

Private Julian Lackley's shoulders were beginning to ache. His tri-layered body armor was supposed to be feather-light, but the Galactic Infantry didn't have the funds to keep the gravity-repelling batteries charged, so the steel plates weighed him down. He was just four days into his assignment as a guard and already unease, shoulder pain, and the constant hum of artificial lighting were beginning to get to him. The Sunny Day Center for Hardened Criminals did not orbit any sun, so the governor merely decreed day and night. He spent identical shifts standing erect and immobile in a row of ten soldiers, all facing the translucent electric cell barrier that separated them from the man they were guarding.

Julian shifted as imperceptibly as he could, and let his eyes follow the prisoner—a tall man who seemed not to know or care what his lanky limbs were doing. He had a long, angular face, made longer by an unkempt beard. He grinned. He was always grinning. Julian watched him walk along the wall of the rectangular white cell, turn at the corner, and continue down the next wall, the grin never leaving his face.

A beep in Julian's earpiece informed him that it was his turn to blink, and he took advantage of the opportunity for a quick yawn. The room was hot; the thermostat never worked properly, alternating between planet-core-scalding and deep-space-frigid. The air quality regulator never functioned either, so the cell gave off a vague scent of sweat and lethargy.

The prisoner, who had noticed the yawn, suddenly ceased his repetitive journey and approached the electric barrier. He focused on Julian, who tried to look past him.

"Not much to do here, is there?" the prisoner asked.

Julian ignored him.

"Do you like it here? You look pretty miserable."

*He's got that right*, Julian thought.

"I suppose we're both here under duress," the prisoner continued. "Look at you: Years of Galactic Infantry Training—what do they call it? The Great Git?—only to end up here in this putrid cell for hours on end alongside your vegetative comrades, all with your battered P-15 Eradicators pointed at me. You must feel like you've gotten rather the short

end of the military stick. Yes, I feel fairly confident about that guess: you are one melancholy prison guard.”

Julian did his best not to react, but he was startled. No amount of training could stave off the unending boredom of a Galactic Infantryman’s life. His previous assignment had been at a dye mine on Zorus Minor, and he had thought that nothing could be more deadening than the headache produced by constant exposure to Zorus Yellowish-Blue. But this was worse. The only comfort was that however long his tour of duty here was, the convict’s would be longer. Julian didn’t know much about the man on the other side of the electric barrier, but what he had been told scared him. A murderer so far gone from the shores of reality that he killed like a Sub-Sentient, only with the precision and ingenuity of a deep-space microbiologist, they said.

The prisoner finally looked away from Julian, and resumed his rectangular trek. As he strode, he went on in his high pitched, drawling voice, in the direction of no one in particular, “As soon as I’m done here, I’m getting a dog. I can’t bring him back to my glorious homeworld, of course: dogs don’t survive long in the mostly-argon atmosphere. My mother had one—a magnificent greyhound, originally from Earth. It lasted just two Galaxy-Standard months, one week, and four days. But from the moment it died, I knew I would get a dog of my own. I think a Sirian Hound would suit me best: large and friendly, and such lovely wings. I’ll call it Brunellus.”

*Dream on, Julian thought silently. You’ll be lucky if you have a pet cockroach in here.*

“But there still remains the question of where I shall go,” the prisoner continued. “Somewhere far, far away from this fluorescent rat hole. Living as I do now in the very center of the Empire”—and he giggled a bit here—“one of the outlying systems seems appealing. I thought about Mu Cephei Prime, but it’s just so...rubbery. A triumph of modern planetary science, of course—the trees *look* real enough. And a dog would love it. I mean, the whole planet is a chew toy. Too bouncy for me, though.”

Julian heard the heavy tread of two duty officers behind him, and he recognized the raspy voice of Captain Savage. “Babble,” Savage said. “Nothing to worry about. I’m sure it’s meaningless.” Julian was inclined to disagree.

Savage was making the rounds with Administrator Ophelius Jago, who had the misfortune of being in charge of this giant floating box of sadness and all its inadvertent inhabitants. “Double the guard,” Jago ordered.

“No need,” said Savage. “He’s harmless now.”

“You weren’t here when he was caught, were you?” Jago snapped. “I went on the raid. He was a monster. Didn’t even know what he was doing, just stumbling around until dozens were dead. Everything was red except for the teeth in his wide grin—that, and the whites of his eyes. Now he’s talking about getting out, and I don’t like it. Double the guard.”

