

"Stephanie"

Winter Base, Charon

22 April 2146

"Mommy?"

Lieutenant Kim Masterson looked up from her report on gravitic weapon development for the Russian Winter project and listened. Only the isolated facility's background noises registered, and she focused back on the report.

"Mommy?"

Kim looked up again. The sound of a young girl's voice had been almost too quiet to hear once, much less twice. *Okay, that time I couldn't have been imagining it, she thought. Why would I be hearing a child's voice on an R&D facility that has almost no contact with the outside world?*

She set the report back on her desk, put her uniform jacket back on, and stepped outside her Spartan office. She had no way to tell the cries' exact origin. The other offices were locked shut, the technicians and clerical workers having long since retired to their quarters.

There's no sign of anyone. Maybe I need to cut back on the hours I'm working on this project ... or maybe I'm hallucinating as a side-effect of exposure to gravity waves. That'd be an interesting study ...

"Mommy, help me!"

The sound had come from directly behind her. Kim turned around and reflexively brought her hands to her face in shock. *Oh, my God!*

The voice had come from a young girl ... or what might once have *been* a young girl, perhaps six years old at the very oldest. The child, dressed only in light pink pajamas, shared the same flowing, golden hair as Kim, but her night-black eyes recessed into their sockets, and a pointed snout protruded several centimeters beyond a normal human’s jaw line. Most noticeably, where her arms should have been, the girl had two vestigial ... *wings*, which stretched no more than 30 centimeters from shoulder to wingtip. The girl looked up at Kim, her deformed eyes pleading.

Kim’s maternal instinct took over—whatever may have happened, this was still a human girl, and she still needed help. She hopped across the two meters that separated her from the girl and scooped the girl up into her arms. “Come, child,” she said softly, “let’s get you to the emergency room.”

Kim traveled the kilometer and a half from her office to Winter Base’s hospital section as well as she could in Charon’s gravity, which was a spitting distance from zero.

The on-call nurse reacted much the same way to the child’s appearance as Kim had. “I don’t know if anything’s ‘wrong’ with her health,” Kim said, “but I want a thorough examination for this girl right now.” The nurse nodded her assent, and together the two women carried the child into an examination area.

After a brief initial examination where the nurse recorded the child’s vital signs as best she could, she moved Kim and the girl into one of the hospital’s inpatient rooms. The nurse closed the door behind her, leaving the two alone.

The room stayed silent for several minutes as Kim marshaled her strength to keep from bursting to tears in front of the girl. "What's your name, sweetie?" she finally asked as she combed the girl's hair.

"Name?" The girl shook her head.

Kim nodded. "My name's Kim. That's what other people call me. What's your name?"

The girl's brow furrowed in concentration as she tried to pronounce the next words: "Speshmen Zero-two-one. That's what other people call me."

"*Speshmen*"? Kim wondered. *No. . . Specimen Zero-two-one. My god, this child is someone's experiment! Who the hell would do something so barbaric? And even more disturbing, who would authorize it?* To the girl, Kim said, "That sort of sounds like my sister's name. My sister's called Stephanie."

"That's a pretty name," the girl said with a small smile.

"Would you like me to call you Stephanie?" Kim asked.

"Okay." The girl paused. "Do you know where my mommy is, Kim?"

This time, Kim couldn't stop the tears from coming. She hugged Stephanie close to her and felt the girl's wings against her. "No, I don't, sweetie, but I'm going to find out."

A half hour later, someone knocked on the door of Stephanie's room. A moment later, a brown-haired male doctor wearing a light blue uniform entered. His gaze focused immediately on Stephanie; and if he felt any shock, he hid it well behind his bedside demeanor. "Well, good evening, young lady," he said warmly. "How are you doing tonight?"

"Good!" Stephanie exclaimed. "My name's Stephanie!"

The doctor's voice and manner seemed to brighten the girl's mood, and Kim's as well. "Well, I'm glad to hear that, Stephanie. My name is John, and I'm going to take a look at you and see how healthy you are, okay?"

"Okay," Stephanie said with a smile.

Kim stood to greet the man and offered her hand. "Kim Masterson," she said.

"Thank you for seeing her so promptly."

The doctor shook her hand with a firm grip, and his eyes displayed his concern.

