

Princes and Soldiers

by

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Prologue:

After a five year conflict between the ruling elite on Earth and the Confederation of Satellites, there was a hard won peace and autonomy for those living off world.

Unfortunately, massive casualties during the war had forced the Confederation to use children as soldiers. The best and the brightest had been reserved to pilot their death dealing stinger ships and to infiltrate behind enemy lines as undercover terrorists. These warrior children, usually picked up from the streets or culled from orphanages, were feared on both sides for their ruthlessness in battle. Growing up dealing death in war and having nothing to go back to afterward, their place in society was disputed. Some called for their indefinite internment.

After years of holding these child soldiers in limbo, the government on Earth and the Council of the Confederated Satellites funneled better prospects into peacekeeping forces and sent the most irredeemable ones to far flung border outposts with no recall orders. These decisions were protested by many who demanded their execution instead. They were over ruled by those who believed that there were still forces who wanted to restart the war and declare dominion over both Earth and the Confederated Satellites. They were loath to throw away assets of war that might be needed again in the future. Hatred for the child soldiers, now young adults, was still strong, though, and trying to live a somewhat normal life, even in peacekeeping forces, proved to be difficult, and sometimes impossible for most.

Chapter One

I Can't Stand You

“I told you that I have my own, hand-picked, agents to assist me, Doctor,” Christian Callinbrook said as he tossed back his long, black hair, and glared at her. His blue eyes were daunting, but Reba McLaren glared back and refused to bend. He sighed in exasperation and slammed two files onto her table with pique.

“They are experts in infiltrating those old U.W.F. bases,” Reba pointed out, “They know them better than we do. You have two months to prepare and to learn how to work with them. You can train them how you like without any arguments from me.”

Christian narrowed his eyes, “How I like?”

Reba grimaced. She was Chief of Staff in Peacekeeper Medical, an officer in her own right, but she was a short brunette and he could tell she was intimidated by his six foot five height and his aristocratic bearing. His shoulder length, black hair wasn't regulation, but the elites made their own rules and it was a tradition in his family. She made herself sound commanding and firm, though, as she said, “Within reason, of course. I won't allow you to abuse them.”

Christian's nostrils flared. Reba was not improving his mood by suggesting that he would be an irresponsible commander. “I'm a soldier, Reba, a General. They're fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants terrorists. What do they know of rank and file and following orders?”

“They've been with the Peacekeepers for two years under close supervision,” Reba reminded him. “We don't tolerate insubordination or an agent making up the rules as they go along. We have procedures that must be adhered to.”

Christian nodded, but his jaw was tense. “Cree seems to have been an exemplary agent. I met him in the war, fought against him, and learned to respect him, but Flynn... I don't know anything about him except that he called himself the Deathdealer during the war. He was a terror to my troops. His file is thick with warnings and cases of insubordination... pranks, he called them. If adhering to procedures is so important to the Peacekeepers, I fail to see why he is still an agent.”

Reba smiled. She pointed to her mouth and said, "That's why." When Christian lifted a dark eyebrow, she explained, "He keeps the moral up with his pranks. They're harmless and they don't stop people from doing their jobs. You'll find out, quickly enough, that he's damn good at what he does. Sometimes, someone can bend the procedures and still get the job done. I stress, bend. Flynn never breaks them."

"He has to pass my inspection," Christian warned. "I won't put up with pranks or insubordination of any kind. I'll reject the entire mission if I don't think my men are fit to carry it out."

"That's a given," Reba replied with a sharp nod, but then smiled up at the proper, at attention, Christian Callinbrook in his perfectly pressed red uniform coat. "You'll find, though, that both Cree and Flynn are absolutely perfect for the mission. I wouldn't have chosen them if they weren't."

"That will be my judgment call," Christian snapped and then, more carefully, eyes on the two files, "Those two... they stayed together after the war. They have the same address on their files. What is their relationship to one another?"

Reba pursed her lips, "I suppose I don't really know. They are like oil and water, those two, but they are always together. They call each other partner, not friend. Maybe it's just a case of old habits die hard, but if you're asking if they're lovers, I couldn't tell you. I know why you're asking. You don't want two agents who have a relationship maybe sacrificing the mission for each other, right?" When Christian gave a tight nod, Reba shrugged. "I think you'll have to ask them, or someone else who knows them. I will tell you that they have proven, again and again, to my satisfaction, that they will complete their orders despite whatever relationship they have. They don't let it affect them."

Christian couldn't imagine someone in love not sacrificing for their loved one. Reba's words helped him to conclude that Cree and Flynn were just partners. It was one less trouble, but the thick file that was Erin Flynn's didn't bode well. He rubbed between his eyes, a stress headache beginning. "Where can I find them?"

Reba glanced at the clock on her wall, "Hard to tell, but it is lunch hour. They do like to work out in the gym at this time when they aren't on assignments. I can have them sent to where ever you would like to speak to them."

Christian picked up the two files again and tucked them under his arm. "I'll take care

of that. They are my concern now.”

Reba smiled in relief. “Good. I’m glad that you’ll at least give them a chance.”

“One chance,” Christian told her icily. “That’s all they would have received during the war.”

“On the U.W.F. side, maybe,” Reba muttered as she watched Christian leave.

Christian strode down the halls, eyes looking angrily at his inner thoughts as his long legs took him towards the gym. Men and women stepped quickly aside, not only wary of his rank and reputation, but also because he was a striking figure amid the olive drab uniforms of Peacekeeper personnel with his red coat covered in a myriad of medals.

Christian had been in the military for as long as he could remember. He had not spent long in the lower ranks, his skill making his star rise quickly. He was used to being in command and used to making most of the decisions. Now that he had been placed in a special ops position, he chafed constantly under the orders of people who had never even been in the war and who knew everything about tactics, but nothing about the dynamics of the men and women who were supposed to implement their plans. His rank, his experience, and the fact that he was the prince of an elite family, allowed him to argue and call most of the shots where his superiors were concerned. This mission, though, was unusual, so too was Reba’s insistence on ignoring Christian’s express wishes and saddling him with two live cannons once known as stinger pilots and terrorists.

The clanking and whir of exercise machines and weights alerted Christian that he was closing in on his targets. Gripping the two files hard in unconscious irritation, he stepped into the very large, open room of the gym. Men and women were sweating and straining in every direction. Christian scowled impatiently. He motioned to an attendant and the man nervously approached, wiping his chalked hands on a rag.

“Flynn and Cree,” Christian asked, “Where are they?”

“Over there, sir,” the man said, his voice almost cracking with his nerves. He cleared his throat in embarrassment as he motioned to a far corner of the room, a corner not occupied by anyone except two young men standing close together and talking.

Christian only nodded in acknowledgement and strode through the exercising throng,

not caring as people stopped to stare and wonder what the usually standoffish prince was doing among them.

Christian stopped a few yards from his goal and simply watched the two men, dressed in regulation drab olive Peacekeeper exercise shorts and shirts, for a few moments. He wanted to evaluate their personalities while they were unaware of him. He noted the familiar, serious face of Marcus Cree, head bent as he listened to what the other man was saying. His shoulders were wide and rounded and his body looked strong and well-developed. His hair was still a dark, rough-cut, and it hung in his pale face as his blue, intense eyes glared at the man next to him.

Erin Flynn was a startling contrast to his partner. There was one photo of him in his file, but it was static and old, not a proper depiction of the live version in front of Christian. This man was constantly in motion, his hands moving and his body turning this way and that. His face was a study in a hundred different expressions, most of them lively smiles, grins, and open mouthed laughs. His eyes were large, like a child's, and they were sparkling and crinkling at the corners as he grinned. They were also the most unusual shade of green that Christian had ever seen; like fresh green leaves. Unlike Cree, Flynn still looked very young. His clothes looked over large and hung on him, slipping off one shoulder. He was much shorter than Cree and had a wiry build. His hair was a startling red color, was a non-regulation shoulder length, and tied back in a braid. Christian remembered an old story about an irreverent boy who refused to grow up. Peter Pan was his name, he recalled. Flynn embodied that character.

"Marcus, I told you, it doesn't matter that mice don't talk, it's what the mouse is saying that's funny!" Erin explained.

"It's not that," Marcus replied as if he were contemplating what the other man had said with the same seriousness he would have given to atomic theory. "I can accept that the mouse is speaking and that the dog can have a dog for a pet, but..."

"But?" Erin prompted.

"It's just not funny," Cree told him plainly.

Erin gaped and then he giggled. Christian blinked. For a moment, Erin looked like some mischievous elf with his wide grin, and then he was putting on a hurt expression that was patently exaggerated for effect. "Are you saying my joke isn't funny?"

“No,” Marcus replied calmly as he turned to adjust an exercise machine, “I’m saying Randell’s joke isn’t funny. He’s the one who first told it early this morning.”

“Oh,” Erin replied, stifling another laugh and trying to continue his ‘hurt’ act.

“Tell your own jokes, Erin,” Marcus advised him.

Erin raised eyebrows, startled. “Are you saying that mine are funnier?”

Marcus paused as if considering and then replied, “They are less annoying.”

Christian chose that moment to walk up and announce his presence. “Gentleman.”

It was interesting, Christian noted, that the diminutive Flynn stepped almost protectively in front of Cree. He blinked and grinned at Christian as he easily recognized his superior. “Sir,” he said cheerily.

Cree came to attention, looking grim and respectful. “Sir,” he echoed. “Do you need assistance?”

Christian paused and looked them both over slowly. It was a test he often used to gauge a man’s nerves. Marcus stared back steadily, unaffected. Erin fidgeted and grinned wider.

“Forget what you were going to say, sir?” Erin wondered impishly. “It happens all the time to me.”

Christian scowled, choosing to ignore the remark. “I want you at Medina barracks at six a.m. tomorrow morning,” he ordered sharply.

Erin blinked. “Both of us?” he wondered.

Christian narrowed his ice blue eyes. “Would there be a problem if I was speaking only to you?”

Erin made a face, one that was perplexed and curious at the same time. “Well, no, sir, but usually we are paired together for assignments. That’s why I’m asking. If you don’t want us together, then which one of us do you want? It wouldn’t do for just me to show up if you just wanted Marcus, or for Marcus to show up, if you just wanted me, or for us to get really confused and have no one show up—”

“Both of you!” Christian snapped, cutting Erin off irritably.

Erin smiled. “Okay, we’ll be there, sir, bright and early.”

“We will be there on time,” Marcus promised, “What will be our objective? Is there a list of preparations and equipment?”

“Yeah, some info would be good,” Erin agreed. “Will we need black stretch suits and repelling equipment for night ops or bunny slippers and jammies for a sleep over?”

“It will be morning,” Marcus reminded Erin, deadpan, and Christian couldn’t tell if Marcus was joining in Erin’s insubordinate behavior or completely serious.

“Oh, yeah! That’s right!” Erin chuckled. “Silly me.”

Christian stared, thinking that silence on his part would warn Erin that he wasn’t amused. Erin didn’t take the hint. He continued to smile, though Christian could see some very small signs of nervousness.

“You won’t need anything except training suits,” Christian replied. “We have several weeks until the operation. I want to know all of your strengths and weaknesses before that time.” He gave Erin a hard look. “I will be judging whether you are fit for the operation. I have been given complete authority in that area.”

“Wow!” Erin exclaimed cheerfully. “We’ve been under Medical’s command since we were placed in Peacekeepers. McLaren must like you if she’s turning us over to you completely.”

“She respects me and my opinion,” Christian corrected Erin harshly and then decided that Erin wasn’t going to respond to anything except bluntness. “According to your file, Flynn, you are a bit of a prankster; a clown, to be exact. I won’t tolerate that. This will be your only warning. If you use any of the tone, and lack of respect, I have seen here in the last few minutes, I will not only dismiss you from the operation, I will suggest that you be dismissed.”

Erin’s eyes went wide as if he were shocked, but there was a twinkle of laughter in his eyes as well, as if he doubted the ability of Christian to carry out that threat. That caused Christian to seethe inwardly, but he kept it under control. There would be time enough to discipline Flynn, he thought as he said, “I will see the two of you tomorrow morning. Be prepared for hard training. “

Christian turned on his heel, the interview over, and began walking back through the gym.

Erin’s voice floated after him, “Do I get breakfast?”

Christian stopped, prepared to turn and give a reprimand. He decided that he didn’t trust himself to do so with restraint. He continued walking. He could hear the pair

conversing.

“Guess not,” Erin sighed. “We’ll have to grab a bite in the morning, Marcus. What should we have?”

“Something high in protein,” Marcus replied.

“Eggs and bacon?” Erin wondered hopefully.

“Adequate.”

As Christian reached the exit door of the gym, he heard Erin babbling on excitedly about eggs and bacon.

I will not have someone like that on my team, Christian thought angrily. Erin was as good as gone. He would allow Erin a first day with his handpicked men, for appearance sake, and then he would inform Reba McLaren that he was definitely unsuitable. Satisfied with that decision, Christian looked back. Marcus was speaking to Erin in a low tone, but Erin, surprisingly, was watching Christian leave. When he caught the man’s eye, Erin waved cheerily. With a growl of irritation, Christian’s grip tightened hard on the two files still tucked under his arm and he stalked away.

Once back in his office, Christian sat down heavily behind his wide desk and slapped Erin’s file down in front of him. He opened it and scanned, once again, the numerous complaints about his mischief. Underneath, were his mission reports, all done in a very slangy, unrefined language and written in a sloppy handwriting style that was almost illegible. Flowers, a swarm of bees, stinger craft, various caricatures of people, some sort of parts diagram, a note to meet someone at a dance club, and various stains from food and coffee, littered the margins.

Marcus’s file was a sharp contrast. It was slim and neat with no complaints or marks against him. His mission reports were typed and read with perfect exactitude. There was a bland photo of him looking sullen. Christian stared at it, recalling their battles and their rivalry during the war. He had learned to respect Marcus the hard way.

In Erin’s photo, his smile was markedly absent. His expression was lost and worried, as if someone had taken the photo of him unawares. He was looking off to the right. Christian found himself intrigued by the photo. He didn’t seem to bear any relation to the young man Christian had just met in the gym. This person... Christian touched the photo with a long finger and traced the outline of the face. The eyes... they looked haunted;

green wells with a tightness around them. Christian looked closer, trying to see every detail of the small photo.

The photo was too small, though, to make out much. Christian didn't want to admit how many times, since he received the file, he had taken out that photo and looked at it. He didn't know why it intrigued him so much. He had read through the pages in the file many times and had tried to reconcile that photo with the profile of an irreverent prankster. The two didn't match. Seeing Erin in person, finding out that the file was far more accurate than the photo, had caused Christian to feel oddly disappointed. The man in the photo was more compelling.

Christian put the photo back and purposeful closed the file. He put Marcus's file on top and pressed it down, as if that could stop his odd compulsion to look at Erin's photo again. It didn't.

He needed to stop thinking about it, about Erin, Christian thought irritably. He needed to concentrate on the task at hand, a task that could cost men's lives if he allowed himself to be distracted now by a pair of green eyes and a mystery.

Chapter Two

April Fool's Day

“He could have MEANT to tell us to wait inside the barracks,” Erin suggested.

“He didn't say that,” Marcus argued. “Don't interpret orders.”

“Marcus, I'm not interpreting... I just think that you should consider the Possibility that our princeling failed to mention that we were supposed to wait inside, not out in the freezing morning air with ice water fog soaking through our clothes.”

“He is General Christian Callinbrook, Erin, or sir. Don't let him hear you call him princeling,” Marcus warned. “And I still say that, if he had wanted us to be inside the barracks, he would have ordered it. I'm staying out here.”

“Fine, fine!” Erin grumbled.

Christian could hear them bickering as he rounded a corner of the barracks and found them huddled against one wall under a light. They were alert to his presence, hands under their jackets, ready to pull guns from holsters, and wary eyes on his approaching shadow in the fog.

“I could have shot you before you gained a visual,” Christian growled.

“We're supposed to shoot at anyone we hear?” Erin asked with raised red brows. “During the war, that was fine, but I don't think it's legal now. Besides, we were expecting you.”

“I could have been someone else,” Marcus agreed with Christian.

Erin looked annoyed and rolled eyes at Marcus. “I'm not going to live my life as a complete paranoid, Marcus. I think the odds are in my favor that there isn't going to be someone sneaking up on me and playing sniper on base.”

“We do have enemies, even here,” Marcus replied, but then surprised Christian by relaxing his stiff stance and conceding, “It is peacetime, though, and I don't want to expect an enemy behind every noise either. This is Peacekeeper headquarters, not a dangerous assignment location.”

“You got it, Marcus!” Erin chuckled as if he were talking to a child that had finally learned a difficult lesson.

Christian uncomfortably found himself agreeing with Erin as well and that didn't help his mood. He forgot they weren't still in the war sometimes, especially in tense or uncertain situations. He had gone through courses to unlearn some of his soldier reflexes. A person couldn't shoot at every noise and one of the benefits of being at peace was that a person didn't always have to be suspicious and alert when they were in safe territory.

"Come with me," Christian ordered sharply, trying to bring himself to order and gain control of the situation again. Erin, he decided, had a definite talent for dominating and directing situations. Christian could have said those were leadership qualities, but, as he glanced back and saw Erin grinning at Marcus and then at him as if he were a vacuous idiot, he couldn't bring himself to concede that to the young man.

"Aw, man!" Erin exclaimed when the fog lifted a bit and they could see a group of men huddled together and waiting by an obstacle course.

Christian turned with a hard frown. "Is there a problem, agent?"

Erin sighed. "I was hoping for an interview in a warm place. You don't have to run me ragged in the wet and cold. Just say you don't want me and I'll go home."

Christian couldn't help blinking stupidly.

Erin grinned. "Come on, Commander Callinbrook! You know you made up your mind that you don't want me when we were in the gym. This is just for show so it looks neat and tidy on the paperwork you intend to give to McLaren. She is our psyche evaluator after all."

"Don't presume to know what I'm thinking, agent Flynn," Christian bit out icily.

Erin narrowed eyes at him critically, not fooled one bit, but then he looked impish and said, "I'll follow any order you give, sir, and I'll ace any physical test that you give me. Don't let my size fool you. I just thought, if you had already made up your mind, I should save you the trouble. You won't be able to put this down as the reason that you rejected me."

Christian didn't answer the charge. He replied simply, "Let's see if your bragging meets with reality, Flynn."

There were several pits, barriers, and locked gates between the men and a squat, dull gray building just visible in the lifting fog. Marcus and Erin exchanged looks. Erin grinned while Marcus only looked thoughtful.

“An infiltrate and retrieve course,” Erin said happily. “My favorite.”

“I designed it myself,” Christian warned. “It won’t be easy.”

Christian didn’t like the smug look on Erin’s face. In his experience, a man who was too confident in his abilities often made mistakes that caused themselves and their team mates to lose their lives.

“Danzin!” Christian called and a tall, middle aged man came towards them with a frown, looking Marcus and Erin over. “Give the computer to Flynn.”

Danzin had the slim machine tucked safely under his arm. He started and frowned even more, but he didn’t question. “Thanks,” Erin said as he took it and tucked it under his arm, “and no, nursery school hasn’t let out early,” Erin chuckled, reading the man’s mind. The man blinked and grunted.

Christian set his watch timer as they joined the others. “I remind you that this is a team,” Christian said sternly. “We are here to act as one and complete the mission, not win a contest.”

“Sure thing, sir,” Erin replied brightly when the others only nodded.

Christian gave him a hard look. Erin grinned back.

“Go,” Christian said without warning.

Erin’s only reaction was a twitch and then he was in motion. He whipped open the computer and began typing furiously. He closed it again quickly. He couldn’t have obtained the codes that quickly, Christian fumed. He was going to guess and hot dog his way through the course. Christian almost put a stop to things then and there, but Erin was in motion again.

“You and you!” Erin jabbed a finger at two men. “Watch our backs.” He pointed to a third man. “You take point. “ The last, he grabbed by the arm and pulled close. “Stick to us like glue and keep your eyes peeled while me and Marcus work on the locks.”

The men hesitated, looking at each other.

Erin snapped, “Move out everyone!”

The men went into motion, realized exactly what Christian had, that Erin had chosen the right men for the right positions. He had also placed Marcus and himself at the protected center. They were the experts and therefore more valuable.

Christian watched the men move out onto the course. He watched for mistakes.

There should have been many. They had never worked together before. They didn't even know each other's names. Erin seemed to take charge naturally, though, and gave commands, verbally and by hand signs, without any trouble. The joker was still there, but there was an edge to his grin, a wildness that spoke of blood, battle, and experience. The men followed his orders, much to Christian's bewilderment. His hand-picked captain was bending to listen to Erin and nodding obediently as they reached the first barrier.

Marcus came into play then. He did the physical work of getting through the barrier while Erin did the codes. They worked in perfect tandem, as if it were an orchestrated dance, and then the men were going through and taking up defensive positions on the opposite side.

They moved quickly, smoothly, passing each obstacle like ghosts in the fog. Christian moved along with them to watch them work. Erin's slight stature was a problem, but Christian's captain and Marcus were both there to get Erin over obstacles to the next lock.

Let's see how you deal with this one, Christian thought, sure that Erin would falter at last. He had purposely entered the wrong codes for the gray building.

Erin entered the codes. They didn't fail and the door opened. Christian blinked in shock. He couldn't understand what had happened. He watched as Erin handed the computer to Marcus. Marcus used it, fingers flying as he did multiple searches. He was trying to access floor and alarm plans, Christian guessed. He found them with ease and directed his team into the building.

Christian waited for the alarms to sound. He had placed them so they couldn't be avoided. He wanted to see how his men and the new additions reacted under stress. When the silence dragged, Christian became aware of his racing pulse and labored breathing. He was both angry and excited. The two opposing emotions warred with one another. The soldier in him was marveling at Erin's skill and his unexpected talent for leadership. The man in him was furious that Erin was managing despite his insubordinate behavior, a clear thumb in the eye to Christian's plan to prove that he wasn't worthy to be a part of the team.

The men came pouring out of the building. They formed up and moved through the next obstacles. When they made it to the finish, panting and exhausted, Christian was

already there, trying to break out of his confusion as he looked from Erin's grinning face to Marcus's satisfied smile.

Erin held up a data chip. "Mission completed," Erin panted.

Christian took the chip, using every ounce of will power not to snatch it and crush it in his fist. He waited a full minute until he trusted his voice to be professional. "Report, Flynn."

"Sir." Erin came to attention and gave a detailed account of their exercise.

Christian listened, but his gaze flicked to the other men. They were relieved and pleased, looking at Erin with smiles. They liked him, Christian could tell. Erin and Marcus had already proven themselves.

When Erin stopped talking, Christian ignored everything he had said and asked, "How did you get the codes?"

Erin winked. "Well, you gave orders to an Alexander Mikelvich to set up the course per your instructions, correct?"

"Yes," Christian replied, perplexed.

"You imputed the wrong codes for the door," Erin told him, "Which I'm sure was on purpose."

"Yes," Christian affirmed.

Erin shrugged as if it were obvious. "I know better than to believe open files, so I searched through Alexander's personal files and found one marked Christ. It was pass protected. I guessed straight away that the password was 'Al'. There's always a weak link, sir, in any organization."

Christian felt his face go hot with embarrassment and anger. He couldn't understand how Erin had been able to gather all of that information so quickly. "And the alarms? How did you deactivate them?"

"Marcus's specialty," Erin laughed. "He deactivated them by making them short. Certain sequences always overload the systems."

Brilliant, Christian thought. He couldn't deny it, but he certainly wasn't going to admit it. "Why did it take you so long to exit after information retrieval?"

Two of the men couldn't help laughing. Christian glared at them and they tried their best to stifle it. "There was hot coffee in a thermos, left, I suppose, by Alexander," Erin

explained matter of factly. "I was cold and I needed some caffeine."

Christian stared and then said, "You all fail the course. You can thank Mr. Flynn for that. Assemble in the instruction room in one hour. Perhaps in that time, you can impress on Mr. Flynn that stopping to drink coffee can cost one of you your lives."

Christian turned on his heel and began walking away with military precision. He heard Erin's voice call after him. "Does this mean you're keeping me? Ah, that's so nice of you, sir. You won't regret it, I promise!"

"Twenty laps, all of you!" Christian called back without stopping, "Courtesy of Mr. Flynn." He heard groans and a swear word. The best way to straighten a man out, Christian thought as his anger cooled with the satisfaction of having punished Erin properly, was to let the man's teammates do it for you.

Christian almost tripped in mid-step as shock jolted through him. He regained his composure with an effort as he continued to walk. He had suddenly realized he had made an unconscious decision to accept Flynn on the team.

Christian went to his office, sat down, and replayed the details of the exercise in his mind, still trying to find flaws. Unfortunately, he only found them in his men. Marcus and Erin had worked flawlessly, like a well-oiled machine, each knowing the other perfectly. They were a powerful force, he knew, and he would be a fool to toss them aside simply because he didn't like the package that expertise came in. McLaren had been right. When it came down to it, Erin did his job. Even the joke of stopping to drink coffee hadn't really impacted his timing. In fact, Christian realized, in a tense situation like that, men strung too tight could be a liability. A small joke like that one could have unwound them enough to do their job better.

Christian didn't realize he had snapped a pencil in half until he heard it break. He looked down at his hand, at how it was tensed on the broken bits of wood. He had always prided himself on his fighting forces. Though he had been a flamboyant general during the war, he had always expected top notch discipline and decorum from his men. Everything about Erin rubbed him the wrong way. His training told him that such a man could only create a disaster and cause men to die unnecessarily. He would have normally weeded men like Erin out within an hour of their induction into the military.

Erin Flynn wasn't like other men though. He was a trained stinger pilot and he... he

had killed Christian's trained men by the thousands, destroyed his installations no matter how he had secured them, and had survived a war that Christian's own commander, the man he had trained under and had most admired, had not. Erin Flynn liked to play the joker, but he was a force not to be underestimated or cast aside because of personality flaws.

Christian uncovered Erin's file and took out Erin's photo. Again Christian was struck by the lost expression on the man's face, the almost frightened sideways glance. What had been happening that had made him look like that? Christian had asked himself that question many times and he still didn't have an answer. He picked it up and brought it close to his face to examine it minutely. It was then that he noticed a very small mark at the bottom corner of the photo. Christian squinted at it, curious, having thought that he knew every inch of the picture by now.

M.D.C. the mark read. Christian blinked, confused. It wasn't a Peacekeeper file photo then. The mystery deepened.

"Sir?" an aide poked his head into Christian's office tentatively.

"Come in," Christian grunted, embarrassed. He tossed the photo down on top of Erin's file with faked nonchalance.

"The specs you asked for, sir." The man handed Christian a computer pad.

Christian took it and looked it over briefly to make sure he had been given the correct ones. Left to wait, the young aide studied his commander with some amount of awe and then, not sure his staring was acceptable, he switched to looking at the commander's desk. When Christian looked up at last, he found the young man staring at Erin's picture with obvious curiosity.

"Do you know him?" Christian asked, seeing sudden surprise on the aide's face.

"No, sir, but..." The young man stopped talking, not sure how much was proper for him to say.

"Well?" Christian prompted as he put the pad aside.

The aide licked nervous lips and then said, "I'm just surprised that the Peacekeepers would allow someone from the Muraka Detention Center on the force."

Christian raised a dark eyebrow and something inside him clenched. "I didn't know that was the case. It's not in his records. How do you know anything about it?"

The aide fished in his back pocket and produced a wallet. He opened it and then paused as shame caught up with his eagerness to please Christian. “Well, sir,” he said uncertainly, “Some men found it hard to give up the war. My-My older brother was one of them. He... well, Muraka is for dissidents and soldiers with... well, who can’t stop committing acts of violence against their former enemies. It’s where they go when they can’t be re-education or sent to an outpost.”

Christian frowned at the photo the aide produced. It was a heavy set older man who looked very angry and disheveled, as if he had fought to not have his photo taken. At the bottom of the photo, in one corner, was the mark, M.D.C. Christian automatically looked down at Erin’s photo, checking that the two marks were the same.

“Thank you for the information,” Christian said, fished his memory for the man’s name, and added, “Agent Pertil. You’re dismissed.”

The man fairly beamed to be remembered by someone like Christian. “Sir.” He snapped a smart salute and then left the office, still smiling.

Christian pulled out his cell phone. McLaren knew. There wasn’t any question about it. He was going to demand an explanation at once.

“Hey... sir?” Erin leaned into the office. His red pony tail swung like a pendulum. Some hairs at his temple had escaped and were matted with sweat to his face. His impish face looked tired, but still full of good humor. He was also bare to the waist. His shirt was balled in one hand.

Flynn had an upper body that was lean and covered in tight muscle. His pale skin, freckled here and there, was running with sweat. His pink nipples were erect in the cool air.

Christian eyes couldn’t help taking the plunge down to Erin’s flat belly button and the thin, reddish trail of hair that disappeared into the low slung waistband of his shorts. Peeking out from that waistband was a tattoo. Christian recognized it as a dancing Hindu god.

“Sorry,” Erin said, noticing Christian’s face and mistaking his confusion for anger. “We almost died out there at the end. We all are pretty sweated. I came to ask if we could hit the showers before we go to the instruction room.” When Christian couldn’t pull his eyes away from the tattoo to reply, Erin looked down his body to see what was wrong.

“Oh, the tattoo. You like? It’s Dancing Shiva.” He grinned. “I nicknamed myself Deathdealer during the war so I thought Shiva would be a great tattoo. Do you know the legend? Shiva loved to dance, but his dancing was destroying the world. The people begged him to stop. He did, but the legend says that when he begins to dance again he will destroy the world. He’s a fertility god, but he’s also a Death dealer too. Pretty, isn’t it? You can’t see it, but he’s stomping on a demon. I wanted to get a nipple ring too, but that’s against regs. I was lucky they gave the hair a pass.”

“Flynn!” Christian snapped, furious.

Erin started, but he was grinning. “Sir?”

Christian counted to three, took a steadying breath, and then didn’t give Erin the explosive, angry, reaction he was certain Erin wanted. Instead, he said tightly, “I give my permission for the men to shower. Now, get out!”

“Yes, sir, thank you sir!” Erin chuckled and then he was gone.

Christian stared after him, the image of Erin’s wiry body burned into his mind so deeply that it was almost as if he were still standing in the doorway. Christian admitted to himself at last what was so fascinating about Erin Flynn. Christian ran a hand over his face and admitted that he was sexually attracted to the man.

“This cannot be happening,” Christian groaned as he slumped in his chair. He had immersed himself in the war and his work and his few sexual encounters had been brief and with only a few trusted friends. His secret trysts with a few officers in the military had been carefully hidden. Attachments in the military could easily distract a man and cause charges of favoritism. Christian had avoided that rigorously. None of his encounters had ever been more than mutual sexual relief quickly forgotten afterwards.

Christian didn’t have any intention of giving in to his desire for Flynn. He was too much of a professional. It helped that he couldn’t, personally, stand the man. He believed he wasn’t in any danger of compromising himself with someone like that.

Christian took up Erin’s photo and stared at it. Those lost eyes, that sensitive, open expression, and that serious, determined mouth... Christian shoved the photo into Erin’s file, closed it, and slammed a hand down flat on the top. It was that man, the one in the photo, that Christian was most in danger from.

Chapter Three

My Enemy, My Friend

Erin Flynn was a genius. Christian stared at the man's paperwork. It was written in a crazy scrawl, erased, crossed out, smudged, and with doodles in the margins, but every question was correctly answered.

Christian rubbed at his chin and sighed as he put the paperwork aside. He stared at the empty desk in front of him for some time before a feminine cough startled him into looking up. His ice blue eyes narrowed at Reba McLaren.

"You can see why we keep him on the force, can't you?" she asked with a barely concealed air of satisfaction. "He's trouble with a capital T, but he knows his stuff."

"That's apparent," Christian replied in an irritated tone, "but he's still a wild card until I see him in an actual combat assignment. Before that happens, I want to make absolutely certain his penchant for being a clown doesn't get an agent killed. I need to know I can trust him to be a professional when it counts. He hasn't shown me that so far."

"So you aren't rejecting him yet?" Reba asked crossing her arms and looking at Christian seriously.

"No, I'd be a fool to ignore his abilities. They are impressive," Christian conceded. "But that's not why I asked you here."

"Oh?" Reba raised an eyebrow. She hadn't liked being summoned to Christian's office. He sometimes forgot he wasn't one of the ruling elite any longer. "Is there another problem?"

Christian handed the photo of Erin to Reba. "I don't like mysteries where my men are concerned. I want to know why Flynn was in a facility like that one."

Christian hadn't named it, wanting to see whether Reba knew what he was talking about. She did. She looked down at the photo and frowned. "He was attacked by U.W.F. soldiers," Reba explained. "The details are sealed because of his age at the time, but I do know the attack was brutal. He fought back and there were some deaths. At the time, the government was over zealous in incarcerating people who weren't willing to embrace

peace. It didn't matter who was attacked or who the attackers were. All of them were sent to the facility."

"And Cree?" Christian wondered, trying to imagine someone as young as Erin at the time being incarcerated with bitter, violent soldiers. His expression in the photo was becoming understandable.

"Cree wasn't in trouble, but he refused to leave Erin's side," Reba explained. "They tried to separate them; drug Marcus, put Erin in lock up, put Marcus in lock up, but, no matter what they did, the two would manage to get back together. Erin was incarcerated for six months and Cree managed to stay with him for most of that time." She handed the photo back to Christian. "I had been keeping my eye on them professionally. I could see that they were possible to re-educate. They had some morality. I took it on myself to offer them positions in Peacekeepers and assistance in becoming good citizens. It wasn't easy convincing the government, but I did it. It's worked out well. They are the best at what they do."

Christian saw the two in his mind's eye, just as they had been on the course; living in the violent detention center back to back, guarding each other, working in tandem to keep themselves safe. "Where was Cree when Erin was attacked?"

Reba looked uncomfortable, "He left under false pretenses. They offered him a position as a government embassy agent. They told him they would release Erin if he showed good conduct and a willingness to follow orders. They were only trying to separate them to get to Erin. Cree was on guard detail when Erin was attacked. During his psyche evaluations, Cree tells me he blames himself for not being there to protect Erin. He refused to be separated again."

"They must be lovers." Christian whispered. He wished he could go on believing that they weren't, but there wasn't any other way to explain their devotion to one another. Christian felt a pain in his heart and he unconsciously rubbed his aching chest.

Reba didn't look convinced. "I've never seen them kiss, hold hands, or even stand too close to one another." She looked thoughtful. "Their relationship reminds me of a big brother looking after a little brother."

"Is that because Cree feels that guilty for allowing Flynn to get attacked?" Christian asked, puzzled, "He, of all people, should know how competent Flynn is at protecting

himself.”

Reba quirked a smile. “More like Erin’s the big brother, actually. He looks after Marcus as if Marcus couldn’t tie his shoe laces without him. Marcus is a very honorable, dutiful, exact, and skilled young man, but he lacks the spark that tells a man to relax, that there’s something else besides duty and work, and that he should have a life and live it. I often wonder, if he didn’t have Erin, would Marcus find a corner and stand there like a deactivated machine until someone needed him for a task. Marcus is very attached to Erin and it isn’t in a needy way. They have a bond that I don’t think I can explain with just a sexual relationship.”

Christian stifled a sigh of impatience. He didn’t want Reba’s spin on things. He wanted a black and white answer, either or, yes or no. Were Marcus and Erin lovers?

“Thank you Doctor McLaren,” Christian said as he picked up the photo. “You’ve answered some of my questions and given me the insight I need to make good decisions where the assignment is concerned.”

“Glad I could help,” Reba replied and began to leave. She paused at the door and looked back at the long haired Callinbrook prince. He was staring at the photo of Erin and one finger had risen to touch the image of the ex-terrorist. When he looked up, she smiled knowingly and then departed. It told him that he was so out of control of his emotions that other people were beginning to notice. He had to find a way to push Erin out of his thoughts and to treat him as any other agent.

