

Axabrast

by Brad Torgersen, 1974–

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Elvin closed his eyes and let the tears silently drip down his cheeks. He knew it would not be good to cry. But the pain of the tattoo needle was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before, and his grandsire's grip on Elvin's wrist—to keep him from jerking his hand away—was like steel.

"The lad's hurting," said Elroy Axabrast, placing a gentle palm on Elvin's head. Elvin's sire was a practical man, and didn't stand much on ceremony. He too bore the mark of their people. Which he'd never talked about much, nor seemed to find terribly important. Unlike Eltar Axabrast—Elroy's sire—who bled Dissenter from every pore.

"The lad needs to know who he is," Eltar insisted, not releasing his grip.

When the needle jabbed a particularly sensitive bit of skin, Elvin let loose with a tiny whimper.

"Who he is," Elroy said gruffly, "is his own person."

Eltar made a scoffing sound.

“D’yae think being his *own person* will make a lick of difference, when he’s grown and tryin’ to survive in this Starstate? If you’re not First Families, you’re second-rate human flesh.”

“It’s not that bad,” Elroy said. “Our house does okay.”

“Our house does as well as Family Oswight *allows* us to do. Same as any other Dissenter home for that matter. Elroy, I can nae understand why ye would stick up for the system.”

“Hold still, lad,” the man running the buzzing needle ordered. Elvin felt his grandsire’s grasp tighten to the point that the nerves in Elvin’s hand began to go numb.

“It could be much worse,” Elroy said. “Starstate Nautilan is our neighbor, out here on the arse end of the Waywork. If Planet Oswight’s shipyards were deemed more of a strategic target, we’d probably be living beneath some Nautilan military governor’s heel.”

Eltar grunted—he couldn’t argue with that.

“Still,” he said, “no grandson of mine is going to come of age not realizing what his people have been through.”

“Almost finished,” said the man with the needle.

Elvin bit his bottom lip between his teeth, each second seeming to last an eternity. Until, finally, the buzzing stopped.

“There,” the artist said, smiling, as he set the tattoo needle aside, and reached for one of the sterile bandages in his little box where he kept the needle, and the ink, as well as antibacterial wipes, and disinfectant.

“When will it stop stinging?” Elvin said, his voice wavering.

“Not long,” said the artist, slapping the boy’s bicep in a fraternal fashion. “If it helps any, I’ve got two more stops to make tonight, for lads your age. So, you’re not alone. ‘Tis a pain of important passing, Elvin. Your sire and grandsire went through it. I went through it. We all did, when we were young. You will understand some day.”

The artist applied the sterile bandage to the intricately-patterned Dissenter seal which was now graven into Elvin’s young flesh. Elvin could not help noticing the same seal, distorted by liver spots and time, on the back of the artist’s own hand. Part of Elvin felt proud—despite the pain. He knew he was taking an important step toward manhood. A lad didn’t turn twelve but once in his life, and now he knew the men would treat him differently. Just as they had treated Elvin’s older brother and cousins differently.

Eltar’s grip released at once, and Elvin felt pinpricks racing up and down his fingers. He rubbed at his wrist, and gently touched the bandage stuck fast over the tattoo.

Elroy’s hand ruffled Elvin’s hair.

“It wasn’t that bad, was it,” he asked, “now that it’s over?”

“Aye, not that bad,” Elvin said, trying to put on a brave face—but still sniffing, and wiping at his nose with his sleeve.

“In a few days, that bandage comes off, and you’re right as rain,” Eltar said encouragingly, then got down on his knees—despite his age—and drew Elvin into his embrace. Elvin allowed himself to be swallowed up by his grandsire’s rough affection. Elvin wrapped his arms around Eltar’s neck, smelling the machine oil

and old perspiration on the man, who'd not even bothered to change out of his work coveralls before coming to his son's home to see Elvin receive the mark.

Eltar thanked the artist and followed the man out of Elroy's modest quarters. Like everyone else who occupied the warren of industrial housing which burrowed deep beneath the surface of Planet Oswight—thin atmosphere, no oxygen, nor any free-running water—the family of Elroy Axabrast lived lean. Just two sleeping rooms, one for Elvin's sire and ma, the other for Elvin and his brother Eljon. It was a galley kitchen so small that two people could not pass through without bumping into one another. A single, small family room that also doubled for dining, with a collapsible table and chairs which hung on the walls during the day. And one spacer-style head, the sink and shower faucets of which dispensed both hot and cold water at a miserly rate.

"Why is Gran bitter?" Elvin asked, resisting the urge to pick at the sticky edges of the bandage on the back of his hand.

"Gran means well," Elroy said. "But he doesn't realize the universe is a *much* bigger place than this single planet. Starstate Constellar is our country. And Family Oswight is just one of many First Families, alongside the great men and women of business and industry, who keep the First Families balanced at the Constellar Council. Which is to say, son, don't keep your horizons near. Keep them *far*."

"Is that Gran's problem?" Elvin asked.

"I wouldn't call it a problem," Elroy said, seeming to choose his words carefully. "Gran has lived his life the best way he knows how, just like we live our lives the best way we know how. Some day you'll decide how to live your life too."

"As a Dissenter?" Elvin said, pointing at the seal on his sire's hand.

"As the man you *want* to be," Elroy said. Then he hurried Elvin to clean up for bed. It was still a work and school night. They would all need to be up early in the morning.

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The fist that caught Elvin in the face was a sucker punch. He toppled back over the school lunch bench, knocking the trays of two other students to the floor and half covering himself in food.

