then he wished he'd stayed quiet; he was in a cell. He stayed as still as he could, trying to move only his eyes as he looked around.

The cell wasn't large, but it wasn't as horrible as his imagination had painted. Just a small room with one side open, probably a force field since he didn't see anything else keeping a prisoner in, and a hole, presumably for waste. He swallowed and tried not to move.

"Don't bother," Jamin's voice came from behind him.

Khael sat up quickly and turned to look. The movement had been a mistake; his head and leg ached, his vision was swimming and he felt like he was going to vomit. "What do you mean?"

"We're the only two who survived," Jamin said, "but the mission was a success. We've been transported somewhere."

"Can't be on the planet," Khael said, looking around. "We'd know. This doesn't look like a ship. So..."

Jamin shrugged. "One of the other planets would be my guess." Someone started screaming. It went on for a long time. "Yeah," Jamin said, after a minute, "been hearing a lot of that. Don't know what they're looking for, but they're determined to find it."

Khael swallowed. Dying was one thing; torture... To distract himself, he tried kissing Jamin.

Jamin shook his head. "Not here. They pass by and *look*; I don't want to be doing that here." He shivered. "Just, no."

In the end, they played stupid children's games to keep from thinking about the screams they could hear. Khael had no idea how long they were in the cell. They weren't fed or given any liquid, and they were both getting terribly hungry and thirsty. There was no change in lighting; it was always bright. Khael's leg hurt more and more; he tried to stand, but it wouldn't take any weight. It was turning black; Khael knew that, if something wasn't done, infection or something would kill him. Khael tried to get Jamin to keep moving, keep exercising, but Jamin just shrugged. "What good will it do me?"

They'd slept twice when four invaders came to their cell. Khael could feel the difference when the force field was brought down, but some kind of weapon was pointed at him and he found he couldn't move. Two of them picked up Jamin and took him to the left; two others picked up Khael and did the same. They strapped him to a table. He couldn't move and he was terrified, but he was determined not to show it. Then one of them pointed the weapon at him and he found he could move.

As Khael struggled, trying to get free of the restraints, to kill the bastards, he could hear Jamin's voice yelling curses. After a minute, Khael grinned, wishing he would be able to repeat Jamin's very creative cursing; it was a shame to lose it to death. "You know," he said, thinking they were going to torture him anyway, "that cursing my friend is giving you and yours? It's the best, most creative, wonderful cursing I've ever heard. That's sheer poetry and you're too stupid to get it."

One of the invaders came up to him and put a hand on Khael's damaged leg. Gritting his teeth, Khael did his best to grin and say, "Y'know, someone should really be taking this down for history. I'd do it if I thought you'd let me go." The invader pressed harder and Khael had to shut his eyes and breathe deeply. He wouldn't scream; he had to be strong for Jamin. The invader leaned all of his weight on Khael's leg and he bit his lips and held his breath to prevent the scream that wanted to come out. A minute later, the pain grew great enough for him to pass out; as he listened to his screams, he was ashamed of himself for giving in.

When Khael came to again, he was in a different room, every bit as bare and white as the previous one had been. There were two differences. First, he was gagged, and not with a physical gag. He wasn't sure what had been done to him, but he couldn't make any noise. That was even scarier than just being hurt.

The other difference was that there was a second table in this room with Jamin strapped on it. Khael's table was tilted so he could see Jamin, but he could tell that Jamin couldn't see him. Jamin's warm brown eyes were moving restlessly, but it was clear he couldn't see anything. Khael suspected it was deliberate, a psychological torture instead of a physical one. In fact, he couldn't feel his leg at all, although he could see it. But he was too far away to reach out and touch Jamin and he couldn't even talk to him to give his friend comfort. And without his sight, Jamin couldn't even see Khael, to know that he was still alive.

And then they started truly torturing Jamin. In part, they were trying to get information from him: what the plans were, where they thought the invaders were, who they thought the invaders were. To the extent that Khael could think logically, a lot of the questions didn't make sense. It was hard to think straight, though, just as it was hard to see through his tears. The fact that Jamin, or Khael, didn't know many answers made it even worse.

In addition to the physical, they were also insulting Jamin, saying that they were questioning him because they'd determined that Khael would die before he'd break, while they knew Jamin would break easily.

They were wrong about the last part. Khael watched as they cut, shocked, punched and did other things that Khael tried very hard not to think about. Jamin screamed, begged them to stop, but he didn't answer their questions for a long, long time and, even then, the answers weren't always right.

It seemed to go on forever. Eventually, Jamin fell silent, and nothing the invaders did would bring him back. As Khael tried to bring himself under some kind of control, knowing he was next, one of the invaders came over to him and said, "We never keep them." Then, he sprayed something in Khael's face, and he passed out again.

When Khael woke up, he was lying face down on barren ground. His leg was on fire, to the point that, under normal circumstances, he wouldn't be able to think of anything else. However, Jamin was lying beside him. It must have been some time since the invaders had killed him, because Khael could smell the decomposition. He tried to get up, but could barely move. Instead, he started vomiting and was barely able to move enough to keep from choking on it. He hadn't felt this useless even when he'd lost Gray. He closed his eyes and let himself lose consciousness, honestly believing it would be better if he died.

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The next time Khael woke up, he was on one of the beds in a ship's infirmary. As he tried to sit up, an unfamiliar medic came over to help him sit up.

"Where am I?" Khael asked.

"You're on the *Endeavour*," the medic said.

"I'm assigned to the *Intrepid*," Khael said, confused. They tried not to move soldiers around too much, unless they were invalidated out. He didn't even remember a ship called the *Endeavour*.

"Where are we then?"

"All I know is we've been putting you back together," the medic said. "Should think that's more important than where you are. You're going to recover, by the way, thanks to your brilliant medic." He scowled. "You don't need to thank me or anything."

Khael hoped he kept his wince from showing, but annoying your medic was always a bad thing. He gave the man his best smile. "Sorry, I suppose I was just confused; the infirmary was so pretty it confused me. I feel a lot better than I would have expected to," which was true. "You gave me the good drugs?"

That got him an eye roll and a reluctant chuckle. "Bringing you off of them, actually. You almost lost your leg; what were you doing?"

"Fighting," Khael said and sighed. "Can I get news or anything?"

The medic looked at his pad and appeared to consider. Finally, he shook his head. "Sorry, orders are you're to be kept quiet until you've been debriefed. I can tell them you're up to it now." He walked away but came back a few minutes later with some chips. "Here, you can read these if you want." He then went over what Khael was and wasn't allowed to do. The first list was pretty short: lie quietly in bed and get better.

"Thanks; I appreciate it." Khael put the first in the reader and concentrated on not sighing audibly and went through all of them. They were all romance novels, the worst, trashiest kind of romance novels. But it was them, or boredom, so Khael read them.

Although he was supposed to sleep as much as he could, to hurry the healing along, Khael found himself restless and unable to sleep. All he could think of was Jamin and how he died. He wished he could talk with the other members of his group, they at least knew Jamin, but the medic confirmed that none of them were on board the ship. Something about his expression made Khael nervous; he wouldn't say anything else, but Khael thought he knew more about their fates than he was saying.

It was another several shifts before an officer came down to debrief. Archbishop Louis was in charge of all of the Church's military action in this sector; Khael would have shot up to stand at attention--except his medic was also in the room and glaring at him. Although the Church technically wasn't involved in the fighting, they gave the frontier militias supplies and training, and anything else they could without Earth and the major systems noticing. The Archbishop caught the interplay and smile. "Son," he said to the medic, "could you give me some time alone with this soldier? I promise not to let him get out of bed or do anything else he shouldn't."

The medic scowled, but nodded. "Let me know when you're done, sir," he said and left, closing the door behind him.

The archbishop turned to Khael and smiled. He was a tall man, of fit build, with pale skin, dark hair and a moustache. He was held in such high esteem that half of the soldiers, at least the ones who could, had grown moustaches of their own. "All right, it's Private Horton, isn't that right?" When Khael had nodded, the archbishop took out a padd and set it next to Khael's head; Khael could see the "Record" icon flashing. "I want you to tell me exactly what happened, in your own words. Exactly what happened. It doesn't matter what; I give you my word that you won't suffer any reprisals, but we have to know."

Unnerved by the hint that something had gone badly enough for reprisals, Khael described exactly what had happened. When he started to describe what had happened to Jamin, though, he found himself unable to talk for the tears. He tried to stop them, tears didn't do anything, but he couldn't stop them.

After a couple of minutes, the Archbishop handed him a square of cloth. Khael looked at him, puzzled. "Handkerchief, to wipe away whatever needs to be wiped away. I'm in no rush; you just take your time."

Khael held onto the handkerchief, but didn't really use it. He managed to get the rest of the story out between sobs. The archbishop, true to his word, sat quietly, looking sympathetic and not at all impatient. When Khael finally finished, he looked up. "Will it help us?"

For several minutes, the archbishop just sat, apparently deep in thought. "Who are we fighting?"

"The invaders?" Khael answered. Normally he wouldn't have questioned it, but something in the archbishop's manner made him feel uncertain.

However, the archbishop just nodded. "And who are they?"

With a shudder, Khael said, "The worst creatures imaginable. And in those suits, it's even worse--" The last word trailed off. "They're using us against ourselves."

He'd impressed the archbishop. "Very good. What's a smart kid like you doing in the army? You belong in school, and don't give me anything about being of age; I know better."

Khael shrugged. "They killed my father, my little brother's missing because I fucked up, my mother hates me and they destroyed my home. Where else should I be?" He carefully kept his anger at the idiocy of the question from showing; this was the archbishop, not one of his fellow soldiers.

All the archbishop did was sigh. "I just meant that you'd be better off using that brain to help us fight instead of acting as cannon fodder."

"Someone needs to do it," Khael said. "Better it be someone with nothing left to lose."

"There's always something left to lose, young man." The archbishop stood. "I don't know if you realize it, but the fighting group you'd been assigned to was all killed in that idiocy of a plan. They released you as psychological warfare, but they didn't expect you to survive; that leg wound was a lot worse than I think you realize. Still, your survival is working against them, and we need every weapon we can use. So, we're using you. Do you have a problem with that?"

Khael shook his head, sitting up straighter. "No, sir! What do you need me to do?"

With a smile, the archbishop said, "Can you fly a ship?"

