

# Off the Parade Ground

by R. K. Wigal

## Chapter 1

The slender, not quite twenty-two year-old man, his espresso colored hair gently tossed about by a light breeze, bent down, picked up his cap and placed it back on his head as he straightened his five foot nine inch frame. Smiling, he looked once again through clear, grey-brown eyes at each of the gold bars that now adorned the epaulettes of his crisp uniform. MACO Academy graduation was over and the newly commissioned second lieutenant, anxious now to start his career, began heading off the parade ground along with a few dozen other graduates, unaware that he was being watched.

As he neared the edge of the field, a tall, stocky man with graying temples, dressed in civilian clothes, approached him. "Roger Kennison?"

"Yes, I'm Ca...I'm Lieutenant Kennison."

"Come with me please," the man intoned, more insisting than asking.

Looking directly into the man's cold-steel eyes, he countered, "That depends. Who are you?" The lieutenant, head tilted slightly, eyebrows raised, was instantly wary. "May I see some I.D.?"

"I have a letter of introduction from the Academy Commandant," he responded, as he took a document from his inside jacket pocket, unfolded it and handed it to the wiry lieutenant.

Kennison looked the letter over for a few seconds, then, looking back at the man, he said, "I know Brigadier Tambul. This does appear to be from him." Then, returning his gaze to the document, he continued, "Special Operations, eh? Mister Graves, is it?"

"Just Graves. Right this way. I have transportation waiting," he said gesturing toward an air car hovering just above the runners' track a few meters away.

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Graves stopped his vehicle in front of an unremarkable older white stucco building on J avenue in National City just south of San Diego. The trip took less than eight minutes. Both men exited the car and walked up onto the overhung porch that fronted the rectangular-shaped former residence. The older man thumbed a button on a remote control device in his right front trouser pocket and the dark-stained oak door, framed in flagstone, swung inward. Graves extended his left hand and Kennison led the way inside.

The room they entered was anything but residential. The oak door was plating for one made of ten-inch thick steel. Though not readily visible, the entire structure was encased in steel. Filing cabinets lined the entire room. Graves led the lieutenant down a narrow hallway to a small room in the back. Inside was a large steel desk with a cushioned chair behind it and three folding gray-steel chairs in front. The walls were painted egg-shell white, as were the walls in all the rooms.

Pointing to the center folding chair, Graves said, "Have a seat. Both men sat down. The older man then removed a thick manila file from a drawer in his desk and opened it.

"My two-oh-one file," Kennison asked, a bit incredulous.

"I have my own copy," Graves replied matter-of-factly, his eyes on the file. Then, after a moment's pause, he looked at the younger man and began speaking in controlled, even tones. "Your record at the academy both physically and academically is most impressive. You did well in sprinting, excelled in long distance running. You set several academy records in sniper training by significant margins. Your math scores are in the ninety fifth percentile. You have an uncanny aptitude for both intelligence and counter intelligence. Your teamwork rating, your language skills, your leadership skills, all are excellent. Above all you're incredibly resourceful. It's no mystery why you finished fourth in you graduating class, lieutenant."

"Which begs the question: why me," he asked with honest sincerity, his eyes focused on Graves. "Why not one, two or three?"

"That is the question, isn't it," he said rhetorically. Then, focusing hardened eyes on Kennison, he asked, "Have you ever killed anyone?"

"No," was the curt reply.

Graves leaned in closer. "Ah, but could you," he asked. Prodding.

Kennison kept his eyes focused Graves'. "That depends," he responded.

"If your commanding officer gave you an order to kill a particular individual, could you kill that individual," Graves asked, insistence in his voice.

Choosing his words carefully, the young lieutenant answered, "If my commanding officer gives me an order to kill, I will kill."

Graves leaned back in his chair and looked skyward for an instant, the edges of his mouth curling slightly. Then, quickly returning his gaze to Kennison, he said "I think you're what we're looking for. I would like you to be available to us for a most important special operation."

"You got my interest," the young officer replied. "Consider me available," he continued, showing the older man the merest hint of a sly smile.

Standing and reaching across the desk, Graves shook Kennison's hand. "It'll be good having you on our team," he said. "I'll have someone return you to your quarters."

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Second Lieutenant Roger Kennison flipped open his secure-channel communicator. A masculine voice at the other end said, "Yes, what is it?"

