

The Terrible Twosome of Talon and Phang

They were spread out across the run-down hangar that doubled as the briefing room for Hondo's Hardscrabble Humpers - more commonly known as The Triple H, especially amongst the enlisted. They weren't the largest mercenary outfit in the Pact Worlds, and they weren't the best, but they were always available, and always affordable - at least, that was the tagline marketing sold to the clients.

Their numbers tended to remain around two platoons - groundpounders mostly - with a few freelancers along as specialists when necessary. Today, there was just the one; a lithe, tawny Pahtra, with harlequin mask markings. She wore a dark jumpsuit over lightweight, second-skin armor.

The big, red Dragonkin hadn't been with the unit for long, and he didn't recognize her; judging from how she kept apart from the rest of the company, he figured it was her first time working with The Triple H. He put her out of his mind as The Major stepped up to deliver this mission's briefing, the half-smoked, dime-store cigar in the officer's mouth doing little to improve the smell of stale coffee, burnt oil, and worked metal, perpetually present in the hangar.

The Major activated a large holo-table display, and a green/gray sphere appeared, rotating slowly in front of everyone. "Our target, ladies and gentle-beings," his voice rough from years of battlefield command, "is here - the moon Karse, one of Bretheda's satellites." A grizzled, fifty-something human, the silver in his hair and beard winning its siege against what was left of youthful features. He wore the uniform of his company, but retained the battle ribbons he'd earned over his two-plus decade career with the Stewards. "The Vesk Imperium has disavowed what they're calling a, *quote* - splinter group of zealots, unhappy with the current peace between the Imperium and the Pact Worlds - *unquote*. Our contract is to drive them off of Karse, and out of the system entirely."

The Dragonkin raised his hand, interrupting. "Sir, I don't get it. What are we doing getting involved? Why don't the Stewards drop the hammer on the lizards?" He let his mouth fall open in the silent grin of his kind. "Not that I'm - in any way - opposed to kicking a little lizard ass." His comment drew a few chuckles from his fellow soldiers.

"It's obvious," a soft, feminine voice spoke up. "Everyone's *playing nice* at the moment." Heads turned to look at the Pahtra leaning against one of the landing struts of the number one dropship. Her upper lip curled slightly on the

left side of her face, showing one of her sharp, feline teeth, the sarcasm dripping from her voice. "The Imperium says this isn't sanctioned, so the Pact Worlds are taking them at their word, at least for diplomatic appearances. You lot have probably been contracted by one of the conglomerates, if I'm not mistaken; but don't buy it. This feels more like the Stewards are playing shadow games."

"Enough chatter." The Major cut her off, drawing the attention of those assembled back to him, and the holo-table. "The only thing any of you should be worried about is getting the job done. That means knocking these Vesks off of that moon. For good. We're not being paid to waste our time on unfounded speculation," he said, with a glare at the Pahtra, who just shrugged back at him, unfazed. "We'll be dropping in two waves. First platoon will be our spearhead, with Second held in reserve." He hit one of the table controls, causing a small, red patch to appear on the moon's surface. Then the view zoomed in on the highlighted sector to show a small, newly built landing field, with a few buildings laid out around it.

"As you can see, they haven't had time to put up much in the way of defenses. A few guard towers, minimal anti-air, and no anti-armor that we are aware of, though we aren't fielding our tank for this mission. We'll drop in just outside of their housing facilities, opposite the landing field. Our primary objective will be to drive them back to their ship, off world, and then out of the system. What intel we have says their ship isn't any more heavily armed than our dropships, so we'll outnumber them, once they're off world."

The Major hit another control, and the view slid eastward along the surface of Karse, until a blue patch appeared on one of the ragged hilltops of the largely barren surface. "This is our secondary objective. Talon," he looked back to the Pahtra, "your job is to infiltrate this building here - the Client says this should be a Communications Relay, but the intel is sparse - they want you to secure the data within before the Vesks can wipe it, and then retreat to the shuttle to await retrieval.

Our main attack at their landing field should draw off any extra security they have at the Comms Relay, making it possible for you to get in before they realize the scope of the attack. We'll extract you after they've been driven out of the system." Talon nodded her understanding, as he redirected the holo-display back to the landing field, addressing the full hangar once more. "Second platoon will hit them, in support of First, as soon as they've committed all of their forces to the defense of their landing field. Drakos, you'll accompany Talon on this one -"

“That wasn’t part of the deal. I told you, I work alone,” Talon interrupted, her voice sharp with surprise.

At the same time, upset, the Dragonkin spoke up. “Escort duty sir? This is bullshit; I should be with First platoon when they drop!”

The Major stopped them both with a single gesture. “Enough! Talon, this is non-negotiable. That data may be our secondary objective, but it is imperative all the same. You *will* have backup.” He moved his gaze to the Dragonkin. “And *you* will follow orders, soldier, or there’s no place for you here. Your mission parameters are quite simple, get her in,” he pointed at Talon, “protect her while she retrieves the data from that facility, and get the data out. *All other considerations are secondary.* Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal, sir,” replied the Dragonkin immediately.

“Understood,” said Talon, as she leaned back onto the landing strut with a sigh.

“Now, having covered that, we do have some good news. We’ll have some camouflage for the start of the mission. There’ll be a meteor shower over Karse for three nights. We’ll drop you two in at the heaviest, in our smallest shuttle, during night two of the shower. It’s unpowered, little more than a glider. They should think you’re just a small meteorite crashing down to the surface. As long as they don’t have any geology enthusiasts amongst their forces, you shouldn’t have any trouble.” He grinned. “It’ll be a wild ride for you two. The rest of us, in the two dropships, will drop on night three. It’ll look, to the Vesk, as though we screwed up. First platoon will drop with little cover at the tail end of the shower, with Second holding position beyond their sensors’ range, until they’ve committed their forces. The two of you are to *wait* until Second platoon arrives at the landing field. That’ll be your signal that all Vesk forces have been engaged.”

