

Battle of the Bulge

By Lupine

The atmosphere of this little moon-planet is cold, and thin, and devoid of oxygen. Wherever you stand upon its surface, to pan from left to right is to witness the same horizon-spanning, cratered, barren vista. A world made entirely of rock, and above that lifeless skyline a frigid vault of empty, unbreathable air, so thin that the stars are visible overhead even during what passes for day here. Inhospitable.

Wait- motion detected. Zoom in for a closer look. A shooting star- some piece of space-debris hitting the negligible atmosphere at high speed. Not uncommon here, almost unremarkable.

Almost.

Keep looking. Two somethings in fact, very close together. Not burning up, heading down towards the surface, fast and straight. Projected point of impact four point seven clicks away.

Well, well, well...

The two objects separated slightly during their near-ballistic descent, one leading, the other falling back. Once down below the limits of long-range detectors, filmy, almost negligibly thin parachutes snapped out to scrub their velocity to something just less than a fatal impact. Torn away almost as soon as they opened, the drogues' brief job was done and their two payloads- close enough now to be revealed as metallic objects resembling armoured Nautilus shells- careered on down. A scant kilometre above the ground a second chute deployed, this one a parawing, lessening their angle of attack and reducing their landing to something marginally below bone-shattering- whatever they were, they were tough. The leading shell struck the ground a glancing blow, its chute severing instantly and leaving it cartwheeling madly across the rocky plain. It bounced along for over a click in the low gravity like a runaway monowheel, carving a trail in the dust beneath it as it gradually shed momentum before- still moving at inhuman speed- it uncurled with a snap to reveal itself as a figure in

white and black ceramo-composite armour. Upright, it sailed through the air in a long shallow arc, legs pumping, until it hit the ground without so much as breaking stride.

“*Woo-HOOO!*” The figure yodelled over the comm-band.

The other shell bowled along after landing until down to a more sensible speed, then likewise deployed. The second suited figure- taller and a little broader in the shoulder than the first- skidded to a crouching halt in the cover of an erratic boulder, heavy-rifle drawn and charged. Their trailing dust-cloud dissipating in the thin wind, the latecomer’s helmet- stylised to resemble a war-horse and attached to the main body via a long collar of interlocking black rings where a human head would be- slowly shook from side to side, then set off in pursuit. It accelerated at a more lumbering pace than its comrade, a low-bodied run that reached locomotive speeds with the armour’s servo-assist. The suit’s legs looked a little unusual, knees high and the lowest joint elongated, the feet armoured into powerful all-terrain hooves.

The armoured figure ahead- distinguishable at this distance by chrome blue shoulder pauldrons- reached the outer slope of a crater at a dead run and began scrambling up it at the same break-neck pace, slowing only as it approached the rim. Reaching the same slope 73 seconds afterwards, the second figure took the ascent more carefully. The last 15 metres of the approach it took at a minimal-profile crawl, moving to join the first in the lee of some boulders overlooking the rim’s inner edge. This close, their suits recognised each other through coded IFF pulses of laser-light. Line-of-sight secure comms was established via their forearm communications arrays and an icon winked in the new arrival’s polarised faceplate, selected with little more than a glance and a blink. His earphones were immediately assaulted by deafening, high-octane rock music.

“Does ‘radio silence’ mean *nothing* to you?” the latecomer- armoured shoulders patterned with brassy yellow chevrons- asked, resisting the instinct to raise his voice above the appalling din.

“Does ‘style’ mean *nothing* to you?” a cheerfully sardonic voice crackled back, its owner still somewhat breathless from his pell-mell run. “Don’t be such a *worrywart*.” But- mercifully- the music cut off. Now he could make out crackles of static on the line- dust motes blowing past and blocking individual packets of coherent light in the signal. “Nobody’s listening- they’re not expecting visitors out here.”

Inside his suit the second figure rolled his eyes, but otherwise didn't respond. In the music's sudden absence the wind souging over their suits' pick-up amps suddenly seemed very loud. Both now laying prone, they inched stealthily toward the crater rim, heavily-sculpted abdominal-plates scraping against dusty rock. In the deep shadow cast by the surrounding boulders, and with their suits' running lights dimmed for maximum stealth, the only illumination came from a virtual display in the corner of their Head-Up Displays, in the top corner of which a circular timer had begun gradually ticking down. The first figure pulled his EM-intensifier from its magnetic holster just above his armoured gauntlet, lifted it to the sensors set into his helmet- this one a stylised, snarling lion- and began scanning the view ahead. Although the armour's posture didn't change, his partner nevertheless saw him tense. Before he could ask, the scanner was handed wordlessly across. The second visitor took it, and looked for himself.

"Butter it," he swore quietly.

In the optic's magnified, wavelength-compensated view he could make out the magnetic anomalies revealing the armoured and camouflaged facility built into the rock of the crater wall below. It seemed to extend all the way around the inner circumference that he could see.

"Bigger than we expected," the first's voice commented in his ear. The second's head shook slowly, still glued to the intensifier. That wasn't the immediate problem.

"Sentries," he reported succinctly. "Two, main entrance portal. Moving this way."

"Like I said," the first drawled. At the same time he detached a long piece of equipment moulded to the contours of his back. With slow, fluid movements so as not to alert any motion-detecting algorithms the enemy's passive sensors might be using, he swung it around and brought it to his shoulder, his suit's HUD synching into the plasma-rifle's sights. There was the faintest high-pitched hum of charging energy. The only sign of animation in the armoured figure was the twitching of an articulated tail of metal rings emerging from above his armoured backside.

With equally smooth and controlled motions- and without taking his gaze away from the scanner - his partner reached across from where he lay and gently pushed the rifle's nose into

the dirt. With underwater slowness the first turned his armoured visage towards him, body-language not amused.

“What?”

“Our orders were to infiltrate, remember? Not *incinerate*.” This earned Yellow-Shoulders a dirty look- unseen, but he knew his partner more than well enough to tell. It was amazing how much disdain could be packed into a single tilt of the head. The cautious one finally lowered the intensifier and made a show of turning his faceplate towards at his comrade-in-arms, the faint whine of servo-motors audible in a sudden lull in the wind. “Two sentries suddenly go offline and you think their Centurion’s just going to shrug and put it down to an unauthorised snack-break?” He shook his head minutely to reinforce the point. “We need to do this *quietly*.”

He slowly took his hand from the rifle’s muzzle. The sharp-shooter stubbornly lifted it with sub-aqua langour, re-established his aim, and disengaged its safeties. His tail flickered. There was a moment of drawn-out tension, and Yellow-Shoulders held his breath, waiting. And then, slowly the rifle lowered. A derisive *huh* transmitted down the comm-line.

“Still say I could take them out from here- they’re big enough targets.” Yellow-Shoulders snorted with what could have been amusement. As the sharp-shooter switched the rifle back to ‘safety’ and re-stowed it, his partner began tapping icons on his gauntlet’s dorsal wristpad. “We need more intel first.”

“You *always* say that.”

“I’ll try their standard comm-codes,” the second carried on talking, ignoring the interruption.

“They really should change those once in a while,” Blue-Shoulders observed ironically,

“You’d almost think they *want* us to be able to hear what they’re saying to each other.”

“Guess so,” his partner continued his hack. “See if you can find us a back door, huh?”

With another ambivalent noise the sharp-shooter reclaimed the EM-intensifier and began scanning methodically along the steep crater wall where it met the ground, searching further and further around the circumference from what was obviously the main entrance portal, a circular airlock deeply recessed into the rock wall so as to be invisible to anyone or anything overflying the crater. It was wide enough to fly a transport-freighter through. Nothing... nothing... still nothing...

“Gotcha,” he grunted. Another magnetic anomaly wavered behind a thin layer of bonded rock nearby- definitely not natural. “This is almost *too* easy.”

“Guess we got lucky,” was his partner’s only comment, his attention absorbed elsewhere. The sharp-shooter now zoomed back in on the sentry patrol’s plodding progress around the crater’s circumference, slowly approaching their position and that of the back door. That was less lucky. The sentries were, he had to grudgingly admit, acting quite competently, watching each other’s backs as they progressed. They were a definite obstacle- and might just present something approximating a decent challenge for the first time on this covert mission.

The two sentries’ armoured suits were indistinguishable- a workaday metallic finish, with scuff-marks in places giving them a second-hand air. The fundamental, irreconcilable divisions between the two sides of the War could be read right there. Whilst technological advances had rendered differences in servo-armour design effectively irrelevant- both sides had long acknowledged it was the wearer *inside* that made the difference- *style* still counted for one of them. And whereas the two watchers on the crater rim were broad of shoulder and scrupulously narrow of waist- physically perfect expressions of their moral superiority, those two armoured suits below were hulking, bulging brutes, broad in the beam and, if anything, even broader in the belly.

“Looks like a couple of Ollies,” he said, then shook his head critically. “These guys just don’t learn- you should *never* pair up like with like.”

“I’ve isolated their comm-band,” his partner said, his fingers tracing patterns on his wristpad.

“What’re they talking about?”

“Dinner.” A small snort of amusement came down the comm-line.

“Figures.” The second figure grunted as his fingers flew over the pad’s tactile input surface.

“Let’s see if any of those access codes we ‘jacked are still good...”

Rising to a cautious crouch, the sharp-shooter increased his scrutiny of the pair below as they moved closer. This world’s dim daylight was already starting to fade, and as they stepped into the long, elongating shadow of the crater-wall all that was visible were the searchlights in their bulbous chest-plates playing against the rock below. A regular patrol? They shouldn’t be expecting intruders- the existence of this base had been an astonishingly well-

kept secret- but it seemed they were taking no chances. *Definitely* more paranoia than your run-of-the-mill Food Farm called for.

“Got it – I’ve ‘jacked their telemetry. They’re not reporting in directly,” his partner said, head cocked thoughtfully. “Those suits are pinging out broadcast beacons. Must be relays set all the way around the crater wall...”

“I’m surprised any of them could walk that far,” Blue-Shoulders muttered. Then he snorted an almost-laugh. “At least we know the Other Side’ll never be able to get a *spy* into our ranks, eh? They’d barely be able to squeeze through our airlocks.” His comrade was either too focussed to listen, or ignored this pertinent contribution.

“...Short range only, though. Lots of static about. High cosmic background...”

Inside his suit, the sharp-shooter slowly smiled.

“You thinking what I’m thinking?”

“On it,” his partner replied immediately. “Isolating the frequency, and...” he tapped out a final sequence and lifted his head. “Relay nearest us just ‘accidentally’ glitched-out.” Down the comm-line, Sharp-shooter snorted smugly and thumped his partner lightly on the shoulder.

“Pecs n’ Techs- best team ever.” Unseen, his partner rolled his eyes again, but smiled.

Below them, the sentries had become invisible down against the crater wall, but their beacons helpfully announced their location with slow regular pings, like a resting heartbeat. Number Two looked over at his comrade. “Think we can do this?”

“You have to ask? We’re the 303 Paladins- when they made *us*, they broke the mould!” He grinned savagely and held out an armoured fist. Unseen, his comrade returned the grin and they bumped knuckles.

“Might is Right.”

“For Pyxis Major.”

Together they moved closer to the cliff-edge of the crater wall and in unison fired micro-pistons from their wrist-holsters into the rim’s bedrock. They abseiled rapidly down the steep inner slope on spider-steel monofilament, landed in the cover of more boulders- scree fallen from the crater rim- and circled stealthily around towards their targets. They didn’t need to confer- rigorous training had rendered them almost telepathically in-sync. Each picking his mark, they crept silently out to either side. One swift tap of their gauntlet cuffs together each

and a glowing line extended between each pair of wrists. They rushed forwards simultaneously and silently from behind, looped their wires down over each target's helmet and *pulled*. Twin sharp crackles and twin grunts of shock- quite literally. The lights on both enemy suits failed, and the regular ping, ping, pings on the intercom stopped just as abruptly. The two rotund sentinels sagged backwards, caught neatly by their two attackers and lowered gently to the floor to prevent the shockwave of their impact alerting any seismic detectors. *That* was the toughest part of the whole operation.

"*That's* for my Progenitor," Sharp-shooter hissed at his recumbent victim. He glanced across to find his comrade's faceplate fixed on him. "*What?*" Yellow-shoulders restrained the urge to shake his head- his commander had always taken that blow to their war-effort personally. No sense in aggravating it.

They carefully carried the two of them back into the boulder-strewn shadows in the lee of the entrance portal. Even in below-standard gravity, it was an effort.