Christian left his office for the day and made his way to the officer’s gym, feeling depressed and irritable. He tried to brush those feelings aside and tell himself that there wasn’t any reason to feel those things. He needed to treat his bizarre infatuation with Flynn as a product of boredom and dissatisfaction with his current Position. Christian WAS bored, he had to admit, and frustrated with the levels of bureaucracy he had to deal with. Flynn was a diversion, nothing more than that.

Christian removed his uniform in the locker room. He slipped into a pair of black spandex and a red tank top and then bound back his hair in a ponytail. After putting on climbing shoes, and clipping his cell phone onto the back of his pants, Christian went out into the deserted exercise room and stood in front of the climbing wall. It was late. Half of the lights were out and all the instructors were gone. Alone, and knowing all the rules

against exercising alone, Christian began to climb. He should have at least put on an anti grav belt just in case, but that would have negated the purpose of the climb.

It was an adrenalin rush, a return to the action he missed so much from the war. Putting himself in danger allowed him to concentrate on staying on that wall and living from moment to moment. He didn't have to think about his men, his job, his duty, and the endless paperwork and decisions. He just needed to climb and feel where the next handhold was.

Christian decided to ignore two small ledges where he could have rested, pushing himself despite his trembling leg muscles and his labored breathing. He imagined himself on a United World Federation mission, in danger of discovery, his life forfeit if that happened. His goal was the top and he envisioned an insurgent camp and a spy mission to accomplish. Christian felt a rush of excitement.

Disaster struck without warning. Christian thought that his footing was secure as he reached up for a handhold. He was sweating heavily from exertion. Unknown to him, he had left some of that sweat on his foothold. As he put weight on it, he felt his foot slide. Still reaching for his handhold, Christian swung sharply sideways and desperately tried to hold on with his one secure hand as his other foot left the wall. His size had always worked against him when he had climbed. It had kept him from utilizing all the holds and from using the limber moves the sport required. That handicap worked against Christian in the worst way at that moment. His own body's size and momentum peeled him off the wall and Christian's one hand didn't have the strength to hold him as his shoulder twisted painfully and his side scraped itself raw on the rough surface of the wall.

Christian fell and there was nothing he could do about it. Several things ran through his mind, all of them regrets, before his body slammed into something hard and the world dimmed.

“Hey Chris...uh...sir?”

Christian opened his eyes to bright light and searing pain in his ribs, right arm, and right leg. A face was hovering very close. Christian blinked in confusion. Two eyes

peered down at him, overly large like a child's, and an amazing shade of green.

"E-Erin...? Flynn?" Christian mumbled in confusion. "What...?"

"Rule number one," Erin said seriously, "never exercise alone, especially when you're climbing a concrete wall without any ropes." He grinned suddenly. "Don't worry, I won't squeal on you. I never follow that rule either."

Christian remembered then. He tried to sit up, but a surprisingly strong hand held him down. "I don't think so," Erin told him. "You need to hold still until the medics get here. You're balanced on a little ledge. Good thing for you they made this like a natural rock and not straight up and down like most climbs. Still, why you didn't fall off... well, you're one hell of a lucky man... sir."

"Ledge," Christian echoed in confusion and then understood. The ledge had broken his fall and saved him from a possibly fatal plunge to the floor of the gym. He shivered, remembering how narrow those ledges were, meant to be obstacles to climb over and not actual platforms wide enough for bodies. He focused on Erin again. He felt calloused fingers brush his dark hair from his face. Erin looked worried. "How bad is it?" Christian wondered, his voice rough.

"Don't know," Erin replied truthfully. "You're talking and moving, so you can't be too bad. Scrapes, mostly, maybe, and a hit on the head for sure."

Christian frowned, the pain radiating throughout his body making him doubt Erin's assessment. A mystery was presenting itself to him and he ignored his body and forced his mind to focus enough to ask, "How did you... What are you doing here? How did you know?"

Erin waved Christian's cell phone where he could see it. "You have all of us on your cell phone dialer so that you can talk to us in the field, I suppose," Erin replied. "You landed on my number when you fell. It kept dialing it. I was pretty pissed. I was in the middle of things, if you know what I mean? I had the number traced, intending to smash whoever it was's face, and found out it was you. Didn't take long after that to pinpoint your location."

"In the middle of things?" Christian wondered and then swore at himself. His aching head attested to a possible concussion. It was disorienting him, making it hard to keep his thoughts to himself.

Erin winked broadly and his grin turned impish. "I think that's my business, sir. If you want a play by play of my personal life then you have to put yourself in the game."

Christian wasn't slow witted, but again, he said what he was thinking and he hated himself and the weakness that caused him to shoot back bitterly, "Play the game? Hasn't Cree already won it?"

Erin frowned sharply, but the frown wasn't directed at Christian. Erin's eyes were turned inward, as if he were considering some unpleasant thought, and then he was grinning again and saying cheerily, "This game's never over, Chris."

"They're here!" Cree's voice called distantly.

Erin patted Christian's good shoulder. "Remember, sir, we were climbing together and you fell, okay? That's our story. I'd tell them, but..."

"But?" Christian wondered, not understanding.

Erin looked sheepish. "I was taught not to lie," he replied.

Christian considered that statement and the man hovering over him, braced precariously and looking as if he were about to fall as he leaned out, keeping hold of the wall, and urged someone below to hurry.

"He looks kind of pale, guys, and his head's bleeding!" Erin called. "He's talking to me like he likes me too, so he's must have had his brains scrambled. He probably has a concussion!"

Erin leaned close to Christian's face. He smelled... Sandalwood? Cinnamon-musk? Vanilla mixed with Erin's own scent. Erin was looking into Christian's eyes.

"Both of them look like they're dilating," Erin muttered. "Damn this light! I can hardly see anything."

Erin looked very worried. Christian wondered why. Didn't they dislike each other? Weren't they well on their way to even being enemies? Erin should have been glad that Christian had taken the fall. Someone else would have to take over the mission now, someone who might laugh at Erin's jokes and tolerate his insubordinate behavior.

"Don't move!" Erin warned, but Christian wasn't aware that he had tried to move. He felt a hand grip him hard to hold him in place. That grip was firm and reassuring.

"Someone call for a cab?" A new voice quipped and Christian felt hands at his waist.

"Anti grav stretcher?" Erin sounded unsure. "That's a long way down, guys."

“Flynn! You’ve been at our tender mercies enough times to know we know what we’re doing. Stop hovering and get yourself down. We’ll take care of the handsome prince.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Erin growled.

“Well, Rapunzel,” another voice joked. “If you’re going to let down your hair for a prince, try to do it with ropes next time, just in case.”

Erin shot back. “He’s my commanding officer, guys! Can it!”

“Care to explain what you were doing here after hours, then?” the second man asked.

There was a long silence. Erin wasn’t going to lie, just as he had said, Christian realized. As Christian felt himself lifted, presumably to be put on the stretcher, the world began to blur and darken. Christian knew he was on the edge of unconsciousness. He owed Erin, he thought dimly. All he could do at that moment was to save the man some embarrassment.

“I-I was teaching him... teaching Flynn some climbing techniques... for our next... assignment,” Christian managed.

Christian wondered if anyone had heard him and then the first medic replied, suddenly formal, “Yes, sir.” Christian knew then they hadn’t known he was awake and aware of what they were saying.

As Christian slipped into unconsciousness, he felt Erin’s hand squeeze his arm in thanks. That touch warmed a place deep inside Christian. “Don’t worry about a thing,” Erin said almost in his ear and, as if the words had some power, Christian felt himself trusting Erin, trusting him enough to let go and fall into the arms of painless oblivion.

Chapter Four

Take Your Medicine

“Dislocated shoulder, torn ligaments, major bruising, and concussion. The rest is pretty minor for the kind of fall you took,” Reba McLaren said as she read off the electronic chart by Christian’s hospital bed. “I’ve already given your field assignment to another group. You can rest easy about that.”

Christian frowned, “I am not happy about that! This was a ridiculous accident! It shouldn’t have happened! I should be cited for incompetence.”

“Which is why you will have to attend a few psych evaluations,” Reba replied calmly. “Don’t give me that story you were climbing with Erin. I know you were climbing by yourself. That’s suicidal.”

“I am an experienced climber,” Christian bit back, but then settled deeper into his blankets, stifling a moan of pain. “It was against regulations for me to climb alone, though.” He eyed her sourly. “Did you question Flynn? He told me he doesn’t lie. That’s not a good trait to cultivate in a career like ours.”

“You’re one to talk about good traits. If Erin had been there, he wouldn’t have let you fall,” Reba replied stiffly. When Christian looked skeptical, she added, “He’s very diligent in taking care of the people closest to him and the operatives who work with him. He would have made sure to use ropes. He would have made sure that you were secure. My report states that you were free climbing, though, and that Erin was there... eventually.” She smiled slightly. “Erin may not lie, but he doesn’t always tell the truth either. He’s a master of evasion.”

Christian fiddled with his hair, suddenly uncomfortable. Someone had braided it and tied it off to keep it out of the way of the doctors and nurses. He slowly worked the braid out as he tried to remember his rescue. He remembered Erin hovering over him and words spoken. Christian wasn’t sure he could vouch for the accuracy of what he remembered being said. It didn’t seem possible that Erin had invited him to join his ‘game’ and compete with Cree. It had to have been a product of his concussion.

“Whatever punishment or censure you care to deliver, I will accept,” Christian

declared. "I was most definitely in the wrong."

Reba looked at him thoughtfully. "I think you've been punished enough. It will take you awhile to heal. You have hairline fractures in one leg and some ribs, so it will be painful for you to move around. Go to your psych evaluations. Maybe I can convince you not to take stupid risks again. I'm giving you several weeks of downtime."

"No!" Christian objected strongly. "I will go to the psychiatrist, but I refuse to let my upcoming mission suffer because of my stupidity."

Reba blinked and then she shook her head skeptically. "I don't think you will be able to get around on your own."

"I'll manage," Christian snapped.

Reba looked him up and down, sizing up his condition and angry that he was arguing with her orders. "I'm reconsidering filing a report."

"I insist that you do file it," Christian replied sullenly, feeling embarrassed and vulnerable.

"Christian Callinbrook!" Reba shouted and the man jumped, startled. "I am your commanding officer as well as your doctor. You will follow my orders! Is that understood?"

Christian glared, but then relented, shoulders slumping. "Yes, commander," he replied dejectedly.

"I am assigning you an aide to assist you in carrying out your duties," Reba told him as Christian's blue eyes widened in confusion. "I will pick who I think is most suitable and you, sir, will not argue. Is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," Christian replied in a small voice and then, relieved, "Thank you. I wish to redeem my good name and your confidence in me as quickly as possible."

"Understood," Reba said. She softened. "Don't over do it, Christian, okay?"

"Yes, ma'am," he replied simply and Reba nodded and began to leave. Christian called after her, "Do you have someone in mind to be my aide?"

"Yes, I do," Reba replied, not slowing her steps, but looking over her shoulder so he could see her smile as she said, "It's Erin Flynn."

Christian fully expected Erin to show up with Marcus in tow. When he came alone, ringing the bell of Christian's well-appointed apartment, Christian hated the traitor feeling of relief. It was a feeling completely at odds with the knowledge that being saddled with Erin as his nursemaid was not going to be easy or desirable.

Aching and scraped raw in many places, it hadn't been easy to roll the wheelchair to the front door. Erin had waited patiently though, expecting that, being injured, it would take Christian some time. The struggle to get the door open, and not tangle with the chair, had been an embarrassment.

"Heya, prince!" Erin greeted with a grin and a twinkle in his green eyes as he leaned down and helped Christian push back from the door again. "Ready for Erin's taxi service?"

Christian swatted Erin's pony tail aside as it dangled in his face. He jerked the wheels of the wheelchair back on his own so that Erin stumbled off balance. When the young man straightened, undaunted, Christian growled, "You are late!"

"Traffic," Erin apologized. "I also didn't expect your place to be outside the city. I thought a guy like you would live right on Peacekeeper base."

Erin eyed the wheelchair. "I didn't know you were that bad."

"What's that supposed to mean, Agent Flynn?" Christian snarled back, feeling embarrassed. He hated being weak, especially hated anyone seeing him like that.

Erin blinked and then looked sympathetic. "It doesn't mean anything, sir. I should have known you wouldn't be walking away from a fall like that one." His sincere tone made Christian rein in his temper. Letting his temper get out of control was not a good way to begin. He tried again, taking the tone of commander; assured and in control.

"My briefcase is over on that table. Get it and then we'll go."

"Yes, sir," Erin replied obediently and Christian watched him walk jauntily over to the table. His hand closed on the handle of the briefcase, and he began to turn back, but then he paused and looked around, blinking at the rich, leather furnishings, the oriental carpets, and the expensive details of a prince's home. "Nice!" Erin said appreciatively. "Decorate yourself?"

Christian scowled. "I don't see how that is of any of your concern."

Erin shrugged, "Guess it isn't. You just didn't look the type to bother with matching

furniture and couch cushions.”

“Are you insinuating something?” Christian snapped, feeling his temper getting out of control again. He had never made his sexuality a secret and he was used to certain insults. The ones that dug under his skin the most were the ones that questioned his masculinity. He hadn’t expected an insult like that from someone who he suspected shared the same sexuality.

Erin looked perplexed and then he understood. His smile was sympathetic as he explained, “You’re very military oriented, sir, and you travel a lot. I expected just the basic home in the city near Headquarters. I figured you would keep all the plush stuff for your palace.”

That was another bitter point shoved under Christian’s skin. He bit out, “My palace was destroyed by terrorists like you during the war.”

Erin winced. “I didn’t know that. War was war, though.”

“It was a civilian target!” Christian shot back and then stopped himself. Erin was right. War was war. Rehashing it wouldn’t bring back his ancestral home. He bit out, “You are not here for a guided tour, Flynn. Do your job.”

It was Erin’s turn to look annoyed, a startling, but fleeting expression seeping through a crack in his happy go lucky persona. Christian sharply reminded himself that he was facing, not just a young man, but a stinger pilot trained to kill wholesale. Erin had slaughtered scores of his troops, destroyed his most secure installations, and infiltrated systems Christian had thought secure. Unseen on his person, he was certain Erin was carrying a battery of weapons, weapons he knew how to use expertly. He would use those weapons without hesitation if the situation called for it. There was always the possibility that he might snap and use them on him. Erin’s annoyed expression left as quickly as it had appeared, though, and Erin easily regained his grin.

“My job is to get the bad guys, sir,” Erin said as he put the briefcase in Christian’s lap, opened the door, and then moved behind the wheelchair in order to push it. “I don’t make a very good nurse.”

Christian felt the injustice himself. Reba was making a mistake, he felt, in using Erin for such a purpose, and he had to wonder at her motivation for doing it. It didn’t seem logical for her to take a skilled agent out of the field for something so mundane.

Punishment wasn't a good enough of an excuse. There had to be more to it. She was a psychiatrist. There might be many layers to her reasoning.

"Reba has me on call, by the way," Erin said, "so you may end up with someone else from day to day, depending on whether I'm needed for a mission, or not."

Erin wheeled him towards his waiting car. The driver, caught looking impatiently at his watch, hurried to open the door of the car and help Christian move onto the seat. It was awkward and it was embarrassing, especially when Erin added with a grunt of strain, "I'll make sure my replacement has some strong biceps!"

"This will only last few days at the most," Christian replied stiffly as Erin slid into the seat beside him and the driver closed the door. "Then you will be back to your proper duties."

Erin snorted, amused. "You're a strong man, sir, but take it from someone who's been there enough times. These things take time to heal. You won't be in any marathons soon."

"I do have some experience as well," Christian grumbled as he dug into his briefcase and pulled out papers to look over. He didn't remember that Erin's file was in the case until some papers from it slipped out. Erin snatched at them as they fell towards the floor. He paused in the act of handing them back when he noticed his photo.

Erin fingered the photo and his face did an odd, indescribable thing. His face turned dark red and his lips tightened into an almost feral grin. Christian couldn't tell what emotion that expression was portraying, but he could see it was a very strong one. It was manic, frightening even, and Christian felt his blood chill. Christian felt the need to defend himself as if he were being threatened.

"Doctor McLaren gave me your file, along with Cree's, so that I could evaluate you," Christian explained, trying to make his voice matter of fact. His embarrassment was deepening and he hated it. He was always in control. That he had failed to return the file to Reba showed him how off balance he was, how badly Erin had affected him. "I forgot I had it in my briefcase. I'll have you return it to personnel today."

Erin's jaw went hard. He shoved the photo into the briefcase along with the papers. "Guess that particular stigma is on my permanent record. I never thought about it, I guess," Erin said and Christian understood that he was talking about his detention.

Christian thought about his own past, about some of the things he had done. At the time, he had been insane, so sure that what he had been doing had been the right thing. He kept those memories locked down tight, refusing to acknowledge them. Next to his crimes, Erin's detention seemed an insignificant thing.

"We all have our dark pasts," Christian found himself saying and then found something outside the window to stare at, unable to meet Erin's gaze.

"Wonder why no one blames you?" Erin replied bitterly and Christian inwardly cringed. They did, he thought as he sank into a deep depression, but it was his title, his reputation, and his bloodline that kept people from demanding that he pay for his war crimes.

Christian replied coldly, "Our crimes were different. I fought against your terrorism and the rebellion. Let's not continue this conversation. I have Peacekeeper business to think about."

Erin said nothing, but Christian could feel his searing anger like fire on his skin. If Erin had even remotely felt anything for him, Christian thought, he had just crushed it under his heel, yet, at that moment, the pain of the uncertain feelings in Christian's heart didn't equal the intense pain of his guilt.

Christian did try to think of Peacekeeper business, but the drive was a long one and the war kept trying to bleed through the cracks in his determination not to think about it. At last, he turned to the one distraction in the car, Erin.

"I thought you never went anywhere without Cree."

Silence reigned for over a minute. Christian continued to stare out of the window, making it seem that the thought had been just a random off shoot of something more important that he was thinking about.

Erin spoke at last, sounding unsure of what Christian wanted to know. "It's true that we're close, but we aren't joined at the hip," he replied. "I suppose, if this was more than just a pick up the boss trip, Marcus wouldn't feel comfortable letting me go alone. We're a team. We watch each other's backs. He's my partner. We know each other's moves. All of them."

That last sentence could have meant many things. Christian closed his mind to the most obvious and continued doggedly, "How can you operate effectively when you have

that kind of dependence on one another? I don't understand why McLaren allows it to continue."

"She knows Peacekeepers gest us both or none at all," Erin replied matter of factly. "If you're wondering if we can do a mission separate, we can and have. We just don't like it." He paused and then said carefully, "We aren't a liability. We both know the mission comes first. We made that decision when we signed on. We've been put to the test. We passed." There was the sound of cloth rustling. "Look."

Christian turned his head and saw that Erin had lifted up his shirt. That close to him, Christian could see many scars crisscrossing his slim, wiry torso. Christian found himself swallowing hard.

"There," Erin pointed to a scar up under his arm. It was the thickest one. "I took that on a mission and almost bled to death, but Marcus left me where I fell and didn't come back for me until he had completed his infiltration mission. A lot of lives had been depending on us. We didn't let them down."

Erin let his Peacekeeper shirt fall back and he tucked it back into his pants as Christian said, "I see." It was all he could manage to say without his voice breaking. He was aroused and fighting it. He turned back to the window, hating himself and his body especially, for wanting someone his mind disliked intensely.

"People say—" Christian began, but Erin cut him off.

"People say a lot of things, sir, but my personal life is my business," Erin said stiffly. "Marcus is my best friend, he's my partner, and together we do our job and we do it well. That's all you should ask."

"You are correct," Christian replied, just as stiff and then couldn't think of anything to follow up with. He shifted uncomfortably, wishing that the ride was over with and not relishing the fact there would be more of them if he continued to be so incapacitated.

"Look," Erin said as if feeling the need to relent some. "A lot of people don't get me and Marcus. Sometimes, I don't know what we got either, but I do know that when we first met we just 'connected' instantly. We're like two parts that don't work unless they are together. When we work together, we get through life like we're supposed to, but when we are alone, we screw up. On a mission together, we don't even need to talk most times. We gel completely, you know what I mean? We're a force to be reckoned with."

“I need to verify that,” Christian heard himself say and he sounded harsh and judgmental in his own ears.

“I can understand that,” Erin replied. Christian looked at him in surprise and Erin chuckled and grinned. “We are an odd couple. I’d be thinking what you are, if I was in your shoes, that two weirdo, war babies like me and Marcus couldn’t possibly do anything together. We’ll show you, though. You’ll understand, then.”

Christian didn’t understand at all and didn’t really want to. Erin had said that he and Marcus had a special relationship, end of story. Christian swore at his thoughts, reminding himself that fraternizing with subordinates was against regulations, especially if all he had in mind was relieving tension, boredom, and sexual frustration. He needed to get his questionable libido under control and to get well as quickly as possible so he could extricate himself from a possibly messy situation. When Erin was out of sight at last, mission completed, then Christian was sure he would forget all about the young man.

“Penny for your thoughts?” Erin quipped and then laughed as Christian stiffened. “Maybe not, huh? You need to learn to relax, sir.”

“Flynn?” Christian said sternly.

“Sir?”

“Do you know what insubordination is?”

“Yes.”

“One more word and I will put you on report.”

There was silence.

“Well?” Christian demanded.

Still silence.

He glared at Erin. The man stared back with an innocent expression. Christian repeated his own words to himself and then felt a flush of temper as he realized that Erin was doing exactly as he had been ordered. Christian growled. “Good!”

Erin barely suppressed a laugh.

Chapter Five

Joined at the Hip

“I’m in the building,” Erin said simply into his cell phone and then shoved it back into a pocket before putting hands to the back of Christian’s wheelchair and pushing. “They have hover chairs you know. This model is prehistoric.”

Christian frowned. “They make muscles weak by inactivity. I’m attempting to regain my health.”

“By having me push you around?”

“It isn’t necessary for you to do so,” Christian retorted.

“I thought that I was helping.”

Erin maneuvered them through the doors of Peacekeeper Headquarters. He paused in the wide, marble floored foyer as they were suddenly surrounded by Peacekeeper agents and employees rushing all around them.

“If you want to do it yourself, sir, I’ll step back,” Erin offered.

Christian heard amusement in Erin’s voice. Christian’s arm was hurting. He knew that pushing the wheelchair was going to be impossible for him and it seemed that Erin knew it as well. Christian had insisted on the manual wheel chair, thinking of the future when pushing and straining his arm muscles would be good therapy.

“It’s too crowded,” Christian said stiffly. “Continue to push for now.”

“Yes, sir,” Erin replied and Christian imagined a smirk, even though he didn’t look to confirm it. The very idea that Erin was laughing at him caused Christian to seethe. He hated looking weak, hated even worse looking weak in front of someone like Erin Flynn, who he felt would joke or talk about his weakness to others.

When attacked, attack in return, Christian thought as he asked, “The person that you called when we arrived. It was Cree?”

“Yes,” Erin replied and a slight edge to his tone informed Christian the young man suspected where Christian was going to go with his questioning. He reminded himself that Erin was a genius. The foolish joker act was just that, a cover over a very laser sharp mind.

“I can’t help but think that your dependence on one another is a distinct liability,” Christian commented.

There was a long silence as Erin pushed the chair into an elevator, pushed a button for a floor, and then replied, “It hasn’t so far. I know you’ve already checked our records.”

“I know the dry facts of your missions,” Christian said, “but I don’t know anything about the why of it. I might have more confidence if I understood the psychology of your dependence.”

He looked up at Erin and saw the young man’s pensive expression, his brooding green eyes under his lowered red brows. Erin grinned suddenly, but it was fierce and not humorous at all. “I guess you could just call us shell shocked and crazy,” Erin said. “How many ways do you want me to explain something I don’t understand myself? We’re a package. We come together no matter what. Take it or leave it.”

Christian opened his mouth for a very pointed question, seeing his opening, but Erin forestalled him.

“Sir, I told you before, when you were half hanging off of that climbing rock,” Erin said. “My personal life is only your business if you make yourself a part of it.”

Christian clenched his jaw, ground his teeth together, and then snarled, “My interest is in the Peacekeepers and how you operate in your position within it! If you think that I have any personal attraction to you, you are mistaken, sir! Our dealings together are strictly professional and shall remain that way.”

The elevator opened and it was then that Christian realized that Erin had been leaning on the door closed button. “Well, that’s clear enough, sir,” Erin replied smoothly. “Thanks for not beating around the bush.”

Erin wheeled Christian out of the elevator and into his office. After removing the padded chair behind Christian’s desk, he wheeled Christian into position there.

“Erin?” Marcus was suddenly standing in the door way, “We have to report to section C.”

Erin frowned. “I’m supposed to watch our commander here.”

“McLaren’s orders,” Marcus insisted.

“Sir?” Erin asking Christian for permission.

Christian made an impatient motion with one hand as he picked up a pencil and slid reports towards himself. "I have work and I have a secretary. I'll page you when I need to go somewhere."

"Uh, okay," Erin responded, but he seemed unsure.

"GO!" Christian barked.

Erin started, "Okay, okay!" he replied and walked towards Marcus. As he came close to the other young man, he slid an arm around Marcus's waist to pull Marcus after him. "Let's go, Marcus, but let's stop and get a Danish on the way. I'm starved!"

Such an intimate gesture made without thought. Christian's world had narrowed down to that slender arm with its wiry strength sliding around the rock hard torso of a man obviously used to such gestures. As the door closed behind them, Christian was suddenly aware of a sharp pain in his hand. He looked down and saw that he had snapped his pencil in half and was clutching it so hard that his knuckles were white.

That small loss of control, and feeling such anger and impotence, had made it that much harder for Christian to call for Erin's assistance later in the day. If Erin had returned with Marcus, and Christian had been forced to admit his weakness and embarrassing need for help in front of the one man who had been his ultimate rival during the war, Christian was sure he would have denied his body until he caused himself harm. As it was, Erin arrived alone, and Christian only had to suffer through the embarrassment of having Erin wheel him to the restroom.

"I don't need your help!" Christian snarled when they had reached the door and Erin began to attempt to help him inside. "Stand here and wait for me to come out."

Erin made a skeptical face. "There isn't anything to get upset about, you know, sir? I pee, you pee, everyone has to pee... I'm telling you, you're going to have trouble. It's a long hallway and then two doors."

Christian's jaw worked. "I am not incapacitated, Agent Flynn, and I am your commanding officer. You will not question my orders!"

Erin raised cinnamon eyebrows, opened his mouth to argue, and then closed it and shrugged. He leaned against a wall and began to whistle a lively tune.

Christian glared and then accepted that Erin was going to do as he was told. Keeping one hand on the wall, he limped heavily into the restroom hallway.

The hallway seemed to stretch forever. Christian was ashamed that he had to stop three times and let the waves of pain roll over him before he was able to steel his will and walk again. When he reached the door at the end, he touched it as if he had reached a precious goal, nodded to himself for a job well done, and then opened it.

It was difficult. Christian couldn't let himself get off balance and using his weight to swing the door was out of the question. Finally, he used his body as a wedge and slid through. That left another stretch of hallway, about four paces, and another door. Christian cursed the man who had designed it that way.

Christian managed that door in the same manner as the first, but he was panting now and getting dizzy. His body was protesting by sending him lightning jolts of pain. He wasn't sure that he could stand it much longer, but calling for Erin was now not an option.

The urinal was a welcome relief, both as a wall to lean against and a cessation of the pain in his bladder. He had almost waited too long, knowing that this simple act was going to be a trial.

Finished and clothing back in place, Christian turned and then fell face first onto the tile, his bad leg letting him know that it wasn't putting up with his pride and foolishness any longer. There was only one thing that Christian could do then and his face turned as red as fire as he did it. Christian Callinbrook, General, Prince, and one of the elite families, crawled across the restroom floor to the door.

Getting it open was a problem. Christian levered himself up and tried to get his fingers in the handle. His hand was shaking, but he leaned back in his sitting position and used his weight to open it. On the other side of that door was Erin Flynn, who was looking at Christian with a mixture of curiosity and concern.

Christian expected a lecture, a laugh, or a joke at his expense. Instead, Erin leaned down, put a hand under his arm, and helped into his waiting wheelchair propped halfway through the second door.

"Ready to go back to your office, sir?" Erin asked in a respectful tone.

"Yes, Agent Flynn," Christian replied, his mind in turmoil as he reevaluated his opinion of Erin. "If you please?"

The rest of the day was uneventful. Christian suspected Reba of cutting back on his

work load. By early afternoon, Christian had cleared his desk of all work and was left to contemplate, with embarrassment, his earlier foolishness. Why had it been so hard to accept Flynn's help? He wondered. The man would have helped him into the restroom and left him to accomplish his task there by himself. Christian had never considered his pride so great that he couldn't bend enough to accept some help. Where Erin was concerned though, Christian's pride was working overtime. There was something about the young man... Christian couldn't allow himself to look weak in front of him or... or what? A small voice said, 'unworthy' but Christian squelched that.

Christian felt suddenly tired. The pain was a constant presence and his injuries were not happy about him sitting in a chair for so long, however well-padded that leather chair was. As boredom took its toll, he found his eye lids drooping. He made one last effort to find some work to do, but succumbed to exhaustion in spite of it, unknowingly falling asleep with a stack of file folders as his pillow.

"Stop getting jealous." Erin's whispered voice roused Christian. How long he had been asleep, he wasn't sure, but his stiffened and aching body was protesting strenuously however long it had been.

"I'm not jealous," Marcus's voice replied. "I think that it would be wisest to allow him to continue sleeping, rather than wake him. The man obviously has over extended himself. If you wake him, it is almost certain that he will continue to work and make his health worse."

"He's going to get all kinked up like that," Erin protested. He chuckled. "Kinky Chris. I made a funny."

"I don't think that he would appreciate your humor," Marcus replied disapprovingly, but then, "It is funny though."

Erin made a mock gasp. "I didn't even have to explain it this time. You're improving your funny bone, Cree."

"Well, the humor in it is obvious," Marcus said.

"Ah!" Erin admonished. "What have I told you about analyzing humor? Funny should never be analyzed."

Marcus chuckled. It seemed an odd sound coming from a young man, who always appeared darkly sullen to Christian, but it didn't last long and Marcus soon became serious again. "The new team leader doesn't have the commander's experience. We will have to work out contingent plans in case he makes wrong decisions during our assignment."

Erin sighed, "Over time, you mean." Christian heard Erin make a sound as if he were stretching and cracking his back. "Lifting and pushing around this big guy is exercise enough. I don't look forward to piling on after hour mission simulations."

"You like him," Marcus whispered.

"If you're talking about the commander, what's it matter?" Erin huffed. "He's out of my league and he doesn't like me."

"Don't be stupid," Marcus growled.

There was a stretch of silence and then Christian heard them walking towards the door.

"Are you okay with that?" Erin asked at last.

"Yes," Marcus replied, but added grimly, "Unless he decides we can't be together."

Erin snorted. "If he did, it wouldn't happen, blue eyes. Friends for life. You promised and I promised."

"As long as you remember it... shorty," Marcus replied.

"Shorty?" Erin snorted again. "Keep trying."

"Hairy?"

"No."

"Pug face?"

"I do NOT have a pug face!"

"Says you!"

"Marcus... You're getting good at this."

"Good?"

"Yeah," Erin laughed. "Good. Keep working on it."

The door closed softly and Christian sat up. He had some new insight into Marcus and Erin and he wasn't sorry for his small subterfuge.

"Friends," Christian whispered. "Close friends. Inseparable friends... not lovers?"

There was hope stirring within him, but he refused to acknowledge it. What was it to him? Erin had been right. He, Christian, was out of the young man's class and he outranked him by a large degree. Not that he had been at all planning to... Christian shook his head sharply. There were still so many unanswered questions about those two and he hated mysteries. There was also the mention of his replacement not doing his job. Christian determined to look into that immediately. Two tasks, each of equal importance.

"Jennifer?" Christian called as he hit the intercom on his desk.

"Sir?" his secretary replied.

"Get me all the information on Marcus Cree and Erin Flynn that you can find and set up a meeting with Chief Medical Officer McLaren."

"But... sir," the woman said uncertainly.

"Yes?" Christian snapped impatiently.

"I thought you were going home early," the secretary replied. "Your health..."

"That is not your concern," Christian cut her off. "Follow my orders."

"Yes, sir!" the secretary replied nervously.

Christian sat back in his chair. It didn't matter how much he was incapacitated. He couldn't leave important work to incompetents or loose cannons. He needed to take over the mission again and he needed to know, once and for all, if the team of Marcus and Erin was fit for it.

Chapter Six

Speaking in Tongues

“Your name is...” Christian asked.

“Carl Randall, sir.”

“And... you were the arresting officer?”

“Yes, sir.” The big man fingered one arm and looked angry. He was dressed in civilian clothes and he wasn’t part of the Police force any longer.

“There was backup?”

“Yeah, but they didn’t come in time,” the man complained bitterly.

Christian sat back in his chair, fingers in a steeple and ice blue eyes almost hidden by his dark bangs. His computer was booted up with pertinent information and his desk was stacked with disks and files. He had a notepad as well, scribbled with brief notations. It had taken only a day to get interviews lined up. It seemed that there wasn’t a shortage of men willing to tell their story about stinger pilot Erin Flynn. That didn’t bode well.

“I would like a detailed account, if you please,” Christian ordered as he motioned for the man to sit in a chair in front of his wide desk.

“Is he in trouble?” the man asked with relish as he sat down. “If you need someone to testify against him, I’m your man.”

“It’s nothing like that,” Christian replied. “All Peacekeeper agents are required to have a thorough back ground check. It seems that many things were omitted because of this man’s age at the time and his reputation. I am rectifying that error in judgment.”

The man scowled. “Let me tell you, sir, he’s not the kind of guy that you want watching over citizens! He’s a freakin’ maniac and a killer through and through! If I had it to do all over again, I would have fired a bullet and put him down like a rabid animal.” He cradled his arm against him. “At least then I would still have my real arm and not this prosthetic.”

Christian sat up straight, ignoring his aching body and asked quickly, “He damaged your arm?”

The man nodded, jaw going tight. “He sliced it open with a knife. He cut through

nerves and tendons and then it became infected! They had to cut it off!”

Christian’s jaw went tight as well. “A detailed account, please,” he ordered again grimly.

The man scratched his head, eyes going hard as he remembered that day. “I got the call that there was a big fight; that some little kid was getting the crap beat out of him and I’d better hurry if I wanted to avoid calling for a body bag. I didn’t know it was soldiers until I showed up on the scene...” He paused, brows coming down as he rubbed at his ‘arm’ again. “It was a mess. That kid had taken down almost all of them and he was after the ones trying to get away. I got to him just as he was about to snap one guy’s neck. I held my gun on him and told him to freeze. He was covered in blood...” The man swallowed and he went pale. “The kid’s eyes were dead, flat, like a shark’s right before... but he was grinning too..... He let go of the guy and turned to me. The guy didn’t have the sense to run. He tried to punch the kid down, but the kid brought out a knife and sliced him wide open. When...When I tried to stop him, he cut at me too. Backup came then, but, it was too fucking late!”

The man cradled his arm bitterly. Christian realized that his own hands were clenched very tight. He relaxed them with an effort and asked, “Were you there when Flynn was questioned?”

The man shook his head. “They dragged me away while other officers brought him down. I was unconscious.”

Christian scribbled quick notes. “Thank you, Mr. Randall. I’m sorry you lost your job because of that incident.”

“Wasn’t that,” the man grumbled, but refused to elaborate. Christian made a note of that too.

“Jennifer,” Christian called and the secretary came into the office. “See Mr. Randall out and compensate him for his time. I would like to see Mr. Rene Lane next.”

“Rene?” Randall said with a grunt. “That’s good that you’re asking him about this. He’ll give you an ear full too. Are you only going to talk to him or some of the other officers as well?”

