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Ship's Company
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DEDICATION

With thanks to Jonathan for all the reading and support.

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You don't expect romance in my line of work. You don't expect to lose your heart to a being that biologically doesn't have much in common with you. Nor do you expect that any of them will treat you like you matter. I didn't resent it for a long time, even though I knew that was probably just my addiction guiding me. I should have resented it, I should have railed and fought, but I was powerless, and at the mercy of a body I could no longer control. There were even days now and then when I managed to fool myself into thinking I liked what I'd become; days when the sex was especially good and prolonged, when the release of orgasm was transcendently ecstatic. Even so, when you work on ships, potent encounters are few and far between and mostly all you get is the crude grinding out of a quick fix that leaves you wanting more in a matter of a few hours.

I've travelled on a fair few ships, I'm not sure how many, there never seemed to be all that much point counting. One set of quarters are much like another – metal prisons in a box that travels through space, carrying you with it, whether you want to go or not. I've seen all sorts of craft; expensive high class ones down to scruffy little merchant ships, and I've had my body invaded by more species than I can count,

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let alone individuals. Some journeys were better, on more enlightened ships where I was allowed to leave my quarters, mingle with the crew and get treated like an individual now and then, but that sort of craft is rare. Pilsk slaves are distracting at the best of times, and most companies would prefer to have us under control, rather than out distracting the workers, or worse, still masquerading as them for our own nefarious ends. On some ships, where the crew is of a decent size, there is gossip; secrets and little intrigues that colour up the otherwise dull monotony of life in space. Whores are like priests – discretion is part of the job, and people find they can talk to us. Easier to talk to us, we already know your deepest desires. The vast majority of ships just want a recreational facility, a place the crew can discharge their fluids and tensions, so mostly what you get in this line of work is tedium, punctuated by sex. I call it work, but it's slavery, really. I was owned, bought, sold, paid for, never to be my own creature.

I could begin at the beginning, my life on a blue and green planet, my birth, parents, my years of training and study, my capture by slavers – it's exciting enough, but it's not what you're here for. I know what you want to hear, just as I know what you want to see. As far as I know, it's a combination of traits unique to my species, and much prized in this wide and mercantile galaxy of ours. It might make sense to call me a Succubus, in your language, but I am a Pilsk in my own, or near enough. We are a unique species in many ways, for our peacefulness, our sensuality and our abilities. We combine a natural

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ability for shape shifting with powerful empathic communication skills that transcend both species and language. Unfortunately, from a certain perspective, this means that we are nature's perfect whores, because we can be whoever you most desire us to be, say what you most long to hear, and perform the acts you barely dared to think about. Throw a little genetic engineering into the mix; a simple process that gives us an addiction to the hormones we produce when in states of pleasure, and we'll do anything to please. It's not much of a life, but it's what I've had and I've tried to make the best of it.

I wasn't born like this, with this flippant cynicism and body ripe for use. I spent much of my early life a thoughtful, sensitive being, delighting in sensual pleasures, but not corrupted by them. What ruined me was the modification, the transformation into a creature driven by sexual compulsion. That change was forced upon me, but I've tried to live with it, and make the best of the dull life that has ensued. I've tried to find joy in mechanistic sex, no small challenge that, I've tried to nurture contact where I could find it, and keep some dignity even in my degraded condition.

So, to begin the more interesting section of my narrative, I was bought by a trading ship - one of those small and ill-kept ones doing the long hauls through space. It's well known that extended periods of travel lead to tension, aggression and even violence in travellers, so all but the poorest companies tend to fit their ships out with something to divert the workers and ensure that its crew will be nice and civil

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on those rare times when there's planet leave to be had, and refrain from killing each other in the meantime. I was the entertainment, me and a games deck with a few playing tables and the like. The first I knew of this was when I was sedated by the medical officer on my old ship, and woke up in a small and unfamiliar room. No one bothered to tell me where I was, or where I might be going. I had no more say in the matter than did the inanimate objects around me.

The place I found myself in looked a lot like the last one – metal and plastic, cold surfaces with little colour, nothing tactile or soft or warm anywhere, and the incessant buzz of the engines always on the peripheries of my awareness. It was another grim little prison, like so many before it. They brought me softer furnishings to make a bed, so that the men could enjoy a little comfort as they fucked me. Still, there was no colour. I could remember vividly the colours of my early life, but they seemed like a dream after so long without them. A machine in the wall produced bland mush for my daily consumption. My body knew that it contained reasonable levels of nutrients, but it did not feed the mind or the eye, and it did not stimulate the palate. Sensory deprivation is almost death for me, but the less I have, the more my body focuses on what it can get, on the sex, and so the more I suffer, the more willing and enthusiastic a whore I become. I know they know these things. I know the deprivation is intentional, that the crew have better food than this, but I must eat blandly to stimulate my other tastes. I do not understand the mind that finds such treatment acceptable. I do not

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want to understand.

Using the computer, I gleaned a few details about the vessel and her destination, but could learn little of the crew aside from the facts that there were twelve of them, and they were all humanoid impregnators. They had allotted times when they could use me, and I was able to examine the program for my use. I was a facility, like the mess hall and the games deck. I was there to help them stay sane. No one asked if I need anything to help me stay sane.

On our first day out, the captain came round to sample the wares – this I gathered was a company ship, and he'd not tried me out yet. I'd been in transit for two days, a third in dock, and every last organ in my body was aching for contact. When he walked through the door, I had a few seconds to eye him up. He was old, for a humanoid; he'd got the grey hair that they all seem to get once past their prime, and the lines around his features were marked. I could tell he was male, and I had a flash of knowing how his sex organs worked. I could feel my body start to shift, that undulating shift of fluid and muscle, squeezing out a different form. Then I was standing a bit taller than him, impregnator type, humanoid, hairy, wearing the ship's uniform. This made him really uncomfortable, and a bit angry.

"Ericsson? What the hell are you doing in here, this is the shag's room."

"But I am your shag."

It's what he wanted to hear, in his heart of hearts, but it scared him nonetheless.

The voice I had was one of a young male; lively,

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sexually keen, playful. I knew these things intuitively.

"I'm really hoping you've come here to fuck me." I told him. I've gone through more uninspired little scenes like this than I care to count. It doesn't matter what the species, the universe is full of sexually talent-less and style-deprived individuals.

He approached me curiously. I could hear him thinking, slow, surface thoughts. He knew what I was, what I can do, but at that moment I looked like another impregnator, this creature he wanted but feared to want, and so he didn't know what to believe. I could see what he was fantasising about, it was a dream he'd had for a while. I undid the bottom half of the uniform, peeling it off and baring sex organs to him. Mine was, of course, large and erect, tingling with sensation. I knelt before him, facing away, showing him a tight, inviting orifice.

"I've never done this before," I tell him, "but I really want you to fuck my butt."

It's hardly an original, but his mind was crude and simplistic; sensuality and seduction would have no meaning for him. I had, of course, presented my every orifice to the lusts of others in my career as a ship's whore, but they all liked to be told I'd not done it before, and it was easy enough to generate the tightness these humanoids associate with virginity. There was no need to tell him that the hole on display was no male excretion system, but an aspect of my own complex genitalia.

His mind was rife with explicit images, I knew already just how he wanted me to cry out as he penetrated me, I knew how he wanted to hear me

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moan and beg him for more. I could already tell that when he had finished, his fantasy was to have me implore him for some oral favour, which he would refuse angrily, asking if I thought he 'was gay or something?' And I said,

"But I know you liked it. And I know you want to make me come."