"John Matthews," he answered. "And you're quite welcome. I've already called Commodore McKinney, and she should be down here shortly. To be honest, I'd like to know what this is about myself, so hopefully she'll have some answers. In the meantime, I'll take a look at Stephanie, make sure she's in good health, and try to get an idea of how her physiology works." He turned toward Stephanie. "How's your eyesight, Stephanie? How well can you see?"

"I can see really well," she said. "People tell me I can see 'intared' and 'ullaviolet.' But sometimes it hurts my eyes when they tell me to look at things."

"Uh-huh," John said with a nod. "I'd like to get you to look at some things that won't hurt your eyes and tell me what they are. Can you do that for me, Stephanie?"

"Okay!" she answered. Kim smiled softly as John pulled out a vision chart and Stephanie began reading from it. *For all she's going through, she seems so eager and light-spirited.* She grabbed a tissue from a nearby table and wiped at her face. *But God help the person, or people, that subjected her to this in the first place.*

“Can you read the bottom line for me, Stephanie?” John asked. He stood on the opposite side of the room from Stephanie and Kim and held the vision chart at shoulder-level.

Stephanie nodded and took a second to focus. “Copy-right two-one-three-eight Adam Ink. All rights re ... ser ... ved.”

John’s eyebrow rose in confusion, and he examined the copyright notice at the bottom of the eye chart. “That’s absolutely right!” he said, and gave the girl a wry smile even as Kim’s jaw visibly dropped. “You have really sharp eyesight!” He paused. “How would you like to take a look at some colored circles?”

“Her visual acuity is off the chart,” John explained to Kim and Commodore McKinney in the hallway just outside Stephanie’s room. “She can read six-point text from six meters; she can discern colors with eight times the normal sensitivity of human eyes—I had to break out the old color discernment tests used for the Al’Tari, and she aced those tests up to the highest discernment level *they’ve* ever measured. She could see Kim and me clearly when I turned off the lights, and she could read what I wrote on a sheet of paper using ink that only reflects ultraviolet light.

“In addition, she seems like a very bright and well-adjusted young child, given the circumstances. I’m not sure how she *feeds* herself or manipulates objects without arms or hands, though... and she has a number twenty-one on the back of her neck that looks like it was branded or tattooed onto her.”

Kim turned toward Commodore McKinney. The older woman stood about five centimeters shorter than Kim and was dressed in a sweater and a pair of jeans, having

been asleep when she’d received the comm-call from the hospital. Her strawberry blonde hair had faded to gray, and her face had accumulated wrinkles from twenty-four years of often harrowing service with the Star Navy. “When I first asked her what her name was,” Kim said, “she said that people call her ‘Specimen Zero-Two-One.’ Ma’am, with all due respect, can you tell us just what’s going on here?”

The Commodore nodded. “Yes, I can. But I can’t do it here, and you’re not going to like what I have to say.”

“All right. Give me just a moment, please.” She walked back into Stephanie’s room, where the young girl was playing—as well as she could—with a portable child’s computer that John had given her. “Stephanie, I need to talk with some other adults for a while, okay? I’ll be back as soon as I can. There’s a yellow button by the bed that you can push if you need anything.”

“Okay,” Stephanie said with the smallest hint of a pout. Kim gave the girl a warm smile and closed the door.

The three officers sat in a break area that two guards attached to Commodore McKinney had closed off. “I’ve called Doctor Sandra Reed from Terran Intel’s Research Division,” the Commodore said. “She’ll be here shortly to take Stephanie back to their research area.”

“You’re right, Ma’am,” Kim said. “I already don’t like what you’re saying. Why are we giving this girl to Terran Intel?”

“Because the specimen *belongs* to us,” answered the smooth voice of the woman who walked through the door to the break area. She wore her black hair cropped around

her neck, and her eyes shone an intense blue. The charcoal gray of her jumpsuit complemented her eyes and hair. The woman took a seat next to McKinney.

“*Specimen?*” Kim repeated. “She’s an innocent little girl who’s been horribly deformed! Are you saying that *you’re* responsible for this?”

