

LITTLE AGONY

by C D Regan

CHAPTER 6: THE PINK, THE RED, AND THE GREY

The new undersuit was tight across his chest. It smelled like some sweet chemical. It would start to adjust to his body in another day or two, but at the moment, it was uncomfortably stiff and crinkly. His elbows and knees felt smothered without their familiar ventilation by the worn out holes, and the neck cuff was too tight. He flexed his arms and pulled his knees up to his chest. Jon reminded himself that his body heat and regular stretching would adapt the undersuit to his form quickly. The density harness also had to be readjusted. Padding on the old suit had thinned as it rubbed against the harness all those years, and the new suit made the harness seem much tighter.

The thermolastic cables of the harness fanned across his body in a network that traced the major muscle groupings. Extruded from the joints were complex reinforced articulations, and gave the wearer a distinct silhouette of subtly bulbous knees, shoulders, and elbows. The collar of the suit fit over the wearer like a yoke, rays of cables extending out to the shoulders and hips. In proper working condition and under the correct exercise regimen, a density harness helped maintain muscle mass and bone density in any environment. Every colony had its own exercise program, and on Ganymede, with only 15% of a G, the workout was brutal. Tarnett felt stronger now than he ever did on Mars. Maybe the ship wasn't quite at full Martian gravity. Tarnett weighed his sense of tight strength against his recently rediscovered body, then dismissed the thought and adjusted the harness to fit better.

He only had simple clothes to wear. A pullover grey shirt, khaki conservatively-

pouched pants, his blue fatigue jacket, and ten year old skuffed-up boots. Although he would stand out next to any of the suits he had seen in the lobby, he could not now be easily labeled as an ex-convict. He looked like an upper middle-class citizen on a casual adventure to another world. A tourist spacer.

The overhead speaker chimed as he put on his boots.

"Dinner will be served in ten minutes. If you ordered from our specialty menu, please display your number placards at your seat."

The other passengers he met briefly in the lobby looked like corporate types, all pressed suits and forced smiles on a slum-ride. They were on the ship as a corporate bonding exercise, maybe, getting a perspective on how good they lived by seeing how other people lived. Tarnett was sure that they could afford to order anything they wanted. As Tarnett sealed up his boots, he recalled what he heard as he left the lobby, "What the hell was that?"

The man who said that was probably too young to have served in the war, and too rich to have suffered much of any kind of hardship during or after the war. Tarnett sneered, thinking about them laughing at his expense; each suit of theirs probably cost more than Tarnett could earn in a year - as they drank from sippers that were a humorous novelty to them, having spent their lives in full or near-full artificial gravity, and never having learned how to operate a zero-G toilet. Tarnett pulled on the collar of his undersuit to stretch it out as he headed toward the commissary.

Jon opened the door and was greeted with lighthearted chatter. The noise became quiet murmurs as all eyes turned to him. Here were twenty well-dressed adults. The room smelled of synthetic body musk, perfume and the fruity exhalations of alcohol-infused breath. A few eyebrows and smirks were carelessly flashed as Tarnett searched the room for an empty seat. He turned his back on them to face the linkscreen to the right of the door.

The Pharos had a substantial menu of rules and regulations for the passengers. He searched for any information on assigned seating in the commissary — nothing — only an explanation of numbers assigned to passengers who order special menu items. Behind him, the conversational volumes slowly rose to their previous levels.

He turned and saw through the moving torsos that numbered cardboard placards were placed in front of these people, but not at the empty seats. They were still waiting for their food, and they were hungry.

Tarnett had just voluntarily exposed himself to zero pressure where he could have had his flesh boiled off to the void, and realized the thought of sharing one meal in the presence of these people somehow seemed more dangerous. He turned back to the linkscreen and consulted a map of the green level. There was a second larger commissary further down the hall. He could taste someone's perfume in his mouth. It was bitter. He left the room.