Christian replied, impatient to proceed, “It’s correct to have several witnesses to an incident interviewed and then to compare their statements.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.” The man scowled. “Watch out though. Some of the men felt sorry for that kid and took his side. Damn freakin’ idiots! If they were here, I’d spit on them!”

“Thank you. Mr. Randall,” Christian replied calmly and coolly. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Yes, sir,” Randall said respectfully and then left with the secretary.

Christian rubbed at his forehead and then reached for his pain pills and a carafe of water. The man had a bias, obviously, he thought, but what if the things he had described were true? If Erin had attacked arresting officers, that was far more serious than defending himself against attackers.

Christian brought his attention back from his dark thoughts as Rene Lane entered his office. Christian motioned him to sit down. The man looked wary. Tall and thin, he had a hatchet type face and small, anxious eyes. He looked as if he had done something very wrong and that he suspected that he had been found out.

“Everything is all right, Mr. Lane,” Christian assured him smoothly. “I’m investigating the back ground of one of our agents. I’ve been told that you were one of the arresting officers for Erin Flynn.”

The man nodded, more of a twitch than a real gesture. Christian’s reassurance wasn’t calming him down. “He was crazy. We did what we had to.” The man said that in a low, vicious tone.

“I wish to have a detailed account from when you arrived on the scene,” Christian told him as he scribbled a few notes.

“What are you writing?” the man barked suspiciously. “If this is about me and Jim Travers using clubs on that little, stinger pilot shit—!”

Christian felt a chill, but he didn’t allow his emotions to show on his face or in his voice as he considered strategies. He assured the man, “I called you here to listen to your side of the story. No one is being judged or prosecuted.”

“That’s good!” Lane snarled, “We were in our rights! After all he did during the war and what I saw left of those officers...”

“You can begin your account,” Christian told him simply, anxious to cut off the start of a list of grievances rather than the factual account he had wanted.

The man fidgeted and then said more calmly, “Well, me and my fellow officers arrived on scene and saw several men down, including another officer. We rushed the suspect and separated him from his victim. He refused to follow our orders. We treated him as a deadly weapon and incapacitated him by all means necessary.”

“How did he appear?” Christian asked. “Was he angry, afraid...?”

The man blinked and was quiet for a moment as he looked at a bad memory. “I could tell that he wanted a pound of flesh. He was vengeful, sir.”

“What happened after you took him into custody?”

“We wanted to...,” The man rethought what he had been about to say and said instead, “We were going to take him to headquarters, but the medics arrived and took him to the hospital. I heard he was canned in Muraka after that. If you ask me, they should have never let him out.”

Christian asked a few more questions and then let the man go. His notes were filling a page. He turned to a fresh sheet and asked his secretary to let in the next man.

The man who entered was dressed in a medic uniform. He was big and blonde and seemed overwhelmed to be in the presence of such a famous man. He was tongue tied and it took Christian a few moments of small talk before the man could answer any questions.

“You treated Erin Flynn after picking him up from the arresting officers?” Christian asked.

The man swallowed and looked green. “Yeah, what was left of him. His injuries were extensive.”

“Do you still remember what those injuries were?” Christian asked. “I realize it was some time ago—”

“I don’t think I’ll ever forget a sight like that, sir,” the man replied softly.

“Explain.”

The man swallowed again and he looked down at his clenched hands in his lap. “Well, the officers didn’t want to let him go. They had kicked and clubbed him, were still doing it when we arrived. The other medics fanned out to care for the other injured... and the dead... and me and my partner were on our own.” He looked up and his eyes were full of pain and disgust. “He was just a kid, sir. Just a skinny little kid. If he had killed some

of those bastards getting loose, I say they deserved it. They..." he paused and then he made motions with his hands as if replaying his own discovery of the damage. His fingers moved as if wiping at blood. "They carved up his back. It said something, I'm not sure what. Big letters all the way across. Burns, cuts, contusions, open wounds, broken bones. They tortured him, pure and simple."

Christian asked in a tight voice, not really wanting to know the answer. "Rape?"

"I checked on him later and read his medical report," the man admitted. "I just wanted to make sure he had made it through. It didn't list that, sir, but it listed about everything else. You can say they weren't such sick bastards, but... the rest..." The man rubbed at his face with his hands and then sat back in his chair with a heavy sigh. "Between those bastards that hurt him and the arresting officers, I'm not sure how he lived through it... or how he fought back hard enough to kill a few."

"I want a detailed list of his injuries," Christian replied. As the man rattled off a list of nightmarish proportions, Christian wondered at the accuracy of his recollection. Christian had seen Erin bare to the waist and had seen his back as well. His skin had seemed smooth, with only enough scarring to account for the rough life he had led as a stinger pilot and a terrorist. The things this man was detailing...

"How were they able to send him to the detention center if his injuries were that severe?" Christian finally asked.

The man scowled. "I wondered that myself. That's a rough place even with maximum security. Putting someone in there who can't defend himself... course, he probably spent the whole time in the med lab healing."

"I will have to inquire," Christian replied, "about his conditions there."

"He's a war hero to people living on the space stations," the medic told Christian. "I think the court took that into consideration when they let him out again. Those men he murdered... it was self-defense, plain and simple."

"That is what I've been able to discover so far," Christian replied. "He was exonerated and released. Most of the records of that incident were sealed, though. I only have personal accounts to fall back on."

The man stood, sensing the interview was over. He said, "Did you talk to Mr. Flynn about all of this?"

Christian was patient with the man's naiveté. "When investigating a case, it's wise to get the facts from eye witnesses. The subject of the case is most likely to tell a false account if he is facing censure or prosecution."

"But..." the man flushed and then said, "I heard he doesn't lie."

Christian blinked. "It seems that you know a great deal about Erin Flynn."

The man looked uncomfortable. "After I knew who he was, and I was following his progress, I got curious. I read up on him."

Christian replied as he shuffled his papers, "Then you know that he was a terrorist who murdered many people. I wouldn't attach altruistic traits to such a man."

The man scowled. He seemed to fight with something unpleasant and then it burst forth, "That's strange coming from a man who's probably killed, and ordered to be killed, a hell of a lot more men. If you're talking about blaming him for what happened in the war, then I don't see why you aren't on trial as well."

Christian gripped the edge of his desk hard and his gut went into a knot, his mind reeling. Always, when he least expected it, he was reminded of the horrific things required of him as a general during the war. "The people judged me a hero as well." He couldn't help the bitterness in his voice.

The medic said angrily, "Some people on the other side wouldn't agree with that, yet that doesn't matter. You're allowed to live your life as if the war never happened. Maybe this kid should get the same treatment? If you're looking for information from that will get him in trouble, you aren't getting it from me. I saw what I saw. They tortured him, pure and simple, and he fought back and saved himself. Afterward, our good Police force beat the crap out of him and attempted to do more before I rescued him. Again, he defended himself. When I had him in the transport vehicle on the way to the hospital, he woke up. He didn't lay a finger on me while I worked on him. In fact, he grinned and said, 'Sorry 'bout the mess. Your cleaning lady is going to want a raise.' What the fuck, right? He's dying while I'm trying to hook him up to machines to save his life and he cracks a joke about the blood he got all over my vehicle."

The man looked distant as he remembered the episode. He came back to himself and went pale, suddenly realizing he had said incriminating, strong words to a powerful man. What was it about Flynn, Christian wondered, that caused men to give him their loyalty

so quickly? He recalled the field test and how his men had given Erin the lead position and followed him gladly. Knowing his own reaction to the man, Christian knew the feelings they had experienced. Flynn was a strong personality, but his easy going, joking mannerism were tempered by an underlying confidence that let people know he knew exactly what he was doing. It was that, Christian thought, that had bothered him the most. That such insubordination was combined with such skill and it worked when every book said it shouldn't. That book said such men should be corrected or expelled from operations.

"Sir?" the man prompted and he sounded uncertain.

Christian came back to himself. "There's nothing wrong with speaking plainly. I will take everything you've said under consideration. Thank you for your time."

"Uh, yes, sir, you're welcome sir." The medic didn't wait for the secretary. He let himself out with the anxiousness of a man escaping a tiger's den.

Christian looked over his notes, entered some into his computer, and then sat back in his chair and sighed. Of all the people he had interviewed, the medic had seemed the most honest and the least likely to falsify his account for his own reasons.

Christian dug into his pocket and took out Erin's picture. He felt a wave of disgust at himself for having made a copy of the original. Why? Why did he keep looking at it? Those lost eyes, that tight mouth, and his sideways gaze that looked as if he was begging for something... help? Knowing what he did now, Christian could now see the reason why Erin's skin had seemed so pale and his face distorted oddly. Someone had touched up the photo to hide the extent of his injuries. The why was obvious. They had put a severely injured man into detention, out of fear for his abilities and uncertain state of mind, Christian was certain, but it didn't excuse the fact that it had been criminal to do so.

"Sir?" Erin Flynn leaned into the office, one hand balancing him on the door knob. Christian turned the photo face down hastily.

"What is it?" Christian asked and couldn't help looking at Erin, trying to see scars, some outward mark that he had suffered the injuries the medic had claimed. There was nothing though, just smooth skin and a bright expression that seemed unclouded by such a terrible past.

“I wondered if you needed me for anything,” Erin replied. “You haven’t called in a while.”

Christian covered the photo with his hand. It was strangely warm against his palm. “Yes, I do need you,” Christian replied, and felt something deep inside echo that sentence and give it an even more personal meaning. He stifled it and growled, “I have a meeting to go to, but I need to eat first. Take me to the commissary.”

“All right!” Erin grinned. “I haven’t eaten either. I didn’t want to take off and eat in case you needed me and Marcus was too busy to drop something off.”

Christian blinked and felt a chill. “You’ve been waiting for me to call?”

Erin laughed. “Yeah, right out there.” He pointed outside the office. “I didn’t have anything scheduled today, so I decided to wait on your beck and call. Interesting guests you had today.”

Christian saw the glint in Erin’s green eyes, letting him know the man wasn’t amused at all. Christian tried to regroup, too many questions firing in his brain. He started with the most obvious. “Did they see you?”

“No,” Erin replied. “I was in the secretary’s room, sitting in a chair and watching the soap operas on the laptop she keeps back there for her breaks. Did you know Frances didn’t really have Kile’s baby? It was his evil twin’s!” He scowled and then said, “The secretary came in to get something and told me she didn’t like any of those visitors you had scheduled. Being the good agent that I am, and having nothing better to do, I did back ground checks on all of them using the room’s video recognition program.” He shrugged and looked bitter and puzzled. “It seems I know all of those guys, even though I don’t remember any of them.”

“I needed to know about that incident with the U.W.F. soldiers,” Christian replied defensively. The photo under his hand burned. “It is my opinion that an error in judgment was made by not investigating that incident thoroughly when you joined the Peacekeepers.”

“I was under age,” Erin told him. He had stepped into the room while they talked and now he was facing Christian across his wide desk. “That incident was sealed. I gave Reba permission to look into it so I would have a clean file when I joined. I’m kind of pissed that she included any of that stuff. That’s not what she promised me.”

Christian found his shield and he took it. “Reba gave me permission to investigate your files to judge your fitness as a Peacekeeper. I had serious doubts.” His shield turned into a sword and he suddenly had a weapon to put between himself and the inappropriate feelings he was having for a subordinate. “I still have doubts, Agent Flynn.”

“That my defending myself against those bastards was self-defense?” Erin wondered and he grinned. His eyes gave that grin a demonic quality. His eyes were a window straight to his true feelings if anyone cared to look, Christian thought with a chill. At that moment, Erin was seething and ... hurt. There was pain there, a pain that made Christian’s sword of words dissolve into nothingness. He ached for that hurt and felt wrong for having cut the man and caused it.

“The court sided with me,’ Erin continued, “The court even prosecuted some of the people in that incident on my behalf.”

Christian hadn’t known that. He hadn’t been able to get that much of the court filings. “I needed as many facts as I could gather to prove that you weren’t at fault in that incident.”

“Proof?” Erin suddenly stepped forward. “Listening to those guys won’t give you that kind of proof. Do you want to see the proof that I showed the court, the proof that convinced them to let me out of that hell hole detention center?”

Christian looked at Erin’s smiling face, the pained, angry eyes, and nodded cautiously, suddenly unable to speak. When Erin came closer, Christian briefly felt in danger, but then Erin was turning his back and pulling his uniform shirt up to his shoulders.

“You have to feel with your fingers,” Erin explained. “I had surgery done to cover up the worst of the scars. Peacekeeper insurance is good.”

Christian cautiously reached out and touched Erin’s smooth seeming skin. It was like an electric shock, touching the man. Christian felt himself tremble and go hot from the top of his head down to his toes. He felt sixteen years old suddenly and fumbling through his first time, trying not to embarrass himself; trying to figure out what was right to do. It was an uncomfortable feeling, but Christian couldn’t stop feeling it... until his fingers encountered a roughness that his eyes could barely see. Then his insides turned cold and he felt a wave of nausea as he traced the roughness that ran all the way across Erin’ upper

shoulder down to his tail bone. The letters must have been cut deep, must have looked horrific when they were fresh, and must have scarred terribly and remained permanently for anyone to see. They spelled out 'U.W.F.'s Bitch'.

When Christian lifted his fingers from Erin's skin, as if he had been burned, Erin dropped his shirt and stepped away as he tucked it back into his pants. "Can't get any better proof than that," he said, and added, as if he had been forced to say it many times. "I wasn't by the way. They didn't do THAT at least." Erin paused for a long moment and then turned, one red eyebrow arched. "Do you get it now? You should. People hate us. People want to hurt us. They're always waiting for a chance, waiting for you to drop your guard. I was stupid that day. I was moping around, hating how Marcus wasn't with me and feeling like half a person and not paying attention. They jumped me, dragged me off, and decided that a slow, painful death was the order of the day for Erin Flynn. They got theirs, sir, and I'm not sorry about it. I don't know if I blame you for looking into it, but I really don't like it. You push me much more and I'll take Marcus and find a nice SWAT team somewhere who isn't so particular about my pedigree."

Christian had a great deal to say, all of it profuse, unprofessional apologies. He could feel that deep, emotional, needy part of him uncoiling and wanting.... he knew what it wanted. He controlled it with an iron will and he said, almost coldly, "I think that I have all the information I need. Once I compile it, I'm certain everything will be to my satisfaction." He bent just a little, letting a small part of his true feelings out of the box to add, "I'm sorry if my investigation has caused you any discomfort."

Erin blinked. "Discomfort?" He grunted sourly, ran a hand through his unruly bangs, and then shoved both hands into his pockets. He rocked slightly from heel to toe. "You need to broaden your vocabulary, sir. Discomfort really doesn't describe it." He cocked his head and gave Christian an appraising look. "Well, if you are done causing me 'discomfort' for the day, should I go ahead and take you to the commissary?"

Christian felt the tension and it made all of his soldier's instincts prickle and warn him. "I can have my secretary bring something here..." he began, but Erin was already taking hold of the back of his wheel chair and pulling him away from his desk.

Erin's voice was cheerful again as he said, "It's my job, sir. Let me do it."

Christian heard another meaning in his words, a plea, maybe. "All right," he said

against his better judgment. “Do your job, but I will be observing you closely.”

“That’s YOUR job, isn’t it?” Erin chuckled and it sounded genuine. Christian didn’t hear any anger in his voice. It was as if Erin had mentally erased the past few minutes. He seemed happy and ready to please as he wheeled Christian to the commissary.

As Erin joked and called out to the people he knew in the hallways, Christian began to wonder at the man’s sanity. It didn’t seem possible to forget such a troubling episode so quickly and thoroughly. It opened up an entirely new line of questioning in Christian’s mind, one that had nothing to do with Erin’s competence or his innocence in a long ago murder case, but everything to do with his mental fitness.

“I can hear wheels turning,” Erin suddenly said in Christian’s ear.

Christian started and looked up at him. Erin was smiling almost gently.

“Sorry I confuse you so much,” Erin said in all earnestness, “When you have me completely figured out, I’d like to see your report, okay?”

Christian suddenly laughed. It was a half strangled eruption, that he quickly stifled, mortified. Erin patted his shoulder as they entered the commissary, as if in sympathy for Christian’s corrupted control.

Chapter Seven

Conversations with Death

Christian had progressed to a cane. Leaving the wheelchair behind had been utter relief. His pride had taken a fall while he had been forced to sit and be pushed around by Erin and whoever else could spare the time. When he had progressed to wheeling himself, it had been awkward because of his still aching arm and shoulder. He had forced himself to do it though, just as he was forcing himself to use the cane and ignore the sharp pains that told him that he was doing things too soon.

It was good to walk out into the sunlight of a courtyard though, to take a deep breath, to feel the sunlight on his face, and to know that he had managed to get there on his own. It was a thrill of accomplishment that Christian allowed himself to bask in, a small salve to his weeks of humiliation.

There was a repetitive, low, creaking noise. Christian blinked and looked around, his dark hair fluttering in a light breeze. His ice blue eyes looked this way and that, searching out the courtyard with a soldier's tense nervousness. In a far corner, almost obscured by bushes and small trees, Christian could see a small children's play set. It was for the day care, he remembered, the one Reba had set up for the Peacekeeper women as soon as she had taken command. Christian hadn't approved. Children and armed agents, going on, and preparing for, dangerous missions, didn't mix in his mind.

Curious, Christian limped heavily down the walkway that wound from the courtyard, across a small strip of green grass, and to a set of swings and an elaborate jungle gym. A door led to the day care and Christian could see children through a window listening intently while they were read to by an adult. None of those children were on the playground, though. The person on the swing, making the small creaking noise as he swung back and forth gently, was Erin Flynn.

Erin was short enough to manage it. His feet cleared the ground and his braided red hair flew behind him as he swung. His expression was relaxed, and it was obvious he was enjoying himself. Christian wasn't fool enough to think that his approach had gone unnoticed. Erin confirmed it by saying, "Nice day, isn't it, sir? Is there something you

needed?" Erin looked sideways at Christian and he didn't stop swinging. "My cell phone didn't ring, if you tried to call me."

"Flynn..." Christian began, not sure what he was going to say, but knowing that he felt strong disapproval.

Erin sighed and smiled. "I know, looks kind of crazy, doesn't it? I didn't get to do things like this when I was young though. When I come out here to eat my lunch, I feel like I just have to swing. It's nice, simple, and relaxing, too."

"It's ridiculous and childish!" Christian growled.

Erin shrugged. "I guess... doesn't matter though. Haven't you ever done something ridiculous and childish just because it made you feel good? Sometimes, you just have to forget what other people think."

That struck too close to home, too close to the humiliation Christian had felt, imagining that everyone was judging him as weak. "I read your file. You were a street child on Lorelei space station."

Erin nodded, sobering. "You know it's a poor station full of crime. All I had time to do back then was to figure out where my next meal was coming from and how to not get killed."

"You were eventually placed in an orphanage," Christian pointed out.

Erin's face went very pale and his jaw tightened. His eyes suddenly had such an intense 'elsewhere' look that Christian felt a chill creep down his spine. "I don't want to talk about that. Let's just say I don't have fond memories about being there," Erin growled. His hands worked on the chains supporting the swing, something gnawing at him deep inside, and then he abruptly changed moods and smiled. "You're bringing me down, sir. I came out here to relax. Your second in command had us running mission drills all morning."

Christian frowned, not saying anything for a long minute as he considered the agent intently. Erin had switched tracks like the flicking of a light switch. Christian had seen that type of behavior before, in men who were suffering from PTSD; traumatized men who were covering up intense mental pain and suffering.

Erin cocked his head at the seat beside him. "Why don't you sit down? There isn't anywhere else and you look shaky."

Christian was tall. He knew he would look ridiculous sitting on a child's swing, but Erin was right, he was shaky. He had over extended himself. He glanced at the window and the children sitting there. They had their backs turned. They wouldn't see him looking foolish. Was it worth it, doing such a simple thing, if he could continue to talk to Erin and hopefully get some answers out of him?

Erin raised a red eyebrow. He was such a handsome man and his smile could charm a man eating tiger, Christian thought, and then clamped down hard on those stray thoughts. As he sat down on the empty swing, Christian felt some satisfaction, albeit small, when Erin looked very surprised. Christian balanced awkwardly, his cane tangling with his legs. Erin automatically reached out and steadied Christian's swing with a hand on one of the chain supports. "I want to talk to you," Christian explained roughly, "and I don't want to fall down while I'm doing it." It was an admission of weakness that he hadn't wanted to make, but it was for a purpose and Christian was willing to make that sacrifice.

He was taken aback, though, when Erin said, standing up, his one hand still on the chain, "If you feel shaky enough to do something like this, sir, then I need to help you back to your office. We can talk there. Come on, you can lean on me." He reached out his free hand to help Christian up. After a second's hesitation, Christian took it.

Once again, Erin was showing a side of his joker, easy going and irreverent personality that Christian was finding hard to believe in. Once again, Erin was choosing not to embarrass or take advantage of Christian when he was at his weakest. Christian held that hand, but didn't make any attempt to get up. He stared into Erin's eyes and suddenly felt as if he were drowning and that he was perfectly willing to do so.

Erin's hand was soft, but there were callouses on his fingertips. It was warm and almost comforting the way it curled around Christian's hand. Christian looked down at their two clasped hands and he suddenly felt his throat tighten.

"Tell the truth," Erin whispered.

Christian clenched in every muscle. He was used to being in complete control of himself, this burning uncertainty, this confusion, as if he were some shy girl, was almost more than he could stand. "It's... It's not right," Christian managed to reply in a small voice. "You know that."

“I guess not,” Erin said as he let loose of Christian’s hand and settled on the swing next to him once more. “I’m younger than you. I’m not in the same class. I’m your subordinate in just about everything...” He paused and then added, “In everything, but skill, that is.”

Christian bristled and his jaw worked as he turned his head and glared at Erin. “Do you think so, Agent Flynn? That has yet to be proven to my satisfaction. Your past—”

Erin looked pained. He stared off into the distance. “See? Already you’re throwing my past in my face. It’s not going to work.”

“What are you talking about?” Christian demanded hotly.

Erin blinked and then said, “You’ve been combing through my past. What do you expect to find? I was left on the streets of Lorelei. I was a thief. I was recruited into the war and trained to be a terrorist and a stinger pilot. I killed a lot of people, your people, during the war. I killed men after the war. I was sent to a detention center for it. I joined the Peacekeepers. I’m making a serious attempt to do my best to help people and to uphold the law. That’s me, that’s Erin Flynn. That’s any number of reasons to treat me like a third rail and I really won’t blame you for it.” Erin looked at Christian steadily. “Just be honest. Tell the truth. Can’t I have that in exchange for you dredging up the ugly past? Stop pretending that you’re doing it because of your mission.”

Christian’s face went hard. “What other reason would there be?”

Erin frowned impatiently, “I’m not stupid, you know, and I didn’t live this long by not keeping my eyes open.”

Christian felt his gut go into a knot. “It isn’t right,” he repeated, almost under his breath.

Erin’s hand reached out. He took hold of the chain supporting Christian’s swing and he carefully pulled the man closer to him. Christian felt an unreasoning fear at the intense look on Erin’s face. It was a ridiculous reaction. Erin wasn’t a danger to him... or maybe he was, Christian thought in a panic as the smell of some light aftershave and sandalwood came to his nose. It was coming from Erin and it immediately excited Christian despite his confusion and trepidation.

“Sometimes, you have to do it anyway and not care what other people think,” Erin said, his breath warm and sweet against the skin of Christian’s cheek. “Sometimes, the

rule book needs to get thrown out the window.”

Christian’s military training bristled at that and protested inside him, but his heart jumped at the possibility, at the idea that perhaps he could shrug off the chains of rules and duty and... “You won’t get very far in the Peacekeepers if you don’t follow the rules,” Christian replied in a clipped tone.

“Some things are worth giving up for the right reasons,” was Erin’s reply and Christian felt the flick of a tongue against his earlobe.

Christian jerked away, shocked, and felt the world gel into a pandemonium of opposing reactions. His body came alive with need, and a flash of heat that made him tremble, and his mind clambered as it tried to sort out what had just happened and form an appropriate response. Unfortunately, his mind reminded him of the fact that Erin had claimed to be with someone before he had come to rescue Christian after his fall. Erin’s bold move, and those reminders, equaled something nasty in Christian’s mind and he responded with words that sounded prim, prudish, and condescending in his own ears, “Maybe that kind of behavior usually gets you what you want, Flynn, but it doesn’t get you anywhere with me.” His heart and body cursed him.

That could have meant so many things on so many levels. However Erin took it, it was clear that he was angry. His face flushed and his lips went into a tight, thin line. He let go of Christian’s swing, stood up, and reached a hand for Christian, saying coldly, “If you would like to return to your office, sir?”

Christian felt like a hypocrite. They were both men with the need of men. Christian wasn’t a virgin. He had experienced a number of casual, sexual encounters without the slightest qualm afterwards. He couldn’t hide from the fact that he found Erin very sexually attractive, either, and that his mind had already imagined a number of enticing scenarios involving removing all of their clothes. It was normal. Not something he could be consciously controlled. Why suggest that Erin was wrong for expressing his sexuality, too, and his interest? Was it because of his upbringing? Did his advances equal crude and mercenary because he had come from the dregs of the streets on Lorelei?

Erin said in the long silence, like a stone dropping into a quiet Pond, “I don’t lie.”

Christian blinked at him, not understanding for a moment, and then realization dawned. He had accused Erin of playing a game, of trying to seduce him, of maybe even

trying to get Christian's favor in the old fashioned way. All of it amounted to lying and Erin did not lie.

Maybe Erin didn't lie, Christian thought bitterly, but he, Christian certainly did. To deny his attraction for Erin, to try to find something about the man bad enough to drown out that attraction, he had searched through the man's records relentlessly, causing pain and humiliation to Erin. Christian had capped that by accusing Erin of being an opportunist as well.

"I should be put on report," Christian muttered, suddenly hating himself for the weakness he saw within him; a weakness that had caused him to do so many unprofessional things and to abuse a subordinate.

Erin didn't argue against that, instead he said, "Men made the rule book, sir, and men make a lot of mistakes. Sometimes, following your emotions is a lot more accurate than rule number three thousand ten, section nine, subsection zeta."

Christian stared and then he asked softly, "What rule is that?"

Erin's face suddenly eased and he chuckled, "I'm glad that you don't know either."

Christian shocked himself when he cracked a smile. He hid it behind one hand, until he could school his face to sternness again, and then he levered himself off of the swing with Erin's help. With one little joke, Erin had erased the entire terrible mood of the moment. Christian felt tension ease, even though the problem of his gross insubordination and his attraction to Erin was still prominent. That was a gift, Christian realized, to take a volatile situation and to calm both parties with a few well-chosen words. Erin's joking nature was also a trait that the rule books claimed was completely undesirable. 'Men made the rule book' Christian thought to himself, echoing Erin's words, and men weren't infallible, yet... He struggled.

"You don't really need me any more sir," Erin said as he released Christian's arm. "I think it would be best if I asked McLaren to return me to normal duties." As Christian tried to switch gears to think about that, Erin added, "If you need me again, you can just let me know."

They were able to say so many things to each other without saying anything at all. Christian hated it. He longed to say what was on his mind, what he was feeling, and why he was fighting so hard against acknowledging his attraction. Erin would understand, he

felt, and not judge him like he, Christian, was judging himself. The words remained locked behind his lips though, sealed by his need not to look weak, to be ‘the commander’, to appear in control, and his reluctance to break the rules that he was already beginning to question.

“I think your request would be premature,” Christian replied at last and Erin looked at him quizzically. “I do still require your presence.”

Erin arched a cinnamon eyebrow that expressed both rebellion and amusement. “You do, sir?”

“Is that disagreeable with you, Agent Flynn?” Christian wondered and couldn’t keep the prickly sharpness from his tone.

Erin studied him minutely for a moment and then smiled as he put a supporting hand under Christian’s elbow. “No, not at all.”

Christian looked down at the top of the young man’s head thoughtfully as he limped back to his office. It would have been easy to dismiss Erin as too young for interest of any kind, just because he was so much slighter and shorter than Christian, but Christian knew that there wasn’t much of a difference between their ages and that it would have been a serious mistake to consider Erin a child. Erin was twenty and older than his years. Deep down, Christian admitted that Erin often made him feel less experienced. Christian had born his share of tragedies, and a man didn’t come out of a war and a rebellion alive by being a fool or naive, but there was a great deal of inner knowledge that Erin seemed to possess, a treasure trove of intuition that always left Christian floundering to catch up with his leaps of understanding. When it wasn’t infuriating him or making him feel embarrassed or inadequate, Christian could appreciate it.

Could he dare it? Christian looked at the possibility honestly. Erin had not just hinted at his interest, but had given Christian permission to express his own. Christian ran with that scenario, trying to imagine the two of them being other than commander and Peacekeeper agent and all that would entail. It wasn’t hard to imagine sex. Christian felt himself flush uncomfortably hot as he pictured his hands running over that wiry body. No, that wasn’t a problem. Imaging a relationship afterwards was more difficult. He tried to think of what it would be like to wake up next to that handsome face every morning, eat breakfast with that joking bundle of energy, separate and go to their work, meet at the

end of the day and enjoy the evening after dinner. Those images wouldn't come to him and Christian knew why. Erin, for all that he professed that there was nothing else to know about him, still seemed a mystery to Christian. He didn't know the man except for what he had gleaned on the surface and there was still the problem of—

“Erin,” Marcus said simply as he came from a side corridor. The dark, intense young man looked as if had been working hard. His hair was more mussed than usual and a sheen of sweat was on his skin. “Did you eat?” It didn't sound so much like an invitation as a man checking up on an irresponsible child.

Erin replied with a chuckle, “Yes, I did, Agent Mother Hen.”

“Good,” Marcus replied, unruffled by the mocking nickname. His eyes flicked appraisingly to Christian. Christian expected a challenge in those dark blue eyes, instead, he found pleasure. “Sir,” Marcus said with a small nod.

“Agent Cree,” Christian acknowledged. This was another aspect of Erin he would have to resolve as well, Christian thought. Erin had said that there wasn't Erin Flynn without Marcus Cree and Christian still wasn't sure what that meant.

Erin brightened as if he had sensed Marcus's silent approval and was glad. “You clean up and I'll meet you in C-4, Marcus,” he said. “We still have those climbing maps to go over.”

“Twenty minutes,” Marcus agreed as he looked at his wrist watch. “Mark,” he said, noting the time.

Erin snorted. “I have to help the commander back to his office and then I'll join you.... around about twenty minutes, not exactly twenty minutes, bone head!”

Marcus frowned and then smiled. “All right,” he said, and was clearly making an effort to discard his need to be precise about the time.

As Erin proceeded to help Christian back to his office, Christian, forgetting his personal problems for the moment, couldn't help asking, “Climbing maps?”

Erin blinked and then shrugged. “There are some high peaks near our target. Marcus and I thought we might get in more stealthily if we went up them and over to the installation. We have detailed climbing maps to help us.”

“Who authorized that?” Christian demanded, suddenly furious. He turned to Erin, almost tripping on his lame leg. Erin gripped his arm hard and his other arm came around

Christian's waist to steady him.

"It hasn't been approved yet," Erin replied. "It's still just a proposal."

Christian found his feet again, but Erin didn't let go of him. They stood like that, Erin looking up at Christian in concern and holding him in a tight embrace. "You will make your proposal to me with all the supporting documentation!" Christian growled in Erin's face. "I may be injured, but I am still in command of this operation!"

"Yes, sir," Erin replied dutifully.

The joker was gone and Erin looked very serious. Christian was caught within those green eyes of Erin's once again. They stood like that for a long moment, silent, Christian struggling to make his mind work past a sudden, violent need to take hold of Erin's chin and kiss those tender looking lips deeply. Erin sensed it, maybe, and there was a spark of excitement and recognition in his face.

Christian wrenched himself away with a tremendous, mental effort. He almost stumbled again as he left Erin's embrace, but he recovered quickly and straightened, one hand on Erin's shoulder and the other balancing his off side with his cane. "I have work," he managed to say thickly. "Get me to my office and then go make up that proposal."

Erin's face went closed and he nodded. He helped Christian into his office and helped him to sit down. As he was turning to leave, he stopped suddenly and said without turning, "This isn't the war, you know, we're allowed to be human again."

Christian felt the sting of that as Erin walked away from him and closed the door softly behind him.

Chapter Eight

I Will Protect Thee

“This isn’t research for a case against the detention center, is it?” the voice of the doctor demanded suspiciously.

Christian was half turned away from the vid phone, tapping a pen on a pad of paper on his desk. He had already scribbled several notes and he already wasn’t pleased by the answers he was getting. “No, it’s a back ground check on an agent, nothing more. You will not be prosecuted for telling me the truth.”

“I’m recording this,” the doctor warned.

“Prudent,” Christian replied. The balding doctor had a dark, cruel looking face, not something Christian would have liked to see at his bedside if he had been ill. The doctor had been the resident physician, though, at Erin’s internment, and it was Erin who would have had to suffer this man. “When Erin Flynn was brought to you,” Christian continued, “can you remember what his condition was?”

“Hell yeah,” the doctor replied. He was bringing up information on a computer where he was, but he was already nodding and scowling as if he didn’t need it to know the answers to Christian’s questions. “Little bastard, stinger pilot! When a celebrity gets dumped into your hands, you remember it.” He traced a line of information with a thick finger. “Broken bones, deep wounds, major contusions, a cracked skull, detached cornea, severe blood loss...” The man winced. “He had damage to the genitals and—”

Christian sat up, looking at the man’s image. “Rape?” he demanded with dread.

The man shook his head. “No, they just kicked him hard.”

Erin had said no, that he hadn’t been raped, Christian remembered, and Erin claimed never to lie. It was hard to remember or believe in that assertion though and it was good to have it confirmed.

“Some burns, second degree,” the man ended. “They burned him with cigarettes.”

Christian ran a hand over his face, trying to banish the images the man had called up and remain professional. “He was conscious when he arrived?”

“Barely,” the doctor replied. “After his arrest, orders went through and they transferred him to us. We kept him in the infirmary.”

“How long was he in the infirmary?” Christian wondered.

“One week,” the doctor replied with an edge to his voice.

Christian blinked, thinking that he had heard wrong. “Say that again?”

“It was the warden’s decision!” the doctor exploded defensively, “and if you ask me, it was the right one!”

Christian asked simply, “Why?”

“There were mostly U.W.F. soldiers in the detention center,” the doctor replied.

“They kept trying to get to that little shit to hurt him, even kill him. The first day, he was on oxygen and drips. I found an orderly crimping his tubes. Putting him in lock up was the only answer. Besides, once that friend of his showed up, we all felt like we were in danger.”

“Marcus Cree,” Christian guessed.

The doctor nodded. “He just appeared one day and nothing we said or did would make him leave. He just... stared... He never said anything. We called security, we called the military, we called everyone we could think of. They did everything short of tossing a bomb at him. Every time I thought he was gone for good, he would show up again, still staring, still not saying anything. We didn’t relax until he was locked up in a cell along with the little bastard.”

“You keep using degrading language when speaking about Erin Flynn,” Christian pointed out as he scribbled notes. “Why?”

The doctor shot back angrily, “Because, every time he became lucid, he tried to cut, gut, punch, or kick someone. I had to keep him drugged and secured. Once Cree showed up though, he calmed right down and let us do our work. It didn’t make me or the other doctors feel better about the situation though. I kept wondering if that Cree would break my neck if I didn’t do my job right.”

“Why would you have to be afraid if you were doing it right?” Christian wondered.

The doctor took offense, snarling, “Some people don’t realize that you are doing your job correctly, sir, especially when a procedure makes their friend scream!”

Christian tensed. “Did Cree ever attack anyone?”

