

My Name is Black

By Ali Jon Smith

Historian's note: This story was originally to be part of the corpus of eyewitness testimony about the *Belt War*, but was cut due to its excessive length, lack of connection with the rest of the events in the official record and the poor reliability of the sources involved. In the absence of the rest of the corpus, allow me to present some basic context: **Gellmar** was just one planet in a war that saw combat on a dozen worlds. Both the **Syndicate** Empire and the alien **scythrial** made widespread use of **Electron Disruption Pulse (EDP)** defences which rendered electronic devices, chemical explosives and combustion engines useless near the frontlines. Although the war was fought across a vast stretch of interstellar space, it was often fought by foot soldiers armed with spears and crossbows. No satellite survived the first few hours of the conflict and intelligence had to be gathered by teams of observers in unpowered gliders.

The other three in the glider hooted with laughter as Orhana Pamok vomited into a paper bag. Gliders were supposed to be gentle, but the near-vertical rocket journey up to the stratosphere was something else entirely.

"Oh man, my head! My ears! What the hell is happening? I'm turning to lead!" she whined as she was pummelled by the G-force.

Albus Orfman took the bag from her trembling hands and held it open. "Best get it all out now Orhana, if you can," he shouted over the roar of the rocket engine. "You'll get used to it. I chundered on my first trip up too."

In front of them, their dwarf pilot, Ericus, strained over his shoulder to see what was going on. "Ye gads! Best not have much more in you Corporal Pamok, we only have one bag!" he jibed.

The joke did nothing to soothe Orhana. Her brain and stomach were fighting to get where her liver used to be. Her ears might as well have had firecrackers in. In short, she was regretting volunteering for Gellmar's Recon Corps.

What the fuck am I doing here? Four weeks ago I was in a lovely commune where we didn't even lock the doors. I drew pictures and baked. Now this!

The roaring rocket engines of their carrier craft died down and their ascent levelled off. Ericus detached them from their piggy-back sledge and brought the morphic wings out to make wide pinions. Blissfully, the glider was plunged into silence and the lead weights lifted from Orhana's body.

"How's that now?" asked Albus Orfman.

Orhana could not see much of Albus's face as it was covered with a thermal flight cap that came down over his ears and met a collar that sprouted up over his chin, but she got the impression he was genially smiling. She appreciated his warmth. Ericus could split her sides with his gallows humour down on the ground, but right now all she wanted was a steady hand on her shoulder.

"Better. Thanks for being so quick with the bag, Albus," said Orhana. "You guys really do this every other day? I'm not sure I'm going to be able to cope."

"We were all rookies once," assured Albus. "And Ericus usually makes sure it's a smooth ride from here."

Ericus twisted in his seat and grinned back at them. "Only when you're nice to me. I take bribes, dating contacts and compliments, in that order of preference. Might be up to you, Orhana. Albus hasn't given me a compliment in weeks. I showed him my wee-wee like he asked and everything."

Orhana stuck out her tongue, which made Ericus's craggy face crinkle in amusement.

"Looks like I'll have to find us some turbulence then...But seriously, we are good for a little while. We're right up in the roof of the world now. From here I'll glide us to the target area pretty quickly. But then we'll have to drop altitude to get you three the best look at the ground, and that means on the way back it'll be a lot of slow soaring on thermals to keep us aloft. The target area will be saturated with EDP, so we needn't worry about any guided missiles trying to get friendly."

"Do the Scythrial try to shoot you down often?" asked Orhana.

"Yeah, every time we do what we're supposed to and find out where they are. Most of the time we're too high to hit, but they still try and use mechanically-launched flak and blinders," said Ericus.

"Blinders?" Orhana questioned.

"Magnesium flares. They flash so bright they can make your retina resemble my scrotum. Speaking of which." Ericus reached into a pocket and produced a small patch. He snapped the patch over his left eye.

"What is that for?" asked Orhana.

"If they manage to get a blinder in our path, then at least I'll have one good eye left. I just swap the patch over. Means we have two chances to get this thing home."

Brutal, thought Orhana. It was the kind of unfamiliar pragmatism one had to have in war. "What do *we* do if they start using blinders."

"If you start seeing flashes, stop looking outside!" said Ericus.

Sergeant Welka Gunthin had been aloof through the banter, but now she extended one wrinkled finger and used it to deliver two sharp taps to the viewing optics in front of Orhana.

"Time to start doing your job, Corporal Pamok," she croaked.

Her tone oozed condescension. Orhana guessed that before the war this woman must have been a college tutor, because there was just no way one adult talked to another like that, unless they were used to talking to teenagers.

Having to take orders rankled with Orhana. She had been avoiding authority her whole life. So she slowly put her eye to the optic, making sure Sergeant Gunthin knew she was only doing her job, not jumping at Gunthin's orders.

Welka Gunthin just rubbed Orhana the wrong way. As well as the glider's senior officer, she was their aerial botanist. It was her job to identify floral species that would give a clue to ground conditions; she was great at picking out swampy areas and dense undergrowth. This part of Gellmar suffered tropical deluges every evening and the geology was loose sand which eroded like grains in an hourglass. New streams, fords,

lakes and swamps formed so fast that maps a week old could be out of date. She was knowledgeable, no doubt. Competent, probably. But so damn haughty.

Orhana looked through her recon scope. It showed a view of the land below dotted with trees like mould cultures. Raging rivers ran between like trickles of perspiration. She could zoom in or swivel the image to see any direction.

“Oh, my! It’s so beautiful from up here!” Orhana exclaimed.

“Yeah, I know. Kinda makes up for the rough takeoffs,” said Albus.

There was a little marker on her screen which showed the settings the other two were using, so she could match it and see exactly what they did. She set it now to see what Albus was looking at. There was a Militia barracks way below them; at maximum zoom it was possible to make out buildings, track ways and a fuel dump. It was not as pretty as the rest of the landscape.

“Okay you two, there’s no telling what you’ll be seeing with your freaky eyes,” said Sergeant Gunthin. “Try drawing me the same picture of that base and we can compare and contrast later.”

‘Freaky eyes,’ how many times had Orhana heard that phrase?

Orhana Pamok was a tetrachromat. One of the tiny number of women born with a mutation on their X chromosome that allowed them to see usefully and in four colours rather than three. The average human could discern about one-million hues. She could see closer to one-*hundred*-million hues.

Orhana only needed to look at a river and she could tell how deep it was. She could see the gradations of milky blue as it deposited fine silt on the shallow inside bends and the rich green of the more energetic, faster flow on the opposite bank. Determining good crossing points was one of the reasons she was on the team. The other was that she could tell leaf-green paint and actual leaves apart like coal and chalk; camouflage may as well have been a bright yellow flag to her.

Orhana took up her sketch pad and stylus, and began trying to make a scale image of what she saw. It had to be in black and white, there was no room for coloured inks in the tiny glider, so all the hues she could see had to be described with letters and symbols. She worked as fast as possible before the base got too far out of sight. It ended up wobbly and overloaded with annotation. And the cold was terrible; even with the thermal flight suit, her hands were numb in minutes. She could feel the tendons seizing up, slowing down and refusing to do what she told them. She looked across to Albus; he was making short confident strokes, barely looking up from his spy scope to see the sketch pad.

Freaky eyes.

If Orhana had freaky eyes, then Albus had downright outrageous ones. He was only a dichromat, which made him colour blind by traditional standards, but the wavelengths he *could* see really set him apart. One of the pigments in his eyes picked up was ultraviolet. That allowed him to see deep into the invisible spectrum that most humans never even suspected exists. He could see the secret sexual language of flower petals and the tiny hidden sparks that pre-empted lightning strikes. But, perhaps most pertinently, he could see the otherwise invisible signals the scythrial used to communicate with when their radios were blocked by EDP.

Between the three observers, nothing should have been able to get past them.

“So, Orhana,” began Ericus, “I hear you can make quite a fortune as tetrachromat. Through the breeding programs I mean.”

“Not me I’m afraid. Never donated any of my eggs,” said Orhana.

The Syndicate had strict rules on human reproduction; absolutely no cloning and no genetic modification. All developments of the human race had to come from naturally occurring mutations and the parent could not be forced to breed or donate without consent. However, it was seen as a priority of the human eugenics program to increase the percentage of functionally tetrachromat women, so they offered big cash incentives for harvesting eggs.

“Never donated? How come?” asked Ericus. “I would have thought they’d be clamouring for a top class tetrachromat like you.”

“Oh, trust me, they were. I got visits weekly from the Eugenics people. But I couldn’t imagine having thousands of daughters out there, never knowing who or where they were. I’m thirty, so I’ve probably lost half my eggs already, but that still leaves a hundred and fifty thousand for them to collect. Imagine that? A hundred-fifty-thousand daughters raised by other people. Every time I met a girl I’d be asking ‘is this one of mine?’” She glanced up from her scope to Albus. “Have you ever donated?”

“Me? Yeah all the time! Every time I jerk off they pay me. I’ll die a rich man, for sure. It never bothered me, the thought of all those kids. And I can make fifty-million or more a go! They told me samples of my sperm were being sent off-world.” Albus giggled, “It always tickled me, the thought that in a thousand years they’re going to find my genes all over the Syndicate. They’ll imagine I was the biggest playboy in the galaxy. A star-hopping Casanova of the highest order!”

“Wow,” said Orhana. Despite the opposite world view, she found herself grudgingly respecting his confidence.

“I wish someone wanted my genes,” said Ericus. “Try going through life at two-thirds size. I wouldn’t wish it on anyone.”

“It kept you off the frontline,” said Welka. “I’d rather be up here than fight scythrial down there.”

“Yeah, but even then, only just. The Militia sends its shortest five percent of recruits to fight in tanks because of the limited space in them. But the very lightest, the bottom one percent, we get made into glider pilots instead. It keeps the weight down. And I only just scraped into the gliders.”

