

ONE

“What is your name?” The question was delivered calmly, almost gently, although it was not the first time it had been asked.

“Aitkin...Cassini.” The reply was a hoarse, raspy whisper. His voice was strained, the space between the words filled with gasping breaths.

“And what is your rank, Aitkin Cassini?” Again, he’d been asked this question repeatedly. Aitkin wasn’t sure how many times it was now, but it had been enough to expect some signs of impatience in the questioner. There were none however, just the same implacable, patient tone.

Aitkin drew another breath, feeling the fire in his throat and lungs as he sucked down the thick air. It was close in the darkened room, hot enough to make beads of sweat break upon his brow and bare chest. Aitkin longed for a breath of cool fresh air. For a sip of water to quench his parched throat and cool him inside.

“Captain.” He struggled to push the word out.

“That is a lie Aitkin Cassini.” The voice came again softly, un-angered. “You continue to tell me this lie Aitkin Cassini. Why do you continue to tell me this lie?” *He should be exasperated, Aitkin thought. He should shout and scream or growl such a response, but his voice is level. Always level. Always the same.*

Aitkin had heard the same questions in the same tone for several days now. At least he guessed it was days, it could be longer. There was no light in the room but for the shaft that illuminated him in a perfect circle. It shone down on him from above, but from exactly what source he had no idea.

It reached far enough to show every detail of his body as he sat strapped tightly into the chair that supported him, but no further. There was a room beyond his circle of light, somewhere for the owner of the voice to stand in the shadows, but Aitkin could see none of it. His whole universe had shrunk to this tiny circle of light and pain.

The pain had been excruciating. Aitkin had been trained to withstand torture and interrogation, but nothing had prepared him for the torment he’d undergone since waking in this room.

He had never seen the face of his tormenter.

No matter what was done to him, all that entered his field of view were the hands of his captor. They were thin and veined with long supple fingers that worked on his body with a delicate and dextrous touch.

Those hands played their way across his skin with a touch akin to that of a gentle lover. The pain that accompanied such a touch was a sick perversion that twisted Aitkin’s stomach.

“If you continue to lie to me Aitkin Cassini, I will not be able to ask you any more questions.” The voice was moving Aitkin realised.

His senses were dulled by exhaustion, but he could just track the sound as it circled behind him.

“If I cannot ask any more questions, then I will be forced to continue to hurt you Aitkin Cassini.” It was directly behind him now, Aitkin judged. He could feel the breath on his neck, disturbing the warm air and sending a cold shiver of anticipation down his spine.

There was a smell too; something rotten that filled his nose and mouth making him want to retch. His hand trembled and he fought to control it, to keep it still and steady.

He had been trained to withstand torture with false drowning, electrocution, beatings.

He knew his boundaries; name and rank. That was the extent of the information he could give. To give any more was treason and treason meant death. Worse than that, if Aitkin allowed himself to be broken he would be worthy only of death. There was honour in dying beneath the torturers knife, but there was no honour in succumbing to it.

“I will ask you once again Aitkin,” the words were whispered into his ear, “What is your rank?”

Aitkin drew a breath, wincing at the daggers of pain inside his chest as he tried to straighten his back and shoulders. He was a marine of the Deorum.

He was strong; strong enough to withstand this mutilation.

I will not break.

“My name is Aitkin Cassini” he said, “Captain of Second Company, Deorum Marines.” He stared straight ahead as he spoke, struggling to put strength into his voice, even as he felt that strength fleeing from him. His words were met with silence, then a soft sigh.

“Very well Aitkin Cassini, Captain of Second Company, Deorum Marines,” Aitkin felt the hairs rise on his skin as his body tensed, “Just know I would prefer not to do this.”

A pale hand came into his field of vision and the light reflected briefly from the slim blade it welded. *I will not break.*

For a moment the light danced as the blade wavered before his eyes. Searing agony blossomed across his face as the blade slipped into his skin and began to smoothly cut away his right eyelid.

Aitkin fought against his restraints as the pain filled him. It burned as the blade entered his flesh. It burned so deeply he feared he may pass out. There was something about that knife that wasn't normal. Every cut, every slice burned for minutes after the touch of the blade had left his flesh.