The doctor calmed himself and shrugged. “Some of the general population, but that’s to be expected. It was self-defense each time. As for the staff... he was intimidating enough where no one dared to mess with the injured pilot, but... a few people came up missing and we haven’t been able to locate them so far. They were all members of U.W.F. during the war. I can’t say Cree had a hand in it, but...”

“I didn’t call you for baseless accusations,” Christian replied, cutting him off. “Once Flynn and Cree were put in a secure cell, did anything transpire that was out of the ordinary?”

The doctor grunted. “The whole situation was out of the ordinary. The warden wouldn’t treat them as general population from the get go. Flynn’s hair was ordered cut short as per the rules, but Cree wouldn’t allow it. The warden not only didn’t enforce the rules, but he made sure Cree and Flynn had whatever they requested. He told one of my orderlies that he was convinced that Flynn would be released quickly and angering a stinger pilot was as good as a death sentence for any man.”

“How was Flynn’s medical care carried out in his cell?” Christian asked.

The doctor rubbed at his chin. “Well, it wasn’t. I couldn’t convince any of my staff to go into a cell with two stinger pilots, especially when the warden had made it clear that he wasn’t interested in controlling them. I wouldn’t go in myself. I just made sure the supplies were delivered and that Cree knew how to use and administer them. Like I said before, I just wasn’t sure that my neck wouldn’t get broken if he decided that I was doing something wrong.”

The doctor suddenly looked amazed and even a bit awed as he finished, “That little, long haired shit pulled through, though, as hard to believe as that is, and your Chief Medical Officer McLaren was waiting at the gate with the cream of the medical profession and an offer to join Peacekeepers when he was released.”

“Thank you. I appreciate your candor and your time,” Christian said smoothly and turned off the vid feed before the man could reply. Pulling his pad of scribbles closer, Christian glared at them. Someone was going to pay for such heinous acts, Christian thought, and he was the man to see to it. The burn of anger and righteousness filled him completely. He needed to meet with officials right away and submit his findings.

Christian paged his secretary and ordered her to call Erin. When the door to his

office opened, though, instead of Erin, Marcus Cree was standing in the doorway.

Christian scowled impatiently. "I didn't call for you."

Marcus looked very stern and professional in his Peacekeeper uniform. His dark gaze was serious and Christian could see that he knew that Christian was not going to be pleased by what he had to say.

"Erin wasn't feeling well. I hope that you will allow me to stand in his place and assist you," Marcus said.

Christian didn't speak as he considered the man before him. He could sense things under the surface and his soldier's instincts prickled. He asked, sharper and more concerned than he wanted, "He's ill? What happened?"

Marcus grimaced. "It might sound insignificant, but he has a headache. They can be debilitating for him."

"A migraine, you mean?" Christian replied, feeling relieved, but then irritated. "I hope that he doesn't get them often or that they sideline him during an operation."

Marcus looked as if he was biting back a sharp response, but then he said calmly, "No, they don't happen often, and I've never known them to compromise any mission. He has a high threshold for pain. When it isn't a significant task though, it isn't necessary to suffer in order to accomplish it when someone else can easily stand in his place."

Christian examined his irritation and, yes, anger, and it made him uncomfortable to realize that he was being unreasonable in his reaction. Agent Flynn was ill. Marcus Cree had come in his place. Aside from a brief question as to the reason why, it shouldn't have been a concern or a problem. Christian knew what the fact of the matter was though. He was disappointed that Erin hadn't come. He had wanted to see the young man that badly, had wanted Erin to see what actions he was taking on his behalf.

"I need to go to the Government Administration building," Christian said as he put all of his papers and disks into a briefcase, picked up his cane, and stood up. "You'll drive me there."

"Yes, sir," Marcus said simply and, when Christian hobbled to the door, he fell into step behind him, tense and ready to offer his hand if Christian needed his help.

People looked at them as they passed them in the hall. Christian didn't blame them. He and Marcus were notorious and people still recalled that they had been great rivals

during the war and the uprising. No one expected them to forget or forgive and that was part of Christian's nervousness. He hadn't spoken a dozen words with Marcus since joining the Peacekeepers. A man couldn't gauge someone's mood towards him from so little contact. For all he knew, Marcus still held a grudge against him. Christian frowned, feeling that familiar stab of deep guilt. Who could blame him if he did, or anyone else? Christian had ordered the deaths of many people. Christian had many enemies and Marcus might still be one of them. Still, Christian thought about that approving look that Marcus had given him earlier and Christian had to admit that he didn't understand it in light of their past.

Marcus called ahead on his cell phone for a car and it was waiting for them at the curb when they left the building. Marcus held the door respectfully while Christian managed to get into the back seat without too much awkwardness.

"Dismiss the driver," Christian ordered. "You will drive."

Marcus didn't question the order, but he did raise a dark eyebrow at Christian's trust in him. Christian was just as surprised at himself, but there were some questions that he wanted to ask Marcus and that required privacy.

As they drove, a light rain started falling. Marcus turned on the wipers and they made a gentle, rhythmic noise as Christian searched for a way to begin. The sullen looking young man was like a wall and it was hard to know what lay beyond it.

"I need to ask you some questions," Christian said at last, trying to keep his tone as neutral and as professional as possible. "I am going to the administration building to file papers implicating the detention center where Erin was interred, certain persons in the medical professional, and, perhaps some officials in decision making positions who dealt in a criminal manner in the incident involving Erin Flynn and several ex U.W.F. soldiers."

"You are under the false impression that papers were not already filed on his behalf," Marcus replied stiffly. "The incident was reviewed and all parties were acquitted."

Christian was stunned. "How can that be?"

Marcus's face darkened. "There was a rush to sweep all things military, and all incidences involving soldiers, out of the public notice. We were supposed to be entering a time of peace. Reporting that there were problems and incidences of violence and unrest

was counter-productive to the propaganda being established. Troublemakers were automatically whisked to detention centers for permanent incarceration, or retraining, and no records were made of those arrests. If there are any official government files left on the internment of Erin Flynn, they state simply that he was held for humanitarian, medical, and psychological assistance following an ‘accident’.”

“There was a trial,” Christian pointed out.

“With closed records, yes,” Marcus replied. “Any information on file since then was released personally by Erin and men not friendly to him. There wouldn’t even have been a trial if it hadn’t been for the efforts of Chief Medical officer McLaren. Without his assistance, Erin would probably still be in the detention center.”

Christian stared down at his briefcase and smoothed a hand over it. “I have witnesses—”

“Who will all change their story once they realize that you are filing reports and making accusations,” Marcus told him.

Christian’s hand gripped his briefcase hard. “Of course,” Christian replied and then added softly to himself, “I’m shocked at my idealism.”

Marcus heard him and he nodded, agreeing, “It is surprising.”

Christian looked up and saw Marcus looking back at him in the rear view mirror. “Agent Cree, tell me what happened at the detention center.”

Marcus’s eyes went to the road again. “Is that an order, sir?”

“No,” Christian answered after a long moment.

Marcus shifted in his seat and Christian saw him swallow hard. “I found him half dead with the word’s U.W.F.’s bitch carved into his back,” Marcus replied. “They were giving him minimal care and he was in danger from medics, orderlies, and the general population. If I hadn’t arrived when I did... I couldn’t sleep; I ate very little in case they drugged my food. They waited.... it was like animals waiting for a weakness, waiting to close in for the kill. I had to be alert at all times. Several times they managed to remove me, and each time I returned before any permanent harm could be done to Erin. He wasn’t aware through most of it. I haven’t told him many particulars. He doesn’t ask either.” Marcus’s hands worked on the steering wheel. “It was hell there, but I had been trained to endure and to always be ready. It served me well during that time. Sir, if you

file reports and accusations, no one is going to pay for those months. No one is going to pay for harming Erin who hasn't paid already. Officials will ignore you and make your reports disappear. You are an important man, but Erin is just an agent. They may not touch you or your career, but Erin is another matter. It's possible they might decide to 'make him go away' to keep the incident away from the public. They might have him sent to the detention center again."

"The men who harmed Erin didn't all pay for their crimes," Christian pointed out darkly. "I spoke with some of them."

"They did," Marcus replied, "whether they know it or not."

A soldier's motto was, 'The only good enemy is a dead one.' If Marcus was talking about subtle types of revenge, Christian didn't like it. He thought those men should have been executed quickly and efficiently. The thought startled him and he clamped down on it. He was law enforcement now, not an U.W.F. general who had complete autonomy when it came to delivering justice among troops and citizenry alike. Marcus's admission that he had practiced vigilantism should have prompted an arrest. Instead, Christian found himself only glad that at least something had been done to right a terrible wrong.

"It should never have happened," Marcus said softly.

Christian remembered then that Marcus blamed himself, "It's foolish to blame yourself," Christian said. "You couldn't have known that something like that would happen."

"I did know," Marcus replied sharply. "We had both received threats. When Erin told me that he suspected that he was being followed... he laughed about it, but I should have taken it more seriously. He was so sure that his training would get him out of any situation, that he was better than everyone else."

"The arrogance of youth," Christian said pensively.

Marcus glanced at him darkly in the mirror. "You were not immune to it either, sir, and neither was I."

Christian nodded, accepting that criticism. "True."

Marcus was silent for a long moment and then he said, "Erin gave me a reason to live. I was nothing inside. I kept... I thought the end of the mission meant that I could release myself from the loneliness, the pain of the life I had been living. I was welcoming

the chance to end my life. I didn't have anything waiting for me, nothing to love or care about. Erin latched onto me, despite everything I did to discourage it, and he... I'm not sure... I'll use his words," Marcus looked embarrassed but he said, reciting from memory, "I'm planting seeds inside you, Marcus, seeds that are going to sprout after a lot of work, and, one day, a life is going to bloom for you.' There is just something special about Erin... I can't imagine him not being in my life."

Marcus seemed to suddenly come back to himself. "Sorry, sir."

"You love him?" Christian asked before he could stop himself, wanting to know, sensing Marcus's vulnerability at that moment, and weak enough and uncertain enough himself to dare ask.

Marcus nodded firmly without hesitation and said, "There will never be anyone else as close to me as Erin. I think, if things had been different, we might have been more than friends."

Christian felt the edge of his briefcase bite into his hand. "Different?"

"Erin is gay," Marcus replied. He glanced at Christian in the mirror and then smirked, as if he understood perfectly well how Christian was hanging on his next words. "I'm not, sir."

The car stopped. Christian sat silently, digesting that bit of information as his image of Erin and Marcus changed. There was a flutter deep down inside him, a feeling of relief and hope.

The door of the car opened. Christian suddenly became aware of their surroundings. They were back in front of the Peacekeeper headquarters. Marcus was waiting respectfully for him to get out of the car. Christian almost demanded to know what Marcus thought he was doing, but then he nodded, understanding, as he began to get out of the car. There wasn't any purpose in going to the Government Administration building. Nothing Christian filed, and none of his accusations, were going to spur any investigations. Marcus was right that the only thing Christian would accomplish would be to make trouble for Erin.

Christian paused. He didn't look at Marcus, but he asked, "We were enemies. Doesn't it bother you that I am with Erin?" Christian meant it in the working sense, but both of them knew the real question hiding in its shadow.

“You were my greatest enemy, but that was war, and we aren’t enemies any longer,” Marcus replied with certainty. “You are as skilled as I am. Who better to protect Erin?”

It wasn’t idle flattery, but the highest compliment Marcus could pay any man, Christian realized, and, even though Marcus was far beneath him in rank and station in life, even though he was younger than Christian by a few years, Christian still couldn’t help feeling a warm pleasure at receiving the man’s trust. As he followed Marcus back to his office, Christian hoped he would never have a reason to make Marcus regret that trust.

Chapter Nine

The Heart of the Matter

Christian watched the men-his men go over their gear. They were knee deep in supplies and weapons in a large hanger, the mood tense, everyone speaking only to correct or reply to a question. They all wore dark military clothes. The Peacekeeper badge was a medal of honor on every sleeve. Erin was standing on a pack, pretending he could fly for a moment as he flapped his arms and jumped off to go to his next project. The men laughed at the antic and Christian felt the tension ease a hair. After the mission, I will talk to him about my interest in him, Christian thought. Now, they couldn't be distracted, couldn't fraternize. They couldn't think of anything but the hard work ahead. Erin had to belong completely to the men.

"Secure your hair or I will cut it off," Marcus said shortly as he passed behind Erin and gave his red braid a meaningful yank. Erin grimaced, nodded, and snaked the short length down into the collar his jacket. Christian's own hair was already braided and knotted in a bundle at his neck with a cord that could save a man as a tourniquet, or kill him as a garrote.

Erin and Marcus were wearing climbing gear and they had very light packs compared to the other men. They would be going in first, taking a mountain route to infiltrate the target. Christian had mountain experience, but, as the commander of the group, his position would be with operations, coordinating the team. Even if he had been able, he wouldn't have been on the mountain with them. It didn't keep Christian from wishing that he could have gone, that he could be there to taste the adrenaline rush they would soon be experiencing as they faced the dangerous heights.

"Ready sir," a man said at Christian's elbow.

"Load up," Christian replied as he watched Erin bob in and out of the crowd of men with Marcus walking patiently at his elbow.

Don't be distracted, Christian reminded himself sharply, as the call went out and the men boarded the transport plane with their gear. That little figure of Erin, seeming so slight and out of place among the brawnier, older men, was deceptive, Christian knew.

The young man was far more capable of coming out of the operation alive than his most veteran officer. It was the other men, Christian told himself, that he should be worrying about.

Christian entered the communications vehicle and took up his command chair at the center of a bank of machines and monitors. They had special channels, secure against eavesdroppers, and voice and video feeds would be beamed to him as the operation progressed.

“Sir?” the pilot called back.

“Proceed!” Christian ordered and braced himself as his transport hurtled off of the tarmac and into the air on a stream of jets. Christian felt still healing bones and wounds groan at him, but he ignored them, his hands moving over the controls even before the transport leveled out and took off towards the East.

It was a long ride. Christian checked all of his men’s coms during that time. He checked Erin’s last. He immediately heard his familiar voice pipe through the earphone, “Two cards, Stanley, and I’ll see you five.”

“Just keep your damn hands where I can see them, you card shark!” Stanley’s voice growled back.

“It’s all skill, Stanley my man, all skill,” Erin soothed.

“Base!” the pilot called and Christian found himself switching Erin’s voice off with a quick flick of fingers as if he had been caught with his hands in a cookie jar. Christian growled at himself and then replied to the pilot, “Land and deploy.”

The transport shuddered and engines whined and protested as the vehicle was set down hard and fast. Christian didn’t move from his position, just turned on outside monitors to watch his men pour out of their transport and begin rolling out supplies. Erin and Marcus were already shouldering their packs, a light picking them out starkly in the darkness, as they headed at once into the forest. Erin’s hands gesticulated as he grinned and said something to Marcus.

Christian watched that place where they had disappeared for longer than a minute, before he pulled himself away and began giving orders through his comlink. They were far from the target, getting his men in place there before sunrise, without detection, was a priority. Not being ready when his two stinger pilots gave their signal of their mission

accomplished, was unthinkable.

Chatter was cut down to a minimum as the men deployed. Christian watched the monitors, checked the blips on his map that told him positions, and ran through the plan over and over again in his head. They were about to stir up a deadly hornet's nest and he wanted as few men stung as possible. Intelligence had told him the factory was trying to make a new attack ship, but they hadn't yet reached the implementation stage. A great deal hinged on that intelligence. If it proved to be wrong, and his men were confronted by operational attack ships, a well-planned operation could quickly turn into a bloodbath.

What was so terrible about peace that these renegades couldn't accept it? Christian wondered. He had spent his life in the military. Maybe he had his answer there. He couldn't stop wanting to go into battle. He couldn't bring himself to sit quietly at home and pursue peaceful hobbies. The only real difference between him and the men he was about to arrest was he used his need for action in the service of those who did want to sit quietly and have peaceful jobs. The men he was after wanted control, power, and even chaos to further their need to fight.

An aide placed a hot cup of tea near Christian's hand. He muttered a curt 'thank you'. The tea grew cold long before he took the time to drink it. The rim was still touching his lips, and he was taking a slow sip, when the rain started pounding on the shell of the transport. Christian swallowed hard and put the cup aside, almost letting it fall to the floor as he began trying to contact Marcus and Erin as quickly as possible.

"Damn, Marcus, what else?!" Erin's voice sounded over the pound of rain.

Christian gained a visual, but he couldn't see much. A light flashed crazily, rain poured against the visual, and the scene jolted and jumped oddly.

"Flynn!" Christian demanded. "Report!"

"Sir!" Erin exclaimed and then to Marcus, "It's the commander!"

Christian's eyes flicked to Marcus's visual. The scene was only slightly more stable. In the uncertain light, he caught several glimpses of Erin's distant upturned face being inundated by rain.

"Sir, we made good time," Marcus's steady voice informed Christian. "The climb wasn't difficult. The rain is hampering us now, though, and our time table will have to be moved back."

“Scrub the operation!” Christian barked. “I want you down off of that rock at once. It’s madness to make that kind of climb in a downpour.”

“Should you tell him or should I?” Erin’s voice panted.

“Sir,” Marcus’s voice said, “Erin slipped and I am attempting to pull him to safety. I am finding it difficult to gain enough purchase on the rock for leverage. The rain is making the rocks slick and our visibility is nominal. I rate my chances of success at sixty percent. Less, if I attempt to climb back down to a lower position.”

Christian felt his heart clench. He looked anxiously from Erin’s monitor to Marcus’s. The twisting and turning visuals made sense now. Erin was swinging at the end of his line and Marcus was trying to find a way to hold on while keeping Erin from falling to his death.

“I am deleting your part of the mission and I am sending troops forward into position for attack,” Christian said. It felt as if someone else were speaking through him, but the military side of him, the commander with lives depending on his quick decisions, didn’t think it was strange that he took care of the mission first.

Marcus paused, not liking the taste of failure. “Agreed,” he said at last and sounded angry. “Permission to join with the forces if the rescue attempt is successful?”

If. Christian gripped the edge of the console, fighting with rising alarm. “Yes,” he replied tightly, “You have my permission.”

“You just made Marcus a lot less pissed at me,” Erin panted cheerfully. “Now, partner, if you don’t mind trying to pull me up again?”

It didn’t make sense. Christian’s mind clicked and he asked. “Are you injured, Flynn?”

“Yeah,” Erin replied reluctantly. “Dislocated my arm and banged my knee damn good. Climbing is out. I can’t get a grip on the rock or pull myself up. Stupid rain. It was a breeze until then. We could have been at the target and knocking back beers over their trashed computer system by the time you guys showed up.”

Christian didn’t admit that he had formed several contingency plans in case Marcus and Erin didn’t make the target. Climbing was chancy at the best of times and Christian knew that well. Erin and Marcus would have made infiltration quicker and cleaner, but Christian had been too experienced to count on it.

Christian coordinated his troops, gave orders, and only then allowed himself to return to the life and death struggle on his monitors. “Progress?” he asked.

“None,” Erin panted and then to Marcus. “I think you’re going to have to cut me loose.”

“You know that I won’t do that,” Marcus replied.

“This whole dying together plan sucks, Marcus!” Erin shouted. “Don’t be stupid! Cut me loose and get your ass up this damn rock!”

“The rope is secured,” Marcus told him. “We won’t fall.”

“Then just leave me! The commander can have someone pick me up later!” Erin growled.

“Unacceptable,” Marcus replied. “There are too many chances for something to go wrong.”

“You are not sitting here and waiting for the storm to either pick us off this rock or freeze us to death, and you are not going to make both of us die while you try and pull me up, Marcus Cree,” Erin’s voice shouted over the rain. “I’m cutting myself loose!”

“God dammit, you will not!” Christian shouted with the full force of his lungs, his heart jumping to his throat as he stood and slammed hands against the console in panic and helplessness.

Erin snorted. “Like you can stop me, sir? I think I have to disobey this one order.”

“You will not!” Christian shouted again and everyone in the transport stared, shocked at the uncharacteristic passion and panic in their commander’s voice. “You will remain secure where you are and, as soon as the storm clears, I will send a rescue team to your position!”

“No can do!” Erin retorted. “That could take hours... days. Like Marcus said, things can happen. I can’t take that chance!”

“You will take that chance!” Christian thundered and his hands slammed against the console again.

Erin wondered angrily, “Why are you ordering two men to die instead of one? Why should I listen to you?”

“Because I—” Christian faltered and then he said more strongly, “Because I have something to tell you.”

There was silence and then Erin's confused voice asked, "What?"

"I have something to tell you. It's... It's important. You need to hear it." Christian swallowed uncomfortably, but he knew he was on the right track. He knew his men. He thought that he knew Erin Flynn. The man's curiosity would, hopefully, be strong enough to—

"You can't just tell me now?" Erin wondered and it was hard to tell whether he was being sarcastic or amused. "Is it worth risking Marcus's life over?"

Marcus said, "Whether I live or die is not your decision, Erin, and it doesn't hinge on whether you decide to wait and hear what the commander has to tell you. If you try and cut yourself loose, I will attempt to save you by any means necessary."

The hiss of the rain and the twirling visuals were all that Christian was left with for three agonizing minutes, and then Erin said, "Shit! You guys are a pair! Okay! I'll dangle here until we both either fall off this damn mountain or Chris comes and picks our asses up!" There was another pause and then Christian barely caught Erin's last remark, "If we do make it out of here alive, I'm going to knock his and Marcus's damn heads together!"

"Noted," Christian retorted and then was forced to ignore Erin's sputter of surprise as he returned to coordinating his troops and the important mission.

The placement of men was complicated. At first, Christian's eyes and ears kept switching between agent movements and the two men in peril, but then his military training took over and he became engrossed in the mission. He had to. Men counted on him and he had to give them his full attention no matter what the pain in the vicinity of his heart was telling him about one man. When he finally gave the order to move in after hours of long preparations, and enemy gunfire began to erupt, Christian became completely engaged in the effort to win the battle and keep his men alive.

"Pinned down; corridor nine, section c!" A man shouted over the comlink. Christian saw a corridor full of troops in the visual. The men were crouched behind bullet proof shields as they tried to withstand the hail of gunfire aimed at them from further down the corridor.

Christian noted the position of his other men and opened his mouth to send backup, but just then there was a familiar voice shouting. Christian's head whipped back around to look at the visual just in time to see the red braid of Erin Flynn flipping jauntily in the

screen as the man dived over the shields, rolled, came up awkwardly on a bad leg, and then began firing a blast rifle in frantic bursts straight at the enemy troops at close range.

“Whoooooohooo! Take that bad guys!” Erin shouted. He grinned as a return hail of bullets whizzed past every point of his body as he dived and rolled sideways along the floor. As he rolled, Marcus Cree came diving over the barrier as well, his blast rifle firing into the men ahead of him. Distracted by Erin, and what they thought was a patent suicide attempt, the enemy troops weren’t ready for Marcus’s attack. Christian watched in fascination as the young man moved with the fearless speed and grace of a panther as he leapt over Erin and kept on firing.

The other agents shook off their surprise and surged forward, blast shields tossed aside as they began firing as well. The enemy, overwhelmed, surrendered, ran, or died under a hail of bullets. Christian blinked, came back to himself, and then began shouting orders as he took control of the situation again.

“Regroup in section E,” Christian ordered. “Join with Marcus’s team and clean out corridor eight. No more damn terrorist tactics either, do I make myself clear? I want this operation by the book!”

“Yes, sir,” the team leader replied dutifully, but said aside to Marcus with a relieved laugh. “Glad you could make the party, Cree!”

“Can’t let you guys have all the fun!” Erin retorted as he stiffly stood up with Marcus’s help.

“Hey, Flynn! You’re injured!” another man said suddenly. “Stay back with the medics and we’ll finish mop up.”

“If I can limp, I can finish the operation,” Erin chuckled. “I bet you crap out after a paper cut, Jack!”

“Keep laughing, Flynn, but let’s see if you can keep up with my ass!”

“I’ll keep up with your ass, don’t worry, but I didn’t know you swung that way, Jack!”

“Shut up, Flynn!”

The team leader snapped, “We have our orders! Both of you shut up and let’s move out!”

“Ready when you are,” Erin replied.

“Ready,” Marcus echoed.

There were murmurs as other men voiced their readiness as well. Christian watched the visual move down the corridor to the next section and then he forced his attention back to the other units. How Erin and Marcus had managed to get off of the mountain and into the target site was a complete mystery to Christian. That they had done it and were still ready to fight was astounding. During the war, he had underestimated the stinger pilots time and time again. It seemed that he still hadn't learned not to do that.

The enemy forces were quickly overwhelmed. Marcus and Erin reached their operations core and shut down all of their systems, effectively making them blind and unable to coordinate against the attack on their installation. Christian stayed in his seat until the last resistance was put down and then he was rising stiffly and giving orders to his lieutenants. Once he was sure that everything was being taken care of, only then did he allowed himself to order the operations transport to the target site.

Christian paced as the ship was in route, his eyes and ears trained on one monitor and one comlink now. The visual wasn't moving. Christian could periodically see Marcus's face and the faces of a few men, but, for the most part, Erin Flynn was in an empty room and obviously sitting down. He was also uncharacteristically silent.

Christian was out of the transport as soon as it set down, the heat of the engine blasting him as he drew his gun and cautiously entered the building with a few of his men as guards. It was still a potentially dangerous situation. It was possible to run into troops hiding from the main force.

Men scrambled to greet him and give him reports. Christian listened and rattled off orders as his long legs took him swiftly through the corridors, his men trying to keep pace. When he reached the operations core, he was met by the nervous glances of Marcus and the other men in the room. He noticed at once that Marcus was soaking wet in a torn jacket and that his face looked worn, bruised, and haggard. Christian quickly looked past him and saw Erin seated in a large command chair. The man was slumped over the console, fast asleep, his wet braid trailing off one shoulder and dripping water on the floor.

“How is he?” Christian demanded as he moved to stand by the chair. Marcus turned almost protectively, but then he seemed to make a conscious effort to relax and he

holstered his gun and leaned wearily against another console.

“He needs rest,” Marcus replied. “I put his arm back in the socket, but it will be out of commission for at least a week. His leg is bruised, but not fractured.”

Christian looked down at the pale, exhausted, and bruised face of Erin. The man’s messy red bangs were plastered to his skin and his clothes were soaked through. There was a bullet hole through the collar of his coat. Christian reached out and fingered it, a chill spearing through him as he realized how close that shot had come to Erin’s jugular.

“I want a full report,” Christian said, dazed. “Get him to the medics.”

“Yes, sir,” Marcus replied and then said, “I suppose that Erin will have to wait to hear what you have to say to him.”

Christian looked at the dark, intense man sharply, thinking he was going to find a harsh judgment in his expression, perhaps contempt that Christian had allowed his personal feelings for Erin to inter into a mission and a potentially deadly situation. Instead, he saw simple curiosity and an understanding there.

“It can wait,” Christian replied and motioned to several of his men. “See that he gets to the medics,” he ordered them, but Marcus stepped forward, shouldered them out of the way, and simply picked Erin up into his arms as if he were a child.

As Marcus headed for the doorway with his unconscious burden, he glanced aside at Christian and said, “Don’t wait too long to tell him, sir. He is not a patient person.”

Chapter Ten

Bedside Manners

“You are to be commended, Commander Callinbrook.”

“Thank you, sir,” Christian responded. “Credit goes to my men, of course. They all performed with excellence.”

Facing the four men across the long table, Christian tried not to fidget. He was dressed in a starched Peacekeeper uniform and the collar was digging into his neck. He denied himself the luxury of pulling at it. His debriefing had stretched into two hours now while he had detailed the mission to the Peacekeeper officials. They made few comments and asked many redundant questions, entering sporadic notes into their computer notebooks. Christian much preferred paper and pencil and he had both under one hand. His other hand was on the handle of a coffee mug. He brought it to his lips and sipped the steaming beverage, wondering when they would decide that enough information was enough. He had already uploaded all the pertinent information from the attack site. Being forced to face officials, and verbally give the same report, was an archaic holdover from earlier times.

A heavy set, grizzled veteran shifted in his seat and frowned. Christian looked at him curiously. It was obvious that the man was bothered by something. He didn't take long to come to it. “This Erin Flynn and Marcus Cree, the ex-stinger pilots...,” the man began, his voice a low bass rumble. “You say that all of your men executed their orders with excellence, but I have to question that given the performance noted in your report.”

“If you look at their records, you will find that they both excel at special operations,” Christian replied. “The circumstances that scrubbed their part of the operation were weather related. A man's performance can't be criticized when it is affected by the vagaries of nature.”

“They endangered the life of a transport platform vehicle pilot, and the copilot, by requesting them to perform a rescue operation with their vehicle. They didn't ask for orders from you when they did so,” the man noted. “If you had required that vehicle in

your operation, it wouldn't have been in position to carry out your orders.”

Christian felt his face grow hot and he willed it to stop. “I did not require that particular vehicle,” he replied stiffly. “It had a hydraulics leak and couldn't deploy its dust off ramp. It was headed back to base when Cree contacted it.”

There was silence. The men sat, staring at their computer screens. A thin, gaunt looking officer suddenly speared Christian with hard, blue eyes. “In the report, it states that Cree ignored hazardous conditions and ordered the vehicle to fly close to the rock face. The pilot's second, then climbed down a rescue rope, swung to Erin Flynn, and secured a line to the injured man. All of this occurred in a low visibility situation. Once Agent Flynn was pulled to safety, Agent Cree...,” the man paused as he read his screen in disbelief and then continued, “jumped from his position to the open hatchway of the transport and pulled himself inside. I credit the phenomenal piloting skills of the transport operator for averting what could have been a fatal disaster. Keeping a vehicle level, using only pulse jets and anti-grav plates that were not meant for planet side use, in a rain storm with low visibility, is a feat I thought, until this incident, was completely impossible.”

“Special Operations Agent Logan was a war time pilot, sir, and her skill is well documented,” Christian replied. “She heard the chatter over the comlink and, since her part of the operation was completed, she replaced the pilot of the transport and flew it to initiate a rescue attempt.”

The man narrowed his eyes and his nostrils flared. “Without your orders,” he pointed out angrily.

“She is a ranking commander,” Christian informed him. “Her part of the operation was under her command, not mine. Cree informed her that a rescue attempt would only be successful if she flew close to the rock face. It was her command decision to do so and I am certain that she knew her own skill, her own abilities, when she made that decision. There is a chance for error in any operation, but Logan is not known for risking lives unnecessarily.”

“We will be discussing this with her,” another officer commented without looking up.

Christian sensed an impending dismissal. He said defensively, “Sirs, because of Logan's expertise and the efforts of Agents Cree and Flynn, the operation was completed

quickly and with a greatly reduced loss of life. They personally saved an entire unit of my men from being pinned down and slaughtered. Their commandeering of the operations room of the target shut down all opposition to my forces. They should be commended, not censured.”

Christian sensed condemnation, whatever the officers assured him. There was an air in the room that he had known during the war, an air of men making decisions in secret, of calculating and planning someone else’s downfall. Marcus and Erin’s actions had been over the top in some instances, but the results, Christian had to admit, had been impressive.

Christian wasn’t given a chance to speak any further. He left the room and the men to their scheming. He knew from experience to be patient, to investigate the matter on his own, and to be ready for whatever attack those men chose to launch. Whatever they were planning, they were as restricted in their actions as he was. If they wanted to bring anyone under their heel, they were going to be forced to do it by the book.

Christian was exhausted. His feet dragged and his body was sending alarms to his brain that he was on the edge of collapse. He had driven his body far past the strict limits set by the Peacekeeper medics. It was begging him to rest now, demanding that he lay his responsibilities in someone else’s lap and have someone take him home. Christian would have agreed wholeheartedly, but there was one duty that still needed doing, one duty that he refused to leave to anyone else.

Christian entered the small medical unit within Peacekeeper headquarters and looked for someone who could find the one man who was keeping him from much needed rest.

“Erin Flynn...,” Christian said as he reached out and stopped a medic from passing by him. “He was ordered to come here for treatment. Where is he now?”

The man looked utterly annoyed. “Oh, that one! I was the one who treated him, sir. He was the most uncooperative young man I have ever had the misfortune to treat! His partner was the second. They allowed me to take x-rays only. When I assured them that Agent Flynn was all right, aside from some deep bruising and strained muscles, Agent Cree announced that he was taking Agent Flynn home and that he would treat him there.”

“Treat him?” Christian frowned. “But you just said that he was all right...”

The man had a file folder in one hand. He slapped it against his thigh irritably.

“Agent Flynn was developing a fever. I wanted to take some tests, perhaps administer an anti-viral, but they both suddenly acted as if they were both in the war and I was the enemy. They left here immediately afterward.”

“Was Agent Flynn mobile?” Christian wondered.

“Barely,” The medic replied.

Christian turned on his heel without a word, a hand wearily rubbing his suddenly aching head. As he left the medical section, Christian pulled out his cell phone and hit his speed dial. His frustration grew when no one answered the phone at the Cree/Flynn residence.

“Damn you!” Christian growled and then dialed the garage. “I want a car and a driver at once,” he ordered. “Have it waiting at the front of Headquarters. I will be there shortly.”

Christian fought his body’s reluctance as he made his way down to street level. The car and driver were waiting. As the driver opened the back door of the sleek, black vehicle for him, Christian paused. Common sense told him that he was at the end of his strength. Common sense told him that it was time to go home and to deal with things after he had eaten and rested. Common sense, unfortunately, didn’t have any sway where Christian’s heart was concerned.

“Sir?” the driver prompted in concern. “Is everything all right?”

“Yes,” Christian replied, steeled himself, and then ordered, “I have an errand to run before I return to my home. I need you to acquire Erin Flynn’s home address and to drive me there.”

It wasn’t a long drive. Erin and Marcus had an apartment near Headquarters and a room on the grounds for when they were training for missions. Now that the mission was over, Christian reasoned that they would return to the apartment.

When the driver pulled up to the rather nondescript, five story building; Christian ordered him to wait with the car and went inside alone. Always a man of privilege, Christian was used to marbled columns and quiet, discrete servants. It was something new for him to tread cheap carpeting, walk down hallways smelling unpleasant scents, and to see water stains and bare pipes on walls and ceilings. He could hear the everyday noises of many people living together under an uneasy truce of sorts. There was music

from several apartments, the sounds of barking dogs, loud television shows, talking, laughing, and even shouting.

Without even knowing the apartment number, Christian could have guessed which one belonged to Marcus and Erin. They were soldiers. A soldier didn't lay his head down to sleep without knowing that there were several exits within easy reach. He found the Cree/Flynn apartment next to an emergency stair, an elevator, and, being on the top floor, Christian was certain that there would be an access to the roof, perhaps through a window or an access hatch nearby, as well.

Self-consciously, Christian knocked on the door. There was a spy hole. Christian felt that he was being studied. Someone on the other side was trying to define his intent. The door was opening cautiously. Marcus was standing in the opening wearing a black pair of jeans and a white undershirt. He looked on the edge of collapse, his eyes dark shadowed and his face pinched and pale.

"If you had left him with the medics, you could have slept and been in a better position to help him," Christian pointed out acidly.

Marcus frowned. "Erin wouldn't stay," he replied. "He threatened to leave on his own, sir."

"The doctor informed me that he was running a fever," Christian said. "I should order him to return and stay for observation."

Marcus didn't reply to that and Christian felt a flash of anger. He had sensed before that his orders were obeyed only after approval, now it was confirmed by Marcus's expression. The man's jaw had tightened and it was clear from the suddenly obstinate look in his blue eyes that he was ready to do anything to let Erin have what he wanted, including leaving Christian's command.

"I can't have men who won't follow my orders," Christian seethed.

Marcus finally replied, speaking carefully. "When it involves a mission, we will both follow your orders, sir, but the mission is over. Erin is entitled to make decisions involving his care. He doesn't like being vulnerable and in a place full of men with uncertain motives. Neither do I. It goes against our training."