"You were right, sir. I was contacted."

## Chapter 2

Second Lieutenant Roger Kennison awoke early to a bright, cloudless Saturday. He threw the bed covers back, rose to his feet, went to the kitchenette stove and turned on the burner under the French-roast espresso he'd prepared the night before. Next, he headed into the small living room where he went through his morning wakeup regimen of twelve deep-knee bends, twelve straight-knee toe touches, twelve sit-ups and twelve pushups. The aroma of the already perking coffee was teasing his nostrils as he finished up his daily dozens. Returning to the stove, he turned off the heat, poured the steaming espresso from the pot into a Pyrex cup, stirred in some sugar, poured the mixture into a vacuum bottle and capped it. Then he shaved, showered, donned a light brown t-shirt, dark blue knee length shorts and sneakers, brushed his teeth and combed his hair. Finally, he sat down at the dinette table and poured his first shot-glass sized cup of coffee for the day. Drinking slowly, he savored its *café* riche flavor as the nectar washed gently over his tongue with every sip until, after three sips, he was done. "Ahh," he breathed, a hint of a smile decorating his lips. He was ready to meet day.

Kennison cleared the table, put the used dishes in the sonic and turned it on automatic. He picked up his standard communicator from the nightstand and clipped it to his belt. *Don't call me, Graves, old man*, he thought, chuckling to himself. *I'll call you!* He left his quarters, went just outside the main gate and boarded the already crowded base shuttle for the ride downtown.

San Diego is a clean city, its cleanliness enhanced by the fresh sea air and the off shore breezes. Great naval vessels still line the bay, myriad high-rises and shops adorn the sidewalks, vehicles of every sort, wheeled and air alike, travel the streets.

The young lieutenant stepped off the shuttle at Pacific and Broadway. He began jogging east, springing off the balls of his feet, his loping gait like that of a gazelle. Three and a half kilometers and twelve minutes later, he arrived at his destination without breaking a sweat or breathing hard. The sign above the lot at 13th and E Streets proclaimed, "Cyrano's Air and Ground Autos, New and Used."

Kennison walked up and down the rows of used personal-sized vehicles wide-eyed. Even the oldest among them looked amazing. *Something in a used ground car*, he thought, *something small, maneuverable, and...*

"Don't settle for just wheels if you want more," the voice behind him chirped. "I can put you in a one-owner Levvy for a song! Cyrano James at your service!"

Spinning around, Kennison saw a well-tanned man in his late thirties, impeccably dressed in a light blue summer suit, wearing a Panama hat and glasses. Looking into the man's pale blue eyes he said, "Well, Mr. James, while something to ply the air in would be great, I'll settle for a ground car. This little Tempo looks fine," he said pointing to a small beige two-door. "Okay if I take it for a spin?"

"I've got a Dart Aero that's just right for you," he nudged.

"No! I'm only interested in this Tempo."

"Very well. Come inside. I'll get the key. I'll need to see your license."

In the show room, Kennison took his wallet from his right front pants pocket, opened it, took out the license and handed it to the older man. James glanced briefly at the license, looked at Kennison, then back at the license. His eyebrows shot up immediately. "You're Second Lieutenant Roger Kennison?"

"That's right," he replied, his own eyebrows up a notch.

"Wait here," James said, almost in a whisper, and disappeared into an adjoining office. Returning less than a minute later, he handed Kennison a small, three by five envelope along with his license. "You have a top-of-the-line Dart Astro, bought, paid for, insured, and fully fueled. All the paperwork you'll need is in the car. The key's in this envelope. It appears you have a benefactor."

Kennison pinned the older man with his gaze and queried, "A man named Graves, right?"

"That's right. Funny thing though. The payment was by direct personal account transfer, but there was no information about the sender's account."

"He's a wealthy man, wealthy enough he can have all the privacy he wants," Kennison, chuckling silently, lied.

"Looks that way," he agreed. "Here, I'll take you to your Astro. You'll love it!"

"Thank you," Kennison said, his smile lighting his face.

The two men shook hands upon reaching the car. Smiling into the younger man's eyes, James said, "you know where to bring her for service, right?"

"I do. And thanks again...for everything!"

