



- CHAPTER THREE - MOUNTAINS OF ANTHILLS

The life of an Enomeg trainee was not all combat training; there were also more traditional academic activities required. Enomegs were very well-educated by civilian standards, and even by the standards of most military officers. Like officers, the classes they took were mostly related to military tactics. In psychology, they first learned how the mind worked, and then they were taught how to use this knowledge against the enemy: how to evaluate their weaknesses, to make them believe that defeat was imminent even if they were actually winning, to make them become overconfident and make mistakes... or simply how to make them quake with fear.

They also learned a bit about troop morale, but as Enomegs it was not their job to lead armies and keep their spirits up. Each Enomeg was a lone soldier, a one-man army who would fight in an extremely small team of his peers at the most. He had to keep his own wits about him, not anyone else's.

Of course, even these regular classes were made into physical endurance tests as well. Throughout the entire session, all of the trainees were forced to stand, rigidly at first, until they were allowed to slacken up later. But if any showed so much weakness as to sit down or lean against the wall, the trainer would quite literally beat the exhaustion right out of them. Only during especially long sessions or exams were they allowed to sit.

Scorp was used to it. Today he was in Xarkon Government History class. It was a large, open room, with walls covered in posters showing various historical timelines and battlefield layouts. These posters were actually holographic projections that changed at the will of the instructor. The instructor himself, a man named Garfield, was currently pacing back and forth in front of the row of students. He was an older, balding man in a crisp black Xarkon officer uniform, and he was currently droning on about the legendary Age of the Golden Skye.

Scorp had heard about the reign of Empress Kristal Skye at least a thousand times during his schooling and seen hundreds of pictures of her. His instruction had practically begun with her, and now it was clearly going to end with her as well. It was under her reign that Xarkon was officially and finally converted into an empire, a one-man – or, at that time, one-woman – dictatorship, and it was she who designed the distinctive five-pronged crimson crown that now stood as Xarkon’s symbol on just about everything, including its flag, currency, and military vehicles.

“During the Empress’s reign,” the instructor said, “she was extremely popular with all of her subjects. But there’s *always* someone who will act against even the greatest of leaders: some rat who either wants to seize power for himself, is bought like a prostitute with enemy money, or simply ‘catches democracy.’ One man in her advisory council, whose name is not passed through history because of his actions, actually tried to *assassinate* the Empress. Before he could execute his plans, however, a close friend that he had confided in revealed his secret to the rest of the council.”

At this point, Instructor Garfield turned to face the room and fix each student with a glare. “His friend – a man whose name, Patrick Ergoff, *is* passed through history – revealed the secret during a public ceremony, in the face of an audience of citizens. Quite frankly, the traitor started to shake like a hairless Yeti, revealing his obvious guilt. The people of Xarkon then rose up and tore the traitor down from his speaking podium. They threw him to the ground, and he was beaten to death there in the square by the angry loyalist mob. Now, I have a question for you, students, and I want you to answer this with all honesty: what is your opinion of the fate of the would-be assassin? Was it just, or was it wrong?”

Silence reigned over the assembly. The students stood still, a few of them going even more rigid, staring at the instructor. The room may as well have been full of statues. Finally one of them spoke up. It was Raven, who was standing in the foremost row. His eyes narrowed as he spoke, and he stiffened even more in his tight black uniform, if that were possible.

“It was no more than he deserved. He betrayed the leader he had sworn to serve, a leader who had done nothing but strengthen Xarkon, a leader that the people of his country loved. He was a coward and a traitor. So the people protected their Empress. They did what was right.”

Garfield nodded, but said nothing. He continued looking around the room, indicating that someone else should speak up. As much as Scorp wanted to remain silent, as he usually did, he found himself strangely eager to compete with Luke, even in this. Raven was overconfident, and Scorp was sure of his ability to beat him in logic.