"Marcus," Erin's soft voice came from behind the young man and a hand gripped Marcus's shoulder, pulling him back. "You're not supposed to leave people we know

standing outside. Let the Commander in.”

Marcus looked back and they must have had a silent conversation. Marcus made a grunting noise and opened the door wider. He motioned inside with one hand. “Sir?”

Christian stepped inside slowly, eyes immediately noting everything around him with a soldier’s alertness. A comfortable, bluish/ gray, leather couch, a gray carpet with a silver sheen, walls painted a light blue dusted with silver, a large screen television, two computer terminals with a dizzying array of interconnecting hardware, a low coffee table seemingly made out of one chunk of metal, overstuffed, black chairs, and pictures of stinger blueprints in metallic frames covering the walls, looked both tasteful and odd, odd in that Christian suspected that the color and material choices were supposed to make a person feel as if they were inside a ship or a machine of some sort.

“So,” Erin said, interrupting Christian’s inspection. “Not as grand as your place, but I think Marcus has a sense of style, don’t you?”

Christian started, incredulous, as he turned to look at Erin and Marcus. He forgot all about the decor when he saw them standing together; a united front against him. There was an energy running between them that so strong Christian could almost see it. It spoke of a connection that Christian was finding hard to understand or accept. If they were telling the truth, and they weren’t lovers, then how could such a strong bond exist? Christian’s thoughts in that direction just stopped when Erin sighed and swayed a little on his feet.

Erin was wearing a very large, loose, cotton shirt and a pair of shorts. His hair was in a loose pony tail, but strands were sticking out everywhere. It gave his bruised, weary face an almost lunatic appearance. His large, green eyes did look fevered. They were too bright, too wide, as if he was struggling to stay alert. It was costing him to stand there and wait on Christian’s pleasure.

“Sit down,” Christian told him simply, feeling the bite of guilt and embarrassment.

He watched Erin limp to the couch with difficulty, Marcus’s hand under his elbow. Christian saw the nest of blankets there and realized that Erin must have been resting on the couch when he had arrived. There were also several pill bottles on the coffee table and a glass of water near the blankets.

What was he doing there? Christian wondered about himself. Why had he personally

gone to their apartment? A call would have sufficed and an order to return to the medical section for treatment. They might have ignored that order, but it would have saved Christian some face not having it done in his presence. Now that he knew how things stood, there was only going to be a protracted awkwardness as he tried to extricate himself from the situation all together.

“Make coffee, Marcus,” Erin said suddenly.

Marcus hesitated only briefly and then he was nodding and leaving the room to obey him. Erin motioned to one of the black chairs closest to him. “Sit down, sir. It’s hard to stare up at you. My neck feels as sore as the rest of me.”

Christian sat down stiffly, as if he were facing a room of generals; straight, correct, and hands resting on the arms of the chair tensely.

Erin fluffed a silver pillow, placed it against the corner of the couch, and leaned his body into it. Propping his chin on his hand and resting his elbow on the pillow, he stared at Christian with amusement.

“Well, are you going to chew me out?” Erin asked. “Marcus is busy, go ahead.”

Christian frowned. “I did not come here to ‘chew you out’. I came here because I was concerned for your health and confused as to why you were refusing treatment.”

Erin sighed. “I could give you some very good reasons, and I will if you order me to, but it’s very personal. I will tell you that I don’t trust doctors and that I don’t trust people I don’t know with free reign while I can’t defend myself. Is that good enough? If I really thought that I was going to die, I’d go back to medical. I’m not suicidal, okay?”

Christian thought of the mountain and Erin’s willingness to cut himself loose and fall to his death to save Marcus and at least part of the mission. “We’re so used to death, Agent Flynn,” Christian said, “that sometimes we may not notice it when it’s staring us in the eye.”

Erin digested that and then conceded. “That’s true, but it’s also true that I’m well aware of my own limits. It’s just a fever, sir. I felt some of it coming on before the mission. Getting banged up and worn out just let it get a jump on me, that’s all. I promise to stay in bed and let Marcus take care of me.” He raised a hand, as if he were giving an oath, and his eyes regained enough strength to sparkle.

The awkwardness returned. Christian knew that it was time for him to go and that the

embarrassment and discomfort of extricating himself couldn't be put off any longer. He tried to save some face by saying, "I'm going to question you about your decision to appropriate a transport vehicle for your rescue without informing me." He stood and added, "But that will wait until you are well enough to return to active duty."

"Thanks," Erin replied. He yawned and rubbed at his eyes briefly. "Are you going to tell me what you wanted to say to me, or is it going to wait now too?"

Christian felt his gut clench. There were a thousand ways of telling Erin, but none of them fit a moment like that one. Everything was wrong; the time, the place, their mood...

"I think another time," Christian replied. "It will keep."

"Will it?" Erin wondered, looking pensive. "During the war, we never thought that there would be another time, so we never waited."

Christian clenched and relaxed his hands at his sides.

"Just say it," Erin told him. "Be spontaneous. Go on, I can take it. Do you want to get rid of me, pin a medal on me, make me your—"

"Agent Flynn..." Christian turned away, suddenly totally interested in the placement of the buttons on his coat. "I don't feel this is the time to discuss anything."

"You came all of this way, then, just to make sure that I was all right?" Erin wondered and there was nothing in his voice to give away what he was thinking.

Christian had been raised a prince, every word coming from his lips thought through and politic, but he had also been a soldier for many years. That part of him chafed at his inability to tell Erin of his interest in him.

"Yes," Christian replied at last and stopped himself from wincing. He tried to cover up his uncertainty by turning and looking for Marcus. The man was taking far too long to make coffee. "I should go now, you need to rest. If the fever worsens, you will go back to medical and allow them to treat you. That is an order."

"Yes, sir, but I told you I'd planned on doing that any way," Erin replied. "Tell me one thing before you go though."

Christian looked back at him. Erin's head was cocked to one side, his eyes curious even though they were beginning to droop as his exhaustion began to take its toll.

"How do you date a Prince?" Erin asked.

Christian flushed. He turned away again, flustered. "Agent Flynn, you seem to be

making an assumption when I've not given you any reason to think that I wish to..." He said a few more things, things that he didn't recall as soon as he turned back to Erin and found him fast asleep on his pillow.

He had a face like a mischievous elf, tangled bangs hanging in his bruised and pale face, a rounded shoulder, hard with muscle, but gentled under the soft cotton of his shirt, and a small, wiry body curled loosely under his blanket. Erin Flynn looked like a normal young man, not like someone who had just completed a mission where he had been forced to kill people, not a stinger pilot who had struck terror into Christian's forces, and nothing like a street child of the streets and orphanages, and all that entailed. Christian felt his heart clench and he felt like a fool. Just then, he felt more than capable of telling Erin that he was beginning to have feelings for him, that he wanted to get to know the young man better, and that he was willing to ignore half the rules in the Peacekeeper handbook to do it.

Christian reached out and carefully brushed the red bangs from Erin's face. His fingers traced the line of a cheek and over a scar only his fingers, and not his eyes, could find. Christian drew his hand back reluctantly. It was his first touch, he realized, the first time he had reached out to Erin as someone who wasn't an aid or an agent following his orders.

"Are you ready to go, sir?" Marcus asked from behind him. Christian flinched and turned, angry and embarrassed to be caught off guard and ashamed to be caught touching the sleeping Erin.

Christian frowned, recovering. "Yes, I'll go now."

Marcus's eyes were intense. They gave Christian the impression that, if he tried hard enough, he could cut titanium with just a glare. "He knows now," Marcus said simply, but those words weren't simple at all. They were both information and a warning.

"He knows," Christian repeated, feeling a burden settle on his shoulders. He hadn't said the words, but Erin had been very perceptive. Erin had divined Christian's feelings for him in the expression on Christian's face and in his actions, his coming to their apartment to check on Erin's welfare. Marcus was worried that Christian would try and backtrack, would try and deny Erin and how he felt, perhaps hurting Erin in the process.

As Christian was escorted to the door, he felt the need to say something to reassure

Marcus, but as he said the words, he realized that he was reassuring himself as well and committing to a course of action that was irreversible. He asked, “How does one date Erin Flynn?”

Chapter Eleven

Roses

The title read Clarification of Operation Procedures and Violations. Christian sighed and went over his carefully worded report for the tenth time. Hunched over it at his desk, his neck was bunching and throbbing with tension, and a pain was beginning to form between his eyes, threatening to blossom into a full blown headache. He rubbed at the back of his neck and heard something give a small popping sound.

“What? Did you spray paint that dress on?” Erin’s voice sounded from outside Christian’s office. He heard his secretary’s embarrassed giggle. “I’m sure there’s a regulation against it,” Erin continued, “Section P, paragraph eight, subsection alpha; dresses will not be spray painted on Peacekeeper personnel’s bodies during working hours.” There was another fit of giggles from the secretary and then Erin was coming into the office.

Erin sauntered. He glowed. He exuded some power that made him the center of attention, as if everything else in the room ceased to exist as soon as he entered. Christian found himself smiling slightly in response to the cheerful grin bestowed on him, even though he felt at a loss as to why Erin was in his office to begin with. He hadn’t called the young man and hadn’t, in fact, known that he had returned to active duty.

“I gave you the week to recuperate,” Christian said.

Erin stopped and regarded him, leaning on one hand on the desk. He looked impish, as if caught doing something naughty. “Marcus wanted me to take advantage of it too, but I feel fine. I feel a lot of aches and pains from all the scrapes and bruises, but the shoulder’s moving and my leg lets me walk. I hate sitting on the couch, doing nothing, so, here I am.”

“You were fevered,” Christian pointed out and tried to look stern.

“That was over with on the second day,” Erin replied dismissively.

Christian studied Erin intently, noting the bruises on his face and a hand taped with gauze bandages. He seemed all right, though, standing easily and looking relaxed. It would have been hypocritical of him, Christian realized, to dress down Erin for doing

something he had done himself and in far worse shape. “All right then,” Christian conceded, “but I expect you to do only light duty until the medics examine and clear you.”

Erin grimaced. One hand smoothed down his pony tail, draped over his shoulder, as if he needed its reassurance. “I spent a lot of years getting banged up and taking care of it myself, sir. I don’t need a medic to tell me anything.”

“The exam is for my benefit,” Christian replied sharply. “I’m not going to assign you to any sort of heavy duty until I’m certain that you are capable of doing it.”

Erin looked ready to argue, but then his mouth tightened into a thin line and it was obvious when he decided to let it slide for the moment. He relaxed again and smiled. “I really didn’t come here to be assigned a duty, sir.”

Christian raised a dark eyebrow. “What then?”

Erin looked unsure of himself for a second and then he was shrugging and looking sheepish as he replied, “Its lunch time, sir. I know a nice, quiet place to eat that has great food. If you want to, I could take you there.”

Christian automatically looked down at all of the paperwork on his desk and then at the computer screen listing his full schedule. He lived by the rule, duty before pleasure. People were waiting for his reports, his decisions, and his direction. It would be completely irresponsible for him to leave all of that undone, even for an hour. Christian searched for a way to politely decline. What came out, though, was something completely different than what his sense of duty was urging him to say. “All right, I’ll call for transportation.”

Erin looked relieved and then eager. “Already taken care of, sir! If you’ll come with me?”

Erin was dressed in his Peacekeeper uniform and Christian was dressed in a much more elaborate version, complete with a fitted coat and signs of his rank glittering at throat, shoulder, and wrist. The difference in their rank was very apparent. An official voice in the back of Christian’s mind quoted the regulation against fraternization and the soldier in him told him how ridiculous it was to get involved with a man that he would surely have to send into combat situations. If he should hesitate to do that, or worse, get distracted or protective when it was necessary to order Erin into danger, there could be

disastrous results.

Looking into Erin's eager eyes, Christian lost the thread of his thoughts. He stared. After a moment, Erin blinked and smiled warmly. "Sir?"

Christian came out of his self-imposed trance. He groped for an excuse, "Damn headache," he mumbled in embarrassment as he began to rise stiffly from his chair, rubbing at the back of his neck.

Erin came around the desk and his hands pressed lightly on Christian's arms with the respect for trained reflexes that one soldier gave to another. Christian had tensed at the suddenness of the move, but he found himself sitting down again regardless. Erin's hands slid up Christian's arms to his shoulders as he moved to stand at Christian's back. Leaning forward, he began to knead the muscles bunched painfully in Christian's neck and said cheerfully, "Relax, sir. I can take care of the headache for you, if you let me. I have enough of them myself. I know a trick or two."

Erin's hands moved to part Christian's long hair and he brushed it forward over Christian's shoulders so that it was out of his way. Neck exposed, Christian felt a warmth spread throughout his body. It seemed a very intimate thing for Erin to have done, Christian thought, even as he told himself how ridiculous that was, especially considering how rough Erin's hands were as the young man massaged his muscles with iron hard fingers and callouses. When he dug thumbs into the muscles over Christians' collar bone, and squeezed with his fingers, the pain was shocking.

"Give it a moment," Erin urged as Christian began to jerk away with an exclamation. "It's worth it."

The pain built and built and Christian hissed between his teeth. When he was almost ready to demand that Erin stop, the pain suddenly lessened and then faded all together. Erin kneaded a bit more, gentler this time, and then his hands left Christian's neck. Before he felt the warmth of Erin's body step back from him, Christian felt a distinctive, lingering pressure on the back of his neck. Erin had kissed him.

Christian felt a blush scald him and then he noticed that his headache and his muscle tension were gone. He grunted in amazement and said, "Thank you. That did help."

"You're welcome," Erin replied and looked pleased.

Christian flipped his hair back and couldn't help touching the spot where Erin had

kissed him. It came to him all at once that he had, not just given Erin thanks for the neck massage, but had also unknowingly shown his acceptance of Erin's kiss. He began to think of a way to retract it, to explain to Erin that he was still unsure about how things should progress between them. Erin was very intuitive. He seemed to suddenly suspect that he was about to receive some sort of rejection and he spoke before Christian could voice it.

“How about that lunch now?”

Christian blinked, put off balance. What he had been about to say seemed suddenly foolish. Erin was opting to pass off his action as if it hadn't happened, an unspoken apology to Christian for taking liberties. ‘It was nothing’, his tone had said, ‘If you don't want it to mean anything.’

Christian replied at last, “I think lunch is a good idea.” He stood and gathered up a small briefcase, slipping several reports and his slim laptop computer into it.

Erin looked dismayed. “You're not going to do work while we eat, are you?”

Christian frowned, unapologetic as he explained, “I have my cell phone with me. There are several cases on going. I need information with me if the agents working those cases should happen to call.” Christian felt the need to stress, “I'm always on the job. There are many agents and civilians counting on me. That doesn't stop because I leave Peacekeeper headquarters.”

Erin looked thoughtful and then said, “It must be lonely.” When Christian frowned, stung, he continued soothingly, “I meant you've probably not run into a lot of people who understand that kind of dedication.”

“No, I haven't,” Christian replied and felt a clenching in his gut, wondering if Erin was going to be yet another one, of the many, who wouldn't be able to understand the responsibilities that were on his shoulders and how they could often consume his life.

“We should talk about that, and some other things; get to know each other better,” Erin said and half turned towards the door. “If you're willing?”

Christian paused as he fought with his rigid control that bade him go slow, research the situation, and not make any snap decisions. He won enough to ask with a raised eyebrow, “Having lunch in a public place doesn't seem very good for personal conversations.”

Erin's lips quirked into a knowing smile. "But it is! It's neutral ground. It's not my place. It's not your place. It's not work. We don't have to defend our territory or keep up appearances. We can sit back and be part of the crowd. We can shoot the breeze over a hamburger and a coke."

"Salad and a tea," Christian interjected wryly.

Erin grinned. "Whatever you want, sir." He began to lead the way and then stopped and asked over his shoulder. "Can I call you something besides, sir, once we're outside headquarters? Having to say 'sir' every other word doesn't help a guy have a relaxing conversation."

"Christian," he replied, but not easily. Erin was blind siding him again, first the kiss and now a request to be on more intimate terms with their names. Erin was directing his steps onto the 'relationship path' and Christian felt almost out of control, as if he were about to slide down a chute of no return. He teetered at the brink, reluctant still, unsure, and balking.

"Christy?" Erin asked.

Christian winced. "No." That was far too intimate and he could see Erin was joking. "You may call me Chris."

"Chris," Erin repeated. "Thanks."

Christian felt the need to ask, "And you. Erin is what you preferred to be called?"

Erin's face clouded and his hand stroked his hair again. "Yes," he said shortly and Christian wondered if he had made him angry. Erin shrugged. "The orphanage named me Erin Flynn. I don't know my birth name. It doesn't have the royal lineage yours does, but it's good enough for me."

Christian heard an old pain in Erin's voice and saw some harsh memories in his eyes. Christian felt as if he had wounded Erin unintentionally, though he didn't understand how he had been able to. He felt the need to comfort Erin. It was an ache in his heart and Christian's inhibited inner voice couldn't stop him from reaching out and giving Erin's arm a small, reassuring caress. His fingers tingled at the contact. He saw Erin shiver and look at him gratefully, the smile coming back to his lips. "I'm sorry," was all that Christian could think to say.

"It's okay," Erin said and then shrugged. "Memories suck. Let's leave them here and

go get a bite to eat, okay?”

“All right,” Christian agreed and he followed Erin as the young man led the way from his office, unconsciously touching the back of his neck where Erin had kissed him.

Erin’s car was waiting at the front of Headquarters. It was a sleek, older model. It had some obvious wear, but it looked as if he had lovingly polished and buffed every inch of it. It was black and the shape reminded Christian of a spaceship built for speed; long and narrow at the front and widening at the back as if it could have supported some booster engines with a few modifications. The seats were leather and the instrument panels were a dizzying collection of dials, touch pads, and screens. As Christian slid into the passenger side, he couldn’t help commenting. “What’s the outbound speed?”

Erin chuckled at the inference that the car could leave orbit. “I get bored while I’m driving and sometimes we have surveillance. When I have to spend hours and hours sitting in a car watching a suspect, I’d rather do it in my own car. I’m hooked up to Peacekeeper databases and communications grids.” He looked impish as he turned the car on and the engine purred to life. “I also have a neat collection of video games.”

“I’m not surprised,” Christian replied and wasn’t sure why Erin suddenly looked worried.

“What is it?” Christian wondered.

Erin opened his mouth, closed it, and then went thoughtful as he pulled away from the curb. After a minute, he managed to say uncertainly, “I like to have some fun. It doesn’t mean I’m immature.”

Christian understood then. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that you were. Knowing your past and your expertise, it would be foolish of me to think that you were immature.”

Erin looked as if he wanted to say something more, but then he shrugged. “We’ll have time to talk about all of that later, right?”

That implied a lot and Christian replied truthfully, “I have reservations and they are well founded, Erin.”

Erin sighed. His hands smoothed along the steering wheel and then he said, “You either like me or you don’t, Chris. Which is it?”

Christian winced at Erin’s bluntness. The man was so impatient. Erin didn’t want to

wait for a slow development, a reasonable time for Christian to sort out just what it was he was feeling for the man sitting beside him.

“I didn’t look for this,” Christian admitted. “It’s too sudden, too soon... I’m not sure why this has even happened to me or what I’m really feeling.” He didn’t add, ‘I was interested in you, strongly, from the moment I first saw you and I can’t stop thinking and caring about you.’ That would have revealed too much before he was ready. He needed more time, whether Erin wanted to give it to him or not.

Erin sighed again. “Well, the fact that you are sitting in my old car and trusting me enough to take you to lunch says a lot.”

Christian raised dark eyebrows. It did say something and he crossed his arms over his chest self-consciously.

Erin patted the dashboard of his car. “Boss here is a good car, but you’re used to limos and taking tea at the club. I was surprised that you agreed to come.”

“Boss?” Christian repeated.

Erin smiled sheepishly. “That’s what I call my car.” He laughed at Christian’s expression. “Maybe it isn’t a stinger ship, but it’s still mine to command.”

“You don’t know me,” Christian said defensively. “I lived rough as a soldier for many years. There weren’t many opportunities for tea at the club during the war.”

Erin sobered. “I just thought...”

“That I would shun a common soldier’s pursuits?” Christian finished.

“Common soldier...,” Erin frowned now. “Doesn’t that say a lot? I piloted a stinger, but, at the end of the day, I still bunked with the soldiers, not the commanders.” He glanced at Christian as he pulled into a parking space behind a plain looking building and put on the parking brake. “There’s a big gap between us, Chris, and I can see why you aren’t sure about crossing it.”

Christian frowned now too. “Are you calling me an elitist? The war is over, Erin. The class distinction that was in place before and during the war doesn’t exist any longer. I have the title of Prince, but that’s a defunct title. I don’t command anything by right of sovereignty.”

“That’s a pretty picture you’re painting, but the reality...” Erin shook his head. “People don’t forget those kinds of attitudes overnight. You can see why I’m interested in

you. That's a given. Why you are interested in me is hard for me to understand. When you feel like explaining it to me, let me know, okay?" He paused and then added carefully, "Some people do things because they are bored or jaded and they want a taste of the rough side of the tracks to spice things up. I have to warn you. If that's all this is, I'll kick your ass, commander or not."

Erin turned off the car and, as the purring engine stopped, it left a numbing silence in its place. Christian replied at last, "I am wealthy. I am a prince. I do have political and social power. I have within my grasp a thousand contacts that could place you wherever you wished. If your interest in me is only mercenary; a means to further your ambitions, I will kick your ass as well, Erin Flynn."

Erin nodded solemnly and then he looked sideways at Christian, quirking an impish smile. "I noticed those blue eyes, and then your strong, handsome face. I thought, 'Out of your league, Flynn!', but I couldn't get you out of my head. I know we're very different from each other, but I think we're peanut butter and jelly rather than oil and water. I think if we want, we can go together really well. It sounds kind of stupid right now. I don't even know why you're making me so... well, and I don't know a lot about you, really. Maybe I should wait to say all of this stuff to you. Sounds kind of stupid to say it now."

Christian nodded, agreeing. "We have a past. It's ugly and violent. We were enemies. We both..." Christian blinked and found himself swallowing hard, almost overcome by a wave of remorse for his part in so much destruction. "We shouldn't even want to speak to one another. I fear that the past will not be forgotten as much as we would like to forget it, that it will make any of this impossible."

"I was thinking that too," Erin admitted, but then he forced a smile and opened the door. "But, hey, this is just lunch, Chris. It doesn't have to mean anything but filling your stomach and then getting back to work, if you don't want it to. It'll be a good story for you to tell over drinks at your next party, how you got your kicks slumming with one of the common soldiers and—"

"Don't!" Christian said sharply, beginning to hear some self-condemnation in Erin's voice. "Things will end, here and now, if you believe that I am a person who would do something like that."

"I don't," Erin assured him, embarrassed. "I just say stupid shit like that when I'm

nervous or feel like I'm reaching too high."

Christian stared, not certain how to respond, and then he glanced around them. The place that Erin had chosen for them to eat seemed popular. There were many people moving about the parking lot and going in and out of the doors of the plain building. He checked his watch. "I believe we are here to eat and to talk while we dine. We are running out of time, Erin. I don't wish to miss this opportunity."

Christian winced at his wooden correctness, but Erin understood what he was trying to say. His smile returned and he visibly relaxed. Christian had just told him, in an off handed manner, that he wanted to spend time with Erin as much as Erin wanted to spend time with him. Erin's feeling of inferiority bothered Christian though. They had enough hurdles to jump if they chose to pursue any type of relationship. While Christian did think that their difference in rank was a distinct problem, their social inequality was of no concern to him whatsoever. When the new government had encouraged the elimination of the old class system, Christian had embraced it without much thought. He had never felt comfortable with the title of Prince at any time. He much preferred Commander, or General. They were titles he had earned.

"Let's go then," Erin said and was obviously excited as he opened the door of the car and slipped out. As Christian joined him and they began walking towards the door of the building, Erin walked at Christian's elbow, looking up at Christian as he talked about the food that the place offered. Christian was taller than Erin and the difference was almost comical, Erin walking with a bounce in his step and looking very animated, almost boyish, while Christian paced with his usual cool and correct demeanor. Looking down, Christian noticed Erin's strong shoulders, his broad, corded 'climber's hands', and his body, which was, to his soldier's eyes, poised, graceful, and deadly. He was young, but Erin Flynn was most definitely a man and a man to be reckoned with.

"I can get a salad and tea?" Christian asked hopefully when Erin ended his list of fried and grilled fare.

Erin looked Christian up and down with a smirk. "Yes, you can, Chris, but I think you need to put some weight on that lanky bod of yours. Order a steak and some cheese potatoes. They're terrific!"

Christian began to retort and then noticed a man standing in the doorway of the

restaurant, glaring. Erin saw Christian tense and he whipped about to look at the man as well, his hand slipping under his Peacekeeper uniform coat to take the safety off of his weapon. Automatically, he stepped in front of Christian to confront the man first. Christian was used to bodyguards. He almost didn't think anything of Erin's action, but suddenly, it irritated him. An angry thought surfaced as he tried to divine what, if anything, the man at the door intended to do. Christian wondered if Erin thought he wasn't capable of defending himself, that he was some sort of coddled aristocrat.

The man, in the end, did nothing. They passed him in defensive mode and then entered the restaurant. Erin kept an eye on the man while Christian scanned the large, crowded room for danger. He almost suggested they leave. He didn't relish a meal where he felt threatened, but then he shrugged off his concerns. He was notorious and hated by many people on the opposing side of the war for good reason. He couldn't turn tail and run, he thought, every time he encountered someone who couldn't forget the past. There were too many of them for that.

Christian chose an open table, by an exit door, along a wall where they could sit facing in opposite directions. It allowed them to keep an eye on all points of the room. They sat gingerly, both of them nervous, but both determined not to abandon their lunch and their talk with one another.

"Do you think that clown was mad at you or me?" Erin wondered and his voice made it sound as if he considered the incident humorous. Christian knew better.

"There are many people who consider the stinger pilots heroes," Christian replied. "There are also many who think I'm a war criminal."

Erin said quickly, "Let's not talk about this. We came here to talk about us, not rehash the war."

"It will always hang over our heads," Christian said despondently. "If you or I can't face the past that we both share, then meeting like this is a waste of time."

Erin took a menu from a holder on the table and passed it to Christian as he said, "If I told you what I think about that, you wouldn't believe me because you don't know me, Chris. Maybe we won't make it. Maybe our pasts will be too much of a wall between us, one that we won't be able to climb over. Let's not try to, though, until we are 'mission ready', all right? Let's have all the facts, all the particulars, to help us beforehand."

Christian stared. He had to stop thinking of Erin as the simple clown that he liked to portray himself as. The man had things that ran deep and he had a wisdom born of his experiences.

The waitress appeared and Christian and Erin ordered. Christian asked for his salad and tea and Erin asked for potatoes covered in cheese, a grilled hamburger, and a soda. After she had gone, Christian looked across the table at Erin and found the young man staring back at him hopefully.

“So,” Christian began as he sat back and unbuttoned the top buttons of his uniform jacket. “Do you come here often?”

Erin smiled cheerfully. “Yes, yes I do.”

A short time later, Christian eyed the tower of tableware and condiment holders that Erin was building with trepidation. Erin was talking animatedly, his hands gesturing even as he grabbed a hold of whatever was in reach and added it to his tower. Christian was sharply reminded that Erin was a pilot, his hand eye coordination, and sense of balance, perfect even when accomplishing such a strange pastime.

“So, there we were, me and Marcus, fresh out of a war, and not one idea between us about what we were going to do,” Erin was saying. “The government wanted to forget about us and, after the celebrations and award ceremonies, so did most everyone else. We were broke, clueless how to do the simplest things that constituted the daily grind for most people, and pretty unwilling to fall back on our skills to provide us with what we needed. Sure, either one of us could have hacked a system and dumped a fortune into our accounts, or forged the papers necessary to get us any job we wanted, but... I guess we wanted a fresh start, a chance to prove that we could be something other than killers. “Erin’s mouth quirked self-deprecatingly. “Didn’t work, mostly. We have our reputations, just like you, and interviewing for a regular paying job usually started and ended with, ‘What makes you think our company needs a terrorist on the payroll?’ or ‘I don’t think we need anyone to pilot a stinger here, sir.’ Nobody believed that we could be anything but soldiers and, after a few ‘incidences’ and ‘failures’, me and Marcus began to think so too. After what happened at Muraka...” His eyes went dark, but then he rallied and continued with a tight smile, “When McLaren offered us the job with the Peacekeepers, it seemed the logical choice. We had bills to pay and we both liked eating

on a regular basis.”

Christian didn't ask for details. Erin had glossed over his troubles with the government and Muraka deliberately. Erin didn't want to talk about it. “I'm sorry,” Christian said, not knowing what else to say to break up the long silence.

Erin shrugged, though his face had grown pensive. “Who the hell can see the future? It wasn't anyone's fault, what happened, except maybe mine for not watching my own back.” Another pause and then he smiled brightly, his eyes sparkling as he looked past his tower to Christian. The sudden change in mood startled Christian. He had seen it before, that mental trick of Erin's that seemed to allow him to turn his memories and moods on and off at will.

“Your turn,” Erin said simply.

Christian stared. They had long ago eaten their lunch, the empty plates set aside. The food had been good, just as Erin had promised. Christian had ordered only a salad and tea, but Erin's hamburger had been large and Erin had convinced him to try a few bites. Erin had also coaxed Christian into trying his cheesy potatoes. Christian had enjoyed them so much he had eaten half of the serving, though most of the enjoyment had come from watching Erin eat his share. The potatoes had been long and fat and the cheese sauce had been thick and gooey. Watching Erin like the cheese off of a potato and then suck the potato into his mouth to eat it the rest, had made Christian's pants uncomfortably tight.

Christian glanced at his watch. “We need to get back,” he replied nervously.

Erin gave him a long, searching look. “If you aren't willing to talk, if you don't want me to know anything about you, then we don't have anything between us.”

Christian looked at Erin's too wise face. “Have you dated so much that you know that for a fact?”

Erin looked uncomfortable and his eyes left Christian and stared with concentration at his tower. “I'm not a virgin, if that's what you want to know, but I haven't dated a lot either. When you live on the street, when you have to depend on people to watch your back, you learn who you can trust and who you can't. Guys who never say anything about themselves are usually the ones you have to watch out for. They're hiding something or doing something wrong that they don't want you to know about. Usually,

what they are hiding is the fact that they're just using you.”

Christian's jaw clenched and then released. He let out a long breath and then said, “After the war, I thought it would be best if I stayed far away from Earth. The military wasn't popular and everyone wanted to forget about the bloodshed and those who carried it out under their wishes. I went to Mars colony with Logan, your rescue pilot. She had hopes for me, and I have to admit that I didn't disillusion her by telling her my true nature. I couldn't face being alone.” Christian swallowed. “Logan soon discovered that we were not going to become a couple in any sense. We separated and I returned to Earth. My family was not welcoming. I wasn't the polished prince, they remembered, and I wasn't interested in my family's estates. When McLaren asked me to join the Peacekeepers as a general, I was eager. Being ‘tolerated’ in one's own homeland is not a pleasant experience.”

Erin nodded, head cocked a little to one side. He had stopped stacking and Christian noted that placing another object on the tower would have definitely made it tumble. Erin peered at Christian from behind its shelter as if he were finding comfort in it, and Christian found himself wishing for a tower of his own. He wasn't the type of man to air his life in a public place, or to reveal it to people even in private, for that matter. He had certainly never told anyone how he had felt about his treatment by the people of his country. He suspected that he had never talked about it before, because he couldn't help feeling that he didn't have the right to complain about any treatment he received. He had killed. He had ordered people to be killed. They had made him feel as if war wasn't an excuse, that he had committed crimes willingly.

“Thank you,” Erin said softly.

Christian was confused.

“For trusting me,” Erin clarified and smiled.

Christian met his eyes steadily. “I think that you've more than proven to me that I can. You have a strong sense of duty and honor.”

Erin's mouth quirked. “So do you. Maybe that's what draws us together? We have very different backgrounds, but we both give every ounce of ourselves for what we believe in.”

Christian nodded. “I did find it... strange that I was drawn to you. We do seem so

different. My reluctance to become involved had a great deal to do with my confusion on that matter.”

Erin sipped his soda and looked at Christian over the rim of his glass. His eyes were clearly saying, ‘That’s not all and you know it.’ but he refrained from saying it. They had found common ground and Erin wasn’t about to make it a quagmire by delving deeper than they were ready for.

Erin’s cell phone beeped. He pulled it out of his pocket with a sigh and said without asking who was on the other end of the call, “We’re just about to leave, Marcus. Relax.” He listened for a moment and then smiled softly, “I know. I’ll be careful. You know the general will be watching my back. I know you trust him, so, be patient and make sure you eat your lunch. I don’t want to hear your stomach growling for the rest of the day.” Another pause and then Erin chuckled and hung up his phone. He looked up at Christian apologetically. “I hope you want to get used to that?”

“Having Marcus Cree as your shadow?” Christian clarified and couldn’t help feeling a sharp pang of jealousy. Erin’s expression had been so warm and... loving? Christian didn’t want to think that last, but he couldn’t help it.

Erin’s smile faded and he suddenly looked pensive as he said, “Our close relationship pretty much sunk all the efforts I made to have a love life. It’s hard for people to understand.” He looked at Christian closely, trying to guess what he was thinking. “I know that look,” he said at last. He stirred his soda with his straw and then let it go abruptly. “Maybe we should get back?”

“Why aren’t you lovers?” Christian asked bluntly, wanting to know, wanting it plain between them. “You are so close. You live together. You work together. You don’t like to be out of each other’s sight. I see your expression when you talk to him. What keeps you from taking the last step? Why should I not think that your closeness to another man won’t compromise whatever relationship we attempt?”

Erin had been in the process of rising from his seat. He sat down again with a thump and lifted one red eyebrow. “Just when I think you’re shy... Okay, you want it straight? Me and Marcus tried, okay? We climbed into bed with each other and both of us had our first time together. We screwed for about a week and then realized that’s all it was going to be, just screwing. He didn’t enjoy it. He didn’t want it. He didn’t find me a turn on. I

was a complete turn off sexually. Once we sorted out that two guys can be that close and not want to be lovers, we ended up where we are right now. We are the closest of friends, end of story. Marcus is not your competition and never will be.”

Christian digested those words and found more questions that needed answers. Like Erin though, he refrained. They couldn't work through everything in one hour in a restaurant. “I understand,” Christian said and it sounded like an inadequate, and a somewhat disingenuous, response, but Erin seemed willing to accept it for what it was.

Erin tossed some bills onto the table for the tip and the bill and stood up, stretching and smiling again. “I feel like I've had a work out.”

Christian replaced some of Erin's money. He slid the bills back to Erin.

Erin took them with a chuckle, saying, “I could argue, since I'm the one that suggested this place, but I think I've figured out that we're both stubborn. It might make us late.”

Christian smiled, some of the tension leaving him. Erin's humor was always good for that. It was a true gift, Christian thought. It was then that he saw a man standing at the open front door suddenly turn and leave. Christian's tension instantly returned, his soldier's senses going on the alert, even as his mind tried to reason with it. This wasn't the war, it said. He didn't need to be suspicious of every one. Christian Callinbrook and an ex stinger pilot were worth a few stares. He should have been used to it.

“You saw him too?” Erin asked under his breath and Christian looked down into Erin's concerned eyes.

“Yes,” Christian replied, “but we shouldn't be so suspicious.”

“Don't let Marcus ever hear you say that,” Erin warned and it was only half a joke. “We aren't like everyone else and you know it. We have to be careful.”

“He may have been a reporter,” Christian suggested. “I think someone would pay good money to know that a Callinbrook had gone to a simple restaurant with a young man.” He studied Erin as Erin realized the implications of that, the potential of having his picture plastered and labeled with unflattering gossip on every newsstand. “I hope you can get used to that?” Christian asked, repeating Erin's words to him.

