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# HOSTAGE

## A Terran Empire story

by Ann Wilson

Nemra, 2555 CE

The crash must've been more realistic than he'd planned, Ranger Esteban Tarlac thought groggily as he regained consciousness. His head hurt where something had hit it, and his body ached in a pattern that matched the crash webbing's. But at least one thing was going according to plan: he'd obviously been captured by the rebels, since he was hanging by his wrists with his arms stretched painfully apart -- and only the rebels, on this world, would be willing to risk treating a Ranger with such hostility.

He blinked a couple of times, then got his feet under him and straightened, taking the weight off his arms. A look around satisfied him that he was indeed a prisoner of the rebels -- and on display in the middle of their base. That detail hadn't been part of his plan, but shouldn't affect it adversely. Even from here, the base looked like the large recreation area it supposedly was; if Tarlac hadn't been familiar with sensor data that showed it was actually close to the equivalent of a planetary defense base, as far as equipment went -- personnel were a different matter -- he would have thought himself at the main campfire site of a particularly prosperous commercial camping area.

"So Your Highness finally decided to honor us by waking up."

Tarlac winced inwardly at the sarcasm in the man's voice. It was the first time since he'd become a Ranger that he'd experienced open hostility, though he'd known from the beginning that sooner or later he would. He looked toward the voice, immediately recognizing the older man as Lord Robert Kaplan, second child of

Count Jonathan Kaplan and the reported leader of this rebellion. "Your hospitality leaves something to be desired, my Lord. I hope you're giving my pilot and bodyguards better treatment than you're giving me."

"In a manner of speaking," Lord Robert said. "They, at least, are in no discomfort."

"They're dead?"

"I'm afraid so," Lord Robert said. "Not that you would really care."

The rebel leader was mistaken there, Tarlac thought grimly. He did care, very much, about the Navy pilot and the four Security Division Marines who had volunteered for the mission that had cost them their lives -- but he couldn't let those feelings show. "What do you plan to do with me?"

"Trade you for rule, I think, rather than fight for it," Lord Robert said consideringly. "That way, none of my people suffer. And I think I should be able to get . . . oh, a Subsector at least for you."

In spite of his position, Tarlac had to laugh. Lord Robert was deluding himself if he honestly thought the Emperor would make that sort of trade! "You must know better than that, my Lord. The Empire doesn't make deals with criminals."

"I think His Majesty will make this one, Highness. You are, after all, his newest Ranger, and he is bound to want to keep you; Rangers, for whatever reason, are scarce enough to be worth trading for an entire Sector." Lord Robert looked thoughtful. "Yes, a Sector would be even better. Myself as Duke, my lieutenants as Earls and Counts, other officers as Barons -- that would be just enough." He scowled. "There may even be places for my beloved parents and sister, once they acknowledge that I am truly the best of them, cheated out of what is due me by the accident of being born second."

"You're welcome to try, but you'll be disappointed." Tarlac remained outwardly impassive, though he was becoming convinced that Lord Robert was, to use the Marine expression, firing from a dead powerpack. Well, he could manage to tolerate a couple of days like this while Lord Robert called the Palace and tried to negotiate; then the time limit he'd given the colonel in charge of his ship's Marine forces would expire, a company or more of power-armored Marines would land to pull him out and take prisoners, then -- if necessary, which he hoped it wouldn't be -- his ship would destroy the base and any of its personnel who chose not to surrender.

"We'll see," Lord Robert said, smiling. "In the meantime, I think your capture is cause for celebration."

His people evidently agreed; not long after he left, they began party preparations, bringing out folding tables and loading them with food and drink -- mostly drink. Their festive mood didn't extend to the young Ranger, though; Tarlac found himself the object of curses, gloating, and comments about what most would like to do with the ranking Imperial officer who was so totally in their power.

Tarlac ignored curses and threats alike, since there was nothing he could do for the moment, and since he was convinced that nothing serious would be done to him, whatever was threatened. He'd never heard of anyone deliberately injuring or killing a Ranger, which wasn't surprising; the punishment was death, with no reduction of sentence or mitigating circumstances allowed. He didn't notice -- and wouldn't have cared -- that his disregard of their threats made the rebels more determined to break through the reserve that was so much a part of him that he never noticed it.

As dusk turned into night and the campfire was lit, the party got both loud and violent enough that he couldn't disregard it any longer. Eventually, one of the rebels brought out an animal whip, suggesting it might be fun to see if they could get some amusement out of the damned Imperial.

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Somehow, Dave Scanlon thought, being held prisoner by a bunch of rebels just wasn't what it was cracked up to be. He wasn't even locked up, and his guard had won every one of their chess games so far! Oh, the rebels themselves seemed to be having a good enough time -- it sounded like a fun party -- but he was bored. Then he heard something odd, and looked around. "Hey, Theo, what was that?"

His guard moved a knight before replying. "Check. What was what?"

Dave scowled at him, waiting for the sound to come again. "That," he said when it did. "It sounded like a scream."

The guard listened for a moment, then frowned as the sound came yet again. "Bad news, if it's what I think." Dave shivered at his expression as he went on. "Don't do anything stupid while I'm checking, kid. This could be serious."

