

Daugment

by August Niehaus

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For Carrie, who showed me science fiction wasn't just for the boys.

And for Nova, Nebula, and Quasar.

Chapter 1

Engineering a world to be what I wanted—I thought that would make me feel the way I wanted, too, you know? As a nine-year-old who'd just purchased my own planet, I thought: Oh, look at me, I'm a god—only I'm doing it right.

Like I had any right to say what I was doing was right.

But that's a long story.

~ General Pitney Scolan, live interview, WinStar Solar System News, December 14th, 2609, 71:00 local time.

Forty-two years earlier:

Pitney buttoned his shirt all the way to the top, because it was *that* sort of morning. He could already hear the pre-dawn hee-haws of the snowbirds, which local scientists insisted were beautiful, complex love-songs. The force of his disagreement with that conclusion made him cinch his tie too tightly against his Adam's apple.

Pitney choked and swore, but finally clawed the tie loose, taking with it the top button. Its lazy arc took it under the bed, out of reach.

Snowbirds never had to get gussied up and attend social events.

Granted, they didn't earn medals for saving their species, either. Pitney Scolan was no snowbird.

No more distractions.

Focus.

One more ceremony. One more day. Then he could take his well-earned retirement bonus from the Human Authority Government (a good three years' spending money, at least), and finally, *finally*, set foot on his personal planet, Prowess.

First he'd call the one thousand, four hundred and ninety-one sentient laborers putting the last touches on the self-sustaining terraforming systems and let them know: all contracts were terminated. Prowess would take care of herself, and he could live there alone, forever free of judgment and stupidity.

First, though... First he had to go and collect his medal.

Damn the Human Authority Government. Damn them and their need for ceremony, for pomp and ritual. It made today stretch longer than the last six decades combined.

Pitney marveled at that. Sixty years'-worth of plans, executions—not enough of those, perhaps—more plans, revisions, revisions, more revisions... and waiting. Somehow, he'd survived sixty years of sleepless nights, hoping against hope and against the asteroids, aliens, programming errors, and dirty freeloaders who could harm his precious Prowess.

All while maintaining a spotless, medal-strewn record as one of the HAG's top military minds, whose career culminated in the heroic defense of a struggling colony against a pack of ruthless, cold-blooded, and heretofore unheard-of aliens dubbed "the Trembling."

No big deal.

He laughed into the silence of his room at that, too maniacally for his own taste. *Scolan... Get ahold of yourself.*

One more twitch of the tie. Pinching the top corners of his shirt together, he hesitated. He couldn't count on his modest chest hair to turn heads anymore, not when it was that shade of springy grey. But what the hell.

He chose a pair of his favorite indoor slippers. *Small rebellions*, he thought. Slippers wouldn't show up in any of the press's reprographs of the ceremony, but they'd make anyone in the room who gave a shit about decorum a wee bit uncomfortable. Perfect.

Last, he pulled on his well-worn grey field cap.

Pitney Scolan, HAG general, looked back at him in the mirror.

It activated the soldier part of his brain, and he drew in through his senses, locking into his physical body like he would before combat. He sorted through the sensory details of this room, which was just another temporary home on a military base, despite its opulence. *There* it was: the strange undertone of someone else's selection in cleaning products. His skin prickled with Makops's ever-winter cold.

Coming out of the meditation with a shiver, he reached for the nightstand, where hot tea awaited him.

Or rather, where it should have been awaiting him. No hot mug, no cold mug, no mug at all met his hand.

Pitney frowned. It seemed none of the usual staff had been through this morning. On a normal day, he would have noted a crucial detail out of place. A whistling wind blew through Pitney's mind, bringing with it a chill he interpreted as anticipation.

Then the double closet doors flew open and out spilled the sound of canine nails on ancient, extravagant wooden floors.

Something quite large darted out of his closet towards him, and through force of instinct, Pitney kicked out with his slippers. He landed a blow with one foot, and with a sharp *whoomph* the air left his unwanted visitor's lungs, but he came down hard on his other ankle, grimacing as it bent the wrong way.

Pitney pressed his hand to his heart. "Gods," he panted. Almost seven decades under his belt. He wasn't a young man anymore. That kind of scare could decommission him faster than he wanted.

He turned the full force of his fear-wrought anger on his unwanted visitor. "HORUS!"

The daugment's head jerked up, though his bionic eye glittered with contempt. He was a lumpy beagle-basset hound mix the size of a six-year-old child, and a sloppy attempt at enhanced intelligence had left him with the smarts to match.

"I hope you aren't injured," Pitney said, feeling a small but genuine twinge of remorse. "All reflex, you understand."

The four metal segments on the end of Horus's tail scritch the floor as he sized Pitney up with his real eye. Twitching towards the spot on his side where Pitney's slipper had connected, he sucked in his breath. "Damn, Pit, wouldn't've thought you the kind of undog what sinks his own claws in the kill." The words buzzed out of vocalization modules installed in the daugment's cheeks, so his speech was audible even when he kept his muzzle closed. "Tristan's going to howl when he hears you kicked me. He's going to *howl*."

Bonus—this bionically-enhanced little shitstain of a lap pet belonged to Pit's personal and professional rival: General Biaron Tristan, also a HAG man. A beautiful asshole who'd had it in for Pitney since the day they'd first crossed paths.

All of Pitney's loathing for Tristan manifested in the ass-faced daugment leering at him in his own room. "Get out," Pitney growled, "or I'll do more than kick you."

“Threats!” Horus’s brows shot up. “Comical. Don’t wear so well on undogs what look at *least* fourteen in dog years.”