He had fallen utterly into the realms of his own fantasy, rapt and playing it out, he dropped to his knees before me like one worshipping an idol. The cock before him looked huge, and I felt the flutter of his fearful anticipation as he found he could fit it all in. He sucked at it like someone starving. I ground myself against him, encouraging him and telling him how good he was. In truth he had some talent for it, his tongue was nimble and his lips firm. I didn't have to pretend, but I was crazy enough for want of sex that almost anything would have relieved me then. I writhed and sobbed, begging him to finish me, to let me come, but he teased it out for a long while, until eventually I was spewing out a great stream of fluids and shouting my ecstasy.

He was shy and embarrassed as he cleaned himself up, and then he left. This, again, was nothing new; once they've had their way, they usually feel shame in being close to me; to the thing that they have used and soiled. I pondered then how strange it was to be in the body his lust had formed for me, to feel as they feel. Gradually, the form slipped away, and I was my own self again, alone with my thoughts.

I'd never given much thought to shifting form, back in the days when it was prompted purely by my

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need or inclination. I don't have all that much control over it any more. I need to fuck, and so I subconsciously draw the most effective form from those around me, and enter it without really knowing what I will become. Just because they want what I am does not mean that they like wanting it, and every so often there are unpleasant consequences. A forced shift is a hard thing, too sudden and angular a sensation, it is a forced experience, a driven one, a sorrowful one in many ways. It is the most fundamental part of myself, subverted by an intervention I cannot reverse. Every time I do it, feel my skin pigments shifting and my shape altering, it grieved me, but I could not escape from it.

* * * *

Over the next six days, I met all of them. I tasted their language and thought patterns and found that they all belonged to the same humanoid culture. I rapidly started to understand their ways and inclinations. I learned how to think a little as they do - it makes things easier. Remembering who you are, and what you have been can be a source of grief to someone who has had their life stolen. I've always found it easier to submerge myself in the cultures and identities around me, to become the fantasy, and forget my own brutal reality as much as I can. There was a ruthless simplicity to their thought patterns, a focusing on ends, and not on means. They took what they wanted with little regard for the consequences, and gratification was the one thing motivating each of

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them. To a man, they lacked altruistic feeling, and ability to empathise. I knew they saw me as an object and a possession, because that way it was all right for me to be caged and abused in ways they would never have tolerated for themselves. They avoided thinking, and there was little about them for me to respect.

As I became better acquainted with the crew, I noticed they all had helpfully comparable genitals, with some size variation, and discovered that most of them had simple tastes. One craved a female breeder type who would lie beneath him and whisper obscenities in his ear as he shoved his member into her various holes. One wanted a very specific female with long blond hair, broad hips and thigh boots. His fantasy was to be ordered about and have her demand that he give her various sexual favours. I liked this one. He did anything I could think of, willingly, and I was always able to come with him. Several of them were not interested in pleasuring me, and those made for hard days, when the frustration nearly drove me mad. At least when those two visits were over I could take care of myself. Every inch of me feels pleasure to some degree, and I can be any form I desire if there's no one else around to force my shape. I can revert to my own anatomy, which is possessed of parts not so very different from the throbbing cock and the moist cunt that so many species enjoy. I can vent my passions, sliding my own delicate parts together and working myself into a frenzy. It's not a patch on real sex, but it wards off the worst of the cravings.

On day four I discovered a familiar face in the

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cabin – he was young, tall virile, and I already knew his voice. It was Ericsson, the captain's fancy. There wasn't a gay thought in his head; he wanted women. Mostly he wanted exotic women of other species, and different colours, but basically the same shape and with the same tight holes. I did not initially undertake to delight him with the variety of other species, but from the outset I suspected he would soon broaden his tastes once he got used to me. We kept it humanoid to start with, and I enjoyed coupling with him in this simplistic way. He was fun and easygoing, and I found I liked him the best. He liked to take his time, as much as my effects would allow, and, if he could, he liked a second round.

That said, there was always something that set him apart from the rest, something beyond the captain's obsession with him. I soon noticed that no matter how sated I managed to make him, I could always sense something else, lingering as a barely formed need on the peripheries of his mind. It caught my imagination; this unformed desire, unknowable even to a being like myself, for whom desires always seem so plain and evident. I like little enigmas, they make life worth living.

I learnt all sorts of things during the first few weeks. I learned very particularly that our captain was fantasizing his way through the crew, but that like me, he preferred Ericsson. As he became more confident about using me; his inclinations grew more submissive; more eager to be bullied and humiliated by the men he normally ordered around. I wondered how this is affecting him the rest of the time, but had

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little scope for finding out. I fell into the usual routine of getting my own hormonal fixes and trying to ignore the boredom and inertia that filled the greater part of my time. The crew came round in strict order, their appearances my only map of the passing days. They arrived to play out their fantasies and pump their various fluids, and I made the best of it. The rest of the time I was confined to quarters – such is the life of a slave creature. I had access to some parts of the computer, but for the greater part, life was lonely and I found, when sated and alone, that, try as I might to keep the past at bay, I lapsed into thinking of home, hankering for the companionship of likeminded beings and the comfort of lovers who do not just take from you.

My door opened unexpectedly one evening. I call it evening, I had divided up the day into the patterns of home, using my body rhythms to mark out the time. It had been something to do, something to give shape to the monotony and the eternal electric light in that metal box. My visitor was none other than our beloved captain. He largely ignored me, and I could tell it was a real struggle for him, but his mind was fixed on something very specific, and that helped him considerably. He managed to cross the room without stopping once, and without even risking a glance in my direction. He headed for the computer panel on the back wall. I watched with shameless curiosity as he typed in a few things, and left without a word.

I took a few moments to indulge a rare feeling of irritation; I knew full well that he assumed I was stupid, because to him I was nothing more than a

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whore and a slave. I hate anyone making assumptions about me. Back before my slave days, I was a thinker by trade, and it didn't take me long to figure out what he'd done - a little re-programming, a final piece in a puzzle he had built elsewhere, which would allow him to use my screen as a monitor. He wanted to watch what happened in my quarters. Again, this was hardly new; I'd travelled on ships where the onboard entertainment largely consisted of monitoring the activities in my room. I've always hated it; it is degrading to be granted no privacy and no choice. I thought about the Captain's actions then, and I knew whom he wanted to see. This wasn't general voyeurism and titillation, this was something he'd been building towards since his first day with me. I knew what he was hoping to find out, and that the odds are he would be disappointed. Given his position, he would of course know when Ericsson got his turn with me, and I guessed he would be observing the next session. To my surprise, I found I wanted to warn the young man. I didn't think this boded well for anyone.

* * * *

I had a second visitor that night, as if I hadn't already had enough surprises for one day. Ericsson actually knocked on the door and waited for me to open it. It was the first time anyone had done this since I was thrown into this life. I was so surprised that I must have sat where I was for some moments, just remembering what the knock meant and how I

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should respond to it. I found I was as moved by his consideration as by how much this told me about my slave state. He was nervous, I could tell that at once, but he had dressed with care, and his blond hair looked silky even under the glaring lights. I felt my form flutter in his presence, but no shape came to me. To my amazement, I realised he was fighting down his own urges to fantasise. I had grown so used to those around me imprinting their desires upon my flesh that this, too, was a strange experience. I invited him in and offered him a seat. As he brushed close to me, I worked out that he had come to me with empty balls and a clear head. This was something new, and for once my mind was more fully engaged with him than my body. I had answered my door wearing a generic breeder form for his species, and I kept that – it was nothing too provocative, but something he would find reassuringly familiar.

“Are you busy?” he asked.