Khael shrugged. He knew the theory, but he'd never had the chance to actually fly one.

"Then that's the first thing," the archbishop said. "Everybody loves a flyboy, especially one coming up the ranks the way you are. Now, if anyone asks how old you are," here he sighed. "Well, tell them what's on your records. Otherwise, just be honest and try to stay out of trouble."

"I am, really, sir," Khael said. "I never used to get into trouble, except--" For dumping Gray instead of watching him. "I'll do my best," he said, swallowing hard. "I swear."

The other man leaned forward and rested his hand on Khael's head. "I have no doubt you are, and have always been, a man of honour." He stood and left.

Khael spent almost a month in the infirmary. Whatever they'd done to his leg meant that it got infected if you looked at it funny and, once they finally stopped the infections, he had to learn to walk all over again. It wasn't really that bad, but Khael was used to being active--sitting around in bed all day was his personal idea of Hell.

It didn't take long for Khael to figure out how the archbishop was using him to increase morale. Even though no one on the ship knew him, he had visitors almost constantly, except when the medic kicked them out. Most of the soldiers on the ship were in the Church, and they were used to the area around Earth, where they were mostly there to keep anything from happening. The brutality that the Clerics, the Church's military, were facing out here wasn't anything they'd ever expected. In addition, intel was coming in that suggested the invaders were going to make a play for Earth and the worlds surrounding it. The thought of that brutality invading their peaceful homes had most of the soldiers wondering if they'd be able to stop them, if they'd have the courage to keep fighting, but it had at least meant that the Church was allowed to join the fight. Khael, from a notoriously peaceful community, but still willing and able to fight and protect those that were left, was comforting.

When he was finally allowed to leave the infirmary, he found his new quarters were right off the flight deck and that his new assignment was to become a fighter pilot. Khael had always thought physics had come easily to him, but flying, this was magnificent. His first solo flight was supposed to be a training flight, but a squadron of invaders were identified just a system over and Khael was sent with the rest of the squadron.

At first, the other, more experienced pilots were keeping him away from the fighting, but things got hot very quickly. It wasn't very long before Khael found himself deep in the middle of the fighting. For a fire fight, it lasted a long time; it was almost two hours before Khael found himself scanning an empty region for more of the invaders.

"Khael," Cleric Ralph, his immediate superior, said as Khael continued to scan for the enemy, "stand down."

"What?" Khael asked, confused, still scanning. "I'm all right, really; I can keep going."

"I know," the cleric's voice was gentle, "but we got them all. You did good; now stand down."

Khael spent the next four years as a fighter pilot, on the front lines of the fighting. Whenever he could, Khael took the most dangerous assignments, protecting the rest of the squadron as much as he could, but he didn't have to see the invaders face-to-face again.

The end of the war came as abruptly as it had begun. One minute, the invaders were fighting desperately to protect themselves and their people; the next moment, they had given up. All of their ships self-destructed and no more arrived.

## 4. Cadet



To Khael's bemusement, most people seemed to assume the disappearance of the invaders meant it was time to demobilize. Khael's opinion was that now was the time to go over all the intel accumulated and determine the invaders' species, home planet, motivations, and anything they might need for the next time, maybe even take the fight to them. When he tried convincing his fellow soldiers, he was faced with a bewildering pity, as if he wanted to spend his life as a soldier. After facing that irritating sympathy a couple of times, he just kept his mouth shut and kept himself ready to go at any moment.

A month passed, as he watched public opinion turn against the military, especially in his own system, where the military was blamed for their losses. One afternoon, when he'd been told the scheduled recon run was cancelled, he was called into the archbishop's office.

To Khael's relief, the archbishop was still in military uniform. When Khael walked in and stood at attention, the archbishop smiled at him and indicated the visitor's chair. "Sit down, son." As Khael complied, the archbishop looked at a padd; Khael assumed it had something to do with him. "Your record is impressive, if a little reckless. The rumours I've been hearing say you're not convinced the war is truly over. Most people think you just don't know how to live if we're not at war. What do you think?"

Khael took a minute to gather his thoughts. "They just vanished. We never found their home planet and, although we were beating them, they still had a lot of fight left in them. This isn't over. It may be years, but we'll be fighting them again." Khael shrugged. "I'd prefer not to be a soldier, to be honest, but I can't in good conscience leave innocents unprotected."

"Good man," the archbishop said, a large smile on his face. "Are you aware that we have more intel than is commonly known?"

"I'd hope so," Khael said, knowing his voice sounded a little sharp, but really.

Fortunately, the archbishop laughed. "We're reasonably certain that the invaders are time travellers." As Khael struggled to absorb that, the archbishop continued with, "In fact, we believe that they're humans, from the future, trying to escape legal action."

"A lawsuit?" Khael asked in horror.

"Criminal justice," the archbishop corrected. "We think they're criminals in their own time, trying to find a refuge here, in a place and time where the people are nonviolent--to their minds, defenceless. We've proven to be a little harder to defeat than they had expected, so they'll try somewhere, somewhen, else.

"What about the people they've taken?" Khael asked dully. If Gray was lost in time as well as space, it was hopeless. Travel in time was so strictly controlled . . .

The archbishop's voice was gentle as he said, "We don't know that they've taken anyone. But that leads me to what I wanted to speak with you about." Khael looked up sharply. "Have you heard about the Time Agency?"

"Yes, sir," Khael answered. "They research the physics, philosophy and ethics of time and time travel." According to his parents, they also meddled in time where they didn't belong, but Khael wasn't sure he believed that any longer. If people could be saved, protected, did it matter how it was done?

"That's one of the things they do, yes," the archbishop answered. "They also police Time. And it's something I think you would be especially good at. I want to submit your name to them." As if he had just thought of it, he asked, "By the way, how old are you really?"

Khael sighed. "I'll turn twenty-one in a week. But--" He swallowed hard. It would probably lose him this opportunity, the only way he had of finding Gray, but he had to be honest. "What about Gray?" He could barely hear his own question.

The archbishop smiled. "There are four kinds of people who join the Agency: the pure scientists, those who genuinely want to police time, those who just want somewhere to do what they want with few consequences . . . and those who want to change their lives. It can't be done, but that doesn't mean you can't search for Gray after he was taken."

Biting his lip, Khael closed his eyes and asked, "How likely is it that they'd accept me?" he asked.

When the archbishop snorted, Khael opened his eyes. "I'm the Church's representative on their Board," he said smiling. "I'm always looking for new talent to throw their way, but they're stricter on age, and appropriately so, than the local militias like you were in, and we needed you here. Now that the invaders are no longer within the military's jurisdiction, the Agency can take over. And find them. And I think a young man like you--intelligent, with a solid foundation in the maths and sciences, with practical military training, the cunning to understand that victory is seldom so simple and an agenda of your own--oh, yes, I think you'll do well in the Time Agency. Very well, indeed."

Something about the way the archbishop had described Khael seemed odd. Or, maybe not so odd. "You're not recommending me because I'm a straight, up-standing citizen who wants to stick to the rules. You're looking for someone who'll do whatever it takes, aren't you?"

The archbishop nodded. "As I said, intelligent and cunning. The Agency needs men like you."

Khael thought about it. His parents would have a fit if they found out, but his father was dead and his mother didn't care. He'd failed his family; maybe this was his atonement. And if he could find Gray . . . "Please put my name in, sir. I'd be honoured to join your Time Agency."

The archbishop's smile made Khael feel proud for the first time in years.

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Three days later, Khael received a communication from the Time Agency, offering him a position in their Academy, which was about to start a session. When he went to his commanding officer, he

found that everything had already been arranged; his discharge papers and transport were waiting. "And, kid," she said, her smile bright in her dark face, "you can't pull the stunt with the transport money you did when you joined the Army."

"I, I didn't know," Khael found himself stuttering. He hadn't been aware anyone really knew about that.

She smiled at him. "Lots of kids like you do it," she said, "but the Time Agency has an image it projects, so your mother will be sent a credit voucher for your enlisting. A nice, big one."

Khael smiled back, relieved. His pay hadn't always been reliable, especially early on, but he'd always sent everything he didn't absolutely need to her, something he knew was common knowledge. "Thanks for that," he told his CO. She'd been one of those who did what she could to help those in her command, something Khael had learned to treasure. Looking down at the info she'd given him, he jumped. He had three hours to make the transport.

He made it, just barely. He'd even managed to say goodbye to all three of his current lovers in person; he'd been rushed, but he enjoyed the resulting soreness.

The transport was basic. Khael shared his quarters with three other men, one an Academy cadet like he was (going to be), the other two just travellers going the same direction. The food was all right, but there was enough of it. The first night, Khael went through the ship's library and downloaded everything there was on physics, mathematics, philosophy, and, as an afterthought, a book on Ukanan society. There was a long chapter on the B'shani. Khael was interested in an outsider's view of his society; he knew he was viewed as something exotic by non-Ukanans.

The book was a revelation to him. Even though he knew that most of his fellow soldiers had been brought up differently than he, he'd never really thought about it. But the author, a Professor Summer Song, discussed the "extreme attachment, in which a child is kept in near continuous contact with another member of the community until just before puberty" as something remarkable. To Khael, it was just a way for a child to feel safe. Even after puberty, Khael rarely wanted to be alone; it was better when there was someone else around. After Jamin died, he'd been bereft; he hadn't just lost his best friend and lover, but no one else wanted the type of closeness Khael needed. He knew he'd gained a reputation for extreme sexuality, even in an environment where there was lots of it, because he hated to sleep alone.

It continued that way: everything that he thought normal was described as unusual or, at the very least, something to be commented on and dissected. He read the entire book the first night, finishing it in the early hours of the morning. He spent the rest of the night in a ball of misery, with the realization that, unless he returned to Boeshane, he would probably never find what he'd grown up with, with what felt right. To avoid thinking about it, he spent the rest of the trip studying. He wasn't going to look like an idiot at the Academy.

The trip took just under two weeks, arriving the day before the new session began. When he reported to the Academy, a bored man handed him his room assignment and his course schedule. "Everything you need will be in your room," he said, almost sing-songing the words. Khael thanked him and asked for a map.

The man looked up at him, his gaze sharpening. After a moment, he handed Khaal a chip that contained a map of the Academy; Khaal was amused to see large sections labelled "Off Limits" and wondered if anyone actually stayed out of them.

