

## In the Company of My Equals

By

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“Tell me again why I have to kill this poor village idiot?” My voice was the only sound in the huge, empty arena, but I think the idiot was far enough way that he couldn’t hear me.

I already knew the official answer – it was the annual Challenge, issued for the last seventeen-hundred years or so – but I still didn’t understand why I had to *kill* the guy.

“You are defending your caste’s position,” the Administrator answered. Her gray uniform was so severe it was hard to think of her as a woman. “If you don’t, then we will have to kill you and all of your brothers.”

You don’t talk back to Admin; they’re picked, after all, by the most discriminating exams, are educated for a decade, and wield complete control over the Republic. And any Admin was considered a superior officer, even above the generals we soldiers elected from our ranks every five years.

But I talked back to this one.

“You can’t be serious. They don’t kill off all the Admin when some prole manages to pass the exam.”

“Admin,” she explained patiently, “are not clones.”

I understood then. We’re not stupid. The proles like to think we’re mindless war-machines, and we encourage them to think that since it makes our lives easier, both on-duty and off-duty (plenty of girls can’t tell the difference between scary and sexy), but we were originally selected for brains as well as brawn, character as well as reflexes. We had plenty of those, even before the gene-techs did their tricks.

The Admin kept explaining, like they always do. “If this amateur can defeat a man genetically engineered and trained from birth for combat, then logically you would expect us to adopt his template as the new genetic basis for our soldiers.”

“But isn’t he five centimeters shorter than us?”

Space suits, combat armor, vehicle controls, even med dosages are optimized to our physical size. Switching to new gear would be horrendously expensive.

“Indeed,” said the Admin, anticipating my thoughts. They were creepy like that. “So the taxpayers of the Republic would appreciate it if you didn’t lose.”

The argument was academic; I wasn’t going to lose. None of us ever had. Even though the proles have competitions to select the best among themselves to send to this challenge, and we clones just pick a soldier at random to oppose him. Never in seventeen-hundred years had we lost. A perfect genetic template and training from birth are insurmountable advantages.

Still, the conversation made me uncomfortable. I’m as pro-rational as anybody, but whatever they do to Admin at their special schools makes them more like robots

than our military training ever does. Well, not robotic, really; just a cold disregard for people's feelings whenever they talk about ugly facts.

"What's the idiot even here for?" I grumbled. "The best he can do is raise the prole's taxes. How does that help them?"

"He's not here for them. He's here for himself. After all the lessons of history, we've finally understood that the most effective way to motivate a person to productivity is through self-determination. The capitalist spirit we encourage in the economy naturally carries over into other areas."

Like I said, it's a real turn-on for the ladies. This guy probably did all right in the lady department, but if he could somehow beat me he'd be drowning in starlets and supermodels.

"He has the desire to see his own face stamped across the centuries as the image of power and strength, regardless of the cost to society," added the Admin. "Proles' concept of collective good is necessarily compromised by their focus on self-achievement. That is why we let them run everything but the government."

I'd heard this before, of course. The history of chaos, and the cure called Admin, are drilled into Clones and proles from birth. Even their own kids get the same propaganda, which probably explains why they're such sour-pusses all the time. I say propaganda, but only because I wanted to show off my education. Really, I think of it as the truth. I've met plenty of people, proles *and* clones, who bitch about Admin policies, but I've never met anyone who had a better idea. I've never even met anyone who wanted their job. Admin is open to anyone who qualifies, but half the reason it's so hereditary is because no prole wants to work that hard for that little reward. Plenty of Admin kids turn down the responsibility, too, slipping away into prole society to enjoy a life of mindless holovision, mind-altering drugs, mind-blowing sex, and general decadence.

Not that I have anything against those things. But my training has taught me that they are best enjoyed in moderation, from a position of strength, duty, and discipline. Like all my brothers, I had at one point or another overindulged and discovered the law of diminishing returns. A few beers with the boys off-duty is great, but twice as many aren't anywhere near twice as great.