Julian heard another bleating tone in his helmet, the signal for a shift change. All ten guards swiveled together, turning to face their counterparts on the replacement detail. The prisoner’s motion was perfectly timed: one set of guards had their backs to the cell, blocking the next group’s view. As Julian stepped past his replacement, he heard a sharp intake of breath and turned back in alarm. When he remembered this moment later in life, he tended to leave out the expression of slack-jawed astonishment that decorated his face. He could see the electric barrier still shimmering, but now there was no one behind it. Snapping out of his stupor, Julian followed the other guards, who were already running down the corridor after the escaped prisoner. The man was fast, and he moved without rhythm, wildly weaving and ducking. Each leg would shoot out, then sink like a paper airplane, and sit lightly on the ground. Then the next leg leapt up. In this jerky fashion, the man somehow stayed ahead of the wheezing guards.

Some soldiers stopped chasing and instead tried to bring the prisoner down with their Eradicators, but in the narrow corridor they couldn’t get a clear shot past their fellows. Peering over the rows of helmeted heads in front of him, Julian slowed to a halt just as the prisoner slipped through the first airlock door, sealing it behind him. There were two more doors separating the cell block from the transport docking station, but Julian suspected the prisoner would have no trouble getting past them: There were only six or seven guards in the whole place who made a point of staying in decent shape. Julian was right: it took the prisoner only a couple of punches to a few ample stomachs and he disabled the guards and sprinted into the docking station, where three transports bobbed, tied to the prison by electromagnetic bindings. He switched off the power, gleefully

liberated two of the transports by pushing them out into empty space, and hopped into the third.

All Julian could think as he watched the Galactic Infantry craft speed away was, “You lucky bastard.”

Julian Lackley had not been first in his class at the Great GIT Academy, and he was never the first to put on his uniform in the morning and begin his shift, or to finish dinner and get back to work in the evening—but he was certainly the first to volunteer for the search mission that would take him away from the Sunny Day Center. The operation had to wait until several dozen dignified and professional looking men in uniform, holding each other’s ankles, had formed a long chain through open space and rescued the drifting transports.

Although it seemed that the prisoner had miraculously diffused through the electric barrier, it turned out that the Galactic Infantry overseers had neglected the mechanism for so long that the electric charge fizzled out, leaving only a translucent trace. The escapee’s superhuman abilities having proved nonexistent, he could only have reached one of three nearby planets: A, B, or C in the 67 Omega-Andromedae System. Julian had been assigned to search 67 O-A C, a rocky, scalding hell that bristling with jagged spires of rock, reaching deep into the smoke-filled sky. These needlestack mountains were constantly melting and reforming at their bases, creating a bleak landscape of shifting lava. It was a small, lifeless planet, but Julian still had a lot of territory to cover: three quarters of a continent all to himself.

Zooming in his speeder between rock spires and up slopes to try and get a better view of the terrain, Julian felt the wind on his face for the first time in a while. It was an experience he could have done without. It wasn’t a cool or refreshing breeze, but a blistering, dry gust. The heat-sensing goggles that were supposed to help find the prisoner were of little use, since they detected the entire planet. Julian spotted a tall peak about seven hundred miles away and turned towards it, hoping for a better view of his surroundings, picturesque though they weren’t. Half an hour later, he reached his destination. There wasn’t enough room at the top to park the speeder, so he hiked up the

steep lava slope. He gazed around—and saw nothing, only an endless expanse of rock. He idly considered kicking a boulder in frustration, but decided it wasn't worth the pain.

Then a distant glint caught his eye. He peered at it, and thought he could see the vague shape of a transport hull. Breathing a little harder, he knelt and opened his saddlebag, looking for his planetary observation high-mag binoculars. When he stood up again, he found himself staring at a hunted man.

Julian's training abandoned him, and he just stood there in shock. The prisoner—ex-prisoner, now—smiled winningly, reached into Julian's still-open bag, and pulled out the pair of high-strength neodymium-IV magnets meant for sealing gashes in the speeder's metal chassis. The man moved with such stunning nonchalance that Julian was rendered motionless. He watched as the prisoner raised one magnet as if lifting a glass for a toast, then reached around and attached it to the back of Julian's armor. Before he was alert enough to struggle, the other magnet was fixed to a nearby rock, effectively pinning him to the ground.