The trio of Outworld boys were the same three who'd been menacing Elvin ever since he'd turned fifteen. Not any bigger than Axabrast was. But—by Elvin's estimation—much meaner. They were the sons of men who'd come from elsewhere in the Starstate. Technicians lured to Planet Oswight's shipyard industry by promises of bonus money. It wasn't glamorous work, any more than the Outworld boys were glamorous young men. They sneered at Elvin as he got to his feet.

"Typical Dissenter," said one of them, a particularly cruel lad named Boxlo. "Doesn't know his table manners."

The three howled with laughter, as sauce, meat, and vegetables dripped down Elvin's front. The smell in his nostrils was the same as it had been on other occasions when these particular lads had come for him at meal time. Like before, Elvin struggled to contain his rage. Three-to-one was never good odds, no matter how you sliced it. He'd fought back each time, and gotten cracked harder for his

effort. He vacillated between eyeing the school mess hall exit, and the leader of the trio, named Ordi.

Elvin unconsciously rubbed the seal on the back of his hand.

“Takes three o’ you bastards to equal one o’ us,” he growled.

“Is that so?” Boxlo said, mocking Elvin’s tone.

“Aye,” Elvin said.

The third Outworld boy, who typically followed the other two, picked up a piece of fruit from the deck—an apple grown in one of Planet Oswight’s many hydroponics farms—and threw it at Elvin’s head.

Elvin ducked, while the older boys and girls around him cleared the area. They’d seen this kind of thing before. Outworlds ganging up on Dissenters, and Dissenters doing the same in kind. The school was riven in this way, to the point that most Outworlds and Dissenters traveled the school corridors in packs. Even the girls, who didn’t ordinarily go in for the kind of macho violence upon which the older boys seemed to feed. But they could get sucked in, too, once somebody threw a punch.

Elvin, in his usual fashion, was one of the few Dissenters who preferred to walk alone. And he paid for it every time.

In his head, Elvin heard his gran’s voice say, *There’s nae respect among men that you don’t earn the hard way.*

Elvin then launched himself at the three, and got Boxlo on his back before the other two could react. One satisfyingly hard fist to Boxlo’s mouth, and the other two were suddenly on top of Elvin, kicking and hitting. Each time, the strikes came harder, got more vicious. Elvin didn’t care. The adrenaline of rage was in his blood. Too many days hearing his name mockingly called after him as he went to class. Too many instances of humiliation in front of the other kids, who always left him to fend for himself—even the other Dissenters, who didn’t consider Elvin to really be one of their own. Not enough to rush in and risk punishment on his behalf. If he’d been a good pack-runner like most, maybe things would have been different. But here again, Elvin had to make his own justice.

Ordi dragged Elvin off of Boxlo, and tried to jam a knee into Elvin’s groin. Elvin deflected that knee, and grabbed both sides of Ordi’s head—hair balled between fists—and smashed his forehead up into the Outworld’s skull. There was an audible *thunk* and Ordi flopped away, stunned. Elvin himself felt pain and disorientation, but was satisfied by the way Ordi couldn’t find his feet, while Boxlo staggered up, and came at Elvin with a steel spork—snatched from the spilled trays still lying on the floor.

Elvin narrowly dodged the makeshift weapon as it slashed past his face. Without thinking, he grabbed Boxlo around the waist with both arms, and heaved. The other boy screamed and began to jab at Elvin’s back, but Elvin wasn’t done completing the motion. He bodily took Boxlo four steps and slammed the bully hard onto the edge of one of the now-empty lunch tables. Boxlo let the spork clatter out of his hand, and sagged awkwardly to the floor, his face gripped by an expression of pain.

“Bastard,” Boxlo gasped. “My ribs!”

“Aye?” Elvin said. “Ye want me to bruise a few more?”

“*Enough!*” thundered a deep baritone voice.

Every child who'd not fled the scene became frozen in place, as the school's resident drill master stepped into the dining compartment. The drill master was bald, with a thick walrus moustache decorating his face. Veins stood out from the skin over both ears, and his flesh had turned and especially angry pink. Flexing weight-lifter's biceps, his mere glare let every child know that someone capable of doing permanent damage had entered the contest.

The drill master immediately placed himself between Elvin and his foes.

"Lads," the man said, "I am growing bloody tired of this."

"He started it!" the third boy croaked.

"Shut up, Mr. Adelsi," the drill master said. "If they'd let me have my way, I'd expel the lot of you, but then what would your parents do about it? Planet Oswight doesn't need any more delinquents aimlessly roaming the corridors and getting into trouble. Some day soon you're *all* going to have to become men. So, pick your chum up off the deck, and get him to the nurse *immediately*. And *stay* there until I come to collect you. If you so much as think about getting *lost* en route..." The drill master smacked a beefy, curled paw into the opposite palm.

"Yessir," said three frightened voices, and then Boxlo was being helped up off the floor, and gingerly herded away from the scene of the skirmish.

Elvin merely stood there, feeling the sauce splattered across his shirt grow cold.

"You," the drill master said, aiming a finger at Elvin's now-swollen face, "come with me."

Elvin sullenly trailed the man. Adults—Dissenter, or no—were all the same. They didn't really care who was in the right, or who was in the wrong. They just didn't want to have to deal with any kid problems. So, Elvin would doubtless be disciplined in equal measure. To send a message to the rest of the students that violence from any "side" would not be tolerated.

The drill master's office was a smallish, barren place, with only a single desk and computer workstation, and no decorations—save for the glass-lidded box of military ribbons which sat on a narrow shelf attached to one wall.

"Sit," the man ordered, physically pushing on Elvin's shoulders.

Elvin did as he was told, taking the chair across from the high-backed school administrator's chair that the drill master enjoyed.