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Back on campus, Kennison looked through the car's papers. A plain white envelope bearing his name caught his eye. Opening it, he took out a slip of paper which read simply, *Aft stow*. Lifting the aft stow lid, he espied a long, rectangular, aluminum case. He took it out, closed the lid and secured the vehicle. In his quarters he opened the case. Inside was a standard particle rifle with a sniper-scope, but there was a difference. The targeting scope was anything but standard.

Kennison flipped open his clear-channel communicator. The voice at the other end said, "Yes, Lieutenant?"

"I have a rifle with a scope, sir. He left them in the new Dart Astro he bought for me. This is no ordinary sniper-scope though. It's longer and larger around. It has fittings for a sleeve and there's a receptacle on top, but the sleeve and whatever plugs into the receptacle are not with the weapon."

"He wants a run-through first."

"I'll give him his money's worth, sir."

"Don't you mean his Dart Astro's worth, Lieutenant?"

The communicator echoed laughter from both ends.

## Chapter 3

Lieutenant Roger Kennison closed his clear-channel communicator and placed it back in its niche. Picking up the particle rifle, he looked it over slowly, appreciatively, from the butt of the stock to the tip of the barrel, paying particular attention to the sight. This weapon's an absolute masterwork, he thought to himself. This is no ordinary rifle. And what of the mysterious missing sleeve? He brought it up to his shoulder and peered through the scope, aiming it at a distant object outside the window. I could rewrite the record books at the range with this, he mused. Unaware of the smile that had crossed his lips, he admired the rifle a moment longer, then he put it back in its case, closed the cover and placed it on a high shelf in his closet. The mystery will have to wait, he conceded mentally as he closed the closet door. First things first! I'm hungry!

Leaving his quarters once again, Kennison headed for his car. As he neared the new Dart Astro, a lilting, feminine voice behind him exclaimed, "Oh No! This can't be happening!"

Turning around, he saw a lithe young woman, not quite as tall as he, with short, dark chestnut hair, dark brown eyes, and golden tan skin. He discerned strength of character in her expression and demeanor. She was standing next to a land car with a flat right rear tire; the car's aft stow lid was open.

He walked over to her, caught her gaze and said, "Need help with the spare?"

"If I had air in the spare, I could put it on myself! But it's flat," she complained.

"Well then, let's just take both tires into town in my car and get 'em fixed. We can grab a bite while we're waiting," he offered.

"That'll solve both my problems," she said. "I was on my way to get some lunch when..."

"Say no more," he chimed, keeping his gaze on her. "It's off to lunch we go! I'm Roger Kennison, by the way," he added as he held out his right hand.

Shaking his hand firmly, she replied, "I'm Melanie Sencindiver, Mel to my friends."

"Mel? Why not Lanie," he asked, half in jest.

"What's more MACO? Lanie or Mel," she quizzed.

"Point taken," he responded with a smile. "Now, shall we flip a coin to see who jacks up the car?"

First she laughed, then he laughed. Then Roger held out his right hand again, and Mel handed him the jack.

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"The lady will have a B.L.T. with French roast coffee and I'll have the same, thank you." Roger Kennison said with a smile to the petite, young, strawberry blond waitress.

"I'll have your order in a jiffy, sir," she replied cheerily, then turned, and hurried off toward the kitchen.

Looking into her eyes, Roger asked, "How do you like your Tempo, Mel?"

"I love it! My dad got it for me second hand when we found out I was accepted into the academy. It's been very good to me since then. You're pretty lucky to be driving a new Dart Astro," she commented, smiling.

"You have no idea," he told her. "I started out intending to buy a used Tempo earlier this morning, but the key to the Astro was dropped into my hand instead."

Eyebrows raised, she asked, "How'd you manage that?"

"Let's just say I have a benefactor with deep pockets and leave it at that," he replied evasively. Smiling slightly, she said with a wink, "Understood."

The waitress returned just then with their meals and coffee. Each took a sip of coffee and started eating.

Melanie looked into Roger's eyes. "Have you been assigned yet?"

"Yes, I have. Looks like I'll be based right here in San Diego, at least for the time being," he replied, matching her gaze. "What about you?"

"I've got thirty days furlough. Then I'll take charge of a squad on board the science vessel, Northern Lights. I'm a little nervous," she confided.