“No,” I told him. “Have a seat. What can I do for you?”

“I guess I just wanted to talk,” he said, almost shyly. “The rest of them, they haven’t got two brain cells to rub together. I’m going out of my mind with boredom. And I’ve been thinking. I mean, we use you, you’re the ship’s whore, but I don’t even know your name. I’ve tried the last few times I’ve been in here, but you... I get...” he trailed, off, embarrassed, I thought.

“I have an aphrodisiac effect, don’t ask me how it works, I don’t know. It’s a species thing, I think.”

“It’s like a perfume, as soon as I breathe it in, it’s in

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my skin, in my body, and I can only think about one thing."

"That's interesting, no one's ever told me how it affects them before. Thank you."

"But it means most of the time when I'm here, I don't get much thinking done."

"Don't worry about it. You must have worked hard to get your head this clear."

He blushed slightly. I caught a trace of the feelings and impressions in his mind; not exactly words, more a flicker of images and sensations, but enough to inform me that he was remembering how he'd passed the last hour or so, alone in his cabin, working every last scrap of desire out of his body. I had the sense of sweat and aggression, of organs subjected to pleasure until they had almost grown sick of the sensation.

"Well, it's the same with me, if that helps," I told him, needing to ease his discomfort, "if I don't get laid every eight hours or so, I can hardly think at all."

"Is that a species thing, too?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"No, it's a modification."

"I had no idea," he said, and he looked away from me. I could feel how confused he felt. He resented what has been done to me.

"It makes us good slaves, willing, compliant whores, because if we don't get our fix, we go slowly crazy. I'm under a very strong physical compulsion to get as much sex as I can, and mine was a sensual species to begin with."

"Were you always like this?"

"No," I confessed. "We had a lot of raiders. Pilsk

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were very saleable a few years back, probably still are, and we hadn't got much with which to defend ourselves, but then someone figured out how to rewire our physiology and we were getting picked up for slaves all the time. I was taken in a raid, I don't even know how long ago it was now. These ships take away all your sense of time."

"Tell me about it," he said. Then he added, "What did you do, before you worked the ships like this?"

That was another question I'd not been asked in a long time.

"I had ideas," I told him.

He looked slightly puzzled, but I wasn't sure if there was a better description for it in his language.

"I solved problems," I tried again, "mostly with making things, but not always. Sometimes with running things, sometimes with friends."

He was trying to follow me, but explaining a culture to one who has never seen it and who lacks basic empathic skills was always going to be challenging.

"What about you?" I asked him. "What brought you onto the ships?"

"The money, partly, and a mistaken idea that seeing more of the universe would be fun, but it's dull, and I want to get back to planet-based work as soon as I can."

"What do you do?" I asked him.

"Engineering, fixing things, solving problems, I guess." He smiled. "Have you always been able to shape-shift?"

"No. We're born with a specific and simple form.

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The shape changing comes as we mature, gradually, as the body chemistry changes and the brain structure grows able to handle more complex ways of being."

"Are you gendered?"

"Yes, I suppose. There are those who carry young and those who inseminate, like most species, but genitally speaking we seem to be a bit more complex than average."

"Go on."

His interest seemed genuine, and more than simply a part of his quest for the exotic.

"You have one set of genitals, yes?"

"Well, normally; although I gather there's quite a few people get themselves modified to have both."

"We have three."

There was a long silence, as I pondered how best to explain my anatomy, and he was clearly mulling over something very different.

"Would you show me your true form?" he eventually asked. "I mean, I don't want to pry if you don't want to, but I'm curious to see how you really look, triple genitalia and all."

I sensed this is partly what he came for; to find my own exotic nature without imprinting his own desires on it. I felt a pang of regret; I had almost dared to hope that his intention was to seek me out as an individual, but I felt increasingly like I was merely supplying his need for the unusual. I don't know what he saw in my face, but he said,

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't have asked. That was rude and inconsiderate of me, please forget that I said it."

This surprised me. Something fundamental was

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changing in Ericsson. He was thinking as he had never done before. I could tell that he was feeling more deeply for some reason; trying to empathise with me and to understand my condition. He had started to care and could no longer see me as some object for his use.

"I don't think I understand you," I answered, trying to encourage him to voice what was in his mind, and needing to encounter it more coherently for myself.

"This isn't about the sex, or the organs, or anything like that, I'm sorry if it came across that way. I just want some sense of who, and what, you really are. I don't want to come in here and keep using you. I want to have some contact with you as a thinking, feeling being. I don't know if you have time, or inclination, for anything like that, but..."

I let the breeder form fall away. It's always an odd sensation, the changing, one of slipping and sliding, falling back through something. My own skin is blue-black in colour, smooth and hairless. My body is long and sinuous, it made him think of a snake. In my most basic form, the form of infancy and unknowing, I have no limbs, and my various sexual organs are folded away inside my body, but will open like flowers. I showed them to him one by one, explaining what they do. I have a rod-like member of my own, which can mimic the uses and sensations of an impregnator, but does not carry seed. I have a fully functioning breeder's orifice as well, and a third place, moist and tightly muscled.

"Both sexes have two sets of genitals evolved

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purely for pleasure," I explained to him. "A male will have a rod for impregnating and a second just for stimulation and enjoyment. He will also have a third, a hole for sensual penetration."

He was studying me, his fascination evident.

"Females, on the other hand, have a rod that exists only to provide pleasure, an orifice for breeding purposes, and the hole for sensual penetration as well. There are every so often individuals who end up being able to both fertilise and conceive, but they aren't so common. As you can see, I'm a breeder, a female."

"It must give you a lot more sexual options than most species," he observed.

"This two-individual coupling your species favour isn't so common amongst the Pilsk," I explained. "We do indulge in it, and a duo with compatible organs can engage in three levels of sexual stimulation at once. However, we have reason to believe that our complex sexuality was largely evolved to support communal living and social bonding. Some of our thinkers have hypothesised that our peaceful, co-operative nature owes a great deal to our communal intercourse."

"Communal intercourse?" he asked, surprisingly slow to get the gist of my meaning.

"Consider me. I have three sets of genitals, plus a mouth. I can therefore engage fully in sexual activity with as many as four separate individuals. My natural shape, as you have observed, is slender, and without the complication of limbs, but durable enough not to crush readily. Thus as a species we are perfectly

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adapted for complex acts of collective intercourse."

"Like orgies, then?" he asked, and I caught the image of tangled limbs and sweaty bodies in his mind.

"Moderately, only we don't think of it as anything out of the ordinary, while you evidently do. We have other advantages over you, biologically speaking," I added, feeling the rush of hormonally generated sexual hunger starting to build within me.

"Possessed as we are of adaptable bodies and multiple sex organs, we can, if all else fails, please ourselves."

His eyes widened slightly.

"Would you like me to demonstrate?"

Either my state of arousal was affecting him, or his own sexual exhaustion had started to wear off, but either way, there was a glint in his eye.

With dexterous ease, I folded my long form in half, arching myself into an elegant circle and working my now firm rod into the moist opening of my breeder's orifice. To please myself, I sent slow waves of muscular contraction down the length of my form, pushing the rod forward, then squeezing the orifice tight about it. This left my pleasure centre open, yielding and more sensitive than ever. With skill and a little practise, two Pilsks of opposite gender can wrap themselves into two interlocking circles, blending intercourse with self-indulgence. I've seen it demonstrated on several occasions, but have never fully mastered the technique.

I was not so caught up in my own indulgence that at first I didn't notice how this was affecting Ericsson.