“I disagree,” Scorp said. “His punishment was unfair. He was not justly accused, not proven guilty, and his punishment was decided by an angry mob. One of Xarkon’s tenets is honor. There was no honor in the way this man was killed. This was unjust.”

“Another of Xarkon’s tenets is loyalty,” Luke said, finally breaking his attentive stance to look back across the room at Scorp. “He was disloyal to his leader; the people were loyal to theirs. So they...”

“Wasn’t *he* one of their leaders?” Scorp interrupted. “He was a member of the Council of Advisors.”

“But he did not wear the Crown,” Luke rebutted, “which is what the people are truly loyal to.”

“Today, yes... now that the Council has all but ceased to exist. Back then, however, it was still a full Council, and still constituted nearly half the government.”

“Because then the government was corrupt!”

Scorp gave a short laugh. “And the people were supposed to know that somehow? They were told by the laws to follow the government, just as we are today. The people are never told *today’s* government is wrong, only yesterday’s. They are never told that *our* government may be wrong, only the government of our enemies.”

Scorp paused. Had he gone too far? Something he said had not sounded right. This was why he always preferred actions to words...

Luke smiled, realizing he had the upper hand. “You just said that the people were wrong, and now you’re saying the government is wrong... So just who are you fighting for, ‘Saber-Scorpion?’”

Scorp’s eyes narrowed. It was then that the instructor took up his cue.

“You fight for Xarkon,” Garfield said, standing up straighter. “You fight for its government, whatever it currently is... you fight for its people, whoever they currently are... but most of all you fight for the symbol, for the ideal. You fight for what Xarkon stands for... honor, bravery, loyalty, and supremacy. Today Xarkon continues to evolve, and it is closer to the purity of those ideals than ever. But it has always striven for them, so it has always been Xarkon.”

The instructor turned to look at Scorp and said, “Nevertheless, you got it right, son. The traitor’s punishment was unjust. The courts of Xarkon and the will of Empress Skye should have decided his fate. By punishing him themselves, the people of Xarkon were disobeying the law, killing one of their leaders on a mere impulse. In their own way, they were traitors as well. That is not to say that the traitor did not deserve his fate. If convicted, he’d either have swung or been shot, possibly lost his head... but those are still preferable to a mob beating. For if we let the whim of the people, of simple emotion, dictate our every action, then chaos will reign. Such is the difference between vengeance and justice, impulse and strategy, mob rule and government. And in your case, that’s the difference between a simple fighter or warrior... and a true soldier. That’s all for today, trainees. You’re dismissed.”

The room was clear in a couple of seconds as the Enomegs filed out like clockwork. Scorp, however, intentionally hung back to dodge Raven. As he did, Lee backed up and bumped into him in the hallway.

“Did you really mean all that?” he asked.

Scorp made no reply. He gave a slight shrug.

A broad smile spread across Mantis's face, and his dark eyes gleamed. "I mean, that was close to treason, my friend. For a moment, I wondered what kind of training centers you had been to before this one. Ha! But you were right in the end."

Scorp knew what Mantis meant. He had been raised in these military academies his whole life. Through all of his classes, they always filled his head with propaganda. They taught that it was wrong, that propaganda and censorship were used by enemy nations to make the people condone the evils of their government... but it was exactly what they were doing. Subtly, ever so subtly, even while sounding coldly and perfectly logical, they were actually teaching blind loyalty to Xarkon.

Of course, Scorp realized it was what every nation must do. When he had first started his schooling, he'd simply accepted the propaganda as truth. Later, he had rebelled against the contradictions it presented, only to be argued with and browbeaten into silence. Now they were appealing to his "logic" through arguments about government policy, and he was ready to either beat them at their own game or finally make them really *convince* him. He explained these thoughts in brief to Mantis.

"Still I am not sure," Mantis replied. "Such indecision can lead to similar unclear thoughts on the battlefield, where you should be fully focused. It is a weakness, in its own way."

Scorp gave a short laugh. "So thought is a weakness?"