Erin didn't answer immediately and that let Christian know that his reply wasn't a reflexive denial. “I guess I'm going to find out.” It was an admission of how much he

was interested in Christian. Christian felt sudden warmth at the affirmation that his interest wasn't in vain.

"Just in case he turns out not to be a reporter and he wants to kill us," Erin said with a humorous wrinkle of his nose, "I'll stay left and you stay right."

Christian nodded, understanding. Erin wanted to be certain they knew each other's positions to avoid accidentally hurting each other if they suddenly found themselves attacked. At that moment, Christian was hoping that it was just a nosy reporter with a camera. He didn't want that moment to be marred by violence and, he thought at a deeper level, he didn't want Marcus's trust in him, his willingness to allow Erin out of his sight to go with him, to turn out to be a mistake. Christian didn't relish pursuing any relationship with Erin under the intense blue eyes of that man.

A clear shot to the car, that's all Christian wished for as they went through the door of the restaurant. He tensed when he saw a van parked beside it, blocking it neatly from view. There was a wall on the other side of the car as well. A perfect screen to keep anyone from seeing if—

"I know," Erin said. "I shouldn't have parked near the wall. I know better. It's too easy to block a car in that position."

Christian replied, his eyes scanning the parking lot, "This is peacetime. You are supposed to be free of having to think about such things."

Erin looked up at him and gave a snort. "I think the only real 'peace' is in heaven, Chris, and I'm not ready to die just yet to have it, so I'll kick myself instead and promise to be more paranoid next time."

"We could call for a cab and avoid this," Christian offered.

Erin laughed, "We're the police, Chris. If there is going to be trouble—"

"If we are going to be the cause of that trouble, then we should stop it before it starts," Christian said. "That's part of our jobs as well."

Erin's expression firmed and he suddenly went from being a 'date' to being a Peacekeeper agent in a heartbeat. It told Christian he had decided the situation as a worst case scenario. "Your orders, sir?"

Christian reached under his coat and took off the safety on his gun. He raised eyebrows as Erin checked two places on his body and then touched his wrists, letting

Christian knew he carried knives as well under his long sleeved uniform.

“If we are going to be attacked, then they are already watching us,” Christian said. “Tactics would be useless.”

“Frontal assault?” Erin wondered without a hint of fear.

“Yes, but we still need to catch them off guard,” Christian replied. “I want you to loudly reassure me that I’m being paranoid and act the fool as we walk up to your car. Walk wide of the van. Keep several paces from me and slightly ahead so that you have a clear shot.”

“Roger that,” Erin said without question. “Any other orders?”

Christian checked his watch and replied sourly, “I don’t want to be late for work.”

Erin laughed. “Roger that too, sir.”

“Go, Flynn,” Christian ordered briskly and made a move as if he were returning to the restaurant.

“Oh, come on, Chris!” Erin said loudly. “You are such a worry wart! This is peacetime! We’re as safe as a ship in dry dock! If you keep worrying like this, you’re gonna die young man! You have to relax like me and have some fun!”

Christian turned, still looking reluctant, and it wasn’t all faked.

“Chris!” Erin drawled. “Come on! We’re going to be late and Command is going to chew us out! Nothing’s wrong!”

Erin was grinning and waving for Christian to follow him. He looked and sounded like a fool, playing his part with his usual outgoing flair. Christian made a show of giving in and following him, his mind sorting through different outcomes and backup strategies as they made their way across the parking lot.

“I told you they had good food,” Erin was saying as he moved to the left, covering up the action with the hyper gesturing of his hands and his attempts to turn and look at Christian as he talked. “You have to try the ribs next time. The spices they use are just the best and the meat just melts in your mouth! Frankie in the kitchen, he’s a good friend of mine. He’ll treat you right if I tell him too. It’ll be the best you have ever had!”

Christian couldn’t hold up his end of the conversation, so he nodded to whatever Erin was saying, and hoped it was enough. His heart was thudding in his chest as they approached the van. Instinct told him he was right, that it was a trap, and one he knew he

had to trip in order to take the perpetrators into custody. Knowing what his duty was, though, and putting Erin into harm's way, was turning out to be harder than Christian imagined. Christian's heart was arguing with his head and trying to force him to stop and to tell Erin that they needed to avoid the confrontation. His head had ample ammunition to counter it. Christian knew that if they didn't trip the trap, some unsuspecting citizen might. If someone was waiting on a hair trigger on the other side of that van, then it was possible that they would shoot at any target that presented itself. Christian couldn't let that happen.

The logic of that argument should have been enough to silence Christian's reluctance, but it didn't. As he watched Erin slip hands under his uniform and pull out his guns, preparing to be the first to enter the line of fire, Christian felt a chill travel up his spine. When Erin grinned and winked at him, his face flushed with the thrill of action, and stepped past the van, it was all Christian could do not to reach out and make him stop.

Christian was three steps behind Erin, knowing that he had to give the man room to fire and to avoid whatever was on the other side of the van. That precaution proved well founded when they were attacked instantly. Erin was able to duck easily without tangling with Christian and avoid a long board that cut the air where his head had been. Christian stumbled back to avoid the same board as it followed through in its deadly arc.

"You're going down, you and that murdering bastard!" a voice shouted. Christian saw a burly man, with his face twisted in an expression of pure hate, rush Erin, but Erin was already straightening from his crouch. He kicked out, sinking his booted foot into his attacker. That man fell, and Erin aimed his two guns at the group of men standing just past their fallen comrade.

"Freeze!" Erin shouted. "One move and I'll—"

The men rushed forward. Christian saw an expression on Erin's face, a moment where he lost it, perhaps going back in time to that other place, that other confrontation where he had been beaten and tortured almost to death. Erin took a shuddering breath and then fired his guns.

Christian gritted his teeth in trepidation as he aimed along the barrel of his gun, but then noted with relief that Erin's bullets had struck legs and arms and not vital organs.

The young man was in control of himself. This wasn't going to be a massacre.

Christian fired his gun twice before he realized that the men weren't going to stop. That startled Christian. He had thought that they would either panic and run or give up at the first blaze of gun fire. When he saw the pure hate for him in their eyes, Christian understood then. Their hatred for him was so great that they were willing to die to reach him.

"Sir?" Erin shouted, asking to use deadly force.

"No!" Christian shouted back and that was all that he could manage to say before he was forced to holster his gun and defend himself. Their attackers weren't trained or well-armed. All were dressed in the blue uniform of government service workers. As Christian took his man down with a sweep of one arm, to deflect the man's fist, and a hard karate kick to the man's genitals, he surmised that the man who had glared at them in the restaurant doorway had gone back to his place of work and rounded up these men, bringing them back and setting up his trap. What they had in common, why so many men who worked at the same job had such an intense hatred of Christian, was something he needed to investigate later.

Christian took out another man, slamming the heel of his hand up under the man's chin. That man dropped, unconscious, but the other men stepped over him and kept advancing. Christian dropped back a few steps to position himself for a defense, but just then, Erin came rushing by him. The small, wiry man was a devastating whirlwind. His feet landed bone crunching blows into their attackers. He spun and jumped, as if he were on springs, to chop and punch at them. The men fell, blood splattering and cries filling the air. Soon, there was no one standing but Christian and Erin.

Erin pulled out his cell phone and called for assistance. He and Christian waited for them to arrive, alert and weapons ready, making certain that the wounded men didn't try and renew the fight. When the patrol arrived they were shocked at the damage and amazed that two lone men had caused it. It was Christian's reputation and rank that made quick work of the arrest and allowed Erin and himself to leave the scene without wading through reports and paperwork.

Driving back to headquarters, Christian knew they were both still on an adrenalin high. Looking over at Erin in the driver's seat, Christian could see that Erin's color was

up and that his eyes were sparkling. He was grinning and, at that moment, he looked wild and passionate.

When Erin glanced at Christian, the young man's smile turned warm and affectionate. It was almost the same smile he had given to Marcus when he had talked on the phone with the man, but it ran much deeper than that, much warmer. Christian had a feeling, perhaps sensing some excitement and uncertainty in Erin, that he had never given that particular smile to anyone else.

Erin pulled into the parking garage of Peacekeeper Headquarters and found a parking space. Turning off the engine, he turned to Christian and began to say something. Without thought, Christian reached out and hooked a hand behind Erin's neck. His fingers felt the soft nape of Erin's red hair as he pulled Erin to him. Their lips met and it felt like being struck by lightning, a force so strong that Christian felt as if it were searing him to the bone, as he hungrily plundered Erin's mouth with his.

Erin hung in his grip and Christian felt him tremble, but Erin's arm slid around Christian's waist and pulled him closer, giving Christian his permission to continue. The kiss seemed to last an eternity and neither one of them, it seemed, wanted it to end. For once, Christian didn't consider consequences. He let the future twist in the breeze as he discovered the other half of his soul in Erin Flynn. Before that moment, Christian would have scoffed at such a patently ridiculous notion, but nothing else adequately explained the powerful feeling he was having just then.

Christian broke the kiss at last and stared into Erin's eyes. They were soft wells of green and they searched Christian's blue eyes for something, Erin's expression very serious. "I think..." Erin said in a whisper, "that I've fallen hard for you, Chris"

Christian knew what Erin wanted, knew what he was searching for. Christian replied in the same whisper, as if it were a great secret between them, "That's good, because I feel the same way about you, Erin."

Chapter Thirteen

Dancing

What was the next step? Christian wondered as he finished up for the day, packed his laptop and papers into his briefcase, and said goodbye to his secretary. The kiss that he had shared with Erin was still on his mind, the feel of Erin's firm, warm lips beneath his and the taste of the young man when he had searched Erin's mouth with his tongue. Erin's bright eyes and obvious enthusiasm had asked for more, had asked for Christian to take the next step. Christian had appreciated that. He needed to be the one to make the decision, to decide how to, or if, to proceed.

Christian's mouth quirked ruefully. There wasn't any 'if' anymore, he knew. There was only the 'how' and that was difficult enough. He wasn't just anyone. Erin, for that matter, wasn't just anyone either. They had reputations and duties and, Christian thought, he had a position that called for him to be beyond reproach. He was in command. He had to have the respect and the unconditional trust of the people under him. If he was going to try and have a relationship with an ex stinger pilot subordinate, he had to be discrete about it.

Christian had forgotten himself in the parking garage, but no one had witnessed his lapse. Christian didn't intend for that to happen again. There had to be ground rules, number one being that their relationship did not exist once they entered Peacekeeper Headquarters. He was certain that Erin was enough of a professional to understand.

Christian recalled his other, brief love affairs, only he wasn't willing to use the word 'love' any longer when describing them even to himself. There had been a close friendship in one case, and simple desire in the others. Those affairs had been covert trysts in out of the way lodges and hotel rooms, none the wiser and no commitments made on either side. It was almost as if they had been ashamed, Christian thought, especially during the war. There had always been a feeling of guilt associated with self-indulgence, a sense that it was wrong when one was commanding men into battle to maybe die. Besides, he thought, commanders were supposed to be completely dedicated, or at least seem so.

That he was intending to pursue a young man wasn't the taboo that it had been in the past, but there were some that still looked down on it and thought of it as something that was below decency, something one didn't bring up in polite society. Christian would have liked to say that he didn't care about people who thought like that, but scandal of any kind, even if it was in the minds of small minded men, was better avoided.

Christian tried to imagine Erin being discrete and suddenly had an alarming blank where that image should have formed. Christian found his steps turning quickly from the hall leading to the parking garage to the section where the agent's did their work instead. A picture was forming and it was a highly disturbing one, Christian thought, one of an over excited Erin talking about his experience in the garage to anyone who would listen. It was imperative, Christian thought anxiously, that he talk to Erin to stop that scenario from becoming a reality.

Christian found the main office empty except for one a harried individual; an older man in the uniform of a division captain. Hunkered over paperwork, and chewing viciously on the end of a computer stylus, the man glared at a computer screen.

"What the hell do you want?!" the man exploded without looking up, only knowing that someone had dared disturb him.

Christian frowned, but he was used to the rough personalities of field agents. He waited silently until the man looked up in annoyance. When he saw who was standing by his desk, the Captain's stylus dropped out of his mouth and he stood up quickly. "Sorry, sir!" he said quickly.

Christian cut off any more apologies by asking abruptly, "I'm here to speak with Agent Erin Flynn. Please page him to this office. There are parts of a report that I need to discuss with him."

The man blinked, probably wondering why his commander had decided to bring his request to his office instead of Christian's own. His answer wasn't much to Christian's liking. "He's left for the day, sir, along with his partner, Marcus Cree."

Christian scowled. "Why?"

The captain was suddenly on the defensive and it was plain that he was finding it hard to think of an appropriate response. Finally, he gave up trying to find a reasonable sounding explanation and said, "Erin Flynn saw action today, sir. He had to take Marcus

Cree home. The man becomes highly stressed when Erin Flynn sees action of any kind without his presence. It usually only takes a day of down time to calm him down and have him ready for duty again, sir.”

The commander in Christian bristled and thought, ‘unacceptable liability’. Two men who couldn’t work apart from each other, and who completely depended on one another for their emotional stability, shouldn’t have been allowed to be agents. If they had been any other men, if they hadn’t had the training that set them head and shoulders above all other agents, Christian would have given them both their walking papers.

“Thank you,” Christian replied and walked out of the stunned and confused captain’s office. The man had expected a reprimand, Christian was sure, and was finding it hard to believe that Christian was accepting his explanation. Christian wasn’t accepting it though. He was enough of a professional to know that the captain didn’t have any of the answers to his numerous questions. The people who did have those answers were Erin and Marcus.

As Christian walked towards the front of the building, he called on his cell phone for his driver. Meeting the man and the vehicle outside, Christian slipped into the back seat. Safe from prying eyes and ears, he took out his cell phone once more and then began to make another call, one to Erin Flynn.

Erin answered the phone sounding tired.

“Christian here,” Christian said curtly. “I was informed that Marcus Cree left for the day. I fail to understand the reasoning behind his action. As his commanding officer—”

“Did you speak with the Captain?” Erin asked and sounded irritable.

“Yes, I did,” Christian replied and felt irritation himself. “His explanation was less than satisfactory. I wish to speak to Cree directly.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but Marcus can’t come to the phone.” Erin sounded cold now, and professional. “Marcus needs to have a day of down time. It was cleared by the Captain.”

“As your commander, I need to know all of the strengths and weaknesses of those under my command,” Christian persisted. “If Cree is experiencing mental difficulties pertaining to your seeing action of any kind I—,” Christian stopped, knowing that he was speaking to the wrong person. “I demand to speak to agent Cree at once.”

There was a long pause and then Erin replied, “I understand your concern, but

Marcus can't talk to you right now. I'll tell him that you want to meet with him tomorrow."

Christian seethed. "Perhaps you did not understand that I was giving you an order."

Erin exploded so suddenly that Christian started and almost dropped the phone. "Marcus is drugged, okay?! It's the only thing that would calm him down. He thought that he had failed me again. He thought that he should have been there to protect me. Can't you understand that? Don't you know anything about PTSD? The last time it happened, I was tortured! I almost died! He saw what they left of me! He was with me the whole time while I recovered. Don't you get what a guilt trip he carries around inside him? Give him a damn day to get his head back on straight and I promise he will be all right in the morning!"

"Erin," Christian began, contrite, but Erin thought that he was going to argue further. The livestream on Christian's cell phone lit up. He saw a very small picture of Erin sitting up in a bed. His face looked very angry. His eyes looked sunken with weariness and his hair was disheveled. The scene shifted and Christian realized that he was looking at a Marcus Cree asleep in Erin's lap, the man's arms locked around Erin's waist.

"He goddam needs me," Erin said, "and I'm going to be here for him. You are not disturbing him. Get over it or get rid of us both. I do not need your military crap right now." The livestream went dead and so did the connection.

"Erin!" Christian snarled and threw the phone angrily against the back of the front seat. The driver started and rolled down the smoky partition.

"Sir?" The driver inquired nervously.

"Nothing!" Christian snapped back and the driver wisely rolled the partition back up.

Christian's feelings were tied up in knots and he hated it. This was why there was a no fraternization rule, he thought angrily. How could he be a commander and have a potential relationship with a subordinate? Lives were in his hands. Marcus Cree was having some sort of break down and his condition was being treated as little more than a passing illness that would be nonexistent given time. Christian knew that he couldn't accept that and he certainly couldn't accept Erin and Marcus's insubordination, no matter what he was feeling for Erin. Marcus had to face him and give him answers and Christian was now determined that Marcus would also have to go through a Peacekeeper psych

evaluation. If Erin and Marcus were both opposed to that decision then Christian was not going to have any choice but to dismiss them both.

Christian felt a violent ache in the center of his chest. He rubbed at it and bowed his head, his long, soft hair framing his pained expression. God! He did not want to lose Erin. That feeling that had overcome him when they had kissed...it had been so powerful. It had felt like finding a missing piece of himself. Now that he had found it, he didn't know if he could live without it again.

He knows what you are like, now, Christian thought bitterly to himself. He knows that you'll choose to be a commander before you'll be a lover. That's when the others left me. He won't be any different. I have to accept that we're over. He pictured Marcus, curled up in Erin's lap, arms wrapped around him possessively. Erin had chosen to, Christian thought, his bitterness growing. Erin had promised that no one was Christian's rival, yet the evidence contradicting that had been right there for Christian to see. Erin had chosen Marcus over him. Perhaps they weren't lovers in the sexual sense, but it was clear that their friendship was more important than a career or a possible lover.

The phone rang. Christian reluctantly picked it up from the floor of the car, composing himself as he did so. He expected it to be business and was shocked when the livestream came on and Erin's face was looking at him guiltily.

"I'm sorry," Erin said softly. "It's... It's just been a very long day and calming Marcus down took hours. He wouldn't let go of me or let me out of his sight. I understand your position. I know I don't have the luxury of calling all the shots in this job, not with so many people depending on me... on Marcus. I know... I know it looks bad to you. I know you'll probably want Marcus's head examined... Just... just go easy on him, okay? It took a long time for me to get him where he is. He was pretty messed up after the war. Without me..." Erin cleared his throat and wiped at his face. "I'm all he has, Chris. I'm what keeps him together. I don't mind that. You have to understand that. It's not a burden to me because... I guess I feel that strongly about our friendship."

Erin coughed and Christian saw him reach past the vid lens and pick a glass of water up from a hidden table. He sipped at the water and then put the glass back on the table. "I guess we both aren't models of stability," he continued, "but we've always been given missions where that's not a liability. I think if you want us both to remain with the

Peacekeepers, that you have to accept that we won't be suited to every mission. I know that's hard for you. I know you think that an agent should be a tool that you can place in any situation. We're specialized tools though. You wouldn't use a commando transport to question a witness and you can't use Marcus and me to lick stamps for envelopes. We are the best at what we do, but outside that... Don't put guard dogs in with babies, that's all I'm saying... Does any of that make any sense, Chris? I hope it does because... that kiss in the garage... that meant a lot to me. I don't want to stop now, what's happening between us. I know your career is part of what you are. I know you can't separate the two. Because I know that, I also know what will happen to US if I have to go against you and your orders. Please don't make me have to, Chris. Find a way that I can do what you want, but still take care of Marcus."

Christian was very quiet, his mind swirling, the commander Christian trying to find common ground with the man Christian. Erin's green eyes gazed at him, too obviously begging him to understand. Could he allow himself to do what Erin wanted? Christian thought of consequences, thought angrily of McLaren, who had allowed Marcus and Erin to run roughshod over rules and regulations, thereby dumping the problem into Christian's lap at the worst possible time.

Christian admitted very carefully, "I want to do that... I want to give you what you want. I ... I don't have enough information though. You have to give me time." Christian swallowed hard. "That kiss meant a great deal to me too. I... I don't want... I don't want this coming between us."

Erin nodded pensively, his face showing some hope, but showing some reserve as well. He winced suddenly and made a small sound of pain.

"What's wrong?" Christian demanded sharply.

Erin chuckled, but it was strained. "Marcus can just about bend steel with his bare hands. He's just holding on a bit too tight."

Without thought, Christian blurted out, "Should I come there to help? I'm not far away."

Erin stared in surprise and then a slow smile brightened his face. "No, that's all right. He won't really hurt me. Thanks though."

Christian wasn't convinced. "You are sure?"

“Yes,” Erin assured him. “I’ve been through this a few times. Marcus just needs to know that I’m where he can protect me. Once he gets his head around that I’m not hurt and that you... well, that you did protect me from the bad guys, he’ll be okay.”

“But...,” Christian felt embarrassment. He was sounding like a fool, he thought. He knew Erin’s skill and strength. If anyone could handle Marcus it would be Erin Flynn. “All right,” Christian replied, but then added reluctantly, “I will expect to see Marcus in the morning, Erin. That is an order.”

“Understood,” Erin replied with a nod and then gave the lens an intense look. “I really want this to work. I hope...” he seemed embarrassed as well suddenly and a bit uncertain as he finished, “I hope we can figure this out because I don’t want to stop seeing you.”

The pain in Christian’s chest turned into something else that was even more painful, but markedly different. This was a swelling, as if he were about to burst with some great emotion, and it all had to do with Erin’s last sentence. Christian had a foolish urge to touch the cell screen, as if it were really Erin’s face there and, even though he knew it was completely foolish, he found his fingers doing just that. Erin blinked, probably seeing odd, dark, unidentified blots, but he seemed to know what they were. When Christian removed his fingers, he saw Erin looking as if he were overwhelmed.

“I have to do my job,” Christian told Erin. “I have a duty to do the right thing, but... if there is a way to reconcile all of this, I will do my best to find it, Erin. I do want to find it.”

Erin blinked a few times rapidly and then said huskily, “That’s all I expect and all I’ll ask for. I wouldn’t ask you to compromise yourself because of... because of what’s going on between us. I wouldn’t ask you to accept Marcus and me the way we are if I thought that we weren’t fit for our jobs.”

“I believe that,” Christian replied and did.

“Good,” Erin said and his smile was soft now. “Erin Flynn doesn’t lie,” he told Christian. “Remember that. No matter what happens, or what anyone says, believe what I’m telling you.”

Erin’s eyes were so intense that Christian found himself not doubting Erin at all, though the more jaded and experienced side of him scoffed. “I do believe you,” Christian

said and then added, “In the morning then, Erin, I will expect to see you and Marcus.”

“We’ll be there,” Erin promised.

The phone went dark and Christian found himself gently caressing it in his hands as if it were Erin he was holding and not a cold piece of technology. “I do believe you,” he whispered and it was more than Erin’s ascertain that he didn’t lie that he believed in.

Chapter Fourteen

Touches

“Hey, Christian,” a familiar voice said and Christian turned and frowned at the man approaching him.

Christian was not in the mood to talk. He had just had a very long session with Marcus Cree that morning, and though his questions had all been satisfactorily answered and his order, to see the staff psychologist for an evaluation, complied with, he was still left with a sense that he was flying in the face of every military precept to allow Marcus to keep his job. It made him irritable, especially since he was now forced to go to McLaren and explain his report and his reasoning behind it when ‘feeling’ that Marcus would complete a mission no matter what the cost to himself, or Erin Flynn, was in no way supported by current facts.

“Busy?” the man who had spoken was Gregory Sharp, a commander for a special ops unit that Christian had worked with before. A tall, dark, spit and Polish soldier from a well-placed family, Christian considered him a friend, though not a close one. They sometimes had more than a working relationship and had gone to social occasions more than once. Christian supposed that was why the man felt free to say, “Heard that you were out with Erin Flynn the other day and ran into a bit of trouble.”

Christian winced inwardly. “If you are going to chastise me for getting into that type of situation, you don’t need to bother. I’ve done enough of that myself.”

Sharp shrugged and chuckled. “You are damn notorious. I don’t see how you can avoid situations like that completely.” He rubbed the back of his neck and seemed suddenly nervous. He gave a swift look around them and then leaned close when he saw that the hallway was empty. “What I want to know is, is he as good as I think he is?”

Christian grunted. “He’s an excellent fighter. I was very impressed by his—”

Sharp snorted. “Christian! I meant, is he any good on his back?” The man grinned. “The talk is that you’ve taken up with that pretty little soldier. I have to tell you we are all envious, well, at least those of us with that sort of interest.” The man winked.

Christian stared and then, his rage on a tight leash, he began to reply, “What gave

you the impression that I—?”

The man snickered. “Oh, come on Christian! We knew you wouldn’t be able to resist him once he ended up under your command! We were laying bets from the first day. I know you come off as damn stuffy and correct, but I know that you have the same blood in your veins as I do.” He clapped Christian on the back. “Let me be the first to know when you get tired of him. When you kick him out your bed, I want to be there to get him into mine. You can tell me all the buttons to push to make him open those lovely legs for me, too, all right?”

Christian was used to the crudeness of soldiers. He had learned to ignore it and to sometimes to join in with it to bond with his men. In that office building, though, far away from any war, or even a barracks room, the last thing that he had expected was to run into it and to receive it from such a person; one of his peers. That alone was enough to make him tremble with disgust and anger, that the man was talking about Erin, as if he were something less than they were, a toy to be played with and then handed on to the next man, was enough to make Christian see red and to feel rage burn through him as if he were on fire.

Christian’s eyes cleared and he stared down at the man sprawled at his feet. He’d decked Sharp with a roundhouse punch without thinking. The man was rubbing his jaw and blinking stupidly. “I am Erin Flynn’s commanding officer,” Christian said in a dangerous voice he hardly recognized as his. “If you speak about him like that again, I won’t be responsible for my actions.” Christian gave the hall a swift glance. It was still empty, the hour early enough that many people hadn’t yet arrived at work. “Don’t imagine that you will report this incident either,” he continued. “I’m not above countering with a report about your behavior towards those of lower rank under your command.”

The man sneered and slowly stood up. “All right, Christian. I know how important your image is to you. I guess you wouldn’t want just anyone knowing you strayed in your entertainment and sampled some cheap fare. Just don’t keep him long or the talk will spread with or without my help. You might need a man like that to polish your boots, but you don’t ask him to stay for dinner afterwards.”

The rage almost washed over Christian again and his hand balled into a fist, but

Sharp was already walking away, his face red with anger and dark with resentment.

The monarchies were dead, Christian thought bitterly, but the attitude of the people who had been a part of them lingered. They still maintained their class structure, they still attempted to rule, using their wealth and prestige to gain them land and positions of importance, and they still retained their acute snobbery. Command positions, whatever the military organization, were too often held by the elite, since they could afford the better schools and connections. It was a sad fact that these elitist commanders brought their aristocratic standards and attitudes with them. They looked on their subordinates, not with just the distance of a commander for a foot soldier, but also with the attitude that they were better than their subordinates. Christian wished he could say that what Sharp, or others like him, said didn't matter, but that would have been naive. He had the respect and trust of his men to think about also. If Sharp wanted to make trouble, he could make a great deal of it.

Common sense and prudence told Christian to call it quits with Erin. The situation was ripe for disaster. Sharp was insulted and Christian had bruised his ego as well as his face. A call to McLaren, Command, or the press, could easily spell the end of Christian's career as well as any social place that he had carved out for himself among his peers. Those two things had given Christian at least some semblance of peace.

"Commander Callinbrook!" Erin called in warning, allowing Christian time to identify him before he took hold of Christian's uniform jacket and tugged him out of a side door. That door led outside. A few steps to the left and they were hidden by a long line of box shrubs. Erin turned to Christian then and his eyes were happy and shining.

"What is it?" Christian asked as he tried to keep his look of annoyance even as the feeling itself melted under the onslaught of Erin's obvious happiness. "I have a meeting with Command to attend."

"I know. I won't keep you," Erin told him quickly. "I just wanted to thank you for the way you treated Marcus. You gave him an honest hearing and you didn't make your decision until you heard him out."

"That's the way a commander is supposed to behave," Christian replied. The sun sparkled on Erin's red hair. His face was glowing, even though he looked tired. He was vibrant, handsome, a bundle of energy. This was the person that Sharp thought was

beneath him. This was the person that people like Sharp thought was an embarrassment to show in public; someone to hide away, use and discard. This was the person they wanted him to give up. If he didn't, Sharp was very likely going to drag Christian's name through the mud.

"Chris?" Erin prompted, less formal now that there was small chance of anyone seeing or hearing them. "Are you just going to stare? You're not mad, are you? I know I was pretty damn rude last night, but Marcus—"

Christian made a small quieting gesture with his hand and Erin blinked, surprised. That hand lowered to smooth along Erin's hair and then his cheek. Erin's pale skin blushed and he looked nervous, not sure what Christian was thinking. Christian leaned close and softly brushed Erin's lips with his. He whispered against them, 'When they told him to take the road to Heaven, he took the high road to Hell instead.' and then he was drinking in Erin's lips with his, not really sure of his reception, especially after their sharp words the day before.

Erin responded. He pressed forward and his mouth opened to let Christian plunder it with his tongue. They stood like that, letting their tongues probe deep and caress each other, letting them take the step that they themselves were not yet ready for. Erin's hands raised and gripped Christian's waist. His pelvis dipped forward and Christian felt a hardness caress him below the belt through the material of their clothing.

It was a shock. Christian felt a shiver travel through his body at the feel of what could only be one thing. When he broke the kiss and looked down into Erin's green eyes, battling with an urge to do more than just touch, Erin said, "Maybe they didn't really know the way to Heaven and he did?"

"You're not at all what I expected," Christian said softly. His hand lifted to caress Erin's cheek and Erin looked unsure. Christian clarified. "I don't give my affections lightly. I'm very aware that I am not like everyone else; free to do as I please without there being consequences. I have a command position. When I first saw you, I made a superficial judgment that was completely in error. When the facts of the matter mounted, informing me that I was wrong in my assumptions, I fought against that truth... I fought against it, because..." Christian couldn't think, not with Erin's hardness planted against him and Erin looking up at him, trying to understand.

Christian purposefully put an inch of space between them, but his hands lowered to gently hold onto the lapels of Erin's uniform jacket so that he wouldn't think that it was a rejection. Christian continued, "I knew that I was having feelings for you and I wasn't sure those feelings were appropriate for someone like me."

Erin's puzzled look sharply turned into anger. Strong hands gripped Christian's hands and Erin looked as if he were prepared to throw them off as he replied hotly, "Not sure you wanted to mingle with street trash? What changed your mind?"

Christian caressed Erin's hands and then took them and pulled so that Erin's arms were around his waist. He pressed them there and admitted, "Someone said something to me and it was ugly. When I realized I had been thinking the exact same kind of ugliness, that I was guilty of..." Christian couldn't say it, couldn't go that far and admit that he had been thinking of Erin as a liability and a potential embarrassment. "I can't be free to do everything I want where this relationship is concerned," Christian told Erin. "I need to be honorable and beyond reproach. In public, we must be reserved and aware at all times that eyes, camera lenses, and people with a vendetta against me could be watching us."

Erin blinked and pulled his arms away from Christian. "Let me get this straight," he said with a tight, dangerous smile. "You're telling me you're ready to try for a relationship, but that we have to have to act, in public, like we don't have one? How is this any sort of 'awakening' on your part? I mean, if this person who talked to you made you realize that you were wrong, but you still want to keep me in your closet with your shiny boots, then I'm not sure what 'wrong' you're talking about."

Christian replied, feeling that he was treading on land mines and not sure of the right path through them to safety. "I discovered it was wrong to not pursue a relationship because of my position and the responsibilities I have. I realized I was insulting you by thinking that way." It was the best that Christian could do. Telling Erin that their positions of birth and class had been on his mind as well, wouldn't be well received, he felt, so he was determined to not admit to them.

Erin stepped back and Christian flushed when Erin moved out of the cover of the shrubs, drew himself up where anyone could see, and then held out a hand to Christian. His eyes were hopeful, but ready for pain, as he said, "If what you want from me is honest, and you really do care about me, then stand where everyone can see you, where

everyone can see us, and let me and everyone else know it.”

Christian stared at the hand, looked at Erin’s handsome face, felt the leap in his heart that begged him to close the space between them. Hadn’t he already said, ‘Damn them all!’ when he had punched Smart? Couldn’t he take that hand held out to him and have a relationship like any other man where everyone could see? That they were two men wasn’t so much of a scandal. It was their positions in rank and their positions in life that could dictate the course of the accusations and insults thrown at them.

“I won’t shame you,” Erin said with intensity. “I won’t make people laugh at us or give them fuel to ridicule you for your choice.” When Christian still didn’t move, Erin said flatly, beginning to lower his hand, “I won’t play your game, because, if you can’t do this, then that’s all it ever was.”

Christian was suddenly there and taking Erin’s hand, lifting it to his lips and kissing the calloused palm hard. Erin’s eyes had widened at the suddenness of it, but then he was smiling softly and his free hand was lifting to Christian’s collar. Taking a tight hold, he pulled Christian down to his level and his green eyes shone. He took his other hand back from Christian’s kiss and gave Christian a quick, painless, slap on the cheek.

Christian grunted and straightened in surprise, touching his cheek in confusion. “That’s for running me through the wringer again,” Erin said. “You have to stop that, Chris. Make up your mind and keep it made up, okay?”

Christian blinked and then laughed. “How do you do that?” he asked when he had quieted. “How do you make me feel…”

Erin looked serious and said, “I can’t make you. You either feel something or you don’t.”

Christian refused to look around them, refused to see if judging eyes were watching. He wanted Erin to be sure of him. He wanted to be sure of himself. Christian reached out, gently took hold of Erin, and then pulled him close. Standing pressed together he felt Erin’s hard lines mold against his. Christian was a tall man and Erin was slightly below average, but they unexpectedly fit and it seemed the most natural thing in the world to hold him. Erin wasn’t submissive. That wasn’t the kind of man that Christian wanted. Erin was strong and his grip on Christian was just as firm, just as in control of the embrace. It was almost painful to finally break it and step back.

“I have a meeting,” Christian said reluctantly.

“Duty calls,” Erin agreed huskily. “I guess I’ll catch you later.”

Christian chuckled and said as he began walking away. “Haven’t you already caught me?”

Chapter Fifteen

Moonlight

Christian struggled up the last few feet of the rock wall, sweating and breathing hard. Erin grinned at him, already comfortably positioned and waiting for him. The younger man had beaten him easily, scaling the wall with the speed of a mad monkey, daring as always, reckless to the point where Christian was gasping out his outrage as soon as he was even with the ex-stinger pilot.

“Erin! That was the single most irresponsible... reckless... insane climb I have—”

Erin swung close, carefully latched onto Christian’s harness with one hand while maintaining his three point hold with the rest of his body. He planted a deep, tonguing kiss on Christian’s mouth and Christian was lost for the space of a few heartbeats. When Erin broke away again, he was panting too, both of them needing air. His eyes were soft wells of green that begged Christian not to start an argument.

His mind quickly going over the climb, Christian banked his anger and was slightly embarrassed to realize that his judgment of Erin’s climb had been solely based on his anxiety for the man. In reality, Erin had used all the precautions and had made certain of all his hand and foot holds before proceeding to a higher level.

“See, we’re both recovered,” Erin said gleefully. “Time to send us both out on some missions, don’t you think, sir?”

Christian grunted. “It’s the medic who makes that determination.”

Erin scoffed. “You know you can override that decision. They’re always too careful.” He nodded to the fake mountain wall. “This is the real test.”

“Adrenalin junkie,” Christian grumbled and blew his bangs out of his face with an annoyed puff of air. Erin had braided it back from his face, but sweaty strands had escaped.

“Like you’re not?” Erin returned good naturedly. He looked unsure for a second and then asked cautiously, “Marcus’s done playing mother hen for now. He’s gotten over that ‘incident’ of ours. If you want...” He paused and Christian saw him duck his head and

hide behind his red tangle of bangs as he asked quickly, “Want to come over for dinner, just us two?”