The second commissary was a much larger room, and Tarnett could smell slate and old sweat. The low ceiling looked like a topographic projection; many layers of plastic strata with small soft lights dotting the surfaces in tight white spirals. Like the lounge, this room had no sharp corners, just organic meandering shapes that were supposed to comfort his early spacefaring ancestors. Thirty people were in a loosely formed line behind the dispenser in the center of the furthest wall. Another 20 were scattered into various factions. They were sitting in booths and at tables which were staggered at different elevations. High tables had low lights, and the low tables were under the highest parts of the ceiling. Steps curled around in wandering paths. It looked like a stepped garden had been sealed in white and grey enamel.

Their bright eyes blazed out from the dead grey of their faces, framed in the pink or brown outlines of their eyelids. Their ashen faces were framed in colorful clothes, which were all mismatched and patched, torn, with pulled seams and overlaid with many layers, pockets and broad stripes. Grey smudges bled over at the neck and wrists onto company logos and slogans which were printed on chests and sleeves with frayed cuffs. Their conversations were more boisterous as those in the other commissary. Children yelled and laughed. Men and women guffawed and tried to speak over the rising and ebbing noise. Tarnett walked to the end of the line, where a woman was holding a boy of about 2 years old, who looked tired or ill. He was probably still adjusting to Mars Time.

Standing closer to the woman, Tarnett could smell the slate distinctly, and the boy she carried looked up from her neck to study Jon. The child had probably never seen a man up close that did not wear the grey face of someone who bathed regularly in dead world dust. The boy's eyes slid over Tarnett's face and seemed to slowly scrutinize every hair of his red beard. Perhaps sensing her son's intrusive gaze, his mother's hand stroked the boy's head. The boy blinked slowly and nuzzled back against her neck as she gently rocked him against her threadbare orange and silver jacket.

The line moved quickly. When Tarnett reached the dispenser, the screen showed an eye icon and an arrow pointing to a blue circle on the screen. He leaned in close and saw a brief flash of red in his right eye. The screen changed to show his picture - a photo that had been taken during the surrender, just before he was shipped off to Ganymede. Below it were cartoon images of a happy pig, a happy cow, a happy fish, and a happy chicken. Each animal face was encircled by a different color. Tarnett wondered which of these artificially flavored soy rations tasted the least synthetic. He scanned the room and saw many blue-green wrappers. The happy pig looked like it was the most popular. He clicked on the pig and it jumped out of its frame, up and down, it wiggled its curly tail. *Happy to eat you, too*, Jon mused to himself.

The soy brick, wrapped in aqua colored thermal cellophane, dropped out of the dispenser. It was warm to the touch, and despite having to eat processed rations like this all during his time on Ganymede, Tarnett began to salivate.

He spotted a place to sit, far enough away from the noisy children, next to a giant man wearing a bright green but dirty jump suit. From the back, his shape reminded Tarnett of Froebischer. Tarnett could see a cracked and abraded *Wyvern Transport* logo on his back. Jon made cursory nods around the table as he sat, then unwrapped the plastic. The smell was pleasant. He bit into it and it tasted like barbecued pork.

Tarnett realized that he must have shown surprise on his face when someone spoke to him from across the table.

"Yeah, it ain't bad." There was laughter in his voice.

Tarnett looked up. The man across from him had a long face and deep-set eyes that seemed to smile from holding in the punchline to some great joke. The grey around his mouth was smeared away to pale pink and this detail made him look like a clown. The fact that his mouth was too wide for the thinness of his face exaggerated his clown-ness. He wore a padded yellow jacket and an orange shirt with a huge Quantum 'Q' logo that covered his chest. The piping along the seams of the jacket were meant to simulate the look of a pressure suit, but was purely decoration, and was frayed, so he looked like he had sprouted thick matted hair along his shoulders.

"I've had worse," Tarnett admitted.

"Three nights ago, they ran out of fish. Figured the fish that showed up on the menu tonight came from Ida. I wouldn't want to eat anything that came from that hole." The man eyed Tarnett.

"Yeah. Can't blame ya. I'd be surprised if they made it on Ida, though."

They chewed for a minute, and the other men at the table looked at each other. Tarnett looked around at them.

"Weren't you picked up from Ida?" The clown man asked – a deeper question hanging in the air.

Tarnett answered suspiciously, "Yeah, so...?"

The men exchanged more looks. Clown man looked down at his food and smiled to himself. Tarnett looked around at them wondering what was going on. He fleetingly wished he had his spring baton with him.