Blood filled his vision and instinctively he tried to close his eyes to keep it out. His left went dark but his right was awash with red, clouding his sight, adding a stinging frustration to his mounting agony as the muscles worked to shut an eyelid that was no longer there. He felt the sickening soft wet pressure of the lid slide down his cheek.

Light flashed, reflecting from the sliver of metal that was the cause of all his anguish, as the knife turned and pressed against his cheek. The slightest pressure let it slip through his skin, parting it smoothly. The fire burned through him as the blade bit deep and traced a bloody line down to his jaw.

I will not...

The pain overwhelmed him and Aitkin Cassini screamed and screamed and screamed.

TWO

The sun was shining high in a blue sky and the long grass tickled her skin as she let her hand brush the stalks. The air was warm and calm, not a breath of wind. Iasa lifted her face to feel the heat of the sun caress her skin.

She smiled at the feeling, knowing it was just a dream but enjoying it all the same. In the distance she could hear muffled bird song, but around her, in this glade surrounded by distant trees, all was quiet and peaceful.

A voice broke the silence.

“Commander, I think we have a situation.”

Iasa sighed to herself and closed her eyes. When she opened them the sun was gone, the long grass and the birdsong too. In their place was the dirtied grey interior of the station's simulation ring.

It was the only place of respite available to her on this god forsaken planet that she had the misfortune of being tasked to protect.

The simulation ring was of an old design, requiring her to attach her comms link to the synaptic enabler via a lead, instead of simply remoting in.

It had required a small surgery from the station's senior medi-tech, Masj, to allow her to use it at all. Plug-in comm links were outdated before Iasa had even been born.

She didn't know how old this station was, but from the look of the place she'd guess it was at least one hundred Martian years, if not longer, since the main reactor was powered up for the first time.

The ring she'd been using was little more than a body harness suspended between three curved arms that stood from the grimy floor. To use it she had to wrap the harness about her from waist to shoulder, plug the enabler into the adapter socket that Masj had carefully fitted behind her left ear and let her weight be taken by the supporting arms.

She knew she must look a fool to anyone who cared to watch her sessions. The link created by the ring effectively shut down her body's movement while she was in the simulation.

It was necessary to prevent the occupant coming to harm. Inside her mind she could run and jump, even fly if the fancy took her, safe in the knowledge there would never be physical danger.

If the fancy took her she could walk from a cliff edge into roiling seas and come out not just unscathed but dry to the bone.

In the real world, having her arms and legs flail wildly in a confined space could lead to any number of injuries. Iasa knew the reasons behind it, but she'd seen others mid-session, lying back or slumped forward in their harnesses. Their feet lifted from the ground giving them the look of a puppet with its strings cut loose.

“Commander, are you receiving?” Hornwood's voice spoke inside her head again.

“I'm receiving Hornwood.” She replied a little too curtly. “What is it?”

As she sent the words she unclipped the fastenings of the harness at her shoulder and then at her waist. As soon as she'd opened her eyes the support arms had closed in, lowering her feet to the floor to take her body's weight again.

Iasa stepped out of the centre of the ring and cursed herself as the lead still plugging her into the enabler pulled taught snapping her head back.

“We've been tracking a blip on the proximity scans,” Hornwood continued, “But we lost it just under six minutes ago.”

Iasa tugged the comm link lead from behind her ear and let it fall as she stretched out her arms and arched her back, then bent her knees to loosen her stiffened joints.

She'd been in the ring for hours this time and the slackness of her muscles for such duration had left her aching all over. She lifted her arms to shoulder height and held them there as she twisted left and right at the waist.

"Why are you bothering me with this Hornwood?"

Iasa straightened her arms above her head and bent over forwards, her outstretched fingers reaching the floor, splaying flat as she bent her body double.

"I don't need to be told of every piece of floating debris that happens to float by."

She took a breath, holding it in a moment before releasing it slowly as she lifted her torso and returned to a standing position. She closed her eyes and concentrated on her breathing. Deep breath in, hold and out again.