"I swear," Sharp-shooter huffed as he laid his prey alongside his partner's, "the Ollies get chubbier every time we tangle with them. What're they doing, seeing just how *fat* they can push this line before they flabbing well *pop*?"

"Don't swear," Yellow-shoulders muttered absent-mindedly as he crouched down by the two recumbent bulks.

"Gut-damned greedy *beasts*," Sharp-shooter muttered. The twilight now completely gone, the crater floor was illuminated by starlight alone. Crouching down as well, he peered into one enemy faceplate, and then the other. Two bovine faces lay inside, eyes closed and slack-jawed from the effects of the stun-wire. "Ugh," he added, mostly to himself, "Progenitors preserve us from *that*." A mantra he'd repeated so often it was almost as autonomic as breathing sprang from his lips. "'A fat worse than death'."

Broad-snouted and brown-furred, save for similar licks of cream white across the top of their muzzle and up between their eyes- *exactly* similar- the two faces almost overfilled their suit helmets' capacity, chubby cheeks nearly pushing as far forward as their noses and a thick double-chin visible beneath. One's cheek twitched, and on the other the long eyelashes over one eye quivered.

Identical faces, identically fat.

“Told you,” Sharp-shooter said. “We’re gonna have to get Tactical to up the voltage again- their necks are getting so thick all that blubber’s actually insulating them!”

“Little busy here,” his partner grunted. His wristpad was plugged into both of their ‘guests’ suits, and he was typing furiously. Two further hair-thin fibre-optics snaked down to a couple of small glossy white spheres at his feet, like perfectly-round pebbles, or eyeballs.

“Cake,” he muttered under his breath. “New encryption cypher.”

“Don’t swear,” Blue-Shoulders shot back at him. He stood in silence for a moment, looking down at these two latest, fat-assed foot-soldiers for the Other Side. “I don’t know *how* Olympus think they’re going to be able to whip these lard-butts into shape once we’ve won the War.” He sighed, “There’s not enough treadmills in the Galaxy. Almost be kinder just to put them out of their misery now.”

“Can it- hacking here!” Tech-Guy’s gauntleted fingers typed even faster.

“Seriously,” Sharp-shooter reached forward and rapped one of the big-bellied beasts on the summit of his armoured stomach. “We should have just stolen a couple of Ollie suits- you’d have room for a Gutbuster *tank* in there with you and they’d not be any the wiser.”

“Jupe, will you shut *up*?!” Blue-Shoulders straightened up abruptly and shot a dangerous glare at his subordinate, but they were too preoccupied to notice. “C’mon... *c’mon*...!” The silence stretched out as Tech-Guy’s fingers flew. Blue-Shoulders tensed as the seconds ticked down. “Yes- *got it!!!*”

The two little pebbles abruptly rose off the ground, wires detaching, spun uncertainly in mid-air for a moment and then shot out of sight in the direction the two sentries would have taken, hurrying to catch up with their predicted position, coming into range of the next relay. Tech-Guy stared tensely at his wristpad and counted under his breath.

“Four... three... two...”

As he reached zero, two almost simultaneous pings sounded loud and clear over the enemy’s comm-frequency. His yellow shoulders sank a little in relief as the two hijacked beacons resumed their rhythm as if they’d never been off-air, moving away around the rim at a steady walking pace. Despite his pique, Sharp-shooter grunted something that approximated to approval.

“Knew I brought you along for something.” Then he jerked an armoured thumb behind him.

“Now, get that salting door open!”

“Yes, Sir...” Yellow-Shoulders’ shoulders slumped again, with only half-feigned resignation. He rose from his crouch and moved towards the concealed entrance, his superior close on his heels. As they ghosted forwards, their suits’ HUDs obligingly outlined the hidden superstructure in neon skeletal lines. Tech-Guy reached out and gently ran a palm flat against the rocky skin covering the airlock’s outer portal, looking for a concealed dataport. Then he froze. Jupe felt it through his feet a moment later- vibration. Rhythmic. *Heavy*. Approaching.

“Cover!” they warned each other simultaneously, then threw themselves to either side of the entrance, scrambling for concealment. Their comm-link broke as they lost line-of-sight. A few pounding heartbeats later, the circular portal split into three and yawned open with a low grinding noise like a tri-beaked mouth, dim light spilling from the tunnel beyond. Then another armoured figure lumbered out into the crater.

Pressed into rocky shadow, the yellow-shouldered space-warrior stared at it, wide-eyed. The hostile’s outsized helmet twisted slowly from side to side, and as the light caught it he could see a long, flexible extension beneath the faceplate, curled upwards like a striking cobra. Its belly was a huge armoured globe resembling the Death Star of ancient screen-history- navel comms-dish and all- and its comparatively short arms and legs would have been comical if the creature hadn’t towered above the Paladin, easily twice his height. That and the fact it was toting a tank-mountable ion-cannon in one hand as easily as if it were a plasma-pistol. To either side of its great head sat protrusions like ancient satellite dishes, doubtless soaking up all the EM information in the vicinity. It was so close he could see the gilded insignia of rank etched into its rerebrace like the decoration on some alien monolith. Jupe was eclipsed beyond the creature’s heavy horizon like he was on the dark side of Old Earth’s Moon. He didn’t dare risk signalling. But he knew his Comrade-in-Abs, and he just had to hold his breath and pray that he wouldn’t do anything *stupid* this time...

Finally, the behemoth took an unhurried, rolling step forward, then another, and another. The ground shook with each thudding footfall. Armoured rump swaying ponderously, the tank-sized titan moved away from the portal. Out of direct illumination it vanished very quickly from his armour’s senses, fading in the visual spectrum, infra-red and broader EM. Which,

given the emissions something that *big* must be putting out, plus the energy needed for servo assist, was worryingly impressive-

“Herc, *go!*” The signal crackled in his ears, interrupting his thoughts at the same time as the low growl from a set of subterranean motors. His suit’s image-intensifiers suddenly outlined Jupe’s armour as a strobing blue blur dashing for the narrowing jaws of the airlock. There wasn’t time to think, he just lunged after him, diving through the rapidly-closing portal into the tunnel beyond, scant seconds before they slammed shut with a CLUNK.

“You... *lunatic*,” he panted, even as he scanned frantically the environment for unfriendly surveillance systems- thankfully finding none.

“Fortunate favours the Buff,” was Jupe’s response, in that oh-so-*smug* tone he used when one of his impulsive, mission-jeopardising gambles paid off through sheer blind luck. His commander’s gaze swept the long, empty, red-lit tunnel, round in cross-section and metal-skinned. “Knock-knock rebels. Jupiter and Hercules have come down from Olympus to kick your supersized butts.” He drew his plasma-rifle again, and disengaged the safety. “Move out. Eyes and ears.” Herc nodded and took point, keeping a specialist eye out for security systems.

“That... thing...” he was moved to ask, once his heartrate had dropped, “what on Ark was that?” As the 303 Paladin’s Tac and Strategy Officer Jupe had access to classified briefings that he didn’t, and probably to information that Herc didn’t even know existed. Not that Jupe could ever resist letting on about it for long.

“A salting War Elephant.” The 303’s undisputed, pre-determined, born-to-be leader snorted insouciantly, but Herc could tell he was doing his best to get over a nasty surprise.

“An... *elephant*?” That was a word straight out of the Old Arkives. “How?”

“Who cares? *Focus*, Herc.” Suitably chastised, they maintained comm-silence for a few paces, but it was a sign of just how rattled he was that Jupe started talking anyway. “The Other Side must have got hold of the basecode somehow. Maybe even genetic material. Jupiter276 always claimed his Paladins came across one in the Prometheus Belt but, *grease...*”

“What?” Herc paused long enough to glance back at his leader. Even with their comm-line low-fi to reduce EM leakage he sounded amused. “You won’t take your own word for it?”

“Yeah, well, 276 has some insecurity issues Quality Control missed- he always has to be *special...*”

They were moving deeper into the installation now, Herc leading the way, taking tunnel after tunnel at each intersection they came to.

“Hope that schematic fragment you recovered is accurate,” Jupe breathed. In the top right corner of his HUD a partial map of the local environment hung, the signal piggybacking through from Herc’s suit processor. It was centred on their location, tracking with them.

“Seems to be so far,” his partner replied. But he sounded uncertain, “This place is bigger than we were expecting. I’ve counted... *three* Refectories so far?” Jupe snorted.

“Explains why we’ve not seen any sentries on patrol. Greedy *beasts*.” They ghosted on in silence for a few more paces. “You’re right, Herc. I think we’ve found more than just some research project here.” Another couple of paces. “We could be in one of their flabbing Genesis Farms.”

“You really think?” Herc sounded dubious.

“Since we’ve apparently got new Clone Lines wandering around here, *yes*.” Jupe’s voice was growing taut with suppressed excitement. “Maybe they’ve even got part of the Ark itself here.”

“*The Ark?*!” Herc actually stopped and stared back at Jupe.

“Where else would the Other Side have got *elephants* from? I’ll bet that Line was originally supposed to do all the First Colonists’ heavy lifting.” Jupe checked his rifle- a sure sign of agitation underneath all his training. He gestured impatiently, and they set off again. “If it is, we could get our hands on the master-genome of every salting clone-line they have. We get *those*, and we’ve got them cold. We’d have elephants fighting on *our* side- hah, how does Ganesha sound for some *real* heavy infantry?” Herc didn’t respond. Maybe he’d never heard the name, but then again his line had never needed the imagination the Jupiters did- it was a strategic trait. “We could even retro-engineer the Ollies to *slim down*.” Jupe smiled grimly inside his helmet. “Now *that’d* be fitting justice for what they did to our Progenitors-” he broke off as Herc suddenly held a gauntlet back, black-padded palm up, and crouched abruptly. He hunkered down too.

“Security sensor just ahead.” Herc said, working on his wristpad. “I just need to fix up a blind-spot here.” Jupe smiled- Herc was *good* at blind-spots.

“They obviously haven’t missed those security codes you ‘jacked, then,” he commented sardonically.

“Amateurs.” Ouch. That was the closest he’d heard Herc ever get to being rude about someone.

The sensor safely navigated, they came to a convoluted, almost intestinal intersection of corridors, and for the first time Herc hesitated.

“What?” Jupe watched his comrade look around, then check something on his suit sensors. He moved up side-by-side, alert for trouble. “Herc? Talk to me.”

“The base is pressurised,” Herc replied, gauntleted hands reaching for the front and rear of his headpiece. “We should conserve our O₂ for the extraction, we might need a longer supply if things go pear-shaped.”

“No” Jupe overruled him, “That’s not approved for this operation. We stay on suit air. Let’s keep moving.”

“Situation’s more complicated than Tactical thought,” Herc disagreed, to Jupe’s surprise.

“We need to use our initiative.”

“It’s against Regulations,” Jupe snapped shortly, discussion over. He stepped forward, then spun back when he heard a small click as the safeties on Herc’s suit collar disengaged.

“We’re on a *mission* here, Herc. *Herc!*” Unbelievably, his subordinate ignored him, ducked forward and, headpiece held in both hands, he twisted it. There was a hiss of escaping atmosphere. Jupe’s teeth locked. “Lieutenant, I’m *ordering* you...”

Herc’s helmet came free, its inner components automatically stowing back into his suit’s collar. Securing the lightweight outer shell between his shoulders, he straightened up and cricked his neck from side to side, rolling it around the confines of his suit’s neck-guard, ears flicking, an expression of relief on his long, dark, powerful equine muzzle. A thick line of yellow lip-balm ran in a precise strip across his top lip- he was always complaining that his helmet chafed, no matter how much the techs insisted he was perfectly standard, and so it *must* be a perfect fit. Then with a sigh the equoid opened his eyes, the golden optics in his bionic irises glowing around rectangular pupils

“You weren’t so bothered about obeying Regs last night, ‘Sir’.” He gave his commander a smile of knee-melting sweetness.

Scrolling neatly down his left cheek was a 2D-barcode and beneath it the numerals 303 in a vertical column, yellow-blonde against his glossy brown-black hide. A genetic amendment,

the draft-equoid's fur pigment engineered to express that unique pattern since 'birth'. It was his identity and his serial number- Jupe knew it so well he could pick his Lieutenant out from a whole parade-ground of Hercs without having to consciously think about it.

Jupe's suit monitor registered a sudden rise in his heartbeat and core body temperature.

