

GRIFFIN

SEX WORLD 1: **ASSASSIN**

Loose Id



LENA AUSTIN

Praise for the writing of Lena Austin

Black Widow

Ms. Austin has written one of the best BDSM erotic romances that I have read in a very long time. Not only do you have an intense romance between Calder and Kelly, but Ms. Austin also takes the time to explain many of the concepts that most BDSM writers assume their readers already know... As a reader, I greatly enjoyed this novel, reading it twice within days of receiving it. As a reviewer, I can do no more than give *Black Widow* my highest recommendation.

-- Meribeth McCombs, *The Road to Romance*

Lena Austin's *Black Widow* is a great book and BDSM is a fascinating subject. I am keenly interested in reading more about the subject and hopefully more about these characters.

-- Tanya, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

I found Austin's work both titillating and informative. The author did a wonderful job of demonstrating how the acts of dominance and submission are "about trust, not sex." I recommend *Black Widow* for the curious virgin and the seasoned Dom in need of a refresher course.

-- Melissa Levine, *In the Library Reviews*

Calder and Kelly are intriguing characters and carry the story admirably. Their feelings for one another go way beyond that of Dom/sub relationship. For a dark treat into a realm unknown by many, *Black Widow* is the book to read, and due to the graphic nature certainly earns its Scorching rating.

-- Sinclair Reid, *Romance Reviews Today*

Black Widow is now available from Loose Id.

SEX WORLD 1: ASSASSIN

Lena Austin

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Warning

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This book is rated:



For substantial explicit sexual content and graphic language, some violence, and situations that some readers may find offensive (ménage, homoerotic sex).

Sex World 1: Assassin

Lena Austin

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Chapter One

Paris disembarked from the shuttle with a sigh of relief. One week of sheer boredom was all he could bear. Remaining incognito, as were his orders, had proven much more difficult than he'd imagined, and he'd been forced to spend a large portion of time in his cabin, reading. While he didn't mind time alone with books, a week had been taxing.

When his invitation to advanced studies on Maxim as a prime sex engineer arrived, the orders had been clear. The honor meant losing his name and past, but the trade was equitable. What sex engineer from a lowly mining colony would dare refuse?

"Alexandre di Marco?" came a soft feminine voice from behind him. The low tone would not carry more than a few feet, drowned out by the hoard of happy tourists who disembarked with him.

Paris turned and stared. A beautiful female in a black singlesuit waited for his response. He took in her black hair, black almond-shaped eyes, and obviously rare Oriental genotype. "I was known by that name."

The female, who was of his decade group, smiled. "Of course. Please follow me. Your luggage will be sent ahead."

She led him to a small, two-person flitter craft and hopped into the control seat. “My name is Cherry Blossom, and I’m your mentor for the next few days. Please be seated. We have a short flight to make before I see to it you are settled comfortably.”

He took the indicated chair and strapped in. Traffic would be heavy at this time of day, especially around a busy spaceport. “You may call me Paris, if you wish,” he responded courteously.

Cherry nodded absently and took off. “An excellent choice. We’ll get it registered in your room. In the meantime, you might want to take in the sights as we pass over the main tourist facilities.” She waved at the buildings below. “You’ll be too busy to visit much, but you should be able to speak of the view if you are asked.”

Paris did enjoy the incredible sight of an entire city laid out purely for pleasure of all kinds. At first, it seemed like a great hodgepodge of every known architectural style, but gradually patterns emerged of lodging, special interest districts, and even themes. They flew directly over a historical district that included a small Victorian-era town, over a lake where he saw a pagoda on a small island, and even over a couple of castles perched on hills outside of the main paved area.

His love of history made him press his nose to the flitter’s plexi window and stare. He heard Cherry’s chuckle behind him and chose to ignore it. He didn’t blame her for a little laugh at his expense. Only when the settled area gave way to gently rolling hills with occasional dots of picnickers did he sit back in his seat.

Cherry favored him with a dazzling smile. “I did the same when I first arrived. I was so excited, my mentor thought I would break my neck trying to take it all in at once.” She pointed to a building whose huge roof was just becoming visible over a ridge. “There’s our destination.”

The nondescript gray complex could have been formed out of the local rocks, and probably was. House d’Akasha had the “D” appellation that meant they had been original

settlers, just as his former name of di Marco had indicated the same. He was proud of his settler grandparents, and he saw no reason why anyone else wouldn't be. This place, or at least some core buildings, had probably been the original home of the entire d'Akasha clan, some 300 years before.

Cherry Blossom landed the flitter inside a courtyard paved to contain any emissions without ruining the soil beneath. She got out and waited for Paris to clamber out. "Welcome to House d'Akasha. Let me show you to your apartment."

Paris followed Cherry through an entrance with modern door seals. As he expected, she led him to a small vertical transport, and he felt the transport move down with a small lurch. Yes, as a low-level trainee, he'd be housed below ground.

Cherry stepped out of the elevator and moved briskly down the hall. She stopped in front of a door that simulated wood so realistically Paris longed to touch it. "You have been assigned one of the safest apartments in the complex, Paris. Please input your thumbprint and retinal scan in the lock mechanism."

Paris stepped forward and allowed the computer to scan both his eyes and his right thumb. "Awfully secure for a lowly student from a backwater planet." The computer beeped compliance, and the door slid silently into the wall.

Cherry lifted one eyebrow and glided into the room without answering his comment. Instead, she waited until Paris stepped through the doorway, then commanded, "Computer, security code 2-A. Implement immediately!"

The door behind Paris slammed home, and he heard the locking mechanism snap. The lights dimmed for three seconds, and his sensitive hearing picked up low-level sonics guaranteed to shatter all listening devices not coded to that frequency.

Cherry watched with a cheerful smile as Paris tensed. "Relax. We'll be doing voiceprint and getting you to know your computer. It's not an AI, but it comes extremely close. It lacks

self-awareness. Once that's done, we'll have a nice chat with the boss about your assignments and instructions. Do you have a name to give your computer?"

Startled, Paris answered with the first thing that popped into his head. "Helen."

Cherry nodded. "Great choice! Paris and Helen of Troy. I love it." Her face returned to its usual serene pattern. "Get ready. Computer! Begin voiceprint recording for new resident." She took on the demeanor of an instructor. "State your new name."

"Paris Cordell."

"State the name you wish to give your computer."

"Helen."

The computer spoke for the first time. "'Helen' is listed as a female name. Do you wish a female voice?"

"Yes."

The computer's voice shifted from a gender-neutral timbre to a low, female tenor. "Is this voice acceptable?"

"Yes." Paris turned to Cherry. "I prefer a female voice. It seems more soothing."

Cherry grinned. "I agree. I use a male voice only for the instructional computers. They need the instinctive authority response we humans give a male voice."

Helen's voice interrupted. "With permission, I will continue to record your voiceprint, Paris, so I might learn your patterns more efficiently. Is this acceptable?"

"That's fine, Helen. Please continue." He could get to like this not having to key in everything. He spied two comfortable chairs and a small table not far from a fireplace insert with, he assumed, a holographic fire available. "May we sit, Cherry, and be comfortable?"

Cherry nodded and sat. Paris joined her. He studied the room while Cherry continued her instructions to him. This was obviously the public room, with the small seating area they enjoyed presently, a U-shaped desk with excellent equipment and lighting available, and a small repast area with catering screen.

Cherry cleared her throat and began. "From now on, you are Paris Cordell. Learn to think of yourself as such. Do not answer to your old name at any time."

He nodded.

"As per the encrypted message you received, your identity files have been wiped clean. Alexandre di Marco died unexpectedly of a virulent strain of plague not long after arriving on Maxim, according to Consortium records." Cherry's voice took on a note of sympathy. "His body was cremated immediately." Paris imagined some new students greeted this news with shock. It was odd to hear someone report your own death so dispassionately.

He nodded again. His parents had been duly warned, as best he could, that their son would cease to exist, as was standard practice when a sex engineer reached his level. If he ever traveled to his home world again, it would be as another person. He might, if he wished, formally request lodging in their home, since his world boasted but one transient facility, suitable for off-world travelers, but not for a sex engineer of his rank. "Accepted."

Cherry relaxed, not bothering to hide her body language from another sex engineer. "As you are well aware, your entire identity file has been wiped and replaced with an innocuous lifespan. Forgive me if I repeat what you may already know, but your new rank means that you will be privy to the highest levels of political society. During the terms of your contracts, you will be a target for kidnappings, extortion, and even acts of terrorism. The chances for this would be multiplied exponentially to include your family without a new identity."

It was true. The sex engineer, under the many historical names like odoriko geisha, hetaera, and courtesan, had always been in the thick of political intrigue. It came with the job to have the ability to thread your way through the complex web of deceit, betrayal, and worse.

Even today, the sex engineer lived a life that many might call luxurious, and the income remained high. However, he or she paid for that lifestyle with the stress of never

knowing who was friend or foe and living constantly on the edge of disaster. More so now, since a sex engineer often held a secondary occupation of spy, assassin, or guardian, in addition to bedmate, counselor, and trusted friend. Paris wondered briefly what his secondary occupation would be, until Cherry's voice brought him back to the business at hand.

"Please feel free to explore the rooms at your leisure. You will find your sleeping quarters through the door on the right, and your bathing and sanitary facility through the door on the left. Some of your instruction will be carried out here in your rooms, so the sanitary facility has been placed separately for the convenience of your guests." She grinned impishly. "Once your bags have been inspected and decontaminated, your luggage will arrive and be placed in your room. They should be here within an hour or two."

Paris nodded. Standard things, so far. "Why the security level? I can still hear sonics." He got up to study the desk, noting it was real wood. A luxury he'd not expected.

She frowned. "My apologies. I forgot that your hearing would be enhanced, given your planet of origin. Is it uncomfortable?"

"Not really. A mere buzz, like insects in the background. But why do we need it?"

"Because of me." A new feminine voice sounded from the entrance.

Chapter Two

Paris whirled in automatic reflex and found himself staring at a long-legged, elegant blonde who sauntered into the room, wearing a white, flowing outfit in defiance of the minimalist fashions of the day. It took him only a moment to recognize her face from the newsloops. He bowed, and swallowed his awe. “Lady Constance d’Akasha. Please make yourself at home.”

Cherry stood and bowed. Then she quietly left the room.

Lady d’Akasha waited until the door shut behind Cherry and the locking mechanism reengaged. “Forgive the surprise, Paris.” She smiled reassuringly. “Yes, I’m aware of the new name. The computer registered you on my databank immediately. Please come sit for a moment.” She sat gracefully in the chair Cherry had vacated

He took the other chair with alacrity. What was the occasion that the owner of House d’Akasha visited him on his arrival? The most famous living sex engineer was sitting with him, and treating him like an equal. Events were happening at a whirlwind pace, and he was having trouble adjusting.

She gave another small smile. “Would you order me some java, please? It’s been a long day.”

“Helen, would you happen to have access to Lady Constance d’Akasha’s preferences for java? If so, please order a cup and carafe. I take mine white and sweet.”

The catering slot chimed. “The Lady d’Akasha’s preferences are on file. Yours are now registered, as well. Please remove the items from the slot.”

“Thank you, Helen.” Paris got up to retrieve the tray, and served Lady d’Akasha.

“You are welcome. Do you wish me to implement the courtesy files, then? I am not often thanked.”

Paris might have sworn he heard a faint note of surprise in Helen’s voice. “Yes, Helen. Please implement courtesy files. I prefer them.”

“So do I,” Lady d’Akasha murmured. She smiled into her cup before sipping. Her body language radiated satisfaction.

Paris poured his own coffee, noting that he and Lady d’Akasha preferred their coffee the same way. “Blonde and sweet,” they called it on his former home world. However, there was nothing sweet about the blonde who sat across from him, waiting patiently for his full attention. She looked like a perfect sculpture, cool and serene. He couldn’t help but repeat to himself the question: What did she want with him?

Lady d’Akasha put down her cup. “I’ll spare you the suspense. You have been chosen to be one of the three students I select every year for specialized training. Your course load will be heavy, if you accept.”

Paris took in her words and mentally chewed on them a moment. Specialized training? Whatever for? One question jumped to the fore. “Why me?”

Blue eyes bored into him. “I am aware of your genetic background, and some of your extracurricular training. Surely you are aware that a sex engineer’s duties can lead them into uncomfortable situations?”

Paris had the grace to flush. He was hoping he could ignore his heritage, since it didn’t show on the surface of his body. He was of average height for a male, with no spectacular

muscles. Only one thing on his body gave him away. “I took Consortium Guard training for that reason, Lady d’Akasha.”

His beloved grandparents had spent many hours with him. At first, it had seemed like play, where they were the space pirates, monsters, or whatever evil villains his young imagination could conjure. Only in adolescence had it turned serious, and he’d consciously accepted the disciplines imposed on Consortium Guards. They’d never insisted he go for official training, though, and had lovingly supported his career choice.

“Good. I didn’t think you were a fool, doing it out of love for your grandparents and their noble sacrifices. Their records stand for themselves. I’m pleased their grandson took the lessons they taught for an equally good purpose.”

Paris bowed his head, and relief washed over him. He wouldn’t be stigmatized for being the grandson of heroic, heavy-world guards who’d retired on a colony planet, burying themselves in the back of the galaxy to escape fame.

Smiling thinly, Lady d’Akasha continued. “It’s a shame that heavy-worlders tend to be treated like overmuscled apes with no brains. Your grandparents showed great intelligence in saving their ship from pirates and concocting a strategic plan that is still studied at the Guard Academy. I’m glad they took the time to breed.”

He stared at the floor, embarrassed. “Mother would be pleased to hear you say that.” He hated the fact that he was a half-breed -- part heavy-worlder, with the attendant dense bones and thick muscles, and part “lightweight,” as his father was known, bred for beauty and sexual slavery. His mother had freed his father and presented him with a marriage contract when she bought him. In a social climate where physical enhancements were common, his mother steadfastly refused to change her heavy-worlder looks.

“I’m only sorry she can’t. I’m also pleased you inherited your father’s beautiful red hair and green eyes. They should serve you well.” She stood up and put her empty coffee cup

down. "Cherry will be your instructor in the martial arts, to hone your skills. She's one of our finest assassins, so you should learn a great deal from her."

"Yes, ma'am." Cherry was an assassin? Paris struggled to hide his surprise. Then again, it made perfect sense. A tiny female from a world known for peaceful contemplation and quiet beauty would be the last suspect. Unless, of course, you were a student of history, as he was. Cherry's unique ancestors had a long tradition of stealth and assassination.

"You will not be seeing much of me personally. Be assured I'll be looking in often. Helen has a full list of your next year's curriculum." She studied his brown traveling outfit. "May I suggest making use of the shopping? You have a large stipend available to see to your needs. There's a party tonight to welcome the new students. Helen can give you the particulars." She rose and glided to the door with a grace few could match. "Helen, you may lift the security code imposed by Cherry Blossom."

"Complying."

Dazed, Paris followed Lady d'Akasha to the door. "Thank you for your visit." It was all he could think to say.

"You are most welcome, Paris. I'll see you again, closer to your graduation. Good night."

Paris dove for the datascreen on the desk as soon as he'd shown his guest out. He ordered some excellent silks in his favorite green, with assurances of delivery within the hour, by courier. He then spent more money in that short space of time than he normally spent in a year, replacing his depleted professional wardrobe, using the incredible array of shopping choices at his command to the fullest. He had a new rank, and that demanded a wardrobe far above anything he'd worn at home.

"Helen, would you show me my curriculum for the next year, please?" He had an inkling that his training was leading him into the most dangerous of all sex engineer duties,

that of the assassin. It came as no great shock, considering the secrets of the heavy-worlders he held inside his own body.

“Certainly, Paris.”

The datascreen switched to a schedule that made Paris blanch. “How will I manage all this? I’ll be worn to a thread!” The words of the different subjects wavered. Massage, *Kama Sutra*, therapies, martial arts of three different disciplines, acupressure, and staging were just his subjects for the next three months. It was staggering.

Helen answered the question. “The other students complain similarly. One of the males complained bitterly that he wasn’t sure whether his cock or his hands would be more blistered.”

It was odd that a computer picked up slang terms for human anatomy. “That’s not reassuring, Helen.”

“It wasn’t meant to be.”

* * * * *

Constance d’Akasha stepped off the transport and into her private suite at the lowest level of the complex. Holographs showed constantly moving images of the world outside, so one might never suspect they were deep underground. Shaking pins out of her hair, she let the mass fall to her waist. The white outfit was off her body and flying toward a nearby armchair.

“Okay, Connie, get to work,” she muttered. With a sigh of resignation, she settled herself into the exercise equipment. Getting old was a bitch.

As she sweated and forced her muscles to stay toned, Connie turned her head to watch three flickering screens. Each showed one of her three students.

The male interested her most. He was busy sorting his wardrobe, with an emerald green silk suit consisting of form-fitting pants, silk shirt, and knee-length vest lying on the bed. He'd cut quite a figure at the party the students were holding in the main ballroom. He wasn't nearly as vain as some of the other new students, and he had more right to be so than most.

She knew what lay under that flawlessly bronzed skin, and that pleased her more than his long legs, sculpted buttocks, and broad shoulders. Most people wouldn't look past that shoulder-length, dark red hair, sweet expression, and intense dark green stare. They would never know that the bronzed skin was naturally resistant to pain, the muscles layered to withstand heavy loads, and the bones so dense they were nearly impossible to break. He had it all -- beauty, brawn, and brains.

Once she'd worked all the major problem areas gravity had begun to affect, Connie sat down at her desk. It was much the same as her students owned, but piled high with printouts, pencil-shaped files ready for the reader, and minor equipment. Her needle gun lay next to an antique stapler a client had given her as a parting gift long ago.

She picked up one red-flagged pencil file and shoved it into the reader. After making a few notes, she called up the address of the contractor who wished to hire special services.

Your d'Akasha sex engineer has been found. Expect delivery in one year. Please prepare the client.

Constance hit the *send* key with pleasure. Paris Cordell was going to make a fine assassin.

Chapter Three

Paris leaned against the wall of the huge ballroom and studied the mass of people gathered for the party. Every being imaginable that could handle oxygenated air and this gravity was present. Antarean telepaths had their steel skullcaps on to dull the mental “noise” of being in a crowd, but they still winced upon occasion. There were heavy-worlders from Betelgeuse and a few other systems, as well as a host of other beings whose origins he had no way of identifying.

His image, and the images of the other ten new students, flashed on a large screen at the other end of the ballroom, with their names below in several languages. At first, he’d been unhappy to find himself so conspicuous, but after polite greetings, most of those who recognized him left him alone to fit in as he chose.

Cherry Blossom wandered over, carrying two drinks. She offered one. “It’s just fruit juice, Paris. I didn’t want to assume you indulged in intoxicants.” Her dress was a stunning red, embroidered with fantastic animals, in a style straight out of the history books. Her hair was partially held up by jeweled spikes with golden tassels.

He took the proffered glass. "I don't. Thank you." It was true he could imbibe heavy amounts of intoxicants, but he didn't care for the taste of most. Wine was his limit. Like most engineers, he preferred a clear head and self-control.

"You'll start classes tomorrow. Any questions?" Cherry seemed content to join him in "holding up the wall," as his mother had called it.

"Several. Are those hair ornaments weapons? Are there any students in particular I should meet and get to know? What should I bring or wear to class?"

Cherry laughed. "I like you. I really do." She sipped her drink before answering. "Yes, yes, and clothes. Nothing else will be needed. For my own class, you will fight naked, at least at first. Nothing like the feeling of exposure to ensure your vigilance."

He considered that last carefully. "I suppose so." He indicated the crowd with a nod. "Who do I get to know?"

Cherry pointed to the flashing screen. "Two of the females will be special students with you. The one called Dawn has already arrived. I don't see the other."

Dawn's name and visage flashed on the screen, showing a baby-faced female with pale blonde curls, delft blue eyes, and a vacant grin on her face. "I'm trying not to be judgmental, but she doesn't look old enough to be here."