The Dragonkin checked the mission clock for the 3rd time. They were still an hour before the drop, so there was time for him to move about the cockpit of their shuttle. He checked over his pack again, there were a few grenades stashed in with his spare magazines. He inventoried the small medkit stashed under the pilot’s seat, and, finding it well stocked, he tossed it in the bag as well. It wouldn’t do anyone any good on the shuttle once they landed. Satisfied that he was as prepared as he could be, he went to the head; it was going to be the

last time he'd get to use an actual toilet for about 48 hours, and his last chance for some privacy as well.

After he was finished freshening up, he took a look at himself in the mirror; what looked back was unpleasant. His golden eyes sunken, his expression grim, and his scales a dull shade of their once crimson hue - he was a poor example of his kind. He sighed, splashed some water on his face, and returned to the cockpit. His charge didn't even spare him a look as he retook his seat, and began his checks all over again. He hated waiting.

Talon glanced over at him while he was preoccupied with his pack. She was impressed with how diligent he was with the mission prep. In theory, this part of the mission was likely the safest, but it was also the point where a slight mistake might snowball into a colossal screw up. The fact that he was taking such care did give her a glimmer of hope that he wouldn't be a complete hindrance once the balloon went up. Mostly though, she was just thankful that he wasn't much for conversation.

Checking his gear for the fourth time, his mind began to wander back to the same night it always did, whenever he could no longer distract himself. Before he was a mercenary, he was a crewman on a massive trading vessel, the *CS Helios' Bounty*. He'd been born on that ship, and had he had his way, he'd have died on that ship. It was where he'd met the person he'd bonded with, and it was where she had died.

There had been an issue with their Drift navigation system, and they'd dropped out much closer to Vesk space than they'd intended. Before the new course could be plotted, a small band of Vesk raiders had attacked, and boarded the ship. The Helios was too large for them to take as a prize, as few as the Vesks were, but there were enough of them to storm the cargo hold, and blow the main hatch, venting supplies and crew alike, out into space, allowing the raiders to fly through the resulting debris field, and pick over the bones of their prey.

He hadn't arrived in time to save anyone from that grisly fate, but he'd felt his bond-mate's mind ripped out of his head, scared and alone, seemingly just on the other side of the bulkhead. He'd pounded his fists bloody against the cold steel separating him from the dead; the lights flickering in the corridor, as engineering teams struggled to restore power to ship systems, and get them away from the prowling Vesks.

His friends and family had begged him to remain aboard, but there was not a single square inch of that ship he could stand to look at, now that she was gone. He hadn't been able to grieve properly; they'd been forced to leave her

body behind when they'd jumped away. He'd disembarked at the next port, and signed on with The Triple H, the first mercenary company he'd found, not bothering to check the infospheres for their reputation. He hadn't cared whether they were any good or not, just that they had active contracts - anything to keep him occupied.

He was jolted back to the present when Talon tapped him on the shoulder, causing him to jump in his seat's harness. He turned to the Pahtra, annoyance written across her face, and apologised quickly. "Sorry, lost in thought; what did you need?"

Deciding to let the Dragonkin's lack of focus slide, Talon pointed out the mission timer. "Drop is coming up fast; you *were* planning on turning off the auto-pilot, yes?" She hoped it wouldn't be this difficult to get his attention once they were at the objective.

Unfazed at her jibe, he took the controls of the shuttle in hand with a surprising grace for his size, and prepared to guide them down to the surface of Karse. "You're going to want to tighten that harness," he growled, "this thing is too small for inertial dampeners, and we're supposed to look like a falling piece of rock. It won't be the smoothest landing."

The seal released on the shuttle, and they stalked out onto the moonscape. The Dragonkin was a good deal louder than his companion, but he did his best to avoid making noise. *He actually moves alright for his size*, she thought, surprised. "Stick to the valleys," she said. "Follow me, and try to keep up."

They walked without a word for hours, zig-zagging their way around hills, doubling the amount of time it would have taken them to reach their target, if they'd just headed straight for it. The Dragonkin finally called a halt just before sunrise. "This should be a decent enough place to camp. We're close enough to the relay that we can get in as soon as First and Second platoons set down, but far enough away they shouldn't stumble across us during the day."

Talon looked like she wanted to argue, but it was good advice. She could see the very top of the Vesk structure over the top of the small hill they were using for cover. As the Dragonkin began making up the campsite, Talon moved slowly up the slope of the hill, crouching as she neared the top. Just before

cresting the hilltop, she went completely prone, and crawled slowly the rest of the way, just peeking up and over to scope out the security.

The guards were obvious - two of them, just outside the building entrance. The cameras weren't difficult to spot either, but that made sense. The Vesks probably weren't too worried about keeping hidden security measures here; relying more on how isolated their facility was on this dead moon.

She lowered herself back down the hillside, and out of sight, before standing. Returning to their campsite, she saw the Dragonkin had been busy. Two bedrolls, a large, portable battery they could use to recharge any powered gear while they waited - sensors, communicators, flashlights, tech weapons, even powered armor or exo-suits - he'd even brought along a small induction heater, so they could warm up the ready-made ration packs that were standard military - and mercenary - issue everywhere in the Pact Worlds.

They sat in companionable silence for a time, managing their gear, nerves, and appetites with varying degrees of success. Talon was glad for the silence. She didn't plan on getting to know the mercenary; didn't plan on remaining with The Triple H beyond this mission. It was better this way, she told herself. No entanglements, no risks, no one to be tied down to.

She'd been trained to work alone, and alone was where she belonged. It was the sacrifice she'd chosen, to help her world throw off their Vesks overlords. The choice to fight dirty, to do what needed to be done, no matter the cost. It had cost her her honor, her friends, and even her family. She wasn't a proper Pahtra, and when the Vesks had finally been thrown off of her homeworld, Pulonis, it had hurt too much to stay. She hadn't been cast out, not officially, but it was clear her presence made a lot of Pahtras uncomfortable when she was around.

