

Unfriendly Persuasion

A Tale from the Arbiter Chronicles

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UNFRIENDLY PERSUASION

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For Harve Bennett.
Thanks for a lifetime of inspiration.

“...Zeus the Father made a third generation of mortal men, a brazen race, sprung from ash-trees; and it was in no way equal to the silver age, but was terrible and strong. They loved the lamentable works of Ares and deeds of violence; they ate no bread, but were hard of heart like adamant, fearful men. Great was their strength and unconquerable the arms which grew from their shoulders on their strong limbs. Their armour was of bronze, and their houses of bronze, and of bronze were their implements: there was no black iron. These were destroyed by their own hands and passed to the dank house of chill Hades, and left no name: terrible though they were, black Death seized them, and they left the bright light of the sun.”

– *Hesiod, Works and Days, as prepared by Hugh G. Evelyn-White from the work of W.H.D. Rouse, 1914*

CHAPTER ONE

We had two minutes to live. Literally.

The enemy was recharging its weapons. Ours were out, destroyed in a surprise attack by the terrorists who were about to rain death on the birthplace of human civilization, my home planet, Rigel V.

I bought us three more minutes the only way I could, by getting closer to our attacker, moving inside his firing perimeter. Crazy, I know, but there are two places you can position yourself so a gun can't hit you –far outside its firing range, or close to its trigger. The latter was *Titan's* only option.

Even there, in the eye of the storm, our enemy had sent out robot shuttles bearing nuclear warheads. *Titan* was about to die.

I wasn't in command, actually. The whole thing began as a training exercise, a test for *Titan's* five midshipmen, of whom I was proud to be one. Two of the five, interestingly enough, Carson and Metcalfe, are from old Terra.

Metcalfe was in command for the first exercise. Any of us could have been, I suppose, but Captain Atal had chosen Metcalfe and myself to staff the command deck. Metcalfe had proposed a primitive Terran ceremony for deciding which of us actually commanded and which of us piloted

the great ship. He called it a “coin toss.” I thought at the time it was one more of his quaint religious customs. Being from Terra, Metcalfe still believes that there are, somewhere beyond the fringes of known space, beings called “gods.” They’re supposed to be very powerful, and, if you speak to them sweetly, they’ll do you favors. It brings a delightful diversity to our midst. Still, it’s unnerving to go into battle with someone who believes that divine intervention can turn the day.

I’ve since learned that a coin toss is not a religious custom, exactly. It’s a way of making a decision by invoking random chance. (A “coin,” for the uninitiated, is a metal disc used in primitive societies as a medium of commercial exchange. Likely you’ve never heard of one, much less seen one. I know I hadn’t, until Metcalfe pulled one from his pocket.)

This day we saw the folly of leaving important decisions to either random chance or Mr. Metcalfe’s gods. The very fate of our civilization was in the balance as a ship loaded down with Senterium K was about to make a suicide run on our most populous world, and the man who was in charge of saving our collective skins was, I have to say it, a charity case.

Let me stop and say that I admire Terrence Metcalfe. By the age of 22 standard years, more than half of those born on his world have already died of disease or misadventure. The remaining minority are largely illiterates, scarred with venereal disease and mental illness, who survive only by resorting to crime. Their criminal records would exceed the personal data storage quota of even the richest citizen of Quintil, if they weren’t quarantined to Terra. There they go unprosecuted due to a dearth of law enforcement and an even greater lack of interest in maintaining civil order.

Defying the odds, Metcalfe secured an appointment to the Academy and has impressed his officers to the extent that he has been field-promoted to the rank of lieutenant. But let’s not fool ourselves, shall we? He has enjoyed the attention and guidance of the Confederacy’s finest citizens,

namely two members of the prestigious Atal family and the venerated Professor Mors of Phaeton. They see potential in him, and I am certainly not one to deny that which such learned colleagues—one of them my superior in the chain of command—believe they have witnessed. I do not begrudge them the privilege of bestowing their favor on the less fortunate, and giving Metcalfe every opportunity they can to succeed, even if it means promoting him ahead of the more qualified.