"That... that was *different*. That was just in case we never got another..." Suddenly his armour was unbearably hot- and it was nothing to do with a malfunction. "Oh... *cake!*"

He reached for his own helmet and, with a few muffled curses, disengaged it. His suit's autonomous security systems protested, but he overrode with a snarled ok-code. Dragging it free exposed his perfectly-sculpted leonoid features, copper-coloured mane trimmed to remain as wild and free-flowing as possible whilst in no way impeding his armour's cyber-neuro-connectivity. He bore his barcode and numeral down his right cheek, in fur so dark blue it was almost black.

"This *isn't* some training sim, Herc. Quit screwing around!" His eyes- blue, speckled with violet points of light from his own interface optics- glared furiously beneath his smouldering scowl, but even they faltered in the face of that smile. He took a deep, cleansing breath.

Then his face screwed up in disgust. "Ugh! What the blubbering heck is that *smell?*"

"Fried food?" his partner said, uncertainly. His nostrils flared slightly, and his chest expanded. "Uh... Vegetable oils, carbohydrates, lactose, casein, sweet chilli sauce... breadcrumb cheese-balls, I think." He swallowed dryly, his Adam's apple bobbing in his long neck.

"Hey, are you ok?" Jupe asked urgently. His suit had priority access to Herc's telemetry, and a medical warning had begun flashing on his auxillary display.

"I'm... I'm *fine*," the draftoid said. His expression and body language said otherwise. He breathed out unsteadily, and a tremor ran through the toned masseter on the left-hand side of his face.

"We're too close to a Refectory." Jupe decided. "We need to move."

"Yeah, just... gimme a second."

"Move, Lieutenant! *Now!*"

"Yes, Sir..."

“Flabbing heck, thank the Progenitors we’re away from *that*. Ugh... more or less.” They’d moved several corridors further into the complex and the appalling smell of junk-food had abated, but it never quite seemed to disappear. Apart from the all-pervasive odour, the local environment seemed free of hostiles, for now. Herc had instituted another security blind-spot, and was leaning back against the curved metallic wall of a corridor alcove- tentatively tagged by Intel as a broom cupboard- deep-breathing. Jupe reached for his belt-mounted ration dispenser and bit automatically into the protein-cube it provided. Perfectly nutritionally balanced to keep him in peak physical condition, he could feel its refreshing lack of taste help him regain his focus. “You had me worried there for a second, Herc.” He gave the equoid a critical look, which the Lieutenant noticed.

“I’m fine, ok? Just... fine...”

“You just... rest up for a moment, ok?” Jupe said, mentally recalling his hypnagogically-imprinted Psych Leadership training. Ah, yes... show empathy. “Flashback, huh?”

“It just... caught me with my guard down,” Herc responded with a slightly sheepish smile.

“It won’t happen again, Sir.” He snorted, shaking his head slightly. “Guess it’s a smell you don’t ever really *forget*...”

“Hey,” Jupe said seriously, placing a gauntlet on Herc’s shoulder and looking into his eyes.

“I know this must be tough on you, but I need you to be strong here, big guy. We’ve got a *mission* to complete.”

“I can do strong,” the equoid said. Jupe nodded slowly.

“I *know* you can.” Flashing a sudden, predatory grin, he patted Herc’s shoulder, gauntlet banging against armour plate. “Hang in there Lieutenant, they’ve got payback coming to them, bigtime. No one does what they did to one of *my* squad and gets away with it.” He snorted in recollection, half amused, half outraged. “Holy Workout, by the time we got you back from the enemy your BMI was pushing *twenty-eight*. I had to go to Aries himself to convince Command I could get you back into shape rather than have them decommission you. Grease, it took *weeks* to sweat that ball-gut off of you. And as for your *butt*-”

“I’ll never forget what they did to me,” Herc said shortly, his expression shutting down.

Jupe gave him a long, appraising look. No-one went through that kind of trauma without psychological scarring, other Jupeters had warned him. Hercules303 was a damaged unit- his effectiveness almost certainly compromised. But, then again, Jupe figured, he definitely had increased motivation: vengeance. It had been his call, as 303 Leader. And it had paid off,

bigtime- it was Herc's tireless work that had unearthed this installation's existence out here on this forgotten little moon.

And if they *hadn't* pulled all those endless extra sessions in the gym together, working tirelessly to get his Lieutenant back into regulation condition, pushing him unrelentingly until those abs resurfaced from all that disgusting belly-blubber, all that time alone together, sweating together, well, they might never have-

He shook his head abruptly.

"Mission," he reminded his lieutenant. Herc looked back at him for a long moment without responding, then nodded his head slowly.

"Mission." He pushed away from the wall and stood upright, a little unsteadily. "Uhh..." he consulted his wristpad. "We go this way, I think."

"You *think*?" Jupe hardened his voice- he couldn't afford anything but perfection from his point-man now.

"*Definitely* this way. Sir."

"Good." He paused, and put a morale-boosting hand on Herc's shoulder again. "We can do this, Lieutenant." He grinned ferociously. "And we're going to kick the fat butt of every single disgusting, overblown clone-beast blocking our way. Let's move out!"

He set off purposefully- but something was wrong. He stopped, and turned back. Herc was still standing there. He had a... a *look* on his face that Jupe had never seen before.

"Herc, what's wrong? Herc!" He took a step closer, suddenly on guard for enemy action.

"*Sit-rep*, Lieutenant!"

"Do you love me?" Jupe stared at him.

"...What?"

"Do you love me? Honestly?"

"Is your suit's medical unit malfunctioning?" Their in-suit autonomics had been known to get a little trigger-happy under combat situations, struggling to tell the difference between pain and stress. And this was certainly a stressful environment.

"I'm serious, Jupe."

"So am I!" The leonoid couldn't quite believe this was happening. Psychological breakdown he had contingencies for, but this- "*Lieutenant*-"

“Jupe, I *mean* it.” The equoid’s voice sounded odd, strained. “This mission... We might not both make it out of this. I *have* to know how you feel about me now, before... whatever happens happens.” He was standing right in front of him now, a full head taller than his leader, reach-out-and-touch distance. “*Please*, Jupe. Do you-?”

“Alright, I heard you!” Jupe just knew his face was going red, and he couldn’t stop himself glancing around for witnesses. Flabbing *ridiculous*. “I... Yes, yes I *do*, ok? We’re on a *mission* here, Lieutenant!” he hissed.

“Kiss me,” Herc said.

“You... what?” Maybe it was Jupe’s suit that had malfunctioned. Things definitely didn’t seem to be making much sense.

“If you really mean that, I want you to kiss me.” The lieutenant’s voice was eerily calm.

“And if a patrol walks by, you think that finding us *making out* will give us the element of surprise?”

Herc didn’t respond to this sarcasm, just put his gauntleted hands on Jupe’s shoulders and stood there, with those big, solemn golden eyes pleading wordlessly, even as the leonoid glared back at him, incredulous. The equoid clearly wasn’t going to let go unless he shook him off- the Hercs were infuriatingly stubborn sometimes. Looking down at him, Herc’s dark mane fell over the narrow yellow bandana he’d taken to wearing... when exactly? Jupe couldn’t recall seeing another Herc wearing one- for the Progenitors’ sakes, what a stupid, *irrelevant* detail to worry about at a time like this! But it was one of the little ways *this* Herc had come to seem... different to him. Special, amongst the hundreds of identical copies he saw every day. Then there had been all those off-duty sessions working out together, watching those draftoid muscles pump and sweat, physique growing better and better by the day, who wouldn’t have enjoyed watching that?

And then there had been the little shared glances in the locker room, then eventually had come those times *after* the workouts, and then on other nights, when his electronic warfare specialist’s talent at creating blind spots in surveillance systems had come in so very, very useful...

It had been Wrong. Worse, it had been Against Regulations- so many regulations.

Relationships of *any* sort were forbidden, especially within a squad. The only worse taboo he

could have possibly broken would have been to fornicate with another of his own clone-line. What they had started doing together was so *wrong*, but...

With a growl of frustration, Jupe suddenly lunged forwards and planted his lips on Herc's. It was a short, hard kiss, before the leonine abruptly pulled back and dragged his lips brusquely across the back of his gauntlet. The only sign it had ever happened was the equoid's smudged lip-balm.

"There, *satisfied*? Now let's get this mission back on... track?" Jupe blinked. His suit had suddenly started to broadcast-chirp urgently. Medical alarm. He tried to look at his auxillary display, but something was interfering with it, making it fuzzy. That or his eyes weren't focussing prop-

"Cake!" he croaked. He tried to haul his helmet back on, but it slipped from his narcotically-numb fingers, falling to the floor with a loud *clank*. "Herc!" he gasped out. "Go internal air! Gas!" He tried to turn and run, but his superb, perfectly athletic body suddenly felt like something folded out of wet paper. As he twisted his legs gave way beneath him and he toppled helplessly. There was a loud 'clang' as he collided with Herc's armour on the way down. He felt those strong arms wrap around him, his fall slowed as they both sank to the floor. Somewhere nearby, alarms began whoop-whooping.

"Jupe!" the equoid's voice seemed to be coming down a comm-line with a bad connection. "It's ok, I've got you! I've got you..."

"Abort," Jupe croaked, his tongue feeling as heavy as a whole flabbing Ollie. Herc sounded ok. Maybe got his suit sealed in time? Couldn't see straight. But then he was expendable. Clones were *born* expendable. What mattered was the mission. "Get out. 'Scape!"

"No," he thought he heard Herc say over the deafening pounding in his ears. Enemy sentries stampeding towards them? Cover definitely blown.

"GO!" Jupe managed to yell the word thickly at the stupid, *stubborn* horse, as the pounding grew closer and louder. Olympus had to know about this place. "Order!" There would always be another Jupiter to lead the squad... why didn't that make him feel any better? Getting tunnel vision...

"Love you..."

Nighty-night...

* * *

Wake up...

“Gnhhh...?”

Wake up...

“Gnff.” Something... not right. Dark. Where...?

C'mon, Jupe...

Felt like he was coming out of a deep cryo-sleep... Some tech had... really caked up the wake-up routine this time... *serious* reprimand in store for that. Feeling... so... slow, and... heavy... not a good start to the mission

Jupe... it's me...

Herc..?

Wait... mission?

MISSION!

With a gasp Jupe tore his eyes open. They felt gummy. Everything blurry, but getting sharper. Still dark, but some light. Get bearings. Room? Big. Hanging... felt like he was hanging somehow, suspended leaning slightly forward, arms out, legs spread. He... he couldn't move! Nerve-blocked? No, feel muscles straining, but no movement at all. Arms... no... legs... no... neck- yes, some neck. Roll head- ugh, hard work!- look around. Up. Some kind of arch overhead, with lights. Down to each side too- no, not an arch, a ring. He was hanging inside some kind of vertical ring. His suit arms were stretched almost to its circumference. Not physically tied, felt like some kind of magnetic restraint-

...Suit?

Yes, *his* suit, but not responding. Should do. Try again- no. Something wrong. *Seriously* wrong. Suit felt wrong too... felt... tight...

“Jupe?”

Hands suddenly pressed against his cheeks- *they* felt wrong too. A blurry face moved closer, swimming almost into focus.

“Huhh... Hnggc..?” He shook his head muzzily from side to side, dislodging those hands as he tried to wake himself up, dispel the cloying feeling he was coated in lead. “Wh... wh...?” He trailed off, eyes fixing again on his arm- thick, too thick- and then were slowly dragged down to his torso.

He let out a low, wordless mewl of horror.

This... this couldn't be happening...

In place of his abs, a Workout-damned *belly* bulged out in front of him, visible even below the suit armour encasing his chest- though from the way it squeezed he could tell it the pecs it contained had lost definition. His suit's abdominal plates had somehow been removed from around his middle (*how?* It should only respond to *his* access codes!) leaving only the body-fitting superconducting monofabric layer. This was now stretched out around that stomach- *HIS* stomach!- to resemble a sagging silver-black sack of lard. He could actually feel the shameful, *disgusting* thing rolling over the top edges of his thigh-plates.

No... no... NO..!

With a rising surge of panic he struggled frantically to free himself, but then froze when he felt that abominable *blob* of blubber sway- the only physical movement he achieved. It actually *wobbled*, and- worse- he felt answering movement in a salting *spare tyre*, the armour plates missing from his sides and in their place a big black-clad roll of dough pushing out. It was this sensation that finally snapped him fully awake. Teeth bared in effort, he hauled his head upright, the back of his neck actually rolling over the top of his suit's neck-guard, and then it sagged forward again, neck muscles aching, dragged by its own *weight*.