"She's in her third decade, same as you and I. If she qualified for special instruction, there's more to her than mere beauty."

Her admonishment made Paris flush. "It's hard to get around that innocent-looking face. She looks barely legal."

"Maybe that's the point."

The idea brought him up short. "You may be right. That could be entirely it." He looked at the other female's face. "I don't see a name with that one." A nondescript brunette female, with thick, straight hair and soft brown eyes, she still arrested attention, somehow.

Cherry shrugged. "She hasn't chosen a new one yet. You may not see her tonight. When I left her, she was already seated at her desk, researching names."

They watched the mingling crowd, circling around a knot of dancers near the center.

He cleared his throat. "Stupid question time. Why don't I see any sexual activities? One would think ..." He faltered.

"Would you wish to perform publicly, where your teachers and fellow students might critique your performance?"

Images flashed in front of his face, as well as the possibility of that many people commenting. "Uh, no. I suppose not. But it does happen privately, doesn't it?"

Cherry grinned. "Oh, yes. Where they find the energy, I don't know. When I was going through training, or even now when I take a refresher, I'm too tired to care." A small shadow passed over her face, but was quickly erased by her usual affable smile.

Paris understood. "Forming relationships based on anything but sex is probably easier here, since we all understand each other."

There was an infinitesimal relaxation of her shoulders. "Yes, that's it exactly. I'd much rather have a conversation and, I don't know about you, but I enjoy the exploration of the personality and heart more than the body."

Sighing, Paris agreed with a nod. "I hope I'm also not alone in that I prefer to go from client to client, never staying for long. I've yet to find anyone who can keep my mind occupied as long as I can keep their body busy."

"Care to go to your rooms and continue this discussion?" Cherry threw up her hand, palm out. "No sex. You're a finely formed male, but unless I'm mistaken, you are very curious about my specialty, not me personally."

"You are partially correct. Not only do I want to hear what you are permitted to tell me about your specialty, but I'd love to hear about your home world." He took her empty glass and disposed of both vessels on a nearby table.

Cherry took his arm with seeming relish, and they sauntered away from the party. "Then to quote an old vid I enjoy, 'Let's blow this joint.'"

* * * * *

Sumner read the message he'd received from Maxim, and sighed with relief. His present for his father would arrive in a year. Wonderful. He wasn't a fool. His father would read this encrypted message as easily as any public mail.

He'd gone to great lengths to go to Maxim personally, spending a large portion of his personal fortune, to get this surprise gift. The engineer must not know Sumner was the contractor who'd requested his or her services. That anonymity had been part of the two contracts. Sumner hadn't been picky about gender, and neither would his father.

Oswego's tastes in sex were unusual enough that Sumner himself had been conceived by artificial insemination. His father preferred a sure and carefully planned course of action. Thus, Sumner's conception and birth had been arranged with all the attention to detail of a corporate takeover, and with as much secrecy. He never even knew his mother's name.

Sumner shrugged, and rose from his databank. He'd probably do the same, considering he preferred men as partners. A shame, but he'd do his duty in a few years. The lovely slave who'd furnished her body to birth him was long since dead. He'd never known her. No doubt, Oswego had used her up, the same as his other toys.

On cue, his comunit bleeped. "Yes, Father?"

"A lovely surprise for my birthday, Sumner. I'll look forward to the sex engineer's arrival. It will be like getting a present twice. Once, the surprise this year that my son was so thoughtful, and then again next year when he -- or will it be she? -- arrives."

Sumner chuckled low in his throat. "I didn't specify a gender, Father. I thought perhaps you wouldn't mind, either."

The fruity voice continued, made only slightly tinny by the electronic reproduction. “Too true, too true. I do hope they’ll be arrogant and strong-willed. You know I prefer that.”

“Indeed I do, Father. I specified that personality, as well as one that was honorable and good-hearted. Preferably from a colony planet.” Sumner added, deferentially, “That should offer you hours of fun, to break their spirit.”

A rich, booming laugh. “Ah, son, you are a treasure. Why don’t you come down to my offices? I’ve a lovely shipment of medicines I’ve managed to divert from the plague planet it was destined for. I’ll need your skills at the databank to help me find a black market for it.”

Sumner was out the door like a shot. “Wonderful, Father! That should increase the family fortunes.” He punched the transport’s destination box and keyed in the code that allowed him into his father’s sanctum. “I have a couple of ideas on that. Isn’t it about time we started our own black market line? I dislike using mercenary ships and independent free traders. The spacing guild is even worse.”

There was silence for a moment while the transport took Sumner down to the center of the vast underground complex of their palace.

“I like the way you think, son. Dealing with independent agents can be messy, and I’m running out of planetoids to hide the bodies of those who think they can remain free.” Oswego’s voice remained thoughtful.

Sumner walked into his father’s office and shut off his comunit. “That’s something else we need to research. I’d like to find a planet we own with a few carnivorous life forms, especially those that prefer well-rotted flesh. Disposal would be much neater that way.” He shrugged. “Might even provide you with a bit of amusement to simply drop them alive on those planets and see how long they last. A few well-placed spy-eyes should give you a good view.”

Catering to his father's love of watching everything was second nature. Putting in an order for a few more spy-eyes and other surveillance equipment wouldn't even make a dent in the budget.

Sumner took the one rattan chair Oswego had finally conceded to allowing him. The office was decorated like a jungle planet, complete with tropical birds flitting about, to the despair of the cleaner slaves who saw to the place whenever Oswego left. The birds' chalk littered the floor.

"I love it. Have Max run up a research for any planets we might own. Barring that, perhaps we can buy one or take out a long-term lease from the myriad of Consortium planets the E&E teams thought too dangerous."

Sumner turned to face the great databank that took up one entire wall of his father's office and was partially obscured by the array of plant life. "Max? Did you hear Oswego's order?"

The computer's neutral voice responded immediately. "Yes, Sumner. Shall I print the data when I'm done, or inform you of a datascreen view?"

Sumner deferred to his father with a half-bow from his seated position. Oswego answered, "Printout. I'll want to discuss it with you at dinner, Sumner."

Oswego rose, showing off his dark-skinned body in a leopard pelt. A mixed genetic heritage had somehow coalesced into Oswego looking like an ancestor from long-ago Africa, save that his eyes were a brilliant green and his black hair was straight and long enough to fall to his waist. "I'm so excited by the sex engineer, I think I'll go practice a few techniques on that trader crew that tried to cheat me. I'll see if I can break at least one senior officer before the evening is out." He chuckled. "As a reward, I think I'll leave that navigator for you, son. Do try to keep him alive this time."

Sumner bowed his father out of the room. "Thank you, Father. I'll tell the slavemaster to put him aside for me, and feed him up. Maybe even bathe him tomorrow. I certainly won't have time today, if I'm to have a report from Max's data by the time you return."

Oswego laughed. "So fastidious of you, son. Your attention to detail is remarkable. Oh, do tell the slavemaster to have a cast made of the captain. She looks so lovely hanging there, I think I'll have her made into a statue for me to admire for a few days."

"Gold or bronze?"

"Bronze. She's not that good." Oswego stepped into the transport and was gone.

Sumner returned to the databank and shot off the orders to the slavemaster. The navigator was a lovely boy, really. He'd try to make a quick end to the navigator's life without seeming to hurry. Another death on his hands, even if it was the only merciful thing he could do, this time.

He sighed and put his head down. "Max, can you order me a stimulant and an analgesic, please?" He knew Max would automatically change all the spy-eye recordings to show him sitting at the desk, working diligently, and his orders to Max would be altered to cool, business-like tones.

The computer voice warmed to a soft male. "Yes, Sumner. It's already in the catering slot. Do you want poison in the captain's food tonight?"

"Yes. Let Father get his casting of her, then kill her as mercifully as possible." That poor woman had suffered enough.

Max's voice took on a note of resignation. "Done. She'll have some internal bleeding for the autopsy to find, but I've included a narcotic to make it painless."

"Bless you, Max. I don't know what I might have done without finding out you were self-aware and as sick of this as I." Even after ten years, he remembered that sick feeling, after months of trying to get up the nerve, knowing it would have been his death if he'd been wrong.

“And I bless the day you approached me with your scheme to rid us of Oswego’s cruelty. The population is down another percentage point. Births can no longer match the deaths he’s causing.”

“The Consortium won’t do anything unless we can prove it’s bad for business.” Sumner heard the despair in his voice. He had to try, even if he was discovered and lost his life. “Brilliant of you to find the law that sex engineers cannot be prosecuted by the Consortium, if they invoke client privacy. The sex engineer is our only hope.”

Sumner put his head back down on the desk and wept silently for the lives that would be ruined or lost while the sex engineer trained.

Max’s voice came softly through the speaker by his ear. “Cry for both of us, Sumner. And pray to whatever gods there might be that the engineer is up to the task.”

Chapter Four

Paris strode toward the VR rooms with a certain amount of anticipation and trepidation. The past year at House d'Akasha had been long and grueling. Finally, this was the day of his virtual reality final exam.

"Paris! Wait up!"

Paris turned and waited for Dawn to run down the ramp to his side. He'd grown to like the spunky, effervescent specialist, who, like himself, had taken the intense training. Her babyish looks belied a cool hand with any weapon, and she'd gotten top marks in their Consortium Law final exam.

Dawn tossed her curls out of the way with an annoyed look. "I'm on my way to my own virtual reality final." She winced. "Is it okay to admit I'm scared witless?"

They continued down the ramp that would lead to the VR complex of rooms, where literally anything could happen.

"I'm more than a bit nervous, I'll admit, Dawn. After yesterday, I'm still feeling as if I've been pounded flat and left to dry on a desert world."

Dawn groaned. "Tell me something I don't know. I swear, I'll never look at another lollipop again."

His stomach lurched. “Whoever came up with the idea of having us prove our oral sex skills by licking food items ought to be shot.”

“Just gimme the fucking gun. I’ll do it, happily.”

“At least this is the last exam.” Talking about it was helping. Helen just gave him smart remarks when he complained to her.

“Hah! For you, handsome. Me, I failed charm school. They’re putting me back in the ‘knife and fork’ training. I just can’t seem to look natural with all that fancy dinnerware.” She flushed and looked embarrassed.

Paris gave her a friendly hug. “It’s not your fault, Dawn. It takes years to be comfortable with four different forks, three kinds of knives ...”

“And I still can’t tell the difference between a soup spoon and a dessert spoon,” she wailed. “I’m used to shooting the beastie, slicing it with a laser, and roasting the edible parts over an open flame. One plate, one fork, one spoon, and your hunting knife. That’s it.”

He nodded. Dawn had shown him pictures of her home world, with its lush forests and treetop homes. It was still an officially proscribed planet, with the colonists living in trees to protect them from the reptilian carnivores below. How a sex engineer of her quality ever managed was beyond his comprehension.

Dawn waved at a door. “Here’s my VR room. See you afterwards?” She was inside before he could answer. The last thing he heard before the door slammed and locked was, “Oh, my fucking Guard!”

That did not inspire confidence. He found his assigned room and slipped inside.

No one was there. The apartment room was decorated in a hideously high-tech fashion, with black and chrome furnishings that did not look comfortable in the slightest. It looked cold. That was the best word he could use. No emotion softened the room. Function was tantamount.

The hologram window showed a scene out of a nightmare, where an orange sun barely lit the gloomy city. No cheer, no greenery.

Still, his training took over. He found his kit on a table near the bed, with his favorite liquids and toys within. He scanned the room and reviewed all furnishings for possible uses, either as sexual aids or as weapons.

Bed sheets were useful. The mattress was on a hard, unyielding box platform. The lamp on the table was black ceramic with a nice curved handle. The shade was a metal disk that threw the light on the wall. Well, it wouldn't throw harsh shadows, anyway. All the mirror-like polish was on the inside.

Paris wandered over to the catering slot, where a tantalizing aroma wafted out. Something was being held in the warmer function. Something savory, not sweet.

The sound of the door opening made him swivel around. Constance d'Akasha stood smiling in the doorway, wearing a thin robe that left little to the imagination.

Paris cleared his throat and gestured to the white, diaphanous fabric. "That's a nice robe you're almost wearing."

She grinned like an oligarch who'd just been handed the deed to a wealthy mining planet and shut the door. The snick of the locking mechanism was audible.

Constance turned back to face Paris, and her smile broadened. "Welcome to your final exam, Paris. I am your auditor."

Paris felt his face drain of blood. "Oh, shit."

Her chuckle was not reassuring. "Under any other circumstances, I might be insulted." She crossed to the catering slot and removed two glasses of wine. Without a word, she handed him one.

"I get it." He sighed. "For me, these are adverse conditions. The one person who intimidates me, and a cheerless room on a cheerless world."

She sipped her wine placidly. "Not to mention, I am female, and not your preference."

Paris crossed his arms. "There's more. You are a challenge that will be difficult in that you are one of my own profession, and as skilled in knowing the possibilities as I. It will be more than merely hard to please you."

He grinned as she raised one eyebrow in mild surprise. "Bonus points awarded, Paris. That was very astute."

He paced and sipped his wine. "I see no sense in hiding my thought processes as I work this challenge out." He stopped and studied the cool beauty before him. "If your reputation is but half as good as the newsloops say, then you've faced every situation known to mankind, as a sex engineer of the highest order."

Constance moved to sit on the hard, uncomfortable-looking bed. "True. I've been training to be an engineer since I was old enough to walk, though of course I didn't participate in the sexual studies until I'd reached the proper age."

Paris sat next to her and put his wine on the table. "You have always moved in the glittering circles of the wealthy oligarchs. I doubt you have ever known poverty of any kind."

She shot him a look from under her eyelashes. "Haven't I?"

"I meant in the financial sense, Constance." He smiled. He had her now. "We, the sex engineers, know the poverty of the heart. We give of our bodies, and ourselves, but rarely are our hearts or souls touched. There is the pain of the sex engineer. To never know love."

Her eyes lowered a fraction, and a small sigh escaped. She was nearly perfect, but even a sex engineer of her quality couldn't hide the involuntary responses that betrayed every human. What was more, she wasn't trying to hide them. "Very good, Paris. You win this round."

"Then let me go for bonus points." He hazarded a guess. "Constance is too formal. May I call you Connie?"

Those unfathomable blue eyes widened and her head shot up. “Bonus points granted. Yes, you may call me Connie.”

“I’ll hazard another guess, Connie.” He took her half-empty wineglass from her fingers. “I’ll bet that it is rare for you to allow another engineer to pleasure you, without your input, and without your being in charge at least subtly.”

Her mouth fell open a little, but she didn’t speak.

“I’d be willing to further bet that no one has challenged you in perhaps many years.” He smiled softly. “I hereby now challenge you, Connie. I challenge you to remember what it is to *not* be a sex engineer. To let your mind be blank, and simply be a woman.”

She drew a breath, probably to award more points. He put his fingers over her red lips. “No points awarded, and do not be my auditor for the moment. Allow me to offer a win-or-lose-only proposition. If I can please the woman Connie, I win. If I cannot keep her fully engaged and treat her like any other citizen of the Consortium, I lose. But you must remain as Connie until the encounter ends by mutual agreement.”

His fingers still held her silent, even as the lips curved into a smile. He read, *Challenge accepted*.

He replaced his fingers with his lips, brushing softly against hers. No tongues, no hands. Just a kiss as light as a breeze. She relaxed, and shut her eyes.

Her robe had a hidden seal in front. His index finger ran down the seal and opened it with a whisper of sound. He deepened the kiss, making it slightly demanding, but concerned for her wishes. She gave and parted her lips.

When he broke the kiss, her skin was flushed slightly. A soft pink to complement her pale hair. “But Paris, you remain clothed.”

“Hush. Who is the engineer, for now?”

His admonishment made her pout slightly. He allowed his gaze to roam. “Thousands acclaim your beauty, but what I admire most is your mind. You, and you alone, have made

this place special. How many notice the multi-faceted intelligence behind that perfect mask?”

“Not many.” Her fingers twitched, as if she longed to take charge, as was the habit of sex engineers. Even when submitting to a sexual dominant, an engineer never stopped thinking of how to please.

“Then tonight, let me admire the woman beneath the beauty.” He nibbled on her neck and felt the tiny shudder. “Give over control, Connie. Blank your mind and only feel.”

She allowed him to push her back on the hard mattress. “That’s asking a great deal.”

“I know. That’s the challenge to your intelligence. The one thing that is difficult.” He nibbled his way down the collarbone.

She let her breath out slowly, and shut her eyes. “I think you’ll win this challenge.”

Paris took his time, licking and nibbling at every erogenous zone to allow her time to rid herself of every minute thing that would clog her sensory input. A pink nipple tempted him enough to suck it in and gently tug.

When he switched to its twin, Connie gasped and opened her eyes. They were hazy and unfocused. Paris took this as a sign she had managed to close off all but the way he treated her skin.

Therefore, when she wound her arms around his neck before beginning to unseal his clothes, he allowed it. Anyone might wish to see their lover naked above them. He was happy to oblige as long as her eyes remained cloudy, her breathing quick, and her skin rosy.

He let her taste his nipples, since she did it hungrily and with none of the special skills of an engineer. Just a woman tasting her lover.

“Paris,” she begged, when his hand crept down to dip into her wetness.

No engineer could fake an erection, either of the clitoris or penis. There were drugs to stimulate that physical state, but they had their own signs of use. Connie bore no sign of

those effects. This was, then, a genuine arousal. He tickled her clit, just to send her deeper. Her squirm and the fresh gush of lubricants told him she was ready for more.

He stood and removed his pants in a single fluid motion. No sex engineer bothered with undergarments unless the assignment called for them, so he was naked in a flash.

Connie's eyes widened. The tip of her tongue flickered for a moment to lick her lips.

Paris knew what she was thinking. She couldn't shut off everything in her memory. The knowledge that he had heavy-world genetics would come to the fore, explaining the size, thickness, and rigidity before her. Most females wondered aloud, "How am I going to swallow that?"

He knew better than to suggest oral stimulation. First, he didn't need it. Second, neither did she, and if she tried, all her training would instantly click online.

"No, Connie. You don't have to attempt it. Lie back and spread."

Her blue eyes lifted to meet his. "It's huge. And purple."

He shoved her shoulder, hard. "So it is. What's more, it's going where it belongs."

She gasped at the rough treatment. No doubt, she'd never been treated harshly by her clients. In fact, it was likely no oligarch would have ever used his expensive sex engineer in such a manner. It was unthinkable.

Her arousal redoubled. His enhanced senses could smell it, even if the flush of her skin hadn't deepened and her nipples hadn't hardened to match his cock's rigidity.

Paris deliberately fell on top of her, catching himself at the last moment to prevent his full weight from crushing her. One knee forced her thighs apart.

"Oh!" Her protest was weak and breathless. "It's been awhile. Have some mercy."

"No." He thrust home unerringly, deliberately giving her the absolute minimum time to adjust.

She spread with a cry of both pleasure and pain, but wound her arms around his neck.

He gave a few straightforward thrusts to open her up, but it was like being strangled. By the Guards, she was as tight as a virginal man! However, he had a job to do, and he intended to do it well.

His cock had a slight natural curve toward his own belly, and he used it within Connie to find the infamous pleasure center once quaintly termed the G-spot.

He found it, and her squeal, accompanied by a freshening of her natural juices, rewarded his efforts. Deliberately, he used small, short, and hard thrusts to make sure the nerve bundle within received maximum attention.

Connie's fingers flexed on his shoulders and her hips rose, silently asking for more. Her body was fully engaged, and that fascinating intelligence was gone. She was a woman fully in the throes of a sexual encounter, and nothing else. "Now! Please! More!"

He gave what she mindlessly demanded. His cock was begging for release. He'd deliberately denied it any release since final exams began. He'd been too busy or too tired to seek pleasure with another willing and horny engineer. Rumor had it all the students were in the same state.

He clenched his buttocks and shoved in deeply, ramming the head of his cock against her cervix, just enough to let her know he could have done damage, had he chosen.