"You'll do fine," he assured her. "Just don't let 'em see you sweat," he added with a chuckle.

"Don't let 'em see you sweat," she echoed quietly, grinning. "I Like that."

"I only asked for a week's leave," he continued. "So my career starts officially a week from Monday. You going anywhere in particular before you ship out?"

"My brother's coming down from L.A. for a few days to visit and to take charge of my car while I'm off gallivanting in space, but I'm staying here in San Diego until I leave."

"Holding her gaze and leaning forward slightly, Roger said to her, "Mel, you know the annual MACO Officers' Ball is next Saturday. You will honor me greatly if you'll allow me to escort you."

"Roger, the honor will be mine," she responded, a little wide-eyed. "I will be happy to have you escort me to the MACO Officers Ball."

Easing back in his chair, he smiled a little and added, "Okay, I'll make the arrangements."

The rest of lunch went by in a blur.

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Roger put the wheel with the repaired tire back on Melanie's car, lowered the jack and placed the jack back into the aft stow with the repaired spare. He closed the lid, then turned to Melanie and said, "This has already been a most eventful day for me, due in no small part to our having met. We must do lunch again...soon."

"I'm glad I fi...I'm glad we met as well," she replied softly, "but let's have dinner instead," she added with a wink.

"Dinner works for me," he replied, with a grin. Then Roger watched her as Melanie turned and began walking toward her quarters.

Looking back over her shoulder, Melanie smiled at Roger and said, "I'll wait for your call."

## Chapter 4

Staring at Sunday's crssword puzzle, Roger Kennison pondered the clue for 63 across. *Ancestry... six letters... starts with O.* As his brain began to search, a seemingly unrelated picture flashed in his mind. His eyebrows went up and his mouth opened slightly. Putting his pencil down, he slowly rose to his feet. He walked over to the closet, removed the rifle case, placed it on the table and opened it. Taking the rifle out, he again examined the targeting scope, focusing on the receptacle at the top. *This is no ordinary receptacle, he mused. It's design, indeed its whole configuration is like nothing I've ever seen. This bears a further look.*

Propping the rifle upright, the young lieutenant made a two-dimensional image of the receptacle. Then he returned the rifle to its case and he placed the case back on its high shelf in the closet. Next, with his computer, he cropped the image so that nothing but the receptacle would be revealed. Then he slipped the image into an envelope and left.

Commander Halleck's residence was a ten-minute walk from Kennison's quarters. The younger officer was there in three. He pressed the door-bell. Opening the door almost immediately, the solidly built, six foot tall, brown skinned, gray templed electronics warfare instructor smiled politely and said, "Ah, good morning, Mister Kennison! Just can't stay away from the learning environment, can you?"

"As a matter of fact, I can't, sir" he replied. "Good morning to you as well."

"What's on your mind, Lieutenant?"

"Can we go inside, sir," he asked quietly.

"Please." the commander motioned him inside and then closed the door. "Would you like some coffee?"

"Thank you, no. Sir, I'm going to show you something, but I need to ask you for your complete confidence and discretion."

"Knowing you as I do, I don't think that'll be a problem."

Kennison handed the envelope to Commander Halleck, then watched his response.

Halleck took out the image and looked at it, lowered his brows, looked Kennison, then looked at the image again. "I don't suppose you can tell where you got this, can you?"

"No, sir, I can't. I have a question for you though. Have you ever seen a receptacle like the one in the image."

"No. Never. It's not of Earth, it's not of Vulcan manufacture, or Andorian, or Tellarite. I'm sure it's not Klingon either. It's a complete anomaly," he said, amazement in his voice.

"That's what I was thinking, but I needed the benefit of your expertise. For that, sir, I'm grateful. For bothering you, I apologize."

"You don't need to apologize," he responded with a smile, "but perhaps you can return the favor one day by answering the one question I have."

"Your question, sir," he asked, matching his gaze.

"Where did that receptacle come from?"

"Good question, Commander," he replied pensively. "Good question. If ever I'm able to, I'll tell you the answer."

Back in his quarters, Kennison disposed of the image, then picked up and flipped open his clear channel communicator.

"Yes, Lieutenant," the male voice queried in greeting.

"Sir, I took a closer look at the receptacle on the targeting scope. It's pretty well unique."