But a chimp, even in the finest resplendent regalia, purchased at the finest boutique in Quintopolis, is still... a chimp.*

So, not meaning to criticize, I have to say it was unfortunate that, on such a crucial day, Captain Jan Atal decided to leave his protege in command of the Confederate Navy's greatest vessel, even after the attack began, while he himself was on board and could have stepped in at any time. I do not doubt Captain Atal's wisdom. I only feel pity that he placed so much faith in someone who, in the breach, did not come through.

** Much has been made in the media of my treatment of my beloved personal assistant, the chimpanzee named Rourke. I'd like to say for all to witness that I find the tabloid coverage offensive and cruel. Rourke is not a slave, as some have suggested. He is a trusted family friend, adopted three generations ago by the then-chairman of Blairich holdings, the man who contributed much of my DNA and signed the order for my conception. The fact that I took him clothes-shopping is not evidence of my abuse of animals, but of Rourke's love of fine clothes. He selected the livery in which he was holographed that day. And I did not invite the reporters who shot the images. I merely was cordial to them, as I always am to the media. I would like this matter put to rest once and for all. Rourke stays with me out of love, because I am good to him. He is free to seek other employment any time he wishes. It is not my fault that I own the majority of the gardens in Quintopolis and thus am his only real opportunity for employment as a landscape architect.*

In short, Metcalfe panicked.

And who wouldn't? Please don't be smug and assume that you would have kept your cool. We were defenseless, reeling from a vicious surprise attack. A freighter had strayed into the field of our mock combat, and, while we were still trying to warn it away, it had fired on us. It was a carefully planned and executed strike, calculated to maximize damage. *Titan*, the grandest ship ever built by human hands, was crippled. Dozens were dead. The Captain and the Secretary of the Navy were trapped in the bowels of the ship. The attacker, a Qraitian named Fehajiq, had finally communicated and told us he was coming around again in two minutes to deliver the death blow. And we had no weapons.

Or so we thought.

Titan has six weapons arrays, plasma cannons, designated Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, Epsilon and Zeta. They all showed offline after the second Qraitian attack. The ship also carries short and long-range missiles, and bombs of various sorts. At close range, these last would have been quite effective... at destroying the *Titan* along with her enemy.

Metcalfe, in a burst of despair and driven no doubt by his belief in an afterlife, announced that he was going to "ram the Titan right down their throats." He plotted an intercept course with our attacker—not difficult, as they were directly in front of us—and took us full speed ahead to what he expected would be our deaths.

That was when I remembered that battery Epsilon, our fifth weapons array, was not, in fact, offline, but only designated so by the ship's computer for the purposes of the exercise which the computer believed we were still running.

I calmed Metcalfe down. The poor boy was trembling, his face fairly running with sweat. Or perhaps tears. He saw his first command ending in failure and the deaths of billions. Already, in just the past

minutes, he'd heard that a shuttle bearing our Bos'n, Aer'La, and his childhood friend Nathan Renfro had been destroyed in the volley between the big ships. It was overwhelming, I'm sure. Once I had his attention and had gotten him to stop muttering prayers to the gods, I gently prodded him. I couldn't say anything too obvious, for the enemy was listening. With a channel open directly to "General" Fehajiq, I could not very well announce, "Hey, Metcalfe, you forgot that battery Epsilon is actually online after all," now could I?

Surprise was key. Fehajiq believed that we were defenseless. He'd been monitoring our communications for hours, courtesy of encryption keys stolen from the data banks of the *Strawbridge*, a Merchant Marine vessel commanded by Metcalfe's friend, the same, late Nathan Renfro. Renfro had himself stolen the keys when he'd been aboard *Titan* months earlier. About the fact that we were under the leadership of a panicking Terran, about to die because of the illegal actions of a second, dishonest Terran, I draw no conclusions for the reader. Wiser heads than mine have turned to the task of deciding whether or not there is something inherently inferior about the Terran psychological makeup, and they have proved nothing.

So I whispered to Metcalfe, "Have you verified the status of all weapons?"

He turned to me, chin quivering, eyes vacant and bloodshot and mumbled, "Wha...?"

I clutched him firmly and warmly by the shoulder and mouthed again, "Status of weapons?"