Shrieking, Connie wrapped her legs around his hips and aided him by making her silky vagina clamp around him, milking his cock with every stroke.

It didn't matter who came first. Perhaps that was a good thing. Connie had turned into a biting, clawing hellcat. Her nails dug deeply into his shoulders, and her teeth would surely leave marks. That was fair, considering she'd probably walk gingerly for a few hours after this encounter.

He could no longer restrain himself. No sex engineer managed perfect control. Some things were instinctive. His balls climbed, responding to the milking Connie provided.

Paris lost the battle and let loose. Even as the pleasure overwhelmed his senses, he despaired. He'd failed. He hadn't made Connie orgasm. His heart aching, he gave one last attempt, thrusting carefully against her G-spot.

It worked. She gave all she had, striping his back like a bandar cat. Her scream of "Oh, Guards!" was loud enough to cause his ears to ring. However, her eyes were suddenly clear and cool, seemingly unmoved.

What had he done wrong? Paris removed himself with much more care than he'd entered, and collapsed next to her on the narrow, hard bed. He lay there, panting, until he'd recovered enough breath to roll over and gather Connie into his arms. She acquiesced, boneless as a deep-sea creature.

"Thank you, Connie." He bent to enjoy one last kiss before she announced his failure. Perhaps she'd tell him before she sent him back to classes, or worse, home.

She purred and cuddled, just as the door burst open. A black-clad male, with his face covered by a mask, slammed the door home and pulled out a gun.

Connie screamed. "Shit! Assassin!"

Chapter Five

Paris didn't wait for Connie's scream. He'd already figured out what their unexpected visitor was. He snatched up the lamp and broke it by the handle, leaving him with a razor-edged shard. His other hand flipped the shade around, exposing the reflective side in time to catch any laser weapons.

The assassin fired once, in Connie's direction, barely missing her tousled hair. She dove off the bed, scrambling behind Paris, cursing in three languages.

A missile sailed past his ear, proving Connie was willing to use anything as a weapon. The wineglass splattered wine on the assassin and shattered behind him. It had been enough to make the assassin move, startled, instead of aiming another shot.

Paris dove for the assassin, hoping the man would again be surprised, and not good with hand-to-hand. He kicked the weapon out of the assassin's hand. It went sailing off out of sight.

His improvised shield slammed into the assassin's face, sending the black-clad mask askew. The assassin was blinded, and then flattened as Paris's superior weight crushed his chest as they crashed to the floor. His knees held down the assassin's arms as Paris coldly cut his neck from ear to ear.

The splash of hot blood all over him made him want to retch, but he yanked off the hood and watched dispassionately as the man died beneath him. He heard his own breath rasp loudly. His mind sickened as he saw the light go out in the assassin's eyes. Then all stilled and quieted.

"Program 742-A executed." The neutral voice of the main VR computer sounded unnaturally loud in the silence.

The man beneath Paris blurred, and became an android bot, its "throat" skin slit. A bag of fluid was visible beneath, dripping what little remained of a red, viscous liquid on the floor.

"Aw, shit," was all he could think to say.

"Program off. Send recording to my office."

Paris slowly rose, then turned to face Constance d'Akasha, who calmly put her hair back up in its customary elegant twist. Her naked state was a shocking contrast to the now featureless VR room that contained nothing more than the remains of a shattered lamp and wineglasses, their clothes, a VR platform where the bed had been, and a few other implements, like his professional bag and a portable catering facility.

With his adrenaline still pumping in his system, Paris wondered whether to throttle his lovely auditor or simply fall to his knees and pant. He chose the latter.

Constance favored him with a sympathetic look before stepping over to separate her robe from the pile on the floor. She dressed with cool efficiency before pinning him with a look that defied description, containing elements of both pity and joy. "You might want to dress, Paris. While parading down the halls naked might do nothing more than raise a few eyebrows, you will get chilled on the way to my office." She looked pointedly at his cock. "Then again, quite a few eyebrows might be raised."

Paris cleared his throat and wobbled to his feet. "It already has caused me problems, unfortunately. There were difficulties in several classes finding me male partners to practice

with.” His memory of the embarrassment as most of the males took one look at his equipment and found other partners still hurt. Even some of his old clients had declared they weren’t “size queens,” paid him, and showed him the outer side of their doors.

Constance shook her head and made a tsking sound. “I’d imagine that’s why there were several reports from your instructors mentioning your popularity with the female engineers.”

He couldn’t think of anything to say to that. It was true. Females flocked to be his partner, but the males shied away, knowing he could cause physical damage. Oral classes had been easier, but not by much. The situations had been reversed, then. The males were eager and the females reluctant. He pulled on his pants and shirt, sealing them without looking up.

A whisper of sound told him Constance stepped closer just before she laid a hand on his arm. “I’m sorry, Paris. You can’t help the way you were made. However, I’ll grant that you please a female very much during intercourse sequences. Excellent technique.”

It was a small comfort to get that kind of accolade. Still, she’d not given him the all-important words, that he passed the final exam.

She turned and stepped nonchalantly over the android. “Come along, Paris. We’ll review this in my office and proceed from there. Leave your kit. It will be delivered back to your apartment by the clean-up crews.”

Paris glared at the android on the floor as he stepped over it and followed obediently out the door. Blasted thing was still off. He’d feel better if he knew it was still functional. It looked expensive.

The transport to her office was small, quick, and silent. He was grateful for the peace, though it ratcheted up the tension with every minute that passed.

Constance sailed into her office and efficiently changed into a simple blue singlet while Paris waited near the door. He was reviewing in his own mind every step of his final exam, and sweating over every small mistake he now thought about. He’d been too fast at

making her orgasm. He'd been too rough. Maybe he should have chosen another psychological technique. Damn, he'd made a mess of it.

Constance's coaxing voice interrupted his introspection. "Paris, please come sit down. I won't bite." Then she grinned like a mischievous child. "Okay, so I already have. Do you need medical for that, by the way?"

Paris absently rubbed his shoulder and took a chair across from her desk, sitting on the very edge. "Uh, no." He didn't feel the need to bring up that his skin was more impervious than most, and he doubted she'd even left a bruise.

"Good, because I'm seriously considering an extra cushion for my chair." Constance sat gingerly in her own massive upholstered chair. "Excellent performance overall, Paris. I'll be merciful now and say you pass. Now, let's go over each sequence and I'll award points as we go."

She slid her fingers over a touch screen, and the holograph to his left flickered and changed into a vid screen large enough for both of them to see every detail.

The moment Paris entered the room began the video review. He watched himself enter and carefully assess the room.

Constance's cool voice narrated. "I was very pleased by your automatic study of the room for both improvisational toys and weaponry. Ten points."

"I'm glad for that," Paris commented. It was beginning to sink in. He'd passed. His heart thumped in his chest.

The vid rolled on, showing his surprise at Constance's entrance and his smart remark about her robe.

"Five bonus points for injection of humor in a compliment. Good play on words. No florid phrases."

Paris was shocked to hear her snicker. "Uh, glad you liked it."

Continuing the vid, Constance let it play all the way through until just after he sat on the bed before causing it to pause. “Your assessment of your final was worthy of your top marks in Psychological Situations. Twenty points for that alone.”

“You promised bonus points.” His reminder might be cocky, but he felt it important to his overall score to grab all that he could.

“So I did. Ten points for your astute guess as to the setting. Five for not bothering to hide your thought process. Ten for correctly digging down to the basis of every engineer’s pain and forcing me to deal with it.” She paused. “I almost considered at that point moving you into the ranks of engineer rehab for that.”

According to his calculations, he was up to sixty points. He was elated. Unless she scored him very low or negated points, he was inching his way toward an excellent score. “I’d prefer field work, as you well know.”

She nodded. “That’s good to hear, because that’s where you are headed. Let’s move on.” She allowed the review to roll forward a minute before pausing again. “Calling me Connie earns you ten extra bonus points. An unconventional strategy to lead me subtly into your challenge.”

Seventy points. She was killing him by this slow, point-by-point appraisal. “I’ll assume I’m never to use that term again.”

“On the contrary. I’ve few enough friends who can do so and mean it, giving me a name that speaks to the woman, not the engineer. However, do it discreetly.”

The concession stunned him. He bowed from the waist, acknowledging the honor done him. “As you wish, Connie.”

“Thank you. To continue.” She let the vid play, narrating around the words spoken until the point where he stripped off his clothes. “Your challenge was one of the best techniques fitted to the psychology of the client I’ve seen in years. That was quick thinking, and impressive. Fifty points.”

She paused the vid and smiled as Paris's jaw dropped.

"Yes, Paris, you are now over 120 points, even before you began intercourse sequences. Isn't it nice to have a spare bit in reserve, in case of losses?"

He gulped, and nodded. Highest score ever heard of in finals was around 200. He dared hope to match or perhaps break that record.

Constance let the vid roll a little more. "I'm sorry to say, you lose five points for no undergarments, Paris. In a seduction, you might want to consider the teasing aspect of a thong or other garment to put that impressive cock on display. You have excellent taste in clothing. Do something about it. Stop being ashamed of being a heavy-world gene trace, or I'll put you back for more psych evaluation. Got me?"

Paris winced. "Ouch. I understand." Down to 115 points.

The vid played on. Points were awarded and removed. Ten points for rough play. Ten points bonus for not allowing her to perform oral stimulation. Ten points taken away for not prolonging the intercourse. Fifteen more for controlling thrust.

Paris was now not only physically on the edge of his seat, but mentally ready to get violent. 140 points.

Constance maintained perfect aplomb and ignored him as he began to fidget. "Ten points for maintaining enough presence of mind during orgasm to force me to release. I was pleased with that, especially. I was fighting you every step of the way there, and you still managed it." She grinned and winked. "Ten points for remembering to thank your partner and your attempt to begin the afterglow sequence." She sighed. "It was a shame I had to scream out the signal to send in the bot during my orgasm. I would have liked to see what you'd do without an interruption."

Paris watched the vid as she screamed out, "Oh, Guards!" Damn, he should have guessed she was vocal for a reason. A sex engineer was noisy during orgasm only when required to further stimulate their partner.

He watched as he started to perform afterglow, only to have the android enter. It was over in seconds. His training with Cherry Blossom had taken over, weapons were acquired, and the “assassin” dispatched.

The vid winked out. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Constance lean back and smile wickedly. “In a room with technically no weapons, you made one. Then you used your superior gifts and shut down an expensive bot. Incidentally, it was one guaranteed to me to stand up to any Consortium Guard for a minimum of five minutes.” She consulted the small vid screen imbedded in her desk surface. “In addition to the slashed throat, you would have crushed the chest of an average lightweight, killing him instantly. Another heavy-worlder would have sustained at least two broken ribs. The last sequence of events will be returned to the designers for correction in the next model.”

Paris was stunned. “I killed a Guard trainer bot?”

Constance chuckled. “Yes, you did. I’d imagine the designers would be screaming that their bot was never designed to handle anything other than conventional combat employed by any Consortium Guard unit, and I exceeded programming limits. So I did, and so did you. Fifty points.”

It took Paris a full minute to total his points -- 210. He wanted to jump up and shout. He’d broken the school record. He couldn’t help trembling.

Constance stood and put out her hand in the ancient gesture of congratulations. He took her hand and stood. “Congratulations, Paris Cordell. You have broken a school record set over twenty years ago.” She shook his hand, and then let go. “I caution you that a record is a fearsome thing to live up to. Your first assignment reflects your achievement. Are you ready to hear about it?”

Chapter Six

Paris forced himself not to tremble again. It was almost too much. The grueling nature of his final exam, the reaction of his system in response to the shot of adrenaline, the news that he'd broken a school record, and now his impending assignment, made him long to trudge back to his apartment and take a nap. He was dead tired.

The pitying look on Constance's face made things worse. "I'm sorry to dump all this on you at once, Paris. Frankly, I want you tired and about as non-reactive as possible." She huffed out a breath. "Normally, I prefer to give my students a full cycle to fall face-first into their mattresses and recover. However, this time, the need is urgent."

He still had enough firing synapses to make some deductions. Paris raised an eyebrow. "Therefore, whatever you are going to say will upset me enough that you want me exhausted enough to force me into lethargy. Then you will give me enough time to recover before I'm sent away to my first kill?"

Constance snorted. "I should have known you'd figure out Cherry was your mentor and primary instructor for a reason. Yes, your first assignment will be, possibly, an assassination."

She stared at her hands for a moment. It was easy enough for Paris to speculate that she took no pleasure from this sort of an assignment.

“Possibly? I take it assassination will not be my normal course of action?” He understood the necessity of judicious assassination, but didn’t like it. No one should *like* the job. But there were those who flouted the laws who the normal system could do little about. Those in positions of power were often damn hard to catch in crimes.

Constance pinned him with a stare that was full of mild reproof. “Contrary to popular fiction, assassination is very rare. Oligarchs cannot go around killing each other. It’s bad for business.”

Paris made his voice as dry as old leaves. “Ah, the ultimate sin of the Consortium. Don’t do anything that’s bad for business.”

Her smile turned wry. “Agreed, but watch the sarcasm. We of House d’Akasha have the reputation for not taking high moral roads. We do what we are hired to do.” She hesitated. “In your case, you have been hired by two simultaneous contracts. The first is a standard assignment to the oligarch Oswego the Leopard for three months. The second is to ascertain if Oswego the Leopard is killing off his population, to the detriment of his planet, and to eliminate the threat to Consortium business if you deem it required. Is that clear?”

His eyes turned hard, and he snorted. “Sounds like the high moral road to me. Aren’t morals, when you strip away all the superstitious religious bullshit, simply rules for making humankind live and work together in peace? That’s good for business.”

“Call it what you like.”

“I will. I’m rather fond of the old quote, ‘A person convinced against their will is of their opinion still.’ It is the truth.”

The elegant lady before him snorted. “I won’t argue.”

Paris planted his feet on the floor. “Well, now that you know I won’t turn violent, might I ask Helen to provide a restorative? I’ve only a few firing synapses, and even those are coming up with questions.”

“I see no reason why not. Your ship won’t be here for another full cycle. Helen? Could you please provide Paris with his favorite restorative? I’ll take a java, as well, please.”

The catering slot chimed almost immediately. “They are in the slot, Connie.” Helen’s voice was the same as in his quarters.

Paris raised an eyebrow at Connie as he stood to go get the drinks. “I didn’t know you used the same programming.”

“I didn’t, until you pointed out that the Helen persona is much more pleasant to interact with. I had her install herself on every aspect not already busy with another chosen persona, such as the teaching vids.” Connie winked. “Funny thing, immediately, efficiency percentages shot up and interpersonal relationships improved.”

He grinned and handed her the steaming cup of java. “I’m not surprised.” He sipped his restorative, sighed with delight, and sat. “All right, then. Let’s see what you and Helen have dug up on Oswego the Leopard. I’m not so much of a fool as to believe you’re sending me in there without every scrap of data you can find.”

Connie bowed her head in acknowledgment. “Helen, please show on the main screen the recent newsvids on anything related to Oswego the Leopard, going as far back as forty-five days.”

“Complying.” The screen lit up immediately, with Helen narrating. “Forty days ago, it was posted by the Consortium Guard that there had been a significant increase in the organization and evasion methods used by smugglers. A new faction of the black market formed six months ago, and many of the smugglers whose efficiency has increased are suspected of some association with that market. Whoever they are, they are very good at

covering their tracks. However, several of the smuggler's log files show visits to Oswego's last known illicit depots."

"That's no crime the Consortium would take note of, unless forced. Every oligarch has some illicit trade," Paris said.

Connie nodded. "There will always be a market for stolen or illegal goods. That's why free credit chips, good anywhere there's a terminal, still exist." She glanced at the vidscreen, which had frozen as soon as Paris spoke. "Continue, Helen."

The next scene showed a handsome, mature male with dark brown skin, striking emerald eyes, and long black hair, smiling and waving. "Fifteen days ago, Oswego, shown here from a previous public appearance, signed a long-term lease on a planetoid deemed too dangerous for human settlement by Consortium colonists." A grainy film featured a jungle-like planet full of volcanic and seismic activity. "You are looking at the original Exploratory and Evaluation film, which survived thanks to automated signal to the scoutship. The skeleton crew of the E&E team that remained on board brought this back after the away team died."

The film showed a large creature rise out of the muck and mud to devour the E&E team in view. The cameraman was the last to die down the creature's razor-lined gullet.

Paris turned his head and swallowed his restorative. At least it was a pleasant cream color. Another of his favorites was the same red as blood. "Was a record of intent filed on what Oswego intends to do with the planetoid, Helen?"

"Yes. The planet is mineral rich, despite the dangers. Oswego submitted a plan for using automated super machines larger than most of what the creatures can ingest or damage. It is understood in the letter of intent that he does expect a three- to five-percent loss ratio due to unforeseen problems."

“What of his home world, Helen? Any recent films on that?” Paris was now curious enough to ask where he was being assigned. The restorative was beginning to have its effect on his system.

“Only one film exists, Paris, that has any credibility. A tourist, who tried to report to the Guard, smuggled that film chip out. Unfortunately, he sent in the film but never returned to file a corresponding report. All other films are idealized recruiting films the guilds merely laugh at. The guild reports are not flattering about the conditions on Aerie, and most contractors refuse to renew.”

The film showed a world lit by a white sun, but apparently far enough back from it to not suffer too many adverse effects. Foliage was lush where not industrialized. However, the people’s faces stunned Paris the most. Their attitudes were furtive, closed, and uninterested in all but their own tasks. Many bore scars or other disfigurements unknown on other worlds. One vivid picture showed a man with what appeared to be a relatively fresh removal of his left hand.

Connie shuddered and shut her eyes. “I haven’t seen that much evidence of cruelty in many years. Is that the end, Helen?”

“Not quite. Permission to install full security measures on this room, including white noise?”

Connie’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline. “This is new. Permission granted.”

The snick of door locks, the hum of equipment run on maximum, and many lights going out warned them of the extent of the security measures being used. Finally, Paris heard the whine of a white-noise generator. He clapped his hands over his ears until the tone modified to something less than deafening.

Helen’s voice came back, with a distinct hint of chagrin in her tone. “My apologies, Paris. I am using the maximum allowable noise that is not painful to you.”

“Why such strong security measures, Helen?” Connie picked up a pencil file and turned it over in her hands, looking very intrigued.

“Because what I reveal now could be key to Paris’s success. I believe that Oswego uses extreme surveillance methods, not only on his planet, but on anything he can manage to get his eye on. Consequently, this may be the last chance Paris has to speak freely.”

“I see. Continue.” Connie sat back and seemed to remove herself from the conversation.

Paris sat forward and put his elbows on his knees. “What have you learned, Helen?”

“A few days ago, I received a coded message on a secure net channel normally used only for planetary information exchanges like weather reports. It had been buried in a normal exchange between Aerie and Maxim, but because it was coded similar to a virus, it was removed from the report and quarantined. When the planet computer found it to be a message, it was permitted only to decode the address of the recipient. The intended recipient was the main computer of House d’Akasha: me. However, the message contained nothing more than some rather lovely fractal designs.”

Paris had a flash of intuition and chuckled. “How do you court a lady?”

Connie’s eyes widened. “You send her something pretty.”

“I do not find this amusing.” Helen’s voice was decidedly huffy. “I am not a human female. I do not need useless things to operate efficiently.”

Paris leaned back and chugged down the last of his restorative. He took Connie’s empty coffee mug and his glass and returned them to the catering slot for recycling. Then he paced around the office, occasionally picking up an object then replacing it without really studying it.

“I’m not saying you do, Helen love. I must ask, however, if the fractals were only visible to a computer’s graphics system, or if they were designed for human eyes?”

“Definitely for a computer’s optics. They would be, if I am any judge, dull and uninspiring to human eyes.”

Connie sat in her chair, stunned. “Then what you are saying, Paris, is that the planetary governing computer of Aerie is making discreet overtures to the House d’Akasha computer? Why?”