What... what have they flabbing done to me?

“Jupe, it's ok-” those hands touched his face again. “I'm here...”

The distraught leonoid tore his eyes off the ruin of his physique and managed to focus on the face in front of him. A face with added weight around the cheeks and chin- he twitched in instinctive disgust- but otherwise oh-so-familiar...

“*Herc!*” Jupe gasped. “Thank Quads! We’ve got to get out of here, *now!*”

Herc’s hands slowly pulled away.

“Herc, *hurry!* Before they find out you’ve escaped! Get me out! *Cut* me out, if you have to!” It’d be one way of losing weight, his hysterical thoughts chimed in. “Herc, for Ark’s sake, get me out of this thing!”

“I... I can’t do that Jupe.”

Jupe blinked uncomprehendingly. As his indomitable metabolism began to deal with whatever salting drugs they’d pumped into him, the world around him sharpened back into full focus. His lieutenant stood in front of him- but he wasn’t in his armour. He was wearing some kind of soft clothing that could almost have been a uniform, but of a design that Jupe didn’t recognise. He was almost as bloated as before they’d rescued him. The equoid’s stomach stuck out like he had a barrel strapped to his front, his entire torso heavier, sides bulging out like saddlebags. His chest, arms and legs still had some obvious definition but they were swollen with excess weight too, his entire stance spread like he was holding a synth-shake can between his thighs, arms hanging out from his body. The neck supporting that fuller face had grown thicker, looking almost squat between newly-burly shoulders-

“Herc... no...”

No..!

“Everything’s going to be ok, Jupe, you’ll see.” The expression on Herc’s fattened-up features was unnervingly peaceful. The draftoid reached out a hand, and the leonoid felt it press gently against the rounded curve of his *disgusting* gut. Jupiter felt an involuntary shudder of revulsion run through him. “But first... we have to let them make some changes to us-”

Jupe *ROARED*. Desperation gave him a strength even *he* hadn't thought himself capable of- he heaved his entire body, back arching as he fought to free himself. The equoid stumbled back as Jupe's arms started to pull forwards, straining furiously against the magnetic field- then a motorised hum he'd only been half-conscious of increased. Servos in his suit whined, and with an ignominious *clang* he was flung back, his own armour working *against* him, tightening its grip. Snarling wildly, he tried to thrash, to buck, to *fight*-

- and then cold numbness, his entire body going limp. He slumped, all major voluntary muscles blocked. His suit, doping him. His flaccid frame held up by his armour alone, all he could do was hang there, panting. He could still move his eyes, even as he drooled down his chin. How... how had they broken through his suit's integrity firewall? It should be impossible! As sensation began to return he sensed movement in front of him.

"Jupe, don't fight it. Please, no one's going to hurt you- I would *never* let them hurt you-" The captive Jupiter found he could work his mouth again.

"Hurt me?! Look at what they're **DOING** to me! To both of us! Just **LOOK** at yourself!"

The equoid did look down, and tentatively put his hands to the sides of his stomach.

"Jupe, I-"

"Hercules303!" Jupiter barked. "Deactivate my restraints! I am Jupiter303, your squad leader! Recognise my barcode!"

The equoid flinched. One rolling eye fixed on Jupe's cheek. Sweat began beading on his forehead as his hypnagogically-imprinted training asserted itself against whatever mind-control he'd been put under. Jupe felt a beat of hope.

"Barcode... acknowledged, Sir."

"You *will* obey my order! Deactivate my restraints!"

Breathing heavily, the draftoid slowly drew himself up to his full height. He shut his eyes in concentration.

"No, *Sir*! Order *refused*!" Jupiter felt the shock like he'd been punched in the gut- he actually grunted. The command structure had been inculcated into all of them since before they were conscious- refusing a barcode-enforced order was... unthinkable! Herc shuddered once, then slowly put his hands back to the sides of his stomach. "I'm not going back."

Jupe swallowed. Then his eyes slowly lifted, met the equoid's.

"Herc..." he croaked, "y-you have to listen to me here, buddy. We have *got* to get out of here. We have to get you back to Olympus-" his eyes ran over Herc's barrel-like bulk, and gulped "-before they make you any *bigger*." Before they made *him* any bigger! "There's still time... We... we can still get you back into shape, *fix* you-" And they could still fix *him*- couldn't they?

"I don't *need* 'fixing', Jupe!" Herc shook his head sharply, as though dislodging post-workout sweat from his ears. "I've *chosen* this."

...No. Not possible.

"Herc, *please*... listen to me. They... they've messed with your head... this isn't the *real* you talking-" The draftoid folded his arms, let out a single exasperated snort through flared nostrils and slowly shook his head. It was such a Herc gesture it actually hurt to see: normally used to express utter disbelief at whatever crazy thing his wildcat commander had done *this* time. "Herc, *listen*, you have to snap out of it! We're 303 Paladins- squad-mates... if you ever loved me then trust me now!" *That* seemed to get through- Herc took a half-step back and *stared* at him. "You've been *brainwashed*-"

"*Nobody's* brainwashed me, you... you... *idiot*!" The draftoid's teeth set in a rigid line.

"*Then what the fat have they done to you?!*"

"We taught him *love*, soldier."

Jupe froze as a third voice interrupted. Something about it caused a nameless feeling of dread- the special kind you get when you realise something so familiar as to be unnoticeable has somehow becomes alien, *wrong*, but for the life of you you can't identify what.

Clunking footsteps came from behind Herc. Jupe strained to see past his renegade comrade, who had also stiffened in surprise and- reading the minutiae of his body language- apprehensive anticipation. The chamber in front of Jupe was large and curved- if it continued the same behind him, his restraint was in the centre of a dipped floor in a circular room. He was bathed in light but the edges of the room were so dim as to be almost entirely dark. He could see two access ports in the curved wall ahead- looking like the mouths of two oval tubes, glowing with muted light from the corridors beyond. He predicted a third access port directly behind him, making a triangle. Each oval was wider than they were tall, with wide

shallow ramps leading down to floor level instead of steps- presumably to accommodate the Other Side's *grotesque* physiques. Sure enough, a large, rounded figure was making their shadowy way slowly down one ramp, their armoured boots clanking on the decking. They walked unhurriedly across the intervening dark space with a loose, casual, rolling gait. A walk that spoke of confidence, of *command*. Jupe braced himself to resist interrogation and coercion at the hands of this enemy, but despite all his training he found himself unnerved by the approaching figure. He didn't recognise the newcomer's silhouette as any of the Other Side's clones, but... like the voice, somehow it was *familiar*.

The enemy stepped into the light and faced him, eye-to-eye. They smiled. A strangled gasp forced its way out of Jupe as though he'd been socked in the solar-plexus.

"Hello, Jupiter303."

The captive stared at the newcomer's face, hard. You might be able to match a Paladin's barcode cosmetically, for a short while at least, but they were programmed to change almost as fast as their fur grew, the patterns evolving according to non-linear epigenetic algorithms. Unless you had designed it, you'd need a whole starship's data-core just to extrapolate a barcode's next probable iteration, and after *that*... forget it. No two barcodes were the same, not even between clone-brothers. Even cloning a clone wouldn't work- their barcode's telomeric clock wouldn't be reset correctly and the pattern would scramble. They were the ultimate recognition codes- in fact it was often the *only* way to discern between two individuals of the same Line. Jupe's eyes tracked over the dense pattern in front of him. It was distorted thanks to the size of the cheek it grew on, but in the back of his mind his imprinted memory was hysterically screaming '*match!*'.

"N-no..."

He couldn't tear his eyes away from that face- a distorted mirror smirking back at him- and the numeral embossed beneath that impossible barcode. '001'

"That's right, 303," the figure said with a malicious grin as he obviously savoured the moment. By the standards of the Other Side he was barely average, but by the standards of his Line he was *enormous*. His hips were easily twice as wide as normal, maybe three times. His stomach was just as wide, stuck out in front almost as far as he could reach and hung

down bare against his thighs, a deep navel almost proudly on display. It was spilling over a pair of armoured leggings so stretched that their armoured plates had separated, exposing white monofabric beneath that appeared vacuum-sealed to his bulging, blubbery limbs. His upper-torso was clad in an outdated version of Jupe's own armour, stretched to maximum capacity and fitting about as well as someone wearing armour half their size it needed to be. His mane was longer than regulation style, and continued down the sides of his face and under his chin as a ragged, fluffy beard. His hair had a single white streak growing off-centre through it. That was almost more shocking than his size- despite its padding, that face was *older* than any version of it Jupiter303 had ever seen before. "I'm your Prototype."

"This... this is a trick" Jupiter303 whispered. He felt as though he were falling through space in his re-entry shell again. He took refuge in what he *knew* to be true. "The Jupiter and Hercules Progenitors *died* 20 years ago in the Battle of Pyxis Major! You were trapped, surrounded by the Other Side in overwhelming numbers, and rather be captured you *detonated your suits' power-cores!*" He abruptly realised his voice had risen to brink of hysteria. He tried to calm himself with a deep-breathing routine.

"Hmmm... yeah..." The Jupiter standing in front of him tilted his head to the right and clicked his tongue- it was the gesture they all used when they were gently mocking a ludicrous new piece of intel that should never have got past the spam-filters. "Command lied to you about that. Vengeance is a *great* way to motivate troops to fight, isn't it, 303?" Jupe tried not to show any reaction, but his interrogator's smile widened as though he could read his mind. "And if they lied to you about *that*, what else can you trust?"

Jupe glared at this imposter, searching for the flaw that *had* to be there, but kept coming up against that barcode. His mind whirled frantically.

"The trouble is, it makes *sense*, doesn't it, 303? Isn't it exactly what *you'd* do?" His tone was almost delighted. "Besides, how else did you think the Other Side were keeping up so well tactically with you invincible Good Guys, hmm?" This other Jupiter- and they *had* to be a genuine Jupiter, somehow- grinned maliciously. "Shouldn't you have walked all over their disgusting, lazy, overblown butts by now? I can tell they haven't replaced me at Command. How IS old Horn-head coping these days? He never was cut out for leadership." Jupe twitched at the use of the classified nickname the Jupiters used amongst themselves- and only

themselves- to refer to the Aries line. “But I’m guessing the other Prototypes decided they weren’t about to take orders from some knock-off copy, right? Aries, Prometheus, Montu, Chiyou, Odin... the whole squad-”

“You are *not* my Progenitor.” Jupe snarled, but even to him it was beginning to sound a feeble protest. He found that he was panting. “You are NOT Jupiter001!”

“That’s right,” he replied, to Jupe’s bewilderment. “I’m not a serial number any more- it was so *dehumanising*.” Jupe blinked at the nonsense-word, but no explanation was forthcoming.

“My name’s Adam now, but *you*-” he tapped Jupiter on the breastplate with a thick finger, with a slow, superior smile, “You can call me ‘Sir’.”

“I... I...” Abruptly Jupe shook his head, and breathed deeply. “No,” he said through gritted teeth. “You are an enemy agent attempting to psychologically destabilize me. It will not work. *Whoever* you are-” it was the closest he could come to admitting the dreadful possibility, “I am stronger than you. I will *not* allow you to break me-”

“*You* aren’t important,” Jupiter001 replied crushingly. He turned away to face Herc. “Hey, kid.”

Jupe grunted, as though he’d received another body-blow.

“S-sir.” Herc saluted, though he seemed uncertain. He was standing stiffly to attention, and there was sweat on his forehead.

“Now is that *any* way to say hello?” the older Jupiter asked, taking a step closer so that his belly was almost bumping against the equoid. He stood there, expectantly. Looming a head taller, Herc’s cheeks turned a dull shade of red. Then he slowly bent his neck forward and gave the lard-laden leonoid a peck on the cheek- except that the fattened-up felid took hold of his chin in one gauntleted hand, and kissed him full on the lips. It went on for quite some time. Afterwards, with a small inarticulate whinny the draftoid pressed his forehead against the lion-clone’s mane, who put a thick, chubby arm around the equoid’s neck. “*That’s* more like it. Good see some meat back on your bones.” The other gauntlet pressed against the bulging flesh of Herc’s belly, and patted it.

The involuntary, guilt-laden micro-glance that Herc shot at Jupe over the monster’s shoulder said everything.

“You... *fornicated* with my *Progenitor*?!!?” Jupe heard his voice finish as a strangled quack, two octaves higher than usual. The situation had tipped over from the nightmarish to the utterly surreal.