Mantis shrugged and stood closer to the metal wall of the corridor to let more of the trainees slip past. "Vague, questioning thoughts, yes. Unfocused thoughts are like inaccurate weapons. Would you wield a gun that you can hardly control, or one that shoots straight ahead, never veering?"

"So now we're nothing more than guns?"

Without a moment's hesitation, Mantis nodded. "On the battlefield, my friend, we have to be."

Scorp laughed again. "Maybe *you're* the one who should be teaching these classes."

He had to admit, Lee was almost convincing him. The young man spoke with such pure conviction, such clarity of mind, that Scorp could not help but admire him. And strangely enough, despite his disciplined loyalty, Lee had a laid-back, smiling demeanor that was almost disarming. In fact, despite the debate they were currently having, Scorp found he couldn't help but like him. Just as he was about to continue the argument, Raven appeared and broke in on their conversation.

"You were right back there, in a way," Raven said, looking across at Scorp, for they were almost exactly the same height. "You did good. But don't think you can beat me out in the field."

Scorp shook his head. "Are you really trying to turn this into some kind of personal competition? You barely know me!"

Raven smiled that irritating smile of his, that confident smirk, and said, “Oh, but I do know you. I’ve studied all the best trainees, those with the highest marks... and do you know who the highest ones are?”

Scorp shrugged. “Me?”

Luke snorted derisively and squinted his cold grey eyes. “You and *me*. You don’t get it, do you? We’re not in school anymore. This place isn’t an education center or a training ground... it’s a test, the final test. Most of the ones taking this test will either fail and be sent away, or fail and *die*. When the test is through, only a handful will have passed. And out of these few, one will be appointed to replace Dark-Dragon as the leader of the Enomegs. And that leader is going to be *me*.”

“Well, good luck with that,” Scorp responded. He shoved past Luke and stalked off down the hall.

“What about you?” Luke shouted after him. “What’s your goal... *Scorp?*”

Scorp paused and glanced back.

“To be the best,” he said.

LOCATION: XARKON CENTRAL PLAINS

The sunlight nearly blinded Saber-Scorpion as he stepped out of the lift – the exit to the ETAB that was disguised as a standing rock. It was good to be out in the fresh air again. The wind was cool, and the coarse, dry grass of the savannah rippled in the breeze. He had come here early, and at first he thought he might be the first one out... at least until he noticed the fist flying toward his face and reflexively ducked.

He looked up at his assailant. It was another trainee, who stood a good three inches taller than Scorp. The padded black armor they wore served to enhance his shoulders, which looked almost half as broad as he was tall. His head was bald, and his elongated face featured a vertical scar running from above his eyebrow all the way down to his chin. Scorp did not know how he had gotten a mark like that, but he could guess it was from a blow that would have felled most mortal men.

The man said in a deep but clear voice, “I should beat you to within a centimeter of your life, traitor, for what you said in the classroom back there. If we were back at my old base right now, the boys and I would show you, you two-tongued little snake. You ain’t fit to polish my boots.”

This was a tradition at the ETAB bases. Most Enomeg students took their training... their job, their life... very seriously. And if anyone was seen dropping out of line, it was viewed by these zealots as bad for the whole group. Thus, they took it upon themselves to aid the instructors unofficially by knocking the wanderers back in line. It was known as “peer discipline” by the trainers, and they usually avoided siding either for or against the practice, letting it slide right under their noses.

Scorp gave a short laugh. “Well, I guess your ‘boys’ didn’t make it to the ETAB then? That’s too bad.”

“Some did,” answered the giant, “but you won’t hear me bawlin’ just ‘cause someone didn’t make the cut. That’s nature. My name’s Kade Gun-Barracuda, and you’ll remember that name when I put you back in line, whelp. Your lack of honor weakens us all.”

“Instructor Garfield didn’t seem to agree.”

Kade shook his head, the muscles on his neck bulging in the process. “The instructor was only tryin’ to teach you on your own terms. But now I’ll teach you on *mine*.”

