



**SEX WORLD 2:**  
**GUARDIAN**

Loose Id

**LENA AUSTIN**

## Praise for the writing of Lena Austin

### *Sex World 1: Assassin*

From the first paragraph, Lena Austin grabs you by the hand and takes you on a journey that includes an imaginative world, a variety of sex, a life and death struggle with a suitably villainous villain, and heart in your throat suspense.

-- Catherine H., *Novelspot*

I found the characters in this book to be fascinating and complex. The action and intrigue is outstanding. Ms. Austin has written a wonderful tale of love between these two characters. I could not put this book down until I finished and learned the outcome between these two characters.

-- Laura, *Enchanted in Romance*

Ms. Austin has written a terrific tale of love, sex and intrigue that I enjoyed greatly. She is a multi-talented author with a very creative imagination. I highly recommend this story to anyone who enjoys futuristic storylines and is interested in reading about same sex relationships.

-- Susan White, *Coffee Time Romance*

The characters are amazingly real, from Sumner's torment to Helen's shyness to Paris's confidence. I enjoyed every moment of this book, from the deadly serious to the irreverent bits of comedy. *Sex World: Assassin* shows that Ms. Austin's deft touch at creating amazingly real universes isn't limited to fantasy, but can turn a fine hand at the future as well.

-- MB, *Romance Junkies*

*Sex World 1: Assassin* is now available from Loose Id.

# SEX WORLD 2: GUARDIAN

Lena Austin

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This book contains substantial explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable (ménage, homoerotic sex).

# **Sex World 2: Guardian**

**Lena Austin**

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## Chapter One

The whole planet of Elysium gave him the creeps. Too perfect, too clean, even for a pastoral world settled by starry-eyed idealists without a grain of sense. He liked order and logic, but this made his skin crawl.

Chance Hesperus inched further up the hill, crawling through the tall, yellow grass-like foliage that made the planet such a popular tourist destination. The sweet fragrance made by his passage ticked his nostrils, and he snuffled back a sneeze as quietly as he could. Any loud sound now would cause his death.

There was the true horror of this seeming paradise of waving golden grass, perfect blue-green sky, and whispering breezes just like a prairie on Old Earth before the apocalypses almost five hundred years ago. Like a poisoned flower with a sweet scent, this place irresistibly drew humans to their doom.

He doubted the planetary oligarch truly grasped the problem. According to the data Chance could gather, the oligarch of this world preferred to keep his feet in the mud and his head in the sand. They actually used plows and domesticated animals on this backwater, for Guard's sake, instead of carefully programmed and managed automation. All in some idiotic attempt to go "back to nature."

Chance shook his head slowly, so as not to attract any unwanted attention. He wouldn't be here now if his best comptroller hadn't decided to take his whole family on a pastoral vacation and never returned. That's when the report had caught Chance's eye. Many tourists disappeared on this world. Not enough to cause a huge stir, just enough to be an anomaly, especially when the planetary government refused to do anything about it. Whole families just didn't vanish without a reason.

He stole a glance at the recreational flitter he'd left back at the bottom of this hilly area. He could just make out Tara, sunbathing in her role as his paid companion. Earlier, she'd been indulging in the ancient art of painting on canvas. No one would ever suspect she wasn't a low-level sex engineer but a highly trained communications tech. Her ear buds were probably giving her a constant stream of data instead of music, and that entertainment reader on her lap was no such thing. He appreciated her efficiency, as well as her beauty.

They'd even had a good sexual encounter, just to ensure she'd have physical evidence on her body if she were caught. He also appreciated that effort on her part, knowing she preferred her own gender and wore the butterfly tattoo of her lifemate on her lower belly.

Chance rolled over on his side to pull out his standard-issue fauna scanner. He wasn't doing his job just musing like this. He wore the beige canvas jumpsuit and hiking boots of a life form hobbyist. The recorder around his neck contained a few captured images of his supposed last visit to Jeti 3. There were no images of life forms recorded from this world yet.

He took out a special cloth and cleaned the lenses of his scanner before putting it to his eyes. That was just the problem. There wasn't any fauna larger than an insect. No avians, no mammals disturbed in the grass by his passing, nothing but the domesticated beasts in their pasture two hills over. The stench of their spoor was enough to chase off anything with olfactory senses, but it just didn't seem right not to see anything.

Nothing but the weather-beaten, oddly isolated farm below. Oddly isolated in the tiny cup valley, the house and barn sat at the back near a thin trickle of liquid -- possibly even real water -- that flowed down a rock face and formed a tiny stream leading out of the valley.



The main house was an odd combination of basic colonist unit mixed with a halfhearted attempt at clapboard siding, straight out of the history dataspoils. The barn to the left was all clapboard, with no windows or other apertures other than the main doors and an odd cupola with ventilation louvers. No hayloft opening, no windows for animals to poke their heads out for a bit of light and air. The only other building was a small, round structure near the edge of the cleared area, where the semblance of a road began. Chance would have sworn it was a gun turret.

“‘Curiouser and curiouser,’ said Alice,” Chance muttered under his breath. Having satisfied himself that the little farm was indeed odd, he wriggled back down the hill to sit in the shade of a large conifer. This was the area, all right. His last communication from Jeter had described this place and the odd farm while he and his family had a -- what had he called it? -- oh, yeah, picnic. Many of the other missing persons had mentioned camping or day trips to this vicinity.

He brought out a sandwich and ate it while lying on his back in the grasses. This was the end of the growing season, and the farm below should be crawling with workers while foodstuffs were prepared for transportation to processing plants. The fields had already been harvested and were clean as a sterilized medical facility. Not even stalks on the ground.

Chance sat up, snatched up his viewers, and crawled back up the hill. Too clean, that was the problem. Other farms in the area still had the stubby remains of stalks in the ground and were littered with other harvest remains. He scanned the fields and barn area. Nothing. He could have eaten off that tarmac where flitters outfitted for hauling harvests should be lined up.

He started the careful crawl back down to the remains of his meal. He knew he shouldn't move so much, but damn, this place deserved as many observations as he could make for his report. The defaults were clear. This wasn't a working farm like all the others, though some attempt had been made to make it appear it was. Where had the foodstuffs gone? Where were the people?

Chance glanced at the setting sun. It was time to go back and tell Tara to send a report. His nerves sang with the feeling of danger. He glanced back up the hill, where the lowering sun made his trail in the grass into a shadowy line anyone could follow. He'd been clumsy, but it couldn't be helped now.

He took a route that led him through a rocky area to avoid any more traces that could be picked up with low-tech equipment. It would take a sniffer or infrared to follow him now.

The heat of the day was ending, and a large clump of purplish-green bushes beckoned. He'd rest there before taking the rest of the slow, careful journey back. Chance didn't mind sweating, but allowing the suit to dry and air out would only be polite before approaching Tara.

He could see her clearly from this position. She got up, stretched, and moved back into the flitter. If he were lucky, she'd be programming their dinner. The sandwich hadn't gone far enough in satisfying his hunger, and his stomach complained loudly.

A loud slam echoed across the hills. From his position in the bushes, Chance couldn't see the exact location it came from, but he could clearly see the nude people boil out from around the hill. Six persons, each armed with some wicked-looking firearm, surrounded the flitter before he could snatch up his communicator and warn Tara. He hit the emergency button anyway, praying the alarm would be enough to alert her to danger.

Next came his image recorder. He'd need evidence of violent behavior and infringement of freedom to show to the government forces. He put it to his eye and hit record.

One of the nude figures, a large female with short dark hair, gestured to two others on either side of her. They responded, and Chance got it all on film. Whatever their silent language was, it reminded him of the hand signals used by the deaf he'd seen in the historical dataspools.

One needle-gun shot popped from one of the small flitter windows as soon as the large female touched the door handle. Obviously, Tara had taken his warning to heart.

Chance grinned as the large female went down, out for the count with a tranquilizer dart in her face. Her body now blocked the flitter entrance. He chuckled softly to himself. "Whoever said net heads couldn't fight didn't meet Tara." He kept filming.

Another pop of the needle-gun rang out, and another of the nude figures, this time a male, went down. The others reacted quickly, shoved the body of the large female out of the way, and stormed the flitter en masse. Tara got another one before the three remaining made it inside.

One shot rang out, then silence.

Chance hunkered down in the bushes and hung his head for a moment before getting back to his job of filming. Despite his fear and anger over Tara's death, he'd have his revenge if he could get away from this mess.

Two of the nude figures crawled out of the flitter, carrying Tara's limp body between them as if she weighed nothing and meant nothing more than a package. There was a black mark in the center of her pink shirt. They carried her off in the direction of the farm and out of sight.

The third attacker exited the vehicle, but did not follow the others. The male's gaze scanned the area, his weapon at the ready and his face as cold as the breeze now ruffling the dust of the valley.

Chance curled his lip in disgust. The male had an erection. He probably got off on killing the innocent tourist. Chance put away his recorder and pulled out his maui pistol. "You, I can do something about," he snarled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Galen Faust waited patiently until the instruments showed signs of life in the lovely captive female. He grinned to himself at the thought of putting her in the orgy chamber, properly hyped on the hormones until she was just a wriggling bundle of lust. He rubbed his forefinger and thumb together and considered enjoying a little respite in the chamber himself before his rest period began.

The workers had removed the damaged pink shirt that had been her only clothing. Her nipples were a lovely shade of pinkish brown, and stretch marks on her belly marked her as a female who'd already bred. Galen could have danced for joy at the thought of a proven female, especially one with pretty insect artwork tattooed on her lower belly.

The display chimed, signaling a change in her breathing and heart rate. Delightful. He'd been so concerned the stingers might have actually harmed her. Still, she didn't move or open her eyes, canny one that she was. He did so love the intelligent ones.

"You can open your eyes, female. The display says you're aware." He hoped his coaxing and gentle tone would tell her she was in no danger.

She opened her wary brown eyes slowly and studied the darkened room around her. A small frown creased her forehead at the sight of the equipment wall of the security room. The wrinkle deepened when she noted the metal ankle restraints locking her securely to the table.

Galen put out his hand slowly so as not to frighten her. They were always so pitifully jumpy when they first were brought in, these wild humans. The males had reason to fear, but never the females. Those his people needed desperately. "Would you like to sit up? Perhaps you're thirsty?"

She sat up immediately, without taking his hand, and followed his gesture to the assortment of refreshment beverages. Her little pink tongue wet her dry lips. "Yes, if you drink some first."

Galen laughed and poured himself his personal favorite, a squeezed citrus drink. He saluted her and sipped, being careful to let her see him swallow. Then he handed the cup to her. "See? Nothing to fear. The stinger always leaves a person with a throat like dried leaves. Drink up. This citrus drink should restore your tissues."

She took a small sip and closed her eyes as the drink slid down her throat. Then she drained the glass and held it up for a refill.

Galen grinned and obliged her, again taking his swallow to prove no ill effects. Not that the drug inside would harm him. It only worked on females. He passed it back to her. "You may have as much as you wish. What's your name, if I may ask?"

"Tara. What's yours?"

Good. The drug was making her compliant and friendly. "Dr. Galen Faust. We'll eat in a little bit. I hope you like proteins."

She grinned and handed the glass back. "Yes, I do. Thanks. I'm starved."

By then end of her third glass, she was trembling, and the scent of aroused female filled Galen's nostrils. He was grateful for the lab coat covering his erection, aching at the smell alone. Only when she was mindless with lust would he dump the restrictive covering.

When she passed the glass back, she noted her shaking hand. Her eyes grew round. "What have you done to me?"

He caressed her cheek and then patted her hand. "It's only a sexual hormone, dear. I do hope you like orgies. Welcome to the breeding population of the hive."

## Chapter Two

Chance snatched the pencil file from the slot as soon as the chime rang. Rage made his hand shake, and he concentrated to eliminate the telltale sign of emotion by staring at the simple metallic tube until his eyes watered. No matter how great his anger and guilt, he could not be seen displaying any impolite emotions in public. Most especially, he dared not be emotional when he appeared before the UCP Security Committee in just a few minutes. “Thank you, Uncle.”

“You’re welcome, Chance. May I commend you on the correct amount of chill in your voice? Would you like me to send a calmativ to your catering slot?” Uncle’s voice never wavered from the cool neutrality he’d achieved long before Chance had been born.

He considered the option and relaxed his death grip on the pencil file. He was a Spartan, born and bred. His mother would be appalled to see him like this, and that thought stiffened his spine more than any drug. “No, thank you, Uncle. I wish to be in full command of myself when I speak before the committee.”

“I suggest you catch one of the lifts within the next five minutes, then. A sporting event on one of the upper levels will finish very shortly, causing long waits. Don’t bother thanking me. I don’t want you to become angry again and lose this assignment.”

Nodding, Chance tucked the file in the breast pocket of his pale blue Spartan singlet and ducked out of his room. He punched the elevator codes to grant him access to the lower levels of the UCP governing planetoid and was pleased when the lift doors opened immediately.

During the short ride down, he had plenty of time to review his escape from Elysium in the recreational flitter, and the images now recorded on the tube in his pocket. He had the proof he needed that people were dying on Elysium and proof of the oligarch's negligence. With all the other data he'd collected, it was clear there was a cover-up. "Why" was something he wanted to find out, even if he had to go back alone. What he needed now was the one thing only the UCP could grant -- the right to kill.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn breathed a sigh of relief when she entered the committee chamber and found she was the first one there. Her role as casual guardian of the members of the committee would soon be over, as the regular guardian had recovered from her wounds after the last assassination attempt.

She ran her hands over the sleek secretarial electronics station in a farewell caress. "I'm going to miss you," she muttered. Strange how she'd grown to like the machine and the work.

Even stranger that a barbarian colonist from a primeval world like hers would find herself here on the UCP planetoid, seeing to the comfort and safety of the elite. Even if she did have to wear the strangest clothes to be in fashion.

Dawn checked her skirt and body paint, afraid she might have smudged the artistry. Who'd have thought she could look like a mermaid? Well, that was the talent of the body-paint artists of the wealthy. The combs in her blonde curls were made with real pearls and worth a year's income even without the special modifications that made them weapons.

Well, that was the point. She looked like some oligarch's fluff-and-feathers secretary, and that's why she ran the station here. Her baby face and outfit made many think she didn't have the brains necessary to find her ass with both hands, despite the intense training necessary to run any secretarial electronics.

Dawn smiled wickedly and checked the rest of the weapons hidden on her person or in the desk's panels. Several assassins had found out the hard way not to ignore her. She was sure all would recover eventually, enough to stand trial.

The doors to the chamber snapped open, and Dawn's jaw almost repeated their movement. She moved to sit on the booth chair and pretended to be busy running a service check while she studied the newcomer.

A male wearing a Spartan military service singlesuit, with dark, shoulder-length hair and blue eyes that matched the pale blue of his uniform perfectly, strode in. In fact, everything about him was perfect, down to the creases in his uniform.

But that was what Spartans were known for -- near perfection. Cool, unemotional intellect that made every female human long to shred the facade and get to the barbaric male beneath.

Dawn kept her grin purely internal. She'd had a few Spartan clients and knew from personal experience there was indeed a primal male beneath the icy Spartan exterior. Their convention that it was improper to show emotions in public meant they were lovely beasts in private.

The man under her scrutiny marched three steps full of feline grace and chose one of the chairs around the massive round table. He pulled a pencil file from his breast pocket and inserted it into the table for the usual security check before display. Then he sat back and stared off into the cosmos.

While her secretarial system warmed up and opened the necessary files for this session, Dawn continued to keep an eye on the Spartan. The security recognitions at the door had



passed him, and her query as to his identity returned with a Need to Know flag. Probably Intelligence Corps. Well, there was hope for Ice Man yet if he was I-Corps. Maybe he'd be willing to indulge ...

“You're staring.”

The low, masculine comment caused Dawn to jump like she'd taken a maser shot. Her cheeks flooded with embarrassment. “Forgive me, Citizen. I cannot find identification authorizing you to attend this meeting. Will you state your ID and business for the record?” She toggled the record button and waited.

His pale blue gaze bore into her. “Voiceprint identification, please. Name given is Chance Hesperus. Stated purpose is to report on missing persons on Elysium.”

The secretarial board lit with a green Confirmed. Dawn nodded her satisfaction and turned off the recording. “Thank you, Citizen.”

The security committee members shuffled in from either of the two entrances as they chose, greeting Chance like an old friend.

Dawn stifled her wish to invite Chance to a rousing game on the holodeck after the meeting. If he was I-Corps, her best bet was to make her invitation through the UCP computer system anyway, to preserve the identity he was using this mission. With a purely internal sigh, she toggled the recording back on as soon as the members were seated and prepared for a long session guaranteed to cure insomnia.

She was dead wrong. Chance's recording of the killing of his tech assistant at the hands of unknown assailants on Elysium, coupled with the overwhelming documentation, proved at least one thousand hapless tourists had gone missing and the evidence they'd ever been on Elysium had been erased with maximum efficiency.

Chance presented a good case. Something would have to be done, but when he requested authorization to return to the planet alone for further investigation, the committee chairman held up a hand.

The old man shook his head regretfully. "I know what you're going to ask for, Chance. You're going to want a license to kill. You can have that under the usual limited circumstances, but you can't go in alone." His watery gaze slid around until it fell on Dawn. He cleared his throat. "You're too valuable for that. I insist on a guardian."

The war of emotions on Chance's face was subtle, but easy to read for a sex engineer of Dawn's training. Ice Man he wasn't, after all. "My last partner died."

His reminder to the committee ground out between clenched teeth, but didn't phase the chairman. He waved his hand dismissively. "Yes, you made that abundantly clear. You also made it clear that the majority of the missing persons were females of any age from birth to their fifth decade. Males who turned up missing were always in the company of at least one female in that age bracket." He steepled his hands and thought for a moment. "I'm going to hazard a guess and say if you want to find out anything, you're going to need a female guardian to act as bait."

Chance launched into an argument, citing concerns for the safety of any partner.

Dawn saw where this was leading, even if Chance didn't. She called up what was available from Chance's report and queried the Sex Engineer Facility's main computer on Maxim. Helen would tell her much more, and she was unsurprised to see the red flag of secure material come up on her screen. On cue, the notation of possible reassignment flashed for three seconds, probably triggered by her query. Whatever was going on, it wasn't good.

Well, hip deep in trouble was where she preferred to be, and what little information she had right now indicated it all fell into the category of "difficult and dangerous." If she'd been alone, she'd have whooped a little celebration in honor of getting away from boredom.

Dawn waited patiently while the chairman and Chance argued politely and diplomatically, with the others chiming in as needed. Chance was going to lose, but he wasn't giving up without a fight. She admired his tenacity.

The chairman finally put his proverbial foot down. His roar would have stunned a charging bull *ganidan* from her home world. “You will have a guardian, and I’m placing the call personally for a sex engineer with guardian training.” His fingers moved across his private board.

Chance stepped back and waited, seemingly perfectly at ease, if one ignored the slight tic in his cheek that gave away his true feelings.

Dawn waited, her attention properly on her own board. As she expected, her new assignment flashed up, with a Details Pending flag. She nodded to herself and hit the accept button.

The chairman warned, “Your sex engineer will contact you. Don’t think to leave the station without her, Chance. All of your orders are contingent on your working with her, and she makes the report. This one is as trustworthy as Uncle.” He hit a button and the traditional sound of knocking occurred. “Meeting adjourned.”

“I won’t ask how you know that.” Chance turned and left, followed by the weary security committee members.

The chairman waited until he and Dawn were the only ones left in the room. He gave her a wry smile. “I’m going to miss your pretty face, my dear. Try not to be too hard on Chance.”

Dawn snickered and vaulted over the desk to give the chairman a hug. “I’m going to miss you, too.”

He hugged her back, heedless of her body paint. “Check your weapons carefully, Dawn. I don’t like this.”

Dawn unwound her arms from around his neck, pleased to note she hadn’t left a smudge on him. “What bothers me most is that the records of the missing were eliminated. That speaks of a high-level breach of security.”

He nodded. "Uncle has reported more intrusion attempts on the UCP system here of late. He's managed to block them all, but they're getting clever about it. Someday, we may have a breach."

Dawn's eyes narrowed. "You think the missing persons and the attempts on the system here are related?"

"I'm almost positive of it. I'm sending two of the best people I know to find out. Try not to get each other killed in the process." He turned and left.

## Chapter Three

Chance strode into the conference room on Maxim one solar cycle later, still seething about having to care for some sex engineer, and he didn't believe for one moment the guardian training would help.

His eyes scanned the occupants, two extremely rare and beautiful blonde females. Blondes had long since been weeded out of the gene pool, as much of an anomaly as redheads and albinos. Yet they were different as night and day except for coloration. The taller, older female was the infamous Constance d'Akasha, known for her cool, calm air of indifference.