Poor boy thought I was suggesting a routine status readout. I think he was in autopilot mode now, and any suggestion seemed reasonable as his mind screamed, "What do I do? What do I do? What do I DO?!"

He called out across the intraship line, "Armory?"

Kevin Carson answered wearily, "Ready."

"Battery Alpha, status?" asked Metcalfe.

"Battery Alpha, offline," was the response. Of course it was. But what could I say? The enemy was watching.

In fact, the enemy was entertained by Metcalfe's irrational behavior. Fehajiq said, "You're an amusing fellow. It's a pity to blow you up."

Metcalfe continued like a robot drone. "Battery Beta, status?"

"Battery Beta, offline."

I tried to get his attention, to no avail.

"Battery Gamma, status?"

"Battery Gamma, offline."

"Robot shuttles, closing!" I reminded Metcalfe, hoping to snap him out of his fugue and draw his attention to—

"Battery Epsilon, status?"

At last! He had come to the point!

"Battery Epsilon, active!" was Carson's surprised response.

Metcalfe was baffled. "Battery Epsilon wha -- ?" he wondered. Not able to help myself, I backhanded his shoulder and pointed at the enemy on the monitors. Then, finally, with a cough he managed, "Battery Epsilon... fire."

Even as Fehajiq cried out in surprise and rage, *Titan's* mighty cannons lashed out, and the Qraitian's helpless ejaculation was lost in the din of detonations, screams and falling debris which came to us over his open comm channel. Remembering that my place was supporting this poor, failing commander, I reported the direct hit.

Metcalfe, energized by his unexpected success, ordered the destruction of the warhead-bearing robot shuttles. With the ship out of danger, he went on, with only minor prodding, to rescue the survivors and reclaim *Titan's* crew and passengers, who circled round the ship in life pods like bees around a hive.

Lest I belabour the point, it was that one, forgotten battery which stood between all of Quintil and radioactive death. At such moments, it is with calm and cold calculation that we must respond. I don't believe I'm going too far out on a limb in saying that it takes a carefully engineered intellect to deliver that level of calm under pressure, yea, under fire.

Quintil was very lucky. *This time.*

But I've been asked, how did I come to be in this place at this time? Well...

– *Excerpt from Who'll Stop the Rain: A Candid Account of the Greatest Terrorist Attack Ever Mounted, and How it was Foiled, by Sestus Blaurich. Copyright 308 PL by Blaurich Industries et al, Quintopolis, Rigel V.*

"And this is *The Naked Truth*, with your host, Vixyn Tantacles. I'm here with author and hero of the Qraitian incursion, Sestus Blaurich. Sestus, Welcome."

"Thank you, Vixyn. It's an honor."

"Please! I'm just the beneficiary of the most spectacular set of mammary glands ever engineered by our civilization. You're an honest-to-commerce hero! Who, I might add, looks even better out of uniform than in."

"Well, Admiral Fournier felt I shouldn't be in uniform, since I'm speaking as a private citizen. Navy regs and all that."

"Allowing you to honor *our* regs, which state that no one comes on *The Naked Truth* wearing a stitch of clothing! And... yum! Look at you!"

"I'd rather look at you, Vixyn."

"So I see. Say, how big—"

"Now, now, my vitals are all public record. Let's not descend to quoting statistics."

"Gorgeous and modest, ladies and gentlemen! I promise I'll keep him here in all his naked glory as long as I can. So, Sestus... Terrence Metcalfe...?"

“What can I say?”

“You’ve already said a lot.”

“Only the truth. I have the utmost respect for what Metcalfe has been able to accomplish, given the hurdles he’s had to leap.”

“But some of those hurdles have been lowered for him.”

“Well... Captain Atal thinks a lot of him.”

“But is that high regard misplaced? Yesterday, my guest was Subcutaneous Fraud, the Welzant Chair of the school of psychiatry at the University of Rigel, Quintopolis campus. He suggested that Metcalfe has a martyr complex.”

“He did see piloting the ship into the enemy and killing us all as our best option .”

“Do you think he has a death wish?”