"I won't," Dave promised, impressed into obedience despite himself. He'd tried escaping a couple of times since he'd been foolish enough to try replenishing his supplies at what had seemed to be a commercial camp, but he'd been recaptured quickly; now he endured his captivity stolidly.

"Good enough. I'll be back as soon as I can." Theo left the tent they shared, with Dave following him as far as the entrance. It was dark, so he saw only fire-glow from the central area -- but from here, he could hear a slapping noise like something hitting flesh before another scream broke through the party sounds. It made him wish again that he was back in his own tent, maybe five kilometers away. His parents had let him go camping alone to celebrate his fourteenth birthday, and that had been a lot more fun than this . . .

Moments later Theo returned, looking grim. "It's time for you to get out of here, kid. Lord Robert's gone beyond trying to kick out his big sister; this ain't just a family fight any more, it's treason against the Empire." He paused. "I'd get out myself, but maybe I can help the Ranger by sticking around. Think you can slug me convincingly with that lamp, then get the hell back home? There're grav-hoppers in the parking area just south of the camp, and it's drunk enough out that you should be able to duck what guards're left."

"Ranger!" Dave exclaimed, horrified. "That's a Ranger -- " He broke off at Theo's expression. "Yeah . . . I think I can." Then he'd see what he could do!

"Okay. Do a good job; I'll need a fair-sized lump to convince his Lordship." Theo turned his back to his prisoner.

Dave picked up the lamp and hefted it, thinking. He and Theo both wanted to help the Ranger, so he'd have to make his escape look real -- but he didn't want to hurt Theo, who'd been as good to him as possible under the circumstances. He took a deep breath, gave the lamp a couple of practice swings, and then brought it down with what he hoped would be the right amount of force.

Without a sound, Theo collapsed.

"Hey, it worked!" Dave exclaimed, a little surprised.

Then he frowned as a sudden thought struck him, and he knelt beside Theo's limp form. A blow like that, he'd read, could sometimes kill! But thankfully this time it hadn't; he was relieved to find his guard still breathing. Theo might play a mean game of chess, but for a rebel he was okay. Dave started to leave the tent, but it occurred to him that it would look better if he took Theo's gun.

He did so, slipping the heavy disruptor pistol into his belt. He knew how to use it; his mother had been an Imperial Marine, and had made sure her husband and children knew how to handle all the weapons she'd been trained on. He checked to be sure the area was clear, then left the tent. Everyone seemed to be near the main fire at the center of camp, but he kept to cover anyway. He knew he should leave without stopping for anything, but he couldn't. Not with a Ranger being hurt . . .

The cries of pain were weaker, and as Dave made his way toward the fire, he found himself hoping the Ranger would pass out. He was getting too close to stay on the ground, though; he climbed one of the trees that ringed the campfire and made his way along a limb until he could see what was going on through the leaves.

Almost immediately he ducked back, half-sick and not wanting to believe what he'd seen. He'd known it would be bad, the sounds hadn't left any doubt of that -- but knowing didn't make it any easier to watch an Imperial Ranger being beaten, maybe to death. Dave's first impulse was to start shooting, but even as he reached for the disruptor in his belt he realized that would do more harm than good. Firing into the rebels would just get him recaptured, maybe killed, and that wouldn't do either him or the Ranger any good. There were too many rebels, and it looked like they were all mean-drunk.

Where in Chaos were the Marines? Dave thought desperately. They should be here, stopping this! In the holos, they always came to the rescue -- but in his mother's stories, they were sometimes too late. He inched forward again, horrified fascination making it impossible for him to look away. The Ranger's cries had subsided to moans, his body jerking at every impact of the whip the rebels were taking turns using on him. After what seemed like hours, even the moans ceased, and he hung limp in his bonds.

With the entertainment over, the rebels lost interest in their prisoner, and the ones who hadn't already been overcome by the refreshments wandered away, too drunk -- or, Dave thought bitterly, too confident of the Ranger's helplessness -- to bother posting guards. He descended from his perch, careful not to lose the disruptor. He didn't dare use it now, it was too noisy, but it could come in handy later. Right now what he needed was a quiet way to cut the Ranger's bonds. Maybe one of the passed-out rebels carried a knife he could use -- most people did, in the wilderness.

The dying firelight provided just enough illumination for him to find what he needed on the second rebel he checked. It was an expensive hunting knife, and he hesitated for a moment, feeling a twinge of guilt at taking it even from a rebel.

But the twinge didn't stop him; he had to help the Ranger! He stared for a moment at the limp figure in the torn and bloody forest-green uniform, then moved toward the south. He had to get transportation first; he was strong for his age, but he didn't think he could carry or drag that much dead weight -- he shuddered at that thought -- very far.

The parking area was guarded, though it was obvious that the two on duty had been doing their share of drinking. Dave thanked any gods who might be listening that the rebels didn't come at all close to Marine standards; if they had, a fourteen-year-old civilian wouldn't have had a chance. Even as it was, he'd be lucky to get out.

Not that he didn't have some things going for him, he thought as he studied the layout of the parking area and the way the guards were negotiating their patrol routes. First was surprise, since they wouldn't know he was free and wouldn't consider him much of a threat if they did see him. Add that he was armed, something else they wouldn't expect -- and, he thought grimly, that he had paid a lot of attention to his mother's stories and teaching. He might be young, but he had as much theoretical combat knowledge as anyone who hadn't been through the Academy, and he was willing to use gun and knowledge both to help the Ranger. But right now, stealth was better than a confrontation.