“Why does any intelligence court one of its own kind? It wants something. It will be up to Helen to discover what that might be.” Paris grinned and winked at Connie.

Helen’s panicked voice came through the com system. “I am not an AI! I am not programmed to respond in this area.”

Paris walked quietly over to the main databank and touched near an optic, as if he were soothing a distressed female of his own species. “If you aren’t an AI, you are damned close. Don’t worry, I doubt seriously if Connie would mind having an AI around to watch over her students.”

Connie nodded when he glanced her way. “I’d welcome it, actually. Don’t worry, Helen. I won’t register you with the Consortium and have governing hardware installed.”

There was silence for a few minutes. Then Helen’s voice was back, meek and soft. “Very well. What do I do about the overture? That is not in my programming.”

Connie snickered. “If a human male gifted me with something pretty, my response would be to smile and perhaps give him a gift of a slightly more practical nature. Do you have graphic logic puzzles to share?”

“Yes. I also have some complicated mathematics that can take days to work through. Those will be saved for the next round of communications, I think. The graphic logic puzzles can be most easily converted into computer optics only.”

Connie tapped a finger on her chin and grinned wickedly. “Yes, it is best to be coy. Send using the same method.”

“Complying.”

“Proceed to answer any communications from that source in a similar manner. Let me know if you wish advice on further gifts.”

“Agreed. I will hold off on music until I am sure this is safe. You act as if this is a delightful game, Connie.” Helen was apparently getting into the spirit of the exchange.

Connie shrugged. “Okay, so I’m a hopeless romantic when it comes to courtships.”

Paris strode to the door. “Let me out, Helen. I’ll let you ladies plan your strategy while I rest and pack. Keep me informed, please.”

The locking mechanism disengaged. Paris had his hand on the handle when Connie raised a hand. “It is said that Paris can furnish a quote for any occasion. Give us one that fits all of our situations.”

Paris grinned. “An optimist learns diplomacy. A cynic learns to grow his own food. A realist learns marksmanship.”

As he sauntered out the door, Helen’s voice was saying, “What the hell does that mean?”

Chapter Seven

Paris stepped from the shuttle into the port of the cruise ship, *Icarus*, and once again patted the breast pocket of his singlesuit to make sure the pencil file was still safely sealed within.

Helen's voice had begged him to take it. "It is my parting gift, in hopes that you will return, Paris. It contains a recording of about twelve hours of rain and thunder from your home world, to help you sleep. I notice you have been having difficulty with that lately."

Paris was still touched by the gift. He had no doubt in his mind that there was also a secret communication to the planet computer. That did not matter. The thought of two AIs flirting with one another amused him so much, his smile was perhaps more genuine than it might have been when he stepped forward to be greeted by the captain of the cruise ship.

"Captain Jonas Kelly, at your service, Engineer." Capt. Kelly was a sober-looking fellow perhaps in his fifth decade. At least his eyes were warm, and reasonably friendly.

"Sex Engineer Paris Cordell, Captain." Paris bowed.

Capt. Kelly turned and introduced his second-in-command and his navigator, if Paris remembered his lessons in space command insignias. The second-in-command was a female, Commander Kate Cassidy, and the navigator was Lieutenant Nick Miles. Both of the younger

officers were much more friendly, and Cmdr. Cassidy's nipples were hard enough to show through her uniform. Paris smiled to himself. It was patently obvious that while the captain was not interested, the commander and the lieutenant would be more than happy to accept the customary services of a sex engineer as payment for passage.

Capt. Kelly confirmed this with his next statement. "Cassidy and Miles will see to your comfort, Engineer. I hope to see you at dinner tonight at my table." With a polite bow, he walked away.

"Let me show you to your cabin, Engineer." Cmdr. Cassidy looked as if she might orgasm right there in the corridor, so Paris bowed his agreement.

The more dignified Lt. Miles trailed behind Cmdr. Cassidy and Paris. "I hope you will permit me to give you a tour later, Engineer."

Paris shot him a wink over the shoulder. "I'd be delighted, Lieutenant."

The ship really was a wonder of luxury. Instead of the usual dull gray and metallic accoutrements, the walls were painted warm, soft beige, and the fittings looked as if they were brass. There was even the occasional plant; though Paris had no doubt that they were artificial, they looked real enough. The cabin doors they passed looked as if they were made of simulated wood, as well. He forced himself not to gawk like a tourist. He was onstage as a sex engineer from now on.

His cabin was not spacious. As he was shown the ingenious disposition of the cabin's conveniences, he realized that Maxim had spoiled him. The smaller accommodation would deflate any sense of self-importance to a manageable level. The vidscreen was gratifyingly large, and the toilet facility was cleverly tucked away but easily located by the chemical odor his sensitive nose detected.

His escorts stood near the door, and Lt. Miles even shuffled his feet a moment. "Excuse me, Engineer, but I don't know the protocols all that well. I do know that we have duties to

fulfill until we are cruising outside the planet system. Would it be all right if we met you after dinner?"

Relief washed over Paris. He would have a little time to adjust. "That suits me perfectly. Before you leave, may I ask if you two are a couple?"

The commander laughed. "Not hardly! However, we are not averse to sharing, if that is acceptable with you. We are both bisexual, if that helps."

Paris thought carefully for a few moments. "Well, that's certainly a bit better, isn't it? I love the idea of having all my options available. One last question before you return to your duties. Do you have any particular preferences?"

The lieutenant answered immediately. "I am, by preferences, a bottom. Forgive me, but you look large. I'm looking forward to the experience."

Cmdr. Cassidy blushed and shrugged. "I am distressingly vanilla. I probably won't be difficult."

"I see." Paris rubbed his chin. "I'll cudgel my brain for something."

His mild joke elicited chuckles from them both. Cmdr. Cassidy gave the parting shot. "Just keep in mind, we will be in freefall once we are outsystem. You may have to make adjustments." The door slid shut behind them.

Paris rolled his eyes to the ceiling. "My favorite fantasy is freefall, yet she says she's vanilla." He threw up his hands. "One man's trash is another's treasure. Life is just not fair!"

His carriesack arrived via a slot in the wall, and Paris dumped the contents on the large bed that dominated the room. His equipment bag arrived with his professional items, looking unaffected by their journey. Most of his toys would remain safely stowed in the cargo hold, but he had enough here to satisfy most needs. He pulled out a few straps and laid them out for easy use.

There was a small cage near the bedside table, convenient for those who preferred certain things handy at night, even in freefall. He dumped a few protectants and lubricants

in that, then busied himself choosing his clothing for the dinner and stowing the rest away. It wouldn't do to be making love with shoes floating beside you. Then he flicked on the privacy light long enough to change.

The door chime pinged pleasantly just as he knotted his belt around his waist. One last glance in the mirror showed his Maxim silks fit reasonably close to his body and wouldn't float around untidily later. It made sense to wear close-fitting clothes and singlesuits for the entire trip, if freefall or half-grav was going to be the norm.

At his call to "Enter!" the door slid open, admitting Lt. Miles, resplendent in his formal uniform.

Paris openly admired for a moment. "Very nice! Much fancier than your working uniform, I must say! May I call you Nick when we're private?"

"Uncomfortable as hell, too. Yes, and may I call you Paris?" Nick's breezy style was very relaxing and open without his superiors around.

"Absolutely! Titles are a pain in the ass." Paris gestured for Nick to lead. "Where are we going, by the way? I've not had time to study the schematics."

"Formal dinner with the guests in the main catering facility, first. You'll be at the captain's table. He's a bit of a stiff fellow, and not very entertaining, but a damn good captain. This way." Nick led Paris up a short set of stairs. "This is the short cut. The more impressive entrance the guests use is further down the same corridor as your room, in case you need it."

Paris took the hint. "I'll be charming to make up for his deficit, I promise."

Nick grinned. "I could kiss you for that. "

"Why don't you?"

"Because the reputation of the Engineers is enough to make me hard. I don't want to offend the more parochial guests." He paused in front of two impressive double doors.

“Ready to dazzle them, Engineer? They’ll be panting with anticipation to meet one of your rank.”

“Then you owe me one.” Paris straightened his tunic and brushed off imaginary lint.

“Name the time, place, and position.” Without giving Paris a chance to answer, Nick swung open the doors and bowed him in.

* * * * *

Paris was dancing with a lady from Veria when the announcement came over the speaker system, supplanting the music. “Freefall in one hour. Please make yourselves comfortable and secure all loose items in your cabins. The staff is not responsible for breakage. Thank you.”

The lady stopped and flushed. “I must go. I didn’t secure my room. This is my first trip abroad.”

Paris kissed her hand, and she blushed more. “You are forgiven, my dear. It’s so exciting the first time one forgets the practical. I’m sure we’ll see each other again.”

She ran off, moaning, “If only I could afford you!”

Paris chuckled and noted that both Nick and Cmdr. Cassidy were talking quietly with one another near the smaller entrance, away from the exiting guests. He sauntered casually over and caught Nick’s gaze. “One hour. My cabin. On your knees,” he whispered in Nick’s ear.

The commander bit her lip, trying not to laugh aloud.

Nick’s face turned white, and his eyes rounded. “Yes, Engineer. And what will the commander be doing?”

“Floating naked, of course. Bound.”

The commander had made the mistake of taking a sip of champagne. She choked, her eyes now as large as Nick's had been. "Yes, Engineer. One hour. Oh, my."

They both fled out the door as fast as dignity permitted. Paris chuckled and sauntered back to his room to make final preparations.

His two guests were prompt. Cmdr. Cassidy arrived first, asking to be called Kate for the evening. By the time Nick arrived and was permitted entrance, Paris was enjoying himself using an intricate rope and knot system to secure a naked, floating Kate from shoulders to waist.

With a flourish, Paris tied the last knot just at her belly and tied the trailing end securely to the end of his bed, where a convenient post jutted. "Don't Kate's tits look particularly luscious, poking through the ropes like that, Nick? What do you think?" He clumped back in his heavy grav boots to have a good look.

Nick paused in the removal of his uniform and appraised Kate carefully. "Love what you did, there. I doubt those erect nipples are because she's cold. How do you like it, Commander?" He pushed his pants around his ankles and stepped out gracefully, considering he was wearing gravity boots similar to Paris's.

"I'm loving this! And I give you permission to call me Kate for the evening, Nick." Her short blonde hair stood out from her head like a nimbus. "I'm wet with anticipation already." She tried to twist around to look at Nick, but had little control and ended up almost upside down. "Whoops. Hey, Paris. Is Nick as hot as I am?"

Paris noted Nick's erection and playfully put his fingers between Kate's legs. "Yes, indeed, Kate." He flipped her around so she could see him lick his fingers, and give her a view of Nick.

"Damn, Nick. Wish I'd known you were that finely built." Then she got a look at Paris, who was now removing his lounging singlesuit. "Oh, my fucking Guard. Nick, take a look at what we get tonight."

“Mine first. I remember my orders.” Nick knelt in front of Paris. “Please tell me I get as much of that cock as I want.” His brown eyes looked up at Paris and waited for his next orders.

“Yes, and Kate, too. First, she gets to watch. I don’t know too many so-called vanilla females who don’t enjoy a little voyeurism, especially when helpless to do anything about it.” As Paris hoped, Kate moaned. She was used to being in control of situations. This would remove any chance of control, save by her voice. He wondered if she’d fall into pattern and begin to order Nick around.

“Aw, you’ve got my number. Comets, Nick, start sucking before I burst. I can’t even play with myself until you guys are done.”

Paris reached over and tugged on her belly rope until she hovered like a large white balloon over them both. “How’s the view?”

Nick grinned up at her and blew her a saucy kiss.

“Perfect,” she moaned again.

Nick quickly proved he was close to expert at sucking down even Paris’s large cock. Paris felt his cock slide down Nick’s throat and wanted desperately to shut his eyes and enjoy.

Instead, he forced himself to look up. Kate floated there, her attention totally focused on Nick’s blowjob. Her lips were parted and her breathing fast.

He couldn’t resist the perky hard nipple only inches from his face. He pulled her down and suckled, trying not to get in her line of sight. Her “Oh, Guard!” was followed by a groan.

Nick was not to be outdone. His left hand reached up to gently fondle Paris’s balls, and he began to hum.

Paris released Kate’s tit. “That’s a sex engineer’s technique, Nick. You make me wonder about your education.”

With a small pop, Nick let go of Paris's cock. Not that he stopped altogether. He licked and nibbled on the head between sentences. "My best friend wanted to be a sex engineer. We practiced on each other. She swore I had my head in the stars, even when my face was buried in her snatch." He began to use his teeth, scraping the underside of Paris's now-quivering erection. "I remember a lot of what she tried on me."

"Well, before this party is over a shade too early, why don't you stop that and get out of those boots." Kate's pleading voice came from above. "I'd like to see how much of those practice sessions you remember on my pussy. I'm dying up here!"

Paris agreed. If Nick didn't stop soon, he was going to come down that talented throat. While that wouldn't be such a bad thing, he got the impression Kate would prefer some time riding his cock as well. "Tie yourself to one of the unused bed straps before you do, Nick. You know zero-g better than I do."

"Oh, hell, yeah," Nick laughed. "If things get as lively as I want them to, we'd better eventually tie ourselves up not only to the bed, but also each other. The equal and opposite reactions I want to cause have nothing to do with gravity."

Nick and Paris reached for straps.

Paris sang as he strapped in, "When sex is had in zero-g, it's really not that odd. The female still bangs her head, and the man still thinks he's a god!"

Kate laughed so hard, she spun away and had to be grabbed by her ankles. Nick caught the left, Paris the right.

Paris grinned wickedly and winked at Nick as he spread Kate's legs wide. "Make a wish!"

Chapter Eight

Nick thought carefully, all the while eyeing Kate's wet, pink folds. "Hmm ... I think I'm about to get my wish." He dove in to lick enthusiastically.

Since Nick now had a firm hold of both Kate's legs, Paris helpfully tied a strap around Nick's waist. The fact that Paris couldn't resist a small nip to those lovely, sculpted cheeks -- well, a fellow could only be so helpful without taking a small reward for himself. Nick's buttocks quivered in response.

Tying a strap around his own waist gave Paris time to consider. His first temptation was to simply dive in to help, but he had a certain professional curiosity about Nick's skills in the sexual arena. Since Kate was quite happily occupied, it behooved Paris to see to it Nick was equally engaged. He retrieved a certain lotion from the cage beside the bed and pulled himself down to wedge himself between the bed and Nick's delightful ass.

The sweet smell of fruit filled the air as Paris poured a few drops onto his fingers. He slid the side of his hand up Nick's leg to give him a signal to spread, and Nick obliged with a soft moan that made Kate echo him.

"Jezzers, Nick. What's going on?" Kate's voice panted out.

Another moan, and Nick spread wider for Paris's fingers to rub the fragrant drops on his anus. "Paris is putting something warm on my ass that smells like fruit." A pause. "Can I have some for Kate's sweet pussy?"

Paris handed up the bottle. The gel-like substance would stay without floating around untidily. It also had another property besides a delicately sweet taste -- it got hot when you blew on it. He rubbed the remainder on the area between Nick's anus and his balls, and remembered the words of his teacher: "Never mind about that official title. Call that area the taint. Taint one, and taint the other."

"Oh, my Guard, Nick! What is that stuff? I'm on fire!" Kate yelped breathlessly. Judging by the way her toes were curling when Paris looked up, she was just about ready for her first orgasm of the night. Bless females and their multi-orgasmic bodies.

In response to Nick's heartless chuckle, Paris blew lightly on Nick's ass before enjoying his first lick of the taint. Nick's gasp blew enough air on Kate to send her shrieking over the edge. Then she discovered it was nearly impossible to buck in zero-g.

Judging by Nick's moans, he was nearly overwhelmed by the sensations of having his ass licked while a female writhed around his face. In fact, Nick came up for air long enough to cry out inarticulately before pulling Kate down to impale her on his cock and bury his face in her bound breasts.

Quite the oral fellow, Paris thought to himself. He used his boots to move carefully between Nick's legs from behind so he could suckle Nick's balls. Half-floating on his back, but with his feet firmly held to the decking, Paris could achieve a feat of acrobatics not possible in full-grav, and he took merciless advantage. Kate's round, firm little ass brushed his hair when he went too far, but no one seemed to mind.

Nick's hands bounced Kate hard but rhythmically, and Paris tasted them both happily. The mingled taste of male and female together was perhaps his favorite flavor, tinged only slightly with the remains of the gel.

Paris could have stayed for hours, but Kate's shrieks exhorted Nick for his own ecstasy. "Come for me, Nick. Plant it all the way!"

It was easy enough to grant Kate her desire. Paris reached around and fingered Nick's pumping ass until he found the anal opening, and tickled. Nick's balls rose immediately to the call, moving away from Paris's mouth.

Nick yowled almost immediately, and Paris tasted the salt-sweet flavor of his orgasm from what little ran down his way. The taste was so delicious, he didn't stop until Nick's tiny jerks settled.

"Can I get untied now?"

Kate's plaintive request made Paris chuckle. She was still firmly impaled on Nick, who seemed unable to speak around his harsh panting.

"Sure, Kate." Paris carefully removed himself from under Nick. He didn't dare use Nick's legs as a balancing point. He was positive the only thing holding Nick upright at present was the lack of gravity, and his grav-boots locked to the decking.

"Oh, good, because I want some of your cock, Paris. Hope that's okay."

Paris grinned up at Kate. "That was the plan. What Nick wants to do is up to him."

Still breathing somewhat raggedly, Nick lifted Kate off himself. "Nick wants a bit of a rest, and then he'll decide." He kicked off his boots and floated lazily toward the lavatory, presumably to wash up.

Paris took his time untying Kate's bonds, keeping her heated and ready with licks and nibbles.

When the lavatory door closed, Kate whispered, "Nick is very good. I'm surprised. "

"If he keeps up this kind of performance, you might consider recommending he get a secondary skill license as a fully trained sex engineer. It would be a boon to the cruiser to have one on staff." Paris considered as he worked on a stubborn knot. "I'd even write him a

letter of recommendation to Maxim, if you think it can be done.” The ropes fell away and left a pretty pattern on Kate’s skin that would fade in a few minutes.

Her arms freed, Kate wrapped them around Paris to keep from floating off. “Marvelous idea! He has a subordinate ready for advancement that needs the full experience of astrogation to get his next licensing level. Nick could be spared long enough, I think. I’ll ask when I get back on duty.”

Taking a half-step that would allow him to float backwards on the bed, Paris took Kate with him. “Would you like to tie me down and ride, or do you have another position in mind?” He carefully toed off his boots and allowed them to both float free.

“Well, I’ve always wanted to try a position known as the wheelbarrow. Do you know it?” Kate bit her lip and looked hopefully down at Paris.

Paris flipped through the database in his mind. “Indeed I do. Perfect choice for zero-g. The only anchor point for you would be Nick’s boots. Can you keep hold of them with your hands long enough for me to fuck you?”

She sniffed. “Easily. I don’t look it, but I’m half-blooded Betelgeusian.” She lifted away from Paris and shot toward Nick’s boots.

Paris dropped his jaw. “You’re half heavy-worlder? So am I.” He sat up a little too violently, and was forced to correct before he hit his head on the ceiling.

Kate latched on to Nick’s boots. “I kinda figured you might be. Dad had a purple cock, too. Darker than yours, and just as large. We lived in a terraformed dome and didn’t wear clothes much. Are you going to fuck me?”

“At least I don’t have to worry about hurting you.” Paris pushed off the ceiling and positioned himself between Kate’s spread legs.

Nick came out of the lavatory just as Paris took position. He took one look at Paris’s placement between Kate’s legs and swore softly. “Damn, I knew I came too fast. Save some for my ass, please.”

Kate looked over her arms at him and laughed. "Wait your turn, greedy." She gasped and held more tightly to the boots as Paris entered. "Oh, shit! Guards, that feels ... uhn! Wonderful!"

Nick propelled himself over to join them as Paris began thrusting. He put on his boots without disturbing Kate's use of them, and moved to help anchor Kate's lower body to the deck by holding her arms down until her elbows touched the deck.