Suddenly a voice broke in from the door behind them. “Hey, why don’t you pick on someone your own size, fish-boy? Someone like me.”

Scorp turned to see another trainee approaching, a grin spread across his face. He had short, dark hair and a bright gleam to his fiery hazel eyes that gave his grin both a playful and somewhat menacing look. Despite his remark about size, he was a good foot shorter than Barracuda, and a bit shorter than Scorp as well. Yet he moved with ease and confidence, raising his fists.

Barracuda sneered. “*Coyote*. You know, seein’ you and ‘*Brutus the honorable man*’ here at the ETAB makes me really question the effectiveness of the Enomeg program.”

“Yeah, it’s not all it’s cracked up to be, I guess,” Coyote said with a shrug. “I just didn’t want to say that, since, you know, it might be *treasonous*.”

“Take one step closer,” Barracuda said in a smooth, deep growl, “and we’ll see how good you look with a gap in those teeth you’re always flashin’.”

The giant raised his fists. The bulging of his muscles gave Scorp the impression of rolling boulders... or the formation of a mountain range at the meeting of two tectonic plates. Most of the Enomegs had sleek, well-toned musculature, but clearly Barracuda was as much a body-builder as an athlete.

Coyote did not mind a bit. “Well, come on then. Take one good swing right here at my face. Put all your weight into it too; no fakin’ it! Gimme your best shot!”

Barracuda did not hesitate. The huge arm unfurled and erupted forward. His fist connected with Coyote’s jaw, and the shorter man’s head was twisted abruptly sideways. He twirled into a heap on the ground. Staring down at the body in front of him, Barracuda blinked curiously. Then he looked sour. He knew he had failed to hit Coyote, because he never felt his knuckles touch, but somehow the act had looked so convincing that it had baffled him for a bit. Coyote jumped up and flashed another grin.

Scorp smiled and nodded. “Bravo.”

“*Gogk*, that was stupid,” Barracuda said, cursing in the Slashrim tongue. “I felt my fist graze your girly-smooth cheek. One more millisecond and you’d have been spittin’ bloody teeth, maybe with a broken jaw.”

Coyote laughed. “You kidding? I’ve been practicing that trick for *ages* just to pull it on you. You put too much stock in your muscles, Kade. It’s your *weakness*.”

“Yeah, great trick, Vinny. You’ll make a great actor, since that’s what it looks like you’re training to be.” Kade scowled with derision. “You two are an insult to the Enomegs, and you make me sick. I don’t know how you’ve made it this far, but mark my words: the training here will either beat that crap right out of you, or it will kill you. I’d settle for either result.”

With that, he turned and stalked off toward the edge of the clearing. Coyote just shook his head.

“Some people can’t take a joke,” he said.

“Well, he was right in a way,” Scorp said, “You must be one crazy nut to try that on a guy like him. He could probably rip a tree right off its roots.”

Coyote gave a dismissive wave of his hand. “Ah, I know how to deal with Barracuda. We’ve tangled before. Name’s Vincent Magnum-Coyote. Best shot and fastest runner in the Enomegs.”

Scorp shook the offered hand. “Justin Saber-Scorpion. Best swordsman and probably a lot more in the Enomegs. In fact, I’d like to test you on that ‘best shot’ theory...”

“Unfortunately we don’t have time,” said a filtered voice issuing from the bushes behind them.

Scorp turned. At first he saw only the waving grass, but then he noticed a dark shape rising out of them not too far away. It was Dark-Dragon, still clad in full exoskeleton, which now appeared to be a dull golden-brown color, striped with shadows. The suits carried the same automatic camouflage technology as the armor plating of the vehicles. They watched as Dragon reached up and removed his helmet, revealing his battle-scarred face. The active camo effect switched off, causing the color to slowly drain back out of the suit, leaving it black and deep crimson like before, the default colors for the Enomeg Commander. The bright gleam of the metal returned as well, reflecting the empty plains and clear sky that surrounded them.