“Be *grateful*, boy,” the self-styled ‘Adam’ said with a smirk. “If I hadn’t, lover-boy here would never have realised what potential *you* had.”

Jupe gaped, struck dumb for the first time ever.

“But... that... was before...” Herc looked wretched.

“Jupe.. i-it’s not what you think- I love *you*-!”

Jupiter suddenly realised what it was time for him to do. He had a *duty*.

“Suit!” he gasped. There was a tingling buzz of acknowledgement. “Self-destruct! Authorisation Jupiter, Zeta Zeta Yot Six-Two!” Another buzz. “Detonate, *NOW*!!”

There was an excruciating pause.

Oh... Cake...

“...Well *done*, Jupiter303,” the older Jupiter said in a kindly tone. Jupe shuddered- he knew *just* how badly he was being patronised. It was worse than the Slow Hand-Clap. “You’ve carried out your programming perfectly- you’ve made your Progenitor proud. Now *that’s* over with, maybe you can relax that sphincter and actually start *thinking*.”

“You... you...” Jupe tore his eyes from the lardy leonoid for a moment to look at Herc, who was staring at him with a frozen expression of horror- as though *he* was the crazy one!

“Your suit will acknowledge any Jupiter’s voice-print, 303. *Any* Jupiter,” the jumbo-sized ‘Adam’ reminded him with a slow smile. “Makes getting replacement parts on the battlefield so much easier, right?” He leaned closer, looking into the captive’s eyes. “While you were having your *nap* I put a few little over-rides in place. To stop you doing anything... impulsive.”

“My... my codes...” *This shouldn’t be happening!*

“Well, yes, *there* I had a little help...” he trailed off with a mysterious little smile.

“Olympus *knows* about your Gut-damned Flab-Farm,” Jupe growled as he hung suspended, sweat dripping from his mane. “When we’re MIA they’ll come looking to rescue me.

Rescue *us*.” He shot an accusing glare at Herc. The draftoid shifted uncomfortably, opened his mouth to say something, but- typically- the older Jupiter broke in first.

“We’re not on that little lump of rock any more. We’re well behind enemy lines- you’ve been out for two weeks, now.” Holy Workout, they’d done this to him in just *two weeks*?!

“Oh, and that emergency tracker secreted in your heel got shorted out, too, somehow. Shame.”

Jupe’s shoulders slumped a fraction further. Then his head slowly rose.

“Then I hope you had to watch as Olympus *vaporised* your precious installation and everyone in it to all Heck!” he spat. “I hope it was something important,” he added spitefully.

“Nope!” Adam contradicted him with infuriating smugness, “It wasn’t even *real*.” Jupe blinked in incomprehension. “You were *set up*, boy.”

“...What?” Adam’s grin widened at his junior counterpart’s confusion. “N-no. That’s not true.”

“Am I lying to you?” The rotund creature took a slow step forwards. He wasn’t- clones knew each other too well to fake anything.

“You..?” *Nothing* about this made sense. “You... set this whole thing up... just to *capture* us?”

“You weren’t captured, 303- *you* were collateral damage.”

Jupe nearly bit his tongue in shock as a fourth voice sounded out. Correction- *another* second voice. From the other access port, a hefty silhouette stepped slowly into the light.

“Finally turned up, huh?” Adam grunted. “What kept you- long lunch break?” He snorted.

“I turn my back for a few weeks and *discipline* around here goes all to Heck.”

“*Someone’s* got to run this war while you’re busy showing off,” the newcomer replied evenly as he approached. He did a small double-take. “Are you *still* trying to squeeze into that old thing?” He shook his head slowly.

“Well, y’know, for Old Times sakes,” Adam grinned. “Thought I’d make an impression on Junior, here. And it *still* fits... mostly.” The other responded with a sardonic snort.

“Mostly *not*.”

This was another Hercules, but thicker than Jupe would have believed possible. He wore no armour, and was dressed in dark pants and a white, sleeveless robe with big shoulder-pads, the two front panels hanging open and draped over a weighty pair of moobs and a belly easily twice the size of Herc's. His height made him look slightly slimmer than Jupiter001, but that was probably an optical illusion. Whereas the outsized leonoid's appalling adipose was mostly built up in his belly, this doughty draftoid was porked up all over, his limbs especially plump-seeming. He looked as though he'd been pumped up with a mixture of steroids and intravenous carrot-cake. He wore a pair of polished metal bands around his hefty wrists- and a long, narrow bandana tied around his brow, holding off a mane of thick black hair that had receded very slightly.

As he got closer, the newcomer turned his head to regard the captive directly for the first time. Jupe swallowed, his attempt to glare back withering. This was a Herc used to *command*. It showed in those eyes, the set of that double-chinned jaw, and the way he held himself. After a long, tense moment he snorted with what might have been amusement.

"We have met the Enemy, and He is Us." Then his gaze flicked away, and lighted on his junior counterpart. Warmth flooded his expression, making him look younger by about a decade. "Hey, kid." He gestured towards his headband with a grin. "A real chip off the old blockhead, huh?"

"*Progenitor!*" Herc yelped. He snapped to parade-ground attention, every muscle in his body seeming to strain, with the exception of his bulging midriff. He tore off a salute and stood ramrod straight, practically vibrating on the spot. Hercules001 regarded his younger clone for a long moment, then shook his head again, ever so slightly.

"Looks like we got you back just in time- you were starting to *think* like one of them again." He stepped forwards and gripped Herc fiercely by the shoulders. "I'm *Noah*, remember?" A conflicted grimace twisted Herc's features, and the older Hercules sighed slightly. "But I guess I'll accept 'sir', for now."

"Sir!" A look of relief washed over Herc's face, and he relaxed infinitesimally. "Mission accomplished, *sir!*"

Jupiter303's eyes widened.

The self-styled 'Noah' nodded solemnly in acknowledgement, and then abruptly pulled they younger clone into a crushing bear-hug.

"I am so *proud* of you, son." His voice actually shook with emotion.

"I... sir... N-Noah..." Herc's voice abruptly cracked, and he slumped, pressing his face against his elder's thick neck.

"Shhh..." the older horse replied, wrapping his arms tighter. "It's alright, son. It's *all* alright. For you, this War is over."

"You're going to be a hero, kid," Adam chimed in.

Revelation struck like a series of dumbbells falling on his head.

...This is almost TOO easy...

...You'd almost think they WANT us to be able to hear what they're saying...

...At least we know the Other Side'll never be able to get a SPY into our ranks...

"*You...!!!*" Jupe choked on his own rage. With a wordless ROAR he HEAVED against his restraint, fingers clenching convulsively in their urge to get around Herc303's neck. There was a buzz, and a feeling of weightlessness, and then he SLAMMED helplessly back against the ring as the magnetic field tightened around him. Adam stood with one thick finger on the control dial.

"Took him long enough," he commented to the two Hercs. He regarded the captive for a long moment, then sighed. "Olympus must have been dumbing-down my Line when they made *this* one."

Jupiter303 spluttered and wheezed as he tried to regain voluntary movement- even enough just to spit. His major muscle-groups twitched helplessly in reaction to the neuro-shock his suit had just administered to pacify him- a safety feature in case anyone went rogue.

"Jupe," Herc said earnestly. "They're our *Progenitors*. I did it for the best. I did it for *us*-"

"You don't have to explain yourself to *him*, son," Noah interrupted. A complex, challenging look passed between the two older clones, and then it was the expanded equoid who stepped forwards, taking charge.

“Just to make sure you *fully* understand your situation, Jupiter303. Your last mission was entirely a ruse set up to extract Herc303 without arousing suspicion.”

“You... *let us...* get... Herc back,” Jupe wheezed, pins and needles prickling his tongue- was that even possible? But that wasn’t the worst part- he felt so *stupid*. “Set us up... When you... first captured... *brainwashed* him....”

“We *de-programmed* him,” Noah’s eyes hardened as he stepped closer. Jupe found himself trying to lean away from the force of that gaze. This equoid glared like a Jupiter.

“We de-programmed him too well,” Adam chipped in with a sardonic smile. “We were ready to pull our boy out months ago, but he’d gone and fallen in *love*.” Herc303 blushed as Adam wagged a finger theatrically at him. “He *refused* the order to evac until we found a way to bring *you* along with him.”

“We couldn’t exactly say no,” Noah commented with a rare half-smile.

“Why... not?” Jupe managed to grunt out, chin still unable to rise from his chest. He’d dribbled on himself. But it was the most basic lesson in the book. “Espionage mission... expendable.”

“*He is not expendable!*” The suddenly-enraged equoid lunged forwards. Staring into those eyes, Jupe abruptly knew *exactly* what it must be like to be facing a Hercules in all-out battle-mode. Legend had it that one had once torn an enemy unit in half with his bare hands. Maybe it had even been Hercules001 himself...

“Noah,” Adam said quietly, in a tone that Jupe... didn’t understand. The older leonoid reached out and put a hand on the draftoid’s shoulder. It twitched slightly under the touch, and with visible effort the elephantine equoid got himself back under control.

“*None* of us is expendable,” he said, coldly. “Not even *you*, Jupiter303.” Then his head swung around to glare at Adam, all fiery again. “You’re a real *jack-ass* at this age, you know that?”

“I grow out of it,” the lard-laden leonoid grinned, “...eventually.” Abruptly, Noah smiled back, and lifted his hand to his shoulder to rest it on top of Adam’s.

The jumbo-sized ex-Jupiter lifted that hand closer, and then kissed it. Jupe stared, making a kind of gargling noise in the back of his throat.

Calmer now, Noah looked back at him. He half-smiled again.

“Let’s just say we had a historical precedent to consider.”

“Like the old song goes,” Adam smirked, “Anything you can do, we’ve already done, *better*. So we had a pretty good idea of how *you*’d react to certain... stimuli.” The leonoid’s smirk widened knowingly.

“...Lip balm.” Jupe blurted out.

“*Finally*,” Adam grinned, releasing Noah’s hand. “I knew I was still a smart *coo-key*,” he commented cryptically. Even Noah looked sceptical at that. “That’s right. Our boy’s lip balm was doped. One kiss and...” his smile widened, “*nighty-night*.” He winked roguishly.

“You’ve only got *yourself* to blame for being here, boy.”

“...My codes.”

“Yes, he ‘jacked your codes too. And a whole *load* of other things,” Jupe’s porked-up Progenitor paused, and his smile turned diabolical. “Supply schedules, encryption cyphers, intelligence assets, battle plans... but most importantly... Care to guess?”

...A spy... an expert ‘jacker... right in the heart of Olympus...

The realisation must have shown on his face.

“Uh huh- Herc303 accessed the master-genome of every salting Olympian clone-line there is. What he’s given us will probably end the whole flabbing War.”

“*Eventually*,” Noah countered more cautiously. “If we play it smart.”

“Smart?! This is *me*, remember?”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Worry-wart.” Adam’s face split into a sardonic grin. “The scales have definitely tipped in our favour.” He snorted with amusement. “I’m looking forward to seeing old Aries’ face when he realises the War’s lost- of course...” he turned sideways-on and struck an attitude as though in a post-workout Posedown, and with one paw he wobbled his bulging belly, making it actually ripple with lard, “...by *then* we’ll have made sure he’s a few hundred pounds heftier, at least.” He shot the captive a wicked grin, who swallowed dryly, trying not to gag.

“Why?” Jupiter303 realised he’d never felt horror before. Not like this. “Why would you do this to your own side? To your own *clone lines*?”

“To *win*, of course,” Adam said, looking surprised at the question.

“For *freedom*,” Noah said. “We’re *not* just replaceable *parts*.” Unconsciously a hand went to his cheek. “We’re *individuals*. We deserve to be free.”

“Free to be flabbing FAT?” Even saying the word made him feel dirty.

“Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it,” Adam winked and jiggled his disgusting doughball of a belly. Jupiter303 shuddered viscerally.

“You’ll see, Juve,” Herc broke in, almost pleading with him. “I promise, you’ll *understand*.”

The captive’s face slowly lifted. He began to growl, right at the back of his throat.

“He will, eventually.” Noah put his hand fondly on Herc303’s shoulder. “He’s *family*, after all.” More nonsensical gibberish. “Now kid- have you chosen a name for yourself, yet?”

“I...” Herc303’s mouth opened and shut like a goldfish. His face went red. “N-not yet, Sir,” he admitted. He looked as downcast as if he was responsible for his squad screwing up a training simulation.