Albus pulled away from his scope and slapped his hand to his forehead in exasperation. “Ericus, you missed a trick! The shortest five percent will almost all be female. You could have had unlimited access to a squad of greased-up, battle-horny women the same height as you!”

Ericus stared at Albus for a few seconds. His face grew red. “Oh heck! You’re right! I never thought of it like that! ...So be it, starting tomorrow I’ll stuff my face with as much food as I can pilfer, beg and steal. I’ll get so fat that the glider won’t even get off the ground. Then they’ll have to move me to a tank squad...no, a tank *regiment*!”

Albus and Orhana chuckled.

Sergeant Gunthin shook her head and said, “I’m going to pretend I didn’t hear this conversation.”

Albus stopped laughing and began looking wistful. After a few moments he spoke. "You may be small, you might not get laid quite as often as you *think* others do, but at least you can guess what life is like for everyone else. With my eyes, I'll never know what the world is like for you. You know how many colours there are in a rainbow for me? Three. I've never been able to stare at one and go 'wow, that's beautiful'."

There are ten for me and it always takes my breath away, thought Orhana. Suddenly she felt very sorry for Albus.

"Bah! You artists are all the same," said Ericus. "Always moaning about something."

"You're an artist Albus?" asked Orhana.

"Yeah, I draw a bit. I just wish I could see like a normal trichromat. It sounds so much more *exciting*," said Albus.

That gave Orhana an idea. Perhaps there was a way she could help.

The mission was a success. They reconnoitred the designated area and spotted very few scythrial. Thankfully, no flak came their way. Just as Ericus had warned, the journey back took a good deal of time, circling in the updrafts to gain altitude and then vaulting across the areas of low pressure on borrowed air. Each time the little glider had to spiral upwards, Orhana had felt her stomach lurch, but she managed to hold it in until they touched down.

As soon as they were on solid ground they peeled off their thermal suits and silly flight caps to stretch their legs. In the late afternoon sun they started to look like respectable humans again. Albus accosted Orhana almost immediately.

"Orhana, we need to go over those pictures, make a final composite to send to command. We can use the equipment in my room, if you don't mind Welka?"

Sergeant Gunthin waved the concern away, "By all means, I can't think of anyone better to tutor Corporal Pamok."

Orhana readily agreed. She was glad she was to be apprenticed by Albus and not Welka.

Ericus volunteered to drive them from the airfield to their barracks. He said that now he was aiming for a tank regiment, he needed experience of driving ground vehicles. It was good to be out of the EDP of the combat zone. It meant that they could use electrical engines, computers, radios and all the other trappings of civilization. Ericus played his music loudly and drove erratically as he struggled to reach the peddles.

"You know the good thing about a tank?" said Ericus, "One, lever for the left track, and one for the right. No peddles or steering wheel. It's even easier to drive than this thing!"

"You're doing fine!" Orhana shouted above the warbling of a soprano songstress and the gravel being chewed beneath the tyres. After taking off in a glider strapped to a rocket, a wobbly ground did not seem all that scary.

They came to the accommodation block and Ericus let them out. He made good on his promise and headed straight to the mess hall for an oversized super. Albus invited Orhana into his room.

It was meticulously arranged. Even though the room was full of maps, light boxes, compasses, scale rulers, pantographs and other cartography equipment, every single item was neatly stacked in its own niche on one of the desks. There were no personal effects to be seen anywhere, except, perhaps, if you included the bed. It looked more like a work room than a living room. It even smelt more of ink than human bodies.

“The first thing we should do Orhana, is check our plans of the Militia base against the ground maps we have of it. That will show us how accurate your rendering is and tell us what the things you see in the air relate to on the ground.” Albus opened a filing cabinet, thumbed through it for a few seconds and produced a large scale plan of the Militia base.

“So do we scan our maps into the computer and run some translation software on it?” asked Orhana.

“Most of the time, yes. But we have to be prepared to do this all under EDP. If that happens, then we only have tracing paper and pens. So it is customary for new spotters to do their first few translations by hand, just to get used to it.”

“By hand! But that could take all night!” protested Orhana.

“It could. Probably will. But the canteen boys and girls don’t mind sending us spotters up some food and caffeine. They know how hard we work.”

Orhana sighed. Sighed, and allowed Albus to guide her through how to turn an oblique sketch into a vertical plan without using a computer.

The process was laborious and technical, although Albus raced through his like it was as easy as breathing. Not only did Orhana take longer on each line, but she had so many more lines to do. Her messy sketches of colour gradients were a nightmare to translate and even harder to do so in a manner someone other than her might understand. She had words for colours that she had made-up, which did not fit on a colour wheel: ‘milkweed’, for where clay and mica were dissolved in the estuary of a river; ‘ilver’ for where blood was visible beneath the scales of a fish; ‘octarine’ for the last few rays of a sunset. None of these were useful to anyone else.

When, finally, she was done, Albus took their drawings and overlaid them onto the plan of the Militia base. Orhana was immediately struck by just how accurate Albus’s map was. The edges of the buildings and routes of the roads almost exactly lined up with the ground survey.

“My word! How did you do that from so high up!” exclaimed Orhana.

“Practice. Simple as that. You get a feel for what works and what doesn’t, how to do things and the little tricks you can use to make free hand drawing more accurate. You’ll get there.”

Orhana suddenly felt very inadequate. She knew she would never get there. Even her free hand drawings with the object right in front of her were not that good. Let alone from a moving glider with numb hands. She braced herself for what her own map would look like.

The lines were ridiculously far out. Squares became parallelograms and straight roads took peculiar curves to their destination. The Militia base looked less like an ordered compound and more like a hotchpotch of shanty buildings. And the entire thing was shifted half a kilometre to the north of its true position.

“That’s terrible,” said Orhana.

“No, no its not. It’s not bad for a first attempt. Not great. But you’ve got all the basics, not missed anything out. You just need a bit of practice scaling at an oblique angle.” Albus smiled at her. She could tell he was doing his best not to crush her spirit, to encourage her in a fatherly fashion. “There is just one thing...why have you drawn this road differently?” Albus pointed to a road that ran parallel to a river and into the base.

“Oh, that? It looked a different colour to me. Like damp-ish mud. I guessed it was because it was in use more.”

It was Albus’s turn to look stunned. “You can tell that?”

“Ah-uh,” said Orhana.

“Just a minute,” Albus shifted Orhana’s map so the road more closely overlaid his own version. Just at the head of the road, beside a clearing Albus had hatched part of the river.

“What is that hatching?” asked Orhana.

“That is something that strongly reflects UV light. Organic fluid most likely. Probably not blood since this is behind the lines, but perhaps (knowing our soldiers) urine...which means, soldiers are moving up and down this road to the clearing...a training field? And when their bladders are full, taking a piss in the river. So the majority of the soldiers on the base spend their day outside of it?” Albus beamed at Orhana. “That’s the kind of detail that turns ordinary recon into battle-winning recon. If this was an enemy camp, we’d know how best to infiltrate it. Our eyes work well together.”

They did. Orhana had to admit it.

They were up for many more hours translating the other sketches they’d taken during the flight. Albus carefully guided Orhana, taught her how to hold the stylus like a brush rather than a pen to avoid the freezing numbness of the glider and forced her to drink more caffeine every time she started to look tired. He said speed was everything with recon. Half a day could mean the difference between a unit intercepting the enemy just in time, or too late.

They finished a few hours before sun rise.

“I thought we’d never be done,” said Orhana.

“The nights are always long after a flight. That’s why the Militia only sends us up every two days, while the weather is good.”

“I’d try and sleep, but I think you’ve got me so wired on stimulants, I’d need to run a marathon first,” said Orhana.

“It’s times like this, I like to read a book, or watch the telecasts,” said Albus.

“Albus, you said in the glider you were an artist. Can I see your work?”

Albus looked reluctant. “I’d rather not. Not that I mind you seeing them and all, but you know. I don’t think of myself as an artist, just someone good with a pen. It gets embarrassing sometimes.”

“Please, I know what you mean, but I’m *really* curious,” she pressed.

Albus rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders. “Fine, just don’t start jibbing me the way Ericus does.”

“Promise. Wouldn’t even contemplate it.”

Albus went to one of his cabinets and picked out a folder. It looked over-stuffed and ready to split its seams. He unzipped it and a torrent of paper fell out. Orhana picked up one piece. It was a portrait of Ericus. It was a brilliant likeness; every crag and cleft of his face had been captured in exquisite detail. She felt like she could reach out and tug his stubble.

"That's amazing," said Orhana.

"Yeah, that's how he got to know that I like drawing. I asked him to pose for me because he has such a strange face. He hasn't let me hear the end of it."

"The lighting is just perfect." Orhana leafed through the folder. All the pictures were in the same style; precise copies of the parent object in black and white, often with strong lighting, producing large areas masked with shadow or just plain black. There were pictures of a few other people, and lots pictures of buildings and vehicles with hard straight lines, but by far the most common subject was that of the scythrial; alien anatomies, sometimes in action poses, sometimes at rest or dead, and sometimes just details of skin or sensory organs.

"I like to draw the scythrial. They are so mutable. Much more difference than between humans. More surprises," said Albus.

"They're simply wonderful. You always use paper?"

"Always. The texture, the smell, the freedom. I just prefer it. And there's not much point doing it digitally unless you're wanting to share it with someone. My drawing, it's just for me."

"I agree completely," said Orhana.

Albus raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. He didn't know if she was just agreeing with him, or if she had some kind of artistic knowledge herself.

Orhana continued to look through the work, and finally she came to a few small pictures of what looked like Gellmar's stingless bees. But they were odd. The patterns on them were all wrong.