“OUT,” Pitney roared in his loudest field commander voice. Smirking, Horus heaved himself to his feet, his long ears dragging on the ground. Without permission, Pitney’s brain ran the calculation on Horus’s sleight: “I do not look NINETY-EIGHT!”

The daugment slunk to the door, which giggled as it slid open, the sound like a claw down Pitney’s spine. He loathed that technology with near the intensity he did the snowbirds or Horus, having encountered the inventor twice. The warning system, which was supposed to make building-goers feel like the doors were their friends, served as a grating reminder of the way the creepy kid had tittered every time he said “calculations.”

Pitney found that he was growling.

On the other side of the door, in solemn contrast to the giggling, stood Pitney’s lieutenant Jason McAver.

Horus darted between the man’s legs and limped out of sight. After today, Pitney would never hear that particular horrid click-clack of nails again.

The lieutenant hadn’t moved or said a word, his cheeks hollow and his brown eyes worried under his broad, creased forehead. Those trenches were probably plowed by the trials of family at home, some obligation of flesh or choice. How unfortunate.

Even among the slim pantheon of human beings Pitney considered in his good graces, Jason McAver stood out: immediate, trustworthy, not given to romanticism or sentimentality. And loyal. At least, Pitney had put his life in the man’s hands many times and been rewarded by safety and service.

Now, hoping to distract his favorite officer from whatever seemed to be worrying him, Pitney vocalized his displeasure. “Did you hear that stupid mutt? I am a respected officer of the Human Authority Government, and I’m about to receive an award for saving my race, and *this* is how some animal is allowed to treat me? Gods. He is the *worst*.” Pitney ground his molars together, and Jace put a protective hand on the older man’s forearm.

“Sir, I—I’ll keep the daugment out of your hair. I wouldn’t worry myself too much over him.”

“Not for long, anyway.” His breathing and heart rate were normalizing, though still heightened. “I’ve got to go have a ceremony dedicated to me, you know.”

Jace’s eyes searched Pitney’s face and managed a genuine smile. “Aye. That I do, sir. Come on, I’ll walk you as far as I can.”

Pitney grunted and turned to get his coat. He didn’t usually mind Jace tagging along; as sidekicks went, he was a good kid, eager and a little bullish. But today—Pitney wanted to savor every moment of solitude, from this moment on. Soon all his moments would be solitary.

As soon as he and Jace stepped into the hall, Pitney was glad he’d thought to grab the heavier of his military-issue coats. Someone somewhere had forgotten to close a door against Makops’s violent cold, which whistled down the corridors seeking underdressed victims.

A pair of polished HAG guards, their faces obscured by solid black helmets, nodded to them as they passed. Pitney nodded back, aware of the silence that had followed him out of his room. It clung to the décor, a miasma of desolation. Like this blasted planet.

He certainly wouldn’t miss this hell of an outpost: no measure of eye candy, as even the attractive ones bundled up against the bitter cold; storm winds funneled between buildings, so that every walk to a meeting was equivalent to an upstream swim; views of empty, wintry

wastelands out every sad porthole of a window. Sure, out here he was safe from the invaders—on a planet so unknown they had to create their own delivery service to get supplies.

One of those delivery service pilots, dressed head to toe in a bright blue jumpsuit, tipped her fur hand-pouch as she passed them in the entrance to the grand hall. She kept her eyes downcast, though they darted up to the pips on his coat. Pitney steered wide to avoid any apology she might offer for eye contact or for getting too close.

He turned his head slightly, taking advantage of his extra wide peripheral vision to watch the woman stop suddenly and then sprint through a service door. He realized the guards, too, had vanished.

Beside him, Jace slowed to a stop.

“I should probably let you go on alone,” he said stiffly, standing at ease with his hands behind his back. “This is your moment, sir.”

Pitney chuckled, mostly to fill the space that sound had vacated. “You make it sound like someone’s died, McAver,” he said, amused at first but then nervous, when Jace didn’t move to laugh or counter that idea.

Five minutes ago, he wished Jace would leave. Now he was watching the younger man edge away, and dread churned in his guts.

“Good luck, sir,” Jace said, then snapped a perfect salute, whirled on his heel, and stepped smartly through the nearest door. It clanged shut behind him, an eerie echo in the now-deserted hall.

Though Pitney Scolan stood alone in the largest chamber in the Makopsian base, he felt like a thousand pairs of eyes were glued to his feet as he dragged them forward. He wished he’d thought to drink a glass of water; his throat was dry and raspy, and his stomach flip-flopped. Receiving this medal suddenly seemed more daunting than the aliens he’d defeated to earn it.

He turned around a pillar to face a hall that narrowed but lost none of its height, ending in a pair of gilded doors. For a military outfit, Makops had very little that was standard issue. It had been assembled from pieces ripped off ancient relics on colony planets.

Torches fluttered in their sconces, and Pitney narrowed one eye at this cliché throwback to a time when a castle was more than a status symbol. Modern technologies came together to mimic something natural with such precision that *they might as well have lit some damn torches*.

In keeping with the illusion of age, the floors remained wood and bare. The cold moved up through Pitney’s slippers. But—this sense of grandeur and ceremony was impressive, and Pitney appreciated that the hall was all alight for his benefit.

He cracked his knuckles. Rolled his shoulders and touched the cold pips there. Brushed the medals over his heart. Pressed his hand to his side where a stitch had formed. The air burned in his lungs.

“This is it, Scolan. Your fairy-tale ending,” he said in a whisper, because today required narration. Today was the triumphant pre-credits scene, the final act’s final act.