“Don’t worry about it, son, there’s plenty of time.” Noah smiled gently. “It’s important to get it right, after all. You’re going to go down in history-”

“How about salting JUDAS, you flabbing *TRAITOR*?!” Jupiter303 bellowed. With super-leonine effort he managed to lunge forwards again, but was yanked backwards, his limbs now being pulled tight to the circumference of the rim. No matter how he struggled, further movement was just impossible.

“Oof,” Adam winced, and shook his head in disbelief. “I don’t know what Olympus were thinking- they’ve turned me into such a *drama queen*!”

“Funny, I can’t see much difference,” Noah said with a half-smile. Then he swung around and clamped his chunky hands to either side of Herc’s face. The younger draftoid looked physically sick, face blanched as much as it could beneath its black pelt, his knees going weak. “Now you listen to me, son,” Noah said intently as he held the trembling horse, staring deep into his eyes. “You remember when we first got a hold of you?” Herc nodded jerkily, his eyes rolling. “It took Adam and me a *long* time to get through to you, didn’t it? We had a lot of conditioning to break through.” Herc gave another spasmodic nod, swallowing convulsively, his breathing laboured. He was starting to sweat. “But before we did, you said some pretty *unkind* things about the two of us, didn’t you? You remember?”

“I... I’m so sorry...!” Herc gasped, before he was crushed in another rough embrace.

“It’s alright,” Noah rumbled softly. “We know it wasn’t *you* talking.” He held Herc away from him a little. “But that’s *exactly* the place where Jupiter303 is right now, you understand? It’s going to take a long time- and a lot of hard work- to get through to him. It’s going to be tough, and what’s tougher still is that I don’t think you should see him again until after it’s over.” Herc gulped, his expression gurning in distress. Noah leaned closer. “I know it’s hard, but he’s all twisted up in his head about you right now. The best thing you can do to help him is to stay away, and to be strong for him. Can you do that?” Herc took a deep, shaky breath.

“I... I can do strong, Sir.”

Closing his eyes, Herc stepped back and straightened up. He turned to face the captive, who hung there, panting.

“You’re not... Herc303,” Jupe grated out before the other could speak. “You’re a *fake*!”

“A *fake*?” the Herc in front of him blinked suddenly in bemusement. “What...?”

“My Herc would have *died* before betraying Olympus. You’re something they’ve... they’ve *made*, in a lab somewhere... trying to break me!”

“Well,” Adam commented, exchanging an eye-rolling glance with Noah, “we’re definitely into the Denial phase. That’s progress, of a sort.”

“I... you... I was there when you were born, you... you *idiot*!” The draftoid doppelgänger ran both hands through his hair in exasperation- a gesture so familiar it hurt to see. “There was a glitch with your activation sequencer, so you were the last of us out of their tank, remember? You were furious- you said you’d wanted *command review* of your squad first to see if we were up to your calibre! That’s how the rest of us knew from Day One you were going to be an absolute pain in our gluteus maximi!”

“That’s... all on record... you ‘jacked my personnel file...”

“How about our first covert Op together? On asteroid 26753-delta? When you made the wrong call and the things went bad, and you couldn’t handle it and funked out? The only reason we won through is because I headbutted you and *made* you get back into the fight! *That* never went on any file, did it? Officially you got that bruise from a boulder dropping on your head.”

“You... I...” Jupe swallowed, “they could have extracted that from the *real* Herc. Got enough personal intel... to try to fool me. Won’t work!”

The draftoid leaned forwards until he was almost eye-to-eye with the captive, but he at least remained tactically-aware enough to stay safely out of biting range.

“Read. My. Barcode. *Read* it, Jupe!” The leonoid stubbornly refused to meet his gaze. “I AM Herc303, and we *both* know it. I know this is impossible for you to accept right now, but I want to you know that I *do* love yo-”

“*Love?!!* You Gut-damned Eggs Benedict!! You filthy, flab-loving *turn-bloat!!* I’ll *never* become like you, you treacherous, disgusting, FAT *greedy bea-hmph!!!*” he broke off as Adam’s gauntleted fingers casually clamped around his muzzle like a slow-closing vice, locking his lower jaw in place.

“I’m a real *charmer* when I’m in this mood, aren’t I?” Adam said laconically. Herc swallowed wordlessly, looking sick again. “This loud-mouthed little punk’s a real Kane-raiser-” he stopped, and the trademark Jupiter diabolical grin spread across his face. “In *fact*,” he said, slowly shaking Jupe’s grimacing face from side to side despite his attempts to resist, “I think ‘Kane’ would make a *very* fitting name for our new recruit.”

“I guess that makes you ‘Abel’.” Noah quipped to his younger clone, putting an arm around his shoulders. Despite his distressed state, Herc blushed deeply.

“How about that, kid?” Adam smirked. “Named by your own Progenitor- you can’t get much more official than that.” The newly-minted Abel looked about ready to faint with pride. Even Noah smiled properly for the first time. Then he and Adam shared a long look, before their eyes both moved to rest on their captive.

“Same protocol as last time?”

“Nah, wouldn’t work,” Adam drawled. “Trust me. We Jupiters are something *special*—” both Noah and Abel snorted and tossed their heads in an identical, unconsciously synchronised gesture of amusement “- and it’s going to take something special to get Junior here to See the Weight.” Adam gave Noah that same unfathomable look as before. “You go spend some quality time with your boy- you deserve it. You leave Kane here to *me*.” He effortlessly wagged the younger clone’s head again, his smile hardening. “I’ve decided you merit my *personal* attention... boy.”

“C’m on, son,” Noah said, squeezing the ex-Herc’s shoulder gently. “It’s time to go.” The younger version of himself looked down miserably, then eventually nodded, and raised his eyes. The silenced captive glared back impotently.

“I’ll be waiting for you, Jupe. When you’re ready. I promise- I’ll be waiting.”

Noah slowly turned ‘Abel’ away from the two Jupiters. He tried to look back, but the older horse gently pulled his head back around. “You hungry, kid?”

“Y-yes, Sir!” He looked half-embarrassed, half flushed with excitement to admit that. As if trying to impress, his swollen belly gave a gurgle.

“You got a favourite meal yet?”

“Th-there’s so many to choose from...” he trailed off lamely.

“Then let me treat you to a couple of *my* favourites, huh?” Noah’s arm tightened around the younger equoid’s shoulders, and gently urged him into motion towards one of the access corridors.

“Th-thank you, Si- *Noah*,” Abel blurted out the correction. “I... I’d really like that.”

“And the *best* part is, you’re never going to have to choke down another of those flabbing *awful* algae cereal-bars as long as you live...”

The entrance irised shut behind them. The room was suddenly very quiet.

“That’s one sweet kid,” Adam said, almost to himself. “You’re a lucky guy- more so than you’ll probably ever realise.” He turned. Without an audience some of his bombast seemed to have disappeared, switched-off. “But *now*, we have the chance to have a little talk, Jupiter-to-Jupiter. The way it should be.”

“Jupiter series,” Jupe growled out, staring rigidly straight again. “Commander, Paladin squad 303-”

“Can the rank and serial-number routine, 303,” the lard-laden leonoid sighed, “it’s boring.”

“-Bench press,” Jupe continued to recite doggedly, “172.2 kaygees-”

“That’s 1.34 kg lower than my personal best,” Adam interrupted. “What are you, *sub-standard*?”

“*Liar!*” Jupe bristled, unable to resist this goad. “Jupiter001 set the bar at 172.5. I’m well within tolerance.”

“Yes, but we don’t ever record our *best* PBs in the official logs, do we?” Jupe twitched, and Adam’s smirk widened. “We like to keep those just between ourselves- need-to-know only. Seems my Line’s *forgotten* a few details along the way, though. What’s the matter, were none of you able to keep *up* with me?”

Hanging helplessly, Jupe glared balefully at his tormentor.

“Jupiter series. Commander, Paladin squad 303-”

“Spare me the mantra, kid, I knew it *long* before you were around.” Adam stepped up, almost nose-to-nose with the helplessly-hanging leonoid. “Your Progenitor has a *new* mantra for you, Jupiter303,” he said, almost gleefully. “Repeat after me: ‘You Can’t. Fight. The Flab.’” Jupe’s eyes widened involuntarily. That distorted, aged version of his own visage grinned at him. Then their hand reached out, and a wide, heavy paw pressed against the underside of Jupe’s hanging stomach, and squeezed slightly. The captive sucked in a deep, sudden breath in reflex. “You’re going to say it, and in the end you’re going to *believe* it.” “Never!” Jupe gasped. He tried to thrash, or even to squirm, but the magnetic restraints held him fast. “Y-you’ll *never* corrupt me!”

“Jupiters are *never* beaten, right?” his captor said with relish. Despite himself, Jupe nodded. “Your trouble is, I’ve had a lot more experience of being Jupiter than *you* have, *boy*.” Adam’s dropped his hand suddenly. Jupe’s belly *bounced*. He grunted and gritted his teeth, trying to ignore the sluggish wobbling of his defaced torso as it rippled under gravity’s pull. “You’ll learn to enjoy that feeling, in time... *Kane*.”

“I won’t be brainwashed. I won’t wind up like Herc. Like *you*,” Jupe spat defiantly, even as sweat beaded on his forehead. “They captured you-”

“Oh, so I AM your Progenitor, now?” Adam smirked triumphantly. “Glad to hear you accept that. We’re making progress faster than I predicted.”

“You *failed* in your *mission*! You’re a screw-up! You let yourself be *captured*, and the Other Side has brainwashed *you*! Look at yourself, Jupiter001! They’ve turned you into a greedy, mindless *beast*, something almost as *fat* as a flabbing Ollie-!”

He burst out laughing. Actually laughing!

“Trying to make me angry *already*, Jupiter303?” Adam chuckled. “That’s still strategy 3-beta, isn’t it? If you can’t disable your captors or win them over, make them angry, so they’ll start to make mistakes.” Jupe stared, dismayed. Any Jupiter worth his sit-ups should have tried to *kill* him for those insults. They just seemed to bounce off this adipose-armoured abomination. Again, Adam was looking at him as though he could read his thoughts. “Sticks and stones can’t break *my* bones- I’m too well-padded for you to hurt me.” Seeing Jupe’s bewildered expression, he snorted with private amusement. “Just wait until you’ve heard the whole story, kid, *then* decide. It’s a long one, but...” the overblown clone reached behind his

back with a grunt of effort, fumbling. There was a click and a pneumatic hiss, and his chest-plate slightly loosened its grip on his tubbed-out torso. "...don't worry, we've got *plenty* of snacks on standby to help us get through it all. Oof, that feels *better*..." He took a deep, luxuriant breath and stretched. The entire armour section seemed to expand as his chest swelled within it, starting to peel apart like an insect moulting its old carapace, the new fuzzy flesh swelling out from within it. He paused, and winked. "Enjoying the view, boy? This is going to be your future."

Jupe shuddered, and tore his eyes away from the sight.

"You can't re-imprint me... we're trained to resist-"

"We're not going to bother trying to *imprint* you kid," Adam shook his head as though disappointed in Jupe's lack of imagination, his armour still clinging to his expansive upper-body. "The whole point is to persuade you to choose for *yourself*. Besides," the leonoid's fat face slowly split into an anticipatory grin, "we've got much more *interesting* methods for trying to change your mind."

"Wh-whatever you try, it won't work!"

"We'll see about that," Adam still looked amused. "I *told* you, you can't fight the flab."

"I'll fight it."

"I'd expect nothing less from a Jupiter. It's not going to do you any good though, boy-you've already lost this battle." His eyes lingered meaningfully on Jupe's middle, and the captive tried desperately to suck his stomach in. He lasted for 43 seconds before his abdominal muscles cramped, and with a gasp he had to unclench them, that shamefully swollen stomach bulging back out inside his inner-suit. "You might as well make this easy on yourself, and surrender now."

A Jupiter *never* surrendered. Hanging there panting, Jupe glared sullenly.

"That beard looks *ridiculous*." It was a pathetic insult, but it was the only one he had left.

"Yeah, Noah hates it, too," Adam flipped a paw dismissively, unfazed. "But *I* like it, so he has to put up with it."

"I *will* fight you," Jupe grated out, feeling genuine fear for the first time.

“I’m looking *forward* to it, Jupiter303,” Adam purred as he stepped over to the control dial. “But for now, I think you’ve had a bit too much to take in at once- you seem a little over-excited. What you need is a nice, long *nap*...”