"What are these?" she asked.

"That's what I see when I look at a bee. The patterns they show each other, but not us."

"Wow! That's something you don't see often, beautiful."

"You really like it?" asked Albus.

"Yeah."

"Then keep it. My apology for keeping you up all night."

"Thank you...Actually, there's something I want to show you," said Orhana.

"Oh yes?"

"But you'll have to come to my room."

"Umm, okay." Albus looked slightly nervous, as if Orhana had suggested something taboo. But not so nervous that he was unwilling to go along with it.

Orhana grabbed his hand and tugged him across the dormitory building to her own room.

The contrast could not have been greater; in Orhana's room there were things everywhere. Clothes were heaped up on desk space, drawings littered the floor and small knick-knacks she had found around the base were lying on the bed. And the smell was

very definitely stale and hers, slight offset by the bottle of faux-jasmine that had spilled on her dressing table.

It was obvious Albus was taken aback by it all. He was still trying to get his head around the chaos when Orhana slid one of the heaps of clothes onto the floor and peeled a sheet of paper, almost as large as her, off from the desk.

"I have a confession. I'm an artist too," said Orhana.

She turned the paper round and revealed an explosion of colours. A great crimson spiral was at the picture's heart, but numerous other spirals sprang from it in all the paints there were pigments for. The spirals intertwined and battled for space with electric filigrees, aquamarine arcs and spots and splodges of violet. In among all this she had collaged strips of gold leaf and textured the paper with cloth and creases. It looked frenzied and random at first, but there was an esoteric sense of order, if you stared.

"This is my attempt to show other people what it is like seeing in four colours," said Orhana.

"There's so much going on, I don't know where to look!" Albus rubbed his stubble in contemplation. "You realise I can only see this in black and white, more or less?"

"Yeah, that's a shame. But there was something I wanted to try."

"Try?"

Orhana shifted some clothing and scraps of paper on the floor. "Sit down for a minute." Albus did as he was told and they sat cross legged opposite each other. "I had two brothers, both red-green colour blind. Their Y chromosome couldn't cope with my mother's mutated X. But, one of my brothers was really into psychedelics. He gave me this." Orhana produced a small vial with an eye dropper in it. "He said when he used it, he could see colours he had no name for. You see, colour blindness is a problem with the eye, not the brain. The brain has a whole host of receptors just waiting to be stimulated. This, it won't make you see things like everyone else does, but it will let you see some of the variety everyone else does."

"An hallucinogenic? I don't think that's a good idea Orhana. What if I start believing I can fly?"

"It's not like that. It's perfectly safe. I take it all the time to inspire my artwork. It just makes you see things a bit differently. Your senses are more vivid, you'll see extra colours and movement and it gives you a real sense of introspection, like a chance to really get to know yourself. It only last for a few hours and I'll be here all the time, just to make sure."

"Really? It's safe?" questioned Albus.

"Almost totally. I looked it up on the Syndicate pharmaceutical database myself."

"And it will make me see like you do?"

"It might," she cautioned.

He looked pained, like a fracture was slowly working its way through his disciplined shell.

"...Ok. I'll give it a go." Albus relented.

Orhana took the eye dropper and held Albus's mouth open. "One drop is all you need." A single crystal clear bead fell from the pipette and splashed on Albus's tongue. Orhana tapped his chin shut. "Now swallow."

Albus swallowed. "Now what?"

"Now we wait."

It took about an hour for the drug to take effect. Orhana could see Albus getting impatient, so she tried to draw him out on his artwork and how he got involved with the Militia recon corps. It turned out they stemmed from the same thing; he wanted to put his mutant eyes to use. The recon corps was the best place for them and so he had learnt to draw to maximise his gift.

The first indication Orhana had of the drug taking effect was when Albus began staring at his hands. Soon he was giggling like a child seeing them for the first time.

"Hehe. That's so weird. The angle between each finger adds up to more than the angle between my thumb and little finger. And the back of my hand keeps moving, like a whirlpool."

For a further hour, this is all Albus did. Stare at his hands and giggle. Orhana found it a little tiresome, but knew she should have expected it. *Get to the good stuff*, she thought to herself.

Eventually Albus gave his hands a rest and started looking at Orhana's artwork. He picked up the piece with the great crimson spiral and gasped. "Oohh! I totally get it now! It's beautiful. I mean, even more beautiful." He asked to see all of her work and as he thumbed through it he smiled or laughed at each piece. "You know, I think I *can* see new colours, in the edges of the silver you've embedded in the picture."

"Good, that's where they should be." Orhana was pleased the drug was starting to have the desired effect. It often affected shiny and bright objects most of all.

Albus pointed to one patch of a picture. "This bit looks like Ericus's glider. And here, that's like the river we saw this morning."

"You're right." Orhana lied. She could not see the objects Albus could, but she knew how otherwise abstract patterns could transform into the likeness of real objects.

When Orhana could find no more pictures to give Albus, he amused himself by hugging the wall, amazed by the illusion that it was heaving, almost breathing. Orhana found his sense of wonder endearing. It reminded her of the first time she had tried the psychedelic drug (there had been a spilt glass of water she swore was alive). Albus Orfman was a talented illustrator, a virtuous patriot and a man who was well in touch with his sense of fascination. Orhana could feel very basic, familiar hormones filling the primal part of her brain when she looked at him.

There was a glimmer of light on the horizon; the sun was just about to come up.

"Albus, let's go outside."

Albus allowed himself to be led into the cold night air and they found a spot on a low bank to watch the sun rise. The first glimmer of the orb crested the misty tree line. *Octarine*, thought Orhana.

"Can you see the colours Albus?"

"Oh yes, I can."

"Can you see the reds, the blues, the greens?"

"Oh, yes, it's so bright. So wonderful."

"Can you see the purples, the gold the pink?"

“Yes, *so many* colours!”

Orhana was well pleased with herself. This was exactly what she had hoped for. Albus’s excitement overwhelmed her and she found herself laughing along with him, gleeful at the inane and surprised by the ordinary.

She goaded him back into her room before someone on the base should notice the two lunatics wondering around in the early hours. Back in the dark and warm, Orhana felt safe and exhilarated all at once.

“Albus, I’ve got one last surprise for you,” she said.

She dropped her trousers so she was naked from the waist down. Her big pale buttocks caught the first light of the day and shone like the moon. She squeezed Albus’s hand and slapped it against her flesh, so he knew it was okay to touch. Then she kissed him.

When they woke up in Orhana’s dishevelled bed, it was mid-afternoon and Albus’s hand was still on Orhana’s buttocks. Albus’s surprise had not been the sex. It may well have been *surprising*, but it was a mutual treat, not just for him. The surprise was on the back of Orhana’s left thigh where Albus was tracing invisible lines with his finger tips. Invisible to everyone but him.

“You like my tattoo?” Orhana purred.

“I love it.”

On Orhana’s right thigh, where Albus’s hand rarely strayed, sprouted one of Orhana’s psychedelic spirals. It grew and enveloped the entirety of her right buttock, bright with all the colours and nuances of one of her paintings. Then it spread onto the small of her back and moulded into her hips and spine. But coming from the other direction, from under Albus’s dancing fingers, there was a UV dragon. It wound round her left leg, up over the thigh, over the sizable mound of her posterior and entwined with the spirals on her back where it revealed a gaping maw of sharp teeth. She had not seen it in years, but could feel the slightly raised ridges where Albus stroked the tattoo scar.

“Orhana Pamok, why, in the good name of the Syndicate, do you have a UV tattoo?”

“I used to have a light in my room which made the tattoo fluoresce. There was a time in my life when I thought it would be the coolest thing in the world if, when I took a boy back to my room and made him take me from behind, suddenly he’d have a ferocious dragon staring back at him.”

“Ha ha! Oh my, you bad girl! Did that put any of them off their stroke?”

“No. And it didn’t seem to put you off your stroke last night. Does it still look ok? I’ve put a few kilos on since I got it. I was worried it had stretched horribly.”

“It looks like it was done yesterday, and you’ve got one beautiful arse to show it on.” Albus emphasised this by biting the tattooed cheek. Orhana gave a girlish shriek.

“Ok, I believe you! I’ve still got to sit on that thing.”

Albus’s hands moved from her rump and traced up her spine, only stopping when it hit a lump at the base of her neck. Albus paused for a couple of seconds, then realised the lump was Orhana’s contraceptive implant.

“Imagine what the Eugenics people would say if they saw us. Two of their prize freaks humping. We could make a fortune,” said Albus.

“Ha ha. You want to film it? Show them some proof?”

“I’ll pass. This time,” said Albus.

“They’d be so happy. They’d offer to have my implant out in a second. They know the only way they’re getting a kid out of me is through my own womb,” said Orhana.

“You’ve really never donated? It’s kept me afloat over the years. Meant I could spend all my time perfecting the drawing techniques,” said Albus.

“No, never. I did the art for a living,” said Orhana.

“For a living? There’s really enough demand for your work?” said Albus.

“There’s never enough demand. It’s always a struggle to pay the bills. But I don’t just do the psychedelic stuff. I do illustrations and private commissions as well. I just don’t *enjoy* doing them quite as much. As much as taking orders from Welka sits wrong with me, it’s actually quite nice to be in the Militia and have everything taken care of for a while. Gives me a chance to let loose and just paint what I feel like,” said Orhana.

“That’s good. I want to see how you go about making something so well planned look so spontaneous and chaotic,” said Albus.

Orhana yawned and rolled on top of Albus so her breasts dangled in his face.

“Most things about me are spontaneous and chaotic,” she said, and they made love once more.