“Perhaps not a death wish... I think he wants to be seen suffering for his beliefs. Remember, being from Terra, the bulk of his education has been a religious indoctrination. Terrans idolize people they call “saints,” who are supposed to be human beings whose behavior exemplifies everything these god creatures want us to do. Most of these saints, if you look them up, you’ll discover they died—horribly, I’m talking, they died in really horrible ways. And I think that’s what Terrans admire.”

“That they died?”

“That they died in pain, crying out the names of their gods. Professing their faith. There was one, Saint Sebastian, who, like Metcalfe, was given a high military appointment by the Emperor of... something or another. When it was found out he belonged to the wrong religious sect, he was shot full of arrows. But he didn’t die. He just inspired a lot of artwork. I think that’s what Metcalfe wants. He wants to be seen suffering nobly and praising his deities. So that the folks back home on Terra will point to him and say that he’s a local boy made good.”

"Wow. That must be hard to deal with. For him and everyone around him. Do you get frustrated?"

"Vixyn, I just try to help the guy. I like him, really. I'm not sure he always likes me."

"But everyone in the Confederacy knows you like him. I've got this holo on permanent view in my office--"

"Oh, no!"

"Oh, *yes*, Sestus. This is a celebration of sexuality if ever I've seen one. Brothers in arms... and legs and tongues and... well... "

"We didn't authorize release of that. It's from Metcalfe's personnel file."

"And it shows you showing your Terran shipmate some very big love."

"It was also a training exercise."

"So? Where do I enlist so you can do that to me?"

"Oh, you don't have to enlist! But seriously, Metcalfe needed a comrade to demonstrate that he didn't suffer from the common Terran perversion of homophobia."

"Homo-what-now?"

"Terrans--most of them--believe that sex should be reserved to one man and one woman for life."

"Ouch!"

"And they're deathly afraid of sex-play between people of the same gender. That's homophobia."

"No, honey, that's just sad."

"Isn't it?"

"Well, I guess Metcalfe doesn't have it, huh? Or maybe you cured him!"

"I don't like to brag."

"I'm embarrassing you! I'll stop. So, you've saved Quintil, hell, you've saved the Confederacy. Let's talk about what happens next."

"Well, obviously we've seen that the threat hasn't gone away. After the Qraitian war ended and the peace treaty was signed, we all heaved a collective sigh of relief. We thought we could go back to business as usual. But I think what we've learned in the last few months is that the universe... it's not a safe place."

"There's a sword hanging over our heads."

"And its name is the Qraitian Empire. I don't think we can pretend that the ongoing peace talks are going to amount to anything. Sure, our leaders might sign on the line and say we're going to make nice; but all it takes is one lunatic who's willing to do something crazy--"

"Like stealing a freighter and loading it with Senterium K."

"And pointing it at our home planet, yes. Exactly. It can happen again. Next time we might not be as lucky."

"Is the Navy taking steps to prevent it from happening again?"

"Big changes are coming. Everyone will be under scrutiny."

"Not me, I hope!"

"Vixyn, anyone could be a rogue, or just an unsuspecting dupe of the Qraitian extremists."

"Sestus, tell me straight: What rights should we, as a free people, be prepared to sacrifice in order to stay safe?"

"We should be prepared to sacrifice *no* rights! That's the meaning of 'a free people,' you horse's ass!" Captain Jan Atal punctuated his remark with a hard slap of his hand on the synthetic glass of the tabletop in front of him. Cups and plates rattled noisily, threatening to spill the remains of a very good breakfast. He was sharing said breakfast with

his daughter on his private promenade aboard the *CNV Titan*. His A.I. unit politely inquired if something was amiss. Atal dismissed it.

Kaya clucked her tongue and smiled with one corner of her mouth. "Daddy, it's a recorded broadcast. It can't hear you. And you've never seen a horse, so how can you reliably compare Vixyn Tantacles to the ass of one?"

Her father swore in a language she did not know and shoved hard at the hologram of Vixyn and Sestus with one hand. Instead of shutting off as expected, the medicine-ball-sized sphere containing the images of two attractive nudes bounced off the wall and caromed about the room for several courses before Atal caught it between two hands and made a compressing gesture, causing the interface to switch off.

Kaya laughed hysterically, holding her breastbone with one hand in an effort to avoid choking.