What surprised him was the shorter, younger female. Even without the ridiculous mermaid getup, he recognized the secretary from the UCP meeting.

His face flushed as he remembered insultingly calling sex engineers "sex toys" in front of her. Still, it was best she knew what he thought of her kind. It was patently obvious she was his new guardian.

Constance d'Akasha rose, and the little sex toy did the same a second later. Constance bowed, the greeting convention on his planet as opposed to the intimacy of touch. "I see the light of recognition in your eyes, so I won't bother introducing myself. I've been told to address you as Chance Hesperus. Is that correct?"

Chance bowed. “Correct, Lady d’Akasha. However, I will need to know how to address the other engineer.”

The little one bowed. She still looked too young to be of majority. “You may call me Dawn, Chance.”

Chance raised his eyebrows. That baby voice held confidence and even a touch of arrogance. He couldn’t help being intrigued. “I will assume you are my guardian.”

Those blue eyes remained cool and assessing. “Correct, Citizen Hesperus.”

Lady d’Akasha smiled. Chance could easily see why oligarchs paid fortunes for the opportunity of an hour in her arms. Even he was tempted to wish to crack that icy calm, and he normally preferred the spicier personalities.

Lady d’Akasha sat, and Chance followed suit.

Dawn remained standing, restlessly bouncing on the balls of her feet. Her black singlesuit fit her like a second skin, her only ornamentation being two silver combs in her hair to hold her curls at bay. Despite her childlike face, she looked like a functional blade, ready for use.

Constance cleared her throat to regain his attention. “Helen, please show Citizen Hesperus the data file on his assignment.”

The screen revealed itself, forming out of what Chance had assumed was an excellent art reproduction. A male face appeared, with black hair and bottle green eyes. In defiance of the current male fashions for hairlessness, this male wore a thin beard.

“Dr. Galen Faust owns the farm where your assistant was slain, Citizen.” The AI’s voice was an alto, with a bit more life in it than average. He was also pleased to hear the sex engineers had been able to discover who owned the farm. His own resources had not panned out. “Dr. Faust is a respected xenobiologist with a specialty in insectoid life forms. He is personally responsible for discovering several new species, providing educational dataspoils, and his political contacts in the UCP are unusual for a scientist.”

Chance interrupted. "Isn't he the scientist who came out a decade ago against colonization of certain planets due to ..."

Constance nodded. "Yes. I see you're up on ecological issues."

One of his pictures flashed on the screen. The AI, Helen, continued the report as if the interruption had never occurred. "This barn is believed to be his studio, where he created the entomology films. It is interesting to note Dr. Faust is authorized to conduct nuclear and genetic experiments. He regularly applies for atomic materials."

Dawn fingered her chin. "That's unusual. It can often take years for the UCP to release atomics, even in small experimental doses."

"I will provide exact amounts in a pencil file report. The data is only mildly relevant to our discussion. Suffice it to say he has ordered enough to create a full reactor over the past few decades."

Chance sat up. "Few decades? He doesn't look past his fifth decade. What race is he?"

"Unknown. He is listed as a naturalized citizen of Elysium, but no previous records exist. The same applies for all of his off-world film crew. They appear to be from a communal society, since they do not socialize with the citizens of the worlds they visit, nor do they indulge in native foods."

"That's unusual. Most humans tend to enjoy trying new things on the worlds they visit, and the entertainment industry is well known for enjoying the local colors and flavors."

Dawn was now cleaning her impeccable fingernails with a knife that appeared in her hand.

The knife being allowed in the presence of Lady d'Akasha at all impressed Chance.

Lady d'Akasha noted his raised eyebrow. "Yes, Chance. I trust Dawn. She has served as my own guardian on two occasions. I suggest you do the same."

Dawn bowed respectfully to her boss, but Chance caught a glimpse of a tiny smile. The kid sure was confident. Or was it youthful arrogance? He'd soon find out. He'd see if he

could talk her into a session on the holodeck to test her skills. Things were likely to get violent, and he wanted to know her weaknesses.

Helen interrupted. "Forgive me, but unless Dawn hustles, she'll miss being the auditor for Engineer Third Class Losoyo's examination."

Dawn flipped the knife expertly back into her belt, where it became part of the decorative buckle. "Right. I'm on it." She strode toward the door, but stopped. "Hey, Chance. After I'm done, want to meet me down there? I've a new threat ratio yellow program I want to test, but it's a tandem scenario. Feel up to a little hack and slash?"

Chance raised an eyebrow, but nodded. Threat yellow was risky, involving the possibility of injury. "Historical or contemporary?"

"Contemporary. Megalodons from Basir 3. Why? Would you prefer dragons?" Dawn cocked her head to one side and leaned against the doorframe. Her sardonic smile was an outright challenge.

Chance permitted himself a tiny grin, since no one here would be offended by such a display of emotion. "Next time, perhaps. Your megalodons will do."

She returned the grin and checked her chrono. "See you at 1500, Holodeck 37." She was out the door in one quick movement.

"It will be a pleasure."

Constance d'Akasha stood. "The test will take less than one hour. I'll escort you there myself."

Chance hid his surprise with difficulty. Surely Lady d'Akasha had more demands on her time than providing him with companionship. "I'm honored."

She gave him a cool look. "Don't be, Chance. I'm saving you from distractions." She snapped at the ceiling. "Secure this room, Helen."

The door locks clicked, and a faint hum heralded the use of white noise inhibitors.



Constance d'Akasha got up to pace, beating a pencil file against her palm. "I know who and what you are, Chance. Let's be clear on that." She stopped and turned jerkily. "Your pencil file contains information linking Dr. Galen Faust to the genetic experiments of Oswego the Leopard. We believe they may have been colleagues."

"Why are you telling me this while we're alone?" Chance ground out. He'd heard too much about Oswego the Leopard to be entirely comfortable. If the brilliant but insane oligarch had allied himself with the equally brilliant entomologist, then their conversations were probably not about a friendly game of gravity ball.

Lady d'Akasha's serious gaze bore into him. "Uncle reports several attempts to breach his defenses. Naturally, we are concerned."

Chance nodded once, afraid to do more than give that one stiff nod of acknowledgement. His blood ran cold at the thought of the UCP's main planetoid computer security being compromised. A thousand worlds' secrets were housed there. "There's a reason for the catchphrase *as trustworthy as Uncle*, and you need say no more. I understand the implications. You wouldn't tell me this unless Uncle had managed to trace the attempts back to the same source -- Dr. Faust's operation. This is more than the simple disappearance of tourists."

Her blue eyes remained icy. "Correct. However, Uncle's trace is tenuous at best. He's allowing the attempts, to keep them occupied, but you must discover why. The answer to that question is even more important than who is making the attempts."

He swallowed the thousand possibilities and his own innate curiosity. They'd given him all they had. Now he needed to use the information to put all the pieces together and discover what lay beneath one scientist's pristine and too-perfect farm.

Constance swept toward the door. "That's enough to set your mind in the proper direction, I think. Helen has provided more information, coded to your retinal scan and

voiceprint only. It will eat itself if anyone else attempts to open the file. I'll take you to the holodeck now. Helen?"

The locks snicked, and the irritating hum stopped.

Chance breathed a sigh of relief. He hated the security features of those in power, because it became a deadly spiraling arms race of who could beat the spies at their own game. He followed the flow of Lady d'Akasha's white gown to the lift.

The holodeck facility was not where he'd thought. Most corporatists considered the recreational facilities least important and placed them at the most vulnerable surface levels of their ziggurats. Chance agreed with the d'Akasha decision. Most of the off-duty personnel would be protected reserves should the on-duty force need reinforcements. He'd bet the weapons stash was somewhere nearby, safely deep underground and out of reach.

Constance stepped from the lift and turned right to glide down a ramp. She turned her head to give him an ironic smile over her shoulder. "Dawn should be wrapping up her auditor duties. We'll wait in here." She waved her hand over the door sensor next to her and sailed out of sight in a breath.

Chance sucked in his breath and followed. The lady would be sexy even when covered in muck, he decided. Such was the power of the sex engineers. They could make the human instinct to mate click online and the brain click offline with one simple look or gesture, even in adverse situations.

Constance waited in front of a large vid display, sipping from a mug of what smelled like coffee. Her attention was on a couple writhing in an intimate embrace on the display.

Chance inhaled the rich scent of real coffee, not the synthetic often served. He was torn between his need for the rare treat's rejuvenating abilities, and a natural voyeuristic urge to watch Dawn at work. The coffee won, but only by the slimmest margin. He located the catering slot and dialed his preferences.

Behind him, Constance tapped her foot on the floor and muttered a commentary on the performance. “No, no, you idiot. You’re letting the sensations overwhelm your training. Control, control.”

Chance studied the two bodies locked in a sexual embrace. Dawn’s lithe body slithered like an eel all over the male, clearly dominating the encounter and eliciting moaning reactions from the hapless male under scrutiny.

Chance’s lips tightened in disgust as his traitorous erection tented the front of his uniform. He sipped his coffee and set his face in a cool mask, determined that the involuntary reaction would not be interpreted as an unseemly display of emotion in public.

Dawn’s naked body reminded Chance of a small reproduction of a statue of a long-forgotten youthful goddess of Old Earth, one called Persephone. He nodded to himself thoughtfully. Yes, the youthful goddess of spring suited the analogy. He couldn’t think of a goddess of wickedness for what Dawn was doing to the hapless male victim. What a way to fail an exam, judging by the look of pure sexual pleasure marring the perfect features of the examinee.

Chance flicked a glance at Lady d’Akasha and her fingers beating a rapid, agitated tattoo on her upper arms. So, this was about who controlled the situation? Well, that made logical sense. Sex engineers were famous for their abilities to change the course of events through a single well-timed action. A sex engineer who could not manage self-control would surely fail at a critical time. Chance admired the ability, as did all Spartans.

A slow smile crept up Constance’s lips, and her eyes gleamed. Her fingers slowed their rhythm.

Chance turned, but saw nothing unusual at first. A strangled cry tore itself from Dawn’s throat, her face mirroring her pleasure. A sharp pain in his hand made him notice his clenched fist, and jealousy squirmed in his belly. Chance struggled to maintain a calm

demeanor even as he fought the urge to tear the writhing couple apart and beat the male to a bloody pulp. Where in the name of Uncle had that insane emotion come from?

## Chapter Four

Dr. Galen Faust awoke from his day sleep at a touch on his arm. A female worker stood above him, her shaved head indicating she was a voiceless neuter, deemed unfit for anything more than simple tasks. What a shame. Her body was neat and compact, but genetic flaws often didn't show on the surface.

The female stepped back, her face a mask of cool neutrality. Her fingers flicked her message. Security needed to update him. Would the prime male present himself in the control room?

Galen sat up, his own fingers acknowledging the message. He longed for a sonic shower, but security would not disturb his day sleep over trifles. He would hear what they had to say that could not be transmitted through the usual hive communicator.

The female nodded, turned, and left, her pert pink buttocks swinging like tempting fruit to be nibbled. She padded out the door and was gone.

Galen sighed. So much to do, and not enough time to accomplish it all. Not only did he have to visit control, check on his latest lab results, and get a report on the weapons development staff, he desperately needed an hour or two in the orgy room. This was one of the few times where he cursed the position of prime male, with the hyped hormones that

kept him aggressively seeking females to breed with. Galen shook his head against futile wishes. He had his duty to the hive, and he would live up to the challenge until he burned out. Then he would gratefully return to the food chain vats to feed his offspring, his work complete. Another prime would take his place.

Fortunately, his sleeping cubicle was only a few steps from the security control room. There, the worker in charge detached himself from his observation booth and shuffled over to intercept him. So named because of his great age, Gray had had been denied the vats for so long because they could not lose his valuable experience until his body literally refused to work further. Therefore, Gray resembled a wrinkled, dried-out bit of meat. He'd require stewing to be fit nutrition for the hive, but it was a small price to pay for his wisdom. He would not disturb Galen without reason.

Gray spoke in a hoarse whisper. "The spy who escaped and a sex engineer are assigned to discover our secrets."

Galen suppressed the urge to seek out the nearest weapon and defend his hive. The instinct was natural, if unnecessary. There were simpler methods to handle this threat. "I will assume the usual assassination squad has been deployed?"

"Yes, Prime." Gray hesitated. "We are using only one this time. This assignment tempts the hive assassin to the limit. I regret we must use fertile workers for this job."

"Why?"

"The targets are on Maxim. We cannot simply use a neutered and voiceless assassin. This assignment requires participation in human society, and perhaps even enticement. There are three targets."

Galen swallowed a certain amount of pity for the worker, surrounded by the pheromones of sexual activity, but forbidden to engage in any acts where genetic material could be lost. "When the assassin signals completion of assignment, bring him in for a stint in the orgy rooms. He will deserve the rest."

“The assassin is female, Prime. I scheduled her instead for a pregnancy after a few days in the orgy rooms.” Gray smiled. “She will have earned her reward, but this shall be her last offspring. She will be neutered and her remaining eggs removed immediately after birth.”

Galen smiled happily. “Excellent! She has earned her freedom. She will not be burdened with intellect, unrestricted emotion, or with individual identity. I am pleased for her. Tender my congratulations upon her return.”

Gray bowed his head, grinning. “I will be pleased to do so, Prime. She will find a position on my personal staff after her neutering makes her less violent.”

Galen nodded and strode out the aperture to the labs.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chance managed to throttle down his emotions long before Dawn bounced through the door of the room where he and Lady d’Akasha sipped coffee and discussed UCP political gossip.

Ignoring Chance, Dawn performed a somersault to land in front of Constance’s chair, effectively ending their conversation. “Wasn’t he magnificent? I’m so proud he recovered and used the spinal tap technique!”

Constance grinned with good humor. “Yes, I was pleased, as well. He simulated the loss of control so well even I was fooled. Have his overall scores been posted to Helen?”

Chance sipped his coffee and listened without calling attention to himself. To be sitting in the same room while listening to privileged information on sex engineer training techniques was treat enough. He knew better than to ask what a spinal tap technique was. It might get him tossed from the room.

“Yes, Constance. I recommend his advancement. If he keeps this up, he’ll be ready for assignment in another year or two.” Dawn all but bounced on her toes.

“Excellent. Then you’ve earned your leisure time. Try not to get hurt. Your pilot will be waiting at this time tomorrow.” Constance waved them both from the room.

Dawn nodded and beckoned to Chance. At the door, she paused to look back at Constance. “Who is our pilot? I’ll ask him for location.”

Chance wondered why she bothered. The planetoid AI would have all the information. He shrugged to himself. None of his business. He stood and headed toward the door, but was arrested by Constance’s snicker.

“Bellatrix.”

Dawn groaned. “Aww, snarf it.” She sighed. “Okay, I can deal for a few days.” She turned and left.

Curiosity got the best of Chance. He hurried to catch up to Dawn, whose short legs were eating up the length of the corridor. “What’s wrong with Pilot Bellatrix? Is he a bad pilot?”

She stopped and palmed open a door, then shot him a cheeky grin. “Nope. Not even a hot-dogger. Star-class-rated cyborg.”

Star-class space pilots were rare in the extreme, commanding high incomes until they either died or were injured in their duties. Most ended up as retired cyborgs, piloting large corporate space yachts for oligarchs, literally merged into their vessels.

Chance nodded, impressed and slightly disconcerted simultaneously. Would she ever stop putting him off balance? “Where do you get all those odd expressions?”

Dawn bounced into the mid-sized holeroom and popped open a weapons locker. She pulled out two excellent laser pistols and checked their charges. Her face serious, she tossed one to him. Her voice changed to mimic a computer’s inflections. “I am not programmed to respond in that area.”

He realized immediately he’d asked a personal question relating to a sex engineer’s past. All sex engineers of her level literally gave up their history and identities, wiped from the



UCP memories. No contacts, not even family, were permitted for fear of extortion, kidnapping, or similar harm befalling the innocent family members. “Forgive me.”

One bright blue eye winked at him, and her grin returned. “Forgiven. How sensitive is your nose to smells?”

The non sequitur made him blink. “Slightly more sensitive than average, why?”

She wrinkled her pert, upturned nose. “Pilot Bellatrix indulges in planet-grown foodstuffs as his one luxury. Says they taste better. But this means when he goes into space, he must expel excess methane, hydrogen sulfide, and butyric acid gases from his system.” Her eyes crossed for a moment. “Don’t go visit him on the bridge.”

Chance immediately envisioned a green, poisonous cloud surrounding the pilot. A snicker that matched Constance’s escaped before he could squelch it. What was it about human bodily functions that made for humor in the psyche? “I see.”

“No, you’ll smell. The scrubbers just don’t filter all the odor.” She hefted her pistol. “You ready for a little action, Chance?”

As a matter of fact, he was. The sexual tension he’d barely reined in still made him feel like a vibrating electron. Additionally, Dawn had just had a rousing bout of sex and was probably still emitting lingering pheromones. Females often were more ready for sex after a good sexual encounter than they were before. No wonder he was reacting. Sex engineers were just sex toys, always ready for a different sort of action.

He fell into the martial stance of his training, loose-limbed and ready. “Yes.”

Dawn snarled inwardly and hit the pre-programmed sequence to start the scenario. She’d seen the contempt in Chance’s body language, despite his new awareness of her rank and training. She’d seen that nose-in-the-air look a thousand times, mostly from parochial colonials who were so positive sex was merely a pleasant pastime for procreation instead of the powerful weapon it truly was.

The lighting dimmed, and the room changed from dull gray walls with millions of projector eyes protruding out of every available space to a jungle world with a glittering blue sun high in the sky. Two moons were visible. Hey, two moons? “Helen, you sneaky bitch.”

A feminine chuckle came out of thin air. “Yes, Dawn. I have altered certain aspects of this scenario to give you more exercise. You were getting stale again.”

Chance at first looked puzzled, but now moved to stand with her, shoulder to shoulder. “Helen and Uncle must have the same programmer. Uncle does this to me all the time. I think we can safely assume this is not Basir 3 and we may be fighting something other than megalodons. Should be fun.”

Dawn got over her consternation enough to give Chance a challenging grin. “You bet your ass, handsome. Our objective is simple and never changes. Somewhere in this scenario is a beacon on a pedestal of some kind. Find the beacon and touch the top within the next three hours to win. If we don’t find it, we lose.”

Nodding, Chance caught on. There would be clues along the way to find, as well. By Vulcan, he loved a challenging game. “Since this is tandem, we both have to get there. Losing a partner to injury means a loss of the game, correct?”

A large reptile with a double row of teeth lumbered into view. It roared and picked up speed, salivating to let them know they were its dinner unless they reacted.

She fired first by a few nanoseconds, hitting the beast square between the eyes.

His shot landed a finger width to the left of hers, creating a double hole in the beast’s cranium. It went down, making a horrible mess of spattering gray matter.

Dawn whooped and leapt over the beast, laughing. “Now that’s teamwork! Let’s go get us a beacon, baby.” She was off and running. The holeroom seamlessly changed the scenario as she raced forward.

Chance followed, irritation clear on his face that she'd beat him to the first shot, thereby earning herself double points. He gagged at the stench of the creature. "We're looking for red clay!"

Dawn slowed to a trot, her eyes trained on following the beast's footprints. "How'd you guess that?"

He caught up with her, not even breathing hard. "Distinctive red clay between its toes."

Damn, he was that good at this? She'd missed the obvious clue. If he was correct, then he'd matched her for points. She checked the footprints. Yes, the gobbets of clay between the critter's prints were unusual. "Good one, Chance."

They ran on, single file, the sounds of jungle creatures like howler monkeys and macaws adding a touch of eerie counterpoint to the scenario. She'd have to compliment Helen on that fine touch, once they were alone. No sense in letting Chance know Helen was self-aware, if it could be helped. Spartans were so parochial.

Dawn finally called a short rest break to review clues after about an hour and no few dead beasts. They'd pretty much figured out their goal was a ruined city, about an hour away, pushing them close to the time limit. She plopped her ass right in the sand and checked her pistol. The charge was lower than she liked.

Chance leaned against a tree. "So, I'd say we're dead-even on points. I'm impressed. Your skills are superb with weapons. How are you in unarmed combat?"

Caught off guard by the implied apology, Dawn settled on the truth. She shrugged, as much to get the fabric off her itchy, sweating back as to convey indifference. "I'm better with weapons, but okay."

Her assassination training hadn't been easy, which was why she was a guardian instead. It was one thing to kill an unintelligent beastie, but she had serious issues with strategy and stealth. She preferred a fair fight, where both parties knew what they were fighting for.

“Glad to know there’s something you’re not perfect at.” Chance grinned down at her. “Beauty, brains, and lightning-fast reactions. You’re a dangerous woman with the face and body of a child.”