"How so?"



Lieutenant Kennison recounted what had transpired. When he finished, the male voice announced, "Halleck was the right choice and his question is pertinent: Where indeed did that receptacle come from?"

Kennison replied, "The question is not *where*, sir, but *when!* *When* in time was that receptacle brought here?"

"Good call, Lieutenant. Keep me apprised."

"Will do, sir." Kennison put his communicator back in its niche, sat down, picked up his pencil and went to his puzzle. At 63 across, smiling, he printed the letters o-r-i-g-i-n.

## Chapter 5

Second Lieutenant Roger Kennison spoke into his communicator, "Establish computer link!"

Eight beeps sounded: one long, one short, one long, one short; then, one short, one long and two short: Morse code for *CL*, signifying establishment of the computer link.

"Computer! Create permanent secure personal log file to be verified by log file code!"

"Please state code parameters," a feminine electronic voice responded.

"Log file Kennison, Roger Winslow, code two, seven, four, seven, apple, six, five, crowns, nine, three, Terrence, Victor."

"Please restate code parameters."

"Log file Kennison, Roger Winslow, code two, seven, four, seven, apple, six, five, crowns, nine, three, Terrence, Victor."

"Code parameters established. Log file Kennison, Roger Winslow created."

"Computer, open log file Kennison, Roger Winslow, code two, seven, four, seven, apple, six, five, crowns, nine, three, Terrence, Victor."

"Code parameters verified. Log file Kennison, Roger Winslow opened."

"Kennison, personal log, Saturday, ten June, twenty-one fifty-eight, fourteen hundred hours. Item one! My military career begins *officially* in two days. Unofficially, my services were required ahead of time and so my career began early. When? A better question, is why. Part of the answer lies in the fact that I'm a man of principle. Item two! Tonight, I meet some important, high-ranking officers at the annual MACO Officers Ball, an event which is as much duty as it is pleasure. The duty will be meeting the brass; the pleasure will be the company of fellow academy graduate, Melanie Sencindiver, beautiful and intelligent, with strength of character. We met by chance last Saturday, but I noticed her much before that. I look forward to spending time with her. I'm ready for tonight. I have more to say in general but that'll come later. Computer! End log entry and store!"

"Log entry ended. Log entry stored."

The young lieutenant closed his communicator and placed it back on his desk.

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Appraising the fit of his newly purchased, tailored and pressed, brown over white dress uniform, Roger Kennison cast a critical eye at his reflection in the full-length mirror. He scanned slowly from head to toe, tilting his head this way and that slightly as he did so, taking note of his haircut and shave, the placement of the name plate, sharpshooter ribbon and rank insignia on his tunic, the alignment of his belt line, the rich, high luster of his cream-polished boots. *Everything looks good*, he complimented himself mentally, an easy smile accentuating his satisfaction. *I'm ready*. He then placed his cap on his head at just the right angle, picked up his keys from the dinette table and sprang light footed out the door.

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Roger Kennison, holding his cap in his left hand, reached up with his right hand and pressed the door chime. Melanie Sencindiver opened the door mere seconds later and caught his gaze, a smile illuminating her face. "Good evening, Roger," she greeted cheerily. "It's good to see you. Please, come in."

"Thank you, and good evening to you." He entered and shut the door behind him, his eyes on hers. "It's good to see you as well."

"I'm ready to go," she informed him. "I just need to get my clutch and my wrap." She turned to leave the room.

"Wait," he interrupted. "Let me look at you."

She stopped and turned back around, looking again into his eyes.

Roger knew nothing of fashion but, looking at her, he could see that her full length, strapless, golden-rose colored, sequined silk evening gown contrasted perfectly with her chestnut brown hair and dark brown eyes, complemented beautifully her golden tan skin, and conformed to her figure as if it were an extension of herself. Around her neck she wore a gold medallion necklace with matching gold earrings, completing the ensemble. "You look so elegant, so regal," he enthused, "positively stunning!"

"Why, thank you, Roger," she effused in reply. "You cut quite a handsome figure yourself...and your uniform adds just the right amount of dash!"

"Thank *you*, Melanie! Nature was generous and I was fortunate," he confided. "Shall we go?"