It might have been different; if things had really ended when the Vesks departed Pulonis. If her masters hadn't kept looking for the enemy within the Pahtras' midst. If they hadn't realized the wealth to be gained from destroying lives. The first targets after they'd won their independence, were legitimate sympathizers who, she felt, didn't deserve their wealth, earned by licking the boots of the Vesks, while real Pahtras had suffered.

Once they'd gotten a taste for how wealthy they could become, her masters had begun manufacturing enemies out of wealthy Pahtra families. It was quite the profit, seizing assets - intellectual, digital, physical. She hadn't known what they were doing at first. She'd believed she was still fighting for Pulonis, protecting its people from the enemy. The great ubiquitous enemy, against whom all manner of nefarious deeds were acceptable.

So she'd sacrificed that proper, Pahtra life twice, first to fight the Vesk and their sympathizers directly, and then again, when she hadn't realized what her masters were up to after the war; when she'd helped them ruin good Pahtra families for no greater purpose than to line their own pockets. She told herself that it had all been worth it though in the end; that her people were free, and that she was happy in her self-imposed exile.

The Dragonkin spoke up, breaking through the dark morass of her memories. "I'll take the first watch. You should get some rest." He finished cleaning his machine gun again, and began reassembling it.

Talon looked offended, "You don't need to coddle me. I am entirely capable -"

He wasn't even looking at her; instead he scanned the surrounding hills. "Not coddling. You'll be taking the next watch, so I can get my own damn sleep."

Mollified, Talon settled down into one of the sleeping bags to rest. She grumbled a couple of times under her breath, but he couldn't quite make out the words. They sounded foreign to him, possibly her racial language, he thought.

When he heard her breathing change, the Dragonkin glanced back at his burden. It was probably unfair to think of her that way, but this would all have been much easier for him if he was part of the vanguard. Instead he was tasked with keeping someone else safe, and helping her in a mission he felt inadequately prepared for.

Still, a mission was a mission, and he'd see this one to completion. He didn't notice her eye crack open as he turned back to look towards the comm relay, completely missing as she stared at him with narrowed, appraising eyes.

"Time to go." The voice was quiet, yet firm. His eyes opened, and he took a deep breath as he reoriented himself to the situation. The purple sphere of the gas giant, Bretheda, hung heavy in the night sky. Its lavender-pink glow covered the hilly moonscape in an eerie, otherworldly light. There was something unsettling about being so near to one of the big gas giants - failed stars in their own right - without the protection of a ship's hull between him and the crushing gravity lurking just beneath that beautiful exterior, waiting to consume him, to add his essence to its own.

The first few meteorites flashed across the sky, and he heard a set of footsteps walking away from their campsite. With a groan he took to his feet and

hurried after his companion, frustratedly adjusting his equipment, before she got too far away.

Talon was annoyed with herself as she stalked around the few small hills still separating her from her target. Not for setting off without him, but for waking the massive Dragonkin in the first place. She worked better alone, she *preferred* to work alone; there were less people to let her down when she was by herself - less complications. She'd felt his eyes on her when he'd thought she was asleep, likely wondering why a Pahtra was so willing to participate in a sneak attack. She had no desire to enlighten him, and after this mission, she'd never see him again. His unvoiced questions would no longer be her concern.

They had timed their arrival almost perfectly, the meteor shower just passing its peak, and the first Triple H dropship timed to launch its attack shortly. They watched the two Vesk guards, obviously bored with their assignment, slowly patrol the circumference of the comms relay, not even bothering to more than glance, complacently, out over the hilly terrain. Timing their approach, Talon led the Dragonkin silently to a large outcropping of rock that would give them near cover from the guards.

They shared no words while observing the outpost; anything that needed to be relayed was done with hand signals, or writing in the dirt. There were two small vehicles near the front of the building, suitable for carrying, between them, no more than a couple squads. They waited for the assault to begin that would hopefully draw the security forces back to the main facilities.

The Dragonkin signalled when the mission timer hit zero hour, and they waited, tensely, for the Vesk forces to respond. Talon nearly set off then, but, sensing her agitation, he placed one large, clawed hand on her shoulder, restraining her. He felt her relax slightly, and was relieved when, moments later, more than a dozen Vesk ran out of the building, and loaded into the two vehicles, armed for combat. Just two Vesk remained behind, resuming their post at the facility entrance, looking mulish, spoiling for a fight.

As soon as the vehicles were out of sight, Talon signalled for the Dragonkin to stay where he was. She didn't need him for this next part, and instructed that he should keep an eye on the guards, watching her back. She lowered herself back down the hillside slightly, making sure she was out of sight of the entrance, and began making her way around to the rear of the structure.. The cameras had been set mainly to watch the obvious approach, and she was able to get right up next to the building without being detected.

Talon was glad to be rid of the Dragonkin; so far he hadn't actually held her back in any meaningful way, but she was too used to working alone to be comfortable around him. Pushing him from her mind, she went back to her search of the building's exterior. She found it followed most Vesk military construction guidelines; no windows on the first floor was a dead giveaway. It was possible there was a second entrance to the structure, but she wasn't counting on it.

Continuing her search around to the far side of the building, she smiled when she spotted the large junction box mounted to the outside wall. Most Vesk tactical buildings would have had a dedicated power supply *inside*. Why this one didn't, she had no idea, but she wasn't about to question her good fortune. She hadn't seen it from her earlier vantage point and, with any luck, she could disable some of the tower's systems, while still leaving the data recoverable.

Meanwhile, the Dragonkin repositioned, getting into a crouched stance, ready to pop up from behind the outcropping with his machine gun, should anything unexpected occur. Talon had chosen a good spot, close enough that he was in range, and well positioned for cover. Bretheda was at his back and, while that wasn't ideal for how the planet lit the surface of Karse, as long as he kept behind the rocks, the guards couldn't see any shadows from him, and he could just edge around the outcropping to watch the guards at the entrance.