This was the culmination of his sacrifices. And he would face it with an army-straight face.

He stepped through the doors, heel-toe, heel-toe, heel-toe.

He crossed the distance between him and the four well-decorated generals of the Human Authority Government, his peers, the only four people in the world who could look him in the eyes and know exactly what it meant to stand under the pressure of his job. They were looking at him with something like—awe? anguish? devotion, perhaps—as he joined them for what would be the last time as a HAG officer in uniform.

He came so close to the man at the front of the group, the handsome fifty-something General Biaron Tristan, that he could smell pungent lunch-soaked breath and a faint trace of dog.

“Sir,” Pitney said, jerking his hand to his forehead. *Last salute for you, Tristan. Give me my medal and let me be on my way, you miserable piece of—*

“Pitney Scolan,” General Tristan said, his tongue very red in his dark mouth, “you are under arrest.”

“Excuse me,” Pitney said. He rocked backwards with the absurd force of that statement.

Under arrest!

“The charges brought against you by this tribunal of generals, ranked as you are or higher, are as follows.” Tristan spoke as much with his thick black eyebrows as with his toothy maw. He began to pace up and down in front of Pitney, walking the edge of the slight dais on which the generals stood. “Deception of a fellow officer, three counts. Inciting anti-government sentiment, twenty-four counts. Embezzling government funds, two counts. Aiding and abetting the enemy, four counts. And abuse of government property, one count.”

Tristan fell silent, as if waiting for Pitney to remember his lines.

Pitney’s tongue knotted up, tangled around the accusations. His limbs were numb. Now he was sure he knew the emotion on the other generals’ faces: disgust.

“Government property?” he managed after what felt like hours of the panel’s stony silence.

“You... kicked... my... dog,” Tristan said through his teeth, dropping each word like a delicate bomb.

A hysterical laugh wrenched out of Pitney. “Yes,” he said, “I’ll plead guilty to that one.”

Chapter 2

In the 2350s, suddenly Man's Best Friend wasn't good enough. He needed to be Man's Best Encyclopedia, Man's Best Camera, Man's Best Security System. To justify their existence, we took some of our pets to corporations who offered to make them cybernetic beings—upgrading their brains with artificial intelligence, enhancing their bodies with tools useful to the average homeowner.

The first wave of these sentient pets set off a string of lawsuits that set precedents for cloning, artificial enhancement, and the rights of cybernetic non-humans. The moral implications of brainwave-to-speech accuracy were hotly debated for nearly a decade.

Our canine companions' pack structure became a part of the socio-cultural conversation, their alpha-beta relationships becoming models for our own.

The daugments themselves just seemed to love the extra attention.

~ "Daugmented: The Tail of Companionship Evolved," by Cochi Soliz, cybernetic studies professor at Central Pluto University

It took three stone-faced guards to drag Pitney down a long, dank hallway.

"Forty-seven years!" Pitney kept howling at the top of his lungs, until he was hoarse. "Forty-seven gods-damn years for *this!*"

Strong as Pitney was, his undignified thrashing and slippered kicks were no match for the grim-faced trio and their iron fingers. One released her vice-grip on Pitney's arm to hold a narrow metal door. The other two exchanged a look, then heaved Pitney in a silent, brutal coordination.

By the time Pitney slid down the wall and untangled his limbs from both themselves and the single holey sheet, the guards were gone. The cell door clanged hollowly behind them, leaving him in near-blackness.

Well. At least they'd let him keep his cap.

Pitney began to laugh helplessly. After a few seconds he swallowed the sound, hard. No. This wasn't funny anymore. Maybe it had been, for a split second, with that look on Tristan's face as he read the charge about *Horus*, of all things...

But now he was a political prisoner on a backwater planet, at the mercy of his greatest professional rival.

Brilliant. Into the stale air, Pitney spat, "Yes, join the HAG, give 'em five decades of your life, get death in a shithole for free."

He ground his teeth. *Tristan*. He refused to speak the name aloud, just in case it'd summon the piece of shit as though he were actually a demon—a likely prospect, in Pitney's current estimation. Somehow, *Tristan* had gotten it into his head that he could stand in the way of what an entire organization, nay, an entire *race* owed Pitney Scolan by throwing him into a jail cell on a backwater world where no one would think to look if he just...disappeared.

Fuck the man. And forget him, too, at least for now.

Pitney had been a field agent, had done his time in the trenches, jail cells, truckbeds, ship holds, and menacing forests. He wasn't about to curl up on the cot and take a *nap*.

He was going to get the hell out.

Pitney began to feel for the boundaries of his immediate world, quickly reaching walls on all sides. Even the ceiling was low, for no obvious architectural reason. Probably just to mess with prisoners' heads while they awaited their fate.

Well, he thought, smiling toothily at nothing, *I've never been good at letting people mess with my head, have I?*

With that thought to fortify him, he turned his attention to the metal door. It opened into the room, so he couldn't get to any hinges to pry them free of the wall. He felt carefully around the edge of the door, but it was well-sealed, probably more to ward off a killing chill than for security. Nonetheless, discouraging.

Pitney stood on tiptoe and pressed his thumbs against the subtle line where the door and the frame met, and then he slowly felt down the door. He was almost to the bottom when his fingers encountered something that made them tremble with excitement.

The food slot wasn't as large as it would have been in a jail cell constructed in the pre-fabfood era, but it still had to be wide enough for the tray. The welding was high-quality, and the little judas door was still made of two inches of magnetic steel. He put his fingers against the bottom edge. If he *could* get it open, Pitney guessed he could get at least a hand and most of his arm through, and then start feeling around for—

He applied a bit of pressure, and the slot flew open.