"And you wonder why I never allowed you to watch holos during meals," the Captain growled. "How can the digestive system function when its owner is always angry at the stupidity of his fellow humans as relayed to us so faithfully by programs like that one?"

"I haven't wondered for some time. Not since I was about six years old and realized my father was the sensitive type, prone to lose sleep over the plight of the stupid and less fortunate."

"Sensitive my left buttock! I sleep fine! But I'd sleep better if those two were working where they belong—in Den's cheapest brothel, servicing blitz addicts!—instead of on the highest-rated news show in the Confederacy and aboard my ship, respectively."

Kaya considered it. "Vixyn belongs in a brothel, yes. But it'd be a shame to risk marring Sestus's beauty. He's quite nice to look at, when his mouth is closed. A work of art, really."

"Perhaps you'd like to have him stuffed and mounted in your cabin."

Kaya giggled. "Stuffed and mounted? Well--"

"Stop. Now. I wish you'd show some appreciation for the gravity of the issue, Kaya. Tantacles is a damned fool, but she speaks for all the other damned fools--most of the population! They really are ready to trade their freedom for security. To be searched at every entryway and egress, to have their every move monitored by holo camera, to have their choice of friends, reading material and clothing scrutinized, all so that they can have the illusion of safety!"

Kaya nodded, sober now. "They really are. And they're going to. That decision has been made."

He shook his head. "The majority shouldn't have the power to take freedom away from those who want it."

"The majority takes whatever power it wants, until the individual stands up and resists. Then there's a fight. Fortunately, the majority doesn't have much will power, so it doesn't win a lot of those fights. You taught me that, Daddy. Why are you railing like a student activist?"

Atal set his chin firmly. "Because even with my years of experience, one should never lose one's sense of outrage over injustice... or idiocy."

"I don't think you're in any danger, Father dear." She frowned. "But I do think you're right. The Arbiter's Council is considering another raft of security measures, and the Navy's intel folks are probably way ahead of them, developing new, draconian S.O.P.s--"

"They are," Atal interrupted. "Admiral Fournier is on his way to us as we speak, to invoke a new galactic order."

"Fournier? Talk about ruining my digestion!"

"You can imagine what he has on his agenda. And I imagine he'll be accompanied by a squad of the Navy Press Corps, ready to draft press releases with each syllable he utters." He assumed an exaggerated deep voice. " 'Your Navy, fighting for safety!'"

"You should have been an actor, Daddy."

"I'd probably have gone farther in my career, since all we're doing to protect our populace is spinning journalistic fantasies to lull them into a sense of calm!"

"All Fournier's doing, you mean. I think we've done considerably more. And it's because we stopped Fehajiq and his band of merry men that Fournier's press releases get any attention at all."

"Ninety per cent of the viewing audience would be dead if we hadn't stopped them," said Atal. "Beyond that, you're right. The success of the working few gives parasites like Fournier a lot of clout with the masses."

"And the masses love us right now."

"Most of them," agreed Atal. "But there is a vocal minority who are asking why the Qraitians were able to get so close to accomplishing their goal."

"You mean 'why was a lowly Terran midshipman all that stood between billions and their doom?' That's the question Sestus is encouraging, isn't it? Trying to make it look like Metcalfe bumbled and stumbled through that crisis, instead of keeping his cool and saving all our skins. As if it was only Sestus Blaurich who stayed calm!"

Now she was angry, Atal observed. His voice climbed an octave, as it did when her temper suddenly flared.

"I wonder if the bastard knows that the complete record of what happened on the command deck that day is available?" she went on. "Maybe the public deserves to know that the great Sestus Blaurich was so scared he damn near pissed himself! That he was shrieking at Yank, begging him to let him go to a life pod!"

Atal smiled, unable to contain his pride at the memory of that day. "While you held your post and prepared to go down with the ship."

"While we all did," she reminded him. "Except for Darby, and Sestus, if Metcalfe hadn't made him stay. And now Sestus is taking credit for stopping the terrorists!"

"I'm sure that doesn't sit well."

"Oh, Daddy, you have no idea!"