"What is it with you?" the man asked, settling into his seat.

"Not my fault, sir," Elvin insisted. "I was just minding my own business."

"And painting a target on your back in the process, lad!"

Elvin stared at the man. "Sir?"

"I've watched you. Keepin' to yourself. You're not really in with the other Dissenter boys. Why is that?"

Elvin eyed the seal on the back of the drill master's hand.

"I don't know, sir," he admitted.

"Are the others not *good* enough for you?"

"No!" Elvin replied, heat in his cheeks.

"Well what is it, then? I'd have a much easier go of things if you had a group to watch your back for you, versus me getting whistled up every time those three idiots decide they want to take a piece."

"Is that what this is, sir?" Elvin said, unable to hide the sarcasm in his voice. "I'm more trouble than I'm worth?"

“Bollocks. You’re not the only Dissenter who finds himself at the center of trouble in this school. I have a nice, healthy roster of lads and lasses who keep me gainfully employed. But most have a group they run with, and that tends to cut down on stitches and broken teeth. But you? You’re flapping out there like a target. So much so that the retrograde Outworlds—the ones even other Outworlds don’t like very much—have decided you’re the low man on the pole. They can jump you and not suffer consequences from your crew.”

Elvin merely stared at his shoes. And said nothing in reply.

“I meant it when I told you, you would all be men soon,” the drill master said. “Whether Outworld or Dissenter—or somewhere in between—most of you will step right into your fathers’ shoes. Your sire does the same kind of work as your grandsire, does he not?”

“Yessir,” Elvin said.

“And you—do you plan on the same?”

“I... I don’t know, sir,” Elvin admitted.

“You do realize that merely being a Dissenter doesn’t mean you’re trapped here.”

“Sir?”

The drill master nodded his head in the direction of the box with the glass lid.

“Starstate Constellar has opportunities for volunteers.”

“What kind of volunteers?” Elvin asked.

“Any kind,” the drill master said. “Constellar’s office of Deep Space Operations and Defense is forever in need of smart, tough, capable young men and women. How would you like to put that independent fightin’ streak to use, in a way that will matter?”

Elvin turned his head and stared at the box—and the ribbons neatly arrayed inside. Everyone who’d passed through the drill master’s office knew that he was not a man to be trifled with. But very few had ever had the guts to ask the drill master where those medals had come from.

“Tell me more,” Elvin said.

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“Face front, Axabrast!” hissed the entry training instructor.

Elvin was fairly certain that he’d not budged a millimeter from his position at rigid attention, but he also knew from experience that the ETIs—all of them, from the senior-most all the way down to the juniors—were very good at discovering things to be unhappy about. In the many months since departing home, Elvin had learned that the mark on his hand didn’t mean much to the other trainees, and it certainly didn’t mean anything to the ETIs. Rather, Elvin had been lumped facelessly in with the rest of his cycle, and like all the other volunteers, ram-compressed through the physical and psychological juicer of DSOD recruit prep.

No feelings were spared. Nor cheeks turned. An ETI would slap a volunteer just as soon as look at him, and there had been plenty of slapping, screaming, bunks being turned over, lockers being tossed out, and sundry physical lessons—which typically involved heavy objects being suspended over one’s head, or at the extent of one’s arms, until one’s muscles gave out. Or the ETIs got bored, and focused their baleful gaze on the next victim.

Elvin struggled to remember if he'd ever had a worse time. Even back when he'd been menaced by the Outworlds taking their shots at him.

Still, it wasn't all misery. Being among the other entry training volunteers meant meeting people from all over Starstate Constellar. Young men and women—and a tiny handful of older ones too—who each came from a dizzying variety of backgrounds. There were daughters of investors, sons of salesmen, nephews of prior DSOD servicemen, and even two First Family members. Who, shockingly, did not get a pass when it came to serving in the DSOD. They endured the abuse right along with everybody else, and if the ETIs ever acknowledge those volunteers' First Family status, it was only to push the First Family volunteers just a little bit harder. Make them sweat longer. Lose even more sleep than the others. As if entry training were a place where the tacit rules of Constellar society did not apply. And even a First Families son or daughter could suffer.

What Grandsire Eltar would have made of it all, Elvin could not say. So far as he knew, he was the first from their house to actually join the military. Elvin made sure to write missives home whenever time allowed. Which wasn't often. The entry training depot was a hive of activity at almost any hour, with different cycles grinding up against each other in their rush from one task to the next. There wasn't enough time to spork a decent meal into your face, much less let your head touch a pillow.

The depot itself was composed of two elements: a bubble-domed groundside facility where the barracks and flightline were located, and the asteroid which had been moved into planetary orbit, then fitted out with different microgravity training facilities simulating the different interiors of different kinds of ships, both in-system security craft, and the more glamorous Key-capable starships which could actually cross the Waywork from Waypoint to Waypoint.

Elvin hadn't thought much about the broader reality of the Waywork before showing up at the depot. They taught Constellar history in school, and Elvin knew those details like everyone else. But the DSOD's training focused explicitly on the fact that Starstate Constellar had been at war for the entirety of Elvin's lifetime. Because Starstate Nautilan's borders were also Constellar's borders, and Starstate Nautilan was a voracious consumer who'd been actively pruning stars and worlds from all of its neighbors—whether those neighbors liked it, or not.

Deep Space Operations and Defense—along with its foot army, known as Tactical Ground Operations—was Starstate Constellar's only means of defense. Thus the constant call for volunteers willing to crew the space fleet that guarded Constellar space.