The sound of it jangled in the hall, and Pitney shot to his feet and held his breath, his heart beating wildly from the combined forces of hope and terror.

But there weren't any sounds of human activity. No footsteps or muttering.

It seemed all too convenient.

Pitney let his breath out in a whoosh. He patted his chest, wished something wordless to his heart, and knelt down to look through the narrow opening.

He could see a low, unnatural light, and the wall across from him at about knee-height. The cold leached all the life from his skin.

Time was running out, for all he knew. Escaping sooner rather than later, lying low in the snow somewhere, that was how Pitney got out of this alive and intact.

He steeled himself and started to move his hand through the opening.

Teeth gnashed, blue eyes flashed, and something horrible drooled on the somehow still intact hand he snatched from the food slot.

Shaking, Pitney peered from a safe distance at what little he could see of the creature that had menaced him. It had a long, weasel-like face, half of which was metal polished to gleaming, half of which was dried bluish skin stretched tightly over sharp little bones. One of its eyes was fogged over, but the other glowed LED-blue.

It made eye contact with Pitney, and he could have sworn it smiled.

So. The food slot *was* all too convenient.

He crawled back to the cot, wound the ragged sheet around his body, and lay down. Pain from being flung against the wall, from the ordeals of the day, coalesced in the back of his skull, thudding with his heartbeat. Even his tendons ached.

He tried not to think, because that hurt too, but he thought anyway, because that's what he'd been doing with most of his life.

At the heart of all of this was Tristan. There was no reason the HAG wouldn't be more open about arresting, even if it was just over a bug up some top chair-brass's ass. They'd make a big deal of military justice in action, slap him on the wrist in public, and whisk him off to Prowess

afterwards; that's how they handled their scandals. So it had to be Tristan, operating alone, or alone enough that nobody but the other generals knew.

But even Tristan wouldn't be stupid enough to level a slew of *entirely* unverifiable accusations against someone as beloved as Pitney. Not on the record, at what was supposed to be a medal ceremony captured on holo for the military archives.

Pitney played back Tristan's words, saying them softly to the unseen ceiling: "Deception of a fellow officer, three counts..."

Well, okay, telling his superior his dalliance with the Algoraban pilot was politics and not pleasure—that was pretty blatant. But all three counts would only stand if telling those lieutenants trying to tag-team a Tarnib scam that he was "interested in their product" was deemed "deception of a fellow officer" by a reasonable jury.

"Inciting anti-government sentiment, twenty-four counts..."

That one was harder. Pitney was an introvert's introvert, keeping all but necessary words to himself. He never wrote for mass consumption, kept his personal memos brief and factual, and always let someone else be the spokesperson for the HAG. And he was hardly one to stir up trouble, since the person sent to deal with trouble when trouble got bad was Pitney Scolan.

Then he remembered the sign.

Him and those two lackeys, his man Loper and some tag-along whose name he couldn't remember now, they'd seen the sign from the bar. It had said, in temptingly magnetic letters, HUMAN AUTHORITY GOVERNMENT. Plastered on a supply barn, he'd guessed in his drunken state, and they'd stumbled up the hill to rearrange the letters and leave the rest in a neat stack on the ground.

YOUR A HAG, the barn said afterwards, as they giggled on their merry way.

Grammar notwithstanding, it wasn't exactly a menacing or inciting message. But the rebels flying overhead—who, according to the official report, presumably would have just continued their scout run and zipped past the target that was *an obvious enemy supply depot*—took it as fightin' words, and bombed the shit out of the shed.

Pitney made a mental tally. *Shit*. The number of magnetic letters he'd vandalized made 24.

Well played, Tristan. Pitney blew out his breath and went back to the list.

"Aiding and abetting the enemy, four counts..."

Now these—these he didn't like to think about. Each one had been an accident, a black mark on his career. The first, fresh out of college, an innocent slip of the tongue against a lover's ear and not two hours later, someone's cover was blown. A quick call from Scolan Senior had chased that away. At least, young Pitney had assumed so.

The second and the third counts had happened together, when his empathy got the better of him. On the field of battle, the cries of two wounded women brought him to their sides. Though they wore enemy colors, he left them with blankets and water. Days later, recovered by his kindness and under cover of night, they'd snuck into camp and slain several of his squadron before he took their lives himself.

The fourth—he shuddered to think Tristan knew about it. He instead faced the final charge.

"Abuse of—" He couldn't even bring himself to finish the sentence, devolving instead into a self-satisfied smirk as he remembered the sound of his slipper connecting with Horus's fat body. Pitney wasn't exactly one for animal cruelty, but—well, sometimes happy accidents happened.

Abuse of government property, indeed.

The smile slipped. Shaky and semantic as parts of it might be, Tristan had the makings of a case against him. Certainly enough to add up to detainment until it could all be cleared up one way or the other.

Or until he was quietly assassinated.

Pitney's stomach turned. He rolled over, mummified in the sheet, and stared at a wall he couldn't see. He always thought it would be the Uprisen who finally caught up to him, tossed him in the clink, and murdered him where he slept.

The Uprisen. What a distant threat those people were, a handful of anti-HAG stragglers still clawing out an existence on the sweltering surface of Earth. For a while, finding creative ways to suppress them had been the majority of his day job. A pathetic part of him wished for the simplicity, the ease of hating a faceless mass instead of a man he'd shared seat with at the highest table.