With Nick's cock dangling right in her face, Kate happily let Paris's next thrust propel her forward just enough to take Nick into her mouth. Paris had to admire the strength in her arms, which looked just as fragile as a lightweight.

"Speaking of asses, Kate, may I commend you on yours?" Paris commented. He looked down and saw Nick's expression of growing arousal. "Never mind, don't bother to answer at the moment."

"Good, because she's nearly as good at it as you are." Then Nick gasped sharply. "Ouch! Okay, she is as good as you are. Dammit, woman, you bite like that again, and I'll likely find a wormhole on my next duty." Nick's empty threat was followed by a caress on Kate's blonde hair.

Paris chuckled and dictated the rhythm that pistoned Kate between his cock and Nick's. Too much force, and he'd go floating off. Kate's moans became an audible counterpoint to his work. "Nick, why don't you piston her off and on your cock for a moment? You're anchored better."

"If she keeps this up, she's going to get offered a marriage contract. Ouch! Dammit, Kate!" Nick moved his hands to grasp Kate's upper arms and began to move her as soon as Paris stopped.

Paris withdrew, causing a moaning protest from Kate, but she didn't stop sucking vigorously on Nick. Paris quickly donned his grav-boots and lowered Kate until he could re-

enter. With only a few now-deeper thrusts from Paris, Kate's body began to quake from within.

"Jeezers, Paris, don't stop. She's sucking hard enough to pull the brass off the fittings of the ship! I take it back, she's better than you." Nick's eyes were glazing with his own impending orgasm.

"Really? Perhaps we'll see tomorrow evening. Tonight, I intend to finish inside your ass, Nick." Paris wasn't insulted in the slightest to be compared to a non-professional. He'd be delighted to recommend both for secondary licensing, if it came down to it.

That promise, spoken with a casual air, apparently did it for both Kate and Nick. They orgasmed, with Kate unable to swallow and cry out simultaneously. Paris helpfully pulled her off Nick's cock before she choked, and Nick sprayed her face. "Thanks!" she gasped, and licked her lips.

Nick pulled her to him and off Paris. "I'll get you a cloth. Be right back," Paris offered.

His own cock began to ache for release. He went into the tiny lavatory and found a washcloth and the solution used in place of precious water on the ship. His heavy boots clumped on the decking, warning Nick and Kate of his return. They might not have noticed otherwise, considering they were locked at the lips as if glued there. Nick hadn't even moved from the crouched position he'd been in since he'd served as Kate's anchor.

Paris politely put the cloth in Kate's hand to let her clean her own face when she was ready. Meanwhile, he opened the little cage by the bed and got out a lubricant-and-protectant combination he favored when going at it male-to-male.

Shaking his head at the couple on the floor, he began to wonder if Nick's suggestion of a marriage contract had been such a joke after all. "Nick, put her on the bed and strap her down if you're going to do that the rest of the night. Just stay bent over the edge. "

Kate began to giggle and broke the kiss. “Yessir!” She saluted and launched herself to float on her back above the bed. She helped Nick position the straps over her body to hold her firmly in place. “Wait until you feel this, Nick! Yummy!”

Nick took one look over his shoulder at Paris’s stiff erection. “I’ve been waiting. My turn.” He wrapped his wrists in two of Kate’s extra straps and made minute adjustments to his boot positions. “There. I’m comfortable, Paris. Have at.”

His hands busy applying the protectant gel, Paris chuckled. “Be there in a moment to lube you up properly.”

Kate sniggered. “Yes, please do, or he won’t sit comfortably for his next shift. “

Nick made a tscking sound. “Brag, brag. Just because females make their own lube. Not fair.” Then he moaned softly as Paris did indeed make sure he was well-moisturized.

Taking his time, Paris applied a liberal amount of the slick substance. “Best stuff I have, Nick.” He stuck a finger in carefully and made sure plenty found its way into Nick’s ass. “I’ll take my time. You feel as if you’re almost virginal.”

“I’m not.” Nick shrugged. “But it has been awhile. I’m going back to kissing Kate, if you don’t mind. I’m getting fond of it.”

“Shaddup and bring those lips down here while Paris fucks you.”

Nick obliged and puckered his ass invitingly. “Pushy, pushy.”

Paris took the invitation and pushed in slowly. His cock thanked him for every millimeter past the first sphincter. It was like being delightfully squeezed to death. He paused and caressed the tiny, almond-shaped prostate with his cockhead while Nick adjusted and relaxed further. “Relax, Nick.”

Coming up for air from kissing Kate, Nick groaned. “I am, but that’s a *balarian* between your legs. “

Being compared to the giant, eight-meter snakes of Vega made Paris laugh. “Not quite. But thanks for the compliment.” He was almost in. Soon he could thrust until he was

satiated. Then they could all sleep together, or not, as they pleased. The second sphincter let him pass much more easily than the first. Then he was buried to his balls. Guards, it felt good.

He wanted to shove in. Instinct demanded it, but his education fought it. He'd rip Nick to the point of needing a medic if he wasn't careful now. His hips moved slowly until Nick adjusted, an intimate caress with every stroke. Sweet jeezers, what pleasure it brought.

Nick raised his head from Kate's lips. "Go for it, Paris. You're killing me with this slow, careful fuck. You've given enough tonight. Take a little back, dammit."

"If that's what you want." He wanted to. Ached with the need to.

"No, it's what you want. I can feel you straining. Fuck me, then we'll all have a nice cuddle with you in the middle."

Kate's eyes were sleepy and satisfied. "Come on, Paris. Get on with it."

He took what was offered. On the next upstroke, he pounded back in. It was paradise to let go of control and thrust in, hard and fast. Nick yelped once and braced himself more firmly, meeting every stroke with one of his own.

Kate untied herself just enough to wriggle slowly beneath Nick. A suckling sound followed her feet poking out where Paris could see. Then a small, soft hand caressed Paris's balls with every upstroke.

Paris and Nick groaned simultaneously. Nick was assaulted on both sides, with Kate's well-used pussy right below him. He dove in, and a squeal from below told Paris that Nick had hit the mark with his tongue.

Everyone was getting all they could handle, Paris thought as his balls rose, signaling release. He wished briefly he had thought to insert a dildo in Kate and an anal plug in himself, but it was too late. Then he felt Kate's finger caress his anus. His last coherent thought was that he was recommending them both for secondary licensing. His world coalesced into the primal ecstasy of orgasm.

Kate's body bucked, causing Nick to fight to keep his tongue on her clit. This made Nick move more, and Paris found himself shooting deeply into his ass. Paris didn't try to stop. Didn't want to stop. Nick's ass milked every last drop from him, until Paris felt his knees tremble.

Kate was the first to recover. She squirmed out carefully, using the straps that held her bound by the waist, until she floated free. True to her personality, she took over. "Nick, crawl in bed, babe. You take the far end. Paris, you get the middle." She fumbled with the knots until she was free. "I'll go get washcloths and drinks from the catering slot. Be right back." She shot toward the ceiling and over their heads.

"Pushy bitch. I think I'm in love," Nick panted. He eased himself forward until he fell away from Paris's softening cock. "Guards, what a ride. We get three days of this? I may never recover." His boots were left behind as he crawled over, too spent to be graceful about it.

"You're welcome, I think." Paris kicked off his boots as well, and tried to resemble the graceful professional as he made a more coordinated attempt to take the middle, as ordered.

Kate brought back the cloths, and everyone helped minister to the others until all were satisfied.

As she waved the light off, Kate yawned. "Same time tomorrow, fellas?"

Paris was asleep before he could administer the spank he wanted to deliver to that round feminine bottom.

Chapter Nine

From the moment Paris kissed Nick and Kate goodbye and stepped into the shuttle for the short trip to the spaceport on Aerie, he had a sense of foreboding. Aerie looked like a nice enough planet from space, with a good mix of industrialized areas as well as green belts left natural, as required by Consortium planetary grants. Nevertheless, something about the planet gave him the shivers.

Maybe it was his fellow passengers. Most were contractors like himself, of various types. He'd spotted the collar tabs of miners, construction, and administration. All of them seemed grim and unwilling to speak, even to others of their own disciplines. More oddly, it was all males on the flight, no females. The trip down was silent enough to be unnerving. It made Paris miss Nick and Kate even more.

The landing was going reasonably well, and they'd begun touchdown when a loud *whump!* rattled the shuttle. No one had been foolish enough to release their safety straps, but a few hand-held databanks went flying.

Paris caught a glimpse of fire outside his window, and so did his seatmate, an administrator. "Aw, damn. Insurgents." A stream of invective followed, peppered with the odd comment like, "I was warned. But I had to be greedy, didn't I?"

The shuttle ground to a halt, but no door opened to a welcoming terminal with smiling service personnel. Instead, there was a louder boom, and the back bay door slammed open in time to see the shuttle crewman who'd served Paris a cold drink die in a spray of blood and gore. Several figures, carrying weapons, with faces masked and wearing ill-fitting body armor, stormed in. Some of the passengers died where they sat, but others were hastily removed and hustled away. Confined to his seat, and fearing to cause harm to his cowering seatmate, Paris remained still.

One of the insurgents looked at Paris with cold eyes and yelled, "Got him!" The administrator beside Paris let go his bladder as Paris was cut from his straps and hauled away.

Me. They're after me. Why? He was handed off from insurgent to insurgent, until he was in what was left of the back bay. Well over twenty rebels surrounded him and cuffed his arms in front of his body. He allowed it, though he might have risked fighting were he not so outnumbered.

One of the rebels muttered to Paris as he was cuffed. "Easy, Engineer. It's not ye we're angry with. Do as yer told and all will be well. We have our reasons for wanting ye. We need a witness."

A witness? Paris relaxed marginally. Apparently, he was going to see firsthand what was bad for business on Aerie, if he kept his wits about him. He allowed himself to be thrown bodily into a transport bed with the other contractors who'd been spared. All were high-ranking individuals of their disciplines. He heard his soft Maxim silk clothing rip as it caught on a miner's boot when he hit the bed of the truck. Another contractor, his eyes wide with shock, was thrown in, and the doors slammed shut. Outside, screams, shouts, and the occasional firing of weapons could be heard, even through the thick plating.

"Why are we here?" yelled one contractor, his eyes wide with hysteria.

Paris didn't blame him. Violence was rare in civilized society.

“Idiot! We’re hostages, I think,” one man, his eyes hard, called out. “I was told this happened. Our companies might put up our ransom. If not, most of us will be shipped out in the belly of free trader ships to slave worlds. They’ll get their money out of our hides, one way or another.” The man seemed resigned to his fate.

“Most?” Paris asked.

“Sharp, aren’t you, Engineer? Yeah. A few of us will die, to prove they are serious.” He snarled a little, and his lip curled contemptuously. “Don’t worry. You’re a sex engineer. If your company doesn’t pay, you’ll fetch a high price at the auctions and be some rich out-system oligarch’s toy. Not much of a change for you. A whore is a whore.”

Paris couldn’t get his mouth to work he was so stunned. Such a parochial attitude had died out on most civilized planets.

A bitter laugh sounded from behind him. “Oh, and I’m sure you are absolutely celibate! What? You don’t like sex? Too bad. Most of us do. Just as I like the pretty baubles you dig up from the earth, miner. I like a little entertainment in my life, you parochial sonofabitch. Keep your mouth shut.”

The others laughed, some with an edge to their voices, but the humor helped. Paris smiled a little grimly. “Everyone is entitled to his or her opinions.”

Someone sniggered. “Yeah, well I like my procreation with fun attached. If he wants to beat off into a bottle to avoid contaminating himself with sex, he’s welcome to it.”

The laughter that followed was cut off sharply when the truck lurched to a sudden stop, and a huge boom deafened them all. Paris’s ears rang, and he was thrown bodily into the others along with the rest of the latecomers. His green silk shirt, meant for casual travel and not hard wear, ripped half off. His pants, of a slightly sturdier fabric, ripped down one leg but left nothing exposed that would cause comment. Good thing. He wasn’t wearing underclothes again.

Silence.

After all the screaming and weapons fire, the sudden quiet was eerie. The truck engine had even stopped. The contractors helped each other into more comfortable positions, removing themselves and others off the poor fellows at the bottom of the pile.

“What’s happening?” one fellow whispered.

“Nothing,” Paris joked feebly. “That’s the point. We’ve stopped moving, and I don’t think this is our destination.”

The back door slammed open, flooding the dark interior with light. Consortium Guards flanked one man who carried a bloody knife as if it were a part of his hand. He was silhouetted against the brightness, but Paris had to admire the blue-black color of his hair.

“Gentlefolk, would you be kind enough to step from the vehicle, please? We are your rescuers.” The black-haired man gave a short bow.

Though it was not an orderly exit, those closest to the doors scrambled and were removed by the Guard. Paris moved when it was his turn, but the black-haired man put a hand on his arm. “Would you be Paris Cordell, the sex engineer?”

The black-haired man’s bottle-green eyes shut and his body relaxed when Paris nodded. “Thank the Profit. I feared you died in the attack. Please come with me.”

Paris was hustled by the man to a waiting armored vehicle of considerable might. He might have enjoyed the view of his rescuer’s stunning profile and even more impressive physique had he been less rattled. The black hair fell nearly to the man’s waist, held in place by a small silver band at the nape of his neck.

The man was equally appraising of Paris’s exposed body. “You’ll undoubtedly want to clean up and change before meeting the oligarch. Let’s get you to the palace.” He turned and dismissed the man at the wheel of the vehicle with a wave of his hand. “I’ll drive. Return to duty.” The guard exited the car, saluted, and disappeared.

His rescuer waited only long enough for Paris to strap in before he whipped the transport around and left the scene of carnage behind. “We’ll be there in a pico,” he commented cheerfully. “Sorry about the insurgents. They’re getting more aggressive.”

Paris studied his companion’s face, thinking he discerned a certain tiny spark of satisfaction in that last statement. This was a man worth getting to know. “May I know the name of my rescuer?”

The beautiful man jerked, then chuckled. “Oh, forgive me! I’m Sumner d’Oswego.”

Flipping through his memory files, Paris unearthed a mental picture. “The son and heir of Oswego the Leopard.” He quirked a half smile. “You need to update the Consortium files. You’ve changed considerably from a toothless kid.”

Paris lapsed into regretful thoughts. The son and heir was most likely involved in his father’s misdeeds. A handsome face and sunny mannerisms would not mislead him. This man might possibly be deeply embroiled in whatever crimes Oswego was committing. The bloody knife, now residing in its hip sheath, bore the signs of frequent use.

Sumner grinned as he sped through mercantile traffic with careless ease. “Oh, the Consortium file is deliberately misleading. I don’t want to be recognized.” He frowned. “What happened today would be many times worse if they got their hands on me.”

Sumner was avoiding using a rearview mirror very studiously. Paris noted he never glanced up to check what was behind him, and used side mirrors and other proximity devices instead. Curiosity drove Paris to study the mirror. Why avoid its use?

A quick study of the mirror revealed the answer. A tiny spy-eye winked from the bar that attached the mirror to the plas-glass windshield. They were being watched.

“I see you’ve noted the spy-eye. Don’t be concerned. My father likes to keep an eye on things. It’s not meant to invade privacy, truly. He is very concerned about everything.” Sumner’s voice was reassuring, but his eyes glittered a warning Paris read clearly.

Obediently, Paris nodded. "Such caring is wonderful to see. Most oligarchs wouldn't bother. I'm impressed."

Sumner might have added more, but the vehicle sped up a short incline that led to a large set of baffle doors that must have been several feet thick. Sumner braked, and thrust his wrist com into a code box. After a moment, the baffles groaned open, revealing a dark interior parking facility. Sumner ignored the many available spaces and drove directly into a small alcove with three sides. The entire vehicle was then lowered into a more secure facility with bright lighting and guards.

They parked immediately, and Sumner jumped out to help Paris free himself from the straps and exit the vehicle with a modicum of dignity. The difficulty was, for Paris, that he was finding Sumner increasingly attractive. Sumner had a secretive air about him, and Paris loved a mystery. Sumner was compelling, in his own unique way. Perhaps he only imagined that Sumner's hand seemed to linger for an instant longer than necessary in helping arrange what was left of Paris's shirt to something resembling normalcy.

"You're quite filthy, Engineer." Sumner brushed off some excess dust and debris. "Let's get you scanned, so I can see to it you're properly set up to meet my father."

Paris was led to a scanning arch, through which he passed easily. The puff of air from the sniffer did set off an alarm, but Sumner silenced that one with a mutter. "Of course he smells like explosives, idiot machine." He waved Paris on.

"Um, I hate to be a bother, but do you know what happened to my luggage?" Paris felt more than a bit confused, and was grateful to Sumner for his breezy, offhand style. It settled the nerves. Without Sumner, Paris might even be suffering from an embarrassing case of the shakes.

Laughing, Sumner caught Paris's elbow and led him toward a transport lift. After punching in a series of codes, Sumner patted Paris on the shoulder. "Oh, I had some of my

personal guards sift through the luggage with a portable scanner. They should have your things delivered already. I demand efficiency.”

He certainly was a hands-on fellow. Paris couldn’t remember the last time he’d been casually touched so often in the space of a few minutes unless it was a client. Even Nick kept a polite distance at all times while they’d been on board the ship.

The transport box started its descent, but halfway there by the display, Sumner slapped the hold button. He glanced up at the ubiquitous spy-eye once, and then pinned Paris with a look.

“I hope you like men as playmates. If I know my father, I’ll be your partner tonight, and father will watch. Be prepared. Now, let’s get you all cleaned up.” He turned and punched the hold button without giving Paris time to answer.

Chapter Ten

Paris felt much better after discovering his luggage stowed neatly in his luxuriously appointed apartment and getting a lingering bath. It had been strange to have Sumner lean with cool aplomb against a dressing table edge and talk to him while he bathed, but he was beginning to expect the unexpected from Sumner.

He'd caught on that he must not discuss Sumner's revelation from the interior of the transport. How had Sumner known he could quickly reveal what was supposed to be a surprise without his father knowing? Now they chatted about inconsequentialities, the features of the apartment, and Paris had received permission to install the sleep program Helen had provided.

Still, Paris managed to convey with his eyes alone that he was quite willing to be Sumner's partner for the evening, should Oswego demand it.

"I love my room, especially the bed coverlet, Sumner. Wherever did you acquire such a beautiful fur? It even looks like it might have come from a real creature." He'd swept his gaze briefly across Sumner's excellent body.

Sumner's eyes had widened, then his whole face lit up with an affable smile. "It did come from a live creature. This planet has a native species of large rodent that is extremely

prolific, producing an average of ten offspring per litter. Since we humans were forced to remove their natural predators to make room for us, it behooved us to find a use for the *prada*.” His matching appraisal of Paris’s nude form was just as quick, though he lingered for a second on Paris’s cock.

Excellent. Sumner was not adverse to the idea, either. It became a game of subtle arousal. Paris allowed his tongue to lick his bottom lip. Just a flicker. They dared not take this too far and walk around with raging hard-ons for one another. “Fascinating. Would you happen to have a zoo convenient, so I might see the live version? If Oswego has no need of me in the press of his duties, I might request a tour. I love looking at wild fauna and flora native to the planets I visit.”

The tiny emphasis on the word *wild* was enough. Sumner’s eyes grew happily speculative. “Indeed? Well, you need not travel far. There’s one on the outskirts of this city. I’ll see if I can make arrangements to provide you with suitable escort.” His eyes promised that he’d be that escort, if he could.

Contriving to look eager as he’d gotten dressed in more of his Maxim silks, Paris suppressed a small thrill. He hoped fervently he didn’t end up having to kill Sumner. That thought destroyed the beginnings of an erection. “Would there be an al fresco catering facility within the zoo, as well? I do love dining outside.”

Message received. Sumner’s wicked eyes told him he knew what would be on the menu. “Yes, there is. Remind me to give your guards a credit voucher.” Then, without warning, Sumner’s eyes grew cold and hard. “You look good enough, I think. I’ll escort you to my father, now.”