Elvin, of course, had been attracted to the TGO. Having survived the first phase of entry training, he'd specifically requested accession to TGO for the second phase—versus the other secondaries which focused on maintenance, piloting, various spacecraft crew duties, and so forth—and had enjoyed every minute of it. Even the constant harassment from ETIs, which seemed to be even harsher and more picayune in TGO phase two, than in general phase one.

Graduation had seemed so far away that first night as Elvin had lain in his phase one bunk, curled up around a cold knot of loneliness and uncertainty. Now? Elvin felt different. Looked the part, too, just as so many of the others did—himself and them arrayed in a box formation on the airtight deck of the bubble-

covered parade field. Planet Waulis's lethally cold and poisonous atmosphere was kept safely outside, while industrial air ventilators ensured that the parade field enjoyed a mild, dry, nitrogen-oxygen breeze at all times.

Every TGO troop had worked hard, though not all of them had made it. Strangely, seeing people walk—or get flushed out—simply added to the sense of accomplishment. Though Elvin could not discern for the life of him how or why anyone failed. The entire thing was designed to help you make it to the end. Constellar needed every able body it could get for the fight with Nautilan. But, some people still couldn't adapt to the challenge, or were so undisciplined and unruly as to be discharged and shown the door.

Though, rumors persisted of an especially hard-core entry training depot, far from Planet Waulis, where those difficult cases who showed signs of salvageability would be transferred. It was one more, hellish go-around at turning them into people who could soldier in Constellar's small, determined military.

"You all look so *beautiful* in your dress uniforms!" remarked the senior-most ETI—her voice dripping with sarcasm. She was a grim-faced woman known among recruits for hating every last soul that passed through her liver-spotted hands. Some said she'd retired twice. And come out again, simply because civilian life didn't offer her enough opportunities to be terrible to her fellow human beings.

The box formation, massing almost three hundred people, did not flinch. They'd endured the senior-most's sharp tongue more times than any of them could count.

"Well let me tell you something," she said, walking slowly around the square of young men and women—who were clad in their pressed pants, shined boots, and mustard-colored topcoats. "Everything you've been put through up until now is just the tiniest little taste of what's up ahead. When you get to your platoons of assignment, that's when the *real* war gets its chance at you. Because those platoons, whether falling under actual TGO brigades, or being assigned to DSOD ships' detachments across the Waywork, will be the business end of the fight. DSOD gets to shoot rockets and lob bombs. Theirs is largely a computer war. You on the other hand will be seeing the faces of our enemy. Either behind the bowls of space helmets, or in the open air. People who don't look too different from you. And you will be killing them. Or they will kill you. I hope to hell my instructors and I have prepared at least some of you to do this job, and do it well enough for yet another generation of Constellar children to be born and live free."

Elvin eyed the woman's jacket sleeves, with their many maroon battle stripes. Something none of the volunteers yet had. The greater the number of stripes, the more fighting a given officer or non-commissioned officer had seen.

"May God favor the bold and the free!" shouted one of the older ETIs at the face of the formation.

"Victory with honor! Hurrah! Hurrah!" the volunteers all shouted back in unison, per training. The DSOD motto had been graven into their brains, week after week. Elvin knew he'd never be able to forget it, even if he tried.

"I couldn't hear you," the senior-most said, laughing evilly. "You're not out of my grasp just yet. Try it again, or you'll all be pushing! *May God favor the bold and the free!*"

"*Victory with honor! Hurrah! Hurrah!*" the formation screamed, some of them to the point it almost hurt. And Elvin was among the very loudest.

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The siege of Planet Alvorn was a true eye-opener.

Having been on garrison duty for half a Constellar year, Elvin thought himself ready for battle. He was twenty years old, and newly minted as a TGO corporal. If he'd been something of a loner among the Dissenters back home, he now found brotherhood with the other TGO troops. To the point that—trained and ready—they each felt they could take on the whole universe all by themselves. They were Constellar's sword and shield against the Nautilan menace. Come what may, they would not falter.

But when the ships from Starstate Nautilan did in fact arrive, there was no stopping the waves of Nautilan troops who descended to Alvorn's surface. Like almost all worlds within the Waywork, Alvorn did not have a clement atmosphere, nor a hospitable surface. Rather, the airless, cratered moonscape was home to domed-over bubble settlements, and the dug-down subterranean dwellings which—Elvin thought—so uncannily resembled the underground family housing back home.

The attackers therefore massed on one bubble settlement and one underground sector at a time. And though the Constellar garrison fought bravely, without significant reinforcement from the rest of the Starstate—because the first thing an invading force does is blockade the Waypoint against enemy ships trying to cross—within a matter of days, it became clear that Alvorn would be lost. Just another Constellar world crossed off the map, and added to the Hall of Remembrance.

So, humiliated and bloodied, Elvin and the survivors of his platoon fought a retreating action to Alvorn's last remaining Constellar spaceport—where civilians were being loaded aboard ground-to-abort clippers which would take them to the few remaining Key-capable interstellar transports. A tiny DSOD squadron of warships was waiting to escort the transports to the Waypoint, where the transports would each individually have a chance to cross over the light-years to friendly territory, while the squadron held off the Nautilan ships which would be waiting to intercept.

If Elvin had felt battle-confident upon departing TGO secondary, such confidence was now leavened with first-hand fighting experience.

"Damned Nauties never run out o' men," he muttered to one of his squad mates, as they hunkered down behind a crater rim on the spaceport security perimeter—waiting for the next wave of Nautilan troops to show themselves. Overhead, occasional flashes of light were seen as the warships in Alvorn orbit hurled tactical-yield nuclear weapons and countermissiles at each other. It was a soundless fight, given the airless conditions. Just as Elvin and the squad never heard any of their targets approaching, nor even the reports of their own vacuum-capable weapons. There was only the motorized whir and hiss of the air moving through their suit helmets, and the chatter over their tactical wireless network, which tied back to the spaceport strategic wireless.