“Not many Humans live out here,” Dragon said. He did not have the deep, commanding voice of Lucas Mars, but it still had an effect of its own. He kept it low, plain, and serious, and it carried with it a clear message of battlefield wisdom. “There isn’t a man for miles. There also isn’t much water for miles. The plants out here live off the sun and the dirt, and it rarely rains. It’s practically a desert – in this area anyway. See these plants? Ukrak, the Mahlok called them. They hate ‘em. They’re coarse, dry, tough... and the tops of them have seeds covered in tiny blades that bite into you like claws. That’s why most of the animals out here have such thick hides and little fur. In the spring, these grasses bloom like you wouldn’t believe. This whole bloody field turns bright, shining yellow, like the surface of the sun. Sometimes it’s so bright it disrupts passing satellites, or so I’ve heard. But those are probably just tall tales.”

By now the clearing in which they stood was full of trainees, and the last few latecomers were filing out of the exit. Scorp had known they were there, but had not paid much attention, for he was focused on Dragon's voice. Apparently it was having the same effect on everyone else. They were staring off in the direction their commander was now pointing. Scorp followed suit.

"You see that mesa?" said Dark-Dragon. "It's the liveliest place out here. A bunch of strange birds make their nests in caves all along the sides, which are steep and treacherous to climb. On the top, however, is a virtual paradise. Somehow, that flat rock is where all the greenest plants grow. But they aren't the only secret up there..."

At this point he abruptly stopped talking. The other students dared not interrupt the sudden silence. They simply stared at him as he looked out at the mesa. The wind blew gently, rustling the grasses, making a dry rattling sound.

"What else is up there?" Seth said at last.

"You'll find out," the Enomeg replied, "because you're going to climb it."

They all looked out at the mesa again with renewed interest. The sides of it were solid rock – a very bright red rock, unlike the soil of the plains. The top of the plateau was lush with green plants, mostly small bushes. Look as he might, Scorp could not make out any of the birds that Dragon said dwelt there. However, he did see the dark holes in the cliff face that must be the caves in which the creatures nested.

Terra Nova was an Earth-like planet in almost every sense of the word, with the primary difference being the longer days and nights and stronger force of gravity. Still, humanity had adjusted, and in some ways the fact that everything was now a bit heavier ensured that the population of Terra Nova remained fit. The planet's ecosystem was much the same as well, and the life that inhabited its surface, both plant and animal, had evolved along much the same patterns, resulting in a surprisingly familiar environment for its first Human settlers. There were blue skies, green trees, and creatures very similar to birds, reptiles, mammals, insects, and all the rest. Scorp could hear this wildlife now... the singing bugs and the calls of a bird far in the distance. Of course, there were some oddities on the planet that were unlike anything seen on Earth. Scorp wondered what kind of birds dwelled on that mesa...

"I'll go first," Dragon said, striding forward. "After about five minutes, I want you all to follow me. Just go as you see fit, whenever you deem yourself ready. But remember, this is a very important assignment, and if you give it anything but your best, you'll probably end up as a scout on the Mordark border when this is all over, not an Enomeg super-soldier. This is the Test of Honor, the first of four main tests you must undertake. All of the tests here are of the utmost importance if you ever wish to wear this armor," he said while performing the Heartbeat salute, "but these four will be the greatest. Do I make myself clear? Good. I won't say it again."

“Now... You have to use the equipment in your backpacks and whatever you find around you. Pick a few teammates if you want, but don't let them slow you down. The first few to make it to the top have to look for something... a bronze replica of the Crown of Xarkon. When you find it, I'll know. For now, enjoy the view. And remember, don't make a mountain out of an anthill.”