He and Tristan had fought side by side against the uprising. They'd sat in the War Room on Mars together, drank *tea* together in between relaying commands to the HAG troops deploying on Earth's surface. They'd even murmured together, late at night when strange thoughts seemed like good ideas, about a peaceful end to the rebellion, about finding a way to convince the Uprisen that the HAG's offer of order and safety and citizenship was the best and only way forward.

Pitney had thought that it was him and Tristan and the HAG against the worlds. Then he'd thought it was Tristan against him, but in the way of a younger rival, stubborn and stupid.

But it turned out it was Tristan and the worlds against Pitney Scolan, a lone old man looking forward to retirement, stuck in a cell feeling sorry for himself.

"Hell," he said, and tried to stop. He knew how poorly he wore self-pity, and it wasn't going to get him out of this place alive.

Unwinding the sheet, he tossed it against the bed and crept back to the door. By now his hands had stopped shaking from the shock, and instead he was quivering with anticipation and the effect of heightened senses. And the cold, which poured in through the food slot.

The bluish weasel thing was still right outside his door, snuffling and breathing bubbles. Pitney cast around on the floor for something small and hard, a pebble or a bit of stale food. His numb fingers came up empty.

Straightening with a groan, he went to the bed and ripped off a piece of the sheet. As best he could, he rolled it in on itself until it was a tight ball. Then he crept back to the food slot and got as close to it as he dared.

He made a *chuck-chuck* sound in the back of his throat. The creature responded with a noise of interest. After a moment so deadly quiet he could hear the blood in his ears, Pitney saw its cloudy eye slide into view.

He pulled back his arm, hand twitching as he perfected his aim. He drew in his breath to steady his arm. *Three, two, one, fire.*

The wound-up cloth shot through the opening and bounced off the wall on the other side. The creature shot after it, a blur of greasy flesh and metal.

Pitney was about to fling himself across the cell when he heard bootfalls, sharp ones. The creature snarled and howled but shot back to its post.

"Scolan!" barked a familiar voice. "Eat up. Doesn't come regularly and it doesn't come cheap down here."

A tray sized perfectly to fit through the food slot clattered through. It arced downward in slow motion, falling in time with Pitney's face.

The voice laughed a nasty laugh as the fabfood squares splatted on the floor and froze on contact.

“Jace,” Pitney croaked. The hope he hadn’t known he’d been nursing was punctured, doubling him over.

“Stow it. You’ll address me as Lieutenant McAver,” said the disembodied voice sharply, “and our past means nothing. I’m Tristan’s loyal man. Remember that.”

Pitney’s shot a hard look at the slat. He could see McAver’s boots, perfectly polished as always, but little else in the murky darkness. He sat down hard on the bed, his legs betraying him. Carefully, he put on Negotiator Voice, the affect he’d cultivated those long years in the field. “So. Easy come, easy go, eh, Macky?”

A little guilt, a little casual familiarity. A little verbal pressure. The bargaining chip of a dead man.

Pitney prayed his lieutenant was playing at newfound protégé to appease Tristan. It was a trick they’d run a few times behind enemy lines, designed to lull the other general into a false sense of security until...

What?

Pitney was praying into a cold, dead silence.

“Well. Now I know where you are,” McAver said at last, his tone colder than the air. “Enjoy your dinner, Scolan. Might be your last.”

Pitney’s throat tightened. He pushed away the feelings. With the emotions went all of his energy and all of his motivation to find a way out.

Bootfalls carried McAver away.

Pitney lay down, folding his hands like a corpse over his chest. He stared up at the ceiling he could barely see, his vision dancing with the static a human brain produces in place of stimuli, and he thought bitter thoughts to himself.

Either Tristan was better at politics and manipulation than Pitney had ever given him credit for, or the breadth of his enemies was much greater than he’d realized.

Either way, he was alone in the universe.

“Fuck,” he summarized.

Most days, Pitney Scolan loved to be alone. Craved it, sought it out, built an entire planet to perpetuate it.

This isolation was torture.

Chapter 3

Patient is showing the first signs of slowing down in the fifty years I've seen him, but remains as remarkably healthy as when we first met. He maintains that in addition to a strict diet, he goes for a daily run, and has for the last same five decades, though my professional opinion is that his knees are not battered enough for that.

~ Physician's remarks on Year 69 Medical Report (Form T-881) for General Pitney Scolan

Bits of voices in the hall, or a hall somewhere, drew Pitney out of a troubled daydream. Or maybe the voices were above? He twisted onto his side on the cot, stifling a groan when his bones creaked.

This was *not* where General Pitney Scolan, heir to the Scolan fortune and creator god of the technical wonder that was the planet Prowess, deserved to end his days. And he'd be damned if he hadn't trained his entire life just for a situation like this.

He'd just been off his guard yesterday.

Baring his teeth to himself in a savage snarl, Pitney ran through a quick set of stretches, loosening his body under stiff protest. In ninety seconds, he was on his feet, rolling his neck and shaking out his wrists, his heart rate up, his breathing calm.

He stretched his senses outward.

The voices in the hall drifted apart, one set of footsteps retreating. A sharp, purposeful step brought another person near. Pitney lowered himself into an attack stance and balled his hands into fists. Boots stopped outside his door, blocking most of the patch of light, and a key scraped into the lock.

Pitney tensed his stomach muscles.

The door flew open. McAver stood silhouetted in the dim light of the jail hall. He turned his head to bark something unintelligible at the creature, who was halfway through a leap at his boots.