The rooms seemed huge to Khaal. About the same size as the quarters he was used to, but he only shared with one other cadet, who had already arrived and had clearly made himself at home. About Khaal's age, shorter and slimmer, with light brown hair and gray eyes, he was lounging on the bed next to the window. When Khaal walked in and put his pack on the other bed, his new roommate looked amused.

Since the other man hadn't said anything, Khaal walked up and held out his hand to shake. "Khaal Jaxom Horton of the Boeshane Peninsula," he said.

His roommate stood up, smirking. "Mitri Trevalian, with enough middle names to be just stupid. From Earth; we're traditionalists. So, Khaal Horton, how did you wind up here?"

"Archbishop Louis recommended me," Khaal said, hoping he wasn't supposed to keep that quiet.

Trevalian's eyebrows went up for a minute before the other man tried to return to his cool, amused expression. "Is that supposed to impress me?" he asked.

"Just is," Khaal returned. "You?"

"Finished West Point, they suggested I serve my term here," Trevalian answered, lying back down. "So, colony world, military service with the Church. Are you Church?"

"No, they were willing to help, so they worked with us."

"You believe in celibacy?" Trevalian was clearly trying to seem uninterested, but he wasn't succeeding.

Khaal grinned. "I believe in it, in that I know it exists. Never quite figured out why anybody'd want to."

Trevalian's sprawl was becoming more sexual by the moment. "What's your preference?"

"Labels," Khaal snorted. "Who needs 'em. But I think monogamy's practically the same as celibacy and I don't want problems, yeah?" He was going to have to get along with Trevalian, at least at first.

The other man shrugged. "Close the door. And I'm with you on monogamy; let's have some fun."

After, Khaal snuggled up to Mitri, or at least tried to. "Mm," Mitri said. "We should agree on other lovers before we go putting the beds together."

Khaal gave Mitri a look. "Why? We have sex with who we want and, if our lovers don't want to play, we deal with it then."

Mitri shoved at Khaal. "Go get your bed over here. I thought you colonists were supposed to be all prim and proper."

Khael snorted as he shoved the beds together and jumped back in. "What does sex have to do with being prim and proper?"

The Army had supposedly been regimented, with everything supposed to happen at set times and everything by the book, but on the frontier, it hadn't worked out that way. The Time Academy, however, was totally regimented. Everything was done to a strict timetable, marked by bells. One joke Khael heard was that even getting sick was scheduled and, if you didn't have it scheduled, you'd just have to wait to be sick until it was. It was only a small exaggeration.

Khael hadn't ever lived this way, needing to be somewhere on the dot, never late, uniform pressed and shoes polished, but he found himself thriving on it. His roommate, on the other hand, had been in one military school or another practically as soon as he could read, and hated every minute. When Khael asked why he didn't leave, Mitri rolled his eyes. "Signed a contract to get into West Point," he said, rolling his eyes, "which my father insisted on my doing so no getting out of it. Four years of service, but they didn't want me fucking with their record so we all agreed I could serve out my time here. Don't need the training, but the Agency insisted."

Khael kept his astonishment that parents could want their children in the military to himself. He'd already been treated to several long conversations on Mitri's family's illustrious military service.

For the first time since the invasion, Khael was living a schedule that felt right. The Academy clearly believed, even as his parents had, that an active body and an active mind were both necessary for good health. Khael surprised his academic instructors at first; knowing that he came from one of the frontier militias, they weren't expecting him to have studied the higher maths and physics. He found his classes switched around almost immediately to reflect his greater knowledge of the scientific subjects the Academy taught.

Where he was weakest surprised him: the softer sciences. His knowledge of psychology and sociology were basic and limited almost entirely to the Ukanan systems. He found that things were very different in human society as a whole. When humanity broke free of the species that viewed them as very versatile sex toys, the humans decided to embrace sexuality and explore everything. Khael agreed whole-heartedly, but found the underlying philosophy of it rather defeatist. To him, it came from a position of weakness, a readiness to be able to please anyone, rather than strength, an enjoyment of who and what they were.

After a week, the floor's proctor asked to speak with him privately. Khael couldn't think of any rules he'd broken, so he felt very uncertain when he did so. "Relax," Feeny told him, "you've done nothing wrong. Your roommate, however--"

Khael sighed. How Mitri had ever finished West Point, which was known for its insistence on strict observance of all its rules, was beyond him. Mitri did what he wanted, when he wanted, and to hell with schedules, rules and expectations.

"His family is both rich and powerful," Feeny told Khael. "One of the most powerful families left on earth. If they want Mitri to graduate West Point, a way will be found for him to do so. If they want him to become a Time Agent, a way will be found for him to do so. And I'm afraid that way here is you."

Khael groaned. He'd tried, but he couldn't carry Mitri to class and handcuff him to the desk. Well, he could, they'd proven that Khael was the stronger of the two of them, but he didn't think it would be permitted. When he said that to Feeny, though, he got a surprise. "Whatever it takes," he told an astonished Khael. "We'd prefer the classes not be disrupted--"

"So I can gag him, too?" Khael asked, not sure he was joking.

Feeny looked surprised. "Oh. Yeah, that'll work. I'll inform your instructors. Er, it'd be better if you found a way without the handcuffs and gags, though. I think."

Returning to his room, Khael found Mitri in bed with second-year twins. He went to the desk and pulled out his history homework, after declining their invitation. Two hours later, when they left, Khael looked at Mitri and said, "We have to talk."

"Thought you'd be okay with this," Mitri said with a pout. "You'd've been more than welcome to join in. Dav thinks you're nine kinds of wonderful."

Khael put that aside to address later; both of them had been very attractive. "Not about that; we agreed and it's not a problem. The Agency has sent down orders that you will pass."

Mitri groaned and pulled the pillow over his head. Khael yanked it out of his hands. Mitri looked up. "You're my keeper?"

"Got it in one and, guess what? I'm not letting that bring me down. I'm authorized to use handcuffs and gags and, if you give me trouble, I suspect anything else I want to use. Now, can we be civilized, or do I have to resort to extreme measures."

"Like what?" Mitri's expression made it clear that he didn't think Khael would be able to control him.

Khael, however, had already figured his roommate out. He was a creature of his pleasures; he would do what he had to to keep them and what he needed to avoid punishment. "First, you seem to enjoy sex." After Mitri had finished laughing at that, Khael's smile grew cold. "If you give me a hard time about being where you're supposed to be when you're supposed to be there, you don't get any." He held up a device he'd acquired while in the army; sometimes it was useful to be able to forget about sex. "Do as you're told or I'll put this on you and only I will know the combination."

Mitri looked at the Sex Inhibitor and swallowed. "You wouldn't," he said, but his voice betrayed his uncertainty.

"Nobody's going to get in my way, Trevalian," Khael said. He could hear how harsh, almost vicious, his voice sounded, but he'd be damned if some spoiled rich kid destroyed his chances at finding Gray.

"And if I'm good," Mitri looked nervous but hopeful.

Which was exactly what Khael was looking for. "If you're good," he purred, putting the Inhibitor back in his pocket and crawling across the bed to Mitri, "you can have whatever you want of me."

"Can I have an advance?"

"Call it a sample," Khael said, stripping out of his clothes.

He could barely move the next day, but Mitri made all of his classes on time, and didn't act up once. By the end of the day, the instructors were looking at Khael in near-awe.

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At the end of the first year at the Academy, the cadets were divided into the field agents and those who wouldn't be leaving Agency Headquarters, the scientists and theoreticians. The cadets were asked for their opinions as to their placements, but there were no guarantees.

Khael was torn. As a child, he would have wanted to be placed with the scientists; he would have been appalled at being chosen as a field agent. He'd still be happy to be placed with the scientists; to his astonishment, he was at the top of his class in his science classes. He knew that his temporal physics instructor, in particular, was trying to get Khael assigned to his division.

On the other hand, he had found that he was good at field work. The physical activity, the quick thinking needed when something went wrong, the independence needed, all of it appealed to him. So, although he thought he'd be good as one of the Agency's scientists, he also thought he'd be good in the field. In the end, he informed his advisor that he'd allow the Agency to decide; he'd wind up making the decision by some form of random chance anyway.

Just before the Academy holiday, he was called to his advisor's office. Khael was confused. The postings were made public; cadets weren't informed privately. "That's correct," his advisor said, "but you're in a unique position. It's usually clear where a cadet belongs, but your case isn't clear."

Khael shrugged. "Then where am I needed most?"

His advisor shook his head, sighed, and handed a black envelope to Khael.

Khael's insides froze. They'd all heard of the black envelopes. Those weren't ever made public; they were given to those cadets who were headed for the Black Squadron. The Black Squadron, made up of the agents who did the dirty work: the assassins, the torturers, the thieves. When an agent of the Black Squadron was caught, they were executed, immediately, so that their crimes wouldn't reflect back on the Agency. They were everything Khael had been brought up to hate.

"This is a choice," his advisor said. "We don't force anyone into the Black Squadron. It's usually not difficult to tell which cadets will be assigned to it; most of them would otherwise wind up facing some form of criminal justice by the time they're thirty."

Khael felt himself flush, then pale. "That's what you--"

"No," his advisor didn't even let him get the sentence out. "If you decline, we'll wipe the last hour out of your memory and go back to trying to decide if you'd be better as a temporal physicist, a creative engineer, or one of our best field agents. However, those same projections . . ." He took a deep breath. "Horton, those same projections indicate that, with the right grooming, we could use you on the Agency Board."

Khael stared at him. The Board? They were the mysterious minds in charge of determining the Agency's direction, of which events needed to be protected. "Me?" he said, amazed his voice didn't squeak. Before his advisor could say anything, he heard himself say, "Although it would be an amazing honour, sir, I'm the Agency's. I will go where they send me, and if they need me in the Black Squadron, I will do the best that I can." After a thought, he said, "Although I reserve the right to try to find ways to do what's needed with as little harm to others and to what's right as I can manage."

His advisor's face broke out into a smile. "Excellent," he said, putting the envelope away. At Khael's confused expression, he said, "We don't actually give you the envelope; it's purely symbolic. You're to tell no one about this conversation and continue with the assignments given. Is that clear, Cadet?"

When Khael returned to his room, Mitri was lying in wait for him. "Guess what?" he said as soon as Khael had closed the door. "I've been assigned to the Black Squadron. It's a secret, though, so don't tell anyone." He held his finger up to his lips in the ancient sign of "Quiet."