Dawn jumped up, once again facing the same prejudice that had annoyed her all her life. “Yeah, I’m small, but consider this, Spartan. I’m at the perfect height to cut you off at the knees.” She kicked off her boots and, with all the speed of her race, scaled the tree he leaned against.

Chance’s slack-jawed surprise was all she could have wanted. “Holy Aphrodite. You’re a Seelie.”

Satisfied she’d made her point, Dawn lounged on her chosen limb as gracefully as a cat, perfectly at home. In a way, she was. This was a Moser house tree from her home planet, just the right size for a single person. She’d had one herself until she’d gotten the letter of acceptance to Maxim. She contented herself with a nod.

Chance bit his lip. “I have to ask. You can choose not to answer and ignore my question if it suits you. Is it true that Seelies are empathic?”

Helen’s voice issued from a hidden speaker above their heads. “Clock’s ticking, kids, and I’m winning while you chatter.”

## Chapter Five

Chance ignored the warning and did his best to remain nonchalant. He had a thousand questions to ask Dawn about the Seelies, perhaps the most secretive, elusive race in the documented galaxies. The only thing known was their cat- or ape-like ability to live, work, and even die in their trees. Their planet was so dangerous, only a few brave freebooter pilots dared to land and exchange goods. Those who made themselves unwelcome gibbered in fear and refused to return. Thus, the legend had spawned of empathic Seelies who scared them into compliance.

Maddeningly, Dawn simply smiled and batted those bright blue eyes at him. “You really ought not listen to spaceflot, you know.”

Embarrassed at the breach of privacy, Chance felt his face redden. He had no right to ask such personal questions other than his burning desire to ensure Dawn was the perfect partner she appeared to be. “Granted. Forget I asked. Come on, let’s get that beacon.”

She leapt off the tree as gracefully as she’d clambered up it, landing precisely at his feet in a crouch. The sweet fragrance of the tree lingered around her. “No sweat. It’s just over the next rise in a temple ruin. After we’re done here, you can come back to my apartments and

ask all the questions I choose to answer.” She shot him a look that would have hardened an invertebrate to sexual readiness. “Maybe I’ll even give you a demo.” She took off running.

Chance huffed out a breath before following despite a cock now rigid with desire. Why did he continue to challenge her and she him? He was satisfied she’d do well and wouldn’t be an encumbrance. When he trotted to within earshot of her, he issued a new challenge. “Sex is a hobby of mine, Engineer. I am not without some skill.”

Dawn waited, her hand poised above the beacon. She grinned when he laid his hand on top of hers. “Yeah? A hobby? It’s my profession. Somehow I get the impression you think you’re my equal in prowess. Prove it.”

They slapped the beacon, and their bodies moved together to mold to one another. The jungle and temple melted away, leaving them locked in an embrace in the empty holeroom, except for a forlorn little mechbot, sweeping and cleaning the remains of their adventure, including the laser pistols on the floor.

They disentangled when the little bot butted repeatedly at their ankles, anxious to finish cleaning the floor where they stood.

Laughing, Dawn grabbed Chance’s hand and dragged him out the door. “I know a service elevator at the bottom of this ramp.”

Grateful he wouldn’t show an unseemly amount of lust in public, Chance trotted behind her willingly. For such a tiny bit of female, her kiss packed enough force to reduce a mountain to dust. His knees were weak, and his cock was rigid enough to pound rivets in space. What was wrong with him? He’d had sex engineer contracts before. None had caused pounding lust like this. Was it because Seelies were really empathic?

Dawn pulled him into the elevator with more strength than her frame suggested possible. Before he could do more than regain his lost balance, she plastered herself to his body like a limpet eel from the seas of his world and shimmied up his torso until her lips met his.

He heard her fingers program their destination, since they stood right next to the panel.

Her kiss hit Chance even harder than the previous one in the holeroom. Little soft lips rubbed and nibbled his, and his arms instinctively wrapped around her waist to hold her up. The sane part of his functioning mind seeped away like water through sand, clogged with sensation.

The service elevator's doors opened, and a discreet chime sounded when they didn't move. Dawn lifted her face from his, her eyes glittering and liquid. "Up the ramp, third door. Helen will open it if we ask nicely."

The familiar alto voice issued from the elevator speakers. "Yes, I will. But only if you move your asses off my elevator. I'm working here, you know."

Mockingly, Chance inclined his head in a semblance of a bow. "Apologies, Citizen."

Dawn giggled and resumed her kisses, limiting herself to his jaw, neck, and ear.

He carried Dawn toward their destination, noting she weighed little more than a feather compared to Spartan females, who tended to be heavily muscled. The nibbles, licks, and kisses weren't doing his concentration any good. Was it the third door or the fourth?

Helen saved him from embarrassment by opening a door as soon as he approached. He glanced at the vid strips embedded where the wall met the ceiling. "Thanks, Helen."

"Anytime, Chance. I'm out of here. Have a good time, kiddies."

Despite Dawn's drugging attention to his body, Chance let loose a chuckle and released Dawn to let her slide to her feet. It was allowable to show positive emotions in private with a lover. "Your AI has a smart mouth and a large colloquial vocabulary. Has she been communicating with Uncle?"

"Undoubtedly. She is our planetary governing computer, after all. Her minion computers control other aspects, but she oversees operations as well as this building's

security. She's been in constant communication with Uncle since the security breach attempts started."

A knife appeared in her right hand and flicked at one of his jumpsuit tags, parting the cloth. "Unless you intend to fuck me while still wearing that uniform, you might want to take it off."

Chance eyed the knife as it made another pass at his second suit tab. He made his voice quaver with mock fear and added a lisp for humor. "Oh, coercion. How sexy." His voice returned to normal. "Lose the knife. I'll remove my clothes without your help."

Dawn backed off and stripped out of her jumpsuit. The form-fitting spider silk from Belugia 7 made fine armor, being many times stronger than fabric, but barriers and protections weren't needed. Her disease and fertility implants were up to date, and she knew I-Corps used the same.

She debated letting down her mental shields and satisfying Chance's curiosity to see if she was an empath, even if she had only minor gifts. Mentally, she shook her finger at herself. No Seelie revealed their abilities. She'd broken the law of secrecy already by letting Chance know what race she was. That was bad enough. Besides, she wasn't a Seelie ranger anymore. She was an anonymous sex engineer. She really needed to learn to leave the past humiliations behind.

Chance peeled off his jumpsuit, revealing the kind of body sex engineers dreamed of enjoying when they talked among themselves. He was pure perfection in a world where health and beauty were expected. Then again, Spartans were known for going beyond the expected physical exercises. They walked or rode animals everywhere for health and shunned mechanical transportation. Everything that could be done manually was performed that way in order to keep their cultural tradition of physical perfection.



She examined his broad shoulders, muscled body, and flat stomach with an experienced and appreciative eye. “Yum, yum, Spartan. You do your people proud.”

Chance returned her gaze, performing the same assessment of her body. “Thank you. You would give the females of my planet a good comparison, despite your small size. If you remind me, I will provide you with a file of my holoroom workout, featuring some aspects of my world. I think you might enjoy an adventure or two on Sparta.”

Dawn cocked her head to one side, enjoying the interlude before sex. This was her kind of foreplay, rather than getting all touchy-feely. “Does it include killing beasties?”

He grinned toothily, looking like one of the lupine races. “Yes, both land and aquatic.”

Her heart raced with excitement. “Oh, baby! Now you’ve got me all twitterpated. Come jump my bones before I expire.”

Chance wrapped an arm around her waist and yanked her to him. His eyes were stormy. “You and your weird expressions. I want a hard, fast coupling. We can take our time on the journey. Acceptable?”

Hot, hard, and quick was what she wanted. To hell with technique. “Accepted. Let’s get to the good stuff.”

Like all of her profession, she had a bed frame at all four corners to accommodate bondage play or provide a place to hang toys. He picked her up and threw her to her bed, his aim excellent. She plopped squarely in the center of the firm mattress.

Chance dove on top of her, catching himself with his arms to keep from crushing her. His cock found her pussy unerringly and slid into the waiting wetness. He was a perfect fit.

She lifted her hips slightly to allow him full access and was rewarded with a deep thrust that slammed into her pelvis. No need to use muscular control to give him an extra boost; he was large enough to make it unnecessary.

They groaned simultaneously and moved as one in rhythm, each complementing the other’s actions as if they’d been lovers for years.

Dawn marveled for a moment at the perfect union of bodies, a rarity in her trade. Instinctively, she thinned her mental shields as if she coupled with another Seelie, to join with him and monitor his pleasures. She acknowledged her body's instincts and decided it wouldn't hurt just this once.

The risk was rewarded instantly with a blend of their pleasures to match their bodies. His mind pounded the happy lust in time with his strokes, like a strong heartbeat, firing her own mood. Who needed aphrodisiacs when emotions melded? She felt his orgasm building, a crescendo to highlight her body's reactions. "More! Give me more!" Her nails raked his buttocks to emphasize her wishes.

Chance responded instantly under the influence of both her vocal demands as well as her mental confirmation that he was doing the right things at the precise moment for ultimate pleasure. His thick cock pounded her flesh mercilessly, ramming his body into her clit, and she echoed the sensation back at him. He moaned as the echo translated to pleasuring his prostate.

Dawn laughed at herself for not letting go of her training enough, analyzing his every move for maximum effect. Even while her body peaked toward release, she still sought ways to make his experience the best he'd ever had.

According to what his emotions said, she'd achieved her goal effortlessly. His mind was full of equal parts wonderment and a screaming orgasm. A vision flashed in her mind -- he wanted her to rake his ass again. Oh, he liked that, did he? Well, she was happy to oblige.

Chance's face contorted seconds before he released, his hoarse cry of pleasure surfing ahead of the sensation. Dawn used his orgasm to follow with her own, feeling his joy as her muscles contracted around his spurting cock to squeeze every bit of juice from him. Their mutual orgasm lasted an eternity.

Of their own accord, Dawn's hands flopped down to her sides. The scent of sex and Chance's clean sweat mingled in the room, and their harsh cries would have disturbed the

neighboring apartments had there not been sound baffles in the walls for privacy. She'd have to lock her heart away and never meld with him again, or she'd lose her objectivity as his guardian, she reminded herself firmly. He was a mission, nothing more. At the end of the assignment, he'd walk away back to his work and she to hers. Their worlds would never mesh as their minds had done.

Dawn carefully unwound her mind from his, taking her time so he would never know he'd slept with an empath, even a poor one such as she. Her minor ability made her a fine sex engineer when she chose to exercise it, but she'd never be of the skills to heal a wound like her father could or even control a crowd like her mother. It was her private shame, never to be spoken of.

Chance slipped from her body, still panting, and fell beside her on the roomy mattress made to hold as many as four people, should she choose. "Thank you, Dawn," he managed. "May I offer you a drink from your own catering unit?"

Before she could finish the courtesies of afterglow, she noted the red flash of an urgent message on her desk comunit. It winked insistently in the dark corner, demanding attention. "Yes, please. A fruit squeezie, if you'd be so kind. I'll go answer that message."

Chance grunted acknowledgement and stumbled to the catering unit to dial.

She managed a little more dignity in her walk, but admitted her knees were as weak as a cephalopod's. She put on the headset and called up the message. The recording had her yanking off the equipment and diving for her singlesuit. "Forget the drinks, Chance. Get dressed. Pilot Bellatrix has been assassinated."

## Chapter Six

The pilot's naked body lay exactly where security forces had found it, on the bed of his spare quarters in town. His cybernetic limbs were twisted and contorted as if he'd suffered agonies before dying. His face reflected that torturous process, with his eyes staring blankly at the ceiling.

"Fucked to death, judging by the evidence of multiple sexual encounters," the security man in charge reported, his voice laced with humor. He glanced at the body before turning again to face Dawn and Chance. "These old guys, even cyborgs, ought to know better than to take on trained engineers."

Chance left her side and wandered over to examine the body in minute detail using a scanner to enhance images and record anything he found.

Dawn swallowed irritation. It seemed rude to laugh at death, even for security forces that were known for having seen the worst the universe had to offer. "What makes you say it was a sex engineer, Security?"

He shrugged, unrepentant. "She flashed her ident badge at the door computer. That was caught on the outer corridor cameras, and she was dressed like one of the nymphs from the Greek area. There's a short in the door computer; it's as ancient as he was and easy to

fool. We're getting the corridor pictures digitally enhanced, hoping we can pick up who she is. There'll be an inquiry, but I'm betting she was a low-level trainee who needs a refresher in the basics of monitoring client health. She probably ran out of here as soon as she saw him collapse."

Dawn folded her arms. "Then she's in deep trouble, Security. That's criminal negligence resulting in death, if she was an engineer at all."

"She wasn't. I'm betting on it." Chance continued to scan, but his voice was a harsh growl. "There's a bruise developing on his left bicep. Looks like a needle insertion point. It's an ancient technique for introducing drugs into the system. Crude, but effective. I'm going to stick my neck out and guess it was a palm shotter, a known assassination device."

A male voice issued from the comunit on the wall. "Rolf, here. Confirmed. The female is not a registered sex engineer. The ident image is fake. A very good imitation, enough to fool a limited computer door system, but not me. I'll update my files. By the way, I'm the residential complex security computer."

Chance straightened and raised one eyebrow. "A Rolf unit for a residential security job? Isn't that ...well, overkill?"

The Rolf unit issued a chuckle like the rasp of a dying lizard. Obviously, it didn't laugh much. "This is the high-security complex, Citizen. Pilot Bellatrix had a residence here since it was built and refused all upgrades, saying he didn't want to learn a new system, not even an AI."

Dawn shrugged. "He was a character with old-fashioned notions. That fit his style. Even his ship is wired to suit his ..."

An explosion rocked the ground. Dawn turned to the window in time to see a massive fireball light up the spaceport before she was knocked to the ground.

With her nose in the carpeting, Dawn sighed. "Want to bet that was his ship blasting into a million pieces? I'll give you good odds."

Chance groaned and rolled out from beside the bed, rubbing his head where he'd connected with a bedside table. "That's a sucker bet. No, thanks."

A stream of expletives issued from Rolf's speakers. "I'm patching into the spaceport AI system. Candy, are you functioning?"

"Yes, I am functional, only just. The explosion got three freighters and damaged a passenger liner's shuttle. Fortunately it was empty. Half my com circuits are down, so I assume my towers are damaged. Do me a favor, Rolf, and get emergency services down here. I've lost my link to that portion of the city. I've got the whole explosion saved, though. Looks like a saboteur. A female ran from the personal yacht that exploded to a one-person spacer. She took off without clearance as I was handling the protests from the traffic controllers. She was good; I'll give her that. Avoided every missile we shot."

Dawn listened to Candy give a steady stream of data, all of it immediately forwarded to security by Rolf, based on his silence. Dawn worked her way to her feet and met Chance's eyes.

His eyes were grim, and he jerked his head toward the door. Security could handle what was left of examining Bellatrix's body. They had what they needed. She nodded and followed Chance out the door.

She caught up with him at their flitter, but waited until they were both inside. "Shall I state the obvious and say I doubt that the assassination and sabotage were a coincidence? Someone doesn't want us to return to Elysium."

He nodded, but lifted the flitter and shot back to the main Maxim complex. He kept his eyes on the flight and his instruments, but his knuckles were white on the controls. "Since I'm staying in the high-security guest quarters and I don't visit the pleasure palaces, the assassin couldn't get to me. She settled for delaying our flight by killing our pilot and his craft."

Dawn swallowed her own bile and sorrow, feeling guilty for every negative thing she'd ever said about Bellatrix. "One sweet old retired cyborg who ferried sex engineers to their assignments, and he just happened to be a secondary target. It's just not right. These people are ruthless."

Chance abruptly put the flitter in hover mode. "Wait. How did she know which pilot to kill? Surely you have a squadron full of pilots and crafts to take engineers to their jobs, don't you?"

Dawn jerked in surprise, then nodded. "When we don't use commercial vessels and are willing to pay the customary fee. Bellatrix was a favorite of mine because of his professionalism, but there are at least twenty other pilots."

His eyes narrowed. "You used Bellatrix frequently?"

"When I don't fly myself. I don't like the crowds of the liners. I pilot my own craft when I don't mind being conspicuous." She wrinkled her nose and shrugged. "It's a bit pretentious to my mind, but my yacht's been useful when I needed to impress some groundhog." Then she saw what Chance was getting at. "Shit. They were targeting me, not you."

"Both of us, I'd hazard. We know there's a leak, somewhere, if they're getting close enough to Uncle for him to notice a potential breach. You might say our target knows we're coming."

She huffed out a breath and sat back, folding her arms. "Fuck me running. What do we do now?"

Chance grinned. "I'd prefer you let me catch you first. I don't see how this changes anything. The assassination attempt failed. This is a subtle group on their own soil, so I'd say they wouldn't repeat the obvious and try again. Let's see what they do next."

That made sense, in a weird way. “The unexpected. I like that. Bet they’re expecting us to be pulled off the assignment and a new team sent. They don’t know we’re the only game in town for this. Okay, so we go anyway, but may I suggest a change in guise?”

He put the flitter back into flight mode and aimed for the complex before answering. “What do you have in mind?”

Dawn turned in her seat and faced his profile. An errant thought slipped in that his ancestors would be proud of his silhouette. He looked like a Greco-Roman coin with the profile of an emperor stamped on it. “We take my yacht and switch roles. I’m a high-level sex engineer, female and alone except for you, acting as my guardian. They know you, but they may not know me. We’ll get the best accommodations the bucolic planet has to offer, ostensibly for my vacation on a pastoral planet, and wait for their next move. If nothing happens in a day or two, we plan a picnic. Get it? The point is to be as visible as possible.”

He drove in silence for a few moments, a frown marring his high forehead. “I hate change, but I can’t find any flaws with your plan. It’s the most overt message we could send them that we’re not going away until we have answers. Your status offers us a small measure of protection, as well. They can’t just make you disappear.”

She suppressed a smile of triumph. “Great. Glad you like it. Got any guardian gear? I won’t be able to wear mine if I play the role of sex engineer on vacation.” Imagining Chance in form-fitting spider silk armor, festooned with the weapons of her trade, was enough to get her wet and heated again. She hoped he would be recovered enough for another round of sex on her yacht, with its luxurious appointments all designed to impress and sweeten the appetites of her guests.

“No, just my military issue and a few other self-defense items. Most of what I own is geared to surveillance and survival.” He shrugged. “Can Helen order me a few things? She can get my credit info from Uncle.”



Dawn raised a mental eyebrow, but kept her face neutrally cheerful. No questions about cost? What I-Corps man didn't worry about satisfying the accounting computers when it came to expenditures? He'd just authorized spending a small fortune and possibly a large one unless she let him borrow a few of her toys. "Let me query Helen. I assume you'll let me pick what you'll need to look the part."

\* \* \* \* \*

Chance didn't so much as bat an eyelash at what most Consortium citizens would have considered the height of luxury when he dropped carrysacks full of his new clothes and weapons on the deck of her yacht's bridge. "Where would you like me to put these?"

His nonchalant tone was just another piece in the large puzzle named Chance Hesperus, as far as Dawn was concerned. Oh, he did look the part of a guardian of a high-ranker, with the black spider silk hugging every bulge and corded muscle to perfection. Too bad the armored cup hid his best feature, but a male had to protect his vulnerable fertility rights, poor thing. She winked saucily when he caught her looking at his assets, sat in the captain's chair, and pointed to a door with a glittering gold star painted on it. "My cabin, if you wish to share accommodations, or go back into the main room and look for any of the other rooms if you prefer privacy."

Then she got the cool, raised eyebrow she so loved to receive from him before he hefted his carrysacks and nudged the door to the captain's quarters open with his shoulder. He left one carrysack on the deck behind her chair for her to dispose of when she saw fit.

She liked that about Chance, too. He treated her as an equal partner, able to think and do for herself. No ridiculous gestures of pretending to help her in and out of flitters, opening doors for her when her hands were free, or any of the other insulting "courtesies" designed to promote the concept that females were weaker because they were smaller. She grinned and powered up her yacht for preflight analysis, then contacted the space tower for her launch window.

The tower answered immediately. "You are set for launch in fifteen minutes from ... mark. Good luck and sweet imaginations, Engineer."

Dawn thanked the controller and downloaded her flight plans to her nav-puter.

Chance sat down in the navigator's chair and poised his hands above the keys. He looked at her for permission to take over navigation. "Sweet imaginations?"

She accepted his help with a nod, grateful for the assistance. Once she assured herself his hands were sure and knowledgeable, she turned all control over to him. "Thanks. Nice to share the duties. Yeah, sweet imaginations." With the computers now set for launch and no longer needing her input, she swung her gimbaled chair to face him while he finished the programming. "What's the most powerful and pervasive gift of all animal kind, Chance?"