Of course, clones occasionally reject the heritage that had been won for them, too. One of the guys from my birth-company never made it through basic. He never really tried to pass the exams. And when we tried to help him, he told us to get lost. Then one day, he just wasn't there anymore.

No, they didn't do anything horrible to him. By ordinary standards, at least. They gave him cosmetic surgery so he wouldn't look like us and sent him to some job-training school. Now he's a prole, just like the rest of them, probably stoned silly every night with little prole brats running around screaming at his prole wife. I'd rather take a fusion grenade in the belly.

There are always a few failures. It's enough to make you think there really is something more to a man than his genes and his environment, but we keep that kind of talk to ourselves. If Admin heard it, they would start lecturing us about mysticism.

And I'd rather do a hundred laps than listen to an Admin lecture. Which, coincidentally, was exactly what was going to save me from this particular sermon. I saluted and dismissed myself before the Admin could expound further on the politics of

Planet Dullsylvania.

"It's not a race," the Sergeant told me while I stretched out my legs. I already knew this, of course, but he'd done the Challenge himself many years ago, so I tolerated his well-meant but unnecessary advice. I didn't know him personally – I mean, I didn't know the nickname his buddies had given him – but like all of us he wore his ID badge. We pretend it's an Admin rule, but we do all look alike, even to each other. Sure, you learn to recognize guys from your unit by shaving scars, a slightly crooked nose, a unique way of pronouncing a word, or a favorite joke, but even in a place as ordinary as the mess-hall it's easy to make a mistake.

"I know it's just an endurance drag," I answered. "Get us nice and tired before the competition starts, just to weed out the obvious losers."

"Don't underestimate him," cautioned the Sergeant. "When I was starting my comp, they told me the same thing. I didn't believe them, and I know you don't believe me. But I gotta say it, just like it was said to me."

"It's okay," I told him. We're pretty big on tradition. It's something we were originally selected for.

The prole was already at the starting line, waiting for me. I grinned inside because I knew this meant he must be nervous. This was my first close look at him. Sure, his face had been all over the hologrid, but like all my brothers, I hadn't deigned to actually pay attention. He was what the girls would call good-looking, I guess. Of course, the only face I was really comfortable around was my own. It was hard to tell how old he was. Proles tend to age quickly from all that debauchery, but at the same time they carry themselves like juveniles. But he didn't look used-up or untested.

The one thing I could tell was that he hated me. I didn't know why, and I didn't care. It was my job to defeat him, crush his spirit, beat him silly, and then kill him. The fact that he already hated me just made it easier.

"It's not a race," announced the Admin. "You have two hours to complete the course. Completing it early will not affect your score." Then she fired her flash-gun into the air.

I don't know why they started races like that. I used to think it was to acclimatize us to energy weapon discharges, but the prole didn't flinch. Obviously he'd been around enough of them. We set out at a leisurely pace, matching each other, egging each other to be the first one to start pushing. If you let the competitive spirit get to your head, you'd soon be running faster than you should.

On the other hand, running *behind* the prole was a lot harder than I had expected. It was one thing to let a brother take the lead, but this was a grav-bike of a different color, as I discovered when he pushed a few feet ahead of me. But I was a good soldier. Discipline comes first, and I stuck to my own best pace.

After a lap he dropped back beside me.

"You should be in front," he said.

I wasn't going to be baited into whatever head-game he was playing.

"Your legs are longer. Your optimum time is about two minutes less than mine."

You know I had to respond to that. Keeping quiet isn't in my nature. I earned the nickname "Mouth" for a reason.

"Then *you* should be *behind* me," I said.

A grin flashed across his face, before he remembered he hated me. Then he

looked straight ahead, and we spent the next two hours in silence, as he slowly fell behind me a few feet every lap.