The three kilometers visible beyond the crater rim were littered with dead, and destroyed combat vehicles—both Constellar and Nautilan in manufacture. An interconnected, automated chain of electromagnetic railguns along the edge of the spaceport tarmac had shot down nukes hurled at the spaceport, while TGO troops

themselves held off the Nautilan ground attack which had not—yet—successfully breached their perimeter.

“More of them to shoot at!” said Private Elz, who simply smiled through his helmet’s face bowl. A relative newcomer to the garrison, Elz’s attitude had been seemingly bulletproof throughout the ordeal, while Elvin’s own outlook had sobered ferociously. Watching friends die had been a shock to his system. Enough so that he realized he’d be dealing with the fallout long after they escaped from Alvorn’s surface. Assuming escape was still possible, once the civilians were up, and it became time for TGO and the remaining DSOD personnel to evacuate.

Elvin shook his head—also behind the face bowl of a helmet.

“Ye treat death like a friend,” Elvin wondered aloud. “What do ye know that I don’t?”

“Nothing,” Elz said, still smiling. “I grew up hearing stories about my uncle, who was also TGO. And partook in every single battle from one side of the Starstate to the other, to hear him tell it. I said to him before I shipped for entry training that I’d have some battle stories of my own to tell one day. And now I do!”

“Did it ever occur to you,” Elvin said, “that none of us might live to tell *any* stories after this?”

Private Elz’s expression changed to one of confusion.

“No,” he said. “Should it have?”

“It’s not a bloody game,” Elvin said, suddenly realizing how much like his former senior-most ETI he sounded.

“But of *course* it is!” Elz said, going back to grinning. “That’s how you stay sane out here, Corporal Axabrast. Or at least, that’s how *I* stay sane.”

“Och,” Elvin said, scoffing. Then turned his attention back to the small display unit in his suit-gloved hands. It was tied to the sweeping sensors that were monitoring the area for kilometers in every direction, looking for enemy movement.

Friendly movement, positions, vehicles, and people, showed up on the display as variously shaped and colored icons. There were grayed-out icons with dull red slash marks across them, for all the known enemy vehicles and positions which had been taken out thus far. All in all, the Constellar forces had been mangling the Nautilan troops. But where Nautilan seemed to have an almost inexhaustible number of replacements, Elvin and his compatriots did not.

Corporal Axabrast sighed, and sat down, absently rubbing the back of one hand.

“What does that symbol mean?” Private Elz asked.

“Nothing important,” Elvin muttered, continuing to touch the back of his hand through the suit’s thick fabric.

“I saw something similar on somebody else’s hand, back during the first part of entry training. He said he was a Dissenter, though he wouldn’t tell me what that means. I found out that’s something from Planet Oswight, right?”

“Aye,” Elvin said, guardedly.

“So, what is a *Dissenter* if you don’t mind my asking?”

“Depends on who ye ask,” Elvin said. “My gran thought it was the very definition of who he was. My sire, not so much. He told me to make my own way in the universe, and was quite proud o’ me when I left home for the DSOD.”

“So, if it’s not a big deal, why the mark?” Elz asked.

Elvin really didn't feel like getting into it, especially at that particular moment, with all that was happening around them. But he was also self-conscious, because for the better part of three Constellar years, he'd spent precious little time thinking about family. The men and women of the DSOD, and especially Tactical Ground Operations, had become his home. So that he'd written a little less, and a little less—to either Gran, or his sire—in the months since being posted to the Alvorn garrison.

Now that death was a real possibility, Elvin felt a wave of shame sweep over him. His letters to his father and mother had become very pedestrian, and he knew it. If he were to die now, on this crater rim, what spirit was there to be carried back to his parents, living in their little two-room family housing unit, with its tiny galley kitchen and claustrophobic spacer's head?

"Sorry if I said something to bother you, Corporal," Elz said, frowning for the first time.

"Not your fault," Elvin admitted. "I guess I haven't given the question enough thought—what is the big deal? Like I said, Gran thought it vital to be a Dissenter. We were the first ones to settle the star system that Family Oswight eventually took over. This was before Oswight flew the Constellar flag. Dissenters fought the First Family, then. This was a long, long time ago. Not much of this gets taught in the schools I attended, but my gran rehearsed it for me a lot when I was young. Dissenters made Family Oswight pay a dear price for their planet, and Gran is still proud of that. Though he never fought at all. It was far before his time. And my sire... he was more concerned with the future. About my brother Eljon and me having a forward path that didn't amount to telling and re-telling legends about the Dissenter rebellion before the rule of Family Oswight and Starstate Constellar."

"That's a lot more history than I ever had," Elz admitted. "I never even got to know my father. My mother wouldn't tell me who he was, and raised me on her own. She wasn't the happiest mother you've ever met, and I got out of her house as soon as I could."

"DSOD makes for a very attractive avenue of escape," Elvin said.

"Yes it did," Elz said. "Especially when I have my uncle's example to live up to."

As if on cue, the threat alert began to tweet in Elvin's helmet speakers. He snatched up the display, and saw the signatures of unknown units moving into the overlapping fields of fire that Elvin and the other TGO troops had erected. He keyed over to the tactical net, and listened as their color sergeant—who'd seen more than one siege on one world—relayed her instructions.

There were two dozen Nautilan tanks, flanked by what appeared to be hundreds of suited Nautilan infantry. As had been the case since Starstate Nautilan first deployed its resources on Alvorn, the numbers heavily favored Nautilan.