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He was intrigued, attracted and aroused by my display, and his reactions slowly impinged on my awareness, fuelling my enjoyment. For a while, he just watched me, but eventually he reached out a hand to explore the smoothness of my dark skin. He traced his way along my flank, towards my aching and unfulfilled pleasure centre, exploring the soft rim of it with care.

"Do you like that?" he asked me.

"Yes."

He nuzzled the finger a little way into me,

"And that?"

"Yes, oh yes."

I could feel his exhausted sex quicken with desire as his strong fingers, first one, then two, plunged deep into me, inducing sensations both rough and delicate in turn. It was the final proof I needed that he wanted me for myself, and not for the illusions I might be able to create. He assisted my pleasure with patience, despite the growing need in him, and he did not take his fingers from me until I told him he had done enough.

"I want you." He said, with gentle determination.

"I want you as you are, as fully as I can. Would you do that for me?"

"Gladly."

It took us a few moments to pull him free of his clothes, and to work out how best to align our various parts. He had already planned it, though, and straddled me with confidence, slipping his own hot member into the sensitive depths of my central orifice, while dipping his mouth and fingers to

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explore the moist recesses of my breeding part. I could see the firm curve of his arse, the perfection of his skin. His cheeks were spread wide, turned towards me. Our captain had taught me everything I needed to know about penetrating the males of this species, and so with great care, I wrapped the upper part of my body around him, helping him deeper into my orifices as I pried myself into his. His body was sweetly warm to enter, and yielded slowly to my pressure, opening up until we formed a complete circle, and something close to the ecstasy of triple bonding that had been so long denied me.

He was too intensely aroused to draw out the experience for as long as I might have wanted, but I enjoyed the trembling of his flesh and the gush of his fluids. He had already pleased me once, but there was a surprising amount of satisfaction to be had from his bucking, prolonged orgasm. I had never known him to come so hard, or for so long.

This was more than humanoid coupling, more than the quick release of fluids and tension. With his passion and care, he had echoed the deep contact Pilsk intercourse normally brings; he had moved my spirit and mind, as well as answering the deep hungers in my flesh. He had given freely and utterly of himself, accepting in return all that I could offer him. Once he was sated, I slipped back into the more familiar form of a human female, with arms to hold him, and legs to twine around his in comfortable intimacy. We lay in companionable, trusting silence for a long time, until I remembered my previous visitor of the evening.

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"There's something you need to know." I said, "I don't normally talk about what people do in here, but the Captain ... he's worked his way through all of the crew in here, but mostly he's fixed his attention on you."

"It's happened before," he said, shrugging. "I don't normally go for blokes, but it doesn't make me uncomfortable."

"He's re-programmed the computer, so the monitor will allow him to view what happens in here."

"So he wants to watch me with you?"

"I would guess that's the case, yes."

"I'll just have to make sure I give him a good show, then." Ericsson smiled.

"Maybe you should pretend to be him, do you think he would enjoy that? Poor old git probably needs something to cheer up his dull life."

"It's not all harmless fun. Remember, I've felt his psyche a fair few times now, and there's something in him very close to being out of control, something that could get violent or dangerous. He keeps fantasising about forcing you, taking you by force in front of the rest of the crew. Sometimes what he imagines is all the rest of them using you as well. It's cruel, brutal, and destructive. I'm worried."

He rolled over so that he was facing me.

"I'm touched," he said, and I knew he meant it.

"Thanks for the warning. I'm going to need to give this some serious thought."

* * * *

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We drifted in and out of sleep, nestled close against each other until he had a shift to work and there could be no more intimacy for us.

As soon as he was gone, I began to miss him. I'd taught myself not to feel, and how to live without the simple pleasures and joys that had once underpinned my existence. He had awakened all those old feelings and needs, and shown me how much of my own nature I had been forced to abandon, just to be able to survive as a slave. I wanted him, not only for the sweet delight his body could bring to mine, but also for the way in which he was moving my mind.

* * * *

A few days passed, during which I was cast back into the pattern I had become accustomed to – sleeping, fucking and killing time as best I could. The ensuing visits from the captain presented me with an assortment of challenges. He had Ericsson very much on his mind, and, knowing my lover's form more thoroughly, I was better able to enjoy exploring it. It felt peculiar, however, to be playing out this ever more aggressive fantasy with a man who was on the brink of significant violence, all because his own sexuality frightened him. He had a new script in his head, no less troubling than any of the previous ones, in which he was the victim, gangbanged by his whole crew. He was having me recreate each crewmember in turn, and it wore my not inconsiderable stamina to keep up with his needs. If I could have stopped him

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from visiting me, then I would have done, because I knew that his obsession was going to drive him to some destructive act if things went much further.

* * * *

"After all the trouble I went to last time, you still didn't tell me your name," Ericsson teased.

"I didn't know how to," I explained. "You people are so word based. You communicate in words, half the time you even think in words, and if you don't, you have to translate your thoughts into words before you can do anything with them."

"You don't think in words, then?"

"No. I don't even have a language in any way that you would recognise. You know, that was one of the hard things about being dragged out into the big bad rest of the galaxy; having to come to terms with the way everyone else has verbal language for everything."

"So how do you communicate, then?"

"We're empathic. It's all impressions, feelings, knowing. Your limited language just doesn't have the words for me to tell you what my not-really-a-language is like."

"Do you even have a name, then?"

"Of course I have a name."

"What is it?"

"Um, imagine a sort of green colour, the sort of green that goes with feeling relaxed and optimistic, when you haven't quite started doing something, but are about to, and have every reason to think it's going

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to work out really well."

"And that's your name?"

"Yes."

He gazed into the dark eyes of the pale-skinned human form I had settled on for this encounter, and I could sense that he was struggling with the ideas I'd just presented to him.

"It sounds like a very pretty name." He said after a while, "But I don't rate my chances of being able to remember all of that. Does it shorten to anything?"

It was my turn to look a touch confused.

"Like Ericsson shortens to 'Eric' or 'Rick', or 'son', you could shorten yours to 'green' or 'mellow' or 'optimistic' or something."

"Only that's not the sort of name you people use, is it? Yours are all weird sounds that have no meaning at all."

"Not entirely true. Ericsson means son of Eric."

"And what does Eric mean?"

"Ok, you've got me there."

"You can call me whatever you like, ok?"

"That's some responsibility. I'll try and think of something."

* * * *

Horried and alarmed though I was by the scenarios the captain had me play out in the privacy of my quarters, it still had a certain allure. His raw, intensely physical lust for Ericsson nurtured my own growing desire for the man, and my forays into my lover's body became all the more intense for having recreated

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his flesh and actions with another. Ericsson became a regular out of hours visitor to my small prison, while the Captain became ever more insistent, and the games we played grew ever more complex.

Ericsson was determined we do some show in which I took the Captain's form, but we were struggling, because he could not hold the notion of our captain as a lust figure in his mind. We'd got so far as getting him to fantasise about other men, which I knew was fuelling the captain's obsession, but we had managed no more. I was enjoying being able to observe his ever-developing sexuality. He had come to me with the usual limited spectrum of tastes and experiences, but while most of the individuals I've encountered liked to stick to what they knew, Ericsson was always hungry to learn and discover new pleasures. Helping him unravel the sensual mysteries of his own form was the most fulfilling thing I'd been able to do in a long time. He wanted to know all the strange things I'd ever been prompted to do by another's desires, and it was good to be able to finally share and explore those encounters. Even the most peculiar and unrewarding contact became interesting when I tried to share it with my lover.

"I want to know more about your people," he said while we were lying together one night.