It was a boring two hours, around a boring tarmac circle, with nothing and nobody to look at. For security reasons, the only people in the arena were me, him, the Sergeant, and the Admin. Even the medics were outside, watching us through the hundreds of floating holocams buzzing around the arena. But the holofeeds only led out, and none of my brothers would be watching them, so there was nothing there for me.

When it was over, the Sergeant brought me a cool, wet towel and a bottle of water. Technically, he was Security, but in reality he was my advocate, there to watch out for any cheating or unfairness. The Admin was the prole's advocate, even though we soldiers were Admin's servants. Admin was like that: capable of taking sides against their own.

Sarge had nothing to say to me, so we just watched the Admin holding the prole's towel while he drank some water. It was a strange sight. But the prole seemed to take no notice of it. At first I thought he was unflappable, but after a while I decided he was spoiled. He was some kind of big-shot favorite in the prole world. He probably thought he was better than Admin.

We lined up for the next event.

"This *is* a race," the Admin said. "The winner will earn one point towards the final event."

One point wasn't enough to buy you a pointed stick. I was prepared to let him win this one; he was smaller than me, after all, and could move faster for less energy. No point in exhausting myself this early.

We took off from the starting gun with alacrity this time. He tried to fool me by running a little slow, thinking that once I got a good distance ahead I would relax my guard. I fooled him back by playing along. If he wanted to turn this into a sprint battle at the very end, I was ready for it. I might be bigger, but I had bigger legs, too. We kept ratcheting up the effort as we got closer to the end. By the time we came around the final corner, we were both going hard. Some reflexive instinct warned me when he started his final sprint and so I started mine. He actually passed me, briefly, but then the same math must have caught up to him. It was too early to burn reserves for too small a gain.

We wound up crossing the line at the same time.

The Admin shrugged off the split-second difference. "A tie – no points."

Fine by me. I preferred a zero-point challenge. The prole stared at me, and when he realized I wasn't upset about the result, something changed in his face.

"He was trying to sting you," Sarge said. "He thinks we're so proud we have to win every single event."

I shrugged. "The last one is the only one that matters."

Sarge glowed with approval, and I admit that made me feel good inside.

The curtains around the inner track were coming down on their automatic lifts to reveal the obstacle course. We knew all about what would be in there: hurdles, ditches, walls, rough terrain, a rope, and a double-G incline. We just didn't know how many or in what order.

"For every thirty seconds you win this event by, you will earn one point." Rules required her to repeat the rules. And for Admin, rules were everything

I'll spare you the gritty details: all that matters is I stumbled across the final line twenty-nine seconds after he did.

"One point for the Challenger," Admin said.

I could tell the prole was angry. He had expected at least three points from that. He had really put the burn on and was still panting from it when we walked to the next event.

This time it was my turn. Carrying around my extra height and ten kilos of muscle had been a handicap in those running events, but now that we were lifting weight, they would be an advantage.

But the little guy was made of more solid material than I expected. After flipping giant bars of iron, stacking huge stones, dead-lifting a grav-bike, and carrying a hundred kilos of potatoes (the traditional equivalent of a wounded soldier) four hundred meters, I only earned one point on him.

"This kid is good," I admitted, while Sarge towed me off.

"Ya, well, it's been his dream his whole life, since he first found out he couldn't be a soldier when he was still in short pants. And his parents were rich enough to indulge him. He's been in training since he was six."

I had been in training since I was six, too, but only to make the grade, not to beat the odds.

The next event was shooting. I figured they scheduled this event early on purpose, before we had generated enough animosity to try and waste each other while we had a loaded flasher. We stood back-to-back while targets popped up in the arena. I knew he had more practice at this than I did – after all, the government has to pay for our ammunition – but I still figured I had an edge. Some of the targets represented civilians, and toasting one of them was as bad as missing three live ones. The hypnotherapy I had received meant I was very unlikely to fry a civvy.

And I didn't. But I did miss three targets, including an unbelievable scenario involving a flying baby, a dog, and a combat-droid disguised as a beach ball. I wasn't disappointed; it was a good score for a clone, and that should have been above any prole.