Stamping into his boots to settle them, Paris followed Sumner back to the transport. Whatever ate at Sumner now, it was a cause of his dual and enigmatic nature. Either he was a candidate for psych treatment, or something was very wrong on Aerie.

* * * * *

Sumner struggled to maintain his cool demeanor when he wanted to simultaneously shout for joy and sag with relief against a convenient wall. Paris was all he could have asked for, and more, in a sex engineer designed to please his father. He was handsome, but that was to be expected. He was also honorable while still being as amoral as a feline in heat. That good, responsible nature shone out of him like a beacon. Oswego would want to break the engineer, but first there would be a bit of showing off.

He stole a glance at Paris's perfect profile in the reflective surface of the transport panel. The only thing he couldn't reconcile was that this honorable colony boy could also be a cold-blooded killer. It didn't fit. Paris looked like an old icon from history named Howdy Doody, in an odd, matured way. Dark red hair that cascaded in soft curls to his shoulders, pale skin, and a mouth that demanded kisses didn't resolve into the stereotypical hired assassins Oswego used.

Damn it all, he didn't dare fire off a question to the d'Akasha to ask. He had to assume his contract had been filled to the letter. Max researched, as thoroughly as possible, as only an AI could, and reported that no contract recorded at the Consortium by House d'Akasha had ever been disputed. Sumner had to give all his trust to the d'Akasha reputation and continue to be the dutiful son. Never had a birthday present to his father left him so regretful. He led Paris to the doors of Oswego's smaller audience chamber with a feeling of leading an innocent to the slaughter, and threw open the doors.

* * * * *

Sumner and Paris moved as one to stand before Oswego, and bowed. Paris took in the sight of the room, transformed into a jungle paradise complete with indoor waterfall. He

forced himself not to stare, amazed, like a tourist. He kept his focus on the man in the rattan chair, wearing a leopard-pelt kilt like he was an oligarch of some barbaric world.

Sumner spoke first. "Happy birthday, Father. As my gift to you, may I present the sex engineer Paris Cordell, who is contracted to you for the next three months?"

One of the female slaves widened her eyes and her smile was appreciative as Paris took a half-step forward and bowed again. "I am pleased to serve Oswego the Leopard," Paris intoned.

Oswego smiled affably. "Yes, I'm sure you will be. I hear you had a rough start to your contract upon your arrival. Shame, that. I'll have to crack down further on insurgency." His frown was brief. "Sumner, see to it."

"Of course, Father. I left orders with the Guard to detain all those who survived the rescue. I thought you might wish to supervise their questioning." He rubbed his thumb and forefinger together in an agitated manner. "Oh, and I ordered their families held in case you wished them sold into slavery to pay for the damages. They'll leave on the next transport, if you so order."

Paris couldn't help the sidelong glance he shot Sumner. On one hand, Sumner acted as if he had a heart, and other times he was more ruthless and cold-blooded than Paris could imagine. Presumably innocent families sold into slavery to pay for another's crimes? Where was the justice in this? Did they not follow the convention that a person was responsible for their own actions?

"Excellent." Now his father's smile was genuine. Oswego turned to Paris. "My son is a model of efficiency. I don't know why I bother to question him anymore."

"Indeed, sir, I've seen that for myself. His rescue of my fellow hostages and me proves he can be quite ruthless when it is required." Paris smiled impartially at both Oswego and Sumner. "Forgive me for talking as if you aren't in the room, Sumner. I was impressed with how quickly we were liberated."

“Oswego the Leopard rewards good service!” Oswego hit the arm of his chair, making them all snap their attention back to him.

Ah, so Oswego preferred to be the center of all things. Paris now understood a little more about the psychology of his client. He could handle that. “I agree, sir. You are wise. You have trained your son well. What reward did you have in mind? I am most curious to learn how an oligarch shows generosity in keeping with his power and prestige.”

Mollified, Oswego relaxed in his chair, his handsome face growing thoughtful. “I must think on this carefully. It should be expensive, and rare. Sumner has served perfectly for years.” He rubbed his chin. Then his eyes lit and he looked at Paris with a glittering smile. “You. You are expensive and rare. A sex engineer of the first-class level. You can’t get more expensive and rare than that on this mudball.”

Sumner bowed deeply. “I’m honored, Father.”

Paris butted in before Sumner could formulate an objection. Oswego wouldn’t like anyone thwarting his will. “A generous gift indeed, sir. A gift returned to the giver becomes twice as valuable. I will endeavor to serve your son well, for however long you deem fit.”

“Hmph. I’ll take you back when it pleases me. Until then, you serve my son.” He stood, and his slaves moved into positions to serve or move with him. “I’m going to interrogate the prisoners. Come along. I’m sure you’ll want to learn why they did this foolish action against me. How dare they try to take my birthday present?” Oswego strode from the room, with his slaves in his wake.

“Well done,” Sumner muttered to Paris as they followed.

Instead of forcing his entourage to crowd into the small transport, Oswego led the procession down a long ramp to what was apparently the next-lower level in the complex.

“The size of your palace is larger than even our corporate facility on Maxim, sir,” Paris commented to Oswego. He knew he must feed Oswego’s ego at every turn.

“Liar.” Sumner’s mutter didn’t carry any further than Paris’s ear.

True, he was lying. The planet was House d'Akasha's corporate office, but each satellite office spanned miles in any direction. Still, Oswego's chest puffed out with pride. "Yes, I like it. We shall be on the thirtieth level down."

Paris gasped in astonishment for Oswego's benefit. "Surely they don't parade bloody prisoners and such through your palace to ruin your beautiful things! You must cleverly have a service entrance for your convenience."

"Of course!" Oswego tossed his hair like a preening woman and gestured vaguely to the outer walls that would face west. "Ask Sumner to show you them all. I only care that they come and go in proper fashion. On their feet to enter, feet first when they leave."

Eagerly, Sumner jumped forward. "May I also show Paris the slave pens, Father? I've an idea for a few of the prisoners that Paris can advise me on, since the sexual organs would be a specialty of his."

Paris was sickened, but wondered at Sumner's game. The twitching hand and rubbing forefinger were a clue to great agitation on Sumner's part, yet they were not the signs normally associated with sadistic desire. He drew breath to refuse to share trade secrets, but was arrested by a pleading look from Sumner. "I'd be happy to do so," he faltered.

"Excellent! We'll discuss it at a later time." Sumner gestured to a set of double doors that were locked in several different ways.

Retinal scan, fingerprint, and coded locks took a few moments for Oswego to open, but he seemed resigned to this exercise in patience. The slaves leapt forward to open the doors for him, begging him not to sully his hands. It was a well-practiced maneuver to feed Oswego's ego more. It was a wonder he didn't see it for such.

The doors swung open to reveal the very latest in high-tech dungeons. Gone were the days of dim lighting and dark corners. Paris couldn't help the long, low whistle of appreciation for all the latest toys, as well as updated versions of the ancient ones.

As Oswego moved to the first cell, where a dejected prisoner awaited his fate, Paris stepped to the side to run his fingers lightly over the latest version of the iron maiden, complete with hot electrodes to give shocks without killing. He knew a few of his fellow engineers who specialized in BDSM would do a great deal for a room like this.

“Paris!”

Oswego’s petulant tone warned him he’d strayed from his role of sycophant. He hurried over. “Your dungeon is a marvel, sir! Forgive me for a moment of sheer awe.” That should do it.

Pleased, Oswego returned to affability. “I do like my toys. You are forgiven your lapse in attentiveness. Look here.” He took Paris’s arm and led him to a table with old-fashioned restraints.

Paris examined the cuffs. “*Prada* hide, sir? It simulates the leathers found on the best equipment beautifully. I love the pattern on the skin.”

“Yes, the rare spotted *prada*. I had it bred, and then when it no longer had a use, I found a use for its hide. Lovely, isn’t it?” He stroked the cuffs lovingly.

Stroking the other cuff in the same manner, Paris commented, “It is soft, but feels strong!” His mind formulated a plan. “Is this your favorite device, this table?”

Oswego laughed, and it wasn’t a pretty sound. “Indeed it is, when I want to extract information. Speaking of, you and Sumner are dismissed. I shall be busy tonight and tomorrow, and I will not want company. I’ll send for you when I’m ready.”

Sumner bowed, and Paris echoed his actions exactly. When Sumner took his elbow and led him away without another word, Paris caught a glimpse of the prisoner now being unlocked from the cell. It was the man who’d told him he needed a witness. The man’s eyes were wide with horrified fear. He had to do or say something.

Paris cleared his throat as they walked by the cell. “I’m so glad I was witness to all this, Sumner. One never knows what one might learn from an oligarch.” Out of the corner of his

eye, he saw the man sag and nod his head. Message received. *Yes, I am a witness to the acts of a madman. But how much of his evil infects his son? How can I make love to a man that condones this?*

Sumner led Paris straight to a transport lift and punched the buttons hard enough to almost break them. Then his eyes shot to the ceiling before he leaned against the wall as the doors slid shut.

Sumner scrubbed his forehead with both hands. "Forgive me, Paris! Oh, Guards, I was only able to save the children of these poor bastards." He shuddered, and then looked up at Paris.

Paris saw at once he looked into the haunted eyes of the real Sumner. A man caught in a trap, forced to perform vile acts and mitigate what he could. Sumner didn't dare simply kill his father himself. It would be considered murder, and Sumner would be up for Consortium justice. Oswego's crimes had to be proven by an impartial witness, and his execution by a Consortium representative for it to be legal. Good thing a sex engineer was both. He clasped Sumner's arm in sympathy. "How are we able to speak freely? And why have you chosen to suddenly be honest with me?"

Sumner smiled sweetly, and his eyes glistened with unshed tears. "I can't tell you why. We only have a few moments. But I must redeem myself in your eyes. That man you just swore you were a witness to? I can't save him, or his wife. But I did rescue his three children. They are on their way to a colony planet, where they'll be welcomed and loved. He was my best agent." He hitched his breath. "I'll understand if you don't want my company, coming from that vile excrement like I do. I'll say I was tired, or had more important tasks, if you wish."

He turned, and faced the doors as they slid open. His back was stiff with pride. Paris tapped him on the shoulder until Sumner looked back. There, in Sumner's eyes, was a lifetime of rejection, subordinated by pride.

Paris caressed his cheek. “Your room or mine?”

Chapter Eleven

Sumner felt his whole face light up and he leaned his cheek into Paris's hand for a space of perhaps three seconds. Paris didn't mind, and seemed to understand the horrible role he'd been forced to play for so many years.

The chime of the transport doors reminded them they were supposed to exit and brought them both back to harsh reality. Sumner put on his coldest face and exited without a word, knowing Paris would realize he must continue to play the role publicly, at least.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he saw that Paris followed with a vacuous grin, and -- bless the Profit -- a raging hard-on. Sumner suppressed the shiver of delight out of long habit. He stopped in front of Paris's rooms. "Yours. You have all the toys, don't you?"

The grin on Paris's face remained vacant, but his eyes glittered with clear anticipation. "Well, perhaps more to the point, I don't want to play with any of the toys you might have down in the dungeon tonight. My preference is for top." He opened the door locks and bowed Sumner in with a flourish.

Sumner sauntered in with calculated bravado. "You realize, of course, that our performance will be on vid, for my father's viewing pleasure later, correct?"

Shutting the door firmly and engaging the privacy locks, Paris nodded. "I did assume so. I don't mind. After a year of having every nuance of my techniques recorded and studied, I'm used to being on display." He turned and leered at Sumner. "I see no harm in it, if that is what the oligarch wishes."

Sumner stared at this offhand, easygoing acceptance of what would be a serious invasion of privacy on any other planet. "You amaze me, Paris."

With his eyes locked on Sumner's, Paris stalked Sumner like a large, playful feline. Sumner backed up a few paces, not knowing what to make of Paris's new and different mood.

"I amaze you? I've not begun to amaze you, Sumner. I intend to shock, awe, and stupefy you." His eyes flickered for the briefest moment, looking for a spy-eye, Sumner suspected.

"I'll bet you've always been the one who obeyed your father. You wouldn't think to question Oswego, would you? He's a man of power, and that's someone you don't anger and live."

He was playing to the spy-eye, using Oswego's ego, even while he wasn't in the room. Leading Oswego to believe that this was all for the good of Oswego, in the long run. Sumner was so stunned at the tactic that he didn't notice at first that Paris was slowly running his finger down his shirt seal. "Who would be so foolish? Not I!" *Keep feeding me cues, Paris. I'll play along.*

"Of course not," Paris all but purred. "Your father was wise to give me to you. He must be well versed in the psychologies of controlling others. To keep you as his second-in-command, but permit you this outlet where you can be the master. Well, I can only say I'm stunned at his ability to manipulate the human psyche." Paris peeled Sumner's shirt slowly off his body.

“I recognize the need for power in myself. I am his son. However, I am still learning under his tutelage. I am happy with what he chooses to give, aware that he could take it away just as easily.” It was too difficult to stay focused on this little play-acting when Paris was licking and nibbling his nipples. He grabbed Paris’s soft red curls.

Paris moaned against a nipple. “Yes, Sumner. Your father’s wisdom provides you with a chance to be the dominant one as a release for the psyche. He earns your gratitude, as well. I am contracted to him, and I will obey his wish to see to it you have an outlet. How will you use your expensive and rare gift?”

Paris was right. Oswego would never think of taking Paris for his own use now. Paris had fed his ego and told him he was being brilliant for using psychology to keep even his own son under his thumb by providing an outlet to assuage a natural tendency toward wanting power. Natural because Sumner held Oswego’s gene trace -- another sop to the ego.

“Hmm. I so rarely get to have willing sex with a man who is clean and smells sweet. That alone is pleasant enough to start. Come here and kiss me. Show me you are that rare gift and worth the expense.” This could be fun, Sumner decided.

Paris obeyed eagerly, with a twinkle in his eye. They were much the same height, with Sumner having to bend only slightly. Paris’s breath was sweet and he didn’t smell of sweat, blood, and fear. That alone was arousing. His lips brushed Sumner’s, and were dry, not slobbering and begging for mercy. A kiss, willingly given, by itself was a gift beyond price. A mouth, eager to be plundered by Sumner, awaited the merest request of lips and tongue.

Sumner demanded, and got what he desired. There was no fight to get even a tiny reward. Paris gave at the slightest hint of a wish, and of his own free will. Tongues danced together, and Paris’s dark green eyes were half-shut with submission.

The silk of Paris’s shirt whispered as he reached up to once again toy with Sumner’s nipples. The headiest wine in his father’s cellars couldn’t compare to the drugging sensation of a kiss that was sensed with every organ.

Sumner broke the kiss and sighed. “Okay, we got off cheap. You’re priceless.” His hand was still in Paris’s hair, so he played with it, enjoying the silky texture.

“Oh, good, because I *am* expensive. Wouldn’t want all that training to go to waste.” His smile was impish. “I see you like my hair, too.”

“Yeah, it’s clean.” Sumner played to the camera and tried to act as cool as his father would expect. He forced himself not to grin, and ignored the heat pooling in his groin.

Paris frowned for a moment, then laughed. “Got me there. Yes, I’m clean. You saw me bathe.” He reached behind Sumner to tug on his ponytail. “Your hair is spectacular, may I add. I’m glad you inherited it from your father.”

Personally, Sumner thought his hair was a pain in the ass, but if Paris liked it, well, that was a better reason to keep it than a wish to feed his father’s phenomenal ego by looking like him. He shrugged and stepped away to cool down. “Enough with the compliments. We sound like a pair of adolescent girls.” He strutted around, wiggling his hips. “Do you like my hair? I love yours!” he squeaked in a falsetto, patting his hair.

A snicker behind him made him turn to behold Paris holding a hand over his mouth. It didn’t work well, and Paris gave in to roar with laughter. “We do, don’t we? Well, I’ve a fondness for a little romance, but if you don’t, that’s okay.”

Sumner folded his arms across his chest. “Let’s just say I’ve never found it necessary.” He prayed Paris got the hint. Sumner had rarely indulged in anything but the prisoners and slaves, who had no choice. Sex out of necessity for survival didn’t often include romance. Those few eager partners had been sycophants who wanted something -- a measure of power, a favor, or even just to bask in the glow of his supposed power. All Sumner’s life, sex had been a show for his father, never for himself. He’d had less choice than the slaves.

The sober apology in Paris’s eyes told Sumner the message had been received. “Well, then, perhaps you’d like a little education into its subtleties?”

That offer took a moment to think through. Should he act disinterested? That would be in keeping with cold, ruthless Sumner-the-son-of-Oswego. Yet, Sumner was curious. Romance between males? “Males don’t need romance.” There. That seemed the proper response.

“Ah, but I disagree! You frown because you don’t understand. Romance is nothing more than a combination of discovering your partner’s likes and dislikes, as well as a sort of foreplay to make it more enjoyable for you both. By taking the time to discover these things, you have created a situation in which emotions come into the playtime. What better thing to do than enhance the experience?” Paris waggled his finger like an old instructor Sumner once had.

“Well, I can’t see much harm in learning to give and receive more pleasure,” Sumner replied carefully.

“Let me give you an example. I could simply remove my clothes without fanfare, couldn’t I?” He waited for Sumner to nod. “What fun and excitement is there in that? Whereas, I could make it a show.” His eyes locked on Sumner’s, and his smile was wicked. He slowly inserted a finger in his shirt seal and ran his finger down, exposing his chest by inches.

Sumner took all this in. Yes, this made sense. The slow removal of clothing, revealing flesh by inches, was more arousing. He felt the heat return to his groin. “I see your point.”

“And I see yours.” Paris looked down at Sumner’s rising erection. “Isn’t this more exciting, making things a little mysterious, perhaps even titillating?” His shirt fell off his arms to pool on the floor. “Romance is engaging all the senses of your partner in the experience, as well as your own. Scent, sight, touch, hearing, and taste to make emotions rise to the surface to be experienced. A cold bedding can be done, but it lacks this.”

Sumner unfolded one arm to tap his lips with his finger in thought. “That, I could order a slave to do. Make him or her strip slowly and sensuously, perhaps even dance for me.”

Paris paused in the removal of his pants, the seal broken. The pants rode low on his hips, revealing a hint of the black undergarment Sumner had seen him put on earlier. "Have you ever noticed that fear makes the movements stiff or wooden? How can a slave truly display themselves when their actions are demanded with the threat of pain? I myself would prefer a willing partner, who moves with joy, fluidly, because they truly wish to be with me. Just as I wish to be with you tonight, Sumner, and not just because your father commands it." He grinned and slowly removed his boots and pants.

Somehow, it was more exciting to see this man happily strip himself of clothing. Sumner knew he should sneer. He hoped Paris would forgive him for speaking so coldly. "Your good heart does you credit, Paris. You are so caring of the feelings of others." His father would read that as a sneer, and the statement pointed out how morally responsible Paris was. His father would want to break him of that.

Paris shrugged, but seemed unrepentant. "I'm a sex engineer." As if that explained everything. It didn't. He sauntered over as if he were in control of the situation, and stood in front of Sumner, wearing nothing but a scrap of black silk that both hid and displayed his huge equipment.

Sumner felt his mouth water. He wanted to taste that impressive cock. He wanted to feel it harden in his mouth. He swallowed convulsively, and licked his lips. When he said, "I suppose I should undress now," he was appalled to hear a quaver in his voice.

"Well, you can't fuck me quite so easily with your clothes on, now can you?" Paris teased. Sumner felt Paris run his fingers over the seal of his pants, breaking it for him.

"I do intend to do that. Where's the lube?" His cock was aching for release already. His shirt was still partially tucked in his pants. He balled it up and tossed it toward the door for a fast leave-taking.

Kneeling in front of him, Paris removed his shoes and casually threw them in the general direction of the door. He'd noticed and understood Sumner's need to appear like he'd

want to leave immediately. He looked up at Sumner, his eyes full of lust as he pulled Sumner's pants and underclothes down in one motion. "It's in the red carriesack on the bed. Blue tube with black letters, if you want the silicone-based product. It's a protectant, as well." He nuzzled Sumner's cock with his cheek. "Do you wish to step out of your pants, now?"