"Was there anything specific you wanted to know about?" I'd already told him a great deal about our culture and traditions.

"You said, it must have been a few weeks ago now, you told me that you go on for a lot of group stuff, that you thought you'd evolved specifically with that

in mind."

"Yes."

"I just wondered how that works."

"Well, that depends on how many are involved, and what gender they are. If we're all of the same gender, we might make a chain, each inserting a rod into the pleasure centre of the next. If there's only four or five of us involved, it tends to be very improvised. If we're going for the full thing, and that's with a very large group, it has to be perfectly organised."

I could see that he was fascinated.

"You've seen how I am, so imagine we begin with one female then, who lies on her back and exposes her genitals. Three others will come to her and lie across her, maybe four if the maths works better that way. Each of those individuals will engage sexually with the first female, and then more will engage with them. It forms a latticework, everyone utterly penetrated, utterly penetrating. When we are all ready and connected, we undulate our bodies, like you've seen me do for myself. We stimulate each other, interacting across a network of flesh, all engaging empathically with each other, so we share the pleasure and the sensation, which of course in turn amplifies it, and we stay there as long as we can. Hours, sometimes."

"That sounds amazing, if complicated."

"It is, both. There are whole schools of thought devoted to understanding the optimal ways of aligning individuals to best effect, based on whether you intend to breed or not."

"So you conceive this way?"

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"Normally, yes, it's rare for a new life to be made outside such contact. We all share the creation of a new life, we all give to that experience."

"Not something I'll ever be able to share." He said wistfully.

"You could participate bodily, if you came in good faith and the others accepted you, but you would never be able to engage with us, psychically, no, and so you would miss out on much of the experience."

He seemed melancholy, but I had no idea what had brought it on.

"If we ever get out of here." I told him, "You're welcome to come home with me."

* * * *

My growing relationship with Ericsson made me want to reach out to the rest of the crew. This was another part of my Pilsk nature that I had carefully worked to repress, but which was returning to me. We are gregarious beings, we need community, contact and connection. I started with the masochist – Ericsson had gifted me with the usual names for many things.

"What is your name?" I asked, standing over him, with a belt in my hand.

"I am your slave, mistress, I would be honoured if my mistress chooses to give me a name."

"I don't want to give you a name, slave, I want your own, miserable name, your real name, your true name. You must surrender every part of yourself to me."

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The trouble was, that to find out anything, I had to play the role he wanted, re-enforce the fantasy and make real contact even harder.

“Peter,” he said.

It was a start. A couple of the others also confessed their names to me, but only when they were tired and about to leave. No one asked for my name in return. They were too used to thinking of me as some sort of facility, rather than an individual being. Ericsson helped me use the monitor to watch them – it passed the time and allowed me to study his species more thoroughly. I learned that two of the men were sleeping together, and watched some of their enthusiastic, graceless couplings. Both used me routinely, but with little passion, and now I started to understand why. Using the raw material gleaned from watching them, I was better able to please them. For a set of people connected by language and genes, they were frighteningly isolated from each other. Despite the lack of space in the ship, they hived themselves off into separate compartments, apart from the two who were sating each other’s urges. They hardly talked save for when the work required it, and there was no joy in their lives. I started to wonder if I could actually make them happy, but most of them didn’t want to talk to me – they’d empty their balls and that would be enough, anything else would seem like an intimacy too far. I decided I didn’t really understand them, and that Ericsson was clearly an exception to their type.

After a little experimentation, we were able to re-work my monitor further so that Ericsson could also

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view the events in my room. I wondered how many of the people in this ship were secretly watching each other while they pretended to live isolated, uncaring lives. Sometimes we used the monitors to talk, or for me to tell him that my visitors had gone for the day. Even when we couldn't be together, it gave me a sense of connection to him, that I could sometimes, when the screens allowed it, see where he had got to on the ship.

More often than not, I made sure any couplings taking place in my room did so in full view of the screen, in case anyone was watching. Sometimes I liked to think that Ericsson might be observing me, although at others, when the demands made of me were more humiliating, I hoped that he was elsewhere not seeing me degraded by my altered body and its insatiable cravings for sex. I know he took to watching the captain in his exchanges with me, saw me wearing his own form, working through the latest scene or act that had moved that man's troubled mind. He told me he found it sexy, watching me pretend to be him, engaged in sex with another man. I think he was telling the truth, for even then some of my ideas were not unfamiliar to him. With every meeting that passed, our Captain became ever more fanatical in his exploits, and in his need to lose himself in the dark recesses of Ericsson's body. I could tell that my magic was no longer enough for him. He needed it to be real, and he needed to have the man in person. I hoped that Ericsson could see this when he watched our antics, that he would read the danger signs and know to be careful.

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The weeks that passed are blurred in my mind, with a scattering of moments that have been caught in perfection. It was a time when bliss and fear tangled together so thoroughly that every experience was heightened almost beyond endurance. Ericsson and I found a lot of time for each other; whenever I was alone, he would come to me, and we would shag our way through half a dozen positions and combinations, until our organs ached and our minds were clear. I pushed his body, and his endurance to the very limits, and he never failed me. For all the limitations of his form, he was a skilled and giving lover.

"Can it be reversed?" he asked me out of the blue.

"Can what be reversed?"

"The modification, the one that compels you to fuck all the time."

"Probably. I don't know. And I expect it would cost. Would you want it reversed?"

"I'd like you free to be yourself, and that's as much a prison to you as this ship is."

"True. I'll admit I can hardly remember what it was like to be able to settle for only one or two moments of release in a day."

"I could probably keep up with that." He smiled, but then his expression clouded, "But would you still want me, without all the hormones?"

"Yes, I'd still want you." I admitted, and surprising though this was, I realised it was true.

"It's nice to have a dream." I said, sleepily.

"I'm not talking about dreams, I'm talking about plans," he said, but when I asked him to expand on

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that, he wouldn't be drawn.

As the days passed, I held onto that thought, to the possibility of freedom both from the ship, and the powerful drives of my modified and engineered body. I feared what would happen when our Captain eventually lost his grip, which seemed more likely every time he came to me. A metal box in the cold vacuum of space is a vulnerable thing indeed, and we were on a long haul to some culture-forsaken spot on the edge of the known universe, and a mining station full of equally desperate individuals. I feared that if he went mad, we could all die out in the cold emptiness, and that left me sick and agoraphobic every time I thought about it. I also began to wonder for the first time how long this company intended to use me. While ship's whores and slave species are common enough, last time I heard, Pilsk slaves weren't so common, and on a far-flung outpost where sexual opportunities would be limited, I would fetch a very high price indeed. I feared being trapped on a mining craft with strangers, taken from Ericsson and forced back into the life of a whore without any of the comforts I had known on the ship. Having grown used to love and care, to talk and contact, going back to being a used body, pumped for sexual release and nothing more would be as grim as those early weeks and months of my confinement had been.

I could still remember the horror of being trapped in a strange place, visited by beings I did not know, whose desires penetrated my thoughts and filled me with inexplicable lust to copulate with them. I can remember how I loathed myself in those days, for the

body I could no longer control, for knowing that if they deprived me of their needs and fluids, I would go mad for want of sex. Age, race, species, gender, dimensions, inclinations – all these things meant nothing to me in the heat of the moment, but afterwards, when I had enjoyed my fix, I would think of the tender passions of my own people, the complex mutual stimulations, and the long hours basking in pleasure, and I would grieve for all that I had lost. I did not take readily to this life, and I did not think I would be able to face learning all of its hardest lessons for a second time. Ericsson's body might be fixed in one form, his genitals might have been limited, but he had a generous heart and a keen mind, and what we shared had richness, depth and significance for me. I feared losing what I had found, and the future took on an increasingly grim appearance.