But the brat had made that beach ball, and now he was up two points on me.

"Just dumb luck," Sarge assured me.

Consoles slid up from the floor in front of us, along with a command chair. Of all the events, this one made me the most nervous. I wasn't weak in tac-com, but the first thing you learn in tactics class is that things can always go wrong in unexpected ways. Dumb luck really could pay off here.

Sarge's arms were crossed in disapproval, too. "I hate this event. It doesn't reflect the real situation where you've got to work with other soldiers."

"But that would hardly be fair," Admin said. "The Challenger can't be expected to provide a team of brothers he's trained with his entire life."

"Isn't that part of what makes us good soldiers?" I asked. "Camaraderie, teamwork, how well we play with others?"

"That part," Admin said, "we can provide. As long as the gene template isn't warped toward the anti-social, and we've already tested him for that."

Meaning prole-boy was a regular guy with regular buddies out there in the real world. They were probably watching him right now, unlike my brothers. This irony

almost made me think of him as a real person. Almost.

He hit me hard and fast, sending destroyers around my starboard flank. I didn't panic, just put two battlecruisers in their path. They would take a beating, sure, but they would hold the line while the rest of my fleet annihilated his center. Without those destroyers, his capital ships were going to be swarm-bait for my fighters.

Watching the little explosions on their hulls, I had to remind myself they were just simulations, not real clones fighting and dying for the victory of their brothers. His center was falling back, leaving his handful of dreadnaughts to take all the heat. This was not a clever delaying tactic like mine. I could afford to lose two cruisers, but he could not afford to lose those dreads. Without them he had virtually no chance. My fighters and small ships dove in for the kill while my capitals pounded them from afar. He had about thirty seconds left in this game. I could sense Sarge shaking his head in disbelief as the amateur threw away the battlefield.

When it happened, I wasn't sure what it was. His dreads all blew at once, filling the holo with a huge ball of white fire. Too huge. My fighters, which should have been pulling away to safety when they detected his anti-matter containment fields falling, were caught in the blast. So were my destroyers and missile-boats.

Sarge growled. "That can't be legal."

"Please don't interfere in the event," Admin chastised him.

It hit me like a punch to the stomach. The prole had self-destructed his dreads. He had left them out there as a trap, and when I had fallen for it, had blown them up on purpose, dropping their containment fields instantly on full loads of anti-matter. Ten thousand men on each dread, consigned to oblivion on a gamble. Had anything gone wrong, he would have lost the battle for certain. No sane commander could have taken such a risk, and at such an expense.

I fought on, but the cause was lost. Now his carriers came roiling in, and without my small ships or fighters, I fed the swarm. My dreads made him pay a fearful cost, smashing everything they touched, but eventually the thousand wasp stings broke apart their integrity and they collapsed into fireballs of chaos, consumed by their own fuel supplies. I did not have a chance to pull the same trick on him, even if I wanted to, since he never committed enough ships to point-blank attack. Of course, holding them back instead of going in for a quick kill cost him even more casualties in the long run, but it won him the battle.

I was sick and trembling by the end.

"It's not that bad," Sarge said. "He took so many casualties it's hardly any victory." But it wasn't the loss that made me ill; it was the cavalier sacrifice of good men. Yes, I know they were only simulations, but that was not the point.

I raised my objections to Admin. "It's not a valid tactic. The morale effects on the rest of his fleet would be debilitating."

"What rest of the fleet?" the prole said. "The parameters of this contest only included this battle and this fleet."

"It was a tactically unacceptable risk!"

"Which is why *you* did not take it," said the Admin. "The Challenger is gambling only for advancement, and possibly his life; you are fighting for your brothers' lives."

This stark fact hung in the air. I realized then that I did not hate the prole. But I also knew that when it came time to kill him, I would do so without compunction.