Khael stared at his roommate. This was one of the reasons they wanted him for Black Squadron, he realized. He was able to keep Mitri, and the half dozen other problem cadets like him, under control and out of trouble. At least at first, his job was going to be Black Squadron Babysitter. He sighed; might as well get started. He picked Mitri up and slammed him against the wall. "If you've been told to keep your mouth shut, then you'd damn well better do it," he snarled, finding himself genuinely angry, "or I'll shut it for you. Permanently. Understand?"

Mitri, his eyes wide, nodded. When Khael had released him, Mitri stared. "They picked you, too, didn't they?" he asked.

"Have you ever heard of security?" Khael hissed.

With a shrug, Mitri said, "If we're both Black Squadron, there's no reason not to discuss it."

Thoroughly exasperated now, and determined that, if he was going to be an Agency thug, he was damned well going to be a good one, Khael grabbed Mitri, threw him against the wall, and proceeded to beat him as thoroughly as possible without needing to take his idiotic roommate to the infirmary. Or, he realized after a bit, to the morgue.

At the evening meal, it became clear that his actions and reasons hadn't gone unnoticed. His advisor caught his eye, nodded at Mitri, and smiled. Khael finished his meal cheerfully. The next day, when the postings were listed, Khael was unsurprised to find himself listed as Field Agent, Red Squadron. Red Squadron were those agents who were both field agents able to work independently and agents who would serve as the Agency's military.

Most of the cadets went home for the holiday; only a few who, like Khael, didn't have family to visit stayed at the Academy. On the first day, his advisor pinged him to visit his office. When he arrived, Khael found not only his advisor but also a media crew. "As you know," his advisor began when the door had been closed, "we have been trying to recruit more agents from the Ukanan sector; so far, you're the first. We hoped you'd be willing to allow us to use you in our recruitment media. Are you willing, Cadet?"

Khael didn't actually have a problem with it, but he was annoyed that his advisor made it sound like he had a choice. He'd pretty much signed his life over to the Agency when he'd enlisted, and what was left when he'd agreed to be placed in the Black Squadron. Still, he supposed appearances had to be kept. "Of course, sir. What may I do for you gentlefolk?" he asked the media crew.

What he could do turned out to be to change into an Agency dress uniform, which he technically wasn't eligible to wear yet, and pose for scores of images. The woman in charge of the crew was in raptures; apparently, Khael was especially photogenic, "Even for a B'shani, and everyone knows they're the most attractive humans in the galaxy. Or, is it near-human?" she asked.

"Smartest, too," Khael said with a smirk, avoiding the human/non-human question. There were many groups who felt that, if you weren't one hundred percent human, you weren't human at all. Khael knew there were just enough non-human in his ancestry, less than five percent, to cause serious trouble if someone wanted to make it.

He was also interviewed--the crew seemed to want to know every instant of his life--and taped him making several publicity statements. "Join the Agency; see and protect the stars." was one of those. Three hours later, as they were wrapping up, Khael invited the head of the crew back to his quarters "to see what a typical cadet's quarters were like." She was a delightful bed partner, and promised to make him look as good as possible.

The promos came out just before the end of the holiday. They were pretty standard promos, designed to make youngsters consider the Agency as a good choice of career. Khael was pleased with them; they'd done a good job of making him look like a fantasy hero. He wasn't as pleased with the sobriquet they used for him; the Face of Boe just sounded plain silly. Otherwise, it didn't make much difference to him; his fellow cadets teased him, but they already knew him well.

In order to keep the Agency as a whole integrated, they kept the cadets from the two different groups together in as many classes as possible. Although Khael was very much on the Field Agent track, for the next two years, he found himself in many of the science and mathematics classes as well. Combat, armed and unarmed, history, sociology, anthropology, psychology, tactics and strategy, languages, and anything else that he might possibly need, to blend in or stand out. Khael loved it; there was always a new goal to meet, a new challenge in which to excel. Mitri, from Earth and with private tutoring since he could walk, had been exposed to most of it, but even he had to work at much of what was required of them.

And then there were the covert classes. There were six of them from their year, where they were taught how to get what was needed using "less than sanctified methods". And again, to Khael's surprise, he excelled. His instructor didn't seem especially surprised, but she did have a sharp warning for him. "Don't expect your pretty face to get you out of trouble," she said firmly. "It'll work most of the time, but you need something to fall back on when it doesn't." Some of the lessons surprised him: they weren't just taught how to use pain, but pleasure, too. And Khael had thought he'd known a lot about sex before; now, he was taught how to combine pain and pleasure and get the results he wanted.

They had the lessons reversed on them as well, in addition to the experimentation all of them did out of classroom hours. One night, Mitri worked him over so well, Khael would have done anything

for him. Unfortunately, Mitri lacked the fine control to play the game safely and Khael wound up in the infirmary. The medic glared at him. "So, which one of you is the stupidly kinky bastard?"

"He is," Khael said, making sure he sounded amused. He was just grateful that the medic thought they were just fooling around, not applying lessons. Those lessons weren't part of the general Academy curriculum.

During the holiday after their third year, the Black Squadron cadets were sent to an illegal hospital on the fringes of the frontier. Khael was shocked to discover it was illegal; he'd heard his parents discuss a friend who had been treated there. There had been no implication of illegality, and Khael's parents were ridiculously strict about such things.

Once there, the six of them were each given their own medic. Khael's looked at him seriously. "This," she said, pointing to the screen next to her, "is a record of everything we know about your physical and medical condition. As a B'shani, well, your people are notorious for their genetic work; there hasn't been a child *born* on Boeshane in over a century with any genetic deficits. However, there are . . . enhancements we can give you. The Agency, of course, can't require you to have them done."

Khael rolled his eyes at her. "Give me the list; if there's anything I strongly object to, I'll let you know." The list was more extensive than he'd expected, but that was mostly because he hadn't thought about it. Strength, endurance, immunities, sensory and psychic sensitivity--all of them would only make him more valuable to the Academy. There was only one that surprised him, mostly because he didn't understand why they'd want it. "What is this?"

"Which one?" She looked at the enhancement Khael was indicating. "Oh, yes. I need to warn you that that one is very experimental, but the Agency is serious about it. It's not something they expect to activate until you retire, but they have such a hard time getting Ukanan recruits. You may not realize it, but the Agency has a, well, breeding program sounds so--"

"Like the Agency," Khael said dryly. "Not arguing, but I'm perfectly capable of participating in a breeding program without giving me a uterus and et cetera. So?"

She shrugged. "It's an experiment. There've been some interesting results from the few men who've had this done; if they can be brought to term, the children are generally stronger and . . ."

Khael thought about it. Her body language was saying she was expecting him to object and, if he did, that she would remove it from the list. But, what the hell. If the Agency wanted him, he'd do what they asked. He pressed his thumb onto the appropriate part of the screen. "What's next?"

Most of the enhancements were done with genetic manipulation; an injection, a day or two feeling less than perfect, and Khael was experimenting with the enhanced abilities. It was kind of fun, really.

The uterine implant, however, required actual surgery, and a real recovery. Khael was in bed for a full three days, and on limited activity, which included no sex, for a week after that. It was boring, but Khael used the time to read and observe Mitri and the rest of the group's playing around. It was kind of fun.

Right before they were sent back to the Academy, Khael was called to the local proctor's office. Puzzled, he stood at attention before the man, Agent Wared.

"Sit down, Horton," Wared said, sounding tired. When Khael did, Wared continued, "I have some bad news for you. Your mother has been living at the Rebme Camps, is that correct?" When Khael nodded, Wared sighed. "I'm sorry to inform you that she's dead."

"How?" Khael asked. There was no military action in the area any more, and his mother was still young, not even fifty.

"There has been some unrest in the area lately," Wared said, not looking at Khael. "Someone planted a bomb in the sector she lives in; nothing was left." He finally looked up at Khael. "I'm sorry."

Khael nodded and wandered away, without waiting for a dismissal or otherwise acknowledging the proctor. It made no sense to him; his mother wouldn't have been involved in any kind of unrest, on either side. No one left, no more family. A stray thought had his hand on his stomach. Some day, one way or another, maybe he could create his own.

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The final two years of Agency training wasn't at the Academy, but in the field. Each cadet was paired with a seasoned Agent in their squadron and was sent out to do field work. Khael was assigned to Lydia. Blonde with dark skin and eyes that betrayed non-human ancestry, she wasn't beautiful, but she was experienced and highly thought of. And since her primary assignments had been character assassination and intelligence gathering, that was impressive. Khael decided that she should be a good mentor.

When his advisor introduced them, Lydia looked sour. "Well, come on then, pretty boy," she said as they were introduced. "Let's see what you're made of. Oh, and I don't sleep with my partners." Khael sighed.

Their first assignment was comparatively easy. Artefacts plundered from the past were being sold on the black market; they were sent to stop it. It was a pretty straightforward investigation job; Lydia played an older woman wanting to indulge her younger lover and they were able to accumulate enough evidence to arrest the ring within a day. As a reward, Lydia took him to bed.

Khael was trained, but Lydia was incredible. After the first round, he lay in bed next to her, trying to remember everything they'd just done because it was amazing, and she chuckled. "Well, at least if I have to break in a rookie, he's a pretty boy who hasn't picked up too many bad habits."

Feeling very much put in his place, Khael gave her his best smile. "You'll just have to work on giving me the right ones then, hm? How about . . . now?"

She laughed.

The next two years were great. Over half of their assignments were straight Agency work: putting Time right when criminals or idiots had screwed something up, or chasing after said criminals or idiots. The rest were intelligence gathering, many of them against the invaders against the Ukanan

Sector. Khael was always eager for those assignments, although Lydia hated them. "You're too emotionally involved," she told him over and over again. "It's gonna get you killed. Keep your emotions out of it." Khael couldn't, though; he had to redeem himself. Even if his mother could no longer forgive him, he had to find Gray.

Towards the end of Khael's apprenticeship, they were given a huge assignment, one that required four Agents, not two. They were paired with an old friend of Lydia's, Kestre, who was working with Mitri as an apprentice. The head of the Agency herself gave them the assignment. "We don't know what they call themselves," she told them, "but we call them the Revisionists. They are trying to eliminate the Church from all of history, although we think that there is a group within that would accept simply eliminating them now. We want them stopped." Her face was stern as she handed over the briefing chips. "We don't care how. If you bring them in alive, that's fine; we'll put them on trial and make an example of them. If you don't--" She shrugged. "The Church, needless to say, is willing to make whatever accommodations are necessary. No matter what you do, as long as it's to a Revisionist, there will be no reprisals. Questions?"