He cursed silently when she moved around, behind the building, and again moments later, almost forgetting the need for stealth, when one of the two remaining Vesk guards began walking in the *opposite* direction in an obvious patrol of the building. *Damnit! What should I do now? The guard is bound to notice her.* He couldn't risk her being spotted, and killed, by the Vesk guard. This entire leg of the mission was lost without her skill set. It took him only moments to think through the scenario - the Dragonkin stood up, and braced his machine gun on the rocks.

Talon had just gotten the junction box opened up, and was starting to map all the wires and connections, figuring out which wires to cut, which to rewire, and which to leave alone. She heard the crunch of gravel beneath large boots approaching from around the building, where the guards had been standing. She glanced over, and saw the beginning of a shadow stretching across the ground, as the guard walked toward the corner of the building.

She knew that Vesk had decent night vision, though not as good as her own. Talon quickly looked around, happy to see how dark it was on this side of the relay. She closed the door softly and stepped behind the oversized junction

box. If the Vesk came around the corner, she felt confident that he wouldn't see her before her knife found his throat.

Before the guard could make it to the corner, the Dragonkin shouted, drawing the attention of both Vesks. "Hey! Over here!" He opened fire with his machine gun, taking aim on the far Vesk first, making sure they wouldn't find the Pahtra. As he cut down the guard, the one standing by the doorway managed to bring his weapon up, and return fire. The guard shouted something in Vesk, but he didn't understand the language. A couple of rounds bounced off of his armor, most either missing entirely, or striking the rock he was using for cover.

He redirected his aim, and quickly dispatched the second guard, just as Talon came racing around from the far side of the building. Sparing a murderous glare in his direction, she made straight for the door, snatching up one of the guards key cards as she did. Opening the door, she dragged the body of one of the dead Vesks into the doorway, so that it wouldn't shut behind her.

"Hey! Over here!" She heard the shout, followed by the unmistakable sound of machine gun-fire. Then nothing.

"Argh!" Talon threw her tools down in disgust. "Well, the junction box is pointless now." The two guards at the front of the building were down, so she took off towards the entrance. With stealth gone, she would have to rely on speed; getting in before the remaining Vesks wiped the data. "Hopefully whoever they have left in there isn't the sort to show a lot of initiative," she muttered as she raced into the building.

She saw the big Dragonkin taking up position outside the entrance, she assumed in case any Vesk reinforcements showed up. A shot rang out from deeper within the facility, and she felt a tug on her clothing as she dove for cover. Peeking around the corner, Talon spotted a makeshift defensive position at the end of the hallway, just in front of the server room. *Great, just where I want to go, too.*

"Hey Red," she called back outside, "get your ass in here and give me some covering fire! There's nobody else coming from out there if your friends are doing their jobs." She pulled her pistol out and fired a couple of shots at the two guards who'd been waiting inside, making them duck back behind cover, knowing she had little hope of punching through both the desk, and their heavy armor.

The Dragonkin barreled into the room, firing his big machine gun as he came. His shots punched straight through the minimal armor afforded to the guards by the desk they'd tipped over. "Don't worry Fluffy, I've got this," he said as he slapped a fresh magazine into his rifle. He proceeded down the hall, grinning as their small arms fire *tinged* off his armor, and he opened up on the guards again as the Pahtra moved in at his six, using his larger frame for cover.

She snarled at him, "Talon! My name is Talon, you great, big LummoX! This was supposed to be a stealth job; infiltration, remember? That's why I'm here." The two guards finally went down under the hail of bullets from the Dragonkin, and she darted past him into the server room. "We have to hope they didn't erase the data! If you cost me my bonus on this Op, so help me -"

She located an i/o port and got to work, as the Dragonkin looked over her shoulder. "How'd you get access so quickly," he asked, watching, as she initiated the data transfer, "and can you read that? It doesn't look like VesK to me." Truth be told, he didn't read or write VesK, but what he'd seen of their alphabet didn't match the characters he was seeing on her display.

Talon gave him a long-suffering look over her shoulder, "It *isn't* VesK. At least, not really. It's encrypted. And I didn't gain access at all. See this?" She pointed at the cord connecting her portable terminal to what, for all the world, looked like some sort of mesh cabinet to him. "I'm not connected via one of the standard terminals; I'm hardlined directly into the server. I'm actually mirroring it right now. No need to fight through their securities here and now. We'll just take them with us, and the folks paying for all of this can take all the time in the 'verse to decipher it."

She smirked as, despite himself, the Dragonkin looked impressed for the first time since she'd been saddled with him. "Like I said, infiltration, and I'm good at it." The portable terminal in her lap beeped twice, and she disconnected it, stowing it and the cord in the small pack she wore. "Alright, let's get back to the shuttle."

Once again, Talon took off first, without waiting for the Dragonkin. Sudden pain, like fire, bloomed on her right thigh, and she tumbled forward in a heap, her pack falling open, and the terminal spilling out onto the hallway floor. Only after she was on the ground did she register the sound of the pistol that had shot her, and she saw three VesK coming around a corner, deeper within the structure.

The Dragonkin, having seen her go down, came swinging around the door, out of the server room, machine gun leading the way, opening fire before he'd even tracked his targets. The VesK went down, and in the brief quiet after, they

both heard several more sets of large, booted feet, closing in. He looked down at Talon, took in her injury, and saw the terminal lying on the floor.

“Great,” she said through teeth clenched with pain, “thirteen successful Ops, not a scratch, but five minutes with you, and I’m going to be out of commission for weeks.” She wasn’t going to be able to move on that leg, and for a moment, he heard The Major’s words in his head, “*-and then get the data out.* All other considerations are secondary-.”