It became a regular thing for them. They would go up in the glider every other day, spend a night translating their sketches, then spend the next day sleeping, making art and getting physical. Occasionally, to add some spice, they would use Orhana’s pipette and call on the psychedelic haze. At first, they took turns, but as Albus got more used to it, they felt confident enough to try it together.

Their skills blossomed. Under Albus’s tutelage Orhana became much better at making accurate plans of what she saw. Their combination of eyes proved perfect for picking up details no other recon crew could: They could identify the chemicals that leaked out of scythrial tankers; they could see fields of scythrial food hidden below the canopy of the forest; they could tell the difference between human and scythrial blood and bring news of victory or defeat long before official reports made their way out of the EDP zone. They became known in the aerial recon world as the second best thing to an orbital satellite.

At the same time, Albus was inspired by Orhana to take that leap from ‘technical illustrator’ to ‘artist’. He kept his monochrome style with its heavy use of shadow, but now he branched into pictures of things he had not already seen. He tried reworking his portraits as caricatures and turning his scythrial into surreal chimeras with human body parts. But his favourite new subject was Orhana. He drew her in every pose he could think of, although most of them focused on her ass and the tattoos they held. In one picture he extended the tattoos over her whole body. In another they were leaking out from under her flight uniform. The only thing that was consistent was that in every picture he had drawn tiny spirals in her pupils. *Freaky eyes*.

They did not advertise their relationship, or recreational habits, but Orhana was pretty sure the others had guessed something was going on. Sergeant Gunthin in

particular could not help but have noticed that they were always together when she came to cross-reference her maps. However, nothing was ever said about it, not in their presence at least.

It was two months after Orhana's initial flight when she had her first up-close encounter with the scythrial. The rocket takeoffs had become so common place that she no longer felt any discomfort as the glider was wrenched just shy of orbit. She had learnt to breathe deeply, endure the g-force and swallow regularly.

The other change was in Ericus, who was now looking distinctly podgy. Rolls of flab overtopped his seat and made him fidget regularly.

"Damn, I'm starting to rethink this idea. I'm having to leave my trousers unbuttoned and the sweat caught in my belly button is itchier than a nest of hoar bugs. Smellier too. I'm going to have to buy new clothes soon."

Albus shook his head. "But think of the prize Ericus! You've got to stick with it!"

"Bah! Alright for some!" said Ericus, shooting a glance between Albus and Orhana. Then he dipped his hand into a bag of food he'd bought with him. *The man's dedication to his cock is admirable*, thought Orhana.

Down on the ground they were following a major arterial river. It was still early in the day and the low sun was reflecting off its surface in dazzling reds and yellows. It wound through a broad green plain with occasional clearings where floods had uprooted the vegetation and stripped the topsoil. There was very little human activity; this was deep in the forested zone where armies feared sudden ambushes. However, Orhana could see a second river, not quite running parallel to the first, but kissing it in many places.

"Hey guys, what's that?" she asked

Albus and Welka synchronised their view with Orhana's.

"I don't see anything," said Welka.

"Me neither," said Albus.

"Kind of like a river, but a different colour. Greenish, not bluish?"

"Nope. Maybe an old channel? Different silts?" suggested Albus.

"Note it down anyway. Who knows what could be useful," said Welka.

Orhana put her nose back to the scope and traced where the river kissed the mysterious ribbon once more and widened out into a deep lake.

"Shit! Guys, look at this!" urged Ericus.

The three reconnoiters raised their heads and looked through Ericus's front view screen. Directly ahead, a few kilometres above them, was a scythrial airship. Orhana felt a flutter of nerves in her heart.

"That thing can't attack us can it?" she asked.

Ericus paused for a long while, much longer than she had hoped for. "...no, not usually. But sometimes we put gas cannons in our gliders so we can take down an airship...and sometimes they put gas cannons in their airships so they can protect themselves."

"Fuck."

Orhana wheeled her scope up to look at the helium airship and found Albus's settings overlap. At maximum zoom, she could just make out three figures in a small basket beneath it, and an array of familiar looking scopes protruding underneath them. One of the figures raised a clawed arm and motioned directly towards them. *Well that's that then, they've seen us*, she thought to herself.

"Corporal Pamok, Corporal Orfman, eyes to the ground please. Let Ericus worry about what's above us," insisted Welka Gunthin. Orhana did as she was instructed, but Albus lingered looking at the airship. "Corporal Orfman! I don't wish to repeat myself."

"Just a second Sergeant!" Albus stayed focused on the airship. "Ah, got it! The airship is signalling using UV flashes." He swung the scope around. "And there, on the ground, a return signal. No two, three...five! There are at least five units on the ground responding to the airship's instructions." Albus made a quick note of where he had seen them coming from.

"Ground units? Okay folks, we need to stay sharp now, this is the critical bit. We need as much information as possible. Numbers, positions, types of vehicles, tracks, buildings, fortifications, supply dumps...everything," said Welka.

Orhana focused on the area where the flashes had come from. At first she could not make out anything through the foliage of the forest, then details resolved for her. Disturbed ground, thinning trees, movement, smoke clouds, camouflage netting, forded streams. All the signs of large scale vehicle movement. At last she caught sight of a scythrial – barely more than a dot. Then when she knew what to look for, another and another. She swept across a broad area of the landscape, and wherever she stopped, she found one.

"Guys, I'm seeing a lot. I mean, really a lot," she said.

"I concur," said Albus. "Check it out."

Orhana synced with Albus and found herself viewing a clearing in the trees. There were scythrial-dots all over it. The thing was, they were moving swiftly from one tree line to the next, so that each dot was only visible for a few seconds; but for as long as they looked the density did not let up.

"We must have just seen five hundred scythrial go by," said Albus. "Times that by the two kilometres we can see them over, we are looking at half a million scythrial."

"Half a million!" croaked Ericus. "Why that's a full fucking army!"

"It's a lot," echoed Welka. "I think we should return to base."

"I haven't finished my sketches yet," said Orhana.

"We can sortie again for details, but this information has to get back to base right now," said Welka.

"I agree," said Ericus, and he immediately began a steep bank that turned them back towards base.

"Sarge, I just saw another UV flash from behind us," said Albus.

"Behind us? You mean we flew straight over some of them?" said Welka.

"I just saw a flash as well, from the same place, visible spectrum," said Orhana.

"Shit! Orhana don't look!" Albus grabbed Orhana's head and physically wrenched it away from the scope. No sooner had he done it, than the entire interior of the glider was filled with blinding white light. Orhana squeezed her face into Albus's flight jacket

to protect her eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that if she had been looking at the scope, she would have been blinded. “Flak!” Albus added, although it was already obvious. The flash on the ground that Orhana had seen, had been a muzzle flash.

“Sneaky bastards!” screeched Ericus. “They waited ’till we had gone past them so they could cut off our escape route.”

Ericus was the only one of them who had not screwed their eyes tight shut. He *had* to see to get them out of there; it was just a matter of luck as to whether a blinder exploded directly in front of him or not. He threw the glider into a steep drop, speeding them up and swinging them around faster. Explosive shells went off close enough to rock the glider’s delicate wings, although they did no serious damage. They had to pass directly over the units shooting at them, at which point Ericus gritted his teeth and just held a steady decline. The glare of more blinders filled the cabin, but failed to get in the right spot.

After about a minute, the explosions stopped.

“Ok, I think we’re through,” said Ericus.

“Really?” asked Orhana, finally letting go of Albus’s coat. Her knuckles had turned white. She hugged Ericus from behind. “Ericus, you dwarf hunk, did I ever tell you I love you!”

Ericus turned to the three spotters in the back and smiled broadly. “I want that in writing from all three of you...Ha ha! I think altitude saved us again. Everything was hitting well below us, though it might not have felt like it.” He tapped the altimeter a few times. “Although...it looks like I might have dropped a bit low getting away. Not that I want to worry you, but I don’t see anywhere that looks like it might have a decent thermal.”

“Ericus, try that ridge over there,” said Albus.

“What ridge?” said Ericus.

“Two o’clock. There is ridge casting a shadow on the canopy.”

It took a while for Orhana to see what Albus meant. There was only a sliver of shadow poking out from under the rise, until they were right over it and the glider grabbed the thermal.

“Nice catch Corporal Orfman. I can see your talent for oblique lighting isn’t wasted,” said Orhana.

“Hey, let’s not forget who’s the hero here,” said Ericus. “No need to get all *arty* on me.”

They managed to limp back to base in the usual manner, riding one thermal then another. They were all physically and mentally exhausted by the attack on the glider. Whilst they were still up in the air they had just got on with the job, but now on the ground, with the time to reflect on their predicament, the fear sank in. They could see the change in each others’ eyes.

Welka Gunthin thought the data was so important, that for the first time she let them enter all the data straight onto a computer. What usually took them hours, only took them minutes. They cross-referenced all the terrain they could and put together

what they hoped was an accurate enough map to help any ground forces who were sent to confront this new army.

“That just leaves my ribbon near the river,” said Orhana.

“It’s not a silted up channel?” ask Welka.

“I can’t see how. I might be able to see a lot of things, but I don’t have x-ray vision. It was covered by plants – I wouldn’t have been able to see the silt underneath them.”

“Hmm, then maybe it was a type of plant? Leave it with me Orhana, I’ll figure something out. For now, I don’t see what difference it makes,” said Welka. “We should be proud of ourselves. Today we did our job and we did it well. No one can ask more of us than that. Let’s get some rest before they send us up again.”

Welka gathered their maps and left for the central office where the chiefs would ponder what action was to be taken. Orhana and Albus stared at each other and could tell neither wanted to be left alone. In silence Orhana led Albus back to her room and they lay on her bed fully clothed. She squashed herself to his chest and remembered how on the glider the darkness of his flight suit had seemed like the only safe place in the world. Its soft, insulated folds had become her little infantile safety blanket. His hands on her back, then and now, were an essential part of that.