As all of Pitney's anger flared into a red-hot spearpoint in his chest, he hurled himself at his treacherous lieutenant.

The breath left McAver's body. He crumpled against the wall, groaning. Momentarily surprised by the success of his attack, Pitney stumbled off-balance, leaning heavily against the same wall with the force of his momentum.

Then he was on all fours, pinned, covering his head as steel jaws clapped shut next to his ear. The metal side of the creature's face was dangerously close, dripping saliva on his sleeve.

Pitney executed a full-body twitch, and the creature went flying. He vaulted to his feet and made to run before a hand on his ankle brought him crashing to the floor.

"Down!" McAver said sharply, and Pitney whirled to glare and wrench free, which was when he realized the lieutenant wasn't talking to him.

The creature was sitting back like a dog, the picture of perfect horrific innocence, tongue lolling as it gazed obediently at the fallen McAver. The lieutenant struggled to sit up and gasped out, "Pit, it's me, Jace, I'm not a traitor, I'm getting you out, gods damn it. We've got precisely twenty-six seconds to get from here to the service elevator before someone walks by. Get up." Wince. "Get up!"

Pitney stared into Jace's eyes and saw what he needed to see. He got up.

Jace got up too, still wincing, but he reassembled both his dignity and his carefully cruel expression. “Stay,” he snapped at the creature, which cowed and whimpered, resting its chin on its forepaws.

“Now,” Jace said to Pitney, still speaking like a cruel guard, “walk just behind me, as fast as you can manage without running. Eyes forward. Look defiant but scared. Let’s go.”

All traces of his Pitney-inflicted injuries thoroughly hidden, Jace spun on his heel with military precision and strode double-time down the long row of cells. Pitney broke into a lope to keep up, staying behind Jace and just to his right. Without looking back, Jace dropped his pace so Pitney could slow to a quick walk.

There was no time for questions. Only escape.

As he followed his liberator, Pitney put his brain to work. When it registered where the holding cell must be in relationship to the rest of the Makopsian base, his blood ran cold.

Anywhere they were planning on going, they’d have to walk past Tristan’s people in some capacity. This was so impossible it was nigh unbelievable that anyone would risk their life for it, chain of command be damned.

Though—Jason McAver would give his life for Pitney’s, chain of command be damned. He’d proven that more than once, and in situations seemingly more dire than this.

But Pitney’s chance to squirm out of this situation had appeared so quickly, so conveniently—too conveniently. Maybe it was a trap, an ultimate humiliation. Maybe Tristan just wanted the last laugh, a chance to see Pitney’s face as he was betrayed one more time.

The thought was so convincing that he bunched up his muscles to spring on McAver and keep him from taking them any closer to the waiting trap. It was in this state of tense preparation that he ran smack into Jace’s rail-hard, stock-still body.

“Tsst, hide,” he hissed, pulling Pitney in front of him as a second pair of sharp-heeled guard boots clattered into the hallway. Pitney found himself nose-to-window with a service elevator he’d never noticed before.

He ducked his head, projecting contrition and submission and willing himself to be smaller, holding his breath as the newcomer drew closer.

“U5,” Jace murmured.

The elevator’s controls were within arm’s reach. Pitney fumbled for the right controls, reading the numbers and letters with his fingers until he found U and 5. He pressed them in sequence and tried to take a step backwards as the door flew open to reveal a precarious open-air car, but Jace crowded him forward and slammed a fist against the interior controls.

The door sailed shut, giggling, on the bewildered expression of the guard who had just reached the spot they’d been standing in seconds before. The square of light vanished and the elevator shuddered. Began to descend.

“Shit,” Jace said. “They’ll know real soon.”

Pit’s skin crawled and he clutched at the cold railing, keenly aware of how much empty space surrounded that thin metal bar. His eyes struggled to adjust, but there was no light to break the monotony of the roaring darkness.

As if reading Pitney’s mind, Jace moved close. “Service elevators. No reason to light them, so they save on energy.” A lighter rasped, and then a flame burst brightly to life between the two men. Jace looked haggard but determined. “Look, sir, I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you anything. Can’t tell you much of anything, really; there isn’t time.”

“Tell me how to get out of here,” Pitney said. “That’s what you can tell me. I’ll figure out the rest of it later.”

“I’m about to.” Jace hesitated, looking down. His face seemed even more skeletal. “You’re not going to like it.”

“Looks like the universe gives zero fucks about what I like or don’t like. Tell me.”

“You’re not going to like it,” Jace said again. The lighter went out. “You know daugments.”

“Yes.” Pitney hoped his derision would fill the roaring darkness. “I know daugments.”

“Sorry, of course you do—well. Daugments’ brains are plumbed for—” Jace fumbled with the lighter again so he could be sure he was looking at Pitney while he spoke. “For a secondary intelligence, usually artificial and made of nanobots that simulate the neuron-chemical soup we call the brain. To get that secondary intelligence in there and give it some control over the dog’s body and systems, there’s an injection. In the dog’s brain. The dog’s knocked out, of course.”

The elevator car rattled its concern around them. Pitney nodded reflexively to cover his horror, and Jace continued, his voice only wavering a little. “The docs inject its brain with this stuff that—honestly I don’t know the exact details, but in poor lay terms: the outcome is something like hyperthreading in a processor. The injection tricks the brain into thinking there’s a virtual duplicate of itself to store information. Drop in a bit of that nanobot brainsoup and, well, it makes itself right at home. Takes the artificial intelligence and binds to that virtual core, which—well, it’s physical too. A bit of the dog’s real brain has to come out to make room, but that’s—at that point, pulling out a little brain’s not...really that excessive.”