"I have an idea. I have a lot of them. I'm not the fool on the hill, as you would cast me. But how is Metcalfe? Really?"

Kaya raised an eyebrow. "Ask Pallas."

Since they had transferred to *Titan*, the romance between the young Terran and Pallas, the Phaetonian psychohistorical researcher who'd joined them as a civilian observer, had been the talk of the ship.

"Green is an ugly color on you, daughter."

"Oh, I'm not jealous. Not in the way you mean, anyway. I just mean... he's not talking to us."

"Us' meaning you and your.. Arbiters' Society?"

"Outsiders may not speak the name, Daddy. We call us 'The Arbiters.'"

"I'm afraid everyone else is starting to. Still. What you're observing isn't new. Metcalfe's ordeal has separated him from his peers. It happens. An officer has to step up and be the one in charge, making life and death decisions. It's hard for people to see someone they consider to be a friend in that capacity, realizing he might decide that their lives have to end for some greater good, assuming it's either greater or good. It's even harder for the one who's singled out, knowing it could come to that."

Not a fan of chairs, Kaya was seated on the floor in lotus position. Now she leaned forward, placing her elbows heavily on the glass. "I'm worried about him."

"You never worry about anything."

"Correction, Daddy. I've worried about you all my life."

"Misplaced concern. I can take care of myself. And I think you'll find that Metcalfe can too."

The giant holo floating over the tables in the officers' mess faded as Vixyn Tantacles enfolded Sestus in her bare arms and legs, insinuating herself about him like she was actually a colony of serpents. It was the traditional farewell greeting for guests on Vixyn's show. More than once, the embrace had continued after the feed was cut, and, more than once, the resultant footage had been released on underground and public networks. Vixyn pretended outrage, but viewers knew it was all part of her P.R. machine.

"Bloody bullshit!" snapped Kevin Carson as the images disappeared. "Making it look as though you were his puppet and he just pulled the strings!"

Across from him, Terry Metcalfe gave a noncommittal shrug. It lacked so much commitment that it involved the use of only one side of his mouth and the slightest elevation of one shoulder. He continued to hold his coffee cup in front of him and stare into it pensively.

"Five's just being Five," he observed.

"Five." It was the nickname they had hung on Sestus Blaurich last year when they'd first come aboard the *Titan*. Although Blaurich had arrived before them, indeed, had been assigned to *Titan* first, they'd named him their fifth midshipman on the grounds that he was an outsider in their midst, wherever the Arbiters went being their home turf. The name had stuck, and even spread in usage to some of the casual crew and the ship's Marines. Those who didn't know its simple origins assumed it described the aristocratic Midshipman's mental age.

"What does that even mean, 'Five's just being five?'" Carson demanded.

Metcalfe let out a deliberate breath. "It means we all have our natures and we have to be true to them. Five has to have the spotlight, and so he seeks it out. Hell, the spotlight probably has to have him, too. Maybe light

needs to illuminate certain combinations of matter, because light is somehow fed by the appreciation that results."

"Christ, Metcalfe, you're waxing poetic about your mortal enemy!"

"He's not my mortal enemy," said Metcalfe, fiddling idly with his silverware.

Had he always arranged it so carefully on the table after a meal? Carson couldn't remember. Probably not, or he'd have noticed.

"I don't have a mortal enemy," Metcalfe continued.

"So it's okay that he claims credit. You saved the goddamned Confederacy--"

"We," Metcalfe corrected him. "We saved the goddamned Confederacy. And Five was there as much as anyone."

"But you called the shots. You had the plan. And, dammit, Five stayed because you ordered him to! The rest of us stayed even though you told us not to! So why are you suddenly going soft on him?"

Metcalfe chuckled. "Maybe because he was the only one who followed my orders to the letter?"

Carson flung his napkin in his friend's face. "Next time, you bastard--next time you're flying the damned ship on a suicide run, you can bloody well do it alone!"

"I'll keep that in mind."

"Seriously, Metcalfe, why is Sestus the only one who's getting interviewed? Why aren't the rest of us talking about this in the media?"

"Maybe because you and I are both Terrans and they're afraid of getting diseases, Cernaq creeps them out, Aer'La downright frightens them, and the Atals have too much class to appear on *The Naked Truth*?"