"I'll get my things," she said, and then, turning, Melanie disappeared into another room. She returned a few seconds later carrying a small, flat, reddish-brown purse in her right hand, and a reddish brown, silk lined, fur wrap in her left, the purse's and wrap's colors matching the reddish brown of her as yet unseen smooth-toed pumps. Handing the wrap to Roger, she turned half around. He draped the wrap over her shoulders, then she turned back around and their eyes met again.

"Ready to meet the brass," Roger teased in query.

"I'm more ready to dine and dance," Melanie countered with a wry smile.

"Dining and dancing are more to my liking as well," he agreed. "I hear there's a good swing band playing, so what say we go cut a rug?"

"Swing's the thing," she declared. "I'm with you!"

At that, Roger put his cap back on his head, held his left arm up slightly and said, "MacArthur Hall isn't far, so there's really no need to drive."

Taking hold of his arm, Melanie replied, "Walking suits me just fine."

So, the two of them strolled together out of Melanie's quarters, out of the building, and into the fresh evening air.

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The MACO Academy is a selective institution. Its corps of cadets is small, so its campus is small. Situated at its center, running east to west, staggered in two rows of three, are the cadet dormitories, long-sided, H-shaped, three-story buildings. To their north sits the base exchange, mess hall complex. Cadre parking to its west, cadet parking to its east. Scattered about just beyond and to either side is cadre housing. Furthest north are the academic buildings, the libraries and the study halls. The baseball diamonds, the football and soccer fields, the parade ground, the running track, the archery range and underground rifle ranges all lie just to the south of the dorm block. The medical complex lies directly to its east, and, finally, to its west lies the athletic complex, MacArthur Hall: gymnasium with Olympic sized indoor swimming pool, assembly hall, and Ballroom.

Roger Kennison and Melanie Sencindiver, her right hand holding his left arm, strolled leisurely west across the MACO Academy campus toward MacArthur Hall. The sun had not quite set, the air was still warm, there was a gentle, soothing off shore breeze.

Roger took deep breath in through his nose, expanding his chest, held it, then let it out quietly through his mouth. "Ah, that sea air smells so good," he exclaimed. "Looks like the weather gods are watching over us, Mel."

"I couldn't have asked for a nicer evening myself," she replied, a buoyant lilt in her voice. "I had my umbrella ready just in case though," she added through a chuckle.

"You don't mind being early," he asked.

"Not at all," she replied. "I have no need to be fashionably late. I don't care much for slow moving receiving-line queues either. Early's good."

"I feel the same way," he told her. "And getting there early means getting a good table," he added.

"Looks like we're on the same page," Melanie observed.

"That we are, Mel." Roger concurred. "That we are."

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No one else was arriving when they approached the front entrance to MacArthur Hall. Roger opened one of the half dozen east facing doors and held it. Melanie let go of his arm and stepped into the narrow foyer. Roger stepped in right after her and she again took hold of his arm. Signs guided them to the right, then left just around a corner to a side entrance through which they entered the main hall. Several high-ranking officers, including generals and an admiral, were standing by their tables along the east wall ready to receive guests. The first to greet the couple was Brigadier General Tambul, the commandant of the academy.

"Lieutenant Kennison, it is good to see you again," the five-foot two-inch brigadier, beaming, said as he reached out his dark chocolate hued hand.

Shaking the brigadier's hand, the young lieutenant, matching the brigadier's smile, responded, "The pleasure is entirely mine, Brigadier. You taught me many valuable lessons and I am grateful."

"I learned much from you as well, light footed one. You will be a great leader one day."

Then, still smiling, he turned his attention to Melanie. She, in turn, let go of her escort's arm and held out her hand to the Brigadier, looking into his eyes.

Taking her hand and shaking it, he said, "Lieutenant Sencindiver, you are an extraordinarily skillful soldier-leader. You are one of the highest scoring women ever to grace this academy with her presence. Your skill with a bow is unmatched. You are an asset to MACO."

The young woman smiled and said, "Why, thank you, Brigadier. Your words are far too kind."

"Not at all, Lieutenant. Not at all."

Moving down the line, Roger and Melanie began greeting and were greeted by some of Starfleet's and MACO's most prestigious senior staff officers.

Lieutenant Kennison looked into the eyes and shook the hand of a Vulcan Starfleet officer and said, "It's a rare pleasure to meet you, Admiral Verek. You blazed many trails in the Alpha and Beta Quadrants."