He frowned and shrugged. "The urgency to mate?"

"Close, but no cigar." She grinned again when he looked confused at her odd expressions. Half the time now, she did it to rattle his gray matter. "Imagination, Chance. If you can't imagine or envision what's a safe place to rest, what's tasty and good for you to eat, or what it would feel like to mate, would you seek it out or wander aimlessly until you found it?"

His thoughtful frown deepened. "Doesn't imagination fall into the realm of intelligence? No, wait. I see. Even the lowest forms of life must know what they are seeking and how to get it. They have to see it or experience it in some way and remember it."

Dawn nodded happily. "Exactly. Even bacteria seek nourishment actively, rejecting some things and devouring others. While I've never asked, even higher-order creatures must imagine what their mates will feel like, or see in their minds what to eat in order to remember it. For them, sensory memory must play an important role. "

"Sensory input requires no intelligence, merely an ingrained memory of what is good or bad. I see. Memory is nothing more than imagining past input." He laid his left elbow on the console and put his hand over his mouth, his eyes clouded in thought.

She left him to his ruminations. He'd have made a fine sex engineer, but he was I-Corps. His would be a short, hard life, since few of his profession ever made it to retirement. Dawn kept her sigh purely internal. She knew they'd part company once the job was over, but if he'd been in a nice, quiet groundhog profession, she might have worked in an occasional visit.

Visiting a funerary urn was not her idea of a good time. Too bad. Why did all the fun guys have to die in real life? Just once, she wanted a partner for life as well as games. Was that too much to ask?

## Chapter Seven

Dr. Faust smiled grimly when informed the sex engineer and her “guardian” had arrived and lodged at the oh-so-tourist-charming Dewdrop Inn at the edge of the nearest town. His spies there reported the female was of special interest. A true sex engineer of the highest order, she was small and agile. One operative had managed to film her using the water sports facility, where she performed gymnastic feats, to the delight of the tourist crowd. The male was equally athletic and identified as their returning spy. Galen’s cock rose at the pictures like a canine sniffing fresh meat.

Gray folded his arms and lowered his eyebrows. “They should be destroyed immediately, Prime. No matter what genetic potential the female carries, these two are dangerous to the hive.”

Galen smiled benevolently and quoted from the words of the Hive Mother, now long one with her people in the vats. “Some danger is good for the hive. It stimulates us and keeps us from complacency.” He waited for the reverent nods agreeing with the wisdom. “The male is of no importance. He will be disposed of unless we find value in his genetics. The female shows great potential, this is true. If she responds well to the hormones to keep her compliant, we may not need to remove her larynx, and may hear words of wisdom from her

lips. I remind you we've not had a Brood Mother in a decade. A highly intelligent young female may be the new Mother we seek."

One of the security females shook her head. "She is too thin." Like all those born to the hive, she was short and pleasantly plump to keep warm, her breasts just peeking over the edge of the table. The Brood Mother had been wise to insist on small, compact bodies for the close quarters of their home. Big, lumbering bodies made no sense. Galen was perhaps the tallest male ever permitted to live, and he knew it was only because of his superior genetics.

Galen shrugged. "That can be changed. This female probably has never bred. Her hips may assume the correct shape naturally."

The female subsided, but her eyes held a rebellious glint Galen didn't like. He flicked a glance at Gray, who frowned for a moment, then gave his Prime a nearly infinitesimal nod. The female was too aggressive. Her hormones would be adjusted immediately.

Gray rubbed his chin and picked up the thread of conversation. "This is why you are Prime. If you see the potential for Brood Mother in the female, I will not argue with you further. However, until she has adjusted, I will recommend extra caution. Choosing a wild one for a Brood Mother is risky."

The security female muttered something and Galen ignored her. Her opinion was unimportant.

However, Gray responded angrily. He stood and glowered over her until she looked down. "You have no right to question the Prime's judgment. It is true there are many females here in the hive, but none have proven worthy, including you. We have done without a Brood Mother far too long, and in all that time, no candidate has appeared. He is right to seek a wild one, despite our misgivings."

She stood, her breasts bouncing with the energy of her quick movement. "I will seek adjustment to attain calm. However, something about this female makes me wish to kill her

and protect my hive. I do not think my instincts are out of line, nor will they change.” She bowed to Galen and left.

Gray sat down, his annoyance melting away visibly now that the problem was solved to his satisfaction.

One of the security males signaled a wish to speak with a small wave. Galen granted him the right to say his piece.

The male remained subservient, his eyes fixed on the table. “The female may be reacting to something we males cannot identify. Perhaps it is akin to the mother’s instinct to protect her children, transferred to the hive. Should we not consider her misgivings, despite her attitude?”

Gray snorted. “Certainly not. You heard her, since you were seated next to her. Her feelings are based on ambition for herself and her sisters, not for the good of the hive. She protects nothing but her own status.”

“Agreed.” Dr. Faust rubbed his thumb and forefinger together, anxious to put his plan into action. The sex engineer interested him, with her compact, athletic body and sunny curls. He wanted that childlike face beneath him, her eyes wide with fear at her own arousal.

The male, too, would make an interesting bedmate for pure pleasure. One did tire of the wet slickness of females, and Galen longed to tame a wild male once more. The image of having the male, meek and compliant, suck on his cock was enough to make him rock hard. He couldn’t wait for the orgy room. He gestured to the security male who had spoken. “I have no time for the orgy room. Come suck me while I dictate my invitation to lunch for the engineer and her guardian.”

The male hurried to please him, planting himself between Galen’s knees beneath the table. Since all at the table were comfortably naked, there was no fumbling with the restrictions of clothing.

Galen sighed with relief as the warm, wet mouth slid over his cock. He wouldn't last long with the delightful images in the forefront of his imagination, so he distracted himself by flicking on the recording toggle. "Dr. Galen Faust invites the esteemed sex engineer to luncheon in three days, if she finds the time and date convenient. Her escort is, as always, expected to accompany her. Please acknowledge."

Gray flipped off the recording toggle for him. "Short and succinct. Why three days? We can be ready tomorrow for their capture."

Allowing his fingers to fist in the security male's hair to guide his movements, Galen closed his eyes to enjoy the sucking movements and the scrape of tongue and teeth on his rigid cock. "Simple, Gray. It's wild courtesy. Less than three days means I show contempt for her plans, and more than that shows I do not consider her important enough to alter my own plans."

Gray stood. "I will never understand the complexities of the wild ones. I will send the message and return to my duties. Enjoy yourself, Prime." He exited without expecting or demanding a response.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn permitted the server to seat her at Dr. Faust's table and pretended to enjoy being the pampered high-ranking engineer. Her best defense was to play up to the prejudices pervading the uninitiated that sex engineers were brainless bed candy.

Dr. Faust wasn't bothering to hide his drooling, that was for sure. He'd need a bib if he got any more obvious about his lust. He had no way of knowing her form-fitting, candy-pink singlesuit and jewelry were festooned with weapons.

Chance took his own chair to her left, and Dr. Faust was seated on her right. Chance played his glowering part well, with an obvious display of weapons covering his black singlesuit. No powerful citizen went anywhere without a guardian, so it was perfectly acceptable for him to retain his weapons.

The servers didn't speak, but they did offer beautiful dishes of pork-like meat covered in a mushroom sauce, and a dazzling array of vegetables.

She was starving, but she took dainty portions of every expensive thing she saw as if she were more concerned with her waistline than her hunger. She picked delicately at her food, but tasted nothing unusual except the meat.

Chance nodded, but as a guardian did not speak once he'd nodded to her that she could taste. He contented himself with eating a healthy portion, but kept his eye on the servers. They'd each taken different dishes, with Chance choosing another meat dish, with a bovine scent.

Dawn waved a languid hand at the entree before her. "What is this pork, Dr. Faust? I don't believe I've had it before."

Dr. Faust played the genial host well, explaining how all was locally grown or raised. The pork dish was produced on his farm, but another farm down the road had provided the bovine. He kept her wine glass filled and politely withdrew when Chance accepted only one glass.

Dawn asked all the farming questions she could cull from her brain and complimented him on how neat and pretty his farmhouse looked.

Dr. Faust waved his hand expansively, encompassing the whole house full of antiquated furnishings. "It was my grandmother's colonial home. Bea Faust was a doctor of entomology, just as I am. She came here with her children after the death of her ... husband in the second wave of colonists and staked out this entire valley. I'm proud to say she ran it all by herself until her children were old enough to take over." He expounded at length about the hazards of colonial life on Elysium, Dr. Bea Faust's early discoveries, and the political harmony achieved under the benign dictatorship of the present oligarch's grandfathers.



She kept a wary eye on Chance, noting he began to smile and relax, in direct contradiction of his role as guardian. Something was wrong, and she dared not relax her own role as an empty-headed toy. Therefore, she emulated Chance's smiles and easy mannerisms.

Dr. Faust seemed unaware of Chance's attitude, but the scientist's mannerism changed to one of forceful command as if he were the oligarch. His statements became pronouncements of fact, even if they should have been phrased as opinions.

Chance's glazed eyes and happy expression mirrored his nods of agreement with every word uttered out of Dr. Faust's mouth, no matter how they differed with known Spartan politics of democratic rule with a senate and local representation.

Dawn unfocused her own eyes and nodded agreement just as happily, smiling with mindlessness until her face hurt. She wanted with all her being to bark, "Snap out of it!" to Chance, but couldn't think of any way to do so without giving away her lack of inebriation. The most she managed was a tinkling giggle. "I think my guardian has had too much to drink. Normally he's so stern!"

Chance didn't react at all to the reprimand. He sat back with a foolish grin on his face, his eyes blank.

Dr. Faust turned his attention fully on her. "Oh, my dear, do you prefer stern men, or do you like them to serve you abjectly?" His gaze traveled from her eyes all the way down to where her body disappeared beneath the tablecloth, as if she wore nothing at all.

Dawn swallowed her bile at such flagrant discourtesy to a female without waiting to see if she displayed interest. He didn't seem to care about contracting her services, only getting her beneath him in the shortest time possible. He'd probably have her on the table among the platters of food, if he could.

She waved her wine glass around, deliberately sloshing a small amount on the white tablecloth, and slurred her words. "Oh, I'm not picky." She giggled for effect. "I am a sex engineer, after all."

Dr. Faust leered. “You’ve had a bit much yourself, my dear. I’m surprised you’re still able to talk at all.”

She felt a frisson of fear. Had she misplayed the inebriation? She slurred her words more. “Oh, that. I’m very good at ass... ass... assimilashun of inebrianks. High metablisum, dontcha know.”

He sat back, seemingly satisfied. “Ah, that explains it. Would you like dessert? I assure you, it’s a fruit compote that won’t ruin your spectacular figure.”

Everything fell into place. There was something in the food. Something undetectable to her training that apparently her Seelie body wasn’t absorbing. Chance had fallen prey to it, whatever it was. She’d better eat the foods served and act very silent and compliant, just like Chance. She contented herself with a brainless nod.

Dr. Faust reached over and caressed her cheek. “I’ll just let you enjoy your dessert, Dawn. Meanwhile, we’re neglecting your companion. Chance is his name, correct?” He signaled a server with a hand gesture in silent, imperious command.

Dawn allowed the server to fill a bowl heaping with fruit, nodding witlessly despite her growing horror. Chance’s name had never been mentioned in the introduction.

## Chapter Eight

Chance blinked his eyes and tried to focus his eyes a bit better. The farmhouse seemed so sunny and cheerful, and the food had been delicious. He wanted to request some of the compote, but it seemed too much trouble to ask.

What was the matter with Dawn? Why was she looking at him with that vapid smile plastered on her beautiful face? He liked her much better when she was her natural, feisty self.

Dr. Faust smiled at Chance, his bottle-green eyes sparkling handsomely in the sunlight. What a personable fellow and so knowledgeable. It was easy to agree with him. He reminded Chance of an old, dear friend. Why, Chance and Faust could be the best of friends, too, even brothers, for all their age difference. Wasn't it nice of Galen to remember Chance was there?

Dawn turned pale at Dr. Faust's suggestion that Chance be included in the conversation. Was the poor little darling feeling ill?

Dr. Faust reached over and caressed Chance's hand where it lay on his napkin. "Dawn is very lovely, isn't she, Chance?"

Chance nodded, happy to be asked. She really was quite stunning in that pink singlet, especially since it looked like it might have been sprayed on her athletic little

body. He'd love to peel her out of that suit and fuck her silly until she screamed for mercy. He forced his tongue to work. "Like her namesake, Aurora."

Blushing, Dawn put her head down and began to eat her fruit. The silver spoon worked its way to her dainty little mouth, and Chance envied it.

Dr. Faust -- Galen, he'd asked them to call him; delightful name and so appropriate for a doctor -- arrested Chance's attention with a pat to his hand. "So you're a student of the classics. I do like intelligent fellows."

Chance preened. "Thank you, Galen. I like you, too." It seemed easier to speak now. Chance leaned back in his chair, pleased to converse. Never mind he had an erection. It was a perfectly natural thing to have in the presence of a lovely lady.

Dawn blinked at him, her dark lashes batting rapidly. Three short flutters, three long. Interesting. Hadn't there been an old code like that once? Oh, yes, the old Morse code. He'd have to remember what it meant, later.

Galen looked down, his eyes lingering on Chance's growing erection. "I don't blame you for finding Dawn attractive, Chance. We ought to share her, don't you think? You wouldn't mind, would you?"

Something rebelled deep in Chance's mind at the suggestion and made him slur his words. He wanted to say, "I hold her contract, thanks" but all he got out verbally was "Contract."

Dawn sighed, a tiny huff of breath. Was she grateful he remembered she was a contract worker, above the par of the ordinary wage slave in a cubicle? Her eyes continued to bat in the weird pattern. Maybe she was interested in a threesome.

Galen slid his chair closer to Chance, the better to caress Chance's black-clad arm. The silk whispered as Galen's soft hands slid along it. Why did the Spartans dislike this display of friendship in public so much? It felt nice. Friendly. "Oh, well, I suppose I could arrange for a

short contract. I'll have one of my employees make the arrangements." He signaled the servants, and they all turned and left.

Chance studied the silly little smile on Dawn's face and ignored her fluttering eyelashes. "She seems willing."

Galen's voice turned into a command. "Chance, look at me."

Focusing on Galen's face, Chance did as he asked. He studied every small feature -- the eyebrows lightly shot with silver, the black thick hair just going gray at the temples, and the strong square jaw. "Yes?"

"How do you feel about sharing with me?" Galen's hand moved to caress Chance's aching erection. "Do you accept men in your bed as well as females?"

Once again, some buried part of Chance protested. He shuddered from the reaction. "Haven't since I was an adolescent." His words were even more slurred now. He glanced at Dawn for help.

Dawn looked appalled, the vapid smile and vacant expression gone. Did Seelies have a convention against adolescent sex or something? He opened his mouth to ask.

"Chance! Ignore her. Look at me. Pay attention to what I'm doing." Galen squeezed Chance's cock enough to enforce the request -- no, order.

Chance's eyes snapped back to look deeply into Galen's intense green eyes. "Can't ignore what you're doing."

The squeeze returned to gentle strokes. Galen's face was inches from Chance's. "I know you can't. We all enjoy our cocks being played with, and only another male truly understands what it feels like." His lips brushed Chance's, feather-light. "Tell me, Chance. What did you like as an adolescent?"

Chance's eyes didn't leave Galen's, though he wanted to shut them and just enjoy. Orders were orders. A Spartan knew how to obey commands. "Didn't matter then. Boys

learn from older men, who keep them content until they choose their sexuality. As you said, only males understand the needs.”

Galen’s smile was dazzling in the sunlight. “Oh, so you were a man’s sexual toy. Did you like to suck and be fucked?”

Chance struggled with emotions that didn’t match. On one hand, what Galen was doing to him felt very good. On the other side of things, there were painful memories conjured up. “Not as much as I liked giving.”

Disappointment hovered on Galen’s face for a moment before being replaced by an appeal. “It’s better between two men of equal size. You’re no longer a child, but a fully mature adult. Are you open-minded enough?”

A popping sound and a small gasp from a high-pitched voice distracted Chance, but he’d been ordered to ignore anything that wasn’t Galen. Therefore, he ignored it.

Spartans prided themselves on being open-minded and democratic. As long as no one was harmed, all was well. Two consenting adults could do what they pleased. To be anything less than accepting of differences in taste was close to criminal. “I’m Spartan.” That was the last word on the subject as far as Chance was concerned.

The glittering smile came back to Galen’s face. “Oh, that explains so much, including the fitness of your body. Surely that black suit must be hot. Why don’t you take it off and show me how beautiful a Spartan is.”

Chance saw no need to deny the purring appeal, if it made Galen happy. He worked hard to keep fit, and who could refuse his friend Galen anything? He stood as soon as Galen removed his hand and stripped quickly and efficiently.

Waiting patiently until Chance kicked the clothing and boots a few feet away, Galen scraped back his chair for a better view. His open admiration was just as apparent as his fully engorged erection. He gestured to his crotch. “As you can see, I’m appreciative of your beauty.”

“Dawn is beautiful, but thank you.”

Galen glanced at Dawn, and Chance looked, too, since Galen thought it important. “Oh, dear, the lovely Dawn has fallen asleep in her chair. I’ll summon someone to put her in a nice comfy place downstairs.”

Dawn was indeed unconscious in her chair, her curls spilling over the high back. Her breasts fell in quiet rhythm, peaceful as a child.

Chance nodded his agreement to the marvelous idea of giving Dawn a chance to rest in someplace more comfortable than a hard old chair. “She’s been working hard to get your attention.”

Galen laughed. “Of course. She succeeded, didn’t she? Therefore, she deserves the finest I can offer a female.” He pressed a button on a small console under the table.

An old, gray man shuffled in, followed by two muscular young men. They seemed to require no further commands. The two young ones hoisted Dawn between them and carried her away. The old man nodded once to Galen, and then he too left.

“You’ve gone soft.” Galen reached out and fingered Chance’s semi-flaccid penis. “No matter. You won’t need it for a bit. I’ll make sure you get it back before then.”

Well, that was a relief. Chance watched placidly as Galen stripped out of his elegant green singlesuit and black half-boots. He’d not been asked to do anything, so he waited. Galen would tell him what to do next.

Galen posed for a moment, showing off a pale but decently trim body about UCP standard, given his age. Then he sat and pointed to his rigid erection, nearly flat against his belly. “As you can see, I’m so hard I’m uncomfortable. Would you ease it for me, Chance?”

Chance sank to his knees. He shuddered again as something inside him squirmed. The happy, content side of him told it to shut up. Nothing should disturb this delightful feeling. Besides, sucking cock wasn’t a big deal, if one was open-minded. “Sure.”

Galen moaned at Chance's first tentative touch on his nuts. "Yes, Chance. Play with my testicles, and then suck them before you give me a blowjob. Give it your best effort."

Chance frowned for a mere instant. He always gave his duties his best effort. Well, his friend Galen couldn't know that. "Yes, I will." He bent down to better see as he rolled Galen's delightfully hairless balls in his hand.

Galen spread his knees to accommodate Chance's broad shoulders and give Chance better access. "Very good, Chance. Now suck them."

As commanded, Chance put his nose at the spot where balls met shaft and sucked first one, then the other into his mouth. His body shook, but the familiar task only required gentleness, not stillness. He remembered the salt-sweet taste and smell of masculine musk. Galen's hairless balls didn't tickle his throat to make him gag. That would be shameful.

Galen made a satisfied sound deep in his throat. His eyes were shut with pleasure. "Very good, Chance. You remember well. Lick until you reach the top; then suck my cock until I say stop."

Pride and pleasure welled up from Chance's happy state. He'd pleased Galen. One at a time, he released the balls to lie wetly beneath the twitching penis that was his next task.

His body was shaking so hard, he had trouble licking his way up the shaft to taste the pre-cum glistening in the sunlight. He might have lingered, since the sweet taste had been the only thing he'd liked as a youngling, but orders were orders. He swallowed Galen's cock in one gulp.

None of the silent servants appeared, concerned over Galen's loud, inarticulate moans of pleasure. For every stroke of Chance's mouth, the volume rose when his tongue scraped the underside of Galen's cock.

Dawn would have made the acidic comment, "Ye Guards, what a noisy lay!"

The thought brought a giggle to the movements of Chance's throat, and that apparently was enough to send Galen over the edge. With no warning, Chance's mouth and throat filled



with hot, salty semen. He choked and swallowed, having no choice unless he rudely threw up in Galen's lap. To be so rude to a friend would be unthinkable.