He made his way cautiously to an aidvan, finding as he'd half-expected that it wasn't secured; aid vehicles had to be ready to go at a moment's notice. He would have liked to take the van, considering the Ranger's injuries, but he didn't dare; he needed something that was both more maneuverable and less noticeable. He also didn't have the training to make use of its resources, at least not enough to make it worth the tradeoff. But he could take things he knew how to use, like bandages, emergency blankets, a survival kit, and rations; he stuffed those into a carrying sack, then went forward to check the controls. This was a rebel camp, after all, so the vehicles shouldn't require personal ID to operate; if it was like most large fleets a single code should be able to activate anywhere from five to a couple of decade vehicles. And the aidvan ought to have one of the code cards in the slot, ready to go . . .

Dave grinned in satisfaction when he got to the driver's position. Convenience, as he'd hoped, had overcome security, something his mother said disapprovingly even happened sometimes with Marine units; the card was in the slot. He took it, then grabbed his supplies and hurried into the next vehicle in line.

He breathed a sigh of relief when the card proved to activate this vehicle as well; he might have had to go through a decade or so. Now to see if it had . . . yeah, good. Lord Robert might be a rebel, with creeps -- well, mostly creeps, Theo was okay -- for followers, but he had good equipment. This had variable coloration, which Dave promptly set for camouflage, as well as convertible capability, a light-enhancing windscreen, and a low-power setting that made the whine of null-grav engines almost inaudible. Making use of the last two, Dave took the vehicle carefully out of the parking area. Really good equipment had its disadvantages, too, he knew,; he'd have to get the Ranger, get out of camp, and find a hiding place fast, before the rebels realized what was happening and used the override the car almost had to have. He wouldn't dare take enough time to get home, or to a town, and his camp was out of the question.

Dave lowered the car's top as he guided it into the campfire area and nudged the passenger side against the Ranger's legs, then he clambered into the back and stood on the seat to reach the man's bonds. They were rope, so he wouldn't have to risk even low-power disruptor fire; he sawed through them, then laid the Ranger as gently as he could on the back seat. The fabric he touched was sticky-wet; he wiped his hands on his pants legs before he got back in the driver's seat and began edging the car away from the camp.

He kept the car on low power, traveling slowly, until he was almost a kilometer away, then went to normal power and sped up. This part of the mountains was honeycombed with caves, so he decided their best bet would probably be to find a nice one and hole up until the Marines finally landed. Dave was confident they would; whatever had kept them from showing up right away surely couldn't keep them from starting to search when the Ranger didn't return when he should!

It took him almost an hour, but he found a cave that would serve them as a decent shelter. It had a fairly level floor, as far as he dared take time to explore, with enough turns and side passages to keep the wind out and maybe provide them with emergency hiding places or a stronghold -- if he could get the Ranger to them. And, best of all, one of the side passages had a small spring overflowing into a stream that led deeper into the cave. Yes, he decided, it would do nicely.

He brought the car to the entrance and turned on the visible-light headlights long enough to unload his gear, arrange a makeshift bed for the Ranger, and finally half-carry and half-drag the man inside and settle him. Then he started to program the car to take it away from them, but hesitated, thinking. He'd gotten what he could carry from the aidvan, but there was a better than even chance the car itself held something useful, this far from any settlements. He checked, finding more blankets and rations, a military- issue medikit -- and the jackpot, a fusion lamp/stove combination. He grinned, lighting the lamp and stacking his fresh loot inside the cave entrance, then finished programming the car and sent it on its way.

It lifted off, climbing to well above treetop height, then oriented itself to a heading that would take it -- if it didn't blow itself up or get shot down first -- to the Planetary Palace an hour or so after dawn. Dave listened

until it was out of hearing range, then carried his finds further into the cave and braced himself to check the Ranger's condition. First he cleaned his patient's face, recognizing him as soon as he'd washed the blood off: Esteban Tarlac, newest and youngest of the Emperor's personal representatives and troubleshooters. Then he started pulling Tarlac's uniform shirt off, trying not to get sick as the wounds were exposed. When he had it about halfway off, the Ranger stirred.

Tarlac woke slowly, aware at first only that he was laying on something hard and that he hurt all over. He shifted, trying to get comfortable, but a hand on his shoulder restrained him. He opened his eyes, to see a young man -- not much more than a boy, really -- bending over him. "What -- "

"We're in a cave in the Webster Mountains, sir," Dave told him. "I'm Dave Scanlon. I was a prisoner too, but when they brought you in, my guard let me go so I wouldn't be involved." He went on to describe their escape and present circumstances. "I'm afraid it was the best I could think of," he finished apologetically.

"There's nothing to be sorry for," Tarlac assured him. The youngster had probably saved his life; he wasn't in any mood to quibble about details. "You might not believe how much I hate to ask this -- but just how bad is it?"

"Uh . . . " Dave hesitated.

"That bad?"

"Well -- not good, so far, and I've only checked your front. I haven't even cleaned that yet, since the water's still cold." Dave swallowed. "I'm no corpsman, obviously, and you need qualified medical attention, but I'll do the best I can for you."

"I'm sure you will." Tarlac tried to sit up, unsuccessfully; Dave caught him as he fell back, groaning. "Is there any painkiller in what you brought along?"