When Ericsson came for his officially allocated visits, we devoted ourselves purely to sexual contact and to furthering our repertoire of possible combinations and activities. I never showed my true form for long in these sessions, I had no desire to share that with the captain's prying eyes, nor did I want him to think there was anything between myself and his favourite. Conscious that unkind eyes might be upon us troubled me. I knew that sooner or later we must reach a breaking point, but had not guessed what form such a moment might take. The first I knew that the time had come was when my door was thrown open. There is an unwritten rule that a crewmember's time with the whore is sacrosanct, and

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can only be intruded upon by explicit invitation, or in case of emergency. This was neither.

Ericsson was locked deep inside me, as I had taken a largely human female form whilst keeping my own unique genitalia unfolded. We were enjoying a simple act. I was on my hands and knees, his member lodged deep in my pleasure centre while his hands caressed both my rod and my breeding orifice. He had already come for me once, and was stimulating me while his body recuperated. I was swimming in pleasure to the point of being almost groggy. The captain's entrance was dramatic, his presence acting on my body even before my mind could respond. I felt my breeder orifice folding inwards, my breasts vanish away and the cock between Ericsson's fingers become more prominent. I knew the body I was wearing, intimately.

We must have made a strange image: Two Ericssons, both surprised, and one deeply buried in the flesh of the other. I felt my lover's hands firm on me. The door closed, and I felt Ericsson stiffen within my flesh. I'd suspected for a while that he had wanted this encounter, and now that the moment had arrived, he was more than ready for it.

"Carry on." The captain ordered, and we did so. We'd made love with the possibility of his eyes on us so many times that it didn't make as much difference as I'd expected. He watched us, and I knew he was enjoying it. This was better than anything he had thought of; two visions of masculine beauty, two versions of the man he lusted after, copulating before his eyes, with determined thrusts and almost

theatrical expressions of our enjoyment. We put on a good display for him.

When at last we had finished with one another, we carefully separated, not bothering to cover ourselves as we waited for the captain to explain himself. His usually pale cheeks were flushed, and there were droplets of sweat glistening on his brow. His arousal was palpable, as was his fear; he knew one of us was the real man, but not which. He looked from one to the other of us, comparing us and finding few real differences. As his imagined Ericsson, I had in the past been slightly taller and more improbably endowed, but experience of the other's body had allowed me to match my form almost perfectly to his. I doubt anyone could have really determined which of us was which.

"You could have both of us, one after the other, or at the same time." Ericsson offered, his voice low and deeply suggestive. I didn't know whether to feel alarmed or aroused, and the same tension filled both of the men, fuelling my own responses.

"I've had enough of counterfeits." The captain spat at Ericsson. He turned abruptly to me.

"Get on your knees."

As Ericsson had made the approach, our Captain had obviously assumed that I was the genuine man. I gritted my teeth, fighting against the inclination to hold the form he had chosen. We needed to do this properly, and if Ericsson was game, it would be best if our man should know with all certainty that he had finally acted his fantasy out. His desire for Ericsson was too strong, and I could not break the form, until I

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felt Ericsson concentrating. All that work towards male forms with a view to eventually forcing me into the captain's shape was paying off at last. He worked up a frenzy of desire for one of the other crew members, a man called Gough, the one who liked submissive, obscene women and very little else. We all knew he was the Captain's second favourite. Seeing me change, my form subtly flickering and shimmering as details adjusted to represent this other man, the Captain recoiled, and returned his attention to Ericsson again.

"So you're the real one," he said, his voice still angry as he tried to mask his fear.

"I know what you want." Ericsson spoke with remarkable calm. I knew he'd been thinking about just such an encounter for some weeks, but had no idea what, if anything was likely to be the consequence of it.

"And I'll offer you a deal. You can have me, I'll do anything you want, any time you want, any place you want. Anything your mind can come up with. But you pay by the hour."

"I knew you were a slut." The Captain replied triumphantly. The bargain was struck, and I could feel his tension seeping away, even though the fear remained.

"I knew it the first time I saw you." He said, "I knew you were a fag and I was right."

Ericsson told him how much it was going to cost, and I could hardly breathe. It was a lot of money by anyone's standards, but the older man didn't voice any objections, he just nodded.

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"You'll have it."

Ericsson began to fondle himself. I'd already taken him twice, but he found his inspiration somewhere, and his organ lifted its head promisingly.

"I know exactly what you want." He said, meeting the captain's eye. "You want it so badly, you'd beg me for it if you thought that would do you any good."

The captain nodded slowly. This was a scenario he'd played out with me more than once.

"So beg." Ericsson commanded, and I watched as our captain fell to his knees and humbly asked that he be allowed to take Ericsson in his mouth. He was more explicit than he'd ever been with me, his words short, plain, but fuelled with a need he'd never quite managed to summon in my presence. I sat back and watched the spectacle unfold.

* * * *

"So this is how it feels to be a whore." Ericsson said softly, as he stroked my skin with his long fingers.

"To some degree, it must. How does it feel?"

"Sometimes it makes me feel powerful, sometimes it makes me feel like I have no control over anything. He's getting more confident, that's for sure."

"What happened?" I asked carefully, sensing that there was something.

"He went public today. I thought from what you've said that he'd want to do it sooner or later, but he's finally got round to it. It was when we were in the mess hall, about half of us at any rate. He ordered me to blow him, in front of the rest of them. Then he

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asked if anyone else wanted a go with me, and explained what my usual rates and terms are. I think that was the worst bit."

"And did anyone?"

"Yes." He paused, and I smiled encouragingly at him. "Roberts, you know..."

"The one who shares his bed with Smith, I know. And?"

"So I blew him as well."

"Was it good?"

"I don't know. It was different. Having a definite audience actually there, not just watching through the screens, knowing there's money in it."

He obviously had mixed feelings, although he was strongly motivated to perform these acts. It was curious, because he had played through innumerable male on male scenarios with me, but somehow males of his own species were a different matter, and he still felt ill at ease with it.

"You're doing something that bothers you." I observed.

"It's not so much the act, more the people. None of them's especially enticing."

"Look on the bright side. You have a choice, you can refuse anyone, any time."

"They are paying, though. I checked my bank balance before I came round tonight, and the money's all there, exactly as much as there should be."

"Does that make a difference?"

"I'm only doing it for the cash. None of these no-hopers ever appealed to me sexually, but I want their money."

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"Why?" I asked him.

"Wait and see." I could tell he was troubled, and it did not rest easily on my mind.

"Talk to me," I tried. "I know you aren't happy."

"I doubt talking's going to do any good. I've never gone for that 'problem shared' crap."

I wasn't entirely sure what he meant, but had a fleeting impression of human breeders discussing their woes at length, mingled with a flicker of irritation.

"Understanding a problem helps, though. You seem confused."

"Okay," he said. "I'll talk, if it'll set your mind at rest. It's just that I'm new to this. I've put about as much as anyone else, always with people I fancied until now. It's finding I can do all the usual moves with anyone, even if I don't really fancy them, my body seems quite happy to just get on with it."

"I know how that feels. Accept this or reject it, there's nothing else you can do."

"I guess you're right there."