"I give up, what's the joke?"

The big man next to him spoke with a voice so deep, Tarnett could feel the bench beneath him vibrate.

"Which side?"

Tarnett looked up at the big man. Under closer inspection, he looked more like a neanderthal than he did a human. He had wide brow ridges and thick lips that loosely covered a row of yellowed jagged teeth. Bits of soyopork were stuck in his lower teeth. His kind of genetic reversion happened a lot. There were five guys in the

Dome that looked like him.

“What do you mean?” Tarnett asked.

Clown man looked up again with his mouth full of food.

“Which side of Ida? The side for respectable folk, or the side that stinks like puke?”

Tarnett looked at him and then realized that most of the table was silent and listening for his response. Since Jon had been dropped off at the ass-end of Ida, it was easy for him to figure what they suspected. Only respectable folks got dropped off at the respectable side of ida. Only criminals got to swim in sewage while they had to wait for their government-arranged transport. Maybe these people were the disenfranchised workers who must still resent the rebellion on Mars. So many resources were pulled away from other colonies in order to support the war. Many of them probably lost their livelihood after Seyopont acquisitioned their businesses and ships, and who-knows-what. He hoped they weren't looking for an excuse to fight.

“Why? Didn't I scrub hard enough?”

The faces at the table all looked at the clown and the big man, who were looking at each other. Then the clown looked at Tarnett.

“Are you the guy who pulled that duckslide?”

Tarnett looked at the clown, then the big man, then at the rest of the faces around him. They were all waiting for Tarnett to speak.

“Guess that doesn't make me respectable, then?”

Clown shook his head and smiled even wider. He leaned in closer to Tarnett.

“You must be one crazy bastard. Why the hell did you do that?”

Tarnett sighed and took another bite from his brick. He chewed it thoroughly and swallowed. He held up the fake meat as if it were a trophy.

“They didn't have any more soyopork.”

They all laughed.

Clown reached over and extended his hand.

“Name's Gable Frenz. But call me Ploot.”

Tarnett shook his hand, “Ploot?”

"Yeah. Long story."

"Okay... Jon Tarnett."

"Hey, Jon."

The big man shifted in his seat to face Tarnett. His hand was large enough that it could easily cover Jon's face. His thumb was almost as thick as Tarnett's wrist.

"Moses Tapling... Mo for short."

Tarnett looked up at the big man, whose facial architecture seemed incapable or at least too pain-inducing to smile.

"Nothing short about you, Mo," Tarnett quipped.

Mo peeled his mouth open into a maw that could swallow an infant whole and brought forth a monstrous guffaw that lasted for only one resonant syllable.

"HA!"

Silence followed his concussive burst as everyone in the room turned to look in his direction. Mo's mouth sealed up again almost immediately and his face relaxed as if it had never erupted. He took a mouthful of soyopork and looked around as if nothing had happened.

A half hour after dinner, most of the parents and children were gone from the dining hall, and small groups of adults remained, trading jokes, tales, and trials. Mo and Ploot both came from Europa and had been dropped off on the 'respectable side' of Ida. Europa, Jupiter's ice moon, supplied water to the outer colonies. Mo and Ploot had just finished a job drilling three pipelines into the fifteen miles of ice crust for new pumping stations, and they had then been contracted by Ares Aqua to drill at the North Pole of Mars.

"It will still be warmer than Europa," smiled Ploot.

The mere mention of Europa made Jon think about a teacher he had in trade school when he was ten years old, Mr. Landry. The teacher was so concerned with the drilling on Europa, he had the children draw pictures of what they thought the microbial life swimming in that subglacial sea might evolve into if left undisturbed. Those drawings had been sent to the board at Seyopont as well as the members of

Sol Senate. Tarnett's class and their teacher had been on the news for one very exciting week. Drilling commenced a few months later.

Mr. Landry had been fired from his job for being *politically inciting*. Jon never forgot that. The incident had put a bad taste in his mouth for politics, and he always felt sorry for those European microbes. Tarnett was astonished that the memory was so easily triggered. He hadn't thought about it for years. Mr. Landry's dismissal had taught the young Jon that politics could get him into trouble, and he avoided political discussions whenever possible.