Elvin and his squad were to make a diversionary maneuver, and hopefully attract the attention of the tanks, while the color sergeant lined up her man-portable antitank weaponry along an adjacent crater rim. Once Elvin gave the signal, the color sergeant—and all that was left of her TGO company—would open fire.

The seven suited Constellar soldiers under Elvin's direct control massed behind him on the rim. He looked from face to face—their expressions somewhat anxious,

but also resigned—and then gave the signal to go. They sprang up from behind the rim and began weaving crazily toward the enemy. Who did indeed notice the squad, and began launching antipersonnel rockets at the same time the electromagnetic railguns on the tanks began hurling hypersonic death in Elvin's direction.

He never got close enough to have the satisfaction of shooting at any of the individual Nautilan soldiers, though the squad did make it far enough to fire their five antitank rockets. Which disabled two of the Nautilan vehicles, and stalled a half dozen more, which maneuvered to take cover behind different crater rims, and the innumerable large boulders which littered the surface of Alvorn. The air itself, unbreathable by men, formed a gentle haze out toward the horizon, where the black sky and rocky surface merged in a kind of mist. How many more Nautilan troops were advancing through that mist, Elvin could not say. The tactical net's uplink to the satellites was being jammed. Which told Elvin all he needed to know in this regard.

"Hit 'em now!" Elvin said to the color sergeant.

Rockets lashed out, and sent vehicles up in brilliant, split-second fireballs—as their supplies of internal oxygen temporarily fed the flames of explosion—promptly to be snuffed by Alvorn's atmosphere. The wrecked tanks sat where they'd been hit, while Nautilan troops crowded behind them, and tried to determine how best to attack the defensive front which had formed up on the crater rim to Elvin's rear.

"Time to go?" Private Elz said.

"Aye," Elvin said.

The squad's survivors turned, and went back toward the spaceport, using a decidedly different route than the one they'd previously taken. The blasts from antipersonnel rockets shot lifeless soil high into the black sky, while railgun bursts tore up rocks as well as men.

When Elvin crossed back into friendly territory, he looked to his right and to his left.

"Private Elz!" he shouted! "Private Elz?"

But no one else remained.

* * * * *

The scene on Alvorn would repeat itself twice more, during Elvin's twenties. Each time, Starstate Constellar put up as much of a fight as it could muster. But the results were inevitable. Where Constellar deployed with guile and tenacity, Nautilan deployed with numbers. Insurmountable. So that all a TGO troop needed do was keep reloading and shooting. Piles of dead, heaped on the surfaces of two more worlds, and in the corridors and passageways of additional bubble towns and underground complexes. Elvin could no longer count how many people he'd gunned down. Not that he relished such things. Past a certain point, all the individual victories—over individual Nautilan troops—soured beneath the realization that Starstate Constellar was shrinking.

In the wake of these losses, Elvin found himself promoted. Not because he'd done a spectacularly good job—he thought—of leading TGO troops. But because so few of his senior non-commissioned officers had survived, and TGO needed to leaven the fresh ranks with veteran men and women capable of leading those

green folks on still other planets. As a platoon sergeant, Elvin found himself staring at his image in the mirror, and wondering if ever there would be anything more to his life than the slow, inexorable constriction of Starstate Nautilan around his home nation.

And all because the Waywork—alien miracle which allowed fast interstellar journeys—was a finite system. There was nowhere else for Starstate Constellar to go. They either held the systems and worlds under their control, or they were diminished by battle after battle. Ships and people and planets, gone. Gobbled up. Or outright destroyed. By a rival nation which seemed not to care even about the fate of its own people, much less the fates of those who became subjugated in the wake of Nautilan’s victories.

Visiting home—and feeling terrible discouraged—Elvin looked up his sire and grandsire.

“Gran’s gone,” Elroy said matter-of-fact, when Elvin entered his old home. Not much about the little dwelling had changed. Though the lines on Elroy Axabrast’s face said that a lot of pain had passed through that place.

“I’m sorry I wasn’t here,” Elvin said, his dress uniform crisply pressed, and three battle stripes adorning the lower portion of each sleeve, just below the elbow.

“The war’s kept you busy,” Elroy said, smiling slightly. “Nobody here blames you. We’re just grateful to God that you’re able to come home and visit us. We don’t hear from you that much anymore.”

“I know,” Elvin said sheepishly, stepping into the living room, where the dining table sat out permanently, with a hand-knit decorative cover. He sat down in one of the chairs—suddenly feeling like he was twelve years old all over again—and looked at his ma, who seemed to be filled with smiles now that her youngest son was back.

“How’s Eljon?” Elvin asked.

“We don’t know,” Elroy admitted. “Your older brother left Planet Oswight—and Oswight System—three years ago. He doesn’t tell us where he is. And I haven’t had the heart to search that hard. The war’s been disrupting a lot of families. Like your mother said, we’re just glad you’ve come back to visit us.”

And, so the conversation went, over a modest home-cooked meal which tasted heavenly. Elvin slept two nights in his old bed—bunk style, not that different from military accommodations—then had to return from leave. The DSOD transported him on military passage, just as it had when he’d first departed for entry training in his teens.

Back to duty—another garrison on another threatened world. It was a strange experience. Mainly because Elvin wasn’t sure he believed in the cause anymore. He believed in Starstate Constellar, without question. He’d watched too many subordinates and companions die defending it. But he wasn’t sure believing in the Starstate, and trusting that the Starstate would survive against all odds, were the same thing.

What made it personal again, was an event Elvin could never have planned on.