As Jace spoke, Pitney’s heart descended down to his stomach, as treacherously slow as their elevator ride. Jace’s meandering explanation did little to hide its eventual destination.

Pitney didn’t like where this logical trail was leading.

He didn’t like who he was at the end of it.

Jace took in Pitney’s twisting expression and let go of the lighter again. He blew on his fingers, or on the lighter. “Yeah,” he said into the dark, “it’s not awesome.”

Pitney grunted. He didn’t trust himself to speak.

“About six years ago, there was—a breakthrough. I guess. It’s still dubious at best, and mostly done by sketchy scientists for weird modder types.” Jace swallowed audibly, his words wobbling. “The breakthrough. Right. There was a woman who was critically injured—it was a miracle her brain wasn’t already gone when the medics arrived. They couldn’t get her permission, but they did it anyway. They tried a transfer. Instead of just the nanobot brainsoup, they mixed it with core samples from her real brain, basically...blended it up, jammed it in there. And it worked. It was just about a miracle, but it worked. The real problem is—” Jace sighed heavily. “The human body doesn’t survive. You can’t exactly take core samples from someone and discharge them a week later.”

Pitney sucked in his breath and resisted the urge to spit the saliva building in his mouth. He could taste his own fear. The words exploded from him. “Gods, McAver, what the *fuck* do you think I want to go through? You think I want to become a dog?”

Jace didn’t answer for a long moment, stretched longer by the darkness. Then the lighter flared up, dancing wildly on Jace’s cheekbones. He looked wild and harried and dead serious.

“To be blunt, sir, you have two options: become a dog, or die. Tristan’s got everything covered—every entrance, exit, service tunnel, you name it. But they’re looking for *you*. They’ve got eyeballs and tech scanning for *Pitney Scolan*. They aren’t looking for your consciousness, and I’d have a body to prove I was loyal. Sir, you’re the well-connected kind of individual who might very well have a chance to not only live through this, but live again, if you don’t choose to die. There have been successful transfers back to human bodies before.” He straightened and squared his jaw, sharply outlined by the flame’s weak light. “Frankly, sir, I understand that you

don't *want* to become a dog, but if you decide to die after everything I've done to keep you alive, I'm going to have wasted a very long career. Sir."

Pitney blinked, considered his lieutenant's words. "Well," he said. His skin felt clammy, distant, like he would shed it and slither away at any moment.

"Yeah," Jace said. He let the flame die.

"When you put it that way."

"Not much room for argument, sir. I apologize."

"Not your fault, Jace. Not your fault."

Still, the elevator crawled downward. The fate in the air grew thicker. Pitney fought back the urge to cry. *No crying matter, Scolan*. Still, he couldn't help wondering what would happen if he said yes to the transfer and never woke up again.

Jace's rush of words shattered the silence. "Sir... I... I just want you to know I've done everything I can. I know it all sounds harebrained, but I know a vet, a really fucking good one, with a degree in nanobiology." There was a sharp, almost possessive note of pride in his voice. "I rushed her to the base on the premise that—well." His tone softened to something almost tender. "That I needed her on Makops. And I got you a ride out of here, someone I trust. We'll rendezvous somewhere Tristan won't think to look, and take it from there."

Pitney clung to the one strand of Jace's outburst that resembled hope. "Perks aside, why don't I just forget the dog business and take the ride? Blaze my way out of here, and—"

"Sir." Jace made a soft sound of patience growing thin. "There are three people on this base loyal to you and there are three hundred sixty-eight loyal to General Tristan. I appreciate the vote of confidence, sir, but hundred-twenty-some to one odds are the stuff of holo-stories even you can't star in."

Pitney's fists clenched, but he said nothing. There was nothing to say. There was no arguing those odds.

"Unfortunately," Jace said, sounding like he would rather do anything than continue.

"Unfortunately? Is it not unfortunate enough already?"

"Unfortunately, the only way to get you past all Tristan's loyal people is to make you into something they would never suspect of being disloyal to him."

As the elevator creaked and moaned and the cold grew truly bitter, the full force of Jace's suggestion dawned on Pitney. "You don't. Mean."

Silence. Heart-sinking silence.

"Yeah," Jace said finally, "I do."

There was one thing on Makops so loyal to Tristan that no one would suspect it of the ultimate treachery. There was also one daught.

Pitney started to cackle, a sharp-edged laugh that built on itself as it ripped out of him. There was nothing else for it. It lasted and lasted and extended spidery feelers into the dark until Jace raised the lighter and cracked a tired grin.

The elevator came to a gentle stop, and Pitney's laughter cut off. The doors trembled open and a dim ambience made them both into fuzzy man-shaped blobs.

Jace pocketed the lighter. "So, sir—in or out?" He took a deep breath and raised one hand. "I *will* ask Thurza and Liev to go out shooting to protect you, if you're out. If it's too much. If you just want to try and make a run for it. But I know...I know you've given yourself chances to live again. I know about the clones. And I think...maybe...this is why you did that. Call it fate. Call it a rich man's life insurance. I call it a damn good coincidence for you."

Pitney closed his eyes. He tried to regain some of what he'd felt when he'd stood in front of the mirror—was it only days ago? It seemed like a year. Now he could barely make sense of the sensations of his own body as he contemplated whether to die or to become a lesser being.

If he chose to live, he would never truly live as Pitney Scolan again. Even if, by some miracle, he could retreat to Prowess and her experimental medical facilities. He would never be this man again.