"Yes, it's an honor to meet a genuine pioneer, Admiral," Lieutenant Sencindiver said next, shaking his hand.

"Why, thank you, Lieutenant, and you, miss," he said, looking from one to the other. "I am quite pleased to meet you as well. May you live long and prosper."

"Peace and long life, Admiral," the young woman said as she and her escort returned his Vulcan salute.

"Good evening, General Harkness. That ploy you came up with at Auriga Seven was inspired and brilliant," Lieutenant Kennison praised, shaking the older man's hand. "Saved a cruise liner and its passengers as well as a minor population on the planet."

"The source of ideas is frequently a mystery, Lieutenant. I was fortunate that day."

"There's no mystery, General," Lieutenant Sencindiver countered. "I believe it was Karma."

"Ah, but what is Karma if not itself a mystery," he challenged. Then he said, "Enjoy the festivities."

"Thank you, General," the two said in unison.

To the last officer in the receiving line, Lieutenant Kennison said, "Good evening, Colonel."

"Good evening, Lieutenant, miss."

Upon hearing the colonel's voice, Lieutenant Kennison looked closely into the colonel's eyes and asked, "Colonel, have we met?"

"We've not met face to face that I'm aware of, Lieutenant," he replied. "And I'd certainly have remembered this young lady."

"Allow me to present Lieutenant Melanie Sencindiver. I'm Lieutenant Roger Kennison." *And yes, we have met before*, he added in his mind. *I'll remember the circumstances sooner or later.*

Shaking first her hand, then his, the colonel said, "Colonel Max Trautman. It's good to meet you both."

"Likewise, Colonel," Lieutenant Kennison replied.

"Pleased to meet you, sir," Lieutenant Sencindiver added.

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As Melanie was checking her wrap, Roger looked around the enormous room. The walls were hung with Persian print tapestries interspersed with shields and crossed swords; the ceiling was draped with fish nets filled with subtly hued transparent glass globes. The indirect lighting was soft amber. At the front of the room was an upraised stage where the band would play. Below and in front of the stage was the dance floor, a rectangular area that could accommodate thirty to forty couples. Between the dance floor and the rear of the hall were four place dining tables. Aisles ran up and down both sides of the hall, up the middle of the seating area from front to back, and laterally across the same area from side to side. Small curved booths were set up along the walls on either side of the room. Except for two couples sitting at a table just left of the center of the room a short distance from the dance floor, the few officers in the receiving line at the back, and themselves, MacArthur Hall was empty.

Her wrap checked, Roger once again held out his arm to Melanie. "Shall we?"

The young woman took his arm, smiled, and said, "Let's."

Roger led her to a booth on the left side of the hall not far from the center cross aisle. Taking her hand, he assisted her to her seat, then went around the table and slid into the booth beside her on her right. The curvature of the booth allowed for ease of eye contact, thus fostering conversation. It allowed for closeness as well.

"Amazing décor," Roger said with a sweep of his hand.

"Definitely medieval," Melanie responded. "Like a castle of old. I like it. It's better than I expected."

"Can I get you s..." he began but paused when a waiter, an underclassman, walked briskly up to the booth. "Sir, ma'am, dinner will not be served until seven but perhaps I can get you an aperitif?"

Roger looked at Melanie, an eyebrow raised slightly.

"A glass of rosé would be nice."

"Bring us a bottle of vin rosé please."

"Would you like bread sticks to go with that, sir?"

Another look at Melanie, then, "No, thank you."

"Very good, sir," he said, and strode off.

Roger returned his attention to Melanie. "The brigadier mentioned your prowess as an archer. I've seen what you can do. No man or woman can outshoot you. You're a regular Robin Hood."

"I wanted to learn to draw a bow since I was a very little girl, so my father taught me. He loves the sport a lot. He's also half Cheyenne. I've seen what you can do too, Roger. You're far better with a rifle than I am with a bow. I bet you could outshoot Annie Oakley. I've watched you run as well," she continued. "You're an astonishing distance runner. I'm surprised you haven't run in the Boston Marathon or the one in Los Angeles."