He looked from Talon, to the terminal, and back again. Their eyes met, and both knew what he had to do. The Dragonkin shifted his machine gun to hang by his left hip, from its shoulder strap, and then he bent down and lifted her much smaller frame easily. Talon’s eyes widened, and she stiffened reflexively in surprise.

Somehow, she had the presence of mind to snatch the terminal up off the floor just as the Dragonkin straightened up, carrying her in a seated position, in front of him. She hissed in pain, as her leg was jostled, but extended the claws from her free hand into the combat harness he was wearing to make sure she wouldn’t fall. He began a slow run, burdened as he was with carrying her extra weight.

More shots rang out as the last of the Vesks finally came within sight of the two intruders, and he grunted in pain, stumbling, but somehow staying on his feet, as one lucky shot hit him squarely in the back and burned through the armor there. Then they were outside, and he picked up speed, his strong legs beginning to get into a fast rhythm.

Talon looked over the Dragonkin’s shoulder, and, seeing the Vesks chasing down the hallway after them, grabbed the last of his grenades, and flung them all together, at the only exit from the building, just as the Vesks were about to charge out after them. “That takes care of the pursuit,” she said, noticing the steady rise and fall of the Dragonkin’s chest. In the silence after, she could hear the strain in his breathing.

They both let the silence linger for a time, as he carried her. The Dragonkin wasn’t talking, as it was all he could do to keep moving, from the pain in his back, and the added strain of carrying her. Talon couldn’t speak for the moment, as she was starting to feel *very* confused. This stranger had just saved her life; something *no one* had ever done for her. She’d never needed anyone else. She told herself that was how she wanted it. She’d sacrificed her happiness, her home, her inclusion in something greater than herself, to spare others.

It had been her choice. Hadn't it? Sure, the seers had predicted her natural talents from a young age. She'd been sequestered, instructed, trained how to operate solo, outside proper society. It wasn't as if she'd been the only one. It had to be that way, to spare her clan the shame. Now, this complete stranger, this mercenary who'd already screwed up her mission, who she *did not* want around, had risked the objective, the entire point of their part in the Op, with hardly a second thought.

What was this feeling, this...warmth? She shook her head. No. It was most definitely *not* safety. She imagined she could feel the beating of his heart through the heavy armor he wore, the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed steadily, deeply. *Stop that!* She shook herself; she *was not* feeling affectionate towards the large, capable, sad merc carrying her in his arms. *Wait, sad? Where'd that come from?* "Enough, Red," she spoke, for the first time in what couldn't have been more than two minutes, but felt like ten. "We're away, and out of sight now; put me down." He didn't stop immediately, and part of her didn't want him to stop, but instead, to fall asleep in those arms. *No I don't! What's wrong with me?* Panicking a little now, she raised her voice. "Red! Stop. Put me down. Now."

With a shuddering gasp he sank to one knee and set her down with as much care as he could. She sighed with relief as she stretched her leg out, the pain from the hole in her thigh easing slightly, now that they weren't moving. He took a moment to catch his breath. Sparing a look back behind them, and seeing no sign of pursuit, he set down his pack and began rooting around inside, looking for something. A moment later, Talon saw him open the medkit she'd seen him take from the shuttle craft. He pulled out the trauma shears. "Sorry about the jumpsuit," he said, and cut the material away exposing the armor underneath.

"We're going to have to remove the armor. Is it segmented? It'll be difficult if we have to remove it completely." The second-skin was tight-fitting, and wouldn't be as easy as the jumpsuit to cut away. Not meeting his eyes, she shook her head. Looking from the small, trauma-kit shears, to the resilient fabric comprising the second-skin armor, he sighed, set them aside, gathered up a handful of the fabric in each hand and tore it open, exposing the wound.

Talon's breath caught as the large Dragonkin tore open the leg of her armor. She watched silently, wondering where he'd received medical training.

She latched onto that thought, as it took her mind in a direction she could feel comfortable with. “So, where’d you learn to do this?”

He retrieved a syringe, and a small vial of clear liquid from the medkit. “I’m going to give you some morphine, otherwise this is going to hurt *a lot*. The bullet is still in your leg, and I have to get it out before I pack and bandage the wound.”

Talon watched the Dragonkin for a long moment, wondering why he was so intent on treating the wound now, not just leaving it for the medics. He rubbed an antiseptic solution over his hands and claws, hesitating, before finally answering. “I...knew someone once. Ship’s doctor.” He focused on the work, allowing it to distract him from the emotions normally brought on when thinking about his dead bond-partner.

“We need to clean the wound now,” he said, clinically. “It’ll be the better part of a day before they pick us up. If we don’t deal with this now, infection could set in; at the least, you’ll have some serious scarring, and it could impact your mobility.”

She was silent for a time, while he worked to remove the bullet from her leg. The painkiller had set in, and she was feeling a little foggy. The silence grew, oppressive, unrelenting; she couldn’t stand it. “Why’d you do it?” Her eyes opened wide, shocked with herself for blurting out the question. Trying to explain, she continued. “No one’s ever done anything like that for me; saved my life, I mean. And there was the mission to think about. You risked the mission. You got shot!” She sat up, *wait, when did I lie down?* “How could you risk the mission for me?”

He’d removed the bullet, and was now stitching up the wound. Eyes steady on the task, he considered her question. “I don’t know. At first, protecting you was the mission, and then, fighting together, you were a comrade.” That much was simple enough to him, but why *had* he saved her? “I failed to save someone once before. You just...felt so alone. I couldn’t leave you to die. Not even if it meant failing the mission.”

“I can’t remember the last time I *wasn’t* alone.” Her voice was small and quiet. She didn’t know why she kept talking. “I don’t want to be alone anymore.” She looked at him. He was wrapping a bandage around her leg. He looked up at her, and their eyes met. He offered her a comforting thought, trying to form the words, but the moment his mind reached out, it was as if she grabbed on with both hands, and dragged their minds together. Before he’d even realized what was happening, it was done.