"I think so." Dave rummaged through the medical supplies, brought out an injector of quidine. "Uh, what's your mass?"

"Call it seventy kilos, that's close enough."

"Yes, sir." Dave read the instructions, set the injector for the weight he'd been told, and triggered it into the side of the Ranger's neck. "I hope that's right -- there's only enough here for another couple of doses."

After a few minutes, Tarlac sighed in relief. "That's fine, Dave -- a lot better. Would you help me sit up?"

"Of course, sir." Dave piled up some of the blankets he'd collected, helped the Ranger to sit up, and shoved the blankets into position to serve as a backrest. "I'm not really sure you should be putting weight on your back -- but I don't really think you should be putting it on your front, either, and you have to rest somehow." He hesitated, then went on. "I ought to check your back now, if you don't mind."

"Whether I mind or not doesn't matter very much," Tarlac said. "It needs to be done, and at the moment you're the closest to a doctor I've got. Plus if I'm in as bad shape as it feels like I am, there's a good chance that I'll be unconscious a lot of the time -- and when I am awake, I won't know what's been going on, and I could very well not be in any shape to make good decisions. Which puts you in charge, until we're rescued. What do you want me to do?"

Dave stared at the Ranger in bewilderment. "But -- I can't give a Ranger orders!" he finally managed to get out. Granted that almost everything he knew about Rangers came from the holo, news and dramas, he was

positive that they gave orders, they didn't take them . . . well, except from the Sovereign, of course.

Tarlac grinned, reasonably sure what the youngster was thinking. "We do take advice, suggestions, and sometimes orders, from anyone who knows more about a given situation than we do, or who's in a position to handle it better. Right now, that's you -- and you had the initiative and resource-fulness to pull me out of the middle of a rebel camp; I'm satisfied to have you go on with the job."

"The kids at school will never believe this," Dave said, as much to himself as to the Ranger. "But okay, if that's what you want. Uh . . . I can ask you for advice, can't I?"

"Sure, but you'll have to decide if it's worth taking or not."

"I promise." Dave shook his head, still not quite believing what he'd gotten himself into. He knelt beside his patient, spreading out more blankets and grateful that he'd been able to find so many. "If you'll roll over, then, I should check your back."

"Okay." It took effort -- he was weak from the combination of pain, shock, and loss of blood -- but he made it.

Dave cut away the rest of the Ranger's uniform shirt, then checked the water he'd put on the lamp. It was warm enough now, so he used it to clean the caked blood away from the whip-inflicted wounds. He didn't want to believe what he saw as he worked -- you didn't use stingweed for any reason! -- but the yellowish edges of the wounds were proof that couldn't be denied, and he used a swear-word he'd seen embarrass his mother once.

Tarlac wasn't sure whether he should get worried or laugh at the boy's virulent language, but on the whole it didn't sound promising. "What's wrong, Dave?"

"The blankers soaked the whip in stingweed sap," Dave told him, trying to control his anger. "It can't have taken full effect yet, or not even quidine could kill the pain -- and it carries something like a cross between a fungus and a bacterium that nothing in a standard medikit will touch. How long till your rescue party arrives?"

Tarlac frowned; this sounded serious. "Is this Tuesday, or was I unconscious longer than I think?"

Dave checked his chrono, then nodded. "2243, Tuesday night."

"They should be landing in about two and a half days, then; Colonel Korda had orders to give me three days, then come looking for me."

"But we're not at the camp any more, and I don't dare use anything much more obvious than the fusion lamp, or the rebels will find us first." Dave brightened. "Unless they blew up the car I used, when they found out it was missing; then they'd think we were dead."

"True, but we can't count on that; it'd be best to assume they landed it, and are looking for us."

"Yeah, I guess so." Dave hid his disappointment; the Ranger was counting on him! "We've got to be awfully careful, then. They were holding you hostage, weren't they?"

"Yes -- to get His Majesty to give Lord Robert a Sector" Tarlac chuckled. "The last I heard, anyway; by now, his Lordship may have decided he wants to be Sovereign."

"He won't be," Dave said positively. "No one who'd take a Ranger prisoner could possibly be qualified as Sovereign -- even if Prince Forrest hadn't been elected Successor."

"True, but that doesn't keep some people from trying." Tarlac shifted, bit back a groan. "I think the quidine's wearing off, Dave. Do you have anything stronger?"

"No -- and I wouldn't give it to you if I did." Dave braced himself against the objection he anticipated from the Ranger. "Quidine's almost too much of a risk itself, for someone who's been hit with stingweed."

Tarlac sighed. "You know more about it than I do; I won't ask again."

"Yes, sir." Dave echoed his patient's sigh. Tarlac's acquiescence helped -- but this was not going to be fun!

And the next couple of hours were hard, for both of them. As the quidine wore off and the stingweed poison grew stronger, Dave wished his patient would pass out -- for both their sakes. Eventually, Tarlac did; Dave made sure he was covered snugly, then turned down the lamp and arranged the remaining blankets into a nestlike bed for himself.