"Thanks, but I'll leave the championship stuff to the Kenyans and Ethiopians. I prefer not to be in the spotlight. For that matter, you could be a champion in gymnastics quite easily. I've watched you perform on a number of occasions. You're so limber, you impress me no end! You're an amazing athlete!"

"I'm not interested in winning a medal in gymnastics, or in archery for that matter," she explained. "What I *am* interested in is being the best MACO officer I can be. My athletic skills are simply additional abilities I can apply to that end. And, like you, I prefer to avoid the public eye."

"We're on the same page again, Mel," Roger commented. "We think alike. We would do well working together."

Melanie's eyes widened a little. "You're *right*, Roger, we *would* do well working together."

"Hold that thought, Mel," he said, his attention suddenly diverted, "Our wine's arriving."

The waiter returned right then with their bottle of rosé and two wine glasses. He set the glasses down, removed the cork and handed it to Roger. Roger sniffed the cork, nodded his approval and handed it back. The waiter poured a little wine into each glass and set the glasses in front of them.

Roger took a sip of wine. Then he smiled at the waiter and said, "Thank you, Cadet,"

The waiter smiled in return and said, "Very good sir!" Then, he bowed slightly, turned and strode off again.

Roger, his full attention now on Melanie, raised his glass.

Melanie, gazing at Roger, raised her glass in response.

"To possibilities, Mel," he proposed.

"To possibilities," she echoed.

They touched their glasses together. Then, holding each other's gaze, they each drank a sip of wine.

\* \* \* \* \*

As seven o'clock arrived, soft music started to play. The room was filling rapidly. Waiters and waitresses, in abundance, were scurrying about hurriedly taking dinner orders. Meals were soon being served with military efficiency, and animated dinner chatter was echoing across MacArthur Hall. Roger and Melanie talked about everything and nothing as he dined on an "excellent" T-bone steak and she dined on "scrumptious" breast of chicken.

Ted Ballard's orchestra began playing at eight o'clock sharp. Roger went around the booth, took Melanie by the hand and led her to the dance floor. He took her into his arms and they began swaying to the strains of "Moonlight Serenade." They continued dancing to "String of Pearls," "At Last," and to half a dozen other such slow romantic numbers. Then the tempo changed from sway to swing.

"All right," he exclaimed. "That's 'In the Mood!'"

"Yeah," she effused, her eyes alight.

Roger put his right arm around Melanie's waist, took her right hand in his left, she put her left hand on his right shoulder, and they both locked eyes as they began tapping their feet and "swingin'!

to the beat." He'd dance with her in close, twirl her under his arm, pull her in close and then twirl her again. Absorbed in each other, they were in perfect unison as they jitterbugged all around the dance floor, their movements going from bold to subtle to bold in sync with the music. Blissfully unaware, they were dancing alone, their eyes on each other while all other eyes were on them. As the last notes played, he twirled her around several times, pulled her in close, then concluded their dance in a dip holding her securely in his arms and looking into her smiling eyes.

There was immediate applause. Roger and Melanie, startled, straightened up, looked around wide eyed at the myriad onlookers, looked at each other, then looked again at their audience. Hand in hand, they made a sweeping bow, then hurried back to their booth. They danced only to slow numbers after that, holding each other closely. They capped the evening dancing to "Good Night Sweetheart."

\* \* \* \* \*

Roger and Melanie, hand in hand, their fingers entwined, strolled lazily back across the MACO Academy campus in no hurry whatsoever. So, they were surprised when they found themselves standing in front of the door to her quarters.

Roger turned toward Melanie and said, "Mel, I had a great time tonight. I've never had a better one. My high school prom wasn't even this good. And you're a fantastic dancer!"

Looking at him with glistening eyes, she said, "Roger, I have to tell you something. I've wanted to meet you since we were sophomores when I first saw you on the track. I was thrilled when you asked me to the ball, and I love the way you dance! For me, tonight was perfect!"

Roger put his arms around Melanie. "We have to keep seeing each other, you know that, don't you, Mel?"

Reaching her arms up and around his neck, she responded, "Yes, Roger...we do...I know."

Then he pulled her body close against his own and kissed her passionately.

Melanie kissed him back with equal passion.

Then, saying, "I'll call you," he released her.

"Yes. Call me," she breathed.

Roger turned and went out into the moonless night. Melanie followed him with her eyes, her eyes welling with tears.