All of the trainees simultaneously turned to look in the direction he indicated. The sun was glinting beautifully off the waving grasses. It looked like an ocean of gold, rippling gently in the wind. Besides the mesa, the base entrance rock, and a clump of trees far in the distance, there was nothing to be seen except a vast, empty sky above a vast, empty plain. When they looked back, Dark-Dragon was nowhere to be seen either. Scorp shook his head in amazement.

Then he realized something: Dark-Dragon mentioned backpacks – and he saw most of the other trainees wearing theirs – but he had never picked up such a pack. He looked around and noticed that Cobra was not wearing one either. Neither were Raven or several others. They were wearing only their black training garb, like him. Had they been talking when the order was given? That was highly unlikely; apparently this was something the instructors had planned. Scorp watched as Raven walked over to the door of the base and pressed a button on the controls, asking if they could be let back in to get their packs. The response was apparently negative, for Luke cursed and stormed back to stand beside Scorp.

“Out of curiosity, who were the best students on that list you said you saw?” Scorp asked him.

Raven scowled. “Look around... most of the top performers don't have a backpack. Apparently they're trying to slow us down. Although I'm surprised Mantis has one; he was near the top. I don't know what they're trying to prove here, but I'm not letting this stop me...”

Scorp nodded. “Want to team up? The two best students, even without packs...”

“I'm going in alone,” Luke replied, interrupting him, “with or without a pack.”

Scorp shook his head, although he had not expected any other response. He too preferred working alone. He'd settled a rivalry with Tanya Silent-Cobra a few years ago simply by working with her, but something told him Raven's attitude was different than hers, and besides, they had bickered for at least half the mission before getting on each other's good side. He certainly didn't need that kind of thing slowing him down today. Then he saw Cat and Mantis approaching.

“Hey, would you like a teammate?” Cat asked Raven as she fastened up her hair. “Most of the others seem to be going in teams of two.”

“I just said, I'm going in alone,” Raven replied, turning to leave.

“Without any gear?” Cat scoffed. “I wouldn't have taken you for a fool, but I guess it's hard to tell. When you change your mind, come find me.”

Scorp felt a pang of emotion that he instantly recognized as jealousy, perhaps because Cat had asked Raven to be her partner first and not even approached him. Apparently Raven's desire to make this into a competition between the two of them was catching. Scorp tried to shake off the feeling. He didn't need that now; he only needed to win.

Raven seemed to have the same idea. "Good luck, Cat," he said as he walked away.

Cathryn stomped her foot in irritation.

Mantis gave her a slap on the back. "I guess you're stuck with me then, Cat... as usual. Let's go."

By then, Scorp had already set off through the grass alone. As he walked, Scorp could feel the seeds that Dark-Dragon had told them about. At first they could not get through his suit, but gradually they began to wear away at it, and he could feel his sides starting to bleed. Looking down, he saw the suit was now torn in several places. He wished he had his nanofiber mesh, but the instructors often stressed the point that they should not come to rely on technology. Deciding the only way to get past the seeds was to get below them, Scorp got down on all fours and began to crawl.

Soon he noticed that there seemed to be small pathways cut in the bottom of the grasses, perhaps by the passing of some kind of animal. By following these narrow passageways, he was able to move through the fields undetected, since he did not bend any blades as he passed. This must be how Dark-Dragon was able to move around so completely unseen, he thought. The Enomeg knew the area well.

Every now and then Saber-Scorpion pushed the grasses aside and stood up to survey the landscape and make sure he was headed in the right direction. One time that he did this, he saw another of the trainees standing a short distance off. Scorp recognized him from a previous training camp as someone named Daniel, though he could not remember his codename.

Suddenly Daniel fell face forward into the grass. He disappeared beneath the blades for a moment, and when he stood back up, his backpack was nowhere to be seen. He turned around, kicking at the grass and searching in all directions, but he could not seem to find it. After only a few seconds, his face and arms were cut horribly by the Ukrak seeds. Scorp instantly knew what had happened... and a few minutes later, his suspicions were confirmed as he saw Raven stand up farther off, strapping on a backpack.