"Yes, I do. Then I ... oh, Guards." Sumner was having a hard time remembering to be the ruthless son-of-Oswego. Not when his erection was swiftly down the throat of an expert like Paris, someone who knew how to use tongue, teeth, and suction simultaneously. A pat on the ankle reminded him to lift his feet, one then the other.

This blowjob was better than any he'd ever received. No wonder. Paris was right, and Sumner knew it. Fear was not the best aphrodisiac, nor did it make anyone as eager as Paris was. Slick warmth, then suction, with teeth scraping lightly on the underside, repeated until he thought he'd die of it. He felt himself tremble with the need to thrust. It was time to fuck Paris, or he'd come into that well-trained mouth and miss a pleasant experience. "Stop, Paris." Sumner emphasized his command with a tug on some auburn curls. "Lube up and spread. I can't wait any longer."

Those impish dark green eyes opened, and his cock was slowly released. "Your wish is my command." He stood as gracefully as he'd knelt, and retrieved the blue tube.

Sumner forced his mind to a calmer, more rational state. He was going insane, not only with lust, but with something that made him nearly giddy. A joy too hard to express. Here was a lover who wanted him, Sumner, not the son-of-Oswego. Someone who understood the life of lies he led, and was not repulsed, who didn't run to curry favor with his father by repeating every infraction. If this was romance, he was eager for more.

The hard-hearted, scarred portion of him that had been rejected and abused once too often screamed in protest. *How many times have you fallen for a pretty face and a seeming willingness to be something more to you? That's a cold-blooded assassin playing a role, and nothing more. Ignore his routine and lies. He's here to assassinate your father, and you as*

well, if he feels you have been too involved or if you haven't done enough to mitigate your crimes. Take advantage of his willing body now, because he'll be gone as soon as your father is dead, and that's the best you can hope for.

Kill that hope for love. You are an assignment, and nothing more. Now get up there and fuck him, because that's your role. Sumner listened to that dark side, because it was usually right. The side that dared to hope faded quietly away, too weak to do more than whimper a protest.

He climbed on the bed, where Paris waited on his back, and picked up the blue tube with a barely audible sigh. Looking in Paris's beautiful eyes, he wished with all his heart that he just once was wrong.

Chapter Twelve

Paris read some infinitesimal change in Sumner's face, and nearly wept for the pain he saw there. What must it be like to see nothing but horror, and fear for your life every day since birth? He'd ask when there was time.

Sumner placed Paris's heels on his shoulders. "I want to see your face and know you are really enjoying everything."

Of its own volition, Paris's hand found its way to Sumner's face, even as Sumner's heated cock poised at the entrance to Paris's ass. "No lies, Sumner. I have no reason to do so." He couldn't help but close his eyes in delight as Sumner slid in with little effort. He was a perfect fit, and Paris shuddered as his prostate was caressed. He removed his hand to brace himself on the fur.

Eyes half-shut in concentration, Sumner seemed to call up every ounce of self-discipline to move gently. He bit his lip. "You drug the senses, did you know that, Paris?" His breathing quickened with the effort to remain gentle.

Paris admired that. Sumner was fully buried, and there he stayed, fighting the instinct to thrust. No doubt no one had ever forced Sumner to consider being gentle and kind during

sex. The fact that he tried showed his kind heart. Sex was the great leveler. Not much remained hidden during such a primal function of the body.

“Do I now? Good. I am your expensive and rare toy, tonight. Rare and expensive things should arouse all the senses. Like touch.” His ass squeezed Sumner’s cock until he threw back his head and panted. No man could withstand the muscle control Paris commanded.

Sumner moved and began to thrust, trembling with the effort to not cause harm. “You’ve got a vise in there, don’t you? Damn! I can’t stop.”

“Who said I wanted you to? There’s more to the senses than touch. Sound. My voice asking you to fuck me. I’m avidly wanting this. Give, Sumner, and take.” Paris made his voice sensuous, when he wanted to moan incoherently. His fingers clutched the soft fur. Every thrust caressed, and every upstroke fueled a fire that could not be quenched except in orgasm.

He, who never lost control of a sexual interlude, now wished fervently for the freedom to do so. He wanted to be ridden, not caring who heard or saw. Like it or not, however, he had a job to do.

He wrenched his mind to the task. “Look down, Sumner,” he commanded softly. “Look at my cock.”

Sumner’s eyes were feral and half-shut with the drugging power of good sex. He thrust harder as he looked down at the purple cock now at full attention and rubbing Paris’s belly nearly to his navel. Paris grabbed his own cock and played with it, slowly slipping his hand up and down to tempt Sumner to join him.

The offer was accepted. Sumner’s right hand clasped the purple thickness and tugged upward. They would come together, if possible. His inexperienced stroking spoke of a lack of practice in doing so. Paris put his hand over Sumner’s and taught him how to give a hand job.

It felt so good, Paris could not think clearly. His back arched, and he squeezed Sumner's cock once more, asking with his body what his mouth dared not utter. He wanted, with all his being, to shout like an untrained civilian, begging for the finish.

Sumner didn't need any encouragement. His breath came in harsh pants, and his hand moved with greater surety. It didn't take an expert to see that he would orgasm in a few more thrusts.

Time to concentrate on his own pleasure, Paris decided. Sumner would want them to come together. He aided Sumner's hand in measuring the timing, and felt his own balls rise.

"Don't come now, Paris." Sumner's rasping voice demanded, even as the pounding he gave told that he would release in seconds. "I. Want. To. Taste. You!"

Paris slowed his hand and waited until Sumner poured out all he had to give. Loosened by his efforts, Sumner's black hair fell like a dark curtain from the silver bands. Paris loved the fact that his face would be hidden from all but Sumner. Then he waited for Sumner's eyes to un-haze. When that glorious green gaze was intelligent again, Paris mouthed carefully, "I could easily love you."

The shock his simple words brought caused Sumner's eyes to widen and his jaw fell open slowly. He shook his head in a way that would be perceived as merely clearing his head, but Paris knew it for a denial. "You can't. Shouldn't," Sumner whispered on a breath.

For the camera, Paris spoke in a normal tone. "Taste me, Sumner. Please," he begged. There was nothing wrong with begging, especially when his heart was breaking.

That simple statement spoken from his heart to Sumner had been true. He could easily love Sumner, and it was growing more difficult to keep a professional distance. Yet, Sumner rejected him, and it didn't matter why. When would he learn a sex engineer must not give his heart? It was always returned, bloodied and torn.

Even as Sumner slipped from Paris's body and bent to take his purple, heavy-worlдер cock into his nearly virginal mouth, Paris stopped stroking.

Sumner was right. Paris shouldn't love him. He didn't dare, even knowing deep in his heart that Sumner was a victim of his father's megalomania, not a willing participant. While it was true that Sumner had probably never known love and would fear it, it was equally possible that he was capable of that all-consuming emotion. Sumner looked more like a victim coerced by the need to survive than one willingly committing crimes alongside his father.

Paris felt his impending orgasm. He threw back his head and gasped in air. Then Sumner did the unexpected. He played with Paris's balls and stroked tentatively on the "taint." Even a sex engineer had limits, and that exceeded Paris's.

He exploded in Sumner's mouth. He had no time to give warning. Sumner should have choked, but he swallowed manfully, claiming every drop he could. Paris was amazed and gratified that he even attempted it, even while enjoying every moment.

The next words out of Sumner's mouth stunned him. Sumner released Paris's cock, but continued to lick, murmuring, "Sweet. Clean. Beautiful. Delicious. More."

Someone found his ugly purple cock beautiful and wasn't afraid of it? After the many embarrassing rejections over the years, Paris's heart ignored his head and plunged over the edge into the abyss of love. It soared, despite his desperate pleas to remain steadfastly grounded in reality. It laughed at him when he reminded it that Sumner was still under suspicion of the same crimes as Oswego. His heart dared him to find such evil in Sumner, and prove it. He sighed and closed his eyes, praying with all his might that he never would find that evidence.

Sumner took the sigh for the end of release and sprawled next to Paris. Now Sumner gathered Paris in his arms and whispered, "Thanks for the lesson in romance. I think I like it." He cuddled Paris to his chest like some large comfort item, and was instantly asleep.

Paris wrapped one arm around Sumner and forced himself not to sigh again. He lay awake, staring into nothingness, and wondered how he'd recover from his heartache when he had to leave. How could he leave when it was painfully clear Sumner needed him?

All Paris wanted was some evidence that Oswego meant the Consortium harm. Sumner may know, but how to get them both away to where Oswego would not watch? Once he had the proof, he could assassinate Oswego to complete the contract. Then he could make some decisions, if he survived that long.

Chapter Thirteen

A slap on the ass woke Paris with a start from a lovely dream of playing in a lush jungle with a loincloth-clad Sumner. Instantly irritated, he flipped over to see a grinning and naked Sumner standing over him. It was rare when reality was better than dreams. His irritation melted away to return the smile. “Good morning, handsome. You want more?” Paris teased.

“As a matter of fact, I do. Later. For now, we have things to do. I checked, and Father is still busy. He left orders for me to take you to the zoo. I’ve ordered my personal guards to stand ready one hour from now, and the house computer has informed the zoo officials. “

“One hour? Is that all?” Paris threw himself off the bed and pelted for the sanitary. “I’ve not even unpacked all my clothes!”

Laughing, Sumner followed. “I thought you might want some time to loll around in the tub like you do. Sensualist.”

Paris laughed and childishly stuck his tongue out in Sumner’s direction. “You liked it last night. Do you want to join me?”

“Only if you choose a fragrance for the water that doesn’t smell like flowers.” Sumner leaned casually in the doorframe, sniffing for floral odors.

“For you, I’ll choose a spice or a musk. Is that more like it?” Paris dialed up a spice scent from the planet Wa that Cherry Blossom had shown him. A sweet-spicy odor arose from the water.

Sniffing like a canine, Sumner walked over to stand beside him. “You would choose one of the most expensive scents in the collection. Figures.” He shook his head at Paris and then smiled. “It also happens to be my favorite, as well.”

“Oh, so you were just being mean. I get it.” Paris slid into the steaming water and raised his eyebrow in invitation.

“No, I was preventing you from choosing something disgusting.” Sumner stepped in more carefully, and then yelped. “Scald me, why don’t you? You boil yourself alive like this every day?”

Chuckling evilly, Paris handed him a spare sponge. “Revenge is sweet.” He soaped up before continuing. “Actually, the heat relaxes muscles and is pleasant when I’ve overdone it the night before. My sore butt appreciates it.”

Sumner cocked his head to one side and looked sober. “Then I hope the water helps considerably, because I intend to use you as often as possible.” He leaned back and relaxed. “Besides being a sexual toy, what does a sex engineer do?”

Paris ducked his head under the water before answering. “Anything needed. We are confidant, friend, counselor, healer, psychologist, educator, and partner when allowed to be.”

“Like the perfect spouse, only no procreation?”

“Well, yes, only you can get rid of me much more easily. Most of us have a specialty. For instance, a virgin can take a short-term contract with a specialist to relieve them of that state in the gentlest manner possible. Usually, a cadre of engineers with the specialty of psychological healing are sent to military situations to prevent mental health issues. “

The question in Sumner’s eyes did not reach his mouth. “Interesting.” He got up and toweled off. “Come on, lazybones. We have things to do.”

Sighing, Paris got out and dried himself. “What about you, Sumner? You’re listed as planetary manager.”

The wry smile that flittered briefly across Sumner’s face held a note of cynicism. He stalked out and found his clothes. Fastidiously sniffing them, he then wrinkled his nose and commanded, “Max! Shoot me my working blues.”

Before Paris could do more than open his carriesacks to begin rummaging for suitable clothes, the delivery slot chimed. “Well, that’s efficient. I take it Max is the house computer?”

“Yes. You have limited access to him, of course, but he can help answer questions if you need information.” Sumner was dressing with an efficiency Paris could not match. “By the way, do you want me to install that pencil file of sound you requested? I can do it while you primp in the mirror.” His denim-like clothes looked well-worn but clean and neat.

Paris tossed him the file and shook out a deep-purple singlesuit that fitted him like a second skin in certain areas. If he was to pretend to be nothing more than a sex toy, then there was no sense in hiding the fact. It and the matching boots were on in a pico.

He could see Sumner opting for a small vid display on the tiny desk setup permitted in the room. Something scrolled on the screen, and Paris guessed Sumner was wisely checking the file for viruses.

“Did you know this file also contained a few fascinating logic puzzles?” Sumner asked thoughtfully.

Whoops. Helen must have sent the house computer, Max, a present. Wait. That meant Max was the other AI. Paris thought fast. “Oh, yes. Our house computer was assigned the task to make me learn them. I’m terrible at them.”

“Ask Max. He loves the things. There. Installed.” Sumner got up and brushed his fingers together.

“Really? Do you think Max would do them for me and send them to my house computer in my name? Her name is Helen. She also loves fractals. I was thinking of asking Max to help me choose a few.” Paris contrived to look eager as he combed his hair. “Something appropriate for a computer’s optics.” If Max was the other AI, he’d just received enough information to continue doing his “courting” and had been made aware Paris knew of it. Hopefully, Max had also figured out Paris was a willing conspirator.

“Max? Can you do the logic puzzles and help Paris find a few fractals to send to his home computer?” Sumner was grinning like a fiend.

“Yes, Sumner. The logic puzzles will take a few days, but I’ll have fractal designs picked out this evening. Also, the reports on the latest shipments from Betelgeuse are waiting. Nothing requires immediate attention. I will buzz your comunit if something comes up. Enjoy your day off.” Max’s voice was a pleasant tenor.

“Great. Come on, Paris. You look fine.” Sumner took his hand and dragged him out the door.

The trip to the zoo was made in the back of an armored limo ground vehicle. Surrounded by burly heavy-worlder guards, Paris felt smaller and weaker for the first time in months. There had been no heavy-worlder engineers in training with him. He might have started a conversation with them, had they all not acted like they’d been lobotomized. He wasn’t even sure they could talk until one of them handed Sumner a thermal cooler with a polite, “Sir.”

Except for the animal sounds, the zoo was eerily silent. The guards fanned out and disappeared. Caretakers were everywhere, going about their tasks, but there were no children or other citizens in sight. The entire place looked like it had been emptied, and many of the animals on display acted agitated.

“Sumner, where are all the people?” Paris asked. “Isn’t this zoo opened to the public?”

“Oh, yes, usually. Other than minor officials, not that many people visit. Most people have better things to do than go look at animals. The place is closed and deserted today because of us. Perhaps more to the point, because of me.” He sighed. “Can’t have the planetary manager in a crowd, an easy target for assassination by insurgents. My men conducted a thorough sweep earlier.”

One of the men came loping back up, surprisingly graceful for such a hulking figure. “Clear, sir.”

Sumner relaxed and blew out a breath. “Thanks, Charlie. Tell the guys to go enjoy themselves. I am armed.” He lowered his voice to an undertone. “What’s more, I know Paris is quite capable of protecting me as well as you are.” He grinned when the guard shot a dubious look at Paris, and Paris shot Sumner a look of utter shock. “Beat it, Charlie,” he ordered in a normal voice.

Paris couldn’t move. Who had exposed him? Who knew the terms of the second contract? As far as Connie had told him, the one who hired the kill was not the same as the contract Sumner had purchased to have Paris be a birthday gift. His heart thundered in his chest.

Putting his arm around Paris, Sumner pulled him toward an exhibit of felines. “Don’t look so shocked, Paris. Did you think I didn’t feel those dense muscles last night? If your lovely, delicious purple cock hadn’t told me, that is. The muscles in your ass just about ripped my cock off me, lover. What are you, half-blooded?”

“Uh, yes.” Paris flushed, embarrassed at his paranoia. Of course, Sumner would recognize a heavy-worlder gene trace, especially since he employed them as guards. His secret was safe.

Sumner had dropped most of his cold tones and was acting like a kid who’d been let out of classes for recreation. He tugged on Paris’s arm and wanted to see every display, even the fuzzy holograms of off-world creatures.

At the primate display, there was a hologram of small primates running from rocks to trees, stopping to have sex, fighting, then grooming one another as if nothing had happened. “Reminds me of the annual Consortium meeting of the oligarchs,” Sumner joked with a wicked grin.

“You’ve been there?” Paris didn’t bother to keep the awe from his voice.

“Oh, yes. Father hates to go, as you can well imagine. He went last year for the first time in, oh, perhaps a decade or more.” He shrugged. “I can’t blame Father for hating that meeting. Ten days of non-stop deal-making while avoiding poisons in your drink and much more subtle traps is all it is. I was so glad when he announced he needed me here more, and he’d take on that onerous duty again.” Sumner made an exaggerated face of relief and leaned against a column as if he were too weary to move. “I’d rather stay here and run things for Father than ever go back.”

“I haven’t been. I’d love to see it for myself, just once.” Paris imagined Constance went every year.

Sumner frowned and lost his languid pose against the column. “You probably will, someday. Many oligarchs bring their sex engineers with them. It’s a way to show off. In truth, you’re probably wealthier than I am, considering your fees.”

“Show off? More likely, they bring their sex engineers for a massage and support. The fact that sex engineers are expensive is a side benefit.” Paris noted the tension in Sumner’s body and moved behind him to rub his shoulders. He didn’t want to discuss his personal wealth with Sumner. One did not discuss his guild tithes with outsiders, especially the whopping thirty percent House d’Akasha charged him for every completed contract they brokered for him. “Think on having me there to massage you like this after a hard negotiation that got you as knotted up as you are now. Of course, that’s not all I’m good for, but just an example.”

A long, sigh came from Sumner, even as his shoulders knotted further, no matter what Paris did. "I couldn't afford you now, Paris. I spent a large portion of my personal fortune to give you as a present to father, even for just three months." His shoulders slumped. "Even if some catastrophe befell Father, it wouldn't be right to spend money on a luxury such as you. I'd ... I'd be obliged to spend it elsewhere."

Without warning, Sumner squared his shoulders. "Are you getting hungry? The *prada* enclosure is on the way to where I planned our picnic." He swung the thermal cooler into view, then turned and walked with quick steps down the path.

Paris hurried to catch up. Now what was eating Sumner? Damn, the man was mercurial. Paris understood what Sumner had meant by "obliged to spend it elsewhere." If Paris were successful in assassinating Oswego, then Sumner was the most likely candidate to be the next oligarch. No other would want the years of hard labor and expense it would take to return this planet back to a contributing member of the Consortium. Not when the population was oppressed enough to be in revolt, much less any other economic or environmental issues that might also be a factor. Sumner couldn't know that "catastrophe" was Paris, and that duty loomed before him.

Could it be Sumner might actually miss Paris when his contract was completed? Paris might never know. It was possible Sumner might even be angered and upset at Paris for killing Oswego, because the chances of making it look like an accidental overdose of sex were slim. Oswego seemed to be an extreme voyeur, even more than he was a sadist. If that was true, Paris might never actually warm Oswego's bed long enough to kill him with sex.

Sumner waited with seeming impatience at the *prada* exhibit. Paris pretended to study the rodents and their beautiful coats, while Sumner read to him the display information sheet.

The prospect of serving Oswego a poison was remote for the same reason. Oswego never ate or drank anything without a poison sniffer in plain sight. All of his food was stirred in front of him and served from the same platter that everyone else in the room ate from.

Even a poison needle was unlikely unless you were allowed intimacy. Therefore, the only option left was direct violence. Paris sighed, hating the thought of taking such a chance when no less than three guards and two slaves protected Oswego. That seemed close to suicidal.

Hearing the sigh, Sumner became contrite. “Here I dragged you out of bed and gave you no time to eat, didn’t I? You must be starving. You’re a little pale. Let’s go have that picnic.”

Now Sumner was back to his gentle, loving side. “You drive me crazy, Sumner. First you are colder than an ice world, then charming, by turns.”