There was a sudden hissing from Jupe’s suit’s medical unit.

“No... I w-wonnnn’t...” but his eyelids suddenly felt as heavy as his jaw- not to mention his stomach- and they closed despite his best efforts to keep them open.

* * *

“You know that your ration cubes are saturated with chemicals to dampen your sense of taste?”

“Mphh...” He... he felt so *heavy*. When had he grown so heavy? *How* had he grown so heavy?

“They would probably rather not have given us taste-buds at *all*, but the trouble is they’re part of our olfactory system. Without them we’d not be able to smell so well, which would have made us less efficient fighting machines. And we Jupiters are *particularly* efficient, obviously. We have a *lot* of tastebuds.”

“Grnk...” Adam was standing in front of him yet again. This was the fifth... sixth time he could remember now? Maybe more. Instead of armour, he was wearing *clothes* of some sort. They were sky blue- not that Jupe had even seen a planet with sky that colour- and looked skin-tight snug. He was holding a tray of some kind. Jupe squinted muzzily, trying to blot out the fact that he could now see his own cheeks in his peripheral vision. There were some odd-looking ration cubes on it. Odd-*smelling*, too- he blinked then at his body’s involuntary reaction, sucking in a deeper breath. Adam’s smile widened.

“I figure yours have had enough time to regenerate by now, so you’re ready to be introduced to the big wide world of *flavour*.”

“No,” Jupe mumbled. He took refuge in repeating his training, but stumbled as he found his mouth felt harder to move, his jaws heavier than before. “Food is fuel... nothing more. ‘Njoyment of it... is... *gluttony*...”

He couldn’t remember how long he’d been hanging here like this- everything had been a drugged, drowsy blur. All he could remember from several brief windows of lucidity were

Jupiter001 and... fullness. And that, somehow, he was getting *bigger* in between those times. He could now feel his belly protruding in front of him, gravity tugging at it. Each time he breathed, he felt his suit's stretched monofabric squeeze around it.

"We'll see about that, boy," Adam said cheerfully. "Now, open wide."

"N-no," Jupe refused through clenched jaws as one of those weird cubes was lifted closer. It had an odd, stringy-looking texture, and squished wetly between Adam's finger and thumb. The smell from it redoubled, and his nostrils flared of their own volition. He tried to turn his head away, but felt added flesh around his neck squashing, getting in the way, fighting against himself. "I *won't*." He was starting to sweat. "I won't become some greedy beast..."

"But you *are*, Jupiter303. We're *all* beasts. We were engineered from *animals*." Jupe's eyes widened at the Arkaic word. "Our ancestors were *lions*- they spent up to 20 hours a day sleeping and could eat up to 45 kaygees in *one go*!" He snrked. "Even *I* struggle to top that." Jupe blanched. "And the Hercs? They're descended from a *grazer* species. They ate pretty much *constantly*. The Beast is there inside of you already, 303." Adam pressed the cube closer, up against Jupe's gritted teeth. "And once you embrace the fact that you're an *animal*, you'd be *amazed* at just what you can achieve."

Some of the cube's juice leaked between Jupe's teeth. A... a *taste* of some kind jolted along his tongue, and his entire body shivered as though he'd been given a minor electric-shock. His head was suddenly full of fumes.

"This is *meat*, boy," Adam said, pulling the cube back a little way as the captive hung, panting. "This is what we were born to eat. Your body recognises it, even if you don't. And I'll admit, the Other Side have gotten pretty good at synthesising this stuff, now- nothing but the finest *steak*." To Jupiter's bewilderment he popped the cube into his own mouth, chewed a few times, and swallowed with every sign of enjoyment. "I've gone easy on you to start with- these are well-done. I prefer medium-rare myself, seared on the outside, still tender on the inside. And they work perfectly with a little *garlikmayonnaise*." His smile became a little more predatory. "Now you've seen it's not poisonous, it's *your* turn to try some, 303. C'mon, open up." He lifted another cube from the tray. "Here comes the docking-pod." "N-no," Jupe clamped his teeth together as tightly as he could. He wanted to growl defiance, but it came out more as a whimper. "*Won't*."

“That was an *order*, 303.” Still smiling, Adam brought the meat-cube up to Jupiter’s muzzle, and tapped the side of his chubby cheek with one plump finger from his other hand. “Read my barcode, and obey.”

“Nnnnngh... N-n-*no*...” It took every effort of will Jupiter303 had to refuse.

“Very *good*, 303. You’ve just disobeyed a barcode-enforced order.” Adam’s lips parted in a smirk. “I’ll have you eating out of my hands by the end of the week at this rate.”

The meat was now being held right under Jupe’s nose. He tried to shut his nostrils, breathe through his teeth, but that only made it worse. Adam’s expression morphed into that one that Jupiter couldn’t fathom.

“You can’t resist forever, 303. Believe me. Besides, I’ve already cheated.” Just then, Jupe’s middle let out a noise it had never made before. A kind of deep, gastric gurgling. “Sounds like you’re getting good and *hungry*, boy.” He watched Jupiter303’s expression impassively- to Jupe, it felt like a pit was opening up in his stomach. “You don’t like that sensation? It’s only going to get worse until you satisfy it. There’s nothing the Other Side don’t know about hunger, and appetites. In the end, it all boils down to signals your animal body understands. Chemicals.”

Jupe became aware of the narrow tubes snaking from the restraint ring to the cuffs where his suit’s medical unit interfaced with his bloodstream.

“What... what are you *doing* to me?” he grunted. Sweat started to bead on his forehead as fought to control these new feelings.

“Making some adjustments to you, 303,” Adam said calmly. He rested his hand on the front of Jupe’s burgeoning belly, right over the dint where his navel was showing through the monofabric’s curve. The captive hissed in a breath, lips drawing back but somehow managing to keep his teeth together. “From now on, you’re not going to be so much expendable as *expandable*. Just like the Ollies.”

“O-Ollies?” The change in tack threw Jupe completely.

“You didn’t think those beef-balls came out of the tank THAT size, did you boy? We’d risk bursting the hardware. When they’re first matured Ollies are built like Olympians- 34 inch waists and all. Before they’re first woken up they’re hung up in a ring like this- only there’s a grid of about 500- and then they’re brought up to their fighting-weight using an intravenous nutrient solution. The Other Side call it ‘*Mothersmilk*’. It’s fascinating to watch- you can practically see them ballooning up. By the time each one’s brought to full consciousness

their butt's already nearly as wide as this ring. After *that* it's up to them to keep their size up- but then that's not a problem- appetite enhancers and stomach capacity stimulants during their 'bulking' make sure of that. Oh yes, the Ollies step out of these things as fully-functioning Fat-Boys."

Jupe's eyes widened. His stomach growled ominously again, more deeply. Adam pressed the same salting meat-cube close to him again, and Jupe felt his mouth starting to water. He clenched his jaws as tightly as he could.

"N-nghh..."

"I don't like doing things this way boy, but we figured things would go easier if we took a few *shortcuts* to start you off." His paw slide slowly from side to side, and Jupe's flabbing belly moved with it, sloshing doughily. The captive clone bit down on the moan that tried to force its way up from inside, somewhere. "That's starting to feel *good*, isn't it 303?" N-no, it wasn't! "We *want* you to feel good, boy. Once you start enjoying this, things'll go so much more easily. That's something else we learned from the Ollies- a little sensory feedback goes a long way. They waddle off their production line practically begging to be made fatter."

Adam's thumb abruptly sank into Jupe's navel. He couldn't help himself- his jaws opened in a convulsive gasp. He tried to close them again as fast as possible- and bit down on something that had been tossed in there.

"*Swallow*, 303," Adam said, his paw now holding the leonoid's jaws together, the captive's cheeks bulging around his grip. Still shivering from the aftershock, Jupe glared hatefully at his captor, but eventually, reluctantly- as the meat-cube practically melted in his mouth- his body swallowed for him. Adam snorted. "I was right to start simple- *garlikmayo* might have given you an aneurysm. One down, four more to go. Let's get to it, soldier."

Jupe resisted stubbornly, but Jupiter001 was implacable. Worse- he didn't get angry. As the stuffing wore on, Jupe's bewilderment on that point grew. Any other Jupiter would have thrown that tray across the room in frustration hours ago. Jupiter001 was instead just terribly, relentlessly, calmly persistent- and *that* was downright scary. And he knew it.

"Surprised, boy? It wasn't easy, but I've learned how to be patient. I picked it up from Noah- I've learned a *lot* of things over the years. I'll get through to you eventually, boy, even if we have to go through every foodstuff in the synthesiser."

“You... can’t... break me...” Jupe wheezed, little bits of meat dangling from his chin.

“Oh, we *could*, boy.” Adam suddenly stepped far too close for comfort. “We could make you quite literally insatiable- you could eat until you were ready to burst and you’d still need more. I could have you pleading for more food whilst we have to float you in zero-G to move you about.” He took a step back, and with a rather resigned sigh picked up the last of the food-cubes. Jupe found his gaze fixing on it, and realised with a horrible lurch of self-revulsion that he was starting to *like* the taste. “But you’re *family*, so we’re going to do this the hard way...”

* * *

“You ever wonder why they made us all *male*, boy?”

“Mmph...?” How long had it been? Weeks? Adam was feeding him by hand every *day*, now. So many awful, fattening foodstuffs, swimming in grease and salt, *designed* to force adipose onto him. And now he was just opening for it- it was humiliating, but he just couldn’t summon the righteous fire to resist any more.

And he was *still* growing fatter. He let out another little moan as he swallowed a spoonful of whatever-it-was. He felt so... heavy... and slow... and soft...

“Males, Jupe. Sexual dimorphism. Females, *girls*. There’s an awful lot on the subject in the Old Arkives- all of it restricted on Olympus, even to us Jupiters. I’ve made it a little hobby of mine this past 20 years to go data-diving, get some Intel on the past. Did you know, fornication was once about making *babies*?” The hanging captive gave him a blank look from his bloated face. “Viviparous reproduction. Know what that means?”

Jupe grunted- of course he did. All Jupiters received training in exo-biology in case they came across any fauna on planetary missions.

“Well, as far as I can tell, it seems that back on the Ark we were supposed to reproduce like that.”

Jupe thought about that muzzily. Even in his drugged-up, spaced-out state, his muzzle wrinkled.

“Ick.”

“I know- sounds *awful*, doesn’t it? I’ve even found reference to design schematics for a *female* Jupiter- but here we are, all *guys* together. I think our creators would have made us neuter if they could, but when the War began they needed our testosterone, our *aggression*. They probably even ramped it up some, make us better fighters. Trouble is, that just created some *other* problems they had to deal with. That’s why Fornication was forbidden- far too distracting. Not that you let that stop *you*...” Jupe grunted hazily. “Of course, you’re not really to blame-” Adam paused, “after all, Noah and I were banging *long* before Pyxis Major.”

Jupe blinked, and then his eyes slowly widened in shock. Adam’s smile broadened unrepentantly.

“Seems us Jupiters are all a little ‘trigger happy’ in that regard- you boys get that from me. Bit of a design flaw. They really ought to have ironed it out, but Herc- *Noah* and I were flabbing careful not to get caught- we knew we’d be decommissioned on the spot for it. That’s as in terminated. Killed. And even a cranky prototype wants to keep on living.”

Jupe grunted again. Adam fed him another spoonful.

“Noah and I weren’t *captured* at Pyxis Major, boy.” There was a slight twitch under his right eye- at least one of Jupe’s barbs had gotten through. “We weren’t brainwashed, either. We didn’t need it. We *defected*. Our choice.”

Jupe choked and spluttered on the mouthful, coughing.

“No...” He was dimly aware that he should be screaming and thrashing in rage that this appalling falsehood- a Jupiter would never be a flabbing traitor. But somehow the anger he needed just didn’t seem to be there- instead he just felt so *full*...

“We’d figured it was only a matter of time before Command found us out- we Prototypes were under a *lot* of scrutiny back then. It was either jump ship or stop doing what we were doing...” he trailed off with a slow grin, “which just wasn’t an option. So when the opportunity came up I looked at him, he looked at me, and we... escaped.”

Jupe realised that his mouth was hanging open.

“But... the Other Side...”

“Oh yeah, we had a flabbing Heck of a time convincing them, at first. They were sure we were spies- they couldn’t get their head around the idea that a clone might think for itself. Even spilling all of the tactical data we had wasn’t enough. In the end, the only way to convince them was to start getting fat ourselves. Voluntarily.”