"So much for honor," Scorp muttered to himself before sinking back down to continue his crawl.

Finally he reached a spot where the Ukrak blades grew shorter. He had passed into the shadow of the mesa. Scorp stood up and saw the tall rock formation looming above him, the sun behind it illuminating its edges in a halo of light. When he reached the side of the mesa, he put his hand on the rough red stone and looked straight up. The rock rose up almost as straight and featureless as a skyscraper before him. There were no discernable hand or footholds with which to climb.

He looked around and quickly spotted Seth, standing next to the mesa and strapping on a pair of climbing bracers from his backpack. Each one had a row of spikes along the side, and they sank right into the side of the mesa in only one or two strikes. The rock was apparently softer than it looked, which went contrary to what Scorp had heard about the formation of mesas. There was something quite different about this particular one, apparently.

So he needed something sharp to climb with. A quick scan of the area revealed nothing of use, so he crouched down and began digging in the sand at the foot of the mesa, looking for some long rocks... anything he could use. Finally he found something, but it was not a rock. He pulled it out and inspected it. It was a bone... probably the remnants of a meal eaten by the cliff-dwelling birds Dark-Dragon had mentioned. Still, it was quite long and sharp, and it felt strong enough as well. Taking it in one hand, point down, Scorp slammed it into the cliff. It took a few strikes, but he finally got it far enough in. Gripping it tightly, he pulled. It held his weight.

Without another moment's hesitation, he grabbed another bone and began scrambling up the cliff face as fast as he could, slamming the bones in rapidly, one after another, sticking his feet into every minor foothold that he could find. As he climbed, he kept his eyes straight up, staring over the shadowy face of the smooth red rock and the darkening sky above, never looking down to see how far he'd come. That was one trick of the trade that really worked; the other was to never stop climbing. Once you stopped, your body took the opportunity to tell you just how tired you really were.

He could make out several Enomegs around him, including Seth not far above, and Coyote and Cobra far off to his left. Scorp could not tell if he was catching up with any of them or who was nearest the top, but at least they were still in sight. He did not dare to look down and see if he was ahead of anyone. Keeping his thoughts thus occupied, he continued mercilessly on.

It was not long before his arms began to burn as if they were on fire. If only he could pause and regain his strength for a moment, he thought, then he could easily make it the rest of the way. But if he stopped now and simply hung there, he knew he'd never be able to summon up the strength to continue, and he'd be left hanging. That was when he remembered the bird nest caves. Looking around as much as he could, he saw what looked like one not far above. With all the effort he could muster, he started making his way toward it.

He also took note of the other trainees around him. Not too far off on his right, almost level with him, were Mantis and Cat, with Mantis in the lead. And just below them was Kade Gun-Barracuda. He had apparently taken a while to get to the foot of the mesa for some reason – maybe because he was too big to crawl under the grass – but now he was making amazingly rapid progress. He slammed his spikes into the cliff with only a single blow... one, two, one, two. It was so easy for him that he looked like a spider.

Scorp was about to look away, but Kade quickly caught his attention again when he suddenly reached up and grabbed Cat's leg by the ankle.

Grinning viciously, he gave it a twist and a jerk. Cat was startled and cried out as one of her climbing bracers was wrenched from the wall. She struggled now to stay clinging to the cliff, while Kade tugged at her leg from below, sneering. Cat reached down with her free hand and tried to unclamp Kade's iron grip from her foot, but it was clearly no use.

Scorp, his fatigue forgotten for the moment, suddenly found himself fighting with the terrific urge to rush to her aid. He did not know what he could do, but he felt he had to do something. They were a good way up the side of the mesa now, and a fall like that could be fatal. He felt himself almost unconsciously making his way sideways, toward the struggling figures that were silhouetted against the sky. His arms burned with the effort.