"I know that Commander," Hornwood sent and Iasa picked up the urgency in him. *"But this time the course was bound right for us."*

Iasa's eyes snapped open.

"You're sure of the trajectory?" She asked.

"Absolutely Commander," Hornwood replied, *"Whatever it was made a direct line for us from about two-thousand clicks out."*

Iasa's mind was racing. They weren't due relief for another three months yet and the rations in stores wouldn't need replenishing for another six after that.

No one was expected to visit the station which meant someone unexpected was turning up at their door. Iasa did not like the unexpected.

"Stay on station Hornwood," She commanded, striding purposefully from the simulation ring and into the darkened corridor beyond.

"I'll be with you in three minutes."

Hornwood's comm link gave an acknowledgement and as she walked Iasa opened hers wider to reach the rest of her detail, "Hold defensive stations with immediate effect until relieved. The situation is real. I repeat, the situation is real. Report compliance."

Her order was issued simultaneously to the other nine members of her unit, including Hornwood.

Within moments she registered his comm link confirmation again, quickly followed by Elba, Diagno, Blist, Bonner and Cross. That still left three; Janner, Trishan and Ipsis.

For some commanders an eight month stint of walking empty corridors and staring through viewing panes at a dead planet would be enough to allow a little slack from their subordinates, but not for Iasa Finsa.

A full half year was a long assignment for any unit, made longer still by the lack of respite activities and the cramped confines of the dorm they were quartered in. It was enough to drive ordinary men and women mad.

Iasa and the other members of her unit were far from ordinary however. They were elite, the best available and proud enough of their achievements to consider 'available' to comprise the known universe. Subsequently, when Iasa commanded an immediate response she expected an immediate response.

Any delay was unacceptable and no response at all meant something was seriously amiss.

She restricted her comm link back to Hornwood alone, "*Hornwood, give me locations on Trishan, Ipsis and Janner.*" She stopped in the corridor outside the entrance to the trans-terminal, waiting on his reply.

The station was made up of fourteen circular levels. The bridge was the smallest, a spire topped disc seated atop the central trans-shaft that ran the length of the station to the reserve comms substation.

Below the bridge, the first three levels made up two wide rings, the second bigger again by half than the first. After that the main body of the station was a cylinder of compressed levels with the primary and secondary loading bays before the elevator dropped to the sub levels and the tertiary dock.

Inside each level was made up of two circular corridors; one running directly around the trans-shaft and the other a third of the way to the outer hull. From the fourteenth level to the bridge was nearly a kilometre in length.

The trans-terminal could cover the distance in less than two minutes, but without it any unlucky traveller would have to take an indirect route to the outside edge of level ten, then through the internal link stair up to level nine.

From there the route required traversing the full width of the station to a second link stair, this time external, which traced its way up the main body of the station, through levels four and three in their ring and right to the edge of level two. From the second level it was a simple climb to the bridge, but the winding route to get this far meant the distance overall was almost double.

Iasa and her unit had run drills requiring each member to complete the route in the shortest time possible and be combat ready when they entered the bridge.

From the outset Bonner and Cross had put down the fastest times, vying with each other to be the best. After eight months and nearly thirty runs Cross was in the lead, although only by six seconds and Bonner had vowed she would beat him thoroughly before their rotation was finished.

Iasa fervently hoped the trans-terminal was working, but knew if the station had been boarded the first action taken by Hornwood would be to shut it down.

The simulation ring was on the fourth deck only a short walk from the main trans-terminal entrance. Hornwood was on shift in the bridge and three members of the unit would have been on rest using the meagre facilities of the fourth deck, just as she had been.

The remainder would be patrolling the rest of the station from level five down to the sub levels. Iasa activated the trans-terminal, heading down to search for her missing unit members.

As the doors slid open Hornwood's comm link opened up again, just as the realisation of her mistake hit her full in the face.

"*Commander,*" The urgency she felt in him was stronger, "*Trishan, Janner and Ipsis...*"

"*...were on rest.*" She finished for him as the figures inside the trans-terminal turned towards her.