“Three points for the Challenger.” As Sarge had said, he had racked up so many casualties that his victory was cheapened. I wasn’t worried; it took twenty points to buy a flasher for the final event.

“I must caution both of you that any illegal moves in the wrestling event will earn your opponent points. The goal is to pin your opponent, not secretly cripple him.”

I had height and weight on him. Also, my loud mouth had earned me extra wrestling lessons while growing up in the barracks. He pulled off one arm-lock, but other than that I racked up three pins in short order, winning the match and a point.

The downside was if he had any sympathy for my cause, it had been drained out of him by the constant contact of his head against the mat. Not that I cared what he thought anymore.

The penultimate event was the one I hated the most. Blindfolded, we had to move across broken terrain full of pits and obstacles, assemble a plasma gun, program a security check-station, and fry a dozen-egg omelet. We accomplished this by orders fed into our ears from a computer. If you don’t hate something like that, you aren’t human.

I picked up another point in this one. There weren’t a lot of points to be gained from it; they just wanted to make sure you could follow orders. I had a lot more practice at that than the prole, but he managed well enough.

Admin announced the final score. “Four points for the Champion, seven points for the Challenger.” Not exactly the odds I had expected. Usually it was five or more points in our favor.

Admin addressed me. “Since you have the lowest score, you have the option. Will you let the scores stand before the final challenge, or would you like to subtract your score from his?”

This was a no-brainer. I had been looking forward to a zero-point challenge; the closer the better.

“Subtract,” I said without hesitation.

The prole was not happy. Seven points would have bought him a sword against the mace my four would have bought. But three points only bought the proverbial pointed stick.

All I would have was my bare hands, but I wasn’t afraid. With a spear, he had exactly one chance, one lunge, and then it was hand-to-hand. We already knew who would win that.

“At this time, the Challenger may choose to withdraw without prejudice. Do you wish to withdraw?” Admin was giving the kid every chance to walk out of here alive. It wasn’t fair: he could quit, no matter how bad he was losing, but I had to carry the livelihood of my brothers on my back. But then, life wasn’t fair. It was just life.

“For the good of the Republic, it is my duty to improve the quality of our military defenses. No, I do not wish to withdraw.”

If I had any sympathy left for him, it would have been evaporated by that arrogance. *Improve this, prole*, I thought savagely, and we went into the hall for the final match.

I stretched out a bit, while the kid swung his spear around. He wasn’t even trying to hide his training, just like I wasn’t hiding my confidence. We were both out of deceptions.

“Just so you know – I ain’t worried,” Sarge told me. “They call me ‘Rocky,’ on

account of my being too stupid to worry.”

“They called me ‘Mouth,’” I told him. “But after this, they better call me ‘Sir’.”

It’s an old joke. Something about how in the old days people who were better than everyone else were called “Sir.” Now we only use it to put uppity brothers in their place.

It made us both smile.

Admin called us to the edges of the ring, a circle marked out in steel.

“Once again I offer you the chance to withdraw.” Admin spoke the words because she had to. We both ignored them.

“As soon as you step inside the ring, the field will be activated. Stepping back across this line will result in an immediate and fatal discharge of energy to the offender.” This was another kindness to the challengers. Throwing them through the field is more humane than choking them out or breaking their necks. “The field will not be lowered until one of you is dead. Other than that, there are no rules.”

I stepped into the ring. Prole-boy looked at the cameras and had the ill manners to actually grin. Then he stepped casually into the ring, and I felt the field activate at my back.

We circled for a bit, me keeping my distance from his steel point. He was fast; my chances of intercepting a lunge were not exactly great. On the other hand, if I did he was in serious trouble. This was the math both of us understood.

He could have chosen to wait, to force me to charge, but he didn’t have that much patience. Probably he was too busy thinking about all the women that would be waiting for him after he killed me.

But I had the patience of a sub-light freighter.

Every time he pushed at me, I circled. I wasn’t going to walk backwards into the field. On the other hand, I stayed reasonably close to the line. If he ran at me and missed, he had to worry about running too far. So instead he did the only thing he could. He took a deep step and lunged.