But he was too slow – for suddenly, Cat fell. Scorp quickly knew something else was afoot, however. It looked more like a gymnastics move than a natural fall, the way she arced backwards off the cliff, still holding onto Kade's wrist with one hand, her other arm held out before her. Kade's arm was twisted backwards, and his grip was torn away from the rock. He made a few desperate grabs at the wall... and then fell with a scream. Cathryn's own extended wrist slammed back into the cliff below Kade, while he fell down past her. Exhausted though he was, Scorp heard himself laugh in amazement.

But Kade recovered quickly, slamming his arms into the cliff as he fell. They dragged long cuts into the red rock until his falling body jerked to a halt, and for a second he hung limply from his bracers. Cathryn proceeded upward as fast as she could, but she had twisted one of her wrists and was clearly straining to go on. Just when she felt she could use that arm no longer, she suddenly felt someone else's hand on hers.

"Lee..." she panted, "Thank God."

But looking up, she beheld Saber-Scorpion, his blue eyes squinted and his hair whipping in the wind. He smiled. Cat stared at him for a second, then returned his smile and allowed herself to be pulled up. When she slammed her free hand into the wall next to Scorp, she felt him put his arm around her torso.

"Hold onto me," he said.

She took a deep breath. "Can you... can you make it?"

Scorp grunted. "No, but I will anyway."

Cat threw her injured arm around his neck and held on as tightly as she could as Scorp pulled his bone free and slammed it in again. Then she drew her bracer spikes out and allowed herself to be pulled up again. In this way they continued, working as one, until they heard a voice above them.

It was Lee. "Hey, up here!"

Their eyes rose toward the darkening sky, and they saw a hand flailing about above them, extending directly out of the rock wall.

Suddenly a head appeared beside it. "I found a cave! One of the bird nests, I think! Come up, and I'll pull you in!"

They both tried not to let the relief get to them, for they knew that once they did, the pain of their weary muscles would become overwhelming.

Luckily, he was not too far above them, for they were barely able to make it up. Mantis reached down and pulled them up one at a time, over the lip of the cave and inside. Then they sat there together, panting as if they had just run all the way from Xarkopolis.

Scorp slowly released his grip on the bone in his hands. As it fell to the cave floor, he noticed how the tip had been broken and worn away. It was almost no use anymore, and he marveled that he had been able to make it at all. His hands were feeling the stress too; his fingers would barely move from their gripping position... and his arms seemed to be burning with the heat of a dozen starfire engines. He felt like he'd never be able to move again.

"You've been climbing all the way up here with *that*?" Lee exclaimed incredulously. "Are you insane?"

"I didn't... didn't get any bracers..." Scorp said between breaths. "Lots of the trainees didn't... I think we were... supposed to work... to work as teams..."

"And you didn't," Lee said flatly. "You must be a complete idiot." Then he laughed. "And a spectacular one too!"

Scorp blew out a sigh. "Well, I guess... I'm with you guys now. If you're willing to help me... Otherwise I'll need to find some new bones in here..."

Lee laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Of course we'll help you," Cat said, "you crazy nut."

Scorp looked at her. Some of her hair had come loose during the struggle and was now whipping in front of her face. The soft light that was leaking into the cave served to frame her silhouette with a golden glow and light up her eyes. To a civilian on the street, she might have appeared dirty and plain, but Scorp couldn't help but wonder what she would look like if she were really cleaned up and...

He caught himself and stopped. These adolescent tendencies were supposed to have been burned out of them years ago in their training. Though the instructors didn't exactly want to discourage reproduction or the keeping of such perfect genes as the Enomegs' out of the gene pool, they also didn't want frivolous flirtations distracting them from their training. So they taught them discipline, to keep their base emotions under control. And of course, they punished any deviation from this discipline harshly.

But Scorp had never been very good at denying his emotions completely. *I really don't need a distraction like this right now*, he thought. But it was too late. He'd put his foot in.

"Okay," Scorp said, having almost forgotten his pain. "Let's go."

**THIS WAS A SAMPLE CHAPTER
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BY JUSTIN R. STEBBINS**

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