Julian flailed and tried to get up, but the best he could do was an impression of a flipped turtle. He sat back, defeated. He tried to glare, but couldn't work up the energy. The man studied him with fascination and a bit of confusion. He seemed intelligent and slightly feral, and Julian felt as if he might receive a hard punch to the face at any moment. "They never told me your name," he said.

The man gave a wide smile. "Didn't they? No, I suppose they wouldn't."

"Well?" Julian demanded.

"My full name would have to be Severan Jones. But you may call me Sev."

"That your real name?"

Sev cocked his head, giving his grin a perplexing leftward tilt that made Julian want to lean in the opposite direction to compensate. "Did you come here to try to take me back? Terrible idea. Didn't they tell you how dangerous I am?"

"I'm a trained Galactic Infantryman, armed to the teeth and prepared to do anything to recover my prisoner," Julian answered. He looked back to try to get a glimpse of the magnet and the rock that held him, and made a halfhearted attempt to pull away. "But, given my current situation..."

Sev beamed, and swung backward until he was leaning against a rough ledge.

“Even if you could ‘recover’ me, it wouldn’t do you much good.”

Julian scratched his nose, grateful that his hands were free even if the rest of him wasn’t. “What do you mean?”

“I watched you carefully in there. I was correct in my assumptions, wasn’t I? If you managed to get me back, they’d laud you for a few days, maybe stick a ribbon on your chest plate, and then they’d send you back to staring all day at a man in his cell. Is that what you want?”

Julian scratched his nose a little harder. There it was again, that strange sense that this man *knew* him, that they had some kind of bond. No he didn’t want that, but what else was there? He had been trained for the Galactic Infantry, and being a soldier was all he knew.

Sev started to say something, then looked pained. For a moment, the grin was gone. He swore quietly, then said, “I can’t leave you here. They wouldn’t find you for days, and by then you’d be dead of exposure or thirst. And that’s a horrible death.” He sighed and then continued, “On the other hand, I can’t exactly let you go, either. I’d have to skip town— I’d have to skip all the towns for parsecs around.”

“They’d find you.”

“Maybe. In any case, I’m left with a bit of a dilemma: Let you die or risk recapture.”

Suddenly, Julian was acutely aware of feeling imprisoned in the heavy steel of his body armor. The hot wind had torn at his face, the Infantry boots had blistered his feet, and now he felt an overpowering desire to let his shoulders slump and his hair grow out. He had lived his life according to a strict code, and now he was sick of discipline.

“I’ll come with you,” Julian said, slowly.

“You’ll what?” It was almost an oath. Sev’s eyes were sparkingly amused, but they were a little too wide. “You surprise me, soldier.” His eyes narrowed. “But tell me, why on 67 Omega-Andromedae C would I want that?”

This was about as far ahead as Julian had thought, and now he floundered. “Like you said...a dilemma. This is a solution.”

“And why would *you* want that? You’d have to remain my prisoner—forever, basically.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I’d join you. I just want to be free from them.” Sev cocked his head curiously, and Julian stammered on. “The Infantry, I mean. I just want – I don’t know, I just don’t want to lose what remains of myself.”

Sev looked agog at him for a moment, then started to shake his head. He paused, reconsidering, and gave a brief grin. Just as quickly, he assumed a businesslike posture and set his face into an unreadable configuration. His fingers twitched. “I’m not going to take care of you,” he said, finally.

“That’s not what I’m asking for.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about this.”

“Neither am I.”

Sev said nothing for a moment. “If both of us disappear and they don’t find any bodies, they’ll figure out you deserted. They’ll look twice as hard because they’ll know we’re together.”

“So we’ll have to run.”

“Not just for now, though. Always.”

“Sure beats standing around.”

Sev once again let that winsome smile flash across his face, and then he jumped up. He spun around a few times. He stood in place and blinked at the barren horizon. Then he turned his head back to Julian, bent over, and was suddenly very close to his face. “One more thing,” he said. Julian waited. “Space can get boring, just the two of us.”

This was not what Julian had been expecting. “I am...not sure what you mean.”

Sev grinned again, and yelled, “We’re getting a dog! A Sirian hound!” He unhooked the magnets binding Julian to the rock, strode gleefully to the speeder, leapt into the passenger seat, and waited with his arms folded. Julian got slowly to his feet. He methodically unbuckled his armor and, leaving it in a rusting pile on the hot dirt, ambled over to pilot’s side of the speeder. Still slightly dazed, he sank into the leather upholstery, yawned loudly and long, and pressed the ignition.