She saw herself, looking back at herself. She saw him, looking back at himself. She felt an overwhelming sense of grief, she'd lost someone so important to her. She was so alone and cut off, yet at the same time, she couldn't remember feeling so connected to anyone as she was now. She was falling, falling into herself, falling into him. It was like looking into a repeating picture of yourself, like looking into the reflection of a reflection, that just reflects infinitely, smaller and smaller, down to a visual singularity. No end. No escape.

She was afraid; what was happening? How could she stop this? When would the falling end? Was she dying?

"It's ok," she heard. "It's ok. You're safe." It was the Dragonkin speaking. It sounded like he was right next to her, but she was caught in that singularity. "I'm here, I've got you." He looked down at the Pahtra, her mind a whirling torrent of emotion. He placed a clawed hand on her brow and stroked it, trying to comfort her, "Deep breaths. It'll pass soon, I promise."

What was he talking about? What would pass? How could all of eternity pass? "It'll be easier on you if you close your eyes. Here, lie down." Lie down? Where? She was *still falling*. "Sleep. I'll be here when you wake. I'm not going anywhere." She was feeling drowsy. The morphine was still working within her system. She listened to him whispering that it would all be ok, and, believing him, she finally drifted off to sleep.

The Dragonkin watched her as she slept, the peaceful rise and fall of her chest belying the upheaval he sensed from her mind. He put his head in his hand, unsure what to do next. He had time, their pickup wouldn't arrive for several hours - more likely close to a full day.

He hadn't expected to bond again; hadn't prepared himself. It had been a difficult bonding, turbulent. Normally, both halves were aware, had time to prepare themselves, to get to know each other beforehand. In the best of circumstances, it was a wondrous joining of two minds, one soul. This had been...almost violent. He still felt a little nauseous from it, a kind of mental motion sickness.

All the lore said a bonding could only happen between willing partners. He had no doubt of that, but he didn't *feel* like he'd been willing, and how could she *possibly* have been, when she hadn't even known what was happening? He didn't know this person; didn't know if he even *wanted* to be bonded to her. She'd just been shot! He couldn't lose someone again, not like last time. It would destroy him to go through that again; it nearly had once already.

He felt the bond vibrate in the back of his mind. Even unconscious, she was picking up on his thoughts and worries. He pressed against the bond, and was struck by the sheer depth of emotions there, boiling just below the surface. Her will was immensely strong, but her mind was unfocused, unprotected. It was no wonder he'd been swept up by it. Besides, he'd be lying to himself if he said he hadn't missed having another presence in his mind. He'd forgotten what it felt like; to be whole, complete.

He tried to send calming thoughts back to her. It was difficult. He was out of practice, and unfamiliar with her mind. Eventually she calmed, her breathing eased once more to the steady rhythm of peaceful slumber.

When he eventually opened his eyes, the Pahtra was sitting up, watching him. "I can feel you," she said, narrowing her eyes, "in my head. How is that even possible?" She cocked her head slightly, considering him as he tried to find a way to explain all that had happened.

"It is a thing of my kind," he said, carefully. "When two people become close, they sometimes share themselves so deeply that they become telepathically bonded." He moved his hand gently, in a meaningless gesture, trying to convey the depth of attachment, of trust, that a bond represented, but not knowing how. He paused for a moment, and looked into her eyes. "It can only be formed *willingly*," he stressed.

She shook her head, breaking eye contact. "No way. I didn't agree to anything like that." It was difficult to return his gaze. There was something piercing, *knowing*, about his eyes. She didn't like how vulnerable she felt, whenever their eyes met. "You formed the bond, right? Just un-form it. I don't remember saying yes to anything like this, and...and I don't want it now." Even as the words passed her lips, he could feel the lie through their bond, but refrained from saying anything.

After a moment, he looked away. "I cannot. It is not a thing that can be broken, except by d-" He choked on the word, cleared his throat, and tried again. "Death is the only thing that can sever a bond. Truthfully, even if I *could* end it, I would not." He saw her jerk, her head lifted, and she stared intently at him, as he tried to explain. "Please believe me, a bond *cannot* form between unwilling people. It is impossible." He shuddered, horrified at even the thought of willingly

terminating a bond. “Also, while my kind can, and do, form these bonds, it was not I who formed *our* bond. This was initiated by *you*.”

She could sense the sincerity behind his words. It was like a whisper in the back of her head. “I do not believe this,” she muttered. “So, what, you can read my mind now?”

“No.” His reply was immediate, emphatic. “We can communicate telepathically. We *cannot* read each other’s minds. Thank the stars.” He sighed, trying a different approach. *Like this*. He sent the thought to her across the bond.

She jumped, eyes wide. “Whoa. What the hells? That *tickles*.” Her eyes narrowed, “I hate it.” She looked at him. “It’s like an itch, inside my head. What am I supposed to do with that?” Her tail flicked in annoyance. It was the first time he’d seen her lose conscious control of herself.

“With practice, it won’t feel so strange. You should try it.” He looked around. “Actually, we should get back to the shuttle.” His back flared with pain as he tried to stand. Skin that had crusted over with fresh scabs and dried blood tore anew as fresh blood trickled down his back. “Urk!” He grunted as he started to grab his gear.

Talon was surprised to find that she felt sympathy for the injured Dragonkin. Yes, he’d jumped in foolishly, when he attacked the guards, and yes, she still felt he must have had some ability to stop the bond, or end it. *But...he did save my life, carrying me out of the Vesk tower, and he’d been wounded doing it...and he did treat my leg, first thing, when we’d stopped*. She sighed, exasperated at her own sentimentality.

“Stop,” she said. “Just grab the medkit, and come over here.” She motioned to the ground in front of her. “Let me have a look at you.” Talon gave him her best ‘I-will-brook-no-arguments’ look, and waited for him to follow her instruction, arms crossed in front of her.