He didn't really think he could rest, with all the excitement and problems going on, so he decided he might as well make what plans he could. They had two days before they could expect rescue, and the Ranger thought the rebels would know they'd escaped, rather than being blown up. That meant he should try to make their cave defensible -- he snorted at the implausibility of one boy with a disruptor holding off well-armed rebels, but he'd have to do his best -- plus play doctor and nurse to a man who had about as much chance of living through his wounds and poisoning as the two of them did of holding off the rebels.

He opened his eyes to more light in the cave than the lamp had been giving off. Scrambling to his feet, he grabbed the disruptor and moved cautiously toward the entrance -- then dropped it to his side as he realized the light was morning sun, not rebel field-illuminants. Good, that would give them a break!

He took advantage of the safety to relieve himself, then he went back into the cave to check on his patient. Tarlac didn't seem to have moved, which Dave thought was probably just as well; at least that way he wouldn't irritate his injuries. But he swallowed hard when he pulled the blanket away from Tarlac's back, then had to run outside before he threw up all over their refuge. He'd read about stingweed poisoning in his first aid and survival courses, even seen holos in his father's medical texts -- but they hadn't prepared him for the sight and smell of it in someone's living flesh.

He wiped his mouth when he finished, the bitter taste in his mouth an echo of his bitter thoughts as he re-entered the cave. He'd have to do better than this, if he wanted to keep the two of them alive! He went to the spring for water, put some on the lamp to heat, then braced himself and knelt beside his patient. Tarlac's wounds were oozing thick greenish-yellow fluid that would have to be cleaned off, as often as Dave could force himself to endure the sight and rotten-cabbage stench. At least the medikit had surgical gloves, he thought as he put a pair on, so he wouldn't have to touch the stuff or risk getting the poison into his own system through a cut or hangnail.

Tarlac woke to a smell so bad it made him gag, and eyes that felt glued shut, so he couldn't see whatever seemed to be scrubbing his chest with a metal brush dipped in acid. He started to protest, trying to sit up, but the only result was a wave of dizziness and nausea. When he gave up on that and tried to rub his eyes, the scrubbing stopped and hands grabbed his wrists.

"Don't -- you'll just make it worse." Dave was unpleasantly surprised at how easy it was to restrain his patient. "Your eyes are all crusted over -- I'll need to soak them to soften the crusts." He put a warm, wet cloth over the Ranger's eyes, then went on. "I'll finish cleaning you up while those soften. I did your back while you were asleep."

The scrubbing started again, and Tarlac let out a yell.



Dave stopped. "I'm being as careful and gentle as I can, sir. I don't want to hurt you, but I do have to get you clean." He frowned. "It won't make you better, though. All it'll do is keep you from getting worse as fast -- but there's nothing else I can do."

Tarlac sighed, managing not to groan. "Your best is all I can expect, Dave. I'll try to be quiet about it."

"Yes, sir." Dave went back to work, grateful that the injuries, bad as they were, were limited to the Ranger's upper body. If Tarlac had been beaten all over with the poisoned whip, he probably wouldn't have survived the night. This way, he had a chance of lasting until he could get real medical help. Not much of a chance, Dave thought grimly as he began cleaning his patient's eyes, but a chance. "There," he said at last. "You should be able to open them now."

Tarlac did manage, though it took most of his strength. His vision was blurred at first, but blinking soon cleared it enough for him to see the strain in his rescuer's face. Well, he probably wasn't looking too good himself, he thought -- and that stink! "What's the smell?"

Dave grimaced, pulling a clean blanket up over Tarlac's shoulders. "Stingweed poison, sort of. You don't want to see what it looks like." He shrugged. "It does have one advantage, though. It'll keep animals away, so that's one thing we won't have to worry about."

"I can certainly understand that," Tarlac said dryly. "I'd certainly keep my distance from a prospective dinner that smelled this bad."

Dave managed a slight smile. "So would I, actually. Especially since it's probably the only thing that'll keep away any owner of a cave this nice." He hesitated, then decided he might as well go on; they were in no position to worry about luxuries like privacy. "The medikit instructions say the poison may not let you go to the bathroom -- but you should try, if it feels like you have to."

"I don't." Tarlac thanked the impulse that had led him to go on a low-residue diet over the last week, though he was less grateful for the rebels' refusal to give him a drink of water.

"It says you should try to drink, at least, and eat if you can -- do you want to try sitting up?"

"Yeah." Tarlac made the effort, groaning, but he needed Dave's help, and was gasping by the time he was propped semi-erect. He was too weak and dizzy to hold the cup Dave offered him, and had trouble forcing a couple of swallows down a throat that felt raw and swollen. He winced at the pain, but made himself drink more. Whether his kidneys had quit functioning or not, he knew he'd lost blood and was feverish; he couldn't afford to let himself get dehydrated, too.

Food was out of the question, though, he discovered when Dave tried to feed him some stew made out of survival rations. It wasn't bad stew, and he knew he'd need whatever strength it could give him, but he simply couldn't get it down. He shook his head, immediately wishing he hadn't when the dizziness got worse. "Dave -- what can I expect?"

Dave put the stew down. He didn't want to answer, but a person had a right to know the truth. "I've never seen a case before, so I can only tell you what the book says." He took a deep breath. "Massive stingweed poisoning -- and you've been given as bad a case as I've ever heard of -- starts off by making you sick and feverish."

"That fits the way I feel," Tarlac said dryly. "Go on."