* * * *

Ericsson became something of a feature, and his antics on enough of their minds that I found I was wearing his form more often than not. I wouldn't always start in his body, but more than a few times when I was halfway through some coupling, breasts bouncing and thighs wet with juices, that familiar trembling change would start to overtake me. I'd feel my body shift, the rush of chemicals to the blood

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stream as the colours started to change on my skin, subtle differences of tone that make such a difference. I could feel my false breasts sinking back into my skin as muscles regrouped and liquids journeyed, pumping my ribs up to be wider. It is always dizzying, and never more so than when it happens in the heat of arousal. Several of them practised on me, sampled the possibility of Ericsson in the limited privacy of my quarters, before accosting him in person. I watched him on the screen, lured into Mac Roberts' room for a long night of sweaty favours, and then paid by Smith regularly for masturbation. The tedium of travel was gradually turning them all into sex addicts, and in their desperate attempts to find some peace of mind, I saw echoes of my own condition.

I watched Ericsson with concern. The sexual antics of others have only ever been a curiosity for me, I am not any more aroused by mating than by anything else. It gives me no hormonal gratification to observe, although there is intellectual interest. I wanted to watch Ericsson to see that he was all right, and to better understand his desires and needs. I saw him serve others with frightening passivity, saw him surrender to acts of sex and let his body guide him even though his mind was unmoved. Perhaps there had been a time when he would have accepted any sort of sex, but we had shared a lot, and his awareness of the greater possibilities made these fumbblings less appealing still. There was no joy in what most of them did, only aggression and want.

I did not really understand it at the time, but in

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offering himself up to his crewmates, he was partly seeking some insight into my condition. We were fellow travellers on the whore's path, both able to perform without feeling or desire, both knowing that to do so was a betrayal of everything good and precious in the coupling act. Every time he submitted to their penetrations, and let himself be used, he understood better what it meant to be able to choose and to act with joy and not lust. Not that there's anything wrong with lust, but when it becomes everything, all of the colour bleaches out of existence.

"Tell me again," he said, "About the lattice. Not the practical details, but take me there, help me understand what it's like."

Smith and his lover had shared Ericsson on the previous night and group couplings were very much on his mind.

"Close your eyes." I told him, running hands over his firm chest. I began to stroke the funny little dimple in his belly.

"Imagine this is a pleasure centre, a soft and yielding place, that gives you satisfaction when it is touched, that aches to be entered." I slipped the tip of a finger in, knowing it wouldn't do much for him, but needing to spark his imagination.

"Imagine slow, sensual penetration, during which you can sense how the individual entering you loves the closeness of your body, the slippery smoothness of your flesh."

I squatted over him, knowing what he was waiting for.

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"Feel a second lover coming to touch your body, sliding their sex down over your waiting rod." I lowered myself onto him.

"I feel the warmth of you inside me, the pulse of blood through your erect flesh, your flesh nuzzling into mine, stimulating my senses, and I feel your delight at being in me once again, you want to thrust up into me, but are waiting, this I can tell. I feel as you feel, you feel as I feel and we can bask in that for a moment or two, and then slowly, inevitably..." I began to press myself down on him, and he responded in kind.

"Feel a third upon you, gently opening your third passage, sliding into you, relishing the way in which your body yields, drinking up your submission." I slid myself into the crevice between his buttocks, feeling along the tender ridge of flesh there towards the intensely sensitive gland within.

"Know that your pleasure makes the pleasure giver giddy, that every sensation feeds back through their awareness. Now, one of your three lovers has entered into congress with another, feel that sexual union as though you too were part of it. Then again, and again, until all you are aware of is the sweet coupling of flesh, the slow dance of penetration and pleasure. Each moment of penetration belongs to you, and they come thick and fast as more come to join the communion. Everyone is still as the first contacts are made, everyone relishing the slow insertion of one body into another. The feelings it produces are sweet, intense, and prolonged, you lie for a long time, absorbing the feeling of connection and possibility. As

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one by one, each individual finds their own rhythm and begins to move, you find the rocking, pulsing of your own body is echoed a thousand times around you, and you feel each thrust, each trembling response as though it were your own. Somewhere out there in the lattice, you are feeling the orgasm of another, a slow, shuddering tease of pleasure that rushes your own senses until your own body is responding in kind. Across the lattice, each mind seems to explode with light and pleasure, a surfeit of sensation, ride it, stay in it as long as you can."

His body was already shaking deep in my own, and I used every skill at my command to hold him on the brink for as long as I could. I squeezed the base of his cock, holding back his fluids even as I caressed the gland that had sent them. I could hear his gasps, and felt the tension build in him until he could barely stand it. I lowered my mouth to his, tasting his tongue in my mouth as I released him and a hot wave of his fluids rushed urgently to meet my body.

I knew from the thoughts and sensations flickering through his mind that he had come close to understanding. He lay exhausted in my arms, and the sense of wonder he felt washed through us both. He understood that when you share so much, you could know no enmity. There could only ever be peace and co-operation between us.

"You don't use the shape changing in the lattice?" he asked.

"No. It doesn't add much."

"So that wasn't evolved for sex, then?"

"I don't believe so."

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"Do you have any theories? You seem to have theories about most things."

"Of course. Our home world was very unstable when we were a young species. There would be flood and fire, desert one decade, jungle the next. We experience a lot of meteor showers, the weather systems are always changing. Everything that survives has to adapt, and the more you can adapt, and the faster you can change, the better you survive. This would inevitably favour a species that does not have to change its form over many generations, but which can respond in minutes to the changing pressures in the environment."

"I guess that makes sense."

"So the whole idea of fixed, unchanging form we'd postulated for a long time, as some sort of fantasy perhaps, but until we came into contact with other races, I don't think anyone had taken the idea seriously, it was just something to worry the young ones with, that they might stay unchanging forever."

"So nothing on your world has a fixed form?"

"Not really, no. Nothing stays the same for long, everything shifts and adapts to everything else, it makes your way of doing things seem a tad dull and predictable."

"I'm sorry."

"No, forgive me, it's how it seems, but the more time I've spent around beings with fixed forms, the more ingenious I realise you are. You can't just grow a new limb or change your genetic code in response to your environment, so you make tools, you make technology to grow the limb for you. It's impressive.

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Our technology is very basic in comparison, it took me ages to get the hang of any of your stuff."

"What about the telepathy, where did that come in?"

"You know, until we met other beings, it had never occurred to us to wonder. It had never entered our thoughts that anyone might depend largely on sound for their communications. It's so crude and imprecise."

"Hang on," he said, "You've evolved to adapt, why can't you adapt your way out of your current problem?" he asked, "You can alter your body chemistry, yes? You do that for all sorts of things. So you should be able to just fix this, stop yourself from being hooked on your hormones."

"I thought that, too."

"And?"

"I can do big modifications, you know, learn to breathe a different sort of gas, cope with big changes in gravity, air pressure, temperature, that sort of thing. I can learn to withstand all sorts, and yes, I can tinker my chemistry quite a bit, but it takes a while. Anything really integral, beyond that manipulating my form, which is just mechanics, but anything really complex takes time, I can't develop it instantly. Most things I can manage in about ten hours, normal time, twenty-four has covered anything I've tried so far. But I have to be able to concentrate on it."

"Ah." I knew he'd figured it out. Eight hours before your sex drive goes into overload is just not long enough to be able to reconfigure your genetic code. I was largely certain that it was my DNA that

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had somehow been modified, and whoever had done it knew enough about my physiology to be able to make sure I wouldn't be able to reverse it all that easily.

There is a remarkably subtle difference between the sound of a craft in motion, and one at rest. I suspect the vast majority of those who work the ships do not even notice the low hum of engine noise that pervades the craft, much less register the tiny variations that tell you how the journey fares. One of the products of having too much time is that I am only too aware both of the hum, and the meanings of its changes. I can't always tell what exterior event has changed the sound, but I like to guess, or imagine.