“Albus, I don’t want to get back in the glider.”

“I know what you mean, but you will. I felt the same the first time we got fired on. You just have to trust in Ericus. Besides, if you don’t get back in, you’ll be shot for cowardice.”

She hugged Albus tighter.

They lay like that for a long while. It was the first time they took completely non-sexual comfort in each other’s company.

“Orhana. I think we need to totally think about something else. Do something fun we can throw ourselves into. Then get some sleep. I promise you it will all look better in the morning. It’s always the way.”

“What did you have in mind? I don’t do sports and I’m not a good drunk.”

“Let’s use your little pipette and just draw. Draw something wild, whatever grips us. On the same canvas, so we have to use parts of each other’s drawing?”

“Hmm, you’ve never tried to draw whilst tripping have you, Albus? It doesn’t work. You get too easily distracted. And things never look the same twice. We could be at it all day and only put brush to paper twice.”

“Well it’s worth a go. Even if I end up looking stupid. It’s better than just feeling sorry for ourselves.”

“Ok, if you want,” relented Orhana.

They each took a drop, then laid out all Orhana’s art materials and a huge sheet of paper. When Orhana felt it kick in, she picked up her brush. She dipped it in the red paint and began drawing a perfect circle. Even before the circle was finished, she was giggling. The angle between the brush and paper just seemed amusing. She looked up at Albus to say ‘I told you so,’ but found the manner in which he was sat even funnier. She burst with laughter.

Albus giggled as well. “What’s so funny?” he asked.

“It’s just, I’m here, and you’re...over there.” Orhana struggled to put words to the concept she was trying to impart. It seemed important and completely novel. She thought she should write it down, so she did not forget.

Albus shook his head in consternation, but kept smiling. He went straight for the black ink and dipped his brush in it. He did not wipe it and began to flick it at the canvas, so thick blobs splashed across it. It was only after a few splashes he stopped to see what kind of shapes he was making.

He stopped smiling, and just stared.

Orhana looked at the shapes he had made, and saw what had upset him. The burst of black ink looked like the burst of black smoke from a flak cannon.

“You know Orhana, when you saw that flash on the ground and I pulled you away. I liked that sensation. I liked being able to protect you. Is that wrong? You were so close to going blind and I liked it?”

“It’s not wrong Albus. It just shows you care.”

“But at the same time, I was thinking *you stupid idiot. You stupid, stupid idiot.*”

“....”

“It was like you were too dumb to take care of yourself. But I was *so* scared. Even though I knew what was coming, I couldn’t do anything about it. I couldn’t save myself from being blown up, let alone you.”

“Everyone was scared. Me more than you.”

“Really, or do I just hide it because I want you to like me? I shat myself the first time we flew through flak. I mean literally. It stank the whole glider out. Ericus doesn’t make fun of me for that. He thinks I’m too delicate, I’m sure. Half my size and braver than me, that’s what he is. I’m sure he’s never shat himself.”

Orhana mentally sighed. She could see the beginnings of a bad trip. Introspection, self-annihilation. Experience told her the important thing was to stay rational and pull him back from his dark thoughts. The only thing she could do was make him feel safe and comfortable, so she wrapped him in her arms and made reassuring mewling noises.

“I wanted to use my eyes to help people, but am I really helping anyone?”

“Of course you are Albus.”

“No, what I mean is, we shoot at scythrial, scythrial shoot at us. But we’re just the same. There’s some poor scythrial feeling just like me at the moment. I don’t ‘help people.’ I’m just propagating my own race, just like I do when I wank into a tub for the Eugenics people.” He began to sob as he spoke. “We are just the same, but we are supposed to ‘hate’ because they have different genes. Well my genes must be a bit closer to theirs, because I can see in the same spectrum as them, so am I supposed to hate them a little less?”

Albus continued to rant for hours. Orhana kept hold of him the entire time. She grew incredibly frustrated. She wanted to just slap him and tell him to get over it, but knew that would have just the opposite effect. She remembered one of her early trips when she had fallen into the same kind of malaise. Her brother had tried to distract her by dangling a piece of crinkled tin foil in front of her. Rather than excite her with its beauty, she had felt intensely threatened by it and retreated to the corner of her room where she curled into a ball and stared at the door in case it tried to eat her. It was comical

now, but at the time it was as real as any flak cannon. Her brother had said she was the only one ever to react that badly, but she guessed not many people tried hallucinogenics a few hours after a near-death experience.

Orhana had a vision of herself carefully taking out a breast placing her nipple in Albus's mouth. He reverted to some kind of childish instinct and began silent sucking, finally giving Orhana the peace she craved.

When Orhana woke, she was alone in her room, lying on the floor next to the canvas. Her clothes were covered in black ink. She had no memory of when she had fallen asleep or when Albus left. Her breast was very definitely inside her jacket. She looked at the back of her hand and saw the skin minutely crawl, which meant the psychedelic drug was still in her system. She had a pang of paranoia about what had happened to Albus.

She rushed to Albus's room and knocked, but there was no reply. She tried pushing the door anyway and found it open. Albus was curled up on the far corner of his bed, a pen and scrap of paper in hand. He crumpled the paper under his arm in attempt to hide it.

"Albus? Are you okay?"

"Yes, kind of. I'm sorry, I just need to be alone right now. There's a lot of things in my head. Things that need sorting."

"Okay, if you are sure?" Orhana did not like it at all, but knew she could not impose where he did not want her.

"I am. Oh, and you were wrong."

"About?"

"About drawing. I think it has focused me totally."

"I only managed a red dot." She shuffled out of the door and had almost closed it.

"Orhana. Thanks," Albus said just before she was out of sight. But it was a cold and mechanical 'thanks,' as if from politeness rather than gratitude.

The next day Orhana visited Albus again. She was given a lukewarm greeting, but at least this time he invited her in. The room was in disarray; there were pieces of sketch paper everywhere, each one turned down so that she could not see what was on them. Albus gathered them into a pile and tucked them under his bed sheet.

"Feeling better?"

"Yes, thank you. Orhana...there is something I think I've found, that yesterday's trip helped me realise."

"What is it?"

"It's not the kind of thing I can tell just anyone. It...well, it could get me into trouble."

"I've never been one to judge."

Before he could say anymore there was a knock at the door. Albus shouted for whoever it was to enter. Welka Gunthin came in, an envelope in hand.

"Ah, I'm glad I caught you two together. Orhana, I want you to look at these." Welka produced a series of leaves and spread them on the floor. "Do any of these have the same colour as that ribbon you saw near the river?"

Orhana did not have to look long, one of the leaves stood out above all the others.

"This one. Its different to all the others."

"Damn. I was hoping you were going to go for one of the floating marimos. It might have given us information about a new waterway."

"What is this one then?"

"A species that is adapted to live in areas of high copper concentrations. It stores excess copper in its leaves as a green pigment. I figured you might be able to see that, although I don't see what good it does us."

"A ribbon of verdigris in a sea of sand," Albus mused. He hastily sketched the geology onto a sheet of paper, the lines far looser and more impressionistic than Orhana was used to seeing from him. When he was done, he let it slip from his hand like an old tissue.

Welka picked it up and stared. "I wouldn't have thought about it like that, but you are right. The geology is sand in this whole area, but in this one spot, the bedrock must form a thin ridge. Look how that massive river clings to it, never crossing it. It must stand proud of the plateau."

Albus took the sketch from her hands and stabbed a flourish of scribbles spewing from the river over the rest of the page. "A pity we can't put a hole in that ridge and give the scythrial a bath. Cool them off a bit." He dropped the paper again.

Welka paused, like Albus had suggested something profound and terrible. Then she shook her head. "No, I don't suppose we could." Even so, she stuffed Albus's sketch under her arm along with the leaf Orhana had picked out. "I'll see you guys tomorrow for another mission."

When she had left, Orhana felt free to speak again. "What was it you were about to tell me?"

"Oh, never mind. I don't think it was really important."

But the way he said it, made her think that perhaps it was.

The next day's flight went as normal in terms of what they found. Orhana was full of trepidation getting on, but once they were up, she was ok. Ok *enough*. There was less banter, which showed her everyone felt the same way. She noticed Albus looking up from his scope a lot, mostly towards her. She thought it was a sign he was worried about her. Somehow that felt very sweet, despite their estrangement for the last two days.

The first cracks appeared when they got back to Albus's room and she tried to translate her sketches into maps. When she overlaid her work onto Albus's, some of her features were way out. Cliffs were not where they were supposed to be and rivers ran entirely different courses. She could not believe she could be so wrong, after all this time perfecting her skills. She was almost moved to tears.

But, just as an afterthought, she checked her plan against Welka's; they fitted together perfectly. It was Albus's map that was out.

"Albus, have you seen this?" Orhana showed him the evidence.

He took a few seconds to take it in and then slumped onto his bed with a flurry of expletives.

“Shit, fucking SHIT...I mean...*how the fuck?*” He shook his head in consternation. “How am I going to show that to Sergeant Gunthin? It must be the instruments! They must have been damaged during takeoff.”

“The instruments? Sure, I hadn’t thought of that.” But in the back of Orhana’s mind she knew that could not be the case. The glider had already been serviced and sent up again with the next recon crew. Any glitches in the optics would have been detected by the engineers. “We should let Welka know.”

Just then there were a series of knocks at the door and Ericus waddled in. He had his hands over his eyes.

“It’s okay guys, I’m not looking. I just came into to say that Sergeant Gunthin wants to see us *right now* in the Commander’s room.”

“You’re perfectly safe Ericus. We’re not up to anything, just maps,” said Orhana.

Ericus peeked from behind his fingers. “Oh...well that’s disappointing.”

“Did she say what it was about?” asked Orhana.

“No, only to be prompt.”