I cross-stepped, circling the other way, and threw my hands into an X-block, seeking the deadly tip and the safe shaft of wood behind it. But he fooled me. Once it was real blood on the line, he wasn’t quite so ready to throw everything away on a single cast. His thrust went low, below the danger-line, and the point sank into my thigh just above the knee.

The pain meant nothing to me except a signal guiding me to the location of the spear. I grabbed down, catching it, not retreating as he had expected. For a brief instant we wrestled with the spear, its point cutting and digging into my flesh, and then it was askew and I closed the gap.

The spear was now a hindrance, and we both released it at the same time. Hand-to-hand we grappled, until my wounded leg failed me and we went to the ground, sliding in my blood. Burning all of my reserves, for I had nothing left to save for, I crushed him like a bad pretzel. He fought with skill, strength, and spirit, but inch by inch he bent to my will. When I shifted my grip for the last time, choking up on his arm, preparing to break his spine against my knee, we both knew it was over.

And then my hand slipped. His arm, coated in my blood, slid away. A quick reversal, the terrible sound of breaking bone, and I lay on the mat, my arm broken instead of his, my fate sealed instead of his. He staggered to his spear, picked it up in



disbelief, raised it in triumph, and stared down at me.

In that final moment I saw no pity in his eyes. But then, there would have been none in mine. A blinding light passed before my eyes, and I marveled that death should be like this.

The smoking corpse of the prole fell over backward.

Stunned, I swung my head around to find the Sarge. But he was as open-mouthed as I, his flasher safely in its holster. No dishonor there.

It was the Admin who had her gun out.

The field whined and died. The holocams began to retreat.

“Let me be the first to congratulate you on a marvelous victory.” Admin was talking, but for once the words made no sense to me. “Of course, irony had its part: if the Challenger had not slipped in your blood, you never could have thrown him into the field like that. Still, it was a brilliant feat. You should watch the slow-mo holos of it as soon as possible. As many times as necessary.”

“You’re faking it?” Sarge said, incredulous. “You’re broadcasting digi-fixed video? And you think you can get away with it?”

“Why do you think there are no live spectators? This is the seventh time this century we have had to fix a fight.”

“But...why?” I had lost. We had lost. The prole was better than me – than us. The random fluctuations of nature had outdone science’s best efforts.

“If Admin announced that all current clones were to be terminated, what do you think the chances are that they would revolt and overthrow the government?”

“We are loyal to our vows.” The fact that his flasher had not left its holster was not insignificant.

“No charge of disloyalty is intended, Sergeant, but the risk is unacceptably high. While individuals can be trusted to keep their word, it is simply too much to ask of an institution.”

“So the Challenge – just a sham to keep the proles satisfied?” If my voice was bitter, it was because all of my cherished ideals of honor and place had just been flashed out of existence.

The Admin shrugged her shoulders. “One of the things they insist on.” She lowered her flasher, but I already knew she wasn’t going to kill us. She wouldn’t have bothered talking to us otherwise.

I still had sour words to say, though. “And by letting us live, you buy our obeisance. A reminder that we owe our place to you. Not because destiny made us the best, but because the State raised us to power.”

“Such is the truth of every warrior, for all of history, no matter what delusions they told themselves to the contrary.” The Admin sounded sad, if you can believe that. “The needs of the State always trump the morals of the individual. A man called Machiavelli once recognized that, many eons ago, but I don’t think the knowledge made him any happier than it has you.”

“I – I don’t know if I can lie,” Sarge stammered.

“It’s only for a little while,” the Admin said. “We’ll arrange for a disability and early retirement for you. A cottage on an out-of-the-way moon – for health reasons.”

“And me?” Not that I really cared. The best part of me had already died in that brief flash of light.

“There’s really only one career left to a man without illusions,” she told me. “Let me be the first to welcome you to Admin.”