Carson grinned. "Could you imagine the Captain on there with Vixyn Tantacles? She'd probably conduct the whole interview seated on his lap!"

"Thus denying the viewers a look at the very thing they'd want to see," observed Metcalfe.

"Be worth it, though, to see the silly little bitch get the cold shoulder."

"I think you just want to see the Captain naked," jibed Metcalfe.

Carson shook his head emphatically. "Too old for my tastes. I'll take my genetically engineered perfection about three decades earlier, thank you very much."

It was oft-observed fact that, though the morals of the Inner Worlds were easy, and public nudity was not only tolerated but encouraged, very few people could say that they'd seen Jan Atal, hero of the Qraitian War and industrial prince of Quintil, nude. Even his officers who had served closely with him for years couldn't say they had, and there were no published holos, though there were many simulations created by fans. It seemed to be all a part of the Captain's mystique.

"I don't see why you're complaining about Five, then," said Metcalfe. "He's 30 years younger and genetically perfect."

"True," Carson agreed. "But, much as I like good-looking boys, I don't see it happening."

"Five wouldn't lower himself, you mean."

"Exactly what I mean, and you know it. He thinks he's better than us. He thinks he's better than everyone. So how can you sit here and let him make you look like the village idiot without even getting a little bit annoyed?"

"By realizing that Five is what Five is, I'm not going to change him, and that it doesn't matter what the drooling masses think happened. I know what happened, and so does everyone who was there. I'll never win a popularity contest with people who are impressed by an empty-headed twit like Blairich. So why try?"

“Aside from referring to him as an ‘empty-headed twit,’ nothing in that statement sounds like it came from the Terry Metcalfe I used to know. Where the hell is he?”

Metcalfe’s face darkened slightly. “He grew up, and he realized it’s pointless to tilt at windmills, especially when the windmills have a dozen public relations professionals in their employ to make them look good.”

“Dammit, Terry, I’m serious. You haven’t been the same since we fought Fehajiq.”

“Of course I’m not the same. Are you the same?”

“I’m not so different that my friends don’t recognize me anymore! Last year, if Five had pulled a stunt like this, you would have plotted revenge the like of which no crime boss on Den ever contemplated. Now you just sit back and say, ‘Five is Five.’”

“Five *is* Five.”

“Yeah! So he is! Congratulations, Doctor of Philosophy Terrence Metcalfe. You’ve proven that ‘A’ is ‘A.’ Would anybody doubt you’re shackled up with a Phaetonian? You’re starting to act like one!”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning I haven’t seen you get drunk in I don’t know how long. You haven’t come to a night out at the pub in weeks. My god, you *walked out* on the party I threw you when you got promoted—“

“I had my reasons.”

That gave Carson pause, and he quieted. Metcalfe had left the party to pray for the souls of the dead. “I know you did. I know... is that it, Terry? Is it Nathan?”

Metcalfe shook his head. “Not really. I mourned Nathan’s death... I guess... He was a screwed up piece of shit, but he was my friend. It hurts to realize that he won’t be there to bail out any more. I won’t get any more calls that he’s in trouble, won’t see him grinning about the latest stupid,

insensitive stunt he's pulled. But then... you know, he died trying to buy Aer'La time, trying to save his crew."

"I know," said Carson.

"I guess that's some consolation. Maybe that's why I can live with it. In the end... there was something good in Nathan."

"Okay, if not Nathan, then--"

Metcalfe held up a finger. "What's that?" he asked.

"What's what?"

Metcalfe reached past Carson's shoulder to place his fingers within the command grid of the news holo. It had automatically quieted and shrunk when two people nearby, namely Metcalfe and Carson, had begun speaking. The interfaces in public areas were programmed to do that. They either shrank and quieted, or muted, depending on the audio intensity of nearby conversations, or they simply bounced away to another, quieter area. There were no quieter areas in the mess this morning.

Making a beckoning and then a stretching gesture, Metcalfe enlarged the holo and brought it closer to him. The volume increased to meet the user's perceived desire to pay closer attention.