Christian still couldn't help that uncertain hesitation, that double check of making certain it was both proper and not something someone could make a scandal out of. After the unexpected kiss, he had found himself looking down at the ground far below and making sure that they were still alone in the gym. He knew he needn't have bothered. Erin, over the last week, had shown himself to be a model of good conduct and had been very careful to maintain the line between the professional and personal sides of their lives. He had not once shown Christian anything above what was due a commanding officer in front of other people, but, on the other hand, he had been very reserved when alone as well. The kiss had been the first show of intimacy that he had initiated after their meeting in the bushes.

Not that they had been alone together much for anything to have happened between them, Christian sighed inwardly. Now that he had made up his mind, he had entertained thoughts of taking Erin back to his home and going to a deeper, more serious level, but Erin had strangely been standoffish in that respect. Christian had been treated more like a friend Erin was trying to get to know than a new lover. He supposed that was wise, but his body protested. It was thinking at a baser level, one he didn't want to analyze too deeply. While he did want to get to know Erin as a friend and then take the more serious step later on, an instinctive urge within him wanted to test the young man, to see who would bend, who would give a little in the game of masculinity, who would surrender first.... Christian would have liked to be more certain that Erin would be the one to do that. It was in Christian's nature to be the protector/ the strong one/ the one in command, and he wasn't so sure he would enjoy it any other way if Erin insisted.... but Erin was so strong for such a small, wiry man. He was masculine, take charge, and bold. Christian thought of Erin's hands taking hold of him, how he had kissed hungrily and taken what he had wanted without hesitation, of how he had wrapped his strong arms around Christian's slim waist and met Christian's advances just as forcefully. The thought that their relationship might be of two strong personalities and that the giving in might have to be done in turns, made Christian pause and consider.

“Earth to Chris,” Erin called with a grin. “I asked if you want to come back to my

place and have dinner.”

Christian blinked, blushing and trying to bring his thoughts to order. He said without thinking, with a hint of the uncertainty that he felt, “Will you put poor Marcus out on the doorstep like a cat until we’re done?”

Erin looked hurt, very briefly, and then his face did something odd. Christian tried to figure out what that expression was as Erin replied, “We’re not glued together, you know? It isn’t like that. He’s my best friend. He’s always going to be there, Chris, but he’s not going to be sleeping with us or getting in between us.”

Christian deciphered the look at last. Erin was expecting their relationship to end because of Marcus. His other ones had in the past. That look had been of someone sensing the inevitable. Christian wanted to ask, ‘but what happens when we become more intimate?’ and ‘What happens when we become a couple and move in to the same home?’ but those were questions he could only ask if he had made those decisions to begin with. Voicing the possibility that they had reached that point was farther than Christian wanted to go just then.

“Marcus does have a life, by the way,” Erin added. “Tonight’s his meeting with the Decorator Club.”

Christian’s eyes went wide.

Erin snickered. “Just kidding. It’s actually a group of other agents who like to talk about martial arts theory.” Erin pantomimed a yawn. “I went once. They go on for hours. It’s very dry and technical. If I give Marcus the sign, he’ll gladly stay all night and love every minute of it.” Erin winked at Christian, “Chris, you have these problems with any roommate. One guy or girl has to sit outside and find something to do while the other has someone over.”

Christian relaxed. “How about tonight?”

Erin nodded. Christian took a deep breath, settling his nerve and quieting that annoying aristocratic voice of alarm that worried about a prince being hosted in less than royal surroundings. Allowing that voice to rule his decision would have been intolerable. He wasn’t going to forget Commander Sharp’s unintentional lesson in the ugliness of snobbery. There weren’t any class distinctions any longer and Erin’s simple home was not beneath him. “I’ll go with you after work,” Christian said at last. “I don’t have any

prior engagements.”

Erin beamed. “I don’t cook and Marcus won’t have time. How about ordering Chinese?”

“Italian,” Christian suggested with a frown. “I enjoy Chinese, but—”

Erin laughed. “First one down gets to choose!” And then he was repelling downward.

Christian swore and began following more slowly, already knowing he had lost. No, Erin wasn’t going to be the submissive/cared for/ protected half of their relationship, he thought with a sigh and then, looking down and seeing Erin’s confident descent, his strength and daring, Christian wondered if he would mind that so much.

After work, Christian drove a car to Erin’s apartment, following Erin in his. Erin soon lost him in traffic, speeding ahead and not waiting. That puzzled Christian, but, when he reached the apartment building and made his cautious way up to Erin’s apartment, he heard Marcus and Erin talking loudly enough to be heard even through the door.

“You need to go now, Marcus!” Erin said breathlessly. “Bye and all. Have a good time!”

Marcus’s voice sounded grumbling and lecturing. “If you had asked, I would have come home earlier and cleaned. You should plan better.”

“I know! I know!” Erin shot back. “It was a spur of the moment thing though! Thanks for getting dinner, now take yours and see you later! I want as much time as I can get with Chris.”

Christian could almost see Marcus’s smirk of amusement. “You like him a great deal, don’t you?”

“Like doesn’t even cover it, best friend o’mine!” Erin replied warmly. “No calling! No coming home early! I’m in our apartment and Christian is—”

“Capable of taking care of you, yes I know,” Marcus finished. “I’m leaving. Have fun.”

“Oh, I intend to!” Erin laughed.

The door opened just as Christian decided it was time to knock. Marcus was standing there with his car keys and a bag of what smelled like Italian food. Marcus had a small

piece of garlic bread in his mouth. He let it drop onto his burden in embarrassment and said, "Good evening, sir, I was just leaving. Erin is inside and expecting you."

"Sorry if this is an inconvenience, Agent Cree," Christian apologized automatically.

"None at all, sir," Marcus assured him. "Have a pleasant evening."

"Thank you," Christian replied and Marcus was moving past him and walking down the hallway. Somehow, despite the neutral conversation, Marcus had made it feel as if it was a changing of the guard and Christian was certain it was intentional.

Going inside, Christian called out, "Erin! I'm here!"

The apartment looked clean enough, Christian thought. A few things were out of place or left out, but nothing to warrant a mad dash to straighten. When Erin appeared, breathing hard and smiling apologetically, he said, "Sorry about the mess. Asking you here was kind of an impulse."

"It is quite all right," Christian assured him. He was dressed casually, having changed before leaving work. He wore a soft pair of black pants and a loose, light blue shirt with a polo collar. Erin had changed into blue jeans and a red shirt that kept slipping a bit towards one rounded shoulder. It showed the enticing line of his collar as he moved nervously, motioning to the couch.

"Sit down, Chris. Would you like something to drink?" Erin asked. "Juice, tea, coffee, soda...?"

Christian sat gingerly and then forced himself to relax and sit back. The couch was very comfortable. It seemed to take the bone weariness of the day into itself and cradle his body. Christian could have easily closed his eyes and gone to sleep there. His furniture in his apartment was tasteful, but its main function was to look good rather than to be comfortable.

Erin stood looking at him, rubbing the back of his neck and looking nervous. Christian realized that he was still waiting for an answer.

"Tea?" Christian asked tentatively.

Erin smiled. "Marcus made some before he left so there's still hot water. Be back in a sec."

The kitchen was small and it had a half swing door. Christian could see Erin's legs as he walked about and made the tea. The smell of Italian food was very strong. "I thought

you wanted to have Chinese!” Christian said.

“You’re the guest, though,” Erin called back with a chuckle. “I remembered my manners about an hour before quitting time.”

Christian laughed at that and then looked carefully about the little apartment. He hadn’t noticed much when he had visited last, but, now that he had more time, he could see that there were many touches that were meticulous and well arranged. A shrine of framed photos showed a collage of stinger pilots in various activities; Erin making a face at the camera and flashing a peace sign, someone else looking reserved but smiling in his goggles, Marcus appearing in the act of turning away from the camera in a mercenary’s instinctive reflex to remain unnoticed, someone who looked as young as ten standing silently with a small smile next to the foot of his stinger. There were a few group photos that Christian recognized from an awards ceremony. The awards themselves were in a display frame above the photos. They looked so young, Christian thought. The war had depleted both sides of fighting age men and the stingers were notorious for having small cockpits to keep them light and fast. Having young pilots had almost been a necessity.

There was a weapons locker against one wall. A rack by the door was hung with flak jackets, a piece of chest armor with a blast mark on one side, and several coats. Someone, he suspected Marcus, had painted the locker gray and made a faux granite finish on it.

Turning, Christian saw two bedroom doors. In one he could see an unmade bed and a side table covered in empty crushed soda cans. In the other room was a bed made with military precision and decorated in the same blue and gray of the living room. Chris could guess which room was Erin’s.

“Yeah, I’m not the cleanest guy in the world,” Erin lamented in embarrassment as he handed Christian his hot tea.

Christian twitched instinctively at Erin’s sudden appearance, calmed his soldier instincts, and took his tea graciously. Erin sat on the opposite end of the couch. His one knee was bent as he faced Christian sideways and sipped his cup of coffee. He still looked uncertain and nervous.

“Marcus makes me keep my mess in my own room,” Erin added.

“That’s wise,” Christian replied and smiled. “I don’t need to be impressed by housekeeping skills, Erin.”

“It’s not the U.W.F. officer’s quarters for sure,” Erin said with a wink.

Christian shrugged, amused, “Officers can be just as messy as regulars.”

Christian put his tea down and Erin, after a moment, put down his coffee mug. Erin sat up and inched a bit closer as he asked, “I hope you don’t mind lasagna and garlic bread?”

“No, not at all,” Christian assured him. He felt that he needed to ease some of Erin’s tension. “I assure you, I’m not expecting anything other than a meal tonight, Erin. We should talk and get to know each other.”

Erin reached out and felt the collar of Christian’s shirt. “I didn’t want to rush you. Marcus told me I’m good at pressuring and overwhelming people. He said I should wait for you to make the first move, so I would know that you were ready and it’s what you wanted.”

“Wise man,” Christian whispered, feeling a heat start to build inside him. “So, if he hadn’t given such sage advice, what would we be doing now?”

Erin had another flicker of uncertainty and then he seemed to toss that aside as he smiled softly and replied, “I think we’ve already established that we have an attraction to each other and that we want things to develop between us. I think we’re past the point where we need to figure out what we really want.” Erin swallowed and looked down. “I don’t want you to think... or... feel... What I mean is...”

Christian hadn’t foreseen this at all. He had thought there would be a slow moving forward, maybe nothing more than friendship for a while. He forced himself to weigh consequences. Was it the right time? Would he regret it? What if something went wrong? Was there a chance that this might damage what was forming between them? Was he even ready for this?

“Skip dinner,” Christian said quietly and his hand slid up under Erin’s shirt, moved along the warm skin of his back, and then pulled Erin gently to him. He stood and brought Erin to his feet along with him, lips hungrily tasting the slim line of Erin’s neck.

Holding Erin against him with one, strong arm, Christian’s free hand smoothed along Erin’s face, his cheek, and then ghosted over his lips. He felt Erin give his fingertips nipping little kisses and then Erin surprised Christian by swallowing his middle finger whole and sucking hungrily on it. Christian felt the rasp of a swirling tongue.

Christian shivered under that onslaught and turned his head in time to witness Erin pulling back and letting that finger do a slow, warm, wet slide out of his mouth. Christian gasped, feeling his pants go very tight at the crotch as an intense heat scalded him from the inside out.

Erin ran strong, calloused hands up under Christian's shirt. Lifting it high, while Christian stood, stunned, Erin winked, then ducked his head underneath. Christian clutched at Erin when he felt that talented mouth latch onto one of his nipples and suck it.

Breathe, Christian told himself as he trembled and tried to keep himself from tossing Erin onto the couch again and having him then and there, especially when Erin began to alternate between his nipples, tormenting them both equally. This wasn't a quick conquest, Christian said to himself. This was someone he cared about. He couldn't allow himself to lose control.

"Bedroom?" Erin whispered against his skin and his hot breath made Christian's nipple go rock hard.

"Yes," Christian replied and it came out as a groan.

Erin came out of hiding from under Christian's shirt and they moved into Erin's bedroom, their lips still kissing and hands roving and pulling at clothing. Erin's shirt ended up on the top of a lamp and Christian's ended up tangled at their feet. When Erin's back hit the bed, Christian was instantly climbing on top. It was his turn to torment.

Erin's jeans rode low on hips and his tattoo was prominent, so was the light tracery of scars that even surgery hadn't completely erased. He was breathing hard. Christian could see knots on his ribs where they must have been broken at one time.

Erin wasn't perfect. He was wiry, all muscle, and as lean as an alley cat. Yet he was perfect, Christian thought, but in a different way entirely than he was used to judging such things. Erin had a glow; a vibrancy about him. His energy was on his skin and it was almost electric. When Christian smoothed hands over his washboard stomach, he almost imagined that he felt a charge.

Erin smelled masculine, but in a way that was like fresh bread in the morning or pastries cooling on a tray. It made Christian's mouth water and his body long for a taste. The way he shivered, the small undulation his belly made as Christian made a trail of kisses and licks down to his naval, and the tensing and flexing of his muscles, was like an

erotic dance. Christian couldn't help wrapping both arms about his waist and bringing him up to open the snap of Erin's jeans with his teeth. Erin gasped and his large eyes went wide, but he reached down and helped Christian with the zipper.

Christian slowly pulled Erin's jeans and underwear down to his knees and then took them off entirely, tossing them aside without taking his eyes from Erin's cock. It was hard and red, the tip tinged purple with need. It was long and narrow, looking almost delicate against his pale skin. Christian looked up the length of Erin's body and found Erin watching him anxiously, with a man's need to know that what he had was all right and that another man wasn't about to ridicule him. Christian knew that he didn't have to speak with words. Instead, he put his hands under Erin's hips and let his mouth speak for him. He bent and took Erin's cock into his mouth.

Erin made a noise that was half cry and half moan, as if he were in pain and experiencing great pleasure at the same time. Christian wrung more of those noises from him as he milked Erin's cock with his warm, moist mouth as if he were enjoying the greatest delicacy. I felt that way to him, Christian thought. He had been with other men in his life, but none of them had made him experience the sensations that Erin was effortlessly creating within him. None of them had made him want them more than anything else on Earth or in Space.

Christian released Erin's erection and Erin reflexively reached for him with a groan of frustration. Christian felt Erin's strong grip on his arm as he looked into Erin's pleading eyes and asked, "How do we do this, Erin? Tell me what you would like me to do."

Both of Erin's hands were on him then, smoothing over his large, rounded shoulders and then down his broad chest. "You're like a mountain compared to me," Erin said breathlessly. "Try not to squash me, that's all." He chuckled, but it was weak as he reached over to the side table and brought out a package of condoms and a tube of lube. When Christian looked surprised at Erin's choice, Erin chuckled again and joked, "What? You thought I might want to be on top? You're the commander sir. You out rank me, right?" He gave Christian a look that had a daring glint to it. "We'll talk about giving me a promotion later."

Christian prepared his erection, trying not to think about when Erin might ask for a

fair turnabout. When he was ready, he positioned himself over Erin and kissed him deeply. As his lubed fingers found Erin's entrance, he felt Erin tense. He looked down into Erin's shining eyes and saw a sudden tension. Was Erin afraid? How long had it been since he had been with anyone? Was he afraid that he, Christian, might hurt him? Erin looked vulnerable and young underneath him, but Erin was definitely a man in every way that mattered. He was also a trained killer. Christian discarded the idea that Erin was afraid of him. If not that, then what was wrong?

"Erin," Christian said seriously, "you can change your mind."

"So can you," Erin replied, as if it were a challenge.

"That's not what I want," Christian assured him.

"Neither do I," Erin said as his hands touched Christian's cock and checked the condom there. That touch nearly sent Christian over the edge. He tried to keep focused on Erin, on waiting, on not letting his twitching cock have its way.

"What is it then?" Christian wondered.

Erin looked embarrassed. "I... well.. Is this all right? I don't know what you're used to. Maybe you think I'm being... easy?" He winced as he said the last word. "That's dumb," he amended, "I mean.... I don't want you to think this is just any other jump in the sack. This is... kind of... special." His blush deepened. "Okay?"

Christian felt relieved, all of his worries melting away. He kissed the pulse on Erin's throat and licked under his ear. "I'm glad," he whispered into Erin's ear. "It's special for me too."

Erin laughed. "Next we'll be braiding each other's hair and painting each other's nails."

Christian laughed as well. "I don't think either of us needs to worry about our masculinity, Erin."

Erin's hands brought their cocks together and rubbed them. "No, I guess we don't, do we?"

"Now?" Christian asked, desperate.

"Yes," Erin replied and his legs opened and his knees rose. He visibly braced himself as Christian's fingers began to prepare him.

"Look at me," Christian told him and Erin looked up into Christian's face as

Christian's fingers opened him up. "I don't want to hurt you. You will tell me if it does."

"Yes, sir," Erin whispered. "Any other orders?"

"Raise your legs higher, pilot," Christian ordered, falling easily into his role.

Christian saw Erin's look of pleasure grow more intense. He liked the game. He liked having the responsibility taken out of his hands, the worry that he might be doing something wrong. If he only had to follow orders, then he didn't need to be anxious. Christian's fingers felt him relax at last and he knew that Erin was ready for him.

"Bend, soldier," Christian ordered and hooked Erin's knees with his arms and helped him to stay in place. "Ready?"

"Yes, sir," Erin replied, but Christian heard him swallow.

"Pain isn't in the mission plan," Christian assured him again.

"Sir," Erin replied, sounding confident at least.

The tip of Christian's cock touched Erin's entrance. As he began to slide in, he found Erin extremely tight. Erin winced and groaned, clutching at his arms, but his knees rose higher and he pushed back, taking more of Christian in when Christian faltered. Halfway, Erin began to pant. Christian did stop then.

"Erin? I ordered you to—"

"Haven't done this in years!" Erin shot back between breaths. "Course it hurts a bit! Push the damn thing in and get it over with!"

"No," Christian told him and pulled out. Erin hissed, angry in his frustration as Christian applied more lube and then positioned himself to try once more. Halfway in again, he began a slow, shallow, rhythm of tiny thrusts. Erin's tightness was driving him crazy. He wanted to drive in as hard as he could and pump for all that he was worth. Erin's expression stopped him from doing that. Erin was feeling pain again. "Have you even done this before?" Christian finally wondered.

"Not with someone built like a horse!" Erin retorted and then laughed. Startled, Christian wasn't prepared when Erin drove himself upward and took in Christian's entire length. "There! Mission accomplished, sir!" Erin gasped out.

"Erin!" Christian exclaimed as he caressed Erin's face anxiously and kissed him tenderly. He watched Erin's expression change from pain to a middle ground, a middle ground that Christian knew was only going to turn into pleasure if he began to move and

loosen Erin up further. "I'm going to write a report about your insubordination, Erin Flynn!" Christian growled as he began to thrust very slowly and carefully.

And then Christian forgot about everything. Erin did loosen, but his body remained a hot sheathe, still tight enough to give Christian a sucking sensation as he thrust in and out. Christian couldn't help pumping in earnest then, especially when Erin grunted with every thrust, moaned, and made small, desperate noises, his hands gripping Christian's back.

Erin came first, crying out with a long drawn out moan as his hot come splattered both their bellies. Christian was only a moment behind. He reached around Erin and cradled him up against his body as he rocked above him in a violent orgasm more powerful than any he had ever experienced before.

Christian wasn't certain what happened after that. It was almost as if he had fallen unconscious, his mind over loaded with pleasure. When he could make sense out of the world again, he found himself stretched out on his back, sated and cooling off, except where Erin was sprawled across his chest. He reached out a trembling hand and smoothed it over Erin's hair. Erin turned his head and grinned at him like a cat with cream.

"You're a great first date," Erin joked.

"So are you," Christian replied, but he was more serious. He brushed sweaty bangs out of Erin's face and felt a wave of protective tenderness. It was attached to an inner instinct that told him that it had claimed Erin as his mate. The rational Christian Callinbrook scoffed at the notion, but he couldn't reason with something that had been operating within men for millions of years. It didn't care that Erin was a male and perfectly capable of caring for himself, it still sent a wave of testosterone and alpha maleness that made Christian put an arm around Erin, hold him close, and feel as if Erin now 'belonged' to him.

Erin had other ideas. He sat up, sliding out of the embrace, and wrinkled his nose. "Let's get cleaned up and then have dinner." He stood, took hold of Christian's arm, and pulled at him. Christian almost protested. He wanted to enjoy the sated feeling a little longer, but Erin was insistent. "Come on, Chris!" He winked suggestively. "I'll help you wash."

Christian was up then and more eager to clean up. As he followed Erin, watching the

man walking gingerly in front of him, he felt a stab of guilt at having caused Erin pain, until Erin half turned and asked anxiously, “I wasn’t too rough, was I?”

Christian blinked stupidly.

“I mean, the way I was pushing up and down like that?” Erin clarified. “I know I was tight, but it felt so good after I got used to it, and you were being so careful. It was like an itch you weren’t scratching deep inside. I needed you in there scratching it good,” Erin chuckled.

“I thought...” Christian smiled slowly. “No, you didn’t hurt me, Erin.”

“Good!” Erin crooked a finger then. “Come one, then, sir, and you can order me to wash whatever you’d like.”

Christian watched Erin go into the bathroom ahead of him. Christian lifted a hand to his heart and rubbed. A pain there blossomed and throbbed. He knew what it was. He wanted to say that it was too soon, that he didn’t really know Erin, but arguments were useless. He had known the truth of the matter from the first moment that he had met Erin in the Peacekeeper gym, when they had first kissed in the parking garage, and when he had affirmed his intentions behind those bushes. Having released all of his pent up needs for Erin, he knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that what he was feeling wasn’t just a physical attraction. Christian was in love.

Chapter Sixteen

Morning After

They sat across the small table from each other and quietly ate their reheated lasagna. Christian felt subdued, sated, content, but he could sense that Erin was nervous. He had to reassure him.

“Sore?” It seemed obvious. Erin was sitting gingerly, shifting uncomfortably in his chair more than once.

Erin blushed, but smiled ruefully. “It was worth it.” He wiped at his mouth with a napkin and then asked cautiously, “Was it okay for you? I know I’m not... well, I was kind of nervous, sorry.”

Christian pushed away the rest of his meal and looked at Erin’s red face squarely. “It was the most exhilarating and fulfilling experience of my life,” he said without reservation.

Erin started, swallowed hard, and then asked in a small voice, “Really? I... you know, it was for me too.” He rubbed at the back of his neck and then rose and moved his chair next to Christian’s. Sitting down again, he swung his legs so that they were resting over Christian’s. Half sitting in his chair and half sitting in Christian’s lap, Erin reached out for him and gripped the front of Christian’s shirt. “I wanted to be with you right when I first saw you,” he admitted. He chewed over something and then laughed. He looked up and his eyes were shining, even though his face betrayed his uncertainty. “I guess I need to ask, ‘Will you still respect me in the morning?’ Stupid, right?”

Christian shook his head. “No, it’s not stupid,” he replied softly and smoothed a hand along Erin’s cheek. He kissed Erin tenderly and then met his eyes as he said, “This is not a one-time affair. I can’t tell you that I know where it will proceed from this point, but I assure you...” Christian leaned forward and nuzzled Erin’s neck. Erin tilted his chin to give him more access and the vulnerable, trusting pose, made Christian want him again, “this is about far more than sexual gratification.”

“You were... gratified, then?” Erin asked, his male pride needing to know.

Christian chuckled. "Can't you feel how much I want to be with you again? You were amazing!"

"Amazing?" Erin grinned as he rubbed his thigh across Christian's erection through his pants. "So were you. I just... well, you have to know that I don't let just anybody do that with me. It's kind of real personal."

"You don't have to tell me that," Christian chuckled. "You were very... tight."

Erin blushed again and Christian found himself doing the same. It seemed ridiculous. They were grown men and neither of them were virgins. He knew, though, where their embarrassment was stemming from. They were virgins in a sense, virgins when it came to being in love. In that area, their inexperience was making them awkward. This wasn't having sex for release and then going about their separate ways. They had to stay and have a relationship, talk about it, and understand each other's feelings. There was also their past to hash over. Christian knew that they couldn't go forward unless they both knew the field they were playing on intimately.

"You've done that with Marcus?" Christian asked.

Erin was uncomfortable and Christian could sense his fear about answering. For a moment, Christian was afraid that Erin was going to lie to him, despite Erin's assurance that he never lied. Christian left off nuzzling Erin's neck and leaned back to see his face. Erin was looking very tense, eyes on a point behind his shoulder as he finally replied, "Yes, does that bother you? I mean, we were hormone crazed teens and we needed that kind of release. Marcus wasn't gay, and he really didn't like too, but a warm body is a warm body, you know? After the war... once or twice, maybe, but mostly not... we just... well, you get it, right? Once we decided being friends was good enough, we stopped doing even that."

"Anyone after that?" Christian wondered and Erin looked surprised that he was being so calm and dismissive of it.

Erin relaxed a bit, but not completely, as if, dodging one bullet, he was facing another, but less dangerous one. "I'm not promiscuous," he replied in a small voice.

"Casual meetings with strangers?" Christian asked with a frown.

Erin scowled. "No! Well, sort of, I guess. They were people I had worked with," he admitted. "I didn't let it go THAT far with them, though."

“So, Marcus was the only one besides myself?” Christian affirmed.

“Does that bother you?” Erin wondered. His hands locked behind Christian’s neck and he moved all the way into Christian’s lap.

“Any man would like to be the only one, Erin, but we are men. It’s to be expected that you would be somewhat experienced at your age,” Christian reassured him.

“But does it bother you that it was Marcus I was with?” Erin pressed and he looked into Christian’s eyes intently. “What I mean is, are you going to get in Marcus’s face every time you see him because you can’t stand the thought of him having been with me? Cuz’ he’s not going away. Marcus is going to be around, a lot, and you are going to have to deal with it.”

Christian replied, “I can’t say that it doesn’t bother me. I’m only human, Erin.” He caressed Erin’s arm and let his fingers trail down to Erin’s hip. “Marcus and I were in intense competition during the war. It’s only normal that I feel—”

“He’s not competition,” Erin assured him, “Or do you think you can make a straight man gay?”

If he were gay, would you be sitting on my lap now?” Christian asked, point blank.

Erin blinked, caught off guard, but he didn’t look defensive, instead, he looked fierce as he stood up a little to press his forehead against Christian’s. “Even if Marcus had been gay, we still wouldn’t be together. What we had, it was nothing like this. I love him... like a brother, but this... This feeling I have for you is like being on fire, being hit by lightning, being wrapped up in everything good in the world. Me and Marcus knew we didn’t have that when we broke off a sexual relationship. We knew there was a piece missing.”

Christian enfolded Erin into his arms and held him against his heart. “I understand,” he said, feeling intense emotions welling up. Yes, he thought, that was the way he felt too, as if he were holding everything good in the world in his arms. It was a powerful, overwhelming feeling and Erin had expressed it so eloquently when he, Christian, hadn’t been able to find the words.

“So,” Erin said against his chest. “What about you? It’s your turn to talk about your past lovers. Do I have any competition?”

“None,” Christian assured him. “None at all.”

“And you were a virgin?” Erin asked with a teasing laugh.

Christian went very quiet as he considered his past, discarding the few and far between affairs, and his thoughts settled on the one man that had meant the most to him.

“Who was he?” Erin asked seriously.

So perceptive, Christian thought and sighed the name, “Another General.”

“Ah,” Erin said thoughtfully and then simply, “Was it serious?”

“He trained me to be everything that I am,” Christian told him with a sigh. “I can’t ever forget him. His memory will always have an honored place.”

Erin nodded. “I guess I feel the same way about the men who gave me my chance to be something besides a thief and a street rat. They trained to be a stinger pilot and gave me a purpose in life. They weren’t lovers, but they were the only ‘father figures’ I’ve ever had. I understand about having a special place in your heart for people like that.”

Christian ran hands gently along Erin’s arm, feeling their strength. “We both have experience, but, I think we both have something to learn about a relationship like this one. We are from completely different backgrounds, we were on opposite sides of a war, we are of vastly different ranks, and I have very complicated obligations. You realize that it is going to be far from easy from this point forward?”

“You’re champagne in a crystal goblet and I’m soda out of a can,” Erin laughed, “But I think that’s a good thing. It makes life interesting. You wouldn’t want me to be one of those pale, flighty, over bred, ex nobles, without a thought in my head except whether I’m wearing the latest fashion? I hope not, because I’m not even going to try for that.”

Christian chuckled. “No, I wouldn’t want you to be different.” He frowned and asked, “Does it bother you that I’m...” There wasn’t a good way to say it.

Erin smiled and understood. “I like all of that perfect correctness and your sense of duty.” Erin ran fingers along Christian’s shoulders. “I like those uniforms too... you look very... uh... sexy in them.”

“Ah!” Christian retorted with false anger. “You’re enamored of my coats and not me. Perhaps I should direct you to a good tailor?”

“Ha, ha,” Erin snickered. “I think I like the man in the coats more.” He shifted uncomfortably and then slid off of Christian’s lap with a wince. He rubbed a hand along

his hip. “Damn! I think I’ve been rubbed raw! We need a lot more foreplay next time.”

Christian grew suddenly serious. “Have I earned a next time?”

Erin turned and looked at him, surprised, and then countered with, “Have I?”

Christian stood and cupped Erin’s chin. He leaned in and tasted Erin’s lips and then delved into his mouth with a hot tongue. Erin was passive, allowing it, his striking, green eyes closed. Christian broke the kiss and said in a whisper, “If you weren’t hurting, I would have you again right now.”

Erin let out a warm breath of relief, and then said huskily, “There’s other ways of having fun, Missionary Man,” but then he blinked open his eyes and smiled up at Christian, adding regretfully, “but we don’t have time. My roommate can’t be left on the mat forever, you know.”

“Perhaps,” Christian suggested as he slid hands to the small of Erin’s back and then pulled him close, lifting him against his needy stiffness, “We can go to my home next time?”

That idea seemed to make Erin nervous, but he replied, “Okay. You just say when.” His pelvis did a very small rubbing motion, teasing Christian, stirring up a need he wasn’t going to fulfill.

Christian quirked his dark eyebrow at Erin. “You are certain that we don’t have enough time?” He took Erin’s hand and laid it against his erection. He could feel the heat of that touch even through his pants.

“No, sorry about that,” Erin replied and it almost made Christian angry. He almost questioned that assertion, almost demanded hotly that Erin not tease and take care of what he had stirred up.

Christian dropped Erin’s hand and stepped back, releasing him. He forced a smile and adjusted his pants. “All right, I can wait.”

“You sure?” Erin asked and his lips twitched.

Christian took a steadying breath, willing his need to calm down. The last thing he wanted to do was to overwhelm or pressure Erin. “Yes, I’m sure.”

Erin stared at him for a long moment and then, very slowly, he lowered himself to his knees in front of Christian. He looked up as his hands pulled down the zipper of Christian’s pants. As Christian felt a hot flush of confusion and desire shoot through his

body, Erin said, “Well, you passed that test.”

“Test?” Christian breathed as Erin took out his cock and smoothed a hand down its swollen, hard length.

“If you had just wanted one thing from me, you would have gotten pretty mad just then,” Erin told him. “You might have tried to convince me, argued with me, even tried to force me... You didn’t though. I guess... I guess this is for real, huh?”

Christian smiled softly as he reached down and caressed Erin’s cheek. “Yes, it is, Dear One.”

Erin grinned. “Hey! A pet name! What do I call you? Blondie? Snowy? Stretch?” Erin teased as he looked up the long length of Christian’s body. His eyes dropped down to the impressive cock twitching in his hand, “Maybe...”

“Don’t say it!” Christian warned and Erin laughed. “I like Chris,” Christian told him firmly. “Stick with that, all right?”

“Okay.” Erin squeezed the tip of Christian’s cock and Christian gasped and leaned back against the table. “You want be to do something with all of this, Chris?”

“Yes,” Christian hissed.

Erin looked suddenly very sensual as he went on all fours. “Tell me,” he urged huskily. “Tell me what to do, sir.”

Christian wasn’t crude. The words didn’t want to come. Erin’s eyes dared him. Christian braced his nerve and ordered sharply in a commanding voice, “Suck it, soldier.”

Erin’s eyes glowed. “Yes, sir,” he replied dutifully and then his hot, tight, moist mouth took Christian in deeply. It didn’t take long. The image of Erin on hands and knees, his swollen cock going in and out of his sweet mouth, and Erin’s intense look of concentration, enjoyment, desire, and, yes, a glowing affection for him that couldn’t be mistaken, combined to make Christian come in an earth shattering orgasm, his hot fluids spurting violently. Erin suddenly suckled hard and deep, taking in every drop and milking Christian dry. Christian saw him swallow convulsively, eyes half shut in concentration. When there wasn’t a drop left, Erin let Christian’s cock slide out of his mouth. He smiled up at Christian. “Was that okay?” Erin asked.

Christian fell to his knees and gathered Erin into his embrace. He buried his face into Erin’s soft, red hair and managed to say, “God!”

“That means yes, I guess,” Erin laughed against his chest. They rested like that for a few minutes, enjoying each other’s closeness and warmth, and then Erin emerged abruptly and stood up, leaving Christian kneeling on the floor. He grinned and reached down to help Christian to his feet. “I was serious about not leaving Marcus out there in the cold. We better wrap up the date and let him back in. I’ll put some lasagna in a container and you can take it home and eat it there.”

“All right,” Christian replied as he zipped up his pants and tried to put himself in order. As he watched Erin wink at him, gather up the dishes, and then go into the kitchen, Christian suddenly felt a flush of embarrassment. He prided himself on being under control. That last orgasm had been wrenched from him by Erin. Christian hadn’t been able to control himself at all. He had been afraid of overwhelming Erin, but Erin had managed to overwhelm him instead. Christian wasn’t sure that he wanted that to happen again. There was something raunchy about it and he wasn’t the kind of man, ultimately, to find that enjoyable. Though he had enjoyed brief sexual encounters, none of them had strayed into the territory that Erin had just taken him in. It had all taken place discretely and simply.

As dishes clinked and Christian heard Erin putting lasagna into a container, he tried to analyze why he felt that it was so wrong to have sex in that manner. He divined, in the end, that having Erin in that position, made him feel that he was failing to show respect for Erin, and that there was also a potential to taint their budding relationship by turning it into just what Erin had feared, sex and nothing more. Erin had tested him and seemed content by the result, but Christian knew that he could fail that test at a later date if Erin persisted in battering down his inhibitions by offering him such unbridled passions. Tenderness, caring, and, yes, love could be left by the wayside in their eagerness to indulge their passions.

Christian determined to put a bridle on lust, especially when Erin reappeared out of the kitchen with his wrapped burden and his shirt slipping off of one rounded shoulder. His hair was escaping his braid in wisps, his eyes were sparkling, and his expression was sated and happy. It was a completely open and vulnerable moment and Christian felt a tremendous urge to take hold of Erin and plunder him completely.

Christian used his strict military training to deny himself as he took his package from

Erin and said a polite, "Thank you."

"Chris," Erin began, suddenly worried by Christian's new reserve.

Christian's cell phone took that moment to ring. Christian took it from his pocket and put it to his ear. "Christian here." A man on the other end rattled off the situation to him in good form. "Specifics?" Christian demanded. The man ran down a list. "Call the men in."

Christian hung up the phone and put the container on the table. "Freeze that," he ordered briskly, becoming the commander now. "There's a situation. I'll need you and Cree for this. Call him and be at Peacekeeper Headquarters in one hour." He looked at his watch and Erin snagged his off of a table. "Mark," Christian said and Erin nodded, noting the time.

"We'll be there, sir," Erin said, in all seriousness. Duty called and they both understood that they wouldn't be lovers again until the 'situation' was resolved.

Christian reached out and cupped Erin's chin. He smiled briefly and then let it go as he turned quickly and swept out the door.

Chapter Seventeen

Worse Case Scenarios

In the early morning light, Christian knocked back yet another pill to keep himself alert and a gulp of coffee so thick it was almost mud. He ignored the curious looks thrown his way. These people weren't used to seeing him at less than his best. They were used to a Christian who was well rested, devoid of any personal life, and always ready for the next mission in tip top shape. He knew that he had dark circles under his eyes, that he was slumping in his chair, and that his hair was caught back in a hasty pony tail to keep the bedraggled mess out of his face as he poured over map after map. He knew that he looked far from professional.