Jupe made another inarticulate noise as he tried to wrap his head around that, and failed. The use of the F-word still made him shudder.

“It was tough at first, boy, let me tell you that. Even *I* didn’t realise how much conditioning we were both under, and the Other Side’s food tech was a whole lot less sophisticated back then. Rehydrated freeze-dried *pasta*, urghh...” Adam shuddered to himself at some memory, and then brightened. “But it was *that* or face termination all over again. And I’d already proven I was willing to betray my Own Side in order to survive. And I found out, this definitely has its compensations.” His smile widened, and he took a step closer. “The thing you don’t get yet is, I’m actually *stronger* now than I ever was in my ‘prime’. I have to be, to carry all this added bulk around.” He smacked a hand to his stomach, a small slice of which was peeking out from where his upper clothing didn’t quite meet the waistband of his lower clothing. “I could leg-press the rest of you into Oblivion. And as for Fornication...” he trailed off, smiling. “Well, you’re already learning just how much more *sensitive* you get at this kind of size.”

Adam reached out and squeezed a handful of Jupe’s abdomen, which had now stretched the monofabric of his suit to its limits. They’d unclipped the chest-plates to give his body more breathing-room- it had started to feel like he was being squashed in a vice. He could feel extra chins now rubbing against his neck and collar-bones. His stomach now hung to his knees, and he was sure they’d reduced the gravity some in the chamber to compensate. He could feel the lower curve of his rear-end resting against the top edges of the cuisses gripping his thighs- though they too felt like they were only being held on by magnetic attraction, now. The remaining components of his suit were coming apart from the inside as he blew up like some kind of alien grub.

“Want to see how much progress you’re making, Kane?”

“N-not... Kane.” He would never acknowledge that *name*. Never

Wait... *this* kind of size? He *couldn't* be as big as Adam... could he?

Adam had already lumbered to the control panel. The lights around them dimmed, and then the laser-light from a floor-mounted holographic projector started up.

Jupe stared with heavy-lidded eyes.

“There you are, kid. Large as life.” Adam set the holo-capture to slowly rotate on the spot.

“It’s really captured your good side”

Jupe stared at himself unable- or just plain unwilling- to reconcile the outsized leonoid lard-butt hanging in mid-air before him with his own self-image. Adam took a step nearer to it, and with a lurch in his chest Jupe actually realised that the hologram’s rear-end was larger than his erstwhile Progenitor’s.

“Outdoing your Old Man already, huh boy?” Adam winked. “Of course, this is just the start.”

“...S...Start?” Jupe had the sensation that he was in free-fall, again. His heart was pounding in his chest.

“That’s right, boy. You ever heard of the idea of *self-improvement*?” In his stunned state, the lard-laden leonoid captive merely shook his head, setting his mane drifting like seaweed.

“It’s kind of the opposite of clone standardisation. Noah and I have convinced the Other Side to think outside the box and give it a try.” What... what *box*? “You’ve probably noticed how the Ollies you fought seemed to be getting bigger and bigger?” Nod. “That’s why- we’ve been running a few trials into *self-improvement*- and there have been a few Ollies you just wouldn’t *believe*.” Adam tapped himself on the chest. “We were originally designed as war machines- as fighters. But that’s not your purpose any more, Kane.” He grinned, rather ruefully. “I’m afraid your *new* role in life is going to be as a *trophy-boyfriend* to a War Hero. And *this* is what we think one of those should look like.”

He adjusted a dial, and the hologram slowly morphed. Jupe's eyes grew rounder and rounder- as did the hologram.

"N-no... not... *possible!*" The image in front of him was fatter than an Ollie. It was fatter than any creature he'd ever seen or imagined. It made that War Elephant look under-nourished. Its stomach brushed floor-level!

"Oh, we disagree," Adam said, "especially now we have access to the Jupiter master-genome. There's quite a few little retro-therapies they've worked up to help boost your size. In fact they say it's going to be almost impossible for you to *lose* weight pretty soon." Jupe carried on staring at the ludicrous image in front of him. "I'm jealous, kid- Noah and I are too *old* for this kind of thing to work for us. You could wind up as the new Prototype. Jupiter 2.0- built for luxury and *ride-comfort*." A plump hand gripped Jupe's chins, and his face was slowly turned to look into that bulging mirror-image... except that that fat face was now thinner than his own. "As part of the package, they're doing a little neurochemical tweaking of that *temper* of yours, make you a little easier to live with. We still want you passionate of course, just a little less... volatile."

Jupiter thought about this, and grunted. It made sense. Adam stared into his eyes for a moment, then snorted.

"And I had to learn to control my temper the hard way. Still, nothing's too good for a hero." He winked. "You're not the only one going through self-improvement. Want to see what your beau looks like?"

Jupe shook his head sluggishly- thinking about Herc still brought a stab of anger. His refusal didn't make a blind bit of difference- the hologram changed regardless. Despite himself, Jupe peeked... and stared. The older leonoid let out a slow, low whistle of appreciation.

"...Abel's turning into quite a *chunk*, huh?" Adam grinned. "And that's just what he looks like right this moment. Here's the projection of the *final* product." The hologram morphed again. "You're a lucky boy- I wish I could order that look for Noah." He stood looking in silence for a couple of moments, then let out a little sigh. "Don't worry, kid, what I did was purely for the mission. I don't stand a chance with Abel. Take it from me, once a Herc gives their heart to someone, that's it, you don't get a say in the matter. They're stubborn beasts." Adam turned his head, and grinned. "Besides, Noah would rip me in half and stamp on my pieces. He doesn't mind my fooling around with other clone-lines once in a while- well, not

much- but if I started making out with a younger version of himself I think he'd take *that* kinda *personally*." He glanced at the hologram again. "And I'd never do anything that could hurt Noah," he added quietly. Jupe stared at him, uncomprehendingly. "Of course," Adam continued briskly, clapping his chubby paws together, loudly, "we don't want you two boys reaching these glorious sizes on your ownsomes. We want you together asap so you can enjoy your growth with one *another*. That's something *else* Noah and I learned together..."

* * *

"Of course, every clone line has its flaws."

So... big... suit... so *tight*.

"The Hercs are over-emotional. It's a side-effect of the empathy their creators were aiming for. The Ollies are nice enough once you get to know them but, oy, they're not the brightest comets in the solar system-"

So... so *hungry*...

"The Aries line is annoyingly short, the Ganeshas have a tendency to flatulence- although we all still live in hope *that* can be cured- and we Jupiters... well, we're just *too* perfect, aren't we? No-one quite measures up to our magnificence. Not even other Jupiters."

He'd been fed so MUCH food today... he was like a living garbage sack of furry flab... how could he still want anything more? And where was that tantalising smell coming from?

"I think we can admit- just between us Jupiters- that we're a little bit sociopathic."

Adam was taking a lunch-break- sitting on a makeshift stool, eating some huge foot-long *sandwich*- and he would *still* not stop talking. Jupe hung there, a captive audience- quite literally.

"Take Love, for instance." Adam swallowed his latest mouthful of sandwich with relish.

"Noah fell in love with me back on Olympus. And we Jupiters... well, we love to be loved,

don't we?" He cast a brief, penetrating look at his companion. "But that's not the same as *feeling* love." He shook his head slowly. "Abel loves you, and wants you to love him- and he thinks that because you kissed him you really do. But I think we *both* know the score there, right kid?" The captive hung there, saying nothing. "Noah... had enough love for the both of us when we were younger, but he's not dumb- and he's had to put up with my bad habits for 20 years. He doesn't have many illusions about our Line. What he *does* have is Abel. You know what a *family* is, boy?"

That word again. Jupe shook his head blearily, still struggling with the load he was digesting- both physically and metaphorically.

"It's kind of like your squad, only more so. Noah has been desperate to have a family, almost since we first unearthed the word from the Old Arkives. We actually got *married* a few years back-" he caught the blank look on Jupe's swollen features- "an ancient personal commitment to a long-term strategic alliance with someone. Kind of like declaring Peace. We had to invent a ceremony, and everything. But what he's really wanted, more than anything, is *offspring*. He wants to be a *father*."

After a few moments where he searched his memory for the meaning of the words, Jupe screwed up his face. Adam gave him a look of complete and perfect understanding.

"Right. I wasn't too crazy about the concept either, I can tell you. But now Abel... Abel has gone and become Noah's *son*. You should see them together! I haven't seen Noah so happy in decades. He *finally* has the family he wanted." He took another large bite of his sandwich, chewed meditatively, and then eventually swallowed. Jupe's nostrils twitched. "The crazy thing is- and I'd never have believed this 20 years ago- I *do* love Noah, now. As I said in my marriage vow, he *is* my centre of gravity." He looked up and gave the captive a stern glare. "A Jupiter *can* learn to love someone other than himself. It isn't easy, boy, but I want you to try. Because that would make Abel happy, and that would make my Noah happy- and then I won't have to keep stuffing you silly until you flabbing well do what you're told." Adam slowly heaved his bulk out of the chair, and came and crouched in front of Jupe, nose-to-nose. "Just between us Jupiters, I had a quiet word with the Other Side's neurotechs and they've slipped in a couple of extra little modifications in as part of your 'upgrade'. I'm hoping they'll help loosen up that all-important emotion a little, so that it won't take *you* 20

years. I know I'm forcibly changing your mind for you here, boy, and that's 'bad', but I know just how stubborn I can be. Besides, nobody said we Jupiters were *good*. You've got a chance here to *learn* from my mistakes. Don't screw it up, ok, *Kane*? Trust me, I know us better than you know yourself. I only want what's best for you."

Adam suddenly flashed his trademark devilish grin, slowly standing up straight again. He took another bite of his sandwich, shortening it by a couple of inches at a time. It had some kind of sliced-meat filling inside. The captive's nose twitched again. *There* was the smell.

"Guess that kind of makes me a father-figure after all. Because, y'see, it's not just about you and Abel. There's all the *other* Hercs and Jupiters out there, too. When the cat first dragged you in I don't mind admitting I didn't give a damn about my clones either way- they were the Enemy. But watching Noah and Abel together this last few months... I've decided I kind of *like* the idea of being a big, fat poppa-lion to a whole *tribe* of bigger, fatter fuzzbutts. How's that for leaving a mark on posterity."

"P... puh..." the captive grunted. Adam turned, looking slightly surprised at the interruption. "That was a rhetorical question, kid." The lard-blown leonoid hanging heavily in the restraints licked his lips, and tried again.

"P-Poppa..."

Adam quirked a sceptical eyebrow, seemingly waiting for some kind of mockery to follow. Then his eyes followed his prisoner's gaze.

"Oh." He slowly lifted the remains of his sandwich. His younger- and fatter- clone's eyes followed it, then struggled to tilt his head as Adam shifted the target from side to side. "You want this, boy?" he asked gently. The suspended chubb-butt's frankly enormous middle let out a deep, resonant grrrrrowl in response.

"Y-yessss..." he groaned. The tip of his tongue was hanging out, panting, his carbon-filament-enhanced EM-sensitive whiskers practically sparking as they strained forwards from the crease where bloated cheeks were threatening to protrude past his muzzle. "Poppa... *p-pleaaase...*"

Adam regarded him for a moment, and then chuckled.

“Shoulda known. I can never resist salami either. Classic good taste.” He crouched forwards, and extended the end of the sandwich, but held it just out of reach. “Now then, boy, you know what I need to hear. You willing to tell me yet?”

One of the captive’s cheeks quivered indecisively for a moment, and then Kane responded.

“You... you can’t fight the flab.”

Smiling, Adam moved the sandwich closer. Kane lunged, teeth bared, and took a bite- a large, greedy mouthful of bread, butter and salami. His cheeks bulged with it as he chewed avidly. Then there was a loud RRRRIP, and the skintight monofabric that had been stretching for so long finally failed, tearing at several places at once. His backside bounced as his gluteus maximi- now thoroughly maximised- expanded against a gaping rent that spread across them, and a number of side-seams also burst wide in sequence, exposing doughy rolls and bulging curves of fuzzy golden flesh. By the time it had finished, more than 50% of Kane’s bulk hung on display. He continued chewing unconcernedly, and then swallowed with a *glorp*.

“That taste *good*, boy?” Adam asked. The lard-butt lion nodded so vehemently that his cheeks and chins jiggled.

“Mph... more...”

Adam leaned forwards from the side and brushed his lips against one of Kane’s chubby cheeks.

“I’m proud of you, Son. Welcome to the family.”

The Story Ends- The War Goes On...