After dinner, between these men, avoiding the topic was impossible. Conversations turned to personal history and planets of birth. Jon told them he was originally from Mars.

"Were you in the war?" asked Mo.

Jon looked down at the cellophane wrapper in front of him, and the oily bits of soyopork that still clung there. Other conversations were rattling back and forth between the other men at the table. Tarnett's answer was almost lost in the din.

"Yeah."

"What side were you on?" asked Ploot.

Here it comes, Jon thought. Here is where they laid into him about how the Martians' petty differences with Seyopont threw the entire system into financial crisis because of selfishness. Jon took another mouthful from his sipper of water and sniffed. Tarnett raised his voice loud enough so that he wouldn't sound apologetic, nor have to repeat himself.

"I was born on Mars. My grandparents were lured to Mars with the promise of fresh air for their grandkids. It was how I was raised, expecting things to head in that direction — to see some progress. But when the anti-terraforming laws were passed, there were a lot of pissed off people. I was one of them. So, yeah, I fought for Mars. I was in the Red Militia, the Spear of Ares, 144th infantry."

Jon realized his voice came out more angry than he intended. The other conversations stopped and the men looked at him. He continued to stare at the wrapper.

"It's all oat..." Ploot said in spacer slang — that everything was okay, *oxygen rich*. Tarnett looked up at him with defiance.

"It was just a question, Jon." Ploot bore Tarnett's gaze for a few seconds, then shifted his eyes to Mo and arched his eyebrows slightly.

Tarnett looked around the table. All the men were quiet, avoiding his hard eyes. They looked at each other and one of them busied himself by folding his empty wrapper. A couple of heads on the other side of Moses stretched forward, trying to catch a glimpse of Jon around Mo's bulk. They began to mutter to each other.

That's right. Here he is. The rebel. The source of all your pain. Which one of you is going to take me on first? Jon grit his teeth, expecting retaliatory comments to flow. Insults. Fists. He wondered if someone was going to try to send him for a cold swim under the stars tonight. Jon set his jaw and gripped the table. He would only have to be around these men for a week, and there was no rule that he couldn't eat out in the lobby or in the privacy of his own sleeper. He didn't have to see them again. He was about to stand and leave the table when a dull rumble shuddered through the bench.

"Never made sense to me," began Mo. Jon looked up at Moses, who was a full head and a half taller than him. Jon glared at him, daring him to start something. This giant looked strong enough that he could crack Jon's spine easily, but he avoided Jon's intensity, and spoke directly to Ploot.

"Why are we allowed to suck all the water out of Europa, killing all those bugs that live down there, but we aren't allowed put any air on Mars?"

There were grunts of approval from the table. Jon looked at the men who nodded in agreement.

"I saw something about these renegade terraformers on Mars. They make these chimneys that vent steam into the air. Terraform it in secret." said a man in a blue zero suit, who sat to Ploot's right.

"I saw that," agreed the man on the other side of Mo. "They say it would take more than a thousand years to get the air thick enough though." Tarnett saw him lean forward so he could talk directly to Jon. He had a shaved head and buggy bloodshot

eyes.

"It doesn't make sense, you guys not being able to make air."

"Sure it does!" A voice at the far end of the table spoke up. Jon couldn't see him through Mo. Everyone at the table turned to listen.

"Why make the air free when they can charge you for every breath? Damn Cong is only out to make a buck. It's just business for them, keeping everyone sealed up in Cong cans, breathing Cong air, eating Cong food, making stuff for the Cong stores, just so the people that made the stuff have to buy the stuff they just made!"

There was a wave of groans and playful dissent that grew around the voice.

"Oh, shut up, Mica. Yeah. It's all a conspiracy!" said the man sitting across from the man named Mica.

"It's true! We're all slaves to the Cong Empire!" Mica continued. Three of the men groaned. Ploot and the man across from Mica laughed.

"If the Cong terraformed Mars, that would mean water was free. Ares Aqua owns all the water rights on Mars now. You know how much money they make? All that would go away if they unlocked the water. It's business, and we're all playing the dumb little worker bees that don't want to see who is eating up all the honey that we make."