He considered ignoring her command, but he sensed an honest desire from her to help. It was a positive step for the two of them, and he reminded himself that the bond was a partnership. He would have to learn to compromise again. “Yes ma’am,” he said, and moved to sit where she’d indicated. *Besides, he thought amusedly, it’ll be worth it, just to teach her the same lesson*.

She hissed when she saw the laser burn. It had eaten right through his armor, and she saw that he was missing several scales where he’d been hit. “I’m sorry, I’m not very good at this,” she said, gathering gauze, bandages, and an antiseptic solution from the medkit.

“Just describe the injury. I can guide you through it.” He hadn’t really felt the injury running from the comm relay, and sitting here, he’d felt fine, if tired, until he tried to stand up. “If it looks bad, the blast probably damaged my nerves there.”

Talon looked over the wound. “Well, your armor has about a 3 inch hole burned through it, you’ve got quite a bit of dried blood down your back, and on your clothes,” she continued, “and...you’ve lost some of your scales.” She winced as she said it.

He sighed. “Yeah, that sounds like 3rd degree burns. Don’t bother trying to treat it here. The Triple H has a small medical team, and they’re equipped for this. Just wrap it up, *carefully*, to minimize the risk of infection. Take one of the large bandages, the ones in the sealed packaging, open it up, and after you place it over the wound,” he pointed first to the bandage, and then the roll of clear plastic still in the medkit. “Then take that plastic there, and wrap it tightly around me, over the wound, and under my arms.”

“Ok, that I can do.” She followed his instructions, and before long the wound was completely covered, and protected from the elements. Hesitant, but concerned, she asked. “Will you have a - a weak point there? Because you lost your scales?”

“A weak point?” Confused, he tried to turn and look at her, until his back twinged, and he stopped. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, I read a story once.” She helped him put his armor back on, over the bandaged area of his back. It still had a hole in it, but it had to be better than nothing. “If a dragon loses its scales, from an injury or something, it has a weak point there, for the rest of its life. A well placed shot could kill it, without the protection of its scales.”

He laughed. He couldn’t help it. Even as his back hurt from it, he laughed harder. Maybe it was the first true laugh since he’d left the *Helios’ Bounty*. “They’ll grow back,” he growled once he’d caught his breath. “You can’t believe everything you read.”

“Don’t laugh at me, you big lummoX.” She smiled as she said it, and swatted him gently on the shoulder. “I was really worried! In the story the dragon died. How was I supposed to know it wasn’t true?”

He stood, cautiously, planting the butt of his machine gun in the ground. Trying to move around without causing too much more damage to his back. He gave the packs to Talon, slung his machine gun again from his shoulder, and

squatted down in front of her, doing his best to keep his injured back from bending and twisting too much.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to laugh at you. I guess the absurdity of it struck me is all. I wasn't trying to offend you." He gathered her up in his arms to carry; her leg was still too damaged to support her on the walk back to the shuttle. Grunting once, he straightened up, and set off. *I'd be happy to tell you all about my kind, so that you don't embarrass yourself in the future*, he thought to her.

She shivered, and grasped the front straps of his combat harness to help steady herself. "Stop that," she growled. "I told you already, it *tickles*. Talk normal to me."

He grinned silently. *No. I don't think I will. I told you, you need practice with this form of communication.*

"I'm warning you!" She shivered again. "So help me-!"

He stood at rigid attention, back screaming with pain, within the Triple H hanger. Talon was sitting on a stack of crates nearby, shifting, trying to find the most comfortable position for her leg. The Major had stormed up almost as soon as they'd gotten off the dropship. He turned to speak to the rest of the company, without taking his eyes from the Dragonkin. "Give us this room." Without a word, both platoons filed quickly out of the hangar, leaving the three of them the only people in the hangar.

Annoyance was etched on every wrinkle of the Major's face. "Well, the client is happy. They'll probably spend the next six months decrypting that data you retrieved," he glanced at Talon, then back to the Dragonkin. If the Major found it difficult having a subordinate who stood head and shoulders taller than him, he couldn't see any sign of it. "The Vesk were successfully driven out of the system, mission complete. So, tell me, Private Drakos. Do I look happy to you?"

The question surprised him. "Um, no si-"

"You're gods damned right I'm not happy! And I so badly wanted to be happy. Now, tell me. Do you know *why* I'm not happy?"

"No si-"

The Major held up a hardcopy of the Dragonkin's after-action report. "It's all right here, in your report, private. Want to know my favorite part? Rhetorical question. My favorite part was when *you*," he pointed at Talon, "dropped the

terminal, and *you*,” he moved to point at the Dragonkin, “picked up the hot piece of ass, in a skin tight suit, instead of the *actual* mission objective.”

Hmm, so I’m a hot piece of ass then? made its way into his mind, and he almost jumped. He had to fight to keep the smile from his expression.

See? He sent the thought back to Talon. *A little practice goes a long way.*

Yeah yeah, don’t change the subject mister. An echo of amusement came to him across the bond. *Enquiring minds want to know. What am I to you, if not a “hot piece of ass?”*

I really should focus on getting yelled at...

Better at dodging questions than blasters I see.

“-AND ANOTHER THING!”

Talon was finally fed up with listening to the human yell, “IF I MAY; Major, your private here has been injured in the line of duty, as have I. I don’t foresee anything useful coming from this conversation, so if you’d please excuse us to med-bay to receive treatment?”

A vein nearly popped out of the Major’s forehead. “Dismissed for medical,” he managed to say, “but Private Drakos, we’ll talk again, and discuss your future with this company.”

The Dragonkin snapped a salute, waited for The Major to return it, then turned to Talon, who was already getting gingerly to her feet. He stepped closer, in case she needed help, and she hopped over beside him to slip her arm behind his back, as if it were the most natural thing in the world. He tried not to think about how good she felt, pressed up against him like that, or how close her paw was to his *very* sensitive tail, and led the way towards the med-bay.