Galen had his head thrown back over the top of the chair, gasping for air, when Chance sat back on his heels and waited for the next command.

An ancient clock ticked away the time somewhere nearby, the only other sound besides Galen's harsh breaths. Galen recovered much more swiftly than the old senator who'd mentored Chance long ago. He sat up straight, with his still-hungry gaze lingering on Chance's naked body kneeling before him.

Chance wet his lips. The part of him that still quaked inside could have been measured on a geologist's monitors, had any been near, but he smiled blissfully when Galen reached out to caress his cheek.

"You did well, Chance, for someone who's out of practice. I'll see to it you get many opportunities to improve your technique. You'd like that, wouldn't you?" Surprisingly, Galen was already hardening again. He lovingly fingered the tip. "You see what you do to me?"

Something akin to triumph welled up in Chance. "Anything that pleases you, Galen, brings me joy."

Galen all but purred. "I've a way for you to please me more, Chance. Much more. I've a special room downstairs where I might enjoy your body further. I'm sure by now Dawn awaits us there. Shall we go?"

When Galen stepped back into his singlesuit, Chance rose to his feet and reached for his clothes.

"Leave them!"

At Galen's snapped order, Chance dropped the black silk and followed Galen, eager as a puppy.

## Chapter Nine

Chance followed Galen down a short flight of stairs off the kitchen into a modern lift and descended.

Galen didn't speak, seeming content with rubbing his thumb and forefinger together while staring at the solid plascrete lift wall.

The churning inside Chance redoubled until he shivered as if naked on an ice planet. He wasn't chilled. In fact, the air warmed and an animal scent lingered in the air. It was somewhat pleasant, if unfamiliar to Chance's nose. Sparta prided itself on open-air facilities on their hot world, making visits to other more environmentally closed worlds a bit of a trial. Odd that it didn't bother him here.

The lift slowed, then stopped. Galen stepped forth as soon as the doors silently opened, and Chance obediently followed.

The corridor hadn't the hard-edged lines of a UCP-built facility, but rounded, smooth walls of an extruded substance Chance did not recognize. There were no seams, even when they turned a corner to the right. Motion-sensitive lights turned on when they approached, and a glance behind showed they turned off again as soon as the next set came on. Chance lauded the energy-saving measure even as his shivering increased.

Galen stopped in front of a set of circular doors. He waited for Chance to stop a pace away. Only then did he seem to take notice of Chance's quivering body. "We'll take care of that shaking in a moment. When the attendant approaches you, hold still and accept what is done to you. You may then proceed further into the room. After that, I think you'll know what to do."

Without waiting for Chance to acknowledge, he waved his hand in front of the door and stepped into the small room as soon as the doors slid into their apertures.

Chance again followed, as if he was tethered to Galen. The tiny room contained nothing more than little hooks on the wall and a small, naked male on a chair who rose and approached with a wand in his hand.

Distracted by Galen, who began to nonchalantly strip off his clothes again, Chance didn't notice the wand swing up until there was a sting on his arm. He gasped and looked at his right bicep, and a small welt appeared.

The stone-faced attendant calmly walked over to Galen and touched the wand to the arm Galen offered. At Galen's nod, the male returned to his seat and touched a large red button on the wall.

A set of doors opened. Galen sailed through, looking eager.

Seconds behind him, Chance made it through the doors just in time. One of the doors closed so fast it clipped his heel.

The cavernous round room was ablaze with lights, showing bodies moving mercilessly in sexual concourse. The walls and floor were covered in a soft, springy substance. He judged it to be nonporous, since a sprinkler system came on over an unused area, washing it clean.

Galen watched him from a few feet away, his arms crossed and his expression expectant. His erection was so hard it resembled a flagstaff.

Chance sagged with relief when his shaking eased. However, a new sensation rose up within him to replace it. He felt feverish, and his hand wiped away sweat from his forehead.

The heat bloomed from his genitals, and he looked down to see his cock spring to life, engorging and filling without help from him. He'd not had one of those since adolescence, when his hormones had raged out of control.

They'd laughed as kids about how the lust monster took control with no warning, but now Chance knew they'd only seen a dim glimpse of the raging beast lust could become. It roared to life fully within him, hazing his vision and causing pain he must ease by any means possible. Preferably by burying it in the nearest willing body.

His hand crept to his groin, but other hands stopped him. Many hands led him to an odd device covered with the room padding. A hole in the table-like structure accepted his aching cock as the hands forced him to lie face down. Clamps restrained his wrists, but Chance didn't care. He had a hole to pump his aching cock through, and that was enough for the moment. A warm, wet slickness below the hole surrounded his cock, and he pumped enthusiastically.

More warmth and wetness accompanied what might have been a hand on his ass, moving in time with his nearly mindless thrusts. He accepted this, more interested in easing the screaming beast of need for his release than any other sensation.

No speech interrupted his hazy thoughts. The cries of others attaining their release faded to mere background noise, replaced by a tinnitus-like buzz in his ears. Whatever was left of his sanity faded with a mere whimper he might have sworn came from his own throat.

A belt thrown across his waist cinched down, preventing him from thrusting into whatever was below the table, but the heated sucking action continued. His instinct to thrust warred with the wish to keep still, the better to enjoy the tugging on his aching, swollen cock. The decision had been taken from him, however. He had no choice but to remain immobile.

His back arched when a finger rubbed his asshole, then probed within. It felt huge, but wonderfully tickled his prostate as it moved in further. More. He wanted more. Nothing

mattered but an orgasm. His body focused on that one need, and his mind followed unquestioningly.

Dimly he noted the limp body of a female carried between two males. Her blonde curls obscured her face, but it was surely Dawn. That woke him from his trancelike state enough to yearn toward her. She was placed on a table structure similar to his and clamped down in the same position he now held. They adjusted the table, lifting her ass high into the air until she was exposed for penetration. One of the males crawled under the table and attached a device to what Chance assumed was her clitoris.

Dawn jerked immediately, and one blue eye opened under the curls in her face. She wasn't focused on anything, just had a wild look in her eyes. She weakly struggled in her bonds and moaned. Her lips formed the word "No."

Chance wanted to help her. His honor demanded no female ever be forced, and that went even beyond his body's cries for release. Something large replaced the finger -- or had it been another device? -- at his anal opening. Mercilessly, it entered, and mild pain replaced pleasure. Chance's biceps strained at the cuffs, but they held. The pain receded and was replaced once more with good sensations.

The male behind Dawn entered her and seemed to not care if she felt pleasure or not. He pumped despite her feeble struggles, not even looking at her. Another male clamped her ankles down when one leg kicked out.

Humiliated for her, Chance's foggy brain cleared more. Rape was unacceptable, especially for a sex engineer of her standing. He didn't feel he was being raped. He'd agreed. Chance was halfway willing to indulge, just to answer the question of whether or not his sexuality was clear. A mildly interesting experiment, nothing more. However, Dawn hadn't been asked, or she would have been conscious. That popping sound he'd heard earlier had been from a tranquilizer dart gun. For her sake, he continued to fight his bonds and whatever had been in his food. Perhaps the two drugs were incompatible, since one acted as a tranquilizer and one hyped him up. Who knew? It wasn't important.

Dawn's eyes took on more clarity and focused on Chance. She took in what was happening to him, and a fire of rage lit behind her eyes.

He could feel her anger pour out in waves and wished there was a way to reassure her that he accepted this experiment in sexuality. It wasn't unpleasant, though he definitely would have preferred her to ease the ache caused by the drug in his system. But how to convey that to her? He shut his eyes, praying Seelies were empathic, and hoped she'd get the message.

As soon as his eyes fluttered closed, the sensations of his own penetration rose to distract him. Whoever had entered him was now thoroughly enjoying himself, and Chance's body responded with pleasure of its own. Fine. He ignored it as best he could, despite the second drug urging him to orgasm.

A feeling like a pet requesting entry into his home nudged his mind. Something warm and soothing wanted his attention, if only he'd open the door and allow it in. Well, he'd go with that. Clumsily, he imagined going to a door and fought with it until it opened. It was as if he pulling a giant, heavy plascrete door, moving it by inches.

In his mind, the cat helped by shoving from the outside, piteously meowing to be let in. As soon as there was enough clearance to squeeze through, the cat leapt into his arms.

Instantly, he held Dawn, cuddling her tightly to his body. She nuzzled his neck, and something soft and furry wrapped around his body. "I am here, Chance. I'll share this horror with you."

Chance discreetly felt the furry warmth wrapped around his waist. It felt like ... a tail. He swallowed. Was it the drug that made him find Dawn's mental tail sexy?

Dawn giggled in his arms and the tail tightened. "No, silly. Males find tails sexy, and don't ask me why. I'll explain about it in a minute. I just want to hold you. This is horrible."

Chance's body signaled that whoever was in him, and he assumed it was Galen, was pumping hard and fast. He'd come soon, and Chance would follow. Their time was short. He

wouldn't be able to hold this mental picture when that was happening, he was sure. "I don't mind this, Dawn. Really. I didn't like it much as a kid, but this is okay. I even somewhat like it. You, however, I'm worried about. This is an insult."

She shook her head and smiled. "It's only my body, Chance. They can't touch my heart, and I could care less about a little meaningless sex. This is no more than a stupid little Seelie mating circle, where everyone is fucked to ease the ache of our seasons. They've put something in our bodies, and it's made you need sex. It didn't work on my Seelie system, so they used a tranquilizer."

Chance closed his mental eyes as a wave of sexual pleasure warned him he was close to release. He was having a hard time staying focused. Some of what Dawn said didn't make sense to his drug-inhibited thought processes. "Seasons? Seelies have seasons? Like, going into heat only at certain times of the year?" He tried to make a mental connection. "Is that why Seelies have tails?" Even to him, the question sounded stupid.

Dawn chuckled. "Yes, we have heat seasons, and I had mine a few months ago. I'm getting a little old to have them, so I probably won't have another for quite a while. It has nothing to do with my tail, or lack thereof."

She unwound herself from his arms and paced in her old energetic way. "Look, eventually whatever they put in our systems is going to wear off. This little interlude of sex has different purposes. For some reason, Galen wants you humiliated. That's why he's fucking you blind right now. They have your cock hooked up to something resembling a dairy milking machine. Your impending orgasm will be collected for some reason. I don't yet know why they want me."

A memory stirred in Chance's beleaguered mind. "Females. They prefer females." He felt like he was in one of the old speculative fiction stories read for amusement in history spools. "Breeding?"

“Great.” Dawn’s tone conveyed a wealth of contempt and annoyance. “Wait until they find out not only am I not human, but any offspring they do get out of me will have tails. That oughta make them jump for joy.”

Orgasm began for Chance. He felt his hold on Dawn and the images she brought with her fade. He could barely get the words out. A dark mist rose up from the floor, and lights sparkled in front of his eyes. His chest burned, as if his heart failed. “So why don’t you have a tail?”

Dawn grinned at him, her image turning transparent and slipping through the door. “Oh, I had it docked to appear more human. It’s in cryogenic storage. Hang on, Chance. Don’t die on me. I’ll have you free as soon as I can. They’ve never seen a pissed-off Seelie, and they’re about to find out we have an unusual set of claws.”



## Chapter Ten

Chance awoke all at once, probably because his head was pounding and threatened to explode at any moment. Part of him wished it would, to save him further agony. He tried to reach up to rub the ache away, but chains rattled and he could only move his arms from his sides perhaps a few inches. Damn. Nightmares did come true.

He called upon his training, relaxing his body one muscle group at a time, while he performed an internal assessment. He was on his back on something hard. Feet okay, except for being chained at the ankles with legs spread slightly. Sore ass. Well, that was to be expected. Bruised and slightly swollen right bicep. Again, expected. Wouldn't slow him down much, if he could get his hands around Galen's throat long enough to break the scientist's neck.

His head appeared to be the worst of his debilities. The pain bordered on the worst migraine he'd ever had, and that was saying something.

He opened his eyes to test for light sensitivity. The dim lighting of his cell -- and it definitely was a cell, with a barred door -- was enough to make him wince. What stood between him and the door was more than enough to make him grimace.

"I see you're awake, Chancellor Tiberius Hesperus." Galen's smooth, imperious voice no longer bothered with the graceful and charming tone, but rather held the cool command of an oligarch. He sauntered in to stand beside the slab where Chance was chained.

Chance sighed and didn't bother to hide it. Galen had used his full name and title. His cover as nothing more than another I-Corps spy was atomized. "You'll forgive me if I keep my eyes shut, won't you, Galen? Whatever drug you put in the food gave me a migraine. Since I'm chained, I doubt you'll be kind enough to provide me with a suitable analgesic."

"Actually, yes, I'd be happy to provide you with relief. However, I doubt you'll take it willingly. The migraine is caused by the absence of the hormone we put in your system to make you tractable."

Relief flooded Chance's mind. Keeping the body disciplines going would eventually allow his system to purge itself of the effects, then. Hormones rarely remained in a body when they weren't manufactured there. "No, thank you."

Galen's hand caressed Chance's skin from neck to knees. "I'm sad to know I was right about you. You're too willful to allow the hormones to completely affect you. Even under their strong influence to make you feel at home and pliant, your own strength of will made you shake with the need to be free."

The headache was easing. Chance kept the deep frown of pain on his face. "I like my freedom of choice, Galen. I dislike it intensely when someone takes it away."

Galen pinched his thigh. "Nonsense. You gave up your freedom the day you took office on Sparta, despite the fact you never campaigned for the position. No leader is ever free. They're tied to their position with a gag in their mouth, knowing every move and every word uttered will be recorded and analyzed by the media."

Chance shrugged without moving his head too much. "True, but it was my choice to put myself in that cage, Galen."

Galen paced four steps, his footfalls echoing off the bare walls of the cell. He went on as if Chance hadn't spoken. "Every human I've met outside this hive weeps and whines about the results of his choices, Chance. They want the governments to take care of them, tell them what to eat, where to sleep, where to work, and even where they can eliminate waste. Make a decision and then take responsibility for it? Perish the thought. Entire societies were built on the abdication of responsibility and the government taking over all thought processes. Individuality was all but eliminated."

Chance ventured opening one eye. The light seared his brain, but he glimpsed Galen facing the back wall of the cell, rubbing his right thumb and forefinger together. He shut his eyes again, not yet able to bear the light. "Those governments failed, Galen."

His reminder caused Galen to return to his position hovering over the platform where Chance was chained. He chuckled. "Of course they did. Humans like the illusion of freedom more than the reality. You can't just walk in and take away all their illusions, my boy. You give them what they want in tiny, measured doses. They love you for it when they don't have to worry or make the tough decisions anymore. They'll call you the peacemaker and erect a statue in your honor, as long as they don't have to stretch their synapses or lift a finger personally."

He smiled and patted Chance's flat stomach, causing mild pain to Chance's full bladder. "Unlike you, most of the human race is extremely lazy. Complacency is what I'm after. Most humans are only good for the simplest of repetitive tasks. Many do such work now, mindlessly putting one item with another, counting widgets, monitoring a gauge, or pressing buttons."

Poseidon's beard, Chance needed to go to the urinal. The discomfort was getting worse than the headache, but he'd be damned if he asked for anything. "Humans aren't robots. They need challenges."

Galen slapped Chance's semi-erect cock. Not enough to cause pain but merely to bring it to the forefront of Chance's mind despite his determination to ignore the problem. "Have a

full bladder, Chance? Go ahead. I know you can't feel the lightweight equipment, but you're fully hooked up for waste disposal. Can't have captured wild ones making a mess, can we?"

"You're so generous." Chance's sarcasm didn't hide his humiliation at having to use the machine.

"Yes, I am, whether you think so or not. Under normal circumstances, I'd have merely ended your life as you know it. However, once we found out who you really were, we knew better than to simply make you disappear. Sparta would boil out like enraged ants if they knew their beloved chancellor vanished here. How did you escape the Senate, anyway? They aren't known for letting their leaders get adventurous."

Chance clamped his lips shut, purposely allowing Galen to see he'd not tell easily. The fact was, Chance had been a UCP I-Corps agent before being called to serve his planet. It had been ridiculously easy to escape the chains of office. However, the methods he'd used were closely guarded I-Corps secrets locked in his subconscious until he needed those particular skills. Galen couldn't get that knowledge from Chance without killing him first.

Galen sighed. "I didn't think you'd tell me. How disappointing. Well, you've forced me to change my plans, and I dislike the necessity. I can't have Spartans overrunning my planet, making inquiries, or possibly even invading my hive. Even your oversized females are dangerously vicious fighters, according to rumor."

Chance's eyes opened, now that the pain had receded far enough to risk sight. "Let me guess. My planet just moved to the top of your takeover plans."

The smile on Galen's face was not by any stretch of the imagination pleasant. It resembled the intense study of a scientist who'd just seen something new to investigate. Then again, Dr. Galen Faust was an entomologist. "Oh, you are so brilliant, Chance. Can you guess how I'll do it?"

The insulting tone was more than Chance's pride could bear. His face reddened, but his increased heart rate didn't make his headache worse. In fact, it eased more. "I'm not an insect

to study, Galen. It takes no great intelligence to assume you'll introduce the hormones into the food and water supply."

With eyes colder than any of his study subjects, Galen stood upright. "No, you're a mere mammal. Humans have only one advantage over insects, and it's a small one -- the opposable thumb. I happen to think insects are superior to humans, and that's why this society here is called the hive. My ancestors were very wise to adopt the insect societal system and adjust themselves to it. We've survived for close to a millennium, right under human noses. After so long in hiding, we're finally ready to show ourselves as superior in every way." He paused and visibly shook himself. "No matter. You are essentially correct. We'll use the food and water. Water is easiest, of course. We're so dependent on it, we choose our planets accordingly for colonization. Yours is especially vulnerable, with its hot, dry climates and small but viable oceans. My specialists could easily integrate into the ranks of the purification systems technicians and, at the proper time, insinuate the hormones into the water supply."

Chance laughed. "Impossible. The water system technicians are screened and checked by security." Then he remembered the breach attempts on Uncle. Attempts designed not to steal secrets as they'd thought, but merely to change data.

Galen read the change in Chance's face. "You catch on quickly. Delightful. We've already infiltrated Maxim, though I admit only low-level service positions. Sex engineers are such a devilishly difficult bunch of altruists. Still, they need service technicians the same as any other society. Their amusement facilities are especially vulnerable."

The rich, famous, and powerful visited Maxim's pleasure palaces and amusement villas. Chance closed his eyes. He could see thousands of planetary governors, city mayors, wealthy businesspersons, and even a few oligarchs suddenly tractable to anything Galen wanted. "What would you do with that many people under your control, Galen? It's a logistical nightmare."

A quiet chuckle. “Nothing much. Just give them a few mild suggestions about allowing certain new technicians into their work force and a few extra servants to return with them to keep them supplied with the hormone in their foods. Ease our way a bit, until every planet but a few isolated agrarian colonies remain unaffected. The overtaken planets will be full of peace and harmony, as citizens lose their ability to think for themselves.” Galen’s voice dripped with false happiness, like a caregiver telling a story to small children. “They’ll do as they’re told in their jobs, go home at night when the day is done, sleep peacefully, and return to work the next day like good little worker insects. They’ll get what they’ve always wanted -- food to eat, a comfortable place to sleep, and no worries to trouble their hearts. Only those deemed worthy will breed, and they won’t have to concern themselves with child-rearing, education, or making sure their offspring are good, productive citizens of the UCP. Peace will reign at last in the known galaxy.”

Chance saw through this perfect little picture. He opened his eyes and let the hatred blaze through to bore into Galen. “So, you take away the human ability to choose for themselves their fate, make them into living robots, decide who will breed according to your standards. The only thing that will reign will be you.”

Galen recoiled slightly from the emotion on Chance’s face. “Tsk, ts. Such anger you’re displaying, dear Tiberius. Your Spartan constituents would be appalled at your lack of restraint. Don’t be ridiculous. No one person could rule an empire like the UCP. Each planet will have its own Brood Mothers to breed and its own Prime Males -- like me -- to rule them. Nothing much will change. The Primes will meet, just as the UCP Council does now.”

He glanced at the chrono on his wrist, the only thing he wore besides the oily smile. “That reminds me. Our lovely new Brood Mother should be awakening now. I must go congratulate Dawn, now that she’s recovering from her surgery.”

Surgery? What surgery? Chance opened his mouth to ask, but Galen covered it with a deep kiss that had nothing to do with love. His hand stroked Chance’s cock to rigid attention. Against Chance’s lips, he murmured. “Pardon the pun, but I’m giving you one last chance.

Join me at my side as my lover, willingly making decisions, or become nothing more than a gene producer, milked every three days for the one useful thing you'll have left: your genes."

He waved the barred door open and sauntered out.