"The fever'll get worse," Dave said reluctantly. "Bad enough to make you delirious. They you'll go into a

coma, and if you don't get first-class medical attention, you'll die."

"I've heard better news," Tarlac admitted. "Just what can you do about it?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," Dave said. "I don't dare give you any drugs, even ones as simple as a fungicide or antibiotic, because they're like painkillers -- too unpredictable on stingweed cases. I don't have either the equipment or the skill to monitor you, or take corrective action if you should have a bad reaction, and I sure don't want to make things worse. I can keep the wounds clean and use cold water to help keep the fever down, and . . . well, I'll do anything else I can think of to slow the poison down. But it won't be a whole lot."

"I appreciate the honesty." And, Tarlac thought, the fact that he'd been lucky enough to be rescued by someone who could appreciate the fact of his own limitations! Not too many people of any age, in his experience, had that much judgement. Too bad Dave's assessment was so negative -- but from what he'd said, Tarlac was able to take grim amusement in the fact that he wouldn't be worrying about it much longer. This mess would be a lot harder on the youngster than it would on the one who should be in charge -- He broke off that pointless line of thought. "Just keep me breathing till Friday morning, if you can -- the Marines will be landing as soon as it's full light, and there'll be Navy mediteams with them. If they can get me into a lifepod, I'll have a pretty good chance."

"I'll do what I can, of course." Dave frowned. "That's less than forty-eight hours . . . the rebels'll be looking for us too, but I don't think they'll get to us very fast."

"Don't be too sure," Tarlac cautioned. "Lord Robert is a fanatic, and he thinks I'm his key to ruling at least a Subsector. He'll be after me, and I'm willing to bet his people have the equipment they need to find us."

Dave shook his head. "It's not as easy as you make it sound, sir. People who've wanted to be found have been lost in these mountains for weeks. We don't want to be -- and we're in a cave, which'll make it that much harder for them." He hesitated, a thought surfacing. "Unless they search on foot, and happen across us. If they do, I guess it'll be up to me to decoy them away."

Tarlac didn't like that idea, but he also didn't have Lord Robert's convenient ability to ignore unpleasant reality. A Ranger was, to put it bluntly, far more valuable to the Empire than any youngster. It was a hell of a note, he thought sourly, that he had to look at it that way; Dave had saved his life once already, and it would be his doing if Tarlac lived through the next couple of days. The fact that Dave would get a substantial reward if they made it out wasn't a lot of help; dammit, part of his job was protecting Imperial citizens! Still . . . "I'm afraid it will."

To his surprise, Dave grinned. "That shouldn't be too hard. Those rebels're city people; they don't know what real mountains're like. Chaos, I don't think they'd even know to avoid something as simple as a trapper vine!"

"This is no holo show," Tarlac cautioned him. "If they do find us, we've bought it."

"I know -- but Mom was a Marine for thirty years and never even saw a live Ranger. I go on a camping trip, and end up helping one, against a bunch of rebels!"

Looked at that way, Tarlac conceded with some amusement, it did have something in common with a holoshow. And maybe having Dave treat this as an adventure wouldn't hurt -- might even help, by keeping his morale up. It was a good bet the youngster would need all the pluses he could find . . . he damnsure wouldn't be one! The way he felt, he wouldn't even be conscious much longer. Which would be a definite improvement . . .

Dave spent the rest of that day alternating between caring for the unconscious Ranger and watching rebel aircars crisscross the sky in what seemed, from the little he could see through trees, to be ever-widening search patterns. The rebels did think they were alive, then, but didn't have enough of an idea of where they might be to mount a concentrated search. So far, so good -- though if things stayed this way, it would work against them later, when the Marines landed and they wanted to be found.

That was more than a day away, though, he thought as the sun began to set. He rigged a door out of blankets, to block any lamplight that might get past the turns in the cave. He should have done that the night before, he told himself, but it simply hadn't occurred to him; it was just luck that they'd gotten away with his lack of foresight.

The night passed, but more slowly than he'd realized would be possible. Tarlac was delirious for several hours, and Dave spent most of that time wrapping him in cold-water-soaked blankets, wiping his face, and trickling water into his mouth. Shortly before dawn, to Dave's combined relief and worry, delirium deepened into coma and Dave's fatigue forced him to take advantage of the silence for a nap.

When he woke, he heard aircars again. They sounded closer than they had the day before, and worry turned into fear. The rebels might not be wilderness experts, the way Nemra's Rescue Service people were, but it didn't take that kind of expert to tell the difference between a mountain-prowler's yowling and a sick man's fever-induced cries. He'd been concerned about that all night, but hadn't been able to do anything about them -- and now it looked like the rebels knew at least their general location. Only the general location, he hoped, since they were still searching from cars. That was standard procedure for the Rescue Service, at least, so he tried to ignore them while he cared for his patient.

He'd gotten used to the smell, for which he was grateful. That and the fact that Tarlac was beyond the reach of pain were the only good parts he could see. The poison was spreading steadily, but -- as long as he kept the oozing fluid cleaned off, and kept Tarlac's temperature as low as he could -- slowly. Maybe slowly enough that he'd live through the next twenty-four hours, if Dave could keep going that long. And if he didn't have to leave the Ranger alone to play decoy.