“Hmmm.” The doctor poked and prodded at the burns with little care for her patient. He hissed at the rough treatment, but otherwise remained silent and unflinching. He found it difficult to look tough, laying face down in a hospital gown, his behind hanging in the artificial breeze from the air circulation being pumped through the station. He was simply glad that Dragonkin did not blush, and hoped that he wasn’t showing any sign of discomfort - or of the embarrassment he felt - on his face.

As she moved to poke at the wound again, Talon spoke up. “Excuse me, but are you actually going to treat him at some point? While I’ll admit to some

small pleasure at seeing our boy here like this, one starts to wonder, if you're actually a doctor, or some sadist with a medical license."

The woman looked over at the Pahtra. "Both?" She smiled brightly. "I'm sorry, but most of the grunts we have aren't tough enough to survive such severe burns, and still retain this level of combat effectiveness." The doctor sounded excited. "Plus, I don't often get to work with scales. They're *fascinating*! Did you know that, just like my human hair, he forms his scales from keratin, and that -"

"Doc!" Talon had to interrupt the woman, before she started poking the Dragonkin again. "It's very interesting, I'm sure. Maybe though, you can study the damaged scales you've already removed, *later*? Can you give him some healing accelerant, or something?"

The doctor pouted. "Well fine, I guess I can just patch him up. I've already cleaned the wound. Human quick-heal won't work on him. I'll prescribe some keratin supplements, along with a basic steroid, to boost his metabolism, and processing functions. That'll help the scales grow back quicker, but if we accelerate the process too much, they'll remain soft, and weak. The best remedy for you," she looked down at the Dragonkin lying half-naked on the oversized gurney, "is time and rest." She finished bandaging him up, patted him once on his rear, and left the room.

The Dragonkin huffed in annoyance as the doctor left. *That's twice now*, he sent through the bond.

Talon twitched slightly on her bed, *Twice what?* She scratched absentmindedly at the fresh bandage around her thigh. "It'll take weeks for my fur to look normal. This is your fault, you know."

He propped himself up on his elbows. "You not looking around the corner, before running into the open is my fault?" *Twice that you spoke up on my behalf. Why?*

Maybe I don't like self-important blowhards wasting my time? She mock-glared at him. "If you hadn't shot the guards, I'd have gotten their security systems down. No alarm, no reinforcements." She crossed her arms to keep from scratching at the bandaging more.

"They were going to spot you. It was my job to protect you. I kept that guard from shooting you." He slowly pushed himself up and back, into a kneeling position, testing the fresh bandages at his lower back. They felt a little weird, stretching with him as he moved, but they seemed like they would hold up, if he was careful. *No I don't think that's it.*

Good for you. She stretched her right arm out to the side, and with her left hand, grabbed at something just beneath the armpit. From the sheath concealed within her jumpsuit, she drew a long, serrated knife, and held it up. "I can take care of myself. You need to be able to trust me, if this is going to work."

The Dragonkin let out an amused snort but let both conversations drop. He was shocked to realize how pleased he felt, knowing she was at least *considering* making the bond work. *So, what are we doing after this?* He got down off the gurney, and reached for his pants.

Talon looked over at him, allowing her eyes to wander over his body. *We? Who said that we were doing anything together after this?*

He took a moment before answering, "Our bond is unbreakable, permanent. But it could be rendered... inert with enough time and distance. You'd likely feel its absence, but you'd be free of me. If that's what you want." He dressed in silence, giving her time to consider his words.

Talon didn't respond for a long moment. Being free of him was what she wanted; wasn't it? For some reason, the thought of not feeling him in her head wasn't appealing. She still didn't understand how she could possibly have been willing, when she hadn't even known what was happening, but then, why did the idea of not feeling him in her head feel so awful?

"Well, I'm *not* signing up with any mercenary company." She said, instead of dealing with the confusion of the bond. "I'm heading right back to Absalom Station. I'm not exactly a joiner, and saluting all day does not appeal to me."

He nodded. "I figured that's how you'd feel. As soon as we get out of med-bay, I'm going to turn in my two-fifty-two. That'll release me from my contract here, though I'll have to forfeit at least part of my pay for early release." He sighed, considering his options for a moment. "I don't really have much saved up. I'll have to figure out how to replace my damaged gear, if I'm going to work as a freelancer with you."

Talon froze. He was leaving his home, because of her? The exile, with no home, had just cost him everything. She didn't want this guilt; she began to pull herself back, trying to rebuild the walls that had kept her safe. Large, warm hands reached out and grabbed her shoulders. "Hey, Talon. What's wrong?"

"No," she shook her head. "No no no. I- I should go. You don't have to-" She tried to slide out of his grasp. "This is your home. You belong here. I don't want to ruin that for you," her voice softened as she spoke; at the end, barely more than a whisper.

She was pulled back from her spiral, as she felt his hand on her face, and his voice in her head. *TALON. This is my choice. As long as you'll have me, I will not leave you. I need you to know that.*

Meyel help her, she believed him. She took a deep breath, choking back a sob, and wrapped her arms around his neck, pulling him into a tight embrace. When she finally settled, Talon reached out through the bond. *You promise; you really want to stay with me?*

I would rather die than leave your side.

She allowed herself to believe that, for once, someone actually wanted her. Not her abilities, not what she could do for them, just her. Talon looked at the Dragonkin again, and smiled. "Well, I can't just keep calling you 'Red.' Are you ever going to tell me your name?"

He shrugged. "I kind of liked Red, but since you ask, it's Phang. Phang Drakos."

She looked horrified. "You're not serious!" Talon closed her eyes, and groaned. "Talon and Phang? Oh no." She giggled. Her hand flew up to cover her mouth, and her eyes popped open, shocked. "This isn't funny." She giggled again. "It's like something out of bad vids!" Phang joined in on her giggles with a bark of his own laughter.