## Chapter Eleven

Dawn tested the length of her ankle chain for the fifth time, knowing it would not quite reach the barred door. She snarled inwardly, but kept her expression vacant and sweet. *Just give me one chance, you bastards. I'm going rip off your heads and shit down the holes.*

As he had the last four times she'd moved, her jailor rose from his stool with an alert look on his face. He didn't speak, just hefted a wand-like device like a whip into a ready position. Even so, when she made no other threatening moves, he bowed to her -- what the heck was that about, anyway? -- and sat back down.

She returned to sit on the platform she'd awakened upon and brooded silently. Okay, she was naked and chained in what looked like a pen. A very comfortable cage with water available -- she rather liked the pretty fountain arc it made when she pressed the lever -- and something resembling a catering slot, if you liked the odd-smelling soup that issued from it. Even a waste disposal seat conformed to a female body was available, but in clear sight of the attendant. Guards, was nothing private in this place?

The scent and closeness of this place was getting to her. She'd happily kill to climb a tree and think in comfort and clean air. Okay, she'd kill just to relieve a few frustrations.



Worst in her mind, her belly had a small bandage on it. They'd removed her fertility and disease prevention implant. Of all the indignities, that one annoyed her most. Not that she could get pregnant without being in heat, but the little grain of medication controlled many things besides when an egg fired. Events just might get ugly without those drugs keeping her calm. She was enough of an empath to need those tranquilizers when around many humans at once.

Where the hell was Chance? He was going to be damn sore from the ass-pounding Galen had given him. She bet herself he'd walk funny for a week. She wasn't doing such a great job of protecting him right now, and that bothered her. Not that he couldn't protect himself just fine under most circumstances. The Spartan sure had a way with weapons, and he was as stealthy as a Seelie for all he was so huge.

She grinned to herself. Huge in more ways than one. She wished for the millionth time she could keep in contact with him after this mission was over. He was without doubt the finest lover and the best damn playmate for holodeck games she'd ever had.

"I'm so glad to see a genuine smile on that lovely face of yours, Dawn."

Chain rattling, Dawn leapt to her feet at the sound of that hated, imperious voice of Dr. Faust's. He was first on her kill list, and conveniently enough, he was there outside her pen. *Come in here, you rapist. I so want to castrate you, I'd do it with my bare hands.* "What do you want, Dr. Faust?"

He waved away the guard and took his wand. The guard retreated out of the room, bowing and scraping like Faust was some sort of royalty. Faust took it all as his due, standing just outside the door, slapping the wand into his free hand. "Well, well. An honest emotion from you at last. I like you this way much better than the vapid idiot you pretended to be yesterday."

Dawn sat back on the platform and folded her legs until they crossed in front of her. She'd be damned if she'd display any discomfort associated with being naked and chained.

Maybe acting like a queen entertaining an annoying supplicant was overdoing it, but the guard had bowed to her same as he had to Faust. Maybe she did have some sort of power here she didn't know about. "Yeah? Whatever. I repeat. What. Do. You. Want? It's a simple enough question."

Faust's confident grin did nothing to give her a clue, but his knees quivered for a moment. Did he want to kneel, and fought the compulsion? Interesting. "I want a great many things from you, Dawn."

He was evading the question, but his answer told her enough. They did want something. Something she wasn't going to like, so persuasion was in order. Well, she could use such a situation to her advantage. "Sounds like a long list. Care to come in and sit? I'm not going anywhere." She gestured to the ankle chain. "I'd offer you a cup of coffee, but I'm a little low on amenities right now."

Faust lowered the whip weapon, his expression triumphant. "Sex engineers are always so gracious, even in the face of adversity. I admire the skill. Yes, I will join you. Allow me to provide the coffee. You take it black, I believe."

*Hot, dark, and straight in the veins when I can get it, buster.* "Yes, I do. Thank you."

He turned and tapped a few keys out of her line of sight before opening the cage door. His eyes lingered on her breasts and pussy, displayed by the folded position her legs were in. His erection rose to half-mast immediately.

Was the insatiable bastard never satisfied? Dawn suppressed the sigh forming in her lungs. Lust was something she could deal with. It was, after all, her stock in trade. She sat up a little straighter, allowing her breasts to lift slightly and look fuller. "I don't like being alone in here. I'm not used to it." She glanced at where the guard had been. "He wasn't much of a talker."

Faust sauntered in and hit a button on the wall that had been out of her reach. A plascrete slab covered with a cushion slid from the wall, giving him an ample seat. "The

guard? Oh, he wouldn't be. He's deaf, neutered, and has no larynx. He can't be influenced by your loveliness in any manner."

*But you can.* She extended what little empathy she possessed without touching Faust. Oh, yes, he was a raving lecher held in check only by necessity. Anything, anyone, anytime, as long as he emptied his balls early and often. It was a wonder he could think at all. Lust for her poured off him in waves, so strong even her pitiful awareness recoiled.

Their coffee arrived, brought in on a tray by the guard. The white utilitarian cups were far different from the delicate antiques used the day before, but they held more liquid.

Galen drank his coffee with all the aplomb of the sophisticate he pretended to be. Now that she knew it was an act, his parody of manners and grace was all the more hideous. Under all the politeness and tasteful execution of courtesy lay an unfeeling monster that cared more about his self-gratification than the humanity of his victims. They were less than nothing to him, just ways to get what he wanted.

She was therefore unsurprised when he waited until she'd drunk precisely half her coffee before persuasively leaning forward, smiling charmingly. "I do hope you'll try the soup I smell in your catering slot, Dawn. It's very nutritious. I'm sure you're hungry."

Her stomach was ready to sue for nonsupport, but she'd be damned if she'd agree to flood her system with more drugs. She shot the catering slot a contemptuous look. "No, thank you."

The cold bastard had the nerve to chuckle like an indulgent father. "Dawn, Dawn. No need to be haughty. I assure you there's nothing in that soup but meat, vegetables, and broth. Your excellent metabolism makes giving you drugs a waste of time." He paused. "I'll enjoy finding out why you're immune to hormones that make most breeders little bundles of lust."

Her insides jerked at the use of such an insulting word. On her planet, to call someone a breeder meant they had nothing else to offer but making more little Seelies. Only her self-

discipline kept her body relaxed and ready for whatever would happen. “Breeder, Galen? Is that what you call females?”

He must have realized he’d used the wrong tack with her, because he reacted oddly for one so arrogant. He inclined his head for a moment, as if apologizing for rudeness. “Females who can serve more than that function are rare indeed. Most are ruled by their instincts to seek out the best male, use any means possible -- including harming others -- to lure the male, and then once they have the male, force him into a form of servitude to provide for her and the offspring she produces. Deny it?”

She narrowed her eyes. His assessment was nothing less than pure distortion, but it did have a measure of cynical truth. He expected her nod and got a slow, careful one. She wondered how he liked a similar argument. “And what of the male instinct to mindlessly seek females, having sex with as many as possible, until his body literally fails him?”

His face lit up in triumph. “Indeed, Dawn. It is ridiculous the way human instincts are set up, isn’t it? Most females want monogamous relationships and males want polygamous freedom.” He set his cup back on the tray. “But what if there were a way to correct the problem?”

Dawn pretended to consider this. You couldn’t change instinct, only modify the behavior slightly. “Then I’d be out of a job.”

Galen stood and walked over to play with her hair. His hands trembled with the desire to take her, with or without her permission. “What if I gave you a new position? Something fitting for your beauty, with no worries and everything you could want for the rest of your life?”

She swallowed the acid bile that rose in her throat and threatened to choke her. She couldn’t kill him yet, not until she was free of her chains. Not until she learned where Chance was. All she needed was for him to touch her skin of his own free will. A kiss, a fuck, something intimate to allow her in deeply, past the ordinary barriers humankind kept from

their deepest selves. Touching Galen's emotions would be like sticking her hands in bandar shit and twice as slimy, but she'd risk losing her mind to find out what she needed so desperately.

She'd have to play on his current surface emotions. One wrong step, and she'd expose what she was. If that happened, she'd better find the quickest way to kill herself and make sure her body was useless. She didn't fancy being an autopsy for Galen to dissect. "Yeah, Galen? I'm not impressed yet."

She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue and softened her eyes to resemble fearful wariness. His lust flared immediately. So, his thing was power, huh? Well, she hated the role of submissive, but she could simulate quite well. Next step was a little gulp of saliva, as if wetting a throat dry with fear.

Galen noted her actions, and his smile became more confident. "You will be, my dear girl. You're so young, you're perfect for the role I have in mind." His fingertips grazed her left nipple. "But first, I'd like to enjoy a sex engineer's skills. Perhaps you'll indulge my curiosity?"

Bait taken. Now to reel in her prize. She steeled herself and locked her own mind behind barriers no human could breach. "I ... I'm not exactly in a position to bargain here."

His right hand was inches away from her pussy, and his lips less than that distance from her mouth. "I know, but it is polite to ask." His lips met hers violently, and he shoved her down on her back, not caring if she untangled her legs first or not.

The lack of finesse was unimportant. She was flexible enough to get her legs comfortable. In his eagerness to get his cock into her and start pumping away, he'd be easy prey.

Her squeak of surprise was all he expected, and he got it. He yanked her body to the end of the platform for maximum access and pulled her ankles over his shoulders.

Classy. She was bored already. Good thing all she needed was muscle control enough to clamp down and make his entry difficult. She closed her eyes and concentrated on delicately insinuating herself into his consciousness, fighting past the hammering waves of lust.

He groaned as he met the barrier of her tight passage. “You’re tight, little one. Scared? I won’t harm you. See, I’ll take my time and make it good for you, too.”

Behind her tightly shut lids, she rolled her eyes. Clichés? Please. Obviously he’d never had to woo a female, just take, and that happened to suit her. The human mind was like an ocean, and she had to swim past the waves to get to the calmer emotions beyond the conscious “shoreline.” While she fought the incoming breakers, he needed a distraction. “Sorry. I’m used to being the one in control.”

There. That did it. The waves did not calm precisely, but turned in direction. He loved having a female of power beneath him and under his control. His mind flooded with images of subduing her, like ghosts of old dataspools.

As a reward and to keep him distracted, she relaxed a few of her muscles and let his cock slip in. Now he’d be happy long enough for her to learn his secrets.

Galen responded with enthusiasm, humping with animalistic pleasure.

Dawn clamped down on her contempt and moved to the vast ocean of his emotional experiences. What she needed would be nearby, but where to begin?

## Chapter Twelve

The eddies and currents threatened to pull Dawn deeper into Faust's emotional memories. She knew her time was limited to how long she could keep Faust in physical contact with her, and that wouldn't be long unless she used every trick in the sex engineer arsenal to keep him aroused but unfulfilled. Difficult at best when she had her supplies handy, but damned uncomfortable when she had nothing.

She angled her hips to give him less pressure and less friction, as well as incidentally giving her less than perfectly lubricated pussy a rest.

A small storm nearby seemed her best bet of a location to find Chance. If he wasn't there, she'd have to risk calling up Faust's emotions consciously.

She swam the currents, pleased to note many fed into the storm. The swirl of clouded emotions and flashes of temper resembled a thunderstorm that produced no tears of rain. Instead, this one lashed impotently and unmoving, stuck in one position. Interestingly, it was not Chance's image at the center of the storm, but a female with a face colder and calmer than her assassination teacher Cherry Blossom's, though they shared the same genetics. This female from the same planet bore no twinkle of humor in her eye as she coolly refused Faust's advances and said, "These are your orders. Carry them out, or your people will be

wiped from existence as useless.” That image repeated itself like a looped dataspool. Emotional waves sick with fear and anger nearly swamped Dawn, and she quickly swam toward a calmer, sunnier area to rest.

Her physical ears took in the sound of Faust’s frustrated groan.

She sighed at the time she had to waste catering to Faust’s ego and libido. “Galen, let’s not limit ourselves to one position. What else would you like to try of my skills?”

He pulled out and nodded, breathing harshly. “On your hands and knees, breeder. Perhaps if I treat you like a bitch, you’ll show some enthusiasm.”

Dawn suppressed the retort, *Perhaps if you showed some finesse, you might get it.* She slipped to the floor and assumed the position demanded, simulating meek compliance.

As soon as Galen reentered and began thrusting happily, Dawn ignored the pain of a less lubricated passage and found her sunny spot again.

This time, the images presented to her were comforting to Galen, but so disturbing to her she recoiled. It wouldn’t do to throw up here. Galen would surely notice.

A woman with a grossly distended belly from multiple pregnancies reclined on a couch-like structure on wheels. Her legs were limp and lifeless, the muscles so atrophied her limbs resembled white sticks.

Like small images attached to the larger came the knowledge that the woman’s hips had been deliberately broken and her lower spine severed in the precise location to immobilize and prevent pain from her waist down. More images followed, and Dawn cried out in horror and pain. They were too much to bear, and all she could do was weep and scream.

Her sobs and shrieks fueled Galen’s ardor. He slapped her ass in triumph. “Come for me, baby. Come hard. I want to hear you scream.”

Her mind swam away to the sound of a litany of the woman’s words played repeatedly, like quotes from a holy book. Reverence, love, and loyalty calmed the emotional waters



Dawn swam in. Whoever this woman was, she'd sacrificed herself voluntarily, and that made the nauseating images associated with her that much worse.

A small but strong eddy yanked Dawn from the image to a smaller, yet much more turbulent area. She waited, knowing something important would be revealed. When the image did appear, Dawn herself reclined upon the same couch, in peaceful repose. This was the job Galen wanted? He wanted her to perform the same self-sacrifice, consigning herself to becoming a pregnant sofa cushion spouting wisdom?

Her shout of "NO!" was out of her throat before she could suppress it. The rage she felt matched that of a strong red current that snatched her with the force of a hurricane and deposited her just outside her own cell, as if she looked in from Galen's point of view. A memory of her surfaced, clearly still unconscious. Galen's emotional ocean roiled around her.

"Galen" turned and moved to a cell a few doors down and pressed a plate on the wall to allow him entry. Chance lay on a slab similar to her own in her cell, but chained down and hooked to more infernal equipment. Galen's greed to have him there, helpless and enslaved, washed over her.

Dawn's heart ached for Chance's state, where his freedom was even more restricted than hers. Her hands clenched until her nails dug into her palms enough to cause pain and wrench her away from Galen's mind. She didn't care. She had what she needed, and it was payback time.

Empath training on Seelie meant leaving the mind delicately, laying down a soothing balm to restore order and heal any problems that might have resulted from the empath's rummaging. However, any healer also knew what could harm the worst, even so poor an empath as an ex-Seelie ranger only fit for keeping dangerous beasts at bay from the colonies.

Dawn grinned, clamped down on Galen's cock where he couldn't escape, and did her best to give him a mental concussion. One explosive burst, and it blew over the seas of his mind like a hurricane, knocking all the eddies and storms before it flat.

Galen's large and heavy body fell on top of hers, shoving her down on the floor. She let go of his cock and let him slide out of her body.

Her ankle chains rattled cheerfully when she sat up to admire her work. Sadly, Galen wasn't out cold, but knelt with a blank expression like a doll's. She huffed out a breath. "Rats and damn. I'll never learn that punch."

She pouted and considered going ahead and breaking his neck, but logic won out. If Galen was mentally out cold, but his subconscious worked, he might still be useful. "Galen, unlock my chains."

The eminent scientist moved like a wooden sculpture and opened the door to her cage. He punched a few keys, and her chains fell off her feet.

Dawn squashed the temptation to rub her sore, chafed ankles. No telling how long Galen would remain an animatronic doll to command. She left her cage and stood near Galen, ready to incapacitate him as soon as he woke up. "Release Chance Hesperus."

Galen moved stiffly down the hall, punching buttons in the same sequence on a console just outside Chance's cell.

A yelp from within made her wince and assume some of the equipment's removal was not a pleasant experience. Chance bolted out the door, his face red with rage. He made straight for Galen, his intent clear.

Hating herself for the necessity, Dawn tripped Chance and flinched when he fell heavily against another barred door. "Ouch. Sorry, that's going to leave marks. Chance, wait a few before you do what you want, please? I don't blame you, but we need Galen to show us the way out of here."

Chance growled and rubbed his shoulder, but the red haze of anger left his eyes. “Did you have to do that?”

“It was either that or bust your kneecaps.” She turned to Galen. “Show us the safe way out of here.”

Chance awkwardly got to his feet and followed Galen’s shambling steps to a large, circular door. Dawn pushed in front of Chance, just in case. She was the guardian. Not only was she putting herself between Chance and possible danger, she’d be the one to kill, not him. Her authorizations from the UCP were broader.

Galen blinked once before starting to punch in the code, but hesitated over the last button. His hand trembled, and he blinked once more.

“Damn, he’s waking up.” Dawn took his wrist and hit the last button with his finger.

Galen gasped and spun around, his eyes now mostly alert. His brow was furrowed in pain, and Dawn bet he had the equivalent of a monster hangover. He dove for her, his hands reaching for her throat.

Ready for such a maneuver, Dawn sidestepped him neatly and then leapt upon his back. Before he could do more than straighten in surprise, she wrenched his head around, breaking his neck with a sickening crackle.

Chance brought up his knee into Galen’s groin as the scientist fell forward with a look of shocked surprise on his face. “I know you probably can’t feel that, but it’s my personal parting gift.”

Dawn rode the dying man down until she could scramble off. She shuddered briefly. “I hate breaking necks. The sound gives me the shivers.”

Chance grabbed her hand. “Come on, we have to find the vats and shut them down.”

She had other ideas of what needed to be shut down, but if he had a better plan, she was open to suggestions. “Why do we shut down food supplies?”

Chance gagged before answering. “They eat people, Dawn. Anyone they can’t use becomes food.”

Her stomach lurched, but her irreverent mouth overrode the nausea. “Humans -- the other *OTHER* white meat? Gross!” The image of the soup, left behind in her catering slot, flitted in front of her eyes.

Then a vision of what Galen had served them upon arrival hit. She’d had a pork-like meat she couldn’t identify. Her stomach heaved, and she turned to lose her coffee in a nearby niche.

Chance pulled her hair away from her face and let her get it all out. “Yeah. I lost what little I had in my stomach after Galen left.”

Dawn wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. Coffee tasted a helluva lot worse coming back up than it did going down. “I’m going to go back and kill him again.”

“Let’s shut down those vats.” He tugged at her hand.

Dawn resisted. “No, Chance. There’s worse than those vats in his hive of horrors.” She took a shuddering breath. “I got a lot of images when I raped Galen’s mind. Some of them pale in comparison to the vats.” She hesitated and shut her eyes before she lost what little remained in her sore stomach. “This really is a hive, Chance. Think about it. What are the three functions of an insect hive?”

Chance stared at her. “Protection, food storage, and reproduction.”

Dawn got to her feet, begging him with her eyes to comprehend without her having to spell it out. “Okay, protection is obvious. Food is the vats, which we can assume run on a continual basis.” She pressed her lips together. “In insect societies, one queen does all the reproductive work, but no human female can do that.” Her voice trailed off, hoping he’d make the intuitive leap.

“Some insect queens produce at the rate of thousands a day. They’d need many females to replace the one.” His face drained of color. “Females. They’ve been taking many human females. Oh, gods.” He grabbed her hand and nearly yanked her off her feet. “Come on!”

She called herself a coward for not telling him everything, but even she had limits to how much horror she could take. “Chance! Do you have any idea where we’re going? We haven’t even got a weapon!”

His pace slowed enough for her to trot beside him. “Kind of obvious where they’ll be, Dawn. The queen of a hive is always in the most protected place -- at the bottom. All we have to do is find one of those damned lifts, get in, and hit the bottom button. My biggest worry is how we’re going to get a thousand or more women prisoners out of here.” He looked around and pointed to a set of open lift doors. “There’s our ticket down.”

Dawn shut her eyes and bit her trembling lip. Coward. She was a raving lunatic coward. She should be able to just say the words. She trudged to the lift where Chance waited, and muttered, “They don’t need rescuing, and they’re not going anywhere.”

“We’re not leaving anyone behind.”

## Chapter Thirteen

Chance wondered at Dawn's gray face and shambling steps. She looked like one of the legendary zombies he had read about in the history spools. Her reluctance was so foreign to her normal ebullient nature, he knew something was wrong. "What's the matter with you? What did you do to Galen?"

She looked up at him with eyes more vulnerable than he'd ever seen on her before. Dawn's mouth moved, but nothing came out. Her body trembled.

Chance grabbed and held his partner close. She snuggled in his arms, without any trace of lust between them. All he wanted to do was hold and protect her, perhaps even soothe whatever had unnerved his normally unflappable guardian. To hell with Spartan rules of emotional behavior. Dawn needed him. "It's OK. You don't have to tell me. There's been enough done to us both to give us nightmares for the next several years. Let's finish this job and get out of this hellhole."