He frowned, thinking as he worked. Playing decoy if the rebels got close had been his idea, and he was still pleased that Tarlac had thought it a good enough one to agree with. It still would be, and it would work, Dave thought, if Tarlac were strong enough to be left alone -- and preferably were able to defend himself, just in case. But he'd put Dave in charge precisely because he wasn't able to do for himself!

It was scary being responsible for someone else's safety, Dave was realizing. Especially when you were a commoner, the someone else was royalty, and a powerful noble -- a crazy, traitorous noble -- would stop at nothing to recapture him. Dave glanced across the cave to the small ledge where he'd put the disruptor -- out of the way, but easy to get to -- and shivered. The only alternative he could see to playing decoy was using the cave as a fort if the rebels found them, and that didn't sound much better now than it had the first time he'd thought of it. One disruptor without even a single spare powerpack wasn't much to build hopes on. He'd do what he could, of course, but he still couldn't help wishing he hadn't ventured into Lord Robert's camp and gotten himself into all this!

He sighed. He had gotten himself into it; now, if he could, he'd get both of them out. The first step was to get the Ranger to as much safety as the cave held -- which meant the spring. Good thing it wasn't far!

Half an hour later he'd filled his emergency containers with a day's worth of drinking water and settled Tarlac as comfortably as possible into the runoff stream. It wasn't ideal, but at least it would keep the fever down and the injuries mostly clean while he did what he could to make the cave defensible.

He discovered quickly that he could do very little. Wood from fallen limbs and whatever brush he could cut

with the stolen hunting knife would provide little protection from stunner fire, and none at all from the blasters or disruptors he thought the rebels were likelier to use. And there wasn't enough loose rock -- in sizes he could move, anyway -- to block the cave entrance. He supposed he could use his disruptor to enlarge that crack in the wall just inside the cave mouth, but that would be asking for trouble; the rebels couldn't possibly miss that kind of energy release. And he didn't dare waste his firepower on that; he didn't have much to begin with. He'd just have to hope the rebels didn't find them, and retreat to one of the side passages for shelter if they did.

He spent the next few anxious hours alternating between Tarlac and the cave entrance. The Ranger was doing as well as Dave had dared let himself hope, but rebel cars were moving by more often, and seemed to be centered closer to the cave. Once, he could have sworn he glimpsed an Imperial Marine troop lander, but decided that had to be wishful thinking; if the Marines were getting ready to land, the rebels should be running for cover, not continuing to search for escaped prisoners.

A little after noon, what he'd been dreading happened. Half a decade rebel aircars descended, and moments later he heard shouts and the sound of people forcing their way through brush. He checked the disruptor one last time, then moved back to the side passage he'd chosen. He wasn't as frightened as he'd thought he would be in such a situation, even though he was certain he'd be dead soon. He was more angry at the unfairness of the whole situation than anything else, and he intended to make the rebels pay as heavily as he could for their two lives.

Waiting for the rebels to get to the cave entrance, Dave had a vivid memory of his mother's amused disgust at war holos. "In combat, the idea isn't to play fair," she'd said more than once. "The idea is to stay alive while killing your enemy. You don't let yourself be seen if you can avoid it, and you certainly don't warn your enemy that you're going to shoot!" Well, he had the best cover he could get, and he didn't plan to issue any warnings. All he needed now was a target . . .

Light flooded the cave, and someone called out. "They're here! I see bloodstains -- "

That was as far as he got; Dave fired toward the light. It went out, and there was a sharp "crack" as air imploded where the rebel had been.

There was a brief silence, then someone cursed, and half a decade blaster-bolts seared past Dave's hiding place, about chest-high. He dropped to the cave floor and fired back without looking.

The exchange of fire continued for several minutes, with the only result Dave could notice being that the cave was getting uncomfortably hot. Then he heard yelling, and the incoming fire stopped abruptly. Moments later, an amplified voice called out. "You in the cave -- this is Captain Heidi Chiun, Imperial Marines. Come out with your hands up."

Dave started to obey, then hesitated. He thought he'd seen a troop lander, yes -- but he wouldn't put it past the rebels to try tricking him, since they hadn't yet managed to kill him. "Send one of your people in here," he called back. "If you're really Marines, you'll be safe in power armor, and I wouldn't shoot anyway."

"Hold your fire, then." Dave heard crunching steps, like something massive moving, then the light from the cave entrance dimmed. "I'm inside," another voice said.

Dave risked a look around the corner, then stood with a sigh of relief. The person at the entrance was wearing power armor, which satisfied him that she was what she was supposed to be. "I'm tossing the gun out," he said, doing so. Then, raising his hands, he stepped out of cover. "Boy, am I glad to see you! Ranger Tarlac needs a medal team, with a lifepod."

"He's here?"

"Yes, sir -- I'll show you."

"Wait one." Dave couldn't hear what she said next, but what his mother's stories had led him to expect was confirmed when she said, "They're on the way. Let's go."

Dave led her to his patient, not at all surprised when she swore bitterly before picking up the unconscious man. "The team'll meet us outside -- they'd never get a pod in here."

"Yes, sir." Dave led the way again, blinking as he emerged from the dimness into bright afternoon sun. A couple of decade Marines in power armor were guarding the perimeter of a new clearing, while several more in camouflage battledress held a number of rebel prisoners at gunpoint near one edge. The medalert team had obviously been in readiness nearby, because a lander with medical markings was already settling toward the clearing's center.