“Yes, I am,” said the other woman, whom Kim presumed was Doctor Reed. “And I’m rather proud of it! We’ve spent years trying to produce viable recombination of Ceti and Terran genetic code. It’s *far* more difficult than what we accomplished with the Altered just a generation ago—because, for all their variety, the Altered all came from the DNA of some form of life on Earth. But the Ceti genetic code doesn’t even have the same molecular base. You have no idea how long it took us just to produce the first viable specimens—”

“Shut up,” Kim snapped with such verbal force that Sandra complied. “Commodore McKinney, you *knew* about this?”

The Commodore nodded. “Yes, I did, Lieutenant. That doesn’t mean I *like* it, but Terran Intel’s research here is just as much a part of the Russian Winter project as the weapons and propulsion research we’re doing for the Star Raptor-class starship design.”

“Ma’am, they’re butchering *children*. Can’t they at least do their research on adult volunteers?”

“We *tried* adults,” Sandra said, sneering. “They don’t survive the recombination process—the physical and psychological shock from the changes to their body structure are too severe for them to handle. Children, specifically under the age of seven, are much more resilient. They adapt much more readily to the process.”

"You can't tell me you're getting children to volunteer for this," Kim said with a smoldering glare at Doctor Reed.

"I have to agree with Lieutenant Masterson, Commodore," John said. "This goes against every ethic in the practice of medicine."

"*Damn* your ethics, Matthews," Sandra hissed. "Your ethics won't save people's lives when the Birds come for Earth the way they came for the New Earth colony, or the way they came for the Ross 154 Outpost.

"And *you*," she turned to Kim with a glare. "Don't presume to dictate your morality to me when you're involved in research to develop better ways of murdering."

"Our people on the front lines know what the risks are," Kim said. "It would be stupid to assume the Ceti aren't aware of the risks as well."

"But you can hardly tell me everyone in the Navy is a volunteer!"

"Most of them *are*, because they know what will happen if we lose."

"Which is exactly what my team and I are trying to prevent," Sandra said. "Think about it: when we finally have specimens who can pass for Ceti, we'll be able to infiltrate their military and their society. We'll have access to intelligence about the enemy that we can only *dream* of right now. We'll be able to sabotage their shipyards, bring down their economies, attack them in their *homes*. We'll finally be able to wage an offensive campaign, instead of sitting in space and taking a sucker-punch every time they feel like delivering one.

"And after the initial research is complete, the investment to produce these operatives will be minimal. Earth is so overpopulated already, and so much of that population lives in such poverty ... we offer people a way out of that poverty, tell them

that their children will grow up to do wonderful things for the human race in our war against the Birds.”

“Which sounds wonderful to someone who obviously has no sense of guilt,” Kim interjected.

“Guilt has nothing to do with it. That’s how we’ve collected *every* specimen we’ve used for our research. Of course, now that you’ve corrupted *this* specimen—”

“What?” Kim snapped. “How have we *corrupted* her?! I found her *wandering in a hallway* near my office in the middle of the night, which brings into question your ability to take care of her in the first place. I brought her to the hospital, and Doctor Matthews ran a few exams to get an idea of her physical condition. Where the hell do you get off saying we corrupted her?”

“You gave it a *name*, and you revealed to it that it has a gender. You planted in the specimen a seed of identity. Now, it will begin to think of itself as human again.” Kim’s face went white as Sandra continued. “You’ve undone nearly a year of mental conditioning.” Sandra’s blue eyes gleamed. “I’m afraid my team will have no option but to have this specimen destroyed.”

“*No!*” In a single movement, Kim launched herself over the table and tackled Sandra. The maneuver launched both women across the break room in Charon’s minuscule gravity, and they collided a few seconds later against the opposite wall. Kim’s left hand found the woman’s throat, while her right drew back to deliver a vicious hook—

“*Stand down, Lieutenant!*” McKinney barked.

The Navy officer in Kim hesitated. She looked into the other woman’s eyes—eyes that burned with fear and contempt. Sandra took in a breath and swallowed, but said nothing.

She felt a hand gently press into her right arm. “She’s not worth it, Kim,” John cautioned. “She’s not worth your career.” Kim looked at him with anguish-filled eyes and reluctantly released Sandra from her grip.

“Lieutenant Masterson, Doctor Matthews, you will both formally report to me at 0700 tomorrow,” Commodore McKinney said. “Doctor Reed, I apologize for Lieutenant Masterson’s behavior. If you’ll come with me, I’ll escort you back to your quarters.”