His murmured words and soft touches seemed to have the desired effect. Dawn stopped trembling and her spine stiffened. "More nightmares to come."

Satisfied his partner was back, Chance pushed the lowest button on the elevator panel. It descended with frightening speed, causing them to clutch at the walls.

When the lift slowed and finally stopped, Dawn swallowed and visibly steeled herself by throwing back her shoulders and lifting her chin. She laid a hand on his arm. "Chance, I don't think you're going to like this."

"Probably not. I haven't liked anything about this place." Now he knew the horror of too much perfection and efficiency -- a world so ordered and controlled, there was no question of disobedience, because no one had a mind to think for themselves.

The elevator doors slid open, and an appalling stench wafted into the tiny enclosure. It reeked both of blood and medical smells, like formalin and alcohol.

His stomach heaved. He blinked his watering eyes and pinched his nose to give his olfactory senses a break. This did not bode well for finding Tara, Jeter, and his family alive. He'd managed to hide that hope from Dawn, or rather they had never spoken of the possibility. The odds were slim to none, now. His heart sank at the loss, and he tried to hide it with a brisk tone of voice. "We're not getting anything done standing here."

Dawn unabashedly had her hand covering her nose. He couldn't be sure if her eyes were watering because of the stench, or she was crying. However, she nodded bravely and was the first to step through.

At least their choice of where to start was easy. There was only one door, at the end of a very short corridor. They strode purposely toward it but stopped just outside the range of the electronic eye.

Dawn paused and listened. If she had been born with canine ears, they would have perked up. She raised a hand in warning. "Chance, listen. What do you hear?"

Chance turned his head and even leaned forward slightly. Machine sounds, like those in a medical facility life-support unit, were all he heard. No footsteps, no voices, no clinking of chains or sounds of incarceration. Just the hiss of breathing machines, the bleeps and blips of monitoring equipment, and the rare dripping sound of some liquid. "The lack of human

sounds with the smell of this much humanity ... we should be hearing people talking, moving. Combined with the medical sounds, I have a feeling this will not be pleasant.”

Dawn closed her eyes for brief moment, but kept her tone brisk. “You aren’t kidding. Just so you’re prepared. Right now I wish I had a few laser pistols.”

He drew in a deep breath. Now he was the one stiffening his spine and praying he was wrong. Deliberately he stepped into view of the electronic eye. The doors snapped open silently, and he peered inside.

His eyes scanned the enormous, low-ceilinged cavern. Dim red lights from tubes running across the ceiling revealed stubby benches, each with transparent glass tubing in pillars at both ends. The tubing pulsed with fluids in brilliant glowing colors, and this distracted him for a moment from what lay between the pillars on the bench surfaces.

Beside him, Dawn gagged and dry heaved just inside the doorway. “I’m tired of getting sick,” she ground out between her stomach’s attempts to rid itself of what it no longer possessed.

Chance stared at the objects, unwilling to believe his eyes were reporting accurately. Each bench carried what appeared to be the torso of a human body from about the neck to the knees, unless you wanted to count the distinctively white medulla oblongata floating inside an inverted glass fishbowl on top of each ... stump. He couldn’t think of another word to describe these bodies that were once human.

On the bench nearest him was a row of at least one hundred grossly male stumps, lined up until they faded into the darkness of the cavern. On each torso there was nothing that could be thought of as flesh below the knees, just tubing with its pulsing colors and electrical conduits. At least they seemed to be conduits of electrical wire, but upon closer examination, each was a tiny tube moving fluid. Each penis was grotesquely attached to some device that held it up and flat against the belly in an obscene parody of an erection.



The female torsos were no better. Among the females were a few whose abdomens bulged as though they were pregnant. In fact, the entire row to his left looked as if they were all approximately in the same stage of pregnancy, and many looked close to term. Another row just within the limits of his sight looked as if they were being inseminated at that very moment, since tubes ran directly from the male torsos across from them and into what appeared to be their vaginal openings. Thick, viscous white fluid moved through the clear tubes.

Dawn stepped forward and touched one of the female stumps, then jerked her hand back as if it had been burned. Her whisper rasped in the silence. "The flesh is warm. They're alive, Chance."

Movement in the room's far corner caught his attention. He saw people parading along the benches there, bending, studying the stumps, examining the tubing and flesh. It was like a caricature of doctors doing their rounds in a nightmare medical facility. The only thing different was that these medical personnel were as naked as their "patients."

A relatively young female, with the stubble of black hair around her genitals and a similar cap on her head, came into view. She carried a clipboard and what appeared to be an ordinary stethoscope. Behind her, he glimpsed an older, tougher-looking female carrying one of those mysterious weapons that looked like a whip.

Chance and Dawn shrank back, but the "doctor" seemed to take no notice of them until they moved. She frowned, and her fingers moved in some sign language he didn't understand. When they didn't answer, her eyes snapped with anger and she gestured more strongly. Her guard seemed to not be alarmed, but was alert.

In desperation, Chance stepped forward and pretended to stumble. He deliberately knocked some tubing away from the nearest torso. Fluids spurted, bathing him in foul liquid, and a beeping alarm sounded that probably carried no further than a few rows.

The naked doctor reacted instantly, gasping and dropping her clipboard. She took no further notice of Chance except to shoot him a filthy look that clearly said she considered him very clumsy. Even her guard leapt forward to assist her, grabbing tubes and handing them to her one by one.

Dawn was an instant quicker at bringing her hand down in a vicious chop across the doctor's neck. Chance took out the guard with the same move, probably breaking her spine with the force of his blow.

He bent over the doctor, felt for a pulse, and found none. Quickly he recovered her stethoscope, and listened for a heartbeat. Nothing. He and Dawn had killed them both.

Dawn examined the odd whip-like object. Up close it looked like black plastic, similar in color and texture to almost every other piece of furniture and small implement he'd seen in the hive, including the clipboard. It was about a yard long, with an indented handle intended for fingers. There was a click-notched dial in the handle base and a yellow stud under the index finger indentation.

She pointed the end of the whip at the guard and depressed the stud. There was a loud *bap-hum* sound, and the guard jerked. When Dawn released the stud, the hum stopped.

A large purple bruise formed immediately along the side of the body. Chance assumed the weapon disrupted cells using some sort of pulse, probably a form of electricity. He grinned without humor. They had one of their weapons, and he knew it could kill. Now they needed another. He'd feel better if they each had one.

He grabbed Dawn's hand and crouched behind the row of male torsos near the beeping alarm. Someone would hear it and come.

They didn't have to wait long. The sound of running feet heralded two more naked doctors and their equally naked guards. After a short, vicious fight, Dawn and Chance each held a wand and had a spare besides. Six bodies littered the floor at their feet. Sadly, the

stump they had damaged ceased its alarm when the monitor beside it flat-lined. The stump was dead.

Chance tried to summon up any measure of guilt for having killed that anonymous human. He even put a hand on the still warm flesh and considered apologizing. The words would not leave his mouth, much less form any sort of coherency in his mind. To him, it remained a thing. He wondered if he would feel that way whenever he found his friends. Would he have the strength to give them mercy?

Tara would be the easiest to find, with that distinctive butterfly on her belly. He doubted they'd take the time to remove a mere decoration. Jeter, his comptroller, had never mentioned any distinctive body markings, and his records hadn't either. Chance had to assume the only way they'd find Jeter was with DNA matches.

He prowled the aisles with a lead weight in his heart, knowing eventually he would find that damned butterfly, and not sure what he would do about it when he did.

Dawn regained her mental equilibrium, and kept one of her hands lightly resting in his as if for support. Maybe she was using some sort of empathic trick to keep him calm. If she was, he was grateful. It would have been enough for her to simply be at his side.

In the fifth row of female torsos they checked, he found it. One bright blue butterfly, standing out like a colorful beacon in the darkness. Some artistic soul must have appreciated it, too. There was a tiny spotlight trained on it from the ceiling.

His whole body shook with an earthquake deep in his soul. The body he'd enjoyed that one time now was nothing more than a reproductive stump. The living, vital person inside would never listen to music, fiddle with electronics, or dance with her children on a Spartan holiday night. Her spouse, Janis, who wore the matching tattoo, would weep and raise the kids alone.

How dare they take a person and reduce them to this one function? Why?

He didn't realize he'd spoken aloud until Dawn's soft voice whispered, "Because she didn't fit in to their standards, Chance. This insect society wants to strip humanity and uniqueness away from the majority, making them into mindless workers. Logical, efficient, emotionless perfect slaves to the society as a whole, not individuals."

Emotionless. Logical. Seeking perfection.

In a blinding flash, Chance saw the correlation between Sparta and this ... this ... hive. His people came very close to making the same mistake of removing individuality in favor of the collective people. Ouch. He winced and vowed to change things. If he got out of this alive.

Dawn's fathomless blue eyes leaked sympathetic tears. She reached out and touched Tara's waist, as if trying to comfort the spirit that had once resided in the living reproductive stump. "I'll bet she was a nice person, too. Some of these stumps are just above pubescent. Others look like middle-aged women. To think, they were all someone's mother, daughter, sister, or friend. It's not right."

Somewhere out there in the headless horde of bodies, his friend Jeter was reduced to this. A laughing, vital father of three who beat Chance at chess, organized better than a computer, and loved to garden. A picture of Jeter, crumbling dirt in his hands and grinning as he planted some new exotic flower, danced in front of Chance's eyes. Jeter had bought the seeds so he could give an endless supply to his wife in appreciation for espousing him.

Tears blinded Chance. Rage coiled out of him like a pissed-off cobra, and he would have sworn he felt a snap inside his mind. He snatched up his wand, intending to destroy everything in the room he saw.

## Chapter Fourteen

Chance's wand swung in slow motion toward the remains of his friend Tara. He would have sworn everything around him moved at a hyper-slow speed. Even the dust motes seem to hang motionless in the air.

Then Dawn's hand stopped him. The smack of her flesh touching his sounded unnaturally loud in the room. Her blue eyes, normally so guileless, bored into his with understanding and command all at once. "No, Chance. You can't kill any one of them. Every female stump in this room might be pregnant. You don't have the right to destroy an unborn child, not even one of *them*. Not even UCP has the right." Her eyes flickered back to the one stump they had used as bait. "We will have to call that one an accident and live with the guilt."

Chance trembled as the implications hit him. If every one of the female torsos in this room was pregnant, then each of the male torsos must be preserved as well for DNA matching. "This is going to be one unholy mess."

Dawn nodded and tugged on his arm she still held. Her eyes were trained on the door to get them out of the cavern. "Not our job, not our problem. We have more immediate

problems. If we don't get out of here, no one will know about this hellhole. Our job is to escape, and we're not doing it standing here."

He lowered his wand and obeyed, still in shock. As they reached the doors, he took one last glance at the reproductive cavern, like the queen's chamber in a termite hill. Queen's chamber, indeed. His eyes sought the row where Tara's stump remained. "I'll be back. That's a promise."

Dawn all but dragged him back to the elevator and punched a button at random. "Anything to get out of here. Anything at all."

The doors opened on an equally large room crawling with toddlers, little children who bounced and played in odd silence on a screened floor that surged under them in places like a trampoline. There was an acid smell to that room, but with a sense of cleanliness about it. Water spurted suddenly from the ceiling onto the toddlers, washing them clean. They took no notice, as if this was a common occurrence. Those voiceless children rattled his already shaken mind just as much as the reproductive cavern. Children shouldn't be that silent or that stoic.

They backed into the elevator hastily. This time, Chance pushed a button randomly. "Maybe one of these near the top is the way out."

Dawn peered at the buttons. "If we could only understand the symbols on them, we'd have a chance." She grinned at her partner. "No pun intended."

Her mild joke helped snap him out of his shock. He shook himself and rubbed at the fluids drying on his body. He made a feeble attempt to joke back. "Maybe I should have joined the kids in their shower. I probably don't smell very good."

She wrinkled her nose cutely at him and crossed her eyes. "You'd have to roll in a sewer reclamation pool to smell worse, I'm sorry to say. However, I don't think we're going to be able to get back to the hotel and take a shower before we get on my yacht. You'll have to wait for a nice sonic shower once we're in space."

He grinned and tested his weapon. There was something normal and reassuring when he heard Dawn's weird phrasings. Naked, sweaty, stinking of old sex, and in danger of dying at any moment, she maintained enough equilibrium to joke. She drove him crazy. She made him fall in love, and wish he could consign his job to Hel.

The lift mechanisms slowed. Dawn quipped, "14th floor, lingerie, sporting goods, and hellish surprises. Please watch your step exiting the elevator."

Chance chuckled and stepped off the elevator as the door opened. "I love it when you're a smart-ass."

This time, the short hallway had several doors leading off it. Above the largest door was a plaque that read, "A filled life, good things in their own time, knowledge of constructive services to your fellows, and into the vats when you die. That is the meaning of true fellowship. One in life, one in death."

Dawn pointed at the plaque. "I don't think we need to go in there. My mind is just not up to seeing giant bubbling cauldrons with people parts floating in the brew."

Chance nodded and opened the door closest to them. They both cautiously looked inside without entering. Chance could hear the sound of running water. The tunnel stretched away into red gloom. To the left, a gentle curve to the cavern floor led down below.

They moved cautiously to the railing and peered out. The space was a wide, low chamber with long tanks interspersed throughout it. Water ran into the giant reservoirs, and people worked with businesslike concentration around the tanks. Chance looked at the nearest tank and discerned fish boiling in it, little fish perhaps six inches long. He saw now that the people farther out in the room were scooping fish from the tank into a wheeled carrier. "A fish farm, by all the holies," he muttered.

Dawn jerked her head in agreement. "Just how fucking big is this place, anyhow? That fish farm alone would feed an army."

He jerked as the implications hit him. Vats big enough to cook human bodies, a fish farm larger than he'd ever seen, and thousands of people to run the place. "It's like an insect colony. There are many more than you'll ever know, and don't piss them off."

Dawn inched her way back to the door. "You're beginning to sound like me. I've corrupted a Spartan. That's one for the record books." She paused and waited for Chance to join her. "If anyone ever finds out. I feel like a foreigner in a bee colony, like I could get stung to death at any moment."

He beat her to the lift doors by inches and punched another button as soon as she was inside. Then he hefted the wand under her nose. "Yes, and this is the stinger." Somewhere along the way, they'd dropped their extra wand. Now he wished he had a box of them.

The lift slowed and stopped. Chance looked at the lit button. It was not the one he had pressed. The doors slid open, and two hive members, a male and a female, stepped in. Both were naked and bald. They seemed to take no notice of Chance, but the male leaned over to sniff in Dawn's direction. He frowned and punched a button on the elevator.

The elevator went down for just one moment and then stopped. The male shoved Dawn out the door and pointed, his fingers wiggling furiously and his nose wrinkling in distaste. Hastily, Chance joined her. Both hive members bowed until the lift doors snapped closed.

Dawn's eyebrows almost met her hairline. "What the hell was that about? Geez, I don't stink as bad as you do."

Chance shrugged. "Whatever they meant by it, this is a new floor to explore." He turned and opened a door. "Okay, I can live with this. I know where we are."

They stepped through the door onto a narrow railed platform about halfway up the wall of an immense circular and domed room. It stretched away from them in bright blue-white light for at least two hundred yards. The floor of the giant room curved slightly



downward to the center, and it was alive with men and women in the complexity of sexual couplings.

Dawn leaned over the rail. When she looked back at Chance, she had a wry smile on her face. "Breeding room. How convenient. Want to climb down, join the orgy, and get a shower? Apparently, we're just another pair of breeders. But why use live breeders when they have the stumps? What's the difference?"

He shrugged. He had the same questions, but he knew when he was out of his knowledge base. Some scientists somewhere probably knew the answer. "I'm not stopping to ask, are you?"

The room was filled with an undercurrent of groans and the sounds of flesh slapping flesh. Chance couldn't take his eyes away. Couples separated, stumbled to new partners, and just went on with their tireless sexual activity. The place carried its own distinctive odor -- a wild mixture of perspiration and a musty scent that reminded him of saliva -- all on top of the pervasive stench of human sexual congress. "The orgy just became my least favorite fantasy."

Dawn snickered. "Then let's just stick with smooching under one of the sprays. There's one now."

She pelted down the ramp to his left and stood under the sprinkler system cleaning the area at the bottom of the stairs.

Startled, Chance hesitated for a heartbeat and then ran down to join her. It was just too tempting. Maybe if they washed some of the stench off themselves, they would be less noticeable. Besides, kissing a wet, naked Dawn under any excuse was a good idea.

He had just wrapped her in his arms when he noticed the door. He knew that door. Dr. Faust had led him through that door after the attendant had given them both the shot in the arm with a similar wand to the one he held. On the other side of the attendance chamber,

and not far up the corridor, was the private elevator to the farm. The way out was within their reach.

He spent a bit of time enjoying the respite from running up and down floors in this giant hive. Kissing Dawn was almost as good as the sleep his body craved. He was spoiled by a sex engineer's perfection, and no Spartan woman would ever have a hope of an alliance with him.

He dreamt of pulling Dawn close to his body on that big bed of his at his villa, both of them clean and sweet-smelling, for hours of uninterrupted slumber. Drinking orange juice on the terrazzo with nothing better to do than talk. Listening to her insult the intransigent senators under her breath while he conducted business for the ailing oligarch. Chance bet himself Dawn could sweeten the irascible old bastard's temper.

Rather than alert the happily fucking hive members, Chance took his time, signaling he was not done with this female breeder. He winked when Dawn pulled away to catch her breath, and pointed with his eyes only. "I think I see our way out."

Her eyes lit, but she kept her arms wrapped around his body. "Yeah, lead on, Macduff."

He shot her a puzzled look. "Huh?"

Dawn unwound herself from his body with an impish grin. "Hallelujah, I finally stumped you. A dirty old Earth playwright named Shakespeare. Wrote great innuendo. Basically, I just told you to lead me into danger, and I don't care about consequences." She shrugged. "The original meaning had to do with fighting and not giving a damn, but the paraphrase works better here."

Just outside of the antechamber doors, Chance opted for a little payback. He grabbed her arm and yanked her close for one last searing kiss. He'd seen an old entertainment dataspool of a "private eye" who spoke out of one corner of his mouth -- someone named Bogie. He imitated the gravelly voice. "You're dangerous enough, sweetheart."

She giggled against his lips, her whole body vibrating with laughter. When he released her, she staggered half a step backwards. “Damn right I am. Let’s go kick some ass.”

They went through the door holding hands. The attendant glanced up, noted they were leaving, and went back to his console. Apparently, he was only concerned with those who entered. They sailed right past him and out the next door into the hallway.

Chance’s memory was hazy, but he remembered the turn around the corner well enough. The corridor they left showed signs of traffic from footprints left on the pristine flooring, but once they rounded the corner, the floor looked as if it were hardly used.

They took a few agonizing minutes of wrong turns and quiet dead ends before Chance spotted the distinctive lift doors of the hive. Sighing in unison, they stepped inside.

Chance froze. The panel only had two buttons. Neither of them was labeled. One was red, the other green. His hand shook, hovering over them. “Which one is which?”

Dawn shrugged helplessly. “Red always means *danger* to humans. No matter what, these folks are human.” She punched the green button.

## Chapter Fifteen

The lift doors snapped closed. Instead of ascending, however, the enclosure lurched downward. Dawn looked up at Chance. “Uh-oh. I done a bad thing.”

He shrugged. “You had a fifty-percent chance of being right. So, you chose the wrong one. It’s correctable. We wait until the elevator stops and then select the red button.”

Dawn swallowed her disappointment and nodded. His calm demeanor was reassuring despite the hell they had already been through. For herself, she couldn’t wait to get out of the hive and get into space. “We should have known that red might signal danger, but to hive members the outside world is dangerous.”

The lift doors opened and Dawn reached for the red button. Before she could press it, voices echoed down the visible dark corridor. Chance slapped her hand away at the first sentence.

And the old man’s reedy voice. “Never forget that the hive is a fly speck when compared to existing outsider forces. We need that pair out there -- for their information and for possible use to compromise.”

A masculine tenor answered, pitched with excitement. “They won’t compromise. They have killed our prime male, and they have seen many of our hive levels. We already know

outsiders find our society repugnant. We must disband, scatter the workers, and hope for a few survivors to restart. We have only a few active female breeders at this time, and even fewer viable males. All total, less than a hundred.”

The old man’s voice faded in and out, probably as he paced around the room with the open door just down the hall. “If the prime male had not killed off all the rival primes, we could disband easily, with each prime taking a handful of females. None of our viable males is worthy to be prime anywhere. We will have to make a plea to order a new prime, and scatter the breeder females with copies of our records. Just in case, our records are ready to be destroyed quickly.”