Lydia and Kestre simply took their briefing chips, as did Khael. Mitri didn't ask any questions, and took his chip meekly enough, but he looked like he'd been told he had carte blanche to do whatever he wanted. Then Khael thought back over what they'd been told. He had.

After going through all of the official information, Lydia declared they needed better intel before they even started in the field. "I've got some Agency contacts who may know more than we've been given. Kestre, do you think your Church contacts will help?"

Kestre's smile was slow and lazy. "Oh, yes, my old seminary buddies will be glad to help."

Mitri looked shocked. "You were in seminary?"

Unbelievable, Khael thought. They've been working together for a year. Out loud, he only said, "I've got a couple of Church contacts myself, although they're probably not as highly placed."

"Good," Lydia said, "they may know more than those up top anyway. Otherwise, I want you doing the prep work. See where the weak points are, when they're most likely to be aiming. If we can predict them, we'll be in better shape."

Mitri wandered off without an assignment. When Lydia gave Kestre a look, he shrugged. "He's got contacts the rest of us can only dream of and he's shit at research. He's best in the field; point him where you need mayhem and you're good."

Khael sighed. So much for apprenticeship settling Mitri down a little.

After a week of research and intelligence gathering, and digging Mitri out of every bar and jail on the planet, they had a plan of attack. "They're trying to wipe out the Church," Lydia said. "Their purposes, which we don't know yet, only need them gone for the last century or so, but they've decided it's an issue of principles and are trying to wipe them out entirely. There's about a dozen of them, spread through time, mostly on Earth. The most dangerous of the group appear to be trying to stop the Church's formation in first century Rome, but they're trying to make some money along the way. Khael and I will go there and try to track them down, at least find out what they're

doing. Kestrel and Mitri, you two will check out the colony on Arcadia in the twenty-seventh century; that appears to be where a second group is."

The Revisionists weren't in first century Rome; they were in first century Pompeii, running a con to make money. "Either our intel is bad or the rest of them are elsewhere," Lydia told Khaal, watching them set up a con to be run the next day, when the volcano erupted. "Do you think you can distract them?"

Khaal gave her his best cocky grin. "Just watch me."

They were a married couple, nice enough when not discussing the Church, and Khaal quickly convinced them that a day of pleasure was just what they needed. While Khaal was distracting them, Lydia searched their villa, taking all the data they had on their plans against the Church. She also removed the motor of their ship so they couldn't leave.

"The Agency doesn't care how we do it," she told him.

Khaal nodded; it was true enough, but it left him feeling unsettled. They'd been nice enough people otherwise.

When Kestrel and Mitri met them back at Headquarters, Mitri was bouncing off the walls, almost literally. "Don't know why they're looking for money," Mitri said. "You should see the diamonds there."

"They probably can't turn them into cash," Kestrel said, looking amused at Mitri's antics. "We did get some better intel. Mid-thirty-third century, Earth, they're looking to bomb the Vatican States. Everyone left will be there; we can get them all."

After the bomb was set, Khaal went after the Revisionists as a distraction while the other three went to stop the bomb. This time, the distraction didn't work.

"He's an Agent," the one man shouted. "Kill him before they track us back here."

"My partners are already here," Khaal said, annoyed. "Kill me or not; they're here and they'll come after you."

"Then we'll trade you for our safety," the Revisionist said. "If they think you're worth it."

Khaal banged his head against the wall. "I told you, it doesn't matter. They have you and, if you want to survive, you'll leave me here and go. Stop fighting the Church and they'll leave you alone." Khaal wasn't sure if it was true, but it was worth a try.

"Stop fighting the Church?" the one woman asked him. "Do you have any idea how many people have died because of the Church? How many people have been tortured? Do you know what they've done?"

"In the past, sure," Khaal said, "but they're trying to protect people now."

"Tell that to the Ukanans," he said.

"What?" Khael asked.

"Yes," the woman said. "They deliberately set up the invasions in the Ukanan Sector in order to get a foothold in that area. And it's working; people are actually fool enough to believe that the Church fought for them."

"Did you?" Khael asked.

She stared at him, and collapsed. "Hi, there," Mitri said, stepping over her body. "Sorry we took so long, lover. Had a bit of trouble with the bomb." He released Khael's bonds and took his wrist, activating his Vortex Manipulator. "Couldn't disarm it, so we gave it back."

Lydia and Kestre were already at Headquarters. "That should be all of them, but we'll check it out to confirm," Lydia said, laughing. "Gotta love it when a plan comes together."

## 5. Agent



It wasn't long after that that both Lydia and Kestrel retired, together. Mitri and Khaal were assigned to work together. "Never saw that one coming, did you?" Mitri asked.

Khaal just sighed. For the last couple of years, he'd been working with adults. Lydia and Kestrel had both been Black Squadron, but they'd been doing a job. They'd both enjoyed breaking the law and skating close to the edge of disaster--Khaal did himself, for that matter--but the job came first. To Khaal, Mitri seemed like a child. He did the job so they'd let him do what he wanted otherwise. Now, with Lydia and Kestrel gone, Khaal was forced to babysit Mitri all by himself.

"You're too serious," Mitri told him as they were going over the briefing for their next assignment--stopping yet another ring of artefact thieves. "Look, the job comes first; I'll give you that. As long as that happens, why can't we have fun?"

"Cause that stuff you're taking leaves you too messed up to work," Khaal said, pointing at a cocktail that included who knew what, but had Mitri's pupils constricted to pin pricks.

"Think?" Mitri said with a smirk. "Tell you what. I'll take the antagonist," he held up an injector, "and you take this, which increases the sensitivity of your senses. Among other things. We'll see who does better."

"That is the worst idea I've ever--" Khaal's felt his breath catch as he felt the injector in his thigh. Somehow, he kept himself focused on the job. And he knew, he just knew, where to go to find the thieves. "Take the antagonist."

"Already did," Mitri said.

Khaal pointed to the unused injector. "No, you didn't; now use it."

Mitri's smile was sly and . . . sexy and wonderful. His kiss was damn good as well, his hands were fucking fantastic, and the only thing to do was to pick him up and slam the smaller man against the wall and ensure that Mitri would do as he was told.

Five minutes later, both men were breathing hard and reassembling their clothes. "Now, come on; I know where the thieves are."

They burst into the sad warehouse where the four pathetic thieves, four kids who needed to be fed more than punished, were sitting with the results of their last excursion. Khaal picked up the biggest boy. "Who's giving you your assignments?" he asked. He'd never understood how people could enjoy beating up someone smaller, but he could now. He let the kid see that.

It took five minutes for the boy to start talking. He and his friends laid out the entire operation, or the part they knew of it. They'd identified the man in charge in addition to the woman giving them their assignments. When they were finished, Khaal picked up the money they'd been given to set

up the next trip. "You're all a bunch of damn fools, you know?" Khael said in disgust. "What's keeping you from taking this and starting over?"

"The big score--" one of the weedier ones started to whine.

"Will never come," Mitri said, his voice rich with amusement. "The people you're working for, doesn't matter what you do, they won't get into trouble. You're the ones who'll take the fall. He's right; take the money and, sweet Goddess, get a couple good meals into you."

Looking between Khael, standing as tall and forbidding as he could, and Mitri, grinning manically and starting to flip a blade in the air, the kids decided to cut their losses and run. "Y'know, those kids aren't that different from you."

"What did you give me?" Khael asked, giving Mitri his coldest look.

"Relax," Mitri said. "It's nothing bad. Brain stimulant, sensory enhancer, and mild, very mild, disinhibitor. And look how well it worked." He smirked. "Probably oughta be straight when we go to arrest the ringleaders, though. This'll be fun; the bloke at the top is an old friend of my father's; nasty son of a bitch. Cheats, too."

Khael didn't say anything about Mitri's asides, although he made a mental note to get more information later. "Let's plan this time, shall we?" he asked, as sarcastically as he could manage.

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Five years as a Time Agent, doing whatever needed to be done, with Mitri as his partner. Most of the time, they were indistinguishable from the Red Squadron agents, the Time Agency's front lines, but more and more frequently, they were given the Black Squadron assignments. It didn't take long for Khael to realize that, no matter how "discreet" the Agency was, most Agents out of their apprenticeships knew who the members of the Black Squadron were. Nothing was said overtly, but it was clear how little they were thought of by the rest of the Agency. Khael did his best not to think about it until, on a mission to find a group trying to undo the current government on a planet that was sympathetic to the Agency, they were trying to get information from one of the group's inner circle. After two days of frustrating questioning, staying within the Agency's guidelines of legal action, the head of the Agency team sent everyone out of the room. "Khael, stay."

"Sir?" Khael asked.

The leader, a man who reminded him of Kestrel, who was now married to Lydia and on their fourth child, looked at Khael, his face pinched. "Agent Horton," he said, the formality unusual enough to grab Khael's attention, "I have called a break for the Agency team. We all need down time. Unfortunately, I have an errand for you to run; there is information the Agency needs. I'll let you have a break when you return." He walked to the door and looked back at Khael. "I trust we understand each other." He gave Khael a look of utter distaste as he left.

Khael understood, but the disgust in the other man's face infuriated him as much as it shamed him. Still, job to do. It took him four hours to break the subject, and another hour and a half to put him back together so the torture wasn't obvious. When he went to advise the leader of the information, he saw the rest of the team. With the exception of Mitri, who just looked bored out

of his mind, they all looked disgusted. Hoping his fury was less obvious than their disgust--after all, he was a professional even if they weren't--he said, "If you don't mind, I'll take a bit of a break now. The Agency has its information." He swept out of the room and went to one of the physical development rooms and beat on the equipment until he was limp with exhaustion.

"Y'know what you need?" Khael heard Mitri ask as he leaned against the wall.

"A good fuck," Khael said.

"Nah," Mitri said, but then he said, "Well, at some time tonight. You also need to get drunk and fight it out of your system. Always better when the fighting's . . . recreational instead of professional." Khael followed Mitri to a bar he'd never seen before, where he got drunk enough to have a hard time remembering the rest of the night, which included running away from the fight just ahead of the monitors and fucking several women, and at least one man other than Mitri, through the mattress.