Albus looked worried, but hurriedly gathered his things and followed behind Ericus anyway.

“Do you think she knows?” he whispered to Orhana.

“Knows? No, how could she?” she whispered back.

“Why else would she want to see us?”

“I don’t know.”

“What if she asks to see our maps?”

“Don’t worry Albus. We can stall. We can redraw yours with some ‘adjustments’ using mine. Just promise me one thing?”

“What?”

“Make sure this is the only time.”

“I can’t help it if the instruments are wrong.”

“Albus...”

“Yeah sure. I promise.”

They arrived at the Regimental Commander’s office. Orhana had not been in since her first day on the base. The guards ushered them straight through. The office was large and proudly displayed the Recon Corps insignia on the wall over the Commander’s desk; an eye with wings. Sergeant Gunthin was standing to attention and the Commander was stood behind his desk. Orhana was about to salute the Commander when she realised there was a third person in the room and the dots on his cap announced him as a Brigadier. Orhana bowed low and was followed by Albus and Ericus. She did not know how long one was suppose to hold a bow. She had never met a Brigadier before and in her former civilian life had been deliberately anarchic with regards to status and etiquette. So she just stayed down.

“Easy, Corporal Pamok,” said Welka.

Everyone else had already reverted.

The Brigadier had a long ash grey beard which came down to the bottom of his sternum. He started running fingers through the tip. “Soldiers, I’m told your crew is the best recon team on the base. In fact, more than that, I’m told your *talents* make you the

only crew that might be able fulfil the task that has been set before us.” At the word ‘talents’ he had stared Orhana directly in the eye, as if expecting to see something special. “That is why I am taking this unusual step of detailing our strategic plans to regular soldiers.”

He placed a large dataslate on the table and highlighted a map. Orhana immediately recognised it as the one they had drawn up after encountering the scythrial flak. The ribbon of green copper was highlighted, as was the mighty river that ran alongside it.

“In fact,” continued the Brigadier, “I’m told it was one of your number who came up with the idea in the first place. We intend to divert the course of a river to kill a significant force of scythrial.” Albus gasped, but the Brigadier ignored him. “We will send in teams of commandos to harass the scythrial and slow their advance. However, their numbers will not be sufficient to present a serious threat, and they will quickly become cut-off from our supply lines. We will then feint an aerial supply drop campaign to keep them stocked with materiel. This will get the scythrial used to the sight of our gliders overhead, dropping crates on the periphery of their positions. Naturally they will want to capture these crates themselves, or set up ambushes and await our commando’s recovery efforts. If all goes to plan, they will not fire upon a recon glider until it has dropped its cargo, so as to keep their positions secret and the cargo within assault distance.

“In the final phase, when the scythrial have approached the designated point. We will send in your glider with a payload. We anticipate the build up will enable you to drop your payload, well away from the main scythrial army without the threat of an EDP.”

The dataslate showed a model of the copper ridge breaching and waters flooding into the plain below.

“Now the reason I am telling you all this ahead of time is so that you can appreciate the stakes involved. Our ground forces and your colleagues in the Recon Corps are going to take heavy casualties. The plan has to work, or all their lives will be wasted for nothing.”

“Begging your pardon sir...er...m’lord,” began Ericus, “but our gliders are not built to take weapons. And it would take something like a nuclear weapon to blast a hole that big in solid rock.”

“In fact, even a nuclear weapon would not be sufficient. Might well blast the sand either side and leave the bedrock intact. There is only one weapon which could do a sufficient amount of damage in a single strike and that’s a macro plasma warhead. It has the raw power of a nuke, but it uses a magnetic vortex to contain the blast, vaporizing everything in a relatively small area. The strike will have to be very accurate, which is why we need the eyes that originally identified the target area.”

“Begging your pardon again m’lord. But I’ve seen macro plasma weapons loaded into the big artillery guns. They are huge, it took a crane. My glider can be picked up by a man on each wing.”

“That may be, but we have been assured by our engineers that theoretically a glider may still function with the added weight, albeit with diminished responses.”

“This plan is ghastly!” blurted Albus. “What about our troops, how will they get out? Do they know their attack is a feint? And the scythrial civilians, what about them?”

The Brigadier looked perplexed, he stroked the end of his beard again. “Scythrial civilians? Neither we nor the Hearth Empire have an agreement acknowledgment the right of protection regarding non-combatants. As for the extraction plan, that is classified.”

Albus opened his mouth to speak again, but Welka cut him off. “*Corporal Orfman, remember your place.*” Her voice was sterner than Orhana had ever heard it before.

“It’s okay Sergeant, I understand your crew may have initial doubts as to the pragmatism of the plan, but I’m going to show you something that should let you know how serious we are.” The Brigadier scrolled down the dataslate, then stuck his thumb over one key sentence:

APPROVED: Provost, Superlative Commander VARLOTH CHLORINUS α1

They were silent. That kind of approval was not thrown around lightly.

“Well, it is settled then,” said the Brigadier. “You are excused from duties until the time of execution. That should be in three, maybe four days time. It should be obvious that this is not to be discussed, not even hinted at, to anyone outside of this room. Dismissed.”

The four of them wondered out of the room.

“How are we going to fly with a huge bomb strapped underneath us?” mused Ericus. “That thing was made for four people, no more.” He paused a moment, then grabbed the rolls of fat accumulating around his belly. “Fuck! Now I have to try and get rid of this as fast as possible!”

“I don’t like it, not one bit,” said Albus. He seemed agitated, and not through fear or trepidation. It was more like a moral loathing.

“Orders are orders. We can meet up tomorrow to go over the plan in detail,” said Sergeant Gunthin.

Orhana did not sleep well that night, a fact which helped her when in the black of the night she was awoken by a rasping sound followed by rustling. In the thick gloom, she could just make out the outline of a figure hunched over her underwear draw. *Oh great, a panty thief*, was her initial thought. As he scrabbled around the draw, Orhana cursed her moral stand on not keeping a locked door. Then she had a hunch.

“Albus?” she called.

He stopped, and turned to look at her. “You’re awake?”

“What are you doing?”

“I just need to borrow this.” He held up what could only have been the little vial containing the psychedelic drug.

“Oh Albus, not without me. You know what happened last time.”

“I just need to... to sort some things out in my head.”

She could not rouse herself to stop him. Part of her wanted to jump up and harangue him into submission. His stupidity and his violation of her bedroom filled her with anger. No, that was not quite true. She thought that was what she should do, but

actually she just wanted to go back to bed and be done with him. Her relationship with him had slipped from mutual affection to his indifference and her anxiety.

It was only some ingrained notion of duty which convinced her otherwise. She decided that the best way to get at what was going on in his head was just to let him start the trip; there was no better truth drug outside of the Gendarmerie's prison vaults. She slowly put on her clothes, then followed Albus's tracks down the halls to his room. He had not even bothered to shut his door properly. Orhana waited outside, listening closely for any sign that the trip had started. When finally she heard the sound of a stylus scratching against paper, she knew it was time to act.

She pushed the door open and the creak drew his attention. He looked shocked and instinctively hid the paper in his hands.

"It's okay Albus, I'm here to look after you," she cooed. "What do you have there?"

"I-I've wanted to show you, but I think it would get you in trouble. I wasn't sure at first, but I am now."

She gently sat beside him and rested her hand on his. "It's okay, it can be a secret between you and me."

"Good, because I think I have found the reason we are at war with the scythrial."

Orhana was perplexed. Was it not enough that humans had invaded their world a hundred years ago? That every time the two races mixed the outcome was always genocide?

"I think we are at war with the scythrial because *we* made them. The Syndicate experimented with a slave race, and they were the result." Albus turned the sheet of paper over and revealed one of his human-scythrial chimeras, but this one was grotesque in its humanness. Not so much a chimera as a fully realised hybrid. "The scythrial *are* humans, and the Syndicate needs to eradicate the evidence."

"Albus, that's nonsense. The scythrial have a completely different physiology to us. Their sex organs are in their throat. They have beaks. Okay, they have a pivoting head with a mouth and eyes, but lots of species on lots of worlds have something similar. It makes sense if you want to look at what you are biting. They don't always even have four limbs, I've seen five and six limb ones before."

"That just shows how easy it is for them to morph," insisted Albus. "Look."

Albus opened one of his cupboards and a torrent of paper fell out. Each one was festooned with sketches showing how each individual part of a scythrial could have been derived from a human organ. Some sketches were just vague outlines, but some were done with all the photo-realism that Albus was famed for. It was a graphic and ingenious stage-by-stage catalogue of human-scythrial hybridization, but it certainly was not proof.

"You still don't believe me do you?" said Albus. "Isn't my eye proof enough? A human mutation lets me see in the same spectrum as the scythrial. It shows we have the same genetic potential. And why don't we genetically engineer people? Why do we leave it to the right egg finding the right sperm? It's because the Syndicate made a mistake. They know they cannot handle a slave race again, so they let us breed and change ourselves slowly, manageably."

"Oh Albus!" Orhana threw her arms around him.

“You believe me?”

“No. No I don’t.” She began to sob. “Albus you’re having a delusion. I’m so sorry. It’s my fault, I gave you the drug, I started you tripping. It does this sometimes, makes people believe odd things.”

“It’s not a delusion.”

“It is, but of course, you won’t believe me when I say that. Don’t worry, it wears off overtime. Whether I’m right, or you’re right, it doesn’t matter. Give it long enough and we’ll see one way or another. Just swear you won’t take any more, not for a good long while. And swear to me you won’t show these pictures to anyone. They might not understand. Really, *swear* that to me.”

“So you do believe a bit, otherwise you wouldn’t be worried. Okay, I swear. But it *does* matter. If scythrial really did come from humans, then its humans we will be killing out there. It makes this war so silly. If the truth were known, there would be a chance for peace between us and the only ones who would suffer would be the Syndicate for hiding the truth.”