When a craft is stationary, it uses very few of its systems; those that support the crew and any required for the maintenance of cargo and ship's systems. The sound of a ship that has stopped is therefore a good deal quieter and lighter, at least as my senses perceive it. The vibration frequency is slightly different as well. Consequently, I knew that the ship had stopped. I had visions of our hanging motionless in space, the fuel gone, or some vital part of the craft broken. I imagined that we would rot for a hundred years until some passing vehicle happened to spot us amongst the debris and asteroids. We would all be long dead by then, frozen and starved. For a while I listened for changes in the support system, but could hear nothing, so I accessed the computer in the hopes of finding out what the problem might be. It took me a while, because I was

looking in all the wrong places, and no one, not even Ericsson, had thought to tell me that there might be planet leave coming up. They would be docked somewhere, and the crew out to stretch their limbs and sample to local attractions. I would be trapped alone on the ship, nourished by the tasteless processed food the computer spewed out for me, but deprived of the sexual fulfilment my body required. I knew I could be alone for days, and that no matter what I might try to do for myself, by the end of that time I would be crawling the walls with frustration. Feeling utterly miserable and abandoned, I played around with the computer, looking for some view of the world beyond, but all I found was the unrelenting metal of the place we'd docked in.

I waited, and time crawled by far too slowly, while my body chafed with impatience. I indulged myself repeatedly, hoping to wear myself out and make sleep possible, but the prospect of being denied proper sex for says to come was enough to keep me awake, despite my best efforts. When a knock finally came at my door, I felt a faint glimmer of hope, but little more. Ericsson was beaming, but when I tried to read his thoughts, all I found was a selection of fruit on which he was concentrating very hard indeed. Whatever he meant to hide from me, he had invested a lot of effort in it. I thought perhaps he had come to help me pass the time.

"We have planet leave." He told me.

"I know."

"Well?"

"Well what?"

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"If you're coming with me, you'd best put some proper clothes on, it's breezy out there."

It took me a few moments to fully comprehend what he'd said.

"I can leave the ship?"

"Yes."

I don't own much proper clothing, my body takes care of whatever my visitors wish to see, even if then removing it raises some interesting practical problems. I dug out a few items, and Ericsson handed me the coat he had been carrying. It felt strange having the fabrics against my skin. He took my hand, guided me down corridors and finally out into the world beyond. I hardly looked at the dock, I was aware of the grey metal, of a place not so different from the ship itself, but beyond it there was sky and a city, the like of which I had never seen before. Tall Spies rose towards the drifting clouds, and brightly dressed humanoids thronged the streets. I could see birds in the sky above us, and I heard the sound of distant bells. Words for the things I experienced seemed to fall from the air around me, permeating my mind.

The light was intense, and far richer in colour than the illumination onboard. The sky above seemed vast, so that looking up at it made me dizzy, and I clung to Ericsson's arm to keep my balance. I could hardly walk. The air had a scent to it, and moved softly against my face, cold indeed, but welcome. The colour around me was almost too much; the sheer vibrancy of the plants, buildings and finely dressed people. I'd lived in monotone for so long that my

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senses reeled as I tried to take in my surroundings. It seemed so vast, as though this world might stretch away forever, and I was afraid to move in it, afraid of becoming lost or overwhelmed. Ericsson led me with a firm hand, amongst the throngs of humanoid peoples, past huge buildings and through the winding streets.

I could hear the flickers of thought and desire around me, so numerous that it seemed akin to the buzz of the spaceship. Aside from the man at my side, no one here knew what I was, and none thought to impose their wants upon me. My form stayed true. I don't remember why I started laughing. It began as an intermittent giggle, and grew, until I was gasping for breath and shaking out of control, and the humour, the joy in freedom had crashed down into bitter tears. We sat in a sheltered spot, out of the wind, and he held onto me as I sobbed. He never asked why, and there were so many reasons that I would never have been able to explain them all. When I was calm again he said,

"I have a gift for you." This, no doubt, was the secret he had been trying to hide.

He pulled a tube of papers from inside his coat and handed it to me. I opened it, and found inside all of the paperwork pertaining to my slavery. I held my first bill of sale, my medical notes, my species certificate, everything through to the last purchase, duplicated no doubt on the various little discs.

"A box full of freedom." He said softly.

"You bought me?" I asked, incredulously.

"Yes." He answered, smiling, "And now you

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belong only to yourself. You don't have to get back on that ship, you can go wherever you like, go home, stay here, anything."

"But that must have cost..." I trailed off. I was no expert in the currency of the trading worlds, but I knew something of what a Pilsk slave was worth, and it was more than most workers could earn in a year. I gazed into his eyes. All of that whoring had been for me, there was no way he could have afforded me otherwise, and even so, he must have given a lot of himself to raise such a sum. The thought that anyone could go to such efforts for my sake brought the trickling tears back again.

"I am much indebted to you." I whispered.

He shook his head, "It should never have happened in the first place. No sentient being should own another, it's barbarous. I'm only sorry it took me so long to realise."

I smiled at him, through the teardrops that covered my cheeks and lips.

"What do you mean to do next, after this job?" I asked.

"I'd thought... if you want, but of course, if you don't, it doesn't matter..."

Those messy human words of his came close to hiding entirely what he meant to say, but his heart cried out so keenly that I could not mistake it. He wanted to go with me.

"Come with me." I offered, putting an end to his doubts. "If you can get out of your contract."

"I've enough left to pay for that. Mostly thanks to Smith and Roberts getting bored with each other. I

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don't know how much further the money will go – probably not far enough to buy us a way out of here.”

I looked around at the colourful, windswept streets, at passing figures, some small and lively, some tall and graceful. The life here seemed so intense that I thought I might be intoxicated by it.

“We could stay here for a while, maybe find work?” I asked tentatively, knowing nothing of the place or its rules.

“I would think.”

“I don't want to go back to whoring, there's too much risk someone will figure out what I am, and I don't want to be enslaved again.”

“Fair enough.”

“I don't know what else I can do, it's been such a long time...”

“Don't worry about it.” He said, “I've got all sorts of saleable skills, I'll be able to find something. You take your time, find your feet again, or whatever you normally use for getting around. You've more than earned a break, and I would be very happy to look after you, if you'd let me.”

“Do you think you'll be able to cope with all the sex?” I asked, teasing. “Every eight hours, promptly, if not more often.”

“It'll be an interesting challenge, at any rate.”

“Tell me about this place,” I said, “Who lives here, and how do they live? If we are going to be here for a while, I need to understand as much as I can, and I'll need to find a name to use.”

“To be honest, I've not been here before, I know it's a human outpost, but there's other species around...”

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I listened to him talking, absorbing the soft cadences of his voice and the warm expression in his eyes. His thoughts were rich with possibilities and aspirations. He dreamed of what might be, and what freedom might bring to both of us. Names for me flickered through his head, but he had not yet found the perfect one, and I was happy enough to wait for that.

I knew then that it would not be a matter of simply walking off into the sunset, in the happy human cliché that suggests a life of ease and delight. I knew we had a long, hard fight ahead of us, that I would always be in hiding from those who might abuse or enslave me, and that our fundamentally different cultures and biology were always going to put a strain on what was between us. But all of this said, it was more than I had dared to dream of; it was hope, and the possibility of a better life.

END□

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bryn Colvin has a fondness for all things strange and unusual, from alternative religion and lifestyle to alternative expressions of sexuality. She is a native of the United Kingdom, and is enjoying putting her degree in English literature to somewhat unconventional use.