Sandra nodded and collected herself. “Thank you, Commodore.” She walked out of the break room, with one of McKinney’s two guards immediately behind her.

John returned to his rounds within the hospital. Kim returned to Stephanie’s room and spent the rest of the night, and part of the early morning, talking to the young girl. By 0200, both had fallen asleep.

When Kim woke up three hours later, Stephanie was already gone. The nurses that ran to answer the screams coming from the room opened the door to find the Lieutenant curled up in a ball, shaking and sobbing with rage.

Kim took a seat next to John in Commodore McKinney’s waiting room. If Kim looked bedraggled, John looked even more so, for she at least had slept. Both lieutenants wore their parade dress uniforms, complete with rank insignia and rows of ribbons along their left breasts signifying their accomplishments as commissioned officers. Commodore

McKinney's male secretary, a lieutenant junior grade, nodded at them. "The Commodore will see you now," he said.

As the two glided into McKinney's office, the door closed behind them. The two junior officers saluted; Commodore McKinney returned the salute. "Stand at parade rest." As they did so, she said, "You are both fine officers with exemplary records. I'm not going to introduce a black mark into either one of those records, as much as Doctor Reed might want me to.

"Off the record, I agree with both of your arguments and *most* of your actions last night. The way Terran Intel has conducted this research is appallingly unethical; and God help us if the press *ever* got a substantial lead on what they are doing. Therefore, I'm not going to make any notes of last night's incident in either of your records; and I promise you that I will evaluate their *other* research projects here at Winter Base with a fine-tooth comb.

"Unfortunately, just because I agree with what you said doesn't mean I can turn a blind eye to what you actually *did*." McKinney continued as she crossed her arms, "I cannot assure the integrity of Terran Intel's research, nor the safety of Doctor Reed, as long as the two of you remain on Winter Base. Stand at attention."

McKinney faced John as he and Kim came back to attention. She gave the doctor a hard stare as she spoke. "Lieutenant Matthews, the order I gave you to turn Stephanie over to Terran Intel was legal, and your refusal to obey it is insubordination." She then turned and regarded Kim. "Lieutenant Masterson, if we were in peacetime, I would ask you to resign your commission after your assault on Doctor Reed last night." Kim's face

flushed red, but she remained silent as the Commodore continued. "However, we are *not* in peacetime, so resigning your commission is not an option.

"You will both depart for Earth in three hours on our next shuttle out," McKinney said. "I will remind you that *all* research that takes place here does so under Infrared-level classification, and you are aware that the punishment for leaking anything classified at that level is execution.

"My report to Admiral Tenaka will indicate that I have admonished you both and that I have demoted both of you to lieutenant, junior grade—which I have suspended, contingent upon maintaining your outstanding performance at your next assignments." McKinney met each of the officers' eyes with an appraising gaze. "But screw up again out there, and the Admiral *will* take you down. Are we clear?"

"Yes, Ma'am!" Kim and John said in unison.

McKinney nodded. "Good." The Commodore came to attention again. "Dismissed."

McKinney sighed as the door closed behind them and rubbed her temples, certain that she had aged more in the last twelve hours than in the previous twelve years. She glanced down at her desk and at the rough sketch of Stephanie that lay upon it. She had won from Doctor Reed a promise that the doctor would make Stephanie's death painless and humane, and that she would limit her research subjects to adult volunteers.

Perhaps that constituted a victory, but it left McKinney in no mood to celebrate.

"What's your next step?" The image of Constance DuChevalier, director of Terran Intelligence, regarded Reed with detachment and mild disinterest.

The doctor glanced toward Specimen 021, then back at the projection of Director DuChavalier. "First and foremost, I'll have a couple of loose ends to tie up. The commanding officer has asked me to restrict my research to adult volunteers, and I've agreed. Our first 'volunteer' will be the *idiot* who fucked up security around the research and development areas. From there, we'll need only minor changes to our recruiting programs to get the bodies we need."

"What about the specimen that escaped?"

Reed glanced toward Specimen 021 and nodded to a guard standing at her office door. The guard pulled his sidearm, leveled it at the child and pulled the trigger. Laser vaporized bone and white matter, slicing through Specimen 021's medulla and trachea. The deformed creature was dead before it crumpled to the floor.

Reed smiled. "Consider it taken care of, director."