A more sedate news program had followed *The Naked Truth*. This particular segment highlighted the opinions of random citizens. Today, cameras were flitting about what Carson recognized as the municipal center of Quintopolis. On the steps and about the open and airy plaza built of a native white stone, demonstrators gathered. Some carried hand-lettered signs, others flashed messages and elaborate animations in holo from their data implants. The camera hovered by one woman who stood on a high step, shouting to her fellows.

"... and we've got to take it as a sign!"

The crowd punctuated this with a cheer.

"We're not *safe!*"

Another cheer.

"We could all have been killed! A civilization gone!"

"Yes!!!" shouted the crowd as one.

"It was Quintil bravery that saved us!"

Cheer.

"One man brave enough to put his life on the line!"

Cheer.

"One man brave enough to kill the enemy!"

Wild cheer.

"Are we going to follow his example?"

"Yes!!!"

"Or are we going to cower in the corner like the Terran?"

"No!!!"

"We're not safe until every last Qraitian is dead!"

Mad, wild, raucous cheers.

"The next signs we carry will be painted on their skins... in blood!"

Noise. Pure and unadulterated.

"What do we want?"

"WAR!!!"

"*Idiots!*" Metcalfe punched the holo, sending it flying.

"Whoa!" yelled Carson as Metcalfe's fist nearly struck his chin. Such was the force of it, that, had it landed, he might have lost teeth. "Watch it!"

"Sorry," said Metcalfe immediately. He looked around to see who might have noticed his outburst. He looked even more crestfallen as it became apparent from the stares that everyone had noticed it.

"What the hell, man?" demanded Carson.

Metcalfe shook his head and smacked the table. "Idiots!" he said again. "We save their lives and they want to throw them away in a war."

"No," Carson corrected him. "They want *us* to throw them away in a war. Very different."

"Who in their right mind wants war? Who?"

"People who have never experienced it, or people who have nothing to live for anyway."

"The Quintils have plenty to live for. By that score, you and I should be the ones wanting war." He sat back and attempted to regulate his breathing.

"You okay?" Carson couldn't help but smile.

"I will be." He paused and then threw a piece of toast Carson's way. "What the hell are you smiling about, asshole?"

"It's nice to see you've still got it."

"Got what?"

"The worst temper in the Confederacy. I was really beginning to think Doc Faulkner had lobotomized you. But *that*—" he gestured to where the holo had finally settled over an unoccupied table "—was a classic Metcalfe tantrum."

"So glad to be of service."

"Best to get it out of your system now, anyway."

Metcalfe narrowed his eyes. "Why?"

"Because of the communique I just delivered to the Captain. Admiral Fournier will be on board within the hour. All officers are to report for new orders."

Metcalfe brought his hands to his face and said something which, though muffled, sounded very much like "kill me now."

Session Transcript**4 October 308 PL****LUCINDA GRAE, LT, CMT, PhD****Patient: Lt. Terrence Metcalfe, CN**

History: 22-year-old officer who served as commander of Naval forces in a loss-of-life incident. 157 killed, 38 of those terrorists killed by subject's direct orders. Note also loss of close, childhood friend during battle.

Following the Fehajiq incident, Lt. Metcalfe was referred to me for routine CISM screening. Of greatest concern at present is a pronounced and continuing feeling of alienation.

LG: You haven't gotten that angry in a while.

Metcalfe: No...

LG: But you think it was only the news of the demonstrations.

Metcalfe: What else would it be?

LG: Carson has noticed a change in you.

Metcalfe: I've changed. There's no question.

LG: He thinks you're holding back. You're not telling your friends what's going on in your head. Is he right?

Metcalfe: Maybe he is.

LG: Maybe it upsets you that Carson is right. That you can't completely hide from your friends.

Metcalfe: Why would I hide from my friends?

LG: You tell me. Why are you bottling up anger until it explodes in a public place?

Metcalfe: Anger... anger is dangerous. I don't want to show-

LG: You don't want to show anger? As opposed to simply not experiencing it? Or is it that you don't want your friends to see your anger?

Metcalfe: Maybe I'm protecting them.

LG: Maybe... you don't trust them. You don't think they can handle it.

Metcalfe: Maybe.

LG: That is a change for you. We need to talk more about that.