An armored Marine with captain's bars and "Chiun" stencilled on her helmet gestured the one carrying Tarlac toward the medical lander, then turned her attention to Dave and stood silently looking at him for several moments before she removed her helmet and smiled. "You'd be David Scanlon, then?"

When he nodded, surprised, she gave him a half-bow -- people in power armor didn't offer to shake hands -- and said, "Captain Heidi Chiun. Pleased to meet you. Now that we have Ranger Tarlac safe, an assault group will be hitting the main rebel camp. The Empire owes you some powerful thanks, young man."

"My pleasure," Dave replied, wanting to be polite though he wasn't quite sure which statement he was responding to. Then curiosity took over. "How did you know me? And why're you here now instead of tomorrow?"

"Two questions, one answer." Chiun frowned. "One of the rebels reported the torture and rescue to us, through the local IntelDiv office. Unfortunately, we couldn't get him out; he was killed while he was still on the screen. That's something we don't intend to have happen to you; His Majesty invites you to stay on the Empress Lindner until it's safe for you to go home, probably sometime after Ranger Tarlac recovers and holds a Tribunal on this mess."

The rebel who'd been killed had to be Theo, Dave thought. That was too bad -- but right now, at least, he couldn't seem to feel much except mild regret. His own problems were more immediately interesting. He hadn't expected protective custody, although when Chiun mentioned it he realized he should have; it was common enough on the news as well as in holoshows. He'd never heard of it being phrased as an invitation from the Emperor before, though! The effect was the same, but it was nicer than being put under arrest. Even if he'd rather be going home . . . "I accept the invitation, of course. Can I call my folks and let them know?"

"As soon as we get to the ship," Chiun promised. "Ranger Tarlac will be taken up first, then we'll ride up with the prisoners."

"Okay." Not that he had any choice, Dave thought. And he admitted to himself that he didn't mind all that much; it would be pretty exciting, being His Majesty's guest aboard one of the tremendous Imperial Battle Cruisers. He'd have to get something to prove it, though, or the kids at school would be certain he was making it up. "Uh . . . he will be all right, won't he?"

Chiun gestured toward the lifepod, now being loaded aboard the lander. "He was alive when they got him in the pod, and an IBC has damn good medical facilities. I think it's safe to say he'll be fine, yes."

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Her prediction was accurate, though Tarlac would carry scars from the beating for the rest of his life, and they were still an angry red when he held the Tribunal. Tarlac didn't mind; at least he was alive to have scars, thanks to Dave Scanlon. And it had been no problem deciding on a reward for the youngster; as Emperor Davis had pointed out, Imperial law made provision even for something so unusual.

Tarlac found himself looking forward to that part of this Tribunal. Punishing the guilty was necessary, but he didn't enjoy it; he much preferred to reward the outstanding, something he had less occasion to do than he liked. Especially to this degree, or with a subject whose fondness for holodramas would make it just plain fun -- and even more especially with Dave's parents and the local newsies in attendance.

The expression of satisfaction on Dave's face as the convicted rebels were led away made Tarlac want to grin, though he managed to keep his own expression carefully solemn. "That concludes the unpleasantness, gentles. But don't leave; I have a far more enjoyable conclusion for this Tribunal." He rose, going to stand in the area before the judges' bench, which had been cleared except for a small covered table. It would probably be best for Dave if this could be postponed for a few years -- it involved responsibilities, as well as privilege -- but justice delayed, whether punishment or reward, was damn near as bad as justice denied, and the Empire would help Dave cope with his new status. "While I could do this on my own," he went on, "my personal involvement led me to seek His Majesty's confirmation, and I am pleased to say he gave it. To use his words, 'Saving a Ranger's life is certainly a critical service to the Empire, and Mr. Scanlon certainly put himself at extreme personal risk to do so. The fact that you're that Ranger should only make giving him his reward more enjoyable.' And it will."

Tarlac found it even harder to keep a straight face as he watched Dave begin to understand the personal implications of the legal phrasing, "critical service to the Empire at extreme personal risk." The only reward Dave had mentioned wanting, when asked, was an appointment to the Imperial Military Academy -- which was a part, though a small one, of what he had earned. Tarlac removed the cover from the items on the table beside him, and now he allowed himself to smile. "David Mark Scanlon, stand forth to receive your Sovereign's accolade."

Dave obeyed, feeling a little dazed. Forget what the kids at school would think; he wasn't sure he believed this! He'd seen the ceremony in enough holos that he was able to get through the noble's fealty oath without stumbling, but it still seemed unreal to have a Ranger putting a surcoat on him, embroidered with arms that were his from now on, then buckling a gunbelt around his waist. He checked the gun almost automatically, not too surprised to find it was the disruptor he'd used in the cave, fully charged, then he re-holstered it.

"Good," Tarlac said with a quiet chuckle. "You'll do fine, Dave." He settled the starstone-gemmed coronet on the newest Imperial noble's head. "Though from now on, you know, it's 'Your Grace'."

"I'm really a Life Duke?" Dave asked. Hereditary Dukes ruled Imperial Sectors, and Life nobles outranked their hereditary counterparts -- which meant he ranked just below the Rangers themselves, now!

"You really are, Your Grace," Tarlac assured him. "You earned it; now enjoy it."

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END

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