He woke up the next morning sore and sick, but not feeling the guilt from the night before. To Khael's great lack of surprise, Mitri knew every establishment within five systems of Headquarters where drink, fights and sex were easily available. For the first time in his life, Khael wasn't spending every spare minute studying. It wasn't like it mattered; he was wise enough now to realize that the lure of the Board given him to convince him to sign up for the Black Squadron was just that, a lure.

The assignment that finally blew things open didn't seem to be much of an assignment. A group of murders were causing problems to the forensic specialists since the corpses were clearly being taken out of time for long enough to cause problems with the investigation. Khael and Mitri were given the assignment to find the murderers.

It didn't take long to determine what the victims had in common; it was then a matter of watching them to find the killers setting up. They were just too late to save the next victim, a retailer with a string of locations across the central Earth colonies, but they were able to identify and prove who his murderers were. As soon as they'd sent the information, their response arrived: "Catch them. Use whatever is needed."

Mitri grinned and Khael set up the trace so they could follow the corpse. By the first stop, the killers were aware of their hunters and were trying to throw the Agents off their trail. Mitri and Khael were good; they'd been doing this for years, and were impossible to throw off. Finally, after nine stops on progressively more primitive planets, the killers stopped on a planet Khael had never heard of that seemed to be completely unpopulated. As the criminals dropped the corpse and were preparing to run without it, Khael and Mitri actually caught them. One of their prey activated a force field, but Khael and Mitri were able to move right through it and apprehend the killers.

The killers were determined not to be returned to the Agency; it quickly became obvious that Khael and Mitri weren't fighting to capture them, but to stay alive themselves. None of the three men stayed alive long enough to find out who was in charge of the ring. "Well, that was a total waste," Khael said in disgust. "We still don't have the ring, just these stooges."

"Better than nothing," Mitri said with a shrug. "Come on, big boy, help me get this stiff situated so we can get him home."

"Just a minute," Khael said. "I want to see if we can use this ship; it's a sweet little craft."

"You and your ships," Mitri groaned, too theatrically to be serious, and sat down, checking the readings from his Vortex Manipulator. After a minute, he said, "Khael, you'd better check your Manipulator. I'm really hoping this one has to be exchanged, for one of the appropriate size."

"I don't know," Khael said, teasing, "do they come any smaller?"

"I'm serious," Mitri said. To Khael's surprise, Mitri looked uneasy, never a good thing.

Khael stepped away from the ship and checked his Manipulator. "Huh. That's quite some field around us. Any idea what it is?"

"Temporal components," Mitri said, trying to focus the readings. "Don't know. Time to leave."

Khael gave the ship one last look--the Agency would be confiscating it--and went to help Mitri with the body. They synchronized their Manipulators for the additional strength and set the coordinates for Headquarters.

After the usual disorientation, Khael and Mitri found themselves in exactly the same place. "Not good," Mitri said, glaring at the corpse.

"No, but let's not freak out yet," Khael said. He was setting up a field around the body that would stop decomposition. "Are you getting anything on your Manipulator?"

"Nothing new," Mitri said, scowling at his Manipulator. "A force field of unknown origin that has temporal components. Don't like that. Do you think that's why the timeline of the victims is so fucked up?"

"Could be," Khael said, standing as he finished with the body. "There might be something on the ship."

"Yeah, yeah, I know," Mitri said, rolling his eyes. "Go on, get your wankfest over so you can think, yeah?"

"You'll be singing a different tune if I find a supply of booze," Khael called out as he went into the ship, carefully taking readings with his Manipulator. "The field isn't being generated by the ship, but there's a similarity to the energy readings. Something about them is the same: power source, origin, something."

In the end, there was nothing on the ship that explained the force field. Nor could they find the device that had been used to activate it. Their retrieval beacons wouldn't leave the planet's electrical field, and none of the available communications devices, either their own or the ship's, would reach beyond the planet either. Fortunately, the ship was well-stocked with plenty of food and drink, including enough intoxicants to keep even Mitri happy.

After two weeks, their theories of what had happened and how they'd be rescued were getting wilder and wilder. There just wasn't that much else to do; even Khael and Mitri could only fuck so much of the time. They were just discussing if they should try to make a rigid schedule, which Mitri

didn't much like, but was coming to agree with Khael that it would give them some control in the situation, when an energy burst knocked them both out.

When they came to, they found themselves fighting the killers again. The force field had just been activated, and Khael went cold as he realized what that meant. Unfortunately, he and Mitri were too busy fighting for their lives to be able to work out a plan to get at least one of the men alive.

Once the killers were all dead, again, Khael saw his partner looking at him in horror. "Sweet Goddess," Mitri said, his voice hushed, "they set a time loop. What are we going to do?"

"Find a way to break it," Khael said, forcing confidence into his voice. "It may take us more than two weeks, but we have unlimited supplies."

"Not really unlimited," Mitri said, with a scowl. "Just renewable. Every, what, two weeks?"

"Just over," Khael said absently. "Let's get to work."

For the first dozen or so loops, they concentrated on keeping at least one of the others alive, at least long enough to find out how to break the loop. The killers were determined to die for their cause and Khael and Mitri eventually gave up on that. Khael tried to work out a way of getting through the loop, but the time loop shouldn't have been possible in the first place, and, although Khael's temporal physics were good, they weren't good enough.

They tried setting up a more comfortable encampment, but they had to start over again every two weeks. Several of the loops were spent seeing how drunk they could stay for how long, and several more were devoted to seeing how much sex they could have. After they had been in the loop for a year, they found themselves fighting more and more, and over the stupidest of things. They'd been together, as roommates and partners, for over ten years, but they'd always had other people around: other lovers, other friends, Khael's old military comrades, Mitri's family. Now, they had only each other and the togetherness was just too much.

They talked about seeing what would happen if one of them died, if it would break the loop or if they'd just come back to life, but it was too extreme for either one of them. When, as the second year was approaching, Khael started to seriously consider it, Mitri stopped him. "No, look," he said, looking a little panicked, "this is bad enough with only one other person. Can you imagine how bad it would be with no one else?" He shuddered. "Bad idea, drop it. Please, Khael." Grumbling, Khael did.

They'd passed three years when, as they were falling asleep, Mitri started to chuckle. "What's so funny?" Khael asked. Too much idleness was driving him insane.

"Just, in my family, we'd be considered married," Mitri said. "When we get out of here," always when, never if, "I'll have to take you home, introduce my little wife to the family."

"I don't know if I should be more insulted that you're calling me 'little', or implying that both partners aren't equal," Khael said. "If that's the case in your family, you're the wife."

"No, you are," Mitri said, his grin almost back to its old brightness.

"You!" Khael said, overjoyed to have a silly fight instead of the same old, soul-deadening ones, and started tickling Mitri.

The argument over "Who's the wife?" was guaranteed to dissolve into a silly, light-hearted wrestling match for over six months, but eventually even it became a point of serious contention.

They were preparing for the 140th restart when an explosion of some kind knocked both of them down. Khael kept his eyes on his countdown; when it hit the reset and nothing happened, he and Mitri made a run for the ship, where they found a full Agency team.

"Having some trouble, boys?" the team's leader asked.

Khael didn't even complain about the amusement. "Can't believe how great it is to see even your ugly face," he said. "What took you so long?"

"Who'd've thought a time loop?" the other agent said. "We were looking for your bodies and hadn't connected your disappearance with the temporal anomaly until a scientific team came out to investigate. They realized what they had and called us in to handle any potential dangers. I suppose you two qualify."

"You'd better believe it," Mitri said, glaring at the other agent. "So, you ready to leave, darling?"

"Always, dear," Khael said with a laugh, enjoying the bemused look on the other agent's face. "Always."

Khael had been expecting a typical Agency debriefing: a recap of the events, success and/or failure of the mission, any clean-up that he had had to do, any clean-up that the Agency would have to do, and any injuries that needed tending.

After the first year as Mitri's partner, Khael's debriefings included what mayhem Mitri had created and which Important Personages had to be mollified. Khael wasn't sure if it was Mitri's success rate, which in all honesty was as much due to Khael as Mitri, or his father's connections, but the Agency was determined not to lose Mitri.

To Khael's bemusement, the Agency was equally determined not to lose him. He'd been told on more than one occasion that if he wanted to change partners or if he wanted to change from Black Squadron to Red Squadron, it could be arranged; they really didn't want him to retire. He once remarked, "I never thought that Face of Boe stuff was that important." He'd heard, of course, that the Agency was finally getting Ukanan recruits, which they attributed to him, but it was never more than a trickle.

The agent giving him the debriefing looked up, startled. "With your record? It's not your publicity value the Agency wants to keep."

This time, when they got to that point of the debriefing, Khael just sighed. "Who else is going to keep Mitri out of trouble?"

Colonel Justinian, who was debriefing Khael this time, shook his head. "We'd prefer you two partnered together; the projections indicate that you're both significantly more effective as a team than partnered with other agents. But if you're tired of playing nursemaid, we will split you up."

Khael shook his head. Even if it would make his life simpler, easier, quieter-- He pulled his mind away from that list and sighed. "Mostly just tired, to be honest, sir."

The colonel looked at Khael's records. "Not surprising. We've had to insist that you take your last two holidays and you've been working straight for the last five years, on your timeline, with very limited human contact." He checked something. "If we just put all of your accumulated holiday time together, you'd have five months. We can add time for emotional stress or however you want it phrased, and give you up to a year." He looked up at Khael, his expression unreadable. "Would you take it and do you think it would help?"

Khael thought about it. He'd resisted taking holidays mostly because what he wanted to do was go home, and that was gone. His mother was dead and he really had no one else. He'd been back to the Boeshane Peninsula once since joining the Agency and had vowed never again; the beautiful community he'd grown up in was gone, nothing but craters and-- He forced those images away. That left going somewhere and overindulging in entertainments--drinking and sex--that he didn't skimp on on duty.

Finally, he shook his head. "I'll take whatever you insist on, sir, but a holiday doesn't really appeal."

To Khael's surprise, the colonel didn't react as expected. That comment usually led to Khael spending several days with one of the Agency counsellors who would then plop him in front of some perky holiday planner. Great sex, but the holidays that got planned were just more of the same. When he said as much, the colonel laughed. Then he sobered up, "Look, you're showing all of the signs of burnout; you need some kind of break." He was quiet for a minute, but then he smiled and started tapping on his padd. "Your transport will leave first thing in the morning; the details will be in your quarters. Six months required leave; after, we'll say a month, you can choose an alternate destination. You're dismissed."