It was a hostage situation. Dissidents had holed up in a forested area far from any other inhabitants and taken with them the daughter of a very important dignitary, a rich dignitary. They threatened to kill her unless their demands were met. A regular swat team would have, usually, been dispatched to the scene, but this was different. It seemed that these desperate men had found the remains of a weapons bunker containing several stingers and the bare bones of a missile launch pad. What their expertise was pertaining to these ships was an unknown factor, but they had threatened to use them.

Christian had been correct in his first assumption that Marcus and Erin were both going to be needed to deal with them. Deciding on his next course of action was more difficult. He didn't want any hint of doubt about his reasoning for what he wished to do next, so he allowed the people around him to advise him.

Talk flew back and forth across a wide table as men examined specs and logistics covering the table top. Fingers jabbed, faces contorted, voices rose and fell. In the end, there was only one conclusion. "Sir, you are imminently qualified to deal with this particular situation," an advisor told Christian and the others nodded sagely in agreement. "While I don't recommend that commanders take to the field, I don't see any other option. A level head is needed and on site command decisions. Coupled with your knowledge of stingers, you are the logical choice to accompany Cree and Flynn."

Christian nodded as if a great weight were being put on his shoulders, but secretly, down deep where he kept it under tight control, he was thrilled and eager for a chance to go out into the field. It was difficult to sit through the rest of the meeting and, when it was over, he found himself quickly striding to the room where his men were awaiting his orders, eager to begin the operation.

“And then I said, ‘Pepper is a very good sealant.’, and he said, ‘My ass, Flynn!’ So I stuck a hole in his radiator and poured the pepper right in. Stopped it right up!”

“You are so crazy!” a man grumbled.

“That’s what he said!” Erin replied in mock astonishment.

There were chuckles and derisive noises that ceased as soon as Christian walked into the large room. Everyone came to attention then, showing the same eagerness that he, Christian felt. Erin’s eyes were fairly glowing and Marcus looked tense and ready for action. They were all dressed in Peacekeeper one piece suits, the logo emblazoned on the breast and arm, and they all looked professional and competent. Christian felt a wash of pride as he quickly explained the situation.

“Cree?” Christian said and Marcus looked at him expectantly. “Are you and Flynn ready for duty?”

Christian knew that Marcus would give him a true assessment whereas Erin might gloss over as much as possible to allow them to take the mission. Christian was well aware that their presence on the mission was crucial, but he didn’t intend to make plans based on false assumptions about their abilities.

“Both of us have not slept,” Marcus reported despite Erin’s roll of the eyes expressing his exasperation, “but we are trained to operate efficiently despite that. Erin is suffering from minor pains due to s—”

Erin elbowed Marcus sharply in the ribs and stepped forward, grinning and saying jokingly, “Hey, Marcus! No kissing and telling! I can do my job, don’t you worry, sir!”

There were snickers, uncomfortable looks, and one or two expressions of disgust, but Erin had managed to divert Marcus from exposing Christian and had taken the embarrassment all on himself. Christian felt a wave of gratitude, but he kept his expression slightly irritated as he said, “You had better be right, Flynn! I’ll need you and Cree with me. We will be infiltrating the sight and disabling the stingers. The rest of the

men will deploy on site and await our signal to advance. You have one hour to gather your gear and meet me on the tarmac.”

“Saddle up!” Erin hooted, already well on his way to an adrenalin rush as he almost danced away to where the weapons and equipment were stored.

Christian watched Erin covertly, marveling at how handsome Erin was when he was flooded with so much excitement. Mind on the mission, Christian snapped at himself, and he forced himself to look away as he went to make his preparations.

Reaching the target required a hike into a wooded area. Christian’s team moved quietly and even Erin managed to keep his joking banter to a minimum. Marcus paced silently beside his partner, eyes ahead, mind perhaps working over the same variables as Christian. Christian couldn’t help but wonder how well they would do working together. Christian couldn’t imagine Marcus allowing personal matters to enter into a mission, but Christian was finding it hard already. In trying to imagine disaster scenarios it kept coming down to, ‘who will save Erin?’ That was a ridiculous thing to think, and Christian knew it, because Erin was more than capable of taking care of himself, but Christian couldn’t help an instinctive urge to protect him, to make certain that nothing happened to him. He had to keep that urge from turning into action though. He had to maintain discipline no matter what happened. If he couldn’t do that, then he needed to back out of the mission all together.

Christian evaluated himself harshly, even imagined Erin in a life or death situation. He swallowed hard. It was hard to know, absolutely, what he would do in such a situation, but Christian thought he could maintain discipline. A girl was depending on him and so were the people who the kidnappers would surely threaten next with their stingers. When Christian thought of that, there wasn’t any question in his mind about what he would do, and that firmed his resolve to continue.

They reached their target point. Christian deployed his men around the perimeter and checked conditions one more time. The weather looked misting and threatening rain. If it did manage to rain that would have been to their advantage, but Christian didn’t hope for it.

“With me,” Christian said briskly and made a motion for Marcus and Erin to accompany him. Marcus looked even more intense, if that were possible, and Erin was fairly vibrating, his eyes shining and his grin at full strength. These two men had been Christian’s worst enemies during the war. Remembering how much damage they had caused to machinery and installations, how many soldiers they had killed wholesale without hesitation, and how they had repeatedly risked their lives, Christian couldn’t help feeling a sudden chill. They were under his command, as much ultimate weapons as the stingers they were about to deal with, and one of the deadly pair was his lover. Remembering that wiry body, the passionate Erin groaning and moaning beneath him, Christian felt as if he had danced with death and lived to tell about it.

“Booby traps,” Christian whispered as they slipped through the thick ferns and trees. Marcus frowned as if irritated that Christian had felt the need to warn him. Erin only nodded, eyes already scanning everything minutely.

Marcus and Erin were a team, Christian saw, working in perfect tandem. Marcus looked one way and Erin looked another, keeping in a two person formation ahead of Christian. He almost halted them to criticize, but then saw that he wasn’t excluded. They glanced back at him as constantly as they looked at everything else about them, checking to make certain that they weren’t missing any silent signals from him. He was in command, those actions said, and Christian felt more confident.

They found several traps, Erin’s sharp eyes picking them out. They didn’t disarm them, for fear of arousing their targets suspicion. Instead, they found a way to circumvent each one and pass safely by.

“Proximity alert,” Erin whispered and pulled out his gun. “Point?” he asked and looked for permission from Christian.

Christian nodded and watched Erin disappear into the forest ahead of them. Hunkering down with Marcus, Christian waited. He noticed how tense Marcus was. The man’s gun was out and his hand was flexing on it, watching the spot where Erin had gone as if it was everything that he could do not to follow.

Erin returned, breathing hard and face looking pale. His grin was forced. “Guard eliminated. Entrance clear.”

One guard? Christian was suspicious, but they were committed now. The guard’s

absence would be noticed eventually. Christian made a sign that asked for the mode that Erin had used to dispatch the guard. When Erin made a motion across his throat, Christian thought that he understood why Erin was so pale. The guard wouldn't be the one to give away their presence. Christian lamented the loss of life. He had to trust that it had been necessary.

Every instinct within Christian was warning him as they approached the solid, metal hanger doors. Through them was a ramp that led underground, he knew. Though it was some way from the main complex, the stingers were the dissident's major defense. Leaving them so shoddily guarded, Christian had to assume one of three things. Either they were very few, they knew nothing about operating the stingers, or, thirdly, they were all inside and waiting for them.

"Point," Marcus whispered and Christian nodded. It was better to send one man in first to spring any traps rather than all of them getting caught.

"Point," Erin argued with a fierce look at Marcus. "Experienced."

Christian glared at them both, wondering what Erin meant by, 'experienced'. He began to hotly motion for Cree to go forward when Erin pointed to his back. It was a simple gesture, but the pained look in Erin's eyes was enough to remind Christian of the scars there and that Erin had escaped from impossible odds in a previous ambush. When Christian thought about that, about how disadvantaged Erin had been in that fight, he wondered how Erin had managed it. He seemed very confident that, if he was ambushed again, he could handle the situation.

"Go," Christian ordered.

Erin grinned even as Marcus scowled in disapproval. He didn't hesitate as he turned and slipped through the hanger doors.

There were several crashes and shouts. Something slammed into the other side of the hanger door and then Erin came running out, dragging a man attached to his shirt. The man was hanging on grimly and raising a handgun to fire. Erin spun, rammed an elbow into the man's gut and then kned him in the face when he doubled over. Freed, Erin sprinted towards Christian and Marcus, waving frantically with both hands for them to run as well.

They began running into the underbrush and the thicker trees, but, when Christian

glanced over his shoulder, he saw that Erin wasn't going as fast as he could have and that he had one arm pressed close to his side. Marcus saw it as well and moved as if to help his partner. It was then that men came crashing through the brush and the obstructing branches of the trees after them, weapons nosing for targets.

Christian stopped, shouting at Marcus as he crouched, "Cover fire!"

Marcus turned and used a tree for protection as he aimed his gun, but because of Erin and the closeness of the forest, he was forced to take slow, careful shots at their attackers. It wouldn't hold them back long, Christian knew, and pulled out his cell to call for his troops to extract them and move on the hanger.

"Erin's gone!" Marcus exclaimed.

Christian dropped his cell into his pocket and scanned the forest anxiously. "He might be hiding," he suggested and then ducked and scrambled to get behind Marcus as shots hit the trees and the dirt all around them.

"Trying to ambush them most likely," Marcus replied and then fired a few rounds. "They'll rush us when they realize that we don't have much fire power, sir."

"No," Christian reasoned. "They'll fall back, to the hanger if they know how to use the stingers, or to the compound itself if they don't. I'm certain they realize we didn't come alone."

"Do you expect intelligence from men who thought that they could bargain from an indefensible position?" Marcus replied tersely.

"Since all stingers were decommissioned as part of the peace process, we don't have stingers to stop them should they use theirs, I hardly see their position as indefensible," Christian replied dryly. More bullets peppered their surroundings. One slapped the sleeve of Christian's jacket. He winced as he took aim and fired his gun at the spot where he thought the bullet had come from.

The missing Erin began to bother Christian. When his men appeared and began firing, he fully expected Erin to make some move. When he didn't, Christian couldn't indulge in worrying about him. He had to give orders and deploy his men and it was some time before they could press forward and force the kidnappers to retreat. He could see Marcus at point, eyes searching the brush and the ferns for some sign of Erin. By the grim, paleness of his face, Christian had a feeling that Marcus was looking for Erin's

corpse. The thought chilled him to the bone.

“Unit B,” Christian ordered, “extract the hostage.”

Men broke off and disappeared into the trees. They would do what they could, but, like Erin, Christian couldn't be distracted by one life from a danger that might cause many people to lose their lives. The stingers had to be taken out.

“Bodies!” Marcus called and he bent to examine them. They were very close to the hanger again. Christian waited with his heart in his throat and then Marcus reported in relief. “They were killed with a razor knife. Erin's knife.”

Christian frowned. His mind worked on scenarios as they moved forward and he didn't like the ones that kept ending up with Erin acting without orders and returning to the hanger. It was logical, Christian knew, especially if the targets had sent most of their men out to repel their attack. Still, to act without clear orders, not knowing what Christian's plans were... Christian felt concern and the slow burn of anger at the same time.

The hanger doors were well guarded. Shots and pressure bombs flew. Christian and his men crouched behind blast shields and returned fire. The shell of the building was too thick for an aerial bombing, protected by the rock and a material that was laced with titanium. The only way in was through the hanger doors and Christian had brought a weapon powerful enough to take them out. He had thought to take the stingers by stealth and with the least amount of bloodshed, but their options had narrowed. Either they broke through the defenses or he would have to give the order to take out the inside the entire complex. There wasn't any telling who was inside or what damage they might ultimately do. It was a gamble, but one Christian might be forced to take.

Suddenly the shooting stopped. Christian called a cease fire and waited. His men were prepared already for any order he gave them. He only had to give a hand signal. He could afford to make certain that the men inside the hanger weren't about to give up. When he saw the girl thrust outside the hanger, her hands tied behind her back and a gag in her mouth, he gasped. The machine gun pressed to her forehead was an obvious threat. They weren't surrendering.

“Permission to move in and extract the hostage when there is an opportunity?”

Marcus requested in a hard voice at Christian's elbow.

“Granted,” Christian returned curtly. “They are buying time for some action, that’s obvious, and I may have to order the target taken out despite the casualties, Cree.”

Marcus nodded and moved forward to position himself to best advantage. There still weren’t any demands. The girl was simply held in place; a shield that they must have hoped would hold Christian back. That they didn’t have any plan beyond that was too much to hope for. Christian looked into the frightened girl’s eyes and then looked away, gritting his teeth in frustration. He waited, grasping at the slim hope that some sort of demand would be made eventually, that the dissidents would want to bargain, but nothing happened.

“Cree!” Christian called at last, “Stand down.” He reluctantly made a motion towards the men manning their most powerful weapon and then gave the order for the rest of his men to fall back.

Christian knew that his hands were shaking, knew that he was on the thin edge of wanting to scream against the murder he was about to do, but he also knew that he had been left without any other choice. A little girl was about to die and Erin.... if he had gone back into the hanger, was about to die too.

It was all on Christian’s head. He had killed in war many times and contemplated worse mayhem than any man could imagine. His hands were steeped in blood. A few more lives shouldn’t have mattered, yet Christian felt blackness over taking him, a sickening knowledge that this was different. He couldn’t manage the cold detachment of a general. He couldn’t make himself stand by with the comfort that it was necessary.

Christian turned and gave an order to his second to take command and then took a high powered machine gun from one of his men. Without saying anything more, he began walking back towards the hanger. It was a moment before he realized that Marcus was pacing beside him and that he had an air about him that dared Christian to order him back. Christian only smiled tightly and nodded, giving him silent permission. They had five minutes before weapons were powered up and ready to discharge; five minutes to save a life or commit suicide in a hail of bullets. Christian found that much more acceptable than doing cold murder behind a blast shield.

Chapter Eighteen

Duty Calls

“Blind side,” Marcus said as they came to where the doors were. He pointed to the left. Christian nodded. That view was blocked by a door and the girl standing outside it. Unless the dissidents wanted to risk themselves, they couldn’t move out far enough to see them.

“Surveillance?” Christian wondered. It was possible that there were monitors.

Marcus shrugged and Christian nodded grimly. It didn’t matter, he thought, whether they were seen or not. They were still going to attempt their rescue.

Marcus pointed to Christian. “Cover fire.”

Christian began to argue and then didn’t and nodded his agreement. He was larger than the ex-pilot beside him, but Marcus was better trained and stronger. If it came to carrying the girl and getting away in time, Marcus was the logical choice. Christian knew that his role wasn’t much safer. He was going to have to move out of hiding and fire as close to the girl as he could to keep the men off balance and undercover.

“Three minutes,” Christian warned Marcus. Three minutes until the weapon was fired.

“Understood,” Marcus replied grimly.

Christian sized up the impossible situation one more time, braced his nerve, and then ordered, “Go!”

It was like a dance, everything seeming to slow down; fluid, graceful, and deadly. Christian fired his gun and saw the bullets whiz by so close to the girl’s face that some of her hair whipped back. She flinched sideways, especially when men began screaming and fire was returned. That movement to the side was the perfect opportunity that Christian needed. Whoever had their hands on her was suddenly gone in a spray of blood as Christian concentrated his fire on him.

Marcus was already sprinting across the small clearing. He was fast, agile, and his body easily cleared underbrush and the few pieces of equipment in his way to reach the girl’s side. He grabbed her and didn’t wait to see if she could follow him on her own. Putting her in a fireman’s carry, Marcus immediately sprinted back for the forest as if her weight was inconsequential. Two men leaned out of the hanger door, daring, faces twisted in hate and anger, and began firing after him. Christian saw bullets send bits of tree trunk flying all around Marcus’s head before

Christian's return fire took the men out.

Christian didn't wait to see Marcus make it to the safety of the trees. He never doubted that the man would make it. His safety was in doubt, though, as the last minute ticked off of Christian's watch and the alarm went off. Running for the forest, he heard the weapon powering up loudly. He had given orders for the weapon to be fired no matter what and all that Christian could do now was to bug out and hope for the best.

Christian felt a bullet slice past his shoulder and he flinched and grabbed at the wound as he staggered and lost his balance. He went sprawling into the dirt and bullets splattered all around him. Instinctively, he covered his head.

Christian heard the clang of the hanger doors running over their tracks as they opened completely. Rolling to his feet, Christian looked back. He wasn't being fired at any longer. Instead, the men, probably hearing the big gun as well, were playing their trump card. They were going to attack with a stinger. The hair on the back of Christian's neck stood up as the familiar whine and roar of its thrusters sent it rocketing down the launch pad and then straight up in the air. It hovered, the heat from its engines blasting in Christian's face. It was a dull gray and tan model equipped with a pair of beam rifles.

Christian knew that it was useless as soon as he began running again. The stinger was already leveling a rifle at his back. It would get its shot off long before the weapon fired. Christian couldn't help looking back and then stopped in the shelter of some large trees. The stinger was hovering erratically, the beam rifle aimed at him unable to lock on target properly. The pilot was obviously inexperienced.

A sudden blast threw Christian backwards and he felt shrapnel rip into his chest, neck, and already abused arm. He landed on his ass, dazed, a large part of a stinger lying in a smoking, hot ruin next to his head. It was more than a second before his mind realized that the big weapon hadn't fired. Something else had destroyed the stinger, not the beam cannon his men had been about to use on the hanger.

"Erin!" Christian gasped, knowing that man's handiwork instantly. Somehow Erin had managed to plant a bomb on board the stinger.

Another explosion rocked the inside the hanger and men began pouring out in frantic haste. Christian's cell beeped. He whipped it out and shouted, "Why haven't you fired the weapon?"

"Malfunction, sir," his man on the other end reported. "Orders?"

“Move in! Group B, left flank, group D, point, and group C, right flank. Advance on targets, not hanger. I repeat, do not enter hanger. More explosions are probably imminent.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was another explosion and the ground bucked, the hanger walls resounding with the force. More men ran out, screaming, and some of them were on fire.

“Permission to extract Erin!” Marcus shouted as he raced by Christian.

Christian didn’t have time to wonder what the man would have done if he had said, no. He replied, “Permission granted!” and ran after Marcus, intent on the same goal, but he threw at the man’s retreating back, “Disable stingers at all costs: top priority!”

“Acknowledged!” Marcus shouted back at him.

Music began blaring suddenly as they slowed and cautiously slipped into the hanger. The rhythm of a dark rock song washed over them. ‘Someone’s gonna die, d-d-d-die!’ The lyrics pulsed with the frantic drum beat. Christian glanced at Marcus and was startled to see him grinning with almost manic glee.

“Erin,” Marcus said simply.

Smoke was billowing and fire was licking at the blast points. They seemed random until Christian saw tables, chairs, scattered weapons, and corpses. Someone had destroyed the firepower and a number of the enemy very effectively.

“You son of a bitch!” a voice shouted furiously. Shots rang out. “You blow that and we’ll all die, including you! What are you, crazy?!”

“Hey, man! You’re the one shooting at a guy setting an explosive charge!” Erin’s voice called back raggedly. “These stingers are going down and nothing’s going to stop me!”

The music was coming from scaffolding along the side of one of several stingers. A man was standing a level beneath that point, looking furious and pointing a gun upwards with both hands. He fired his gun again and wood from the upper platform flew as bullets peppered it.

“Missed me!” Erin called out in a gleeful singsong voice. “No wonder you guys are losing! You’re crappy strategists and even crappier shots!”

“Hold it right there!” Christian shouted as he and Marcus ran to the platform and trained their guns at the man. The man looked down in defeat and then his expression firmed. Christian wasn’t surprised when he leveled his gun at them. The man was committing suicide, unwilling to live with failure.

“Erin!” Marcus shouted even as Christian and the man fired their weapons at the same time. “Area secured!”

“Too late, buddy!” Erin called back regretfully. “Three minutes, mark! Bug out now!”

The man jerked and shuddered as he was filled with bullets. He fell backwards and took the long fall to the concrete floor of the hanger. Christian and Marcus flinched as several bullets passed by them closely, but none hit their targets as they both shouldered their weapons and began climbing the scaffolding.

“Erin!” Christian shouted, refusing to let his wounded arm slow him. “Status?”

“I told you to bug out!” Erin almost screamed it. “They caught me and managed to beat me up some before I got away. I’m wounded, down for good! You don’t have time for extraction! Get the hell out!”

“Marcus!” Christian shouted, wanting with all that was in him to reach Erin and save him, but knowing that the man beside him was far more capable. “Extract Erin, now!”

Marcus nodded grimly and shot forward, his muscles bunching and flexing noticeably as he pushed them to their limit and climbed the scaffolding with incredible speed. Christian continued to climb, knowing that Marcus might need help, but feeling helpless in the face of Marcus’s super human strength. He couldn’t help the awe that he felt and wondered, not for the first time, just who and what Marcus was. A normal man shouldn’t have made it to the top of the platform as quickly as Marcus did, or slung a wounded man, however slight, onto his shoulders and climbed down again. Marcus did it all easily.

Erin clung to Marcus, cursing him profusely and so foully that Christian blinked in shock. His hair was half out of his braid and a very large bruise was coloring one side of his face. His lips were bleeding and Christian could see a large, dark stain on his side. Blood dripped down from that wound in steady droplets.

“Erin!” Christian exclaimed in fear and shock, realizing that Erin was bleeding to death and that they couldn’t halt and stop it. They needed to get down and get him to a medic quickly. Christian longed to help accomplish that, but all he could do was climb down with Marcus, ready to offer a steadying hand if Erin lost his balance on his precarious perch.

Marcus didn’t need his help, though. The young man was climbing down quickly, Erin balancing as securely as a cat across his shoulders and managing not to move despite his continuous verbal assault and his injured condition. Through it all, music was still playing,

throbbing through the air. It was coming from Erin's hip, a player of some sort.

"Music. Off!" Marcus snapped, his only reply to Erin's tirade.

Erin reached down and slapped the off button without argument and the crackling of the fire came loudly to them then. Smoke was choking them and visibility was quickly fading.

"Christian, Sir!" A voice called from below and Christian knew that his men were in the building and that the dissidents had been defeated.

"Retreat!" Christian shouted instantly. "There's a bomb!"

He heard barked orders and there was no one to greet him when his feet touched the concrete floor. Marcus was down shortly after and he didn't acknowledge Christian's offer of help, but began a steady trot towards the hanger doors.

Erin looked over at Christian and grinned uneasily as he bounced on Marcus's shoulders. The grin looked manic though and Christian could see that Erin was frightened, not for himself, but for Christian. Erin reached out a bloody, grimy hand and Christian touched it briefly without breaking stride. It was all the closeness that they could manage in that situation.

"You two are fricken' idiots, if you don't mind me saying so, sir!" Erin growled, but his heart was in his eyes, taking the sting out of it.

Christian smiled and he would have laughed if he wasn't so afraid that it would sound hysterical. "For you, yes, Marcus and I are idiots!" he replied.

"And you try and blow us up for our trouble!" Marcus snorted, managing to express grim amusement even as he ran under Erin's weight.

Erin blinked at them both and then he laughed and it was... Christian tried to understand it. The laugh sounded amused, happy, surprised, but all wrapped up with an intensity that made the hairs on Christian's neck stand up. It came to him that Erin didn't think they were going to make it.

"Move faster!" Christian shouted.

"No, damn time!" Erin lamented and then looked back at Christian as they cleared the hanger doors. "I love you, you know?" and then put his face next to Marcus's as he jolted on the man's shoulders, "and you're the best damn friend anyone could ever have."

"Shut up!" Marcus panted back angrily. "You're talking is making wind resistance!"

"Hah!" Erin snorted. "A joke from Marcus Cree in my last moments!"

And then the blast hit their backs and Christian realized that Erin was right. They weren't

going to make it. As he felt pain rifle over his back, and he was thrown into the dirt, he sourly wondered at himself for doubting a bomb expert and hoping that, for once, Erin was wrong.

Christian did something that he never thought that he would do again, he opened his eyes. They were sore, and dry, and the light bothered them. He blinked and tried to focus. White dominated everything and then a face came into his view. It was an older man with a serious frown and a receding hairline. A light was shone in his eyes. That was not what he needed just then. He squinted and turned his face away.

“He’s coming around,” a male voice said. “Contusions on his back. Shrapnel, but nothing in vital areas. He’ll survive. I would really like to know why one of the Peacekeeper’s premier commanders was pulling a stunt like that in the field. I’m sure there will be questions. I should copy my medical report in quadruplicate. The officers will all want their own copy.”

A female voice wondered, “Is quadruplicate a word, Doctor?”

“When it comes to bureaucratic paperwork, it is,” the doctor replied. Christian felt the cold touch of hands feeling along a very sore place on his arm. “Plasti-seal is working nicely.” The face leaned into his view again. “Are you alert, sir? Can you understand me?”

Christian nodded shakily and then asked the first thing on his mind. “Agents... Cree.... Flynn...” His mouth was as dry as a bone and his vocal chords didn’t want to function.

“Both alive,” the doctor assured him and Christian felt a relief so sharp that it was painful. “Flynn has a knife wound along his side, but it’s a cut across his ribcage and not into his lung. He received a transfusion due to blood loss, and he seems to have taken a beating on his upper body. His collar bone is cracked and his right shoulder had to be placed back into its socket. He has a welding torch burn on his neck, cuts to his hands, a broken index finger on his left hand, and minor shrapnel wounds all over his back. He is awake, now, and making loud demands for his release.”

“Cree?” Christian prompted.

“He has the lightest injuries,” the doctor informed him, “but he is unconscious as of yet, due to a concussion and severe physical distress. I’ve seen it before when someone pushes themselves to the limit. All of their reserves are depleted and they simply collapse. From the way his muscles are twitching with spasm, I’ll hazard an early diagnosis and tell you that he has probably strained most of the muscles in his body. He should be placed on muscle relaxants and

pain medication for several days.”

“Casualties?” Christian asked then, turning to his other major concern.

“Three,” the doctor replied and said their names and cause of death for each one.

Christian felt a pain at every name and then listened intently to how they had died. His mind wasn't at a hundred percent, but he thought that none of his decisions had caused those deaths and, though he was deeply saddened by them, he couldn't help a sense of relief as well.

“Get the hell out of our way!” Erin's voice snarled.

“I strongly suggest you not interfere!” Marcus's voice said closely on the heels of that and then both men came into the room, Marcus in a motorized wheel chair and Erin leaning on it and using it to help him walk. Three male nurses were trailing after them along with a security guard, though the man was looking confused, probably wondering how dangerous two injured men could be.

The doctor raised an eyebrow, but seemed used to the idiocies of soldiers. “I wasn't aware that is was visiting hours, gentlemen.”

“Special case,” Erin quipped back and winked dangerously. “I suggest that you wait outside that door for a bit. We'll call you when we're done.”

“There are laws against threatening civilians,” Christian said roughly. Erin snagged a water bottle from a table and handed it to Christian. Christian sipped at the straw gratefully and then said, clearer, “You will cease your actions, now, and put yourselves on report.”

“Yes, sir,” Erin replied as he sat on the edge of Christian's bed wearily, “but not before I've made sure that my commander is all right.” He leaned forward and kissed Christian softly on the lips.

There was a hint of uncertainty to it, but Christian returned the kiss, embarrassed by Marcus's presence. He then looked at Erin's happy face and said seriously, “Your report should make interesting reading, Agent Flynn,” Christian said. “I do hope that all of your actions were justified?”

“They were, but we can go over all of that later,” Erin admonished him. “Doc said that you were okay, but are you, really?”

“Why would he lie?” Christian wondered and then relented when he saw Erin's frustration. “I feel all right.”

Erin looked relieved then and looked back at Marcus. Marcus looked pale, weak, but

determined. “Good,” Erin said, “Because we’re making a jail break and getting out of here. Want to come along? That is, if you can move under your own power? I don’t think I can help you out if you can’t.” His dislocated shoulder was strapped and so was his broken finger. He was bandaged in many places.

Christian almost argued, almost ordered them back to their beds, but something stopped him, a sense that his orders were going to be ignored. He could have become angry about that, called for security, and forced them to comply for their own good, but, instead, he thought of the long days he himself would be confined to the hospital until doctors deemed him well enough to leave. He thought of bland hospital food, uncomfortable beds, and invasive routines. Christian felt a wash of rebellion flow through him, an urge to cast away all restraint and join those mad men. Something stopped him before he could utter an agreement, though, a sense of duty and what was proper grinding that rebellion to a halt.

Erin saw it and he smiled down into Christian’s eyes and said, “That’s okay, Chris. Don’t be sorry for having common sense and going by the book. That’s what makes you what you are, the guy I love, okay? Don’t think you have to be any different.”

Christian touched Erin’s cheek, stroked it, and replied, “I don’t think that and I’m not sorry for following the rules. You and Marcus are on report, love of mine.”

Erin sighed and rolled his eyes as if he was a disappointed child, but the smile hadn’t left his lips. “That’s two reports on us, Marcus. We’re going to have to come up with some fancy explanations to clear our good names.”

“Why do I imagine that you will?” Christian replied sourly.

“See, Marcus?” Erin chuckled. “He has faith in us.”

Christian gripped Erin’s arm suddenly, all amusement fading. “Erin, I...” He thought about almost losing him and it made his heart constrict painfully. Erin leaned close and looked into Christian’s eyes, his amusement fading as well.

“It’s all right, love,” Erin said fiercely and leaned forward to press his face against Christian’s, kissing him several times. “We made it. We’re all safe. If you want... maybe I should stay here with you?”

Christian didn’t misunderstand how difficult the offer was for Erin. Erin was willing to stay in a place that he feared and hated, among strangers that he didn’t trust, for him. Erin’s aversion to hospitals and doctors, born after that attack long ago, after being reluctantly treated by

uncaring doctors who had wanted him dead, was well-known to Christian. That Erin offered, told him how deeply Erin cared for him.

Marcus sounded like the soldier he was as he offered, as if they were in enemy territory, “I will stay and guard the both of you, if Erin remains.”

The offer was ridiculous. Christian could see that Marcus was almost done in by simply sitting in his wheelchair. It made him consider the man, consider the relationship that Marcus had with Erin; something he hadn't wanted to face. This man wasn't going to go away because he, Christian, was having a relationship now with Erin, and, Christian discovered, he didn't really want Marcus to go away. They had bonded on that mission, found common ground, and had worked together to save the person they both loved. If they could do that, if they could trust their lives to each other, and trust each other to save Erin's life, then couldn't they also trust each other enough to share Erin's affections? Those affections were different, after all. Marcus was Erin's friend and Christian was Erin's lover. As Erin had said several times, Marcus and Christian were not competing with each other. What he wanted to give each of them was completely different.

“What are you thinking about so hard?” Erin wondered, amused, but a little worried too by Christian's silence.

“That you don't have to stay,” Christian replied thoughtfully, “and...”

“And?” Erin prompted.

“That I need to look into buying a house with a set of separate living quarters,” Christian finished.

Erin looked confused now, as if he wondered if Christian were hallucinating and whether he needing to call his doctor or not. “Why....?”

“You wouldn't want Marcus to sleep on the couch when you move in with me, would you?” Christian replied, faking crossness. He covered up his embarrassed and fear of rejection by trying to get comfortable on the hard mattress of the bed and allowing his real pain and weariness to show.

“I am capable of living on my own,” Marcus spoke up surprisingly. “Your offer is generous, but not necessary, sir.” It was very obvious that what he was saying was not what he wanted. Marcus's voice was strained, as if he were forcing himself to say the words.

Erin said, and Christian could hear his fear, the fear that came from numerous rejections due

to his closeness with Marcus, “I know it’s strange, and that it’s hard to understand, but, I need Marcus with me. He’s my friend. I know he feels the same way.”

“I understand,” Christian replied and took Erin’s good hand in his; ceasing trying to cover up his emotions so that he could reassure Erin. “There isn’t anyone else like us. We came through a terrible war. No one will ever understand us as we understand each other. You and Marcus came together under intense circumstances and you learned to depend on each other. I’m not going to force you to do otherwise now. You accept me for the way I am, I will not do any less when it comes to you, Erin.” He smiled. “Besides, I grew up in a house filled with servants, guards, and aristocracy. After that, I spent time exclusively in the company of soldiers and the barracks. Why should living with one man, beside the one that I care about, disturb me?”

Erin thought about that and then visibly relaxed and looked so happy that his eyes seemed to glow. Christian thought that he would have agreed to live with a thousand men just to keep that expression on Erin’s face.

Christian looked past Erin to Marcus. “If you are going to your home to recover, I leave Erin’s welfare in your hands, Cree, and I trust that if he becomes worse, instead of better, that you will return to the hospital.”

“Yes, sir,” Marcus replied promptly.

“Chris,” Christian corrected him and Marcus blinked. “If you’re going to be living with me, you need to learn to be less formal.”

“Yes, Si-Chris,” Marcus corrected himself and a small smile played on his lips. “Thank you.”

Christian was going to reply, but his lips were suddenly covered by Erin’s and Erin was kissing him deeply, unmindful of his injured lips. Erin was smiling, that happy glow even more intense. “I love you!” Erin exclaimed around the kiss. “You just seem too damn good to be true!”

Christian felt a powerful emotion take hold of him. He slid arms around Erin, careful of his injuries, and Erin pressed against him in a masculine, one armed hug. “You snuck into my soul, Erin,” Christian whispered lovingly into his ear, “When I was least expecting it. I was slow to understand my feelings. You were the last person I expected to fall in love with.”

“Thought you’d go for some stuffy politician’s son, right?” Erin chuckled against his throat. “Tea at twelve, the formal dinner party at six, and all that? If you ask me, that sort of things sounds a lot more unlikely for someone like you. You just didn’t know yourself. I had to come

along and shake you out of your cobwebs.”

“When I thought we were dead, when those bombs exploded...” Christian swallowed hard. “I used more colorful language than you did for dragging my feet for so long about this.” He smoothed a hand over Erin’s hair, over his cheek, and then curled it around Erin’s hand. “I’m not going to drag my feet any more. I want you with me, at my side, Erin Flynn, every part of you, even though I know one of those parts is Marcus Cree. We proved that we can be a team. That we are even somewhat alike in what we want and our methods.” Christian looked past Erin and smiled as Marcus nodded gravely. “I know that I can accept him into our life together.”

Erin snickered and sat up, looking at Christian mischievously, but his heart was in his eyes when he said, “Marcus does have a life, you know, Chris? He’s not like my Siamese twin, or anything. I’ve spent time getting him out of that military shell and into normal life. Because of me, he attends clubs, talks to people, does needle point...”

“Needle point?” Christian echoed, confused.

Erin laughed, “Just kidding!”

“That’s not very funny,” Marcus grumbled and then said, “What he’s trying to say, is that I’m not going to be sleeping at your feet, or guarding your door twenty four-seven, but there is something that Erin and I have found in each other, a friendship and an understanding that we never want to lose. We trust each other implicitly. I don’t think we could ever find that with someone else. Being apart for long is not something that I wish to contemplate.”

“Me either,” Erin said seriously, never taking his eyes from Christian.

Christian knew what Erin wanted. He wanted to be certain that Christian wasn’t accepting a bad deal simply to have him. Christian squeezed Erin’s hand and said, with all the feeling he felt for Erin in his voice, “When princes fall in love with soldiers, what does the rest of conventionality matter?”

Christian had only thought that Erin glowed before. Now Erin was blazing like the sun, his eyes dancing with love and delight. When his lips seized Christian’s and Erin kissed him as if he wanted to pull Christian into his soul, Christian knew he would never regret his decision.

The End