He fell in love.

* * * * *

Fasna Hubnatiri was not military, and definitely not of Dissenter stock. In fact, her family had been wandering from world to world within Starstate Constellar—and a good many places outside of it—for generations. They were interstellar merchants, and not particularly settled. But Fasna herself had gained an interest in medicine, and settled down to study at one of Starstate Constellar’s medical universities on Planet Dannof.

While her brother carried out the family business, her father paid her university bills, and she became an intern at the attached veterans hospital which supplied the university with patients for the students to practice on.

Much to Elvin’s initial chagrin.

“Och,” he said, upon learning that she was not yet fully degreed. “I’m nae cadaver for ye to poke and slice!”

But she was pretty—in the way that women who look very different from the women men grow up around are always pretty. So Elvin allowed himself to be gowned. And poked. But thankfully, not sliced. And before long, he realized he was making return visits to see the intern-physician, not because there was anything particularly wrong, but because he wanted an excuse to talk to Fasna, as she had increasingly come to dominate his interest in the weeks since his first visit.

“We need to stop doing this,” she eventually chided, motioning around the patient room, and shaking her head—with pointed finger—at Elvin’s hospital attire.

So, the romance moved to more appropriate settings. And within months, Elvin found himself in his best dress uniform, a medallion of matrimony clutched in his hands, asking her to marry him. Despite the fact their families had nothing in common, and despite the fact that Elvin’s posting to the Dannof Garrison was liable to be disrupted once he made color sergeant. And that would be soon. He would either be posted as a company color sergeant to another world—one likely on the strategic radar of Starstate Nautilan, for the next planned invasion—or as a TGO detachment senior non-commissioned officer aboard a DSOD cruiser. Neither of which would promise anything like a wealthy or glamorous life for a new wife.

But, Fasna said yes. And the two were married by a DSOD chaplain in a very small, very humble event attended by Fasna’s few close friends on Dannof, as well as some of the enlisted and officers of Elvin’s specific unit of assignment.

Word of the marriage was sent to both families, and if anyone had anything negative to say about it, this never reached the happy couple.

Elvin himself could not remember feeling so alive. If the day-to-day doldrums of garrison duty had begun to permanently cloud his perspective, Fasna was like a breaking wave across the beach sand of his existence. She washed away seemingly all the emotional debris which had accumulated during Elvin’s time in the service. And before long, they found themselves planning a family—news of which delighted Elvin’s mother. So much so, that she demanded to be able to come visit when the baby was due. Despite the expense.

“It’ll be a boy,” Elroy said, smiling, as they waited in the maternity ward of the very same veterans hospital.

“Girl,” said Elvin’s ma. “The Lord d’nae see fit to bless me with a daughter, so He owes it to me to give me a granddaughter.”

“I nae think it works like that,” Elvin chided her, holding Fasna’s hand.

“Of course it does!” his ma said, then looked at Elvin’s wife and added, “Isn’t that right, lass? Granddaughter? On the way?”

Fasna laughed, and then grimaced with the next contraction. They’d deliberately not found out the gender of the baby simply for the sake of having the surprise.

Once labor became more intense, the doctors—some of whom were Fasna’s peers—moved her back to a sterile birthing room, with only Elvin permitted to attend. His parents smiled and waved at them as Fasna was wheeled away, groaning and trying to also smile, before groaning again.

Thirty minutes later, the groans turned to sharp screams, and Elvin knew something was very wrong. Doctors—experienced physicians now, in addition to the students—invaded the room, and unceremoniously pushed Elvin to the door.

“But my wife!” Elvin protested helplessly. “The baby!”

“We’re doing what we can,” the lead physician said, putting her hand on Elvin’s shoulder. “Please let us work. Things have gotten complicated, but we’ve got the best equipment on the planet, and the best staff too, if you ask my opinion.”

Elvin wandered woodenly back toward the waiting area where his parents had been left.

As soon as they saw his face, they knew it was trouble.

“Oh no,” Elvin’s ma said. “Is it serious?”

“Aye,” Elvin said, feeling very much like he should do something—anything—and being unable to come up with what that thing ought to be.

“What happened?” Elroy asked.

“They d’nae say. It was a blur o’ people in there.”

“But, the baby—” his ma began, and Elvin cut her off.

“They d’nae say!” Elvin then felt ashamed, for having raised his voice to his mother. “I’m sorry, Ma.”

“No, we’re sorry,” Elroy Axabrast said, putting his hand on his son’s shoulder. “When your brother was born, and then when you were born, we had the luxury of both babies and mother coming through it—without a nick. Now we have to hope to God Fasna and the baby can manage the same, whatever’s happenin’.”

The lead doctor emerged, stone-faced.

Elvin didn’t even have to ask. His ma quietly began to weep into Elroy Axabrast’s collar, while Elvin rushed past the doctor to the sterile bay, and clutched at the lifeless bodies of his wife and newborn baby, which were being reluctantly and delicately removed from the gurney.

* * * * *

Elvin floated empty, from his post at Dannof, to a senior NCO position aboard first the cruiser AGILE, then the frigate PORTSMOUTH.

To the people in each command, he said almost nothing about the deaths of his wife and daughter. Fasna had come into Elvin’s personal universe so quickly, and with such force, that her departure left him spinning.

So, he threw himself into his work. As a way to avoid having to think about that little bundle—wrapped by the attendants—into Fasna’s folded arms.

When Fasna’s family got the news, they fairly bombarded Elvin with demands for answers. As if he himself had somehow been culpable in their daughter’s

death. Which Elvin could not be entirely sure he wasn't. Since it had been the child which had ultimately cost Fasna her life, and the child could not have happened without Elvin.