A little startled by the abrupt dismissal, Khael was still trying to gather his thoughts when he bumped into Mitri on the way to his quarters. Mitri was already started on his holiday; he was already weaving and his pupils were blown. "Did they at least insist you go on holiday?" he asked as he turned to follow Khael.

Khael nodded. "The colonel didn't say where though; I leave first thing in the morning."

Mitri scowled. "Change it. I'm taking you home with me; it'll be great."

"After the last time?" Khael asked. The one time he'd gone home with Mitri, he'd discovered that the Trevalians had a very old-fashioned view of appropriate bed partners. They hadn't objected when he'd been found with one of the servants, but he'd been asked, with icy politeness, to leave when he'd been found with Mitri. Getting kicked out hadn't bothered Khael nearly as much as not being told that it might, just possibly, be a problem. "I don't think so."

"They asked for you," Mitri said, his tone wheedling. "By name."

"I'm not marrying your sister," Khael said. Which was one of the reasons finding him in bed with Mitri had caused such a fuss.

He'd only been sent a destination, on Arcadia which wasn't that bad, but no other details. He was to be met at the spaceport and given the details then.

"Sounds more like an assignment than a holiday to me," Mitri said, pouting.

After spending the night appeasing Mitri, Khael was at the transport in plenty of time. The trip was quiet, with a nice selection of books in the library, drinks in the bar, and attractive and willing potential bed partners. If nothing else, Khael thought, the three day trip was relaxing enough.

The holiday wasn't at all relaxing and it was wonderful. It was an orphanage, for children who'd been orphaned by the war who hadn't been adopted. One of the workers had taken ill and needed to take time to recuperate; Khael was temporarily replacing her.

His job was to keep an eye on the children, keep them out of trouble, discipline them when that didn't work . . . and sleep in the dormitory with them. His group was the 8 to 12 group--old enough to be reasoned with but young enough to not be too defiant. They were awed by Khael's uniform, which he quickly used as a reward, and they wanted to hear all about the Time Agency. Khael was careful what he told them, but he loved the children and loved telling them stories. And, unlike many of the people who worked there, he understood what they had been through.

He begged a three-month extension, which Colonel Justinian granted easily, but eventually he did have to leave. He let the matron who ran the orphanage know that he'd be willing to come back and help out, as a volunteer, on any of his holidays.

When Khael returned to Headquarters, he discovered that the investigation to find the monsters that had invaded his home was finally beginning to find information. Khael immediately requested to be put on the investigation team, but was told that he was too close to it. "My little brother--"

The woman in charge of the team put up her hand. "I don't want to hear it. If I don't know, I can make a mistake later, if you get my meaning."

Khael did, and knew how to play this game. "Of course," he said. "You may not have heard, but I'm really good with kids. I spent my last holiday volunteering at an orphanage, so I have a good feel for how to work with them." He couldn't help wondering if Colonel Justinian had had this in mind all along.

She smiled. "Understood. If we need someone good with children, I'll keep you in mind."

The investigation proceeded for the next year. The invaders were travelling throughout time, mostly in the future which caused more problems for the Agency than the past; however, the investigators were some of the Agency's best and they were persistent. Khael kept abreast of the investigation. No one questioned his interest; few people knew about Gray, but most knew that he was from the Boeshane Peninsula, which was one of the hardest hit communities.

Khael and Mitri had just finished an assignment. They were given a short holiday; Mitri went home, but Khael stayed at Headquarters taking it easy. He woke up the day before the end of his

holiday and went to message Iza, one of the women on the invaders' investigation, when he noticed the date. His first reaction was that something had gone wrong with his padd; the date was two years later than it had been yesterday. Caution, however, stopped him before he called to get his padd repaired.

He walked down to the main caf, thinking he'd get breakfast, news and some gossip, and confirmation of his worst suspicion. People were giving him wary looks and no one was meeting his eye. Changing course, he went to an information terminal and checked the day's information; the date matched the one on his padd. Although he could think of several reasons he had a two year gap in his memory, only one matched the way people were looking at him. Taking a deep breath, Khael went to get confirmation of his fears.

It turned out to be more difficult than he'd expected. Colonel Justinian, who had been his commanding officer for the last several years, had been transferred. Khael made a note to find him and had to ask who his CO was.

He hadn't met Colonel Katey before, not that he remembered. She was a tall woman, older than most Agents, with grey hair pulled back into a bun, tall and slender. "Horton," she said when he walked into her office. "You didn't check your messages?" She made it sound like the worst of sins.

"No, ma'am," he said, standing at strict attention. "At first, I thought my padd was malfunctioning. Once I realized the problem, I thought to get full information as quickly as possible. Can you tell me why I've lost two years worth of memory?"

Her lips pursed, but she gestured to the visitor's chair. "At ease, and please sit down." She waited until Khael had before continuing. "As you know, the Time Agency holds its agents, all of them, to the strictest of ethical standards. You violated a number of them. Due to extenuating circumstances, and several other agents' speaking up for you, it was decided to remove the memory of the violations and the circumstances leading up to them in the hope that they would not be repeated." Her expression was sour, but her voice was level and matter-of-fact.

The information was even more confusing. Ethics violations would have had him removed from the Agency, if he weren't charged with even more serious crimes. The type of crimes, to be honest, that he committed as a member of Black Squadron wouldn't be described as "ethical violations"; the words used would have been much stronger. And, if either had happened, there would be hearings and records. Khael was willing to bet that there weren't any. "May I ask what these violations were?" he asked, keeping his voice level. "Certainly if my fellow agents think highly enough of me to give me an unprecedented second chance, I should know where my weaknesses lie."

The colonel stared at him unblinkingly for several moments. Finally, she said, "It was decided that knowledge of what had occurred would insure that it would happen again. You are a valuable agent; the Time Agency is willing to help you through this . . . difficult time in order to retain your value." She looked down at her desk for a moment. "Two years of memories were taken. That is the beginning and end of the discussion. You may have up to a month of leave and, of course, may avail yourself of an Agency counsellor to discuss your concerns. However, the violations

themselves will not be discussed." She stood and looked down at Khael. "That will be all. You will be advised of your next assignment."

And that was all that Khael could find out. No one else would say anything, except to tell him to speak with his CO or a counsellor. Khael did go to one of the counsellor's; he wouldn't discuss the violations, either. He was aware that Khael was Black Squadron, but wouldn't tell Khael if that had anything to do with what had happened. He was also, unfortunately, impervious to Khael's charms, citing chapter and verse of the ethical code.

Finally, Khael went looking for Mitri. He had gone home to visit his family on Earth. Khael messaged him and waited. "They did what?"

"Two years of memories, Mitri," Khael said, for what felt like the millionth time. "No one will tell me why, what I did wrong, nothing. Are you going to shut me off as well?" Khael's throat closed at the possibility. With the Agency shutting him out, Mitri was the closest thing he had to family left. "Please, I have to know."

Mitri looked uneasy. Then he gave Khael a code and ended the conversation.

That didn't bother Khael; the line hadn't been secure. He hadn't worried about it; he'd made no secret of what he was doing. However, if Mitri was insisting on secure communications, he was likely to help.

Which he didn't. "I'd tell you if I knew," Mitri said. "I just don't. When I came back from holiday, you told me you'd been given a new assignment, hush-hush, can't tell you, that kind of thing. You were surprised I wasn't assigned with you, but that was all you ever said."

"And you don't know anything?" Khael said, frustrated. He was also surprised; Mitri had the best sources of anyone else he knew; Khael had expected him to know even if he wasn't supposed to.

Mitri didn't say anything for a minute, but then he closed his eyes briefly and looked Khael straight in the eye. "You let a couple of little things slip. I can't be sure, but I think you got yourself on the invader investigation."

Sighing, Khael acknowledged that that would make sense. "What have you heard about it?"

"That's the thing that doesn't make any sense," Mitri said, sounding nearly as frustrated as Khael felt. "They closed it four months ago. Scorched earth, no one left alive. And, no, in the end they said the missing people were just killed and never found. No one will talk about it even now, but you took leave about four months ago. Then you came back and insisted on working alone. You haven't been talking much, but that didn't surprise me under the circumstances." He shrugged. "That's all I know."

"Do you think it's Gray?" It was the only thing that made sense to Khael.

Mitri shrugged. "Can't think of what else it would be, but then why all the secrecy? With your record, even if they took the memories, no one'd do more than shrug their shoulders. It's not like you've hidden it or anything."

After a month of no answers, Krael had finally had enough. He requested an appointment with Colonel Katey. "Ready to go back to work, then?" she asked when he arrived. "Good, here's--"

"No," Krael said, cutting her off. "Is there any way to get my questions answered?"

Her lips were thin as she bit out, "No."

"Then I quit," Krael said, placing his Agency-issued hand weapon on her desk, turning and leaving. He'd already packed his things and had transport arranged. Within an hour, he was off the planet and using all of his Agency-trained skills to disappear. By the end of the day, Mitri had been given an assignment that required all communications to go through Headquarters.

## 6. Conman



Khael had always been something of an odd duck in the Black Squadron. He was very good at what he did, but it rarely leached over into his personal life. In order to hide, he used Mitri as a guide and took on a persona of a hard-drinking troublemaker, always ready for a fight, no diplomacy, only interested in indulging his pleasures. He found the lifestyle wasn't so bad--the drinking helped him forget on the bad nights when the loneliness got to be too much, the fighting helped release all of the pent-up anger, and, well, he'd always been up for sex with anyone. Now, he found himself expanding his repertoire into the non-human and wondered why he'd waited so long. Tentacles were really something else.

However, he wasn't as aimless as he was pretending to be. He needed a way to get his memories back, or at least to find out why they'd been taken. That meant he needed to find something the Agency wanted more than it wanted to keep that secret. That wasn't easy to find.

Khael finally got the clue he needed. He'd been on the periphery of a bar fight that had left one of the planet's leading lights dead. He hadn't been involved even indirectly in the death, he'd been dodging and avoiding the flying bottles, but he was one of the few who were caught. He was sentenced to death, and had pretty much given up when he noticed one of the executioners, a man named Grigor, giving him the eye. His best come-hither smile, a muttered conversation, and a corpse was executed instead of him.