“All of our files?”

“You know what must be done. I’ve sent the emergency signal to those who’ve been our eyes and ears outside. As of right now, they have been cut off from us. They may have to live out their lives now, eating mostly outsider foods, obeying outsider laws, accepting brief lives and empty outsider pleasures as the final price of their service to us. They’ve always known this could happen. But some of them can survive. We can begin a new hive if we can get our new prime in time. All I can do is ask for one. The resource has been most reticent lately.”

The young male’s voice calmed. “Our most powerful socializing force is our interdependence on one another. The fact that we key workers also eat outside foods does not isolate us from those not chosen for the privilege. I would prefer we scatter now.”

The old male sighed. “No. We must attempt to gain a new prime. I do wish the outsider male had not been so resistant to the hormone therapy for males. He would have been an excellent prime. However, since he is too willful, we will make use of his genes alone.”

Dawn looked at Chance, her face full of irony. She whispered, “I prefer you whole. You’d make a lousy stump, pal. I’d rather play with a clitoral stimulator than use just your

stump.” She tapped his head lightly. “The best part is up there. Why did you have to be I-Corps, asshole?”

The younger male sighed loudly. “Gray, why do we need living breeders, anyway? Can’t we just use the sexual stumps? Breeders are so ... messy.”

“You don’t know?” The older male, Gray, seemed shocked. “I must speak to the educational coordinators. Something lacks in the mental processes of the offspring from the sexual stumps, making them suitable only as workers and low-level leaders. To create high-level leaders and security staff such as you, living breeders who are naturally inseminated must be used. We suspect it has to do with the breeders maintaining their voices and the fetuses listening while in the womb. It’s an old theory, but our scientists have never discerned another reason. This was decreed by the original Brood Mother, Ankara, and we have never argued with her wisdom.”

Reverent murmurs throughout the room indicated to Dawn and Chance there were many more security hive members in that room, not merely the two conversing.

“So, you wish the two outsiders to become live breeders?”

“Yes, Aron. The male is worth a great deal, and the female more so because of her small size. The prime, bless his passage into the vats, discussed the possibility of perpetuating his genes through her so we were no longer dependent on the outside source for primes. The prime himself disliked the fact that he’d been created and engineered elsewhere, but nowhere else could the hive acquire such perfect genetics in a viable, thinking male.” Gray sighed. “Unfortunately, the prime was flawed with megalomania and destroyed his successors.”

The elevator door chimed to remind Dawn and Chance to exit. The voices in the room stopped, and chairs scraped.

Dawn shoved Chance until he fell against the back wall, and stabbed the red button. The lift doors closed as security forces bearing wands boiled out of the room.

Chance pulled himself erect, and Dawn braced herself against the lift panel as the elevator began its ascent. However, they were not quick enough. A *bap-hum* sounded loudly in the elevator's small space.

Dawn's hands, palms flat against the panel, bloomed with agony. She screeched and fell hard to the floor, nearly blacking out from the pain.

Strong arms lifted her to her feet. Chance's face swam in front of her eyes. "I know, baby, I know. Your hands are purple and swollen. The damned wands apparently only work on living cells. The lift is still working. We'll get you out of here."

Lights danced in front of Dawn's vision. She looked down at what was left of her hands and whimpered. They looked grotesque, like someone had put quilted purple gloves on her for an entertainment spool's special effects. "There goes my career in massage."

Chance squeezed her waist and kissed her nose. "Can you move them at all?"

She attempted to flex her right hand. It screamed with pain, but her thumb twitched. It gave her some hope, anyway. "Not right now, but there's no nerve damage, and I got my thumb to at least move a little."

The lift doors opened to reveal a homey little farmhouse cellar. Chance scooped up her dropped wand and all but carried her up the stairs, his arm locked around her waist. "We don't have time for any sort of medical treatment. I'm sorry. We've got to run like hell."

Dawn remembered their naked state. She could just see them sauntering into the hotel buck-assed. "Chance, grab the tablecloth. We'll make it into a toga for me and a loincloth for you and say we were at a party."

On their way through the dining room, Chance snatched one corner of the tablecloth and hauled it to him. The crash of antique china and silver made them both wince, but they had covering. He looped it over her neck so she didn't have to use her hands.

Shockingly, their rented flitter was precisely where they'd left it, though the door locks showed scrapes and even a laser scorch mark.

Dawn snickered in spite of her pain. “Good thing I double locked the flitter with my own key code. I’ll bet it drove them crazy.”

Chance grinned and poised his hand above the keypad. “I’ll have to punch it in for you. What is it?”

“I hope you know music, then. It’s the first four notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.” She bah-dah-dah-dah’d for him, half singing the notes.

He raised one eyebrow haughtily. “I happen to have a classical education. However, I’ve never tried to play music on a security keypad. Only you would come up with something so weird.” He tapped the keypad.

Dawn glanced up nervously, watching the farmhouse door. She sighed gustily when the flitter’s locks opened with a loud click. She followed Chance’s dive into the vehicle.

Chance powered up the engine and threw the flitter into overdrive. They shot off the ground with enough force to snap Dawn’s head against the back of the seat. “We can’t go back to the hotel,” Chance muttered. “Remember what they said about having operatives on the outside? Want to bet the hotel is full of agents of the hive?”

Already in the process of trying to remove the tablecloth from her neck despite the uselessness of her swollen fingers, Dawn cursed in three languages. “Shit, *lequona*, and *merde*. You’re absolutely right. OK, so we make a naked dash for my yacht. That ought to give the flight controllers a thrill. At least we have spare clothes onboard. While running around naked on Maxim is nothing new, I would prefer a little more dignity when we report.”

His face contorted into a snarl. “To hell with reporting. You’re going straight to the nearest medical facility I can find. I doubt if even this luxurious boat of yours has got anything more than a diagnostic computer and a medical cabinet.”

Dawn shrugged. “True. But I really don’t think ...”



He didn't give her a chance to finish. "Then it's settled. For once, the guardian is going to get guarded. I can make a few lines of communication burn from there."

The spaceport was crawling with security when they circled overhead. Chance cursed and landed the flitter so close to her yacht that it would burn up when they lifted. They could hear security yelling and the sounds of running feet, and they pelted up the ramp.

As soon as they made it into the interior, Dawn slammed the security panel with her shoulder. Somehow, she managed to hit the emergency button. The ramp door clanged, and the air lock door hissed closed.

Chance claimed ownership of the pilot's chair, leaving Dawn in possession of the navigator's. Disgruntled at not being able to fly her own ship, Dawn grumbled and sat with ill grace. "I can't even program in where we're going."

He didn't wait for clearance, nor did they answer any attempts to communicate from the tower. He did courteously send an emergency lift beacon to warn them and heard the claxon response from the external microphones of her ship. "We warned them, and that's all they get. We're out of here." He jammed the thrusters forward and shot them into the stars.

As soon as they were out of the gravity well's pull, Chance stopped all forward thrust. "Be right back. I'm going to raid your medical cabinet."

Dawn nodded wearily. She hovered in and out of consciousness. Shock was setting in, and she knew she'd need something. She felt so helpless, with her hands throbbing intermittently like solar flares and useless for any manipulations.

She bit her lip and tried not to cry. If the cell disruptions went deep enough, she'd lose her hands and be a cyborg. "That's two careers down the drain. First I get tired of killing beasties and want something where I give love and protection, and then I screw that up." She sobbed quietly and hunched down in the chair.

The sounds of bangs and items hitting the floor with soft thuds told her Chance had found the medical cabinet. Maybe he'd bring her a good, strong analgesic and a cup of coffee. "Hey, Chance! Would you program me a cup of coffee and a straw to go with the analgesics?"

A moment of silence.

"Certainly. Be right there."

A few minutes later, he was beside her with a cup of coffee, straw poking out of the heat seal. Steam issued from the straw like a chimney in an old dataspool. She grinned up at Chance as he set it in the chair arm's drink receptacle.

He stroked her hair and took the forgotten tablecloth from around her neck. Instead, he tucked a thermal blanket around her with a tender expression on his face. "Drink up, Dawn. You haven't had anything decent in your stomach for two days now. I'm going to program the galley with the most sumptuous meal in your hold."

Dawn nodded and then looked him dead in the eye. "No meat, especially pork." She shuddered at the thought of anything resembling her recent meals. She took a healthy sip from the straw and sighed with bliss. Real coffee. No tricks, no additives. Just black gold.

He laughed. "No pork, no soups. I understand." He waited patiently beside her until the mug was empty and her straw brought up air with a slurp. Then he stood over her, grinning.

The room swam, and she noticed for the first time her hands didn't ache. She looked up accusingly at Chance.

He nodded. "Yes, there was a knockout drug as well as an analgesic in your coffee. Go to sleep, darling. When you wake, hopefully you'll be comfortable and encased in a med-bed." Then he smiled wryly. "Sweet imaginations, baby."

"Baby? Darling? Watch it, Spartan. You'll be in trouble." Then the world spun out of control, taking her with it.

The last words she heard were "I already am."

## Chapter Sixteen

Several times, Dawn almost awakened. She'd struggle against the powerful narcotic and the hive-induced nightmares, then hear the hiss of a spray and a sting on her arm. Once, she managed to mumble, "I'll get you for this, you highhanded Spartan."

Finally, she fought her way to consciousness and no one stopped her. True to his word, Chance had indeed installed her in a med-bed, and she was firmly locked in place. At least she felt clean, thanks to the med-bed's automated services.

Footsteps heralded a visitor. Dawn turned her head eagerly, hoping to see Chance's face and hear the results of their report. Instead, the gentle face of a Cerulean nurse floated into view, her -- Dawn assumed it was a female, though it was hard to tell with Ceruleans -- mirrored green eyes whirling hypnotically. "Hello, Engineer. I see you are now conscious. Are you in pain?"

Definitely female timbre to the voice, and Dawn couldn't help but relax when listening to a Cerulean's soft purr. She did an internal check for pain. "I'm not in any discomfort, thank you."

One of the nurse's many long blue appendages corresponding to fingers caressed Dawn's cheek. "Excellent. You have been allowed to awaken so we may get permission to

transfer you to Maxim's medical facility, at the request of the Maxim oligarch. I apologize profusely, but the damage to your hands is beyond our capabilities. We understand a specialist awaits you on Maxim. I have a holocube for you that explains much, if you wish to listen. It's voice activated and cued only to you." She placed the cube on the med-bed's data monitor.

Dawn's eyes pricked with tears. If the UCP medical couldn't fix her hands, then she was in deep trouble. She swallowed her sobs. There'd be time to cry over lost careers later. She was getting used to disappointment now. "Where's Chance? The human male who brought me here, I mean."

The Cerulean nurse smiled gently. "He left two cycles ago, saying he'd return. We can tell him where you've been transferred when he gets back. Oh, and your yacht has already been moved to Maxim. The transport will arrive in a few hours. At the end of the cube's message, it will ask your permission to be moved. Just say yes or no." She adjusted the monitoring panel on the bed and left.

Dawn sniffled and said, "Cube on."

Lady d'Akasha's face appeared on the hologram. "Good day, Dawn, and good job. Chance reported safely, and you'll be pleased to hear the UCP security forces did take the hive peacefully. Those few leaders captured on charges of kidnapping citizens and murdering them have been sent to full rehab. The ..." Constance choked for a moment and struggled on. "The sexual stumps are now being monitored, and the infants born have been removed to foster care, along with all the children under the age of majority. Those stumps not found to be pregnant were given mercy under UCP policy. The rest of the workers in the hive are being processed to colony planets or retraining, whatever the testing shows is appropriate. Many years of work lie ahead for the UCP socio-anthropologists, as you can well imagine."

Dawn nodded. An unholy mess was what Chance had called it. She hoped his new assignment was something nice and quiet.

Constance cleared her throat. “In any case, we’ve arranged for our own medical staff and a few Seelie healers to be waiting for you. Please say yes and come home. You’re on medical leave until further notice.”

There wasn’t much choice, was there? Chance was gone, and despite what the nurse said, Dawn knew what I-Corps was like. Here today, gone tomorrow. Usually they were gone permanently. He’d moved on, and she’d better do the same. She had a new, unwanted life to plan for. Dawn drew in a deep breath and spoke for the cube. “Yes.”

The cube darkened, its message delivered. Immediately, Dawn heard a hiss and felt the sting of a hypo. She flopped back down on the pillow and whispered to the air, “I want to go home now.” Then she waited for blessed unconsciousness and prayed she’d never awaken.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dawn fumed and killed another beastie on the monitor. She sang, “One little, two little, three little beasties ...” to keep from cursing aloud and teaching Helen any more new words and phrases. With access to over five thousand sex engineers from nearly as many home worlds, Helen had an astonishing vocabulary of words and phrases never used in polite society.

The surgeries and the work of the Seelie healers had restored her hands to functionality, but the rest was up to Dawn to reconnect the lost neural functions enough to do more than simple tasks like feeding herself. Her latest therapy was enough to drive anyone over the brink -- computer games using a variety of control devices.

She’d finally persuaded Helen to give her a better game than the idiot flutter races and space pilot scenarios that were the stock and trade of most therapists. Now at least she had a reasonably fun “kill or be killed” command-and-conquer kind of game. Dawn had taken a whole day to run through all the scenarios and now designed her own skirmishes to keep herself amused. Officially, she was on light-duty status, meaning she could guard minor

officials at their parties and be eye candy. Yippee. “Light duty. Hah! I’m dying of boredom here.”

A laser pistol hit her therapy desk. A deep masculine voice chuckled. “Want some real work, then?”

Chance planted his gorgeous ass in the chair next to hers and put his booted feet up on the desk surface just out of range of her control device. “Since I hear you still can’t play with me on the holodeck for another couple of cycles, I figure I’ll just have to be your copilot or offer you a better assignment contract.”

Dawn continued her game as an excuse to sort out her emotions. She wanted -- needed -- to act like a brainless ass and jump into his arms, sobbing like a damn baby. She also conversely wanted to grab up the pistol and beat the crap out of him. How dare he leave her for the past six lunar cycles with nothing to do but worry if he was dead or alive? Her hand shook on the control, but she managed to kill six beasties and grab up another supply pod. “Hiya, Chance. How’s life been treating you?”

He leaned over to watch her use an ion cannon on the enemy base, taking out their tech center in a glorious explosion. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched his face light up at the bloody mess she was making on the screen with enemy bodies. “Nice job there. Life’s been treating me very well, thanks. Hey, there’s a pod. Better grab it. I’ve got a new job.”

Her heart skipped a beat. New job? Could it be he’d found a nice, safe occupation? “Can’t grab the pod. I only pick up those things with my heavy equipment. Some are trapped, and I hate losing points that way.” She angled one of her tanks over to pick up the pod, knowing it was likely to go away before the tank got there. “Congrats on the new job. Is it safer than I-Corps?”

He studied his nails as if they held the secrets of the universe, his face grim. “Not really.”

Damn. Dawn turned back to her game, disappointed. The enemy forces were massing for an assault on her base, as was usual when she blew up something important of theirs. Arranging her protections properly took a few moments and gave her an excuse to think up something polite to say. "Sorry to hear that."

"I'm not." He put his boots on the floor and leaned in to peer at the screen. "Who'd you annoy in this game? He's throwing everything at you. Did you say something nasty about him?"

Dawn snorted. At least the game was a safe subject. "Not really. I just said his mother needed to go back under the porch. She lost her flea collar. Love and kisses, Dawn."

"What are those shock troops he's tossing at you, anyway?" He listened to several die. "Are they saying *Offline*?"

"Yeah. They're cyborg commandoes. I prefer the beasties like this one." She pointed out with her finger a mammoth-like creature that spat fire, then sent four airborne bomber flitters at it. "They're harder to kill. But the game doesn't care what kind of critter it is. One point per kill. So I make more points off the shock troops, in the long run."

He remained silent while she wiped out a large portion of the shock troops, bombed a few mammoths, and her base protections took care of the rest.

She built a few more surface-to-air missile sites while she waited for the enemy's next move. She was nearing the end of the game and therefore would soon run out of excuses not to look at Chance fully. Her hands were beginning to hurt from the exercise, so she didn't dare start a new game.

He'd mentioned offering her a new assignment contract. Probably wanted her to guard him again, and this time she'd have to refuse. She was on light duty, dammit, and not allowed any fun. Some other guardian would get the job, and she'd be stuck on Maxim. Jealousy shook her. Her one opportunity to be with Chance, and she wasn't fit for duty.

Fuck it. Just fuck it. Best get this over with. Resigned to refusing the offer, she sent the bombers in to finish the enemy base off, then followed up with the twenty disruptor vehicles for ground assault. It was over in minutes.

As soon as the computer announced, "Enemy forces destroyed. Game over," Dawn pretended to be vastly interested in her scores. "So, what brings you to Maxim, Chance?"

"Don't play stupid, Dawn. You heard me. I'm offering you an assignment contract. Lady d'Akasha is working out the details now, but I came to you first."

Dawn smiled at the exasperation in his voice. She loved getting under his skin. She began to shut down the program, satisfied she'd upped her hand-eye coordination another couple of points. "I'm not fit for anything but light duty, Chance. Unless you're planning a garden party, I can't accept guardian assignments." She wiggled her scarred left hand in his general direction.

He grabbed the hand and kissed it right on top of the ugly red scars.

Dawn bent her head and shut her eyes, refusing to let him see her embarrassment. Nothing would change what her hands looked like, even when time faded the red to white. She ignored what those hard, firm lips were doing to her gut as they drenched her pussy with longing.

"Dawn darling, look at me. Really look."

She couldn't refuse that gentle plea. Biting her lip to hold back tears, she raised her eyes and turned her chair.

Then she stared.

Resplendent in the pale blue Spartan uniform, he also wore the gold-and-royal-blue sash of the oligarch of Sparta. His dark hair was longer and streaked with gold, as if he'd spent a great deal of time in the sun. His eyes, however, were somber. "I should confess a few things, Dawn. My real name is Tiberius Hesperus, and Chance was a nickname for my title, chancellor of Sparta."



“But ...” she sputtered. Oh, now that sounded intelligent.

He kissed her fingers, one by one, in between sentences. “I *was* I-Corps, before they called me to be chancellor and take my father’s place beside our aging oligarch, Remus IV. When my comptroller Jeter disappeared on Elysium, I escaped my duties and pulled many political strings to be allowed to investigate. No one figured I’d uncover such a mess as the hive. They figured I’d find Jeter, drag him back home, and be done. Then Tara died, and I insisted on continuing, even if I did have to take a guardian.”

She gave a wry little smile. “You didn’t plan on the sex toy being good at her job.”

He shook his head. “I didn’t plan on falling in love with my guardian. I didn’t plan on having to leave her alone on the medical satellite when the message came that Remus was dead and I was the new oligarch.” He sighed. “It took me six lunar cycles to settle my government and apply to Maxim for your services. They made me wait until you were healed.”

Joy leapt up in her. She cleared her throat rather than shriek. “Oh, so you do need a guardian for garden parties after all, huh?”

Chance rolled his eyes toward the ceiling and groaned. “Yes, dammit. I need a lot of things a sex engineer and guardian combined can provide. I swear, if someone doesn’t charm the senators into thinking beyond their own districts, I may strangle a few of them. But most of all, I need ... you.”

Dawn plastered a serious, business-like expression on her face. “Oh, so you need me to charm senators, guard your expensive ass from assassins, be arm candy at parties, and of course the usual bed services. Anything else, Oligarch?”

His eyes narrowed. “Yeah. Oligarchs by law must be married within one year of ascension. I’m hoping you’ll accept a lifetime contract, Engineer.” He paused and pleaded, “I love you. Didn’t you hear me?”

She giggled and threw herself into his arms. “Yeah, I heard you. I want to hear you say it every day. That’s my payment for the contract. Oh, and regular holodeck workouts killing beasties together.”

“Deal. Helen, draw up those contracts, please.” He paused and added sheepishly, “Is there any way to get Dawn’s tail back?”

 THE END 

## **Lena Austin**

Lena Austin is a “fallen” society wench with a checkered past. She has been a licensed minister, hairdresser, and realtor, radio DJ, exotic dancer, telephone service tech, live-steel medievalist swordswoman, BDSM Mistress, and investment property manager. Not necessarily in that order. She never finished that degree in archaeology, but did learn to scuba. After a life like that, gardening is pretty restful. Of herself, Lena writes, “I’m tall, moody, and I look like an unholy mating between an Amazon and a librarian.”

Visit Lena on the web at [www.lena.realmsoflove.com](http://www.lena.realmsoflove.com) or email her at [lena@loose-id.com](mailto:lena@loose-id.com).