Orhana did not see the point in fighting him. The hallucinogen occasionally caused brief episodes of psychosis, but if the only difference it made to him was that he questioned where someone’s genes came from for a week or two, that was fine by her. They could ride it out together. She hugged him harder and murmured platitudes to his strange theories.

They almost overslept. But then, it had been a while since they shared a bed. They managed to make it to the briefing on time (with minor dress code violations) and the Regimental Commander spelled out their part in the plan to the last detail. At the end of the briefing Ericus was introduced to two engineers who would modify their glider. One was so old he could have come to Gellmar with the first founding, the other so young she could not have finished any kind of academy program. Together they went over the glider adding a bomb carrying harness and stripping every excess screw that might contribute to its weight.

Orhana, Albus and Welka were conducted to a spare room in the officers’ mess to keep them apart from the rest of the soldiers. They had a window seat where they could watch the comings and goings on the base. Other teams of engineers were fixing crates to the bottom of the rest of the gliders in preparation for the initial drop phase. Orhana had seen them packed with food rations and ammunition, much lighter than their disguised bomb was going to be.

Half way through the day Ericus came to join them. He sat down with a plate of food, but did not look pleased.

“I still don’t think this is possible. We had to take out the Faraday cage,” said Ericus.

“Is that bad?” asked Orhana.

“Let’s just say, we should be hoping for a lightning free day.” Ericus took two tentative bites of his food, then threw his fork down. “I can’t eat this! I need to lose some weight. That young one agreed to be my trainer in the gym this afternoon, so I’m going to get some warm-ups done.” He dumped the food in the bin and stomped out.

The second day they watched all the recon planes go up on their rockets and they counted them out. Ericus loaded the modified glider with sacks in the crew's place and a fake plasma bomb underneath. They were not allowed to join him in case it went wrong; a glider pilot could be replaced, but their eyes could not.

Once in the sky the glider seemed to descend fast and took an awfully long time to make its turns. Ericus seemed to struggle to get it lined up for a landing in time and Orhana genuinely thought it might crash into the canopy before it was in position.

When Ericus joined them he was shaking his head in despair. "It handled like a brick," he said. "I couldn't even catch a thermal that would raise it again."

"What's the plan?" asked Welka.

"We'll have to go over it again, see if there is anything we missed. The only obvious thing we can get rid of is one of the crew."

Welka did not look like she liked that suggestion, but knew *something* was necessary. "Well then, that means me or Albus. Orhana and you are the essential ones."

"No offence Sergeant, but I'd rather have Albus," said Ericus. "His eye for thermals might be what we need."

"Agreed. I'll run it by the Commander. We cannot be too picky about rank in these circumstances."

Welka went to speak with the Commander and Ericus went off to another gym session with his young engineer. By early afternoon, some of the gliders were starting to return. But not as many as they had counted out. Some of the gliders looked like they had damaged wings; close encounters with scythrial flak. All of the crews coming back looked harrowed and shaken. It sent a chill down Orhana's spine.

"I'm amazed some of those can fly," said Orhana.

"Definitely. But with any lucky the guns will run out of ammo by tomorrow," said Albus. "They can't normally expect this many targets."

In the evening, they saw Ericus return to take a meal. He was accompanied by the young female engineer. But as they got to the door to the officer's mess, she stooped to kiss him on the head.

"That was very intimate," said Orhana.

"Yeah, what kind of workout do you think she's been giving him?" said Albus.

"I don't know, all that time alone in the glider, perhaps they've been testing how it'll cope with shaking in turbulence?" They both giggled. "Seriously though, it's nice to see him get somewhere with a girl."

"Yeah."

There was a large pregnant pause between them. The situation invited a discussion of their own state of relationship, if there was one. Orhana gritted her teeth. She had a policy of being forthright about these matters; she felt no shame about lust or love. But sometimes her ego liked to remind her it was as tender as anyone else's. 'What ifs' wormed their way into her mind before she could speak. It was a sure sign Albus had started to mean something more to her.

Before they could break the silence themselves, Ericus joined them. He did not even go through the pretence of eating and hopped up on the chair with only a glass of water and a vitamin pill. He was red faced and sweating.

“Good workout?” asked Orhana.

“She’s a slave driver,” said Ericus. “But I need it.”

“Hmph, I bet,” muttered Albus.

Welka was not far behind.

“Well there’s good news,” she said. “Ericus, you are now an acting Sergeant for the duration of the mission.” She passed him a new badge. “Of course this means all the responsibility for the mission is now on you.”

“Woohoo! A wage increase for a day!” mocked Ericus. “We’ll do our best.”

“I’m sure you will.”

The morning of the third day, the weather report was good. All the debriefs from the recon crews suggested the scythrial were acting as expected and were likely to be in position by around midday. The Brigadier had returned to see the conclusion of the mission and he and Welka were waiting for them on the launch pad. They gave them no last words of encouragement; it did not have to be restated. Ericus was the only one with anything to say.

“You two, take a piss and empty your bowels now, because frankly that could make the difference with this thing staying in the air.”

“Already taken care of Sergeant,” said Orhana.

Ericus’s engineer came out to see them off, but she hung back and bit her nails with nerves. Ericus blushed.

“You been getting rid of other bodily fluids Ericus?” whispered Albus.

Ericus fixed his eye patch in place. “I would never defame a lady’s honour,” he said.

“I think that means ‘yes’,” chuckled Orhana.

The bomb was slung under the glider’s chassis with a rudimentary release mechanism, but it looked just like a normal crate. They mounted up into the glider and made ready for takeoff. The rocket powered ascent went as normal, but as soon as the glider detached and levelled off, the change was apparent. The glider shook like a pneumatic drill.

“Sorry guys,” said Ericus, “with the added weight our fly speed is barely above a stall, I’m trying to re-shape the wings but there is a lot of buffeting.”

The glider descended much faster than was normal and by the time they were half way to the target, they were already having to use updrafts to stay in the air. Albus rose to the challenge and pointed out every feature on the ground that might be producing enough hot air to keep them aloft. However, the small ridges did not work nearly so well as they had before and more than once the glider continued to descend even when circling a column of air.

“This is going to be damn tight,” said Ericus.

“We’ll get there,” reassured Orhana.

“Get there, yes. Or I’m not a pilot. But getting away from the explosion at this altitude? Or getting away from the flak?”

“One o’clock, Ericus. A rise in the land, could be making a decent thermal,” said Albus. Ericus took Albus’s advice and he managed to guide the glider from thermal to thermal, just about keeping in the air.

It was obvious when they reached the target area. There were weapon flashes and EDP burst sporadically rising from the trees. The scythrial airship still floated menacingly above them. Height would not save them this time; they just had to trust that the scythrial would wait for them to drop the ‘cargo’ before opening fire. Orhana focused her optics on the ribbon of verdigris she could see in the canopy. They were supposed to hit a narrow section where it met the river.

“Albus, can you find us a thermal near this point, it’s where we need to be,” said Orhana.

“Uh-huh, let me just scan this patch,” said Albus. Albus was focusing on something almost directly beneath them, just a few hundred metres away, but Orhana did not dare move her sights to see what. Suddenly he rose from the optic, startled.

“Oh heck!” he gasped.

“What is it?” Orhana asked.

“We cannot do this! We can’t kill them!”

“What?”

“This isn’t right. What I said before, the thing we talked about, *that* is true!”

“What is he saying Orhana?” asked Ericus.

“Nothing, never mind,” rushed Orhana.

“Good, because this thermal isn’t holding us. We’re going down. We need a new one before it’s too late!”

“I won’t do it,” said Albus. His face had gone red and tears were rolling down his cheeks.

“Albus, we just need you to get us to a new location, never mind about the mission. It’ll be over soon and then we can have this conversation again,” insisted Orhana.

“I can’t. I won’t look out of the scope anymore! It’s too horrible.”

“Corporal Orfman, as your commanding officer I *order you* to find us a place to glide to,” said Ericus.

“That won’t work!” Orhana barked at Ericus. Then she turned to Albus and spoke as softly as the situation allowed. “Albus, you’ve got to help us here! We might die!”

He shook his head and so Orhana did something very silly. She tried to grab the back of his neck and force him to look down the viewing scope

“Albus, please, just look!”

But he was a lot stronger than her and pushed back. His legs went thrashing, he screamed and backed himself into the tail of the glider, as far away from Orhana as possible.

Shit, she thought to herself.

Orhana had never seen a ‘freak out’ before, but she was pretty sure she had just witnessed one. Now he would not trust her for hours. There was only one thing left to do. She grabbed hold of the scope and began looking for herself. There was no point looking in the distance, they could not make it that far; she had to find something close.

The trees seemed dense and constant beneath. Any ripples in the land were masked by the canopy. She had to think like Albus. She had to envisage his faces and how he caught the light on every crease, every comb stroke in every bristly beard and eyebrow. Every pock scar and pale cist. She was looking for some ground substantial in texture or height difference.

Suddenly she found it; a row of trees with an especially light outline. They must have been on top of a slight ridge because the trees around cast no shadow on their foliage.

“Ericus! Follow my instructions! I’ve found something.”

“Okay, I’m putting this in your hands...”

Ericus steered the glider towards where Orhana directed. They were barely a few metres from the canopy when they came to the ridge. Ericus re-shaped the wings once more to catch any updraft and instantly the glider juddered and began to climb again. From straight above it was possible to see the break in the canopy where the sun shone on the face of a cliff and generated a warm column of air.

“Phew, out of the danger zone,” said Ericus. “Not enough to make a final run though.”

“What about the copper ridge line itself?” suggested Orhana. “I mean, if the trees’ leaves are packed with a different kind of pigment, they must be reflecting the heat differently. Might make an updraft.”