He passed what condolences he could to her parents and siblings, whom he still had not met, due to the fact they were all separated by so much interstellar distance, and returned to his duties. Ensuring that his detachments of TGO troops aboard first one ship, then the other, were the most professional detachments in the DSOD. Models of training and proficiency. The kinds of TGO detachments that recruiters loved to send informationalists to get interviews from and footage of, for enticing the next generation of DSOD volunteers to sign on and serve.

And there was always more combat. Including successful defenses against probe forces deployed by Starstate Nautilan to both Syberestad and Faltarion. Victories which felt empty, despite the fact that Elvin had long desired to halt the line of Nautilan advance, if even for a short while.

As Elvin's time aboard the PORTSMOUTH was drawing to a close, a curious inquiry reached Elvin's desk. It had been hand-delivered by the skipper of the ship, with whom Elvin had become somewhat friendly.

"It's got a First Family seal," the PORTSMOUTH's commander said, his eyebrows raised, as he handed the hardcopy—not digital—message to his color sergeant.

"I c'nae understand what any First Family would want with me," he said.

"Planet Oswight origin?" the commander asked, noting the header.

"*Family* Oswight," Elvin said, bewildered, and then read the document. It was an invitation—not an order—to attend a private reception at the Family Oswight estate. The date was well into the future, so that travel arrangements could be made. Already, the approving signature of the group commodore had been appended. Which pretty much made attendance mandatory, lest Elvin's refusal give the DSOD a political black eye. Which Elvin knew he could not do.

So, home he went. Again. Still feeling the hollowness of his heart like a starving man feels the emptiness of his stomach.

Ballroom dress was another level up from the traditional DSOD uniform. Elvin made sure to look his best when he went to the estate. It dominated an untold number of acres both above and below the surface of planet Oswight, resplendent with hydroponics gardens, luxurious fountains, carved and polished stonemasonry, and a vibrant flock of attendants, servants, functionaries, and other hangers-on who seemed to orbit each of the various Oswight Family members, as they conducted themselves for the event.

Elvin found himself obediently nodding his chin to his chest over and over again, as he was introduced through the Family line. It wasn't until he reached the end, and came face to face with none other than Brelston Oswight—the sire of the Family—that Elvin's purpose at the reception became clear.

"My son is a very busy man," the Family patriarch said, pulling Elvin aside to where they could talk discretely.

"Aye," Elvin said. "I imagine the life o' a Family son to be filled with important business."

"More to the point," Brelston said, "my son's wife, Garsilva, recently gave birth to two boys. And will soon give birth to a daughter."

Elvin stood deathly still. He worked up the nerve to show a smile, and heartily congratulated the Oswight patriarch on such joyous news. But inside, his own pain threatened to reach up and strangle. He barely managed to excuse himself to the latrine, where he took a few moments for quiet weeping. Then cleaned his face.

Brelston Oswight grabbed him again, as soon as Elvin reemerged.

"I understand that you might be looking at retirement in the not too distant future," Brelston said.

"Nae, sir," Elvin said. "I c'nae leave the service when they need me more than ever."

"A commendable attitude," Brelston said. "But what if I told you I am willing to make you the following offer? You retire, with full honors, and are officially attached to the Oswight estate through the DSOD retiree placement program. I've already vetted you, and find you to be a prime candidate. Which means a considerable salary."

"Candidate for *what*, exactly, sir?"

"My son, Bremen, is up to his ears in Family business. Between what needs doing here, in our own system, and also at the Constellar capitol, he cannot be multiple places at once. But Garsilva Oswight understandably doesn't want to have to be traveling. And there is the matter of the boys—and their eventual sister—needing supervision."

"I'm afraid I can't promise to be good with children," Elvin blurted, and was about to say, *when I never even had a chance to raise one of my own*, when Brelston stopped him with a gentle hand on Elvin's chest.

"I know about your wife and child," the Oswight sire said, his tone tender, but also quite serious. "When I made it known through certain channels that I was seeking someone to fulfill certain Family duties within the estate, I was flooded with applications from a horde of politically motivated parties. But the application that touched me most, was not even from someone seeking the job. It was a letter from your mother. She expressed deep regret that she never got to know her granddaughter, and that you never got to have the family she felt you deserved. But she vouched for your character—which I find aligns perfectly with your service record. And asked that I consider you for the position."

"Again, sir... I don't know what to say," Elvin said. "I don't even know if I am any good for your needs."

"There's something else to it," Brelston said, leaning in. "I know that Dissenter hostility toward Family Oswight remains. Even to this day. But I fear the war may soon bring us to the point where everyone in this system must be united. To face the threat. I think having a Dissenter carrying the banner of this Family—especially a man with your credentials—would help smooth relations. Not because I think you credulous, sir. For all I know, you may have your own resentments. But because I believe you to be a Constellar *patriot*. So, I ask you, will you do it?"

At that point, two little toddlers—looking somewhat comical in their Family finery, but with cake all over their hands and faces—charged into Brelston and Elvin both. They toppled onto their backsides, then climbed to their feet, and stared up in awe at Color Sergeant Axabrast, with his dress medals arrayed—bright and shiny—on his chest.

One of them pointed, and his eyes were wide.

“It’s the future, Mr. Axabrast,” Brelston Oswight said, looking down at his grandsons. “A future that deserves the best training and guidance this Family can find.”

Elvin looked down at the young boys, and sighed.

“Can you promise me that my parents will be comfortable too?” he asked.

“Absolutely,” Brelston said. “Consider it part of the contract.”

“Then I gratefully accept, sir. I gratefully accept.”