Grigor had a wife, Tatie, who enjoyed variety. They insisted that Khael spend several days with them, in order to avoid being caught again. It wasn't a hardship; they were a lovely couple and as much fun to talk with as to have sex with.

It was as Khael was leaving that Tatie said, "Do you want to get at the Agency?"

Khael turned and looked at her. "I'd prefer not to go to another execution, especially mine. Why?"

She bit her lip. "You'd have to be careful, but they're really careful about their image. You start playing fast and loose as a Time Agent, and they'd . . . Well, I'm not sure what they'd do, but it'd get their attention."

Khael thought about it. It wasn't a great idea, but it was better than any others he had.

The first thing he needed was a ship, one with time-travel capabilities. That led him to the Chula shipyards, for the best ships available. Here he ran into his first problem: he fell in love. These were ships crafted perfectly for what they were intended to do, a dream to pilot, difficult to damage and easy to repair when necessary, beautiful to look at and a surprising list of amenities available. They were completely out of his budget, but it was so tempting to just hire himself out as a pilot and stop fighting.

As he was making the rounds of the different sellers, trying to determine who would be willing to accept non-monetary compensation, or a percentage of earnings, a woman started shopping. She

had the money to buy half the ships available, but knew nothing about them. She simply wanted a ship to take her where she wanted to go, but it had to be expensive.

Khael waited until she'd purchased her ship from Roalf the Honest. It was a lovely little ship, with everything he needed and the sweetest AI Khael'd ever dealt with. To his relief, she walked into the nearby bar to celebrate her purchase and show off. He gave her time to fend off several would-be partners and then walked over to her. "Gorgeous ship you've just bought," he said as he slid into the seat next to her. "Lot of power; wish I had one just like it."

She smiled. "I love a . . . ship with power," she said as she finished her drink. Khael gestured for the bartender to give her another. "Are you here to buy?" she asked.

"Nah," Khael said with a shake of his head. "Just love to see a good ship, and he's got some beauties. Early retirement, you know; have to have something to fill the day." He stuck out his hand. "Matt Howard," he said, introducing himself with the name he was currently using.

Her smile was lazy and appraising. "Dara," she said. "You're a bit young to be retired." There was a hint of a question.

Khael shrugged. "Over ten years with the Time Agency is enough, I think. Not a big spender, so I've put plenty by."

"Time Agent?" Dara asked, looking impressed. The Time Agency had an impressive reputation in the human sectors. "Perhaps you can tell me if I've wasted my money." Her expression said checking the ship out was far down on Dara's list of priorities.

After a very enjoyable afternoon, Dara offered Khael a little trip "to help eliminate all that boredom you must feeling."

Khael agreed and travelled with her until they were out of the Chula system and Dara was trusting him to do most of the piloting. Dara had him land on a planet known for its fashions when Khael struck. "Hey, love," he said, "do you mind if I really try her out? I know you don't enjoy fancy flying, but this is an incredible ship. It's just irresistible."

"What about me?" Dara asked with a purr.

"I waited until you were going shopping, dear," Khael said with his best smile.

With an eye roll, Dara said, "Oh, all right. But don't be long; I'll be needing your help in a bit."

"I'll be back in five minutes," Khael promised. He flew a couple of showy manoeuvres--which were an absolute delight--and jumped back in time two weeks. Once there, he packed up all of Dara's belongings and stashed them in a time-locked container with a letter to be sent to her ten minutes after he'd left. Then, he dropped back in on Grigor and Tatie and let them know how to keep in touch. He also asked them to contact Mitri. "The Agency has him on a sensitive assignment," he told them. "I think it's so they can monitor his communications. Still, a message from you won't trigger anything. Even if they do come to ask you questions, you can just tell them the truth."

"It's a dangerous game you're playing," Tatie told him. "If they catch you, it'll be more than two years of memories."

Khael shrugged. "I've been playing dangerous games my whole life. This is just more of the same."

His plan was simple: get into trouble as a Time Agent and let them come after him. He couldn't come up with any way of getting into trouble without them killing or imprisoning him or, worse, taking even more memories. It was Mitri, in a message relayed through Grigor and Tatie, that had the answer.

*Run some cons, on the younger or stupider Agents while you're looking for leverage. Self-cleaners. Word that you're out there and causing trouble will get back to them but, since you're not looking for anything more than to be noticed, there won't be a pattern for them to follow. Eventually, they'll have to send someone with some brains or pull or both and then you can bargain. I wouldn't be surprised if, if you cause enough trouble, they don't have me bring you in.*

*Of course, that's assuming that this plan of yours isn't the stupidest thing ever. My father's trying to find out what happened. Come stay with us. They won't dare try to take you from the compound, and we can find out what's going on. And my sister's decided to join the Church, so you don't have to worry about marrying her any more.*

*Be careful, would you? I can't look after you now that you've left the Agency. Say the word, and I'll join you.*

The sentiment was nice, but Khael wasn't putting anyone else in danger because of him. Gray's hand had slipped out of his; no one else's ever would.

As both Mitri and Tatie had pointed out, what he was doing was dangerous as hell, but Khael had never worried about danger. It was kind of fun, finding the right kind of space junk, a time where he knew the junk was about to be destroyed and one of the younger or stupider Time Agents and bring them all together. The best kind of puzzle. The money didn't really mean much; Khael had never spent much of his salary and had been smart enough to keep it in secret accounts far away from the Agency. It was a great way of keeping score, though.

It was the first time in his life that Khael had no schedule to meet. It was so easy to just drift for days at a time, travelling around and seeing the sights. He'd done some of that as a Time Agent, but now he had no deadlines to meet, no meetings to make. Although a little of it was nice, Khael knew that, as soon as he had his memories back, he was finding something a little more regulated to do with himself.

Other than avoiding the Ukanan systems in any time period, Khael had all of time and space to explore and he loved it. The planet of Shangri-La anytime in the fourth millennium was one giant party, as was the Labyrinth of the forty-seventh century. Pompeii was a wonderful vacation spot, before August 79 at least. Any time and place on Earth was pretty terrific, actually, as long as there wasn't some kind of natural disaster looming. Or the Spanish Inquisition, as Khael decided after getting out of one of their jails before they could start torturing him. They just had no sense of humour about the gods of the cat people.

Khael decided to visit World War II on Earth; he'd heard so much about it. His accent in English was generally American, so he'd need an American identity, but the London Blitz was one of the archetypal events. Fortunately, a little research showed that there were some American officers serving in the British forces.

He found one of them, a Jack Harkness who was a Group Captain in the Royal Air Force, who was going to die on a training flight in January 1941. Perfect. Khael changed the records so that Harkness's body was never found, and changed his status to Missing in Action. Then, he set himself up as Captain Jack Harkness and inserted himself into a group stationed in London and settled in.

After about a week, he was alerted to a temporal disturbance near his latest piece of junk, an empty, burned-out Chula ambulance. He set off the programmed flight plan and triggered the mauve alert. Then he sat back to wait.

He wasn't surprised when he heard the air-raid sirens, but he ignored them. He knew where the bombs were landing for the next month; none were landing here. He was scanning the skies with a set of binoculars when he saw something hanging from a barrage balloon. An officer was trying to clear the room, and then Khael heard Algy, one of the soldiers, approach him.

"Jack? Are you going down to the shelter?" Algy asked. "Only, I've got to go off on some silly guard duty." Then he spotted the barrage balloon. "Ah! Barrage balloon, eh? Must've come loose. Happens now and then. Don't you RAF boys use them for target practice?"

Khael wasn't really paying attention to Algy, a sweet bloke, but you had to be careful about such things in this culture. Right now, he was paying more attention to the blonde hanging from the balloon. Wearing a Union Jack T-shirt. During the London Blitz. Young and stupid, but probably very well-connected to be able to get away with such non-contemporaneous clothing. He zoomed in on her arse. Still, there were compensations. "Excellent bottom."

## Author's Notes

### The Story

Jack Harkness is a fascinating character and a study in contradictions. In writing him, I've made some guesses as to how he's turned out the way he has; this is part of that story. Two of the incidents in this story are alluded to in other stories of mine. The incident with the Sivans is related in "Soldier Boy" and Lydia is introduced in "The Sacred Band of Cardiff".

I made a conscious decision when planning this story to keep it rated PG-13 or, at most, a soft R. One of my biggest fans is my 15-year-old son; I hated the thought of having to tell him, "Yes, I wrote a 28,000 word story about your beloved Captain Jack, but you can't read it because your mother is writing sex scenes." So, the sex is happening "off-screen". And, to be honest, I don't like writing explicit scenes.

This is listed as Volume 1 of *The Biography of an Immortal*. Because we all know that this is just the beginning of the story.

### Names

Jack himself tells us, in *Captain Jack Harkness*, that Jack Harkness isn't his real name. In writing Jack, especially out of the time we know him in Doctor Who and Torchwood, what to call him becomes an issue. When it came time to "name" him, I had several factors in mind. First, I wanted to keep his initials CJH, since Captain isn't his first name and, so, shouldn't be included in a monogram. Since then, I've changed my opinion; I think Jack does think of "Captain" as his first name, but the sentiment remained the same.

Second, just as languages and cultures change over three thousand years, so do names. However, the two names we're given for Jack's family, and later River Song, indicates that the names haven't strayed too far. Still, I didn't want to give him a name that is common today, but one that is clearly descended from a name in popular use.

Khael is pronounced with a Hebrew ch, a long i, and the syllable el. In Jewish and Christian tradition, Michael is the general of the angels, which made it an appropriate name for a soldier. And its meaning is: "Who is like God", which points to what Bad Wolf does to him. It is my understanding that in Hebrew it is pronounced Mi-cha-el. Just as language and culture change over time, so do alphabets. None of the alphabets used three thousand years ago are still used today; his name is a transliteration.

Jaxom is completely made-up. At one point, I had a person's middle name used as the name a person is called by his family, which means that "Jack" would be familiar; however, that's since changed. The Jaxom, though, stayed.

Horton came about because I needed a last name beginning with "H". I was discussing it with my husband and he said Horton. Then we realized that it had to stay that, because Horton Hears a Who.

For people who are interested in names, Jamin is from Benjamin, Mitri is from Dmitri, Keres is Ceres, Khestre is Chester.