“Or it might not make a blind bit of difference. Might even make a downdraft.”

“We’ve got no other options that I can see.”

“Fair enough, you’ll have to guide me precisely though. I don’t have a clue where this thing is.”

When they were as high as they could get on ridge air, Orhana directed Ericus on a line straight to the verdigris ribbon. Then she made him make minute adjustments to stay over it as it snaked towards the target point where it hemmed in the river most. It did not lift the glider, but it seemed to slow its descent. Orhanna could not tell if they were going to make it or not.

“If we keep this up, they’ll be able to take us out with a crossbow, let alone flak,” mumbled Ericus.

The glider came to within two hundred yards of the target. Orhana fixed her eyes firmly on the scope and hovered it over the target. A hastily installed set of altimeters and speedometers were giving a range readout for when to drop the bomb. It was just coming up.

“Now Ericus!” she shouted.

Ericus pulled a lever and the whole glider wobbled in the air. Ericus banked immediately and Orhana saw the bomb as it descended to the ground, disappearing below the canopy. They had only a matter of seconds before the internal timer detonated it.

“Now hold on back there,” shouted Ericus.

He nosed the glider into a dive in order to speed it up and put as much distance between them as possible.

“Do we have enough space for this!” squealed Orhana as she saw the ground close faster than ever.

“If you’ve got a better idea?” Ericus grunted through his teeth.

Orhana realised what he meant as the first thud of a flak round exploded above them. Height was impossible this time; they needed speed and trees for protection.

The second shot sent fragments of hot metal streaking through the fuselage. The tail section was peppered with holes, but it managed to miss the passengers. Albus shrieked and curled up into the foetal position. Ericus levelled out at the treeline, winging it on the cushion of air that formed between the dense foliage and the fast-moving glider. The next two blasts missed by some distance.

Then there was a blinding white light which streamed in through the shrapnel holes. Orhana assumed it was a blinder, only for the plasma bomb’s shockwave to catch up.

The noise of the detonation was so loud that Orhana felt it in her bones rather than her ears. The glider jerked and momentarily flipped so its tail was vertical. Then it started to move backwards and up, completely against the laws of aerodynamics.

“We’re caught in the backdraft,” warned Ericus, “I don’t know where this might end!”

The glider continued to be drawn up into the sky amid a great column of dust. Then, just for a second, the glider levelled out and Ericus dived on the rudder control. His face turned red as he strained to overcome the forces around them. He managed to keep it in position and the glider moved to the edge of the column and finally out into the clear air.

Orhana looked back at the scene of the detonation. A great halo of white glowing air still occupied the drop zone. Lightning bolts discharged from it like some oversized tesla coil. There was an elliptical hole in the landscape where every last particle had been vaporised. It cut clean through the verdigris ribbon and into the river, which now steamed and boiled violently.

But the power of the river slowly won through and the waters filled the perfect crater and extinguished the heat with a hissing roar. Then they swelled and poured out onto the plain where the scythrial were encamped. The waters did not seem to move fast – faster than a man could run or a truck could drive, certainly – but from their height, it looked like a slowly creeping blanket. The blanket ripped up the trees rooted in the soft sands, leaving a swirling mass of mud and felled trunks.

The scythrial gunners did not realise their peril. They continued to fire on the glider, putting a couple of extra holes in the fuselage. It would only take one averagely-lucky shot to pass through her just as easily.

Then, suddenly they went silent. Orhana looked up at the airship, still way above them. They would be the only other people to witness this event in its entirety; the impending tragedy and sense of hopelessness as it unfolded across the landscape. If she were up there, she would be frantically signalling down “GET TO HIGHER GROUND!” in their invisible UV code, which was probably why the guns had suddenly stopped.

Albus whimpered from the back of the glider.

“Ericus, can you fly this without me?” asked Orhana.

“Sure,” said Ericus. “This glider’s as light as a paper dove now.”

Orhana crawled to the back of the glider and enfolded Albus in her arms. He did not resist. He did not make any reaction at all. Orhana hoped he had not fallen into a catatonic stupor.

“Oh, Albus, Albus. What should I have done with you?” She hugged him harder, but then felt something hard poking through Albus’s thermal flight jacket. “What’s that?” she asked. When he said nothing, she carefully unzipped his jacket and pulled out the hard thing from inside.

It was a tightly bundled roll of paper. Orhana carefully peeled them apart and found each to bare a drawing. They were all her. Each was done painstakingly in Albus’s best photo-realistic style and each was some kind of scythrial hybrid. They got progressively less and less human until towards the end the only way she could recognise herself was the spiral in the eyes.

“Albus? Is this what was worrying you so much?” she muttered, more to herself than him.

Then she came to the last picture in the sheaf. It was a fully formed scythrial with her tetrachromat eyes, but it was carrying something on its chest. It took a while for Orhana to disentangle the various limbs and chitinous protrusions and realise it was a baby scythrial. It looked like a small spider clutching some much larger prey. Its head was craned round one-hundred-eighty degrees to face the viewer. One tiny eye was filled with a spiral in exact mimicry of hers; the other was split diagonally; half black, half white.

Orhana had a moment of profound intuition and an intense fear crept into her thoughts. She grabbed her viewing scope and scanned the ground. She found the edge of the flood and followed it as best she could until it reached a clearing. There were trucks caught up in it, hundreds of supply crates and the ever thrashing trunks of trees. The bodies were harder to see, but occasionally one surfaced. The thing that interested her though, was the scythrial running away. They fled on all fours, running with an agility that could only make human athletes jealous. It was when some of them realised they could no longer outrun the water and began climbing trees that she saw what she needed to see; tiny spiders clinging to their parent’s bellies, just like in Albus’s drawings.

It was not just the scythrial in the airship that could see the full horror of what they had done. It was Albus as well, in his mind’s eye, before the event. For someone in a psychotic state, that was just too much.

“Civilians Ericus. That’s who we just killed.”

“Us or them Orhana, I can’t say it bothers me all that much,” said Ericus.

“No...nor me.”

But for Albus, who had tried to remain honourable, it was everything.

When they got back, there was no fanfare. The Brigadier and Sergeant Gunthin had them ushered straight into a private room for a debrief. It took two of the base guards to carry Albus, who offered no resistance, out of the glider. He ranted a little and it was impossible to conceal what had happened. Orhana was forced to meekly confess everything Albus had said about his beliefs on the scythrial, although she left out the part where she supplied him with the hallucinogenic. The Brigadier seemed content with the detonation

of the bomb and the initial effects of the flood, but he saved any celebration until the final extent of the flood could be confirmed. Meanwhile he had each of the three crew detained separately until he decided what to do with them over the onboard mutiny.

It was late in the day when the Brigadier came back to talk to Orhana alone.

“Well?” she asked, forgetting the rank protocol.

“It was a resounding success. The scythrial force has been annihilated as a viable military force and survivors will be rounded up by fresh troops moving in as we speak.”

“Corporal Orfman? Will he be court-marshalled? Or will you give him treatment. I’ve heard psychiatric patients like him usually recover quickly when given time to rest.”

“Treatment? Psychiatric? No, no, no! Corporal Orfman has some very interesting theories about human-scythrial origins and we think that such an outstanding intellect should be sent to one of our off-world research bases where he can study this field at length. As to his misdemeanour aboard the glider, we the command staff think it is only too understandable given his beliefs.”

Orhana could not believe what she was hearing. Suggesting any kind of relationship with the scythrial was tantamount to treason, let alone failing to fulfil your duty in the line of combat.

Then realisation dawned on her.

“You bastards. You want his sperm. If he is executed or declared insane, then the law means you cannot take it. If you pretend he’s just got some unusual theories, you can harvest him all you want.” Orhana was incandescent with rage. “He needs treatment, not you indulging his delusions! He’ll never get better!”

The Brigadier smiled. “He does have such rare genes.”

“And me?”

“You have performed your duty proficiently. You are still under official orders of secrecy so I’m afraid there cannot be any kind of medal. We also still need you in the air, we never know when your special vision may come in useful again. Although I have been authorised by the Eugenics Office to offer you a place in one of their reproduction programs. It would keep you away from the frontline for at least a year. What do you say?”

She spat at him.

It was potentially a capital offence, but she guessed if they were not going to court-martial Albus, she was safe as well.

The Brigadier stroked the tip of his beard in agitation. “Don’t make enemies in every department Corporal Pamok. The Syndicate has a way of getting what it wants.” The Brigadier turned to leave, then span on his heel as if remembering something. “Oh, I found this in your room.” He held out the little vial of hallucinogen. “I’m not sure what it is, probably just some stale water, yes? You won’t mind if I just pour it out here? Wouldn’t want someone getting ill on it, eh?”

He tipped the vial upside down and let all the contents drizzle onto the ground. Then he tossed the empty container at her.

“Good day Corporal Pamok.”

Orhana stared down at the tiny bottle.

There was one last little drop at the bottom.

Historian's Note: Albus Orfman disappeared from Gellmar records following his transferral to an unspecified off-world academic institute. Orhana Pamok continued in Gellmar's Recon Corps until the end of the war, during which she reached the rank of sergeant and commanded her own glider. The records show she had a single child, a daughter, conceived using donated sperm from an unknown source and carried conventionally. The child failed to inherit her mother's unusual ocular gifts and was noted by the Eugenics Institute as being almost totally colour blind. The off-spring, Alba Pamok, is not currently considered a person of interest.

Thanks to Pete Davey for his technical advice on gliders. Drama won over realism in several places....Sorry, I mean – waves science-fiction wand – flying conditions on Gellmar are slightly different to those on Earth.

If you enjoyed this you can find more at <https://www.ali-jon-smith.com/>

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