Whatever he chose, he was choosing his death.

He closed his eyes. Tried to linger in every nerve, tried to encapsulate what exactly it meant to *be* Pitney Scolan.

It meant to creak. It meant to ache, and shake, and burn hot and cold where his feeling had started to go.

Maybe he wouldn't miss this old thing.

He grunted, resting his hand on the railing as close as he dared to Jace's. "Well. I suppose—I'm in. What's a general if he can't put himself on the front lines now and then."

Jace's face very carefully showed no expression. "Very well, sir. Please come with me."

Pitney briefly indulged in self-pity. "Please don't be formal with me, Jace. Can't stand that right now."

Jace's throat bobbed. "This isn't easy on me. Protocol helps me maintain my focus. Sir." He unwound his long arm to gesture his superior officer forward, and Pitney stepped first into the underground storage level.

As their weight left the elevator car, the doors slammed shut and whisked the car away into the darkness, much faster than it had come down.

"Emergency recall," Jace said grimly. "Walk fast. We've got no more than forty, probably thirty minutes."

Spurred by the adrenaline prickling in his blood, Pitney speed-walked around the indistinct shapes of long-forgotten items. His shoes crunched over ancient tarps and shuffled across dusty concrete. This close to Makops's core, the cold was oppressive, stifling. Pit could no longer feel his feet in the slippers.

The clip of Jace's boots echoed and echoed in the silence. Their shadows stretched out behind them, lengthening and darkening as they drew closer to the nebula of hazy light.

They went wordless for a while. Fears like demons crowded in Pitney's brain until he had to break the silence.

"So. I'm going to die. You gonna kill me yourself, Jace?"

Jace's whole body shuddered. "Gods. Sir. Please."

"Oh. Sorry. Just—gallows humor. Oooh, more poor taste? More poor taste. Sorry. I'm—bad at walking to my doom. Doom and gloom, gloom and—sorry, sorry, mouth running off. Do that from time to time, when I'm nervous."

"I know, sir," Jace said, tragically gentle.

"Oh." Pitney's heart sank. The demons scattered, replaced by a very clear image of Jace helping him up off the ground as explosions rumbled around them. "Right."

They were silent the rest of the way to the light source.

It coalesced into a single, harsh bulb in a small side room, so bright that Pitney had to shield his eyes with his forearm. As he squinted, two grey-clad figures took shape.

"Thurza. Liev." Jace's voice betrayed his relief, and he clasped each of their hands. Pitney caught the looks they all gave each other, the way they were drawn to one another's physical orbit.

“Jace. You’re alright.” Liev tipped his square chin at Pitney. “This him?”

“General Scolan, this is Thurza, Liev. Thurza is the nanobiologist.”

“And veterinarian,” Thurza said, shaking Pitney’s hand. Her piercing black eyes seemed to size him up and deem him worthy.

“And vet, yeah,” Jace said. “And Liev’s my—man. Keeps an eye on both of us.” His left hand drifted of its own accord towards Liev’s.

That sense of convenience once again struck Pitney: the nanobiologist-veterinarian who just happened to be Jace’s partner; the bizarre technological impossibility masquerading as an escape plan; the assassination attempt the day of his retirement. His head started to swim.

At the back of the room was a table draped with a thin sheet of paper. He stared at the polished metal surface with cold horror.

That’s where he’d lie down in a few moments and offer himself into the hands of three strangers. People who could drill holes in his brain and then proudly present him to Tristan for a reward. People who could decide it was much cleaner for General Pitney Scolan to never wake up, in any form.

That wasn’t fair to Jace.

But still.

Strangers.

Too late now.

“You all look out for each other, yes?” Pitney said, looking at each of them in turn, seeking anything that would distract him from the back of the room, from that table.

“Yes,” Thurza said immediately.

“Thurza,” Liev warned.

“It doesn’t matter now!” She pushed at him with the flat of her hand, then sobbed without tears. “Oh, Liev...I’m sorry. Apologies, sir,” she added to Pitney, low and urgently, “but I love them both and I don’t care.”

“Well, my dear,” Pitney said, leaning in, wishing his smile could dazzle like it used to, “I don’t care who you love. I’m at rest going under your knife, or knives. At rest as a walking corpse can be, ah-ha-ha—ha? Too much?” Even as he resented the stupid remark, he relished the hot rush of blood to his cheeks. It was a last moment of humanity. Awkward laughter and an idiot’s flush.

“No, that was funny, sir.” Thurza’s smile worsened the blush.

“No need to humor me.”

“I completely agree,” she said, the smile deepening in those black eyes.

“Sir,” Jace said, inserting himself between Pitney and Thurza, “we’ve got a very brief window before Tristan sets his best people on us. If you don’t mind—”

Pitney chuckled. It was a genuine laugh. “Rest assured, Jace, this woman’s heart is yours. And now my brain is hers.” He shuddered and extended both arms by his sides. “Well. Let’s get this over with.”

Jace awkwardly helped Pitney out of his jacket, then his shirt, and his pants, until finally he stood only in his underthings. Pitney climbed up onto the table with all the slowness of his sixty-nine years.

Laying his head back on a gauzy camp pillow that Thurza slipped into place at the last second, he stared up at yet another stained ceiling.

He realized he really had no idea how transfers worked, other than the horrible things they would have to do to extract his consciousness.

He realized he'd seen no evidence that they'd been able to sanitize their equipment, their hands.

He realized he hadn't seen them in possession of that revolting beast, Horus.

He shuddered as Liev put something warm and sweet over his face.

Then Pitney Scolan died.