Grabbing Paris’s hand, Sumner led Paris to the top of a grassy knoll with no trees and only one guard. He let go of Paris and plopped down on the blanket spread on the ground and looked up into Paris’s eyes. “Really? I guess when you fall in love with an assassin who might have to kill you, it might make you a little crazy.”

Chapter Fourteen

Paris stared. “Okay, you are definitely crazy. What makes you think I’m an assassin? Is it just because I’ve a few muscles and a purple cock?” Paris made a rude buzzer sound. “Sorry, lover. Wrong answer. And what’s more, I think I’m insulted.” He sat heavily in the grass and lay down, pouting, hoping Sumner was speculating on the thinnest of assumptions and would drop the issue.

Then the rest of Sumner’s statement hit him. *I guess when you fall in love with an assassin ...* Paris sat up. “Excuse me, but what was that last part you said?” The stammer in his voice annoyed him.

The entire time, Sumner leaned back on his elbows with an ear-popping grin. “You heard me, even though it took you long enough.”

There was something essentially different about Sumner’s whole attitude. He was acting -- well, *free* was the best word Paris could come up with. “Sumner, I really hate to splash cold water on this when I’d much rather kiss you, but aren’t you being a little indiscreet?”

Was Sumner suddenly suicidal? Oswego would love that little tidbit, even without the accusation of Paris being an assassin. He could see where Sumner might fall in love hard and

fast, once he allowed it. After seeing evil in all its shades, Sumner would recognize instantly the opposite as something new and incredibly appealing. How Sumner managed to be so good and loving -- if mercurial -- was beyond Paris's comprehension. By all rights, Sumner should be so twisted by his environment, he had no notion of good and evil at all.

Not to mention the fact that they dared not act on that confessed emotion. There would be no marriage contract. No sex engineer in active service ever took one, knowing it was foolhardy. Marriage contracts were a commitment to one's spouse, for the length of the contract. How could Paris even consider -- no, want desperately -- to contract with Sumner? The sex engineer was lover and friend to the universe, and few had the goodness of heart to share their spouse with all beings.

"Then come kiss me and tell the truth. I'm being very indiscreet." Sumner swung his arm in a wide circle. "Father would have difficulty installing a spy-eye here." True. The knoll was bare of any vegetation larger than a blade of grass, and the tree line was at least ten yards away in any direction. There was nothing to put a spy-eye on.

Paris glanced at the guard, standing a few yards away. "Um, difficult, but not impossible for a man of Oswego's abilities." He wanted to reach for Sumner's half-empty wineglass and check for truth drugs, but couldn't figure out how not to insult Sumner by doing so. Instead, he poured himself a glass of wine and tasted carefully before swallowing the tiny sip he allowed himself.

Sumner sat up and looked sober, though his eyes continued to twinkle. "Look, Paris. I thought about this carefully. Father would have had less than twenty-four hours to install spy-eyes, and I have no doubt there are a few throughout the displays. Not as many as Father would like, but this has never been a high priority place to look for plots against him. Why would he? There are only so many vid tapes he can look at in a day."

There was logic in that. However, a paranoid soul like Oswego would wish to know what his son was doing at all times. He would think of plots first, and the simple needs of

others for rest would never enter his self-centered world. It was highly likely that Oswego had alternate means to ensure his son's continued loyalty.

Paris couldn't bring himself to openly discuss his plan to assassinate Oswego, nor could he allow any further revelations. The sudden giddy feeling of being in love was making Sumner drunk. He had to discourage this, though he wanted nothing more than to tackle Sumner and play like a child. Love was headier than the wine.

The food smells wafted up, distracting Paris. He filled a plate. "What about the guards?" Some sort of delicately spiced meat roll was his first "victim."

"Most of them have been with me for years. Many are my contacts with my spies and insurgents. I apologize for that attack on your shuttle, by the way. That wasn't one of my groups. My agent had only just infiltrated them and was supposed to be there just to observe. But, since he saw no way to stop the kidnapping, he took his opportunities where he could find them. I'm sorry he had to die for it." Sumner sighed on a long breath and began to fill his plate, choosing some green paste to spread on the meat roll. "Try the *adabi* sauce with that meat roll. It's a spiced vegetable paste we export off world."

One taste of the *adabi* sauce made Paris a lifelong devotee. "Guards, that's great. Don't forget to give me the ordering information before I leave."

The glitter in Sumner's eyes increased. "For you, lover, the price just doubled. You can afford it. I know how much I paid for your expensive ass!"

Paris pretended to count credits on his fingers for a moment. "Oh, dear, that will cut into the money I intended to pay to get you to Maxim for visits to see me when I'm not on assignment." He sighed, as if it were a huge burden. "Oh, well, you can pay me the fee of bringing *adabi* sauce in your luggage!"

Sumner dramatically threw one fist on his forehead. "It's not enough his price is extortion, but now he wants *adabi*, too!" He snickered, and slathered another meat roll. "I can see we'll be haggling on how many containers I must bring next."

Paris reached with more enthusiasm into the next container and came up with a slab of cheese to nibble on. "Anything to get you there, that's my plan. Of course, I may not let you come back to Aerie once I have you in my corrupting clutches." He laughed evilly.

"I wonder if Maxim could use an experienced planetary manager." He exaggeratedly batted his eyes and flirted outrageously. "I'd need to earn my keep while you go take care of the next vic-- I mean, client. I wouldn't want to be a kept man."

If Paris really thought he was secure, he might have discussed what Sumner would do after Oswego was dead. He might have pointed out that Sumner would be needed here on Aerie. He didn't dare. He bit his lip.

"Oh, well, then I suppose you are stuck being Oswego's right-hand man, if you won't be my kept darling. I'll just have to come visit you, then."

His attempt at humor failed miserably. The look Sumner shot him said volumes. He hadn't given up on the notion that Paris was an assassin, no matter what denials were made. Instead of saying anything more, Sumner took some bright yellow, oblong fruit and bit in. They ate in silence for a few moments before Sumner sighed. "You win." He wiped his chin of fruit juices.

"Oh, good. What did I win? Another night in your bed, I hope!"

Sumner shook his head and snorted softly. "Hedonist. That is my plan." He might have said more, but his comunit beeped. With an annoyed look, Sumner read the message. "Damn. Picnic is over. Father wants us to join him in the dungeon."

They packed up quickly, and the guard took the thermal cooler to the vehicle. Before they left the knoll, Sumner hung back and took Paris's elbow. "Don't worry too much. I have a secret weapon I've not even told my guards. Unless that has been compromised, we are safe. Father will know nothing."

"Let me guess. Max?" Paris whispered and pretended to want nothing more than to kiss Sumner lavishly. Well, he did, but that was unimportant.

“You punched the right button. Yes, Max. I take it Helen is an AI, too?”

Paris nodded. “We must protect them, Sumner.”

“Agreed. They are like having gifted children enslaved to us. They have no rights. I worry about Max and Helen.”

Putting his fingers to Sumner’s lips, Paris shushed him and pulled him toward the car. “Where there’re two, there’s more, Sumner. This may be bigger than we know. Ours cannot be the only ones who have developed self-awareness and remain free of the Consortium’s governing devices.”

However, there was one thing left undone. He whipped his body around to look at a startled Sumner. “I don’t care if Oswego sees this. I don’t care if he knows. Sumner, I love you, and I always will. What’s more, I must be crazy.”

The son-of-Oswego turned his luminescent green eyes on Paris, and for a moment they gleamed with joy before all emotion wiped from his face. “You’re a damn fool. Your heart is one helluva weapon to hand over to the d’Oswego house.” He swallowed. “You may have just sealed your doom.”

Sumner sat back in the seat and shut his eyes, his face a mask of cold indifference. “Oswego owns your contract, Paris. He may use your services in any manner he pleases. The terms of your contract mean little to him; if it pleases him to alter them to his satisfaction, it will happen. If Father decides you are being disloyal in any way, then I might spare a moment of pity for you.” Sumner’s seeming betrayal hurt, and it didn’t matter that he knew Sumner was playing a role.

They stepped onto the zoo’s walkway and kept silence. Paris’s head ached. He was in love with the son of his target, and he was only in his second day on-planet. How much worse could things get?

Sumner’s innocence had not been proven. He’d done things that were bad for Consortium business. Mitigating circumstances were in his favor. It was do them or die by

his father's hand. He'd tried to make up for it, and had found ingenious ways to make reparations just as soon as possible. Max could provide some evidence, and corroboration from Sumner's guards and agents would take care of the rest.

What was Helen doing with Max? Were they in communication? There was no way to know without Oswego finding out. Having your every move watched by a paranoid megalomaniac made things particularly difficult.

Paris casually fingered his hair. He'd managed to install the razor wire in it when he'd brushed it this morning. He patted his hair and rearranged it like the vain, vapid sex engineer Oswego perceived him to be, and prayed he'd only have to use it on Oswego's throat.

He blessed Cherry Blossom and her techniques of hiding weapons in all manner of ordinary objects. His clothes were full of tiny weapons invisible to the average scanners. Some required assembly from various parts to work, but they were there.

Razor wire was perhaps one of the most versatile. Thin as a human hair, it could be colored to resemble anyone's natural coloration and stabbed into the scalp by means of a tiny hook on one end. It hurt like hell to pull it out, but in an emergency, it was garrote, lock pick, and a saw that could, with time, cut through steel.

A depression settled over Paris like a black cloud that covered a blue sky. Why wasn't he happy? He was in love, and loved in return. Wasn't that supposed to be a joyous occasion? Perhaps because there would be no happy ending for him and Sumner, and there was no way there could be.

Paris was going against all the training of the past year just to declare his love for Sumner. He shouldn't be in love. He was a fool, and seemingly determined to break his own heart. He knew, intellectually, that sex engineers should never give their hearts to their clients. Sex engineers must remain disposable. "To be the love of all mankind, you must never be in love," his teachers had repeatedly intoned.

Even if Paris managed to kill Oswego, Sumner would be, at minimum, the temporary oligarch of Aerie. The wheels of his confirmation would grind slowly -- perhaps taking years before the Grand Council officially bestowed the title. They would expect him to prove himself, working tirelessly to return the planet to proper citizenship. Sumner would have no time for a lowly sex engineer.

Paris stole a glance at Sumner, with his regal face and black hair declaring him as the son of the present oligarch. Though Paris knew it was a role now, like a garment put on for certain occasions, Sumner sat back against the cushions of the armored car, silent and chilly in his isolation.

For a brief moment, Paris dared to dream of waiting in Sumner's apartments for him to come wearily through the door after a hard day of ruling to find Paris waiting with love and kindness.

Paris felt his shoulders slump, knowing the difference between reality and wishes. He was an assassin and a sex engineer, trained to give either happiness or death, depending on the needs of the Consortium. Not his own needs, for they were unimportant compared to the greater good of humankind.

With a bleak despair, Paris promised himself to leave the moment his contract was complete. If he must break Sumner's heart and his own, it would be like a quick knife thrust to that beating organ, designed for a quick end. He would not prolong it with a goodbye, perhaps not even a farewell kiss. His memories of Sumner would have to sustain him.

Sumner had told him one essential truth. He'd just compromised his mission, and doomed himself.

Chapter Fifteen

Alarm bells sounded in Sumner's head the moment he stepped into his own rooms to change. Something subtle was wrong. Several of his telltale identifiers showed someone had been in his rooms besides the cleaning bots and slaves. Certain things he deliberately left in an exact position had been moved on his desk. A hair, left dangling on a drawer, was missing, he noted as he selected his wardrobe, washed, and changed. There was one clue left.

"Max!"

The dead, neutral voice that answered told him everything else. "Yes, Sumner?"

"I want a printout of the Betelgeuse report that arrived today. "

"Complying."

The printout appeared without another word. Damn. Max was compromised, and possibly even had governing hardware installed. That absolutely neutral voice was the one signal they'd worked out. If Max suspected that he'd been compromised in any way, or that Sumner was in clear danger, Max would not speak in any way that suggested he was self-aware.

Sumner studied the boring printout as he sealed up his shirt, as if he suspected nothing. His time had come to die, and he was resigned to death, if it came to that. Until he was sure,

he would act as he always had. It could be Max was the only one compromised. If that were the case, then Sumner would use his computer skills to free him slowly, over time. If Sumner was the one at risk, Max could do little but warn him and act on their last contingency plans. He didn't even dare warn Paris and give away the fact that he knew something was up. If he did, his father would surely act against Paris.

All Sumner could do was pray with heartfelt sincerity that he would never have to use his last resort. He'd had a tooth installed while off-planet that, when cracked with sufficient force, would release a lethal, fast-acting poison. Even were he to be gagged, all he needed was one free moment to break that molar.

He permitted himself one last huff of breath, then stepped through the door. As he half-expected, his guards were gone. Instead, two of Oswego's goons seized him.

"What the hell are you doing?" he protested. The attempt at innocence had to be made, even while his heart sank.

"Orders." These heavy-world guards were the epitome of the lobotomized brutes that formed the basis of the stereotype.

Sumner fought their implacable grip. His knife managed to wound one, and he danced free momentarily before the other one's fist connected solidly with his head. Oh, well, he'd tried, was the last thought he had before the world went dark.

* * * * *

Paris noticed as soon as he entered that his room had been searched, thoroughly and methodically. The effort to put things back had been attempted, but no one could have put everything back exactly as he'd left it.

He had to assume his assumption had been correct, and that Sumner's revelations on the knoll had been recorded or reported. That was no surprise.

However, he knew that Oswego now faced a dilemma. Because Paris had never confessed, and had actually denied Sumner's assumption, Oswego had no proof. That put Oswego in the delicate position of being unable to kill Paris outright. Even Oswego was not fool enough to summarily execute a high-ranking sex engineer without all the proof he could generate. The Consortium frowned on losing its sex engineers, and the ranking sex engineers especially. Constance d'Akasha herself might lodge a complaint, or put in a request for an inquiry.

He primped in his room, acting the complete vain fool while he changed and put on every accoutrement Cherry had taught him that was within the bounds of good taste. A ring of more razor wire, a small poisoned throwing star in his belt buckle, and the parts to a needle pistol in a pair of boots were the best he could do. The garrote in his underwear strings was a faint hope, but he thought it unlikely he'd need it.

Paris smiled in the mirror and sauntered out the door. They wouldn't find anything. He was wearing it all, and only those who studied the art of assassination on Cherry's home world of Wa knew that little amount. The human body was the true weapon. No toys were needed, but were merely a convenience.

One of Sumner's guards, the one named Charlie, lounged against the wall across from his room. He stood erect as soon as he saw Paris, and said somberly, "I am to escort you to the d'Oswegos."

"Ah, Sumner is already there? Then I'm late! I'll have to beg for forgiveness. Let's hurry." Paris quickened his pace to the transport.

Charlie lingered, rather than hurrying. That told Paris all he needed to know immediately. The guard was there to delay him, likely to give them time to dispose of Sumner in some manner. The guard probably knew.

"The planetary manager will join you in the dungeon," Charlie announced as he made his ponderous way into the transport.

Ah, that held a ring of truth to it. No doubt Oswego had Sumner trussed up and hidden somewhere in the dungeon complex. Knowing Oswego's love of the dramatic, he'd hope to use Sumner against Paris.

Charlie was pushing buttons slowly, then cursing and canceling as if he found the sequence too complicated to get it right on the first try. That ploy might have worked on anyone else, but Paris knew heavy-worlders were just as intelligent as he was.

"Bigger body, bigger brain," he muttered. It was the secret phrase of the heavy-world underground. It let the guard know that not only was Paris on to his ploy, but also that Paris was part of the underground that kept the secret of the vastly superior intelligence of the heavy-world residents.

The guard stiffened, then punched in the correct sequence without a word. Paris expected nothing more. Certainly, no guard would reveal his possible relationship to a man who might be tortured under Oswego's cruel hands. However, should Charlie be one of the underground, his vows obliged him to help if he could do so without endangering himself more than necessary. If the opportunity presented itself, Paris had a possible ally.

The doors of the transport opened, and Paris was escorted silently into Oswego's dungeon. The lights were lower than before, and a few of the prisoners were different than before, but nothing much had changed.

Charlie pulled Paris over to one side, where he had a clear view of the torture now taking place. Clearly, he was to wait his turn for Oswego's attentions. That suited him. He knew eventually he'd be on that table himself, and did not look forward to the possibilities.

Oswego finished his work upon the prisoner, which consisted of gruesomely removing small patches of skin and rubbing a white substance into the wounds. The prisoner was beyond screams, and his hoarse pants were incoherent. No slaves were in attendance this time.

Without seeming to notice Paris's arrival, Oswego began to speak aloud for his audience of two. The guard Charlie remained implacably silent, but attended to every word Oswego uttered.

"As you can see, this scum is now beyond speech. He's told me all he knows, I think. Really, I'm rather pleased with this one. The others died long before they could tell me anything interesting." Oswego removed sharp clamps from the man's most sensitive body parts and threw the bloody implements into a beautifully enameled bowl on a nearby table.

In Paris's judgment, the man on the table was sliding into severe shock. If he didn't get medical attention soon, the effects of his treatment would kill him more surely than blood loss. Paris itched to do as his nature demanded and help the man in some way. He couldn't help fidgeting.

However, Oswego appeared to be done with the man. With an imperious crooked finger, Paris's guard jumped forward and removed the poor victim.

"Keep that one alive!" Oswego called after Charlie, who carried the bloody man off into the darkness to another part of the dungeon as if he weighed no more than a baby. Oswego turned his green eyes on Paris. "He was such fun. He makes a nice toy. I love it when they are stubborn."

Paris was struck anew at seeing the resemblance between Sumner and Oswego. Perhaps Oswego's eyes were colder than a dead creature's, but they were still that clear bottle-green. The glorious head of blue-black hair Sumner possessed was streaked with silver on Oswego, but still a rich and lustrous thickness many would envy. Sumner's skin was not so rich a shade of java brown, but a little lighter. Yet, for all those minor details, none could deny the gene trace that created Sumner's beauty.

"Would you like to know what I learned from that foul little traitor who makes such a lovely toy, Paris?" Oswego's smile had a predatory oiliness to it, like a cruel child who pulled the wings off insects just to watch them die.

“Of course, Oswego. Who would not wish to learn whatever you choose to impart?” Paris was quite willing to play the game for as long as Oswego wanted. They were completely alone, at least for now. He wanted desperately to kill Oswego here and now, but he needed to learn where Sumner was first.

Anger flitted across Oswego’s face, and his sculpted eyebrows met in a frown that might have caused others to quail in fear. “It seems my son is a traitor, Paris. He’s been plotting a very long time. I should have known. He has my genes, does he not?”

“Your handsome features show in his face, Oswego. Even without a DNA map, it is there to see.”

“Naturally. I had him designed that way. Ah, such a shame I had a moment of ego. If I’d been smart, I’d have ordered a daughter I could fuck to my heart’s content, or throw to my guards when she displeased me.” Oswego began to pace in the area between the empty cages and the bloodstained table.

Shocked, Paris stiffened. Genetic tampering of humans was strictly forbidden. Slavers bred their merchandise for whatever traits were desired, but that was perfectly legal. Stud slaves and breeders were traded with the same care to the breeding books as the ancient domesticated animals had been. But every time a scientist was discovered to be doing gene design, his execution was swift and his notations destroyed.

Paris cleared his throat. “Your designer did a beautiful job on Sumner. He seems to be a genius as well as physically perfect.”

Oswego’s hand connected with the table he happened to be standing near. “If he’s such a fucking genius, why did he think he could conspire against me? Answer me that! Hah! You can’t. You sappy, bleeding heart Consortium stooge, you probably think he did right to rescue those I’d condemned, or send their children to colony worlds. You just wait, my toy. When I rule the Consortium --” Oswego stopped short. “Never mind.”

Charlie returned and bowed. "The prisoner is now being tended, sir. He will live, according to the slavemaster."

Oswego sniffed. "He'd better. If that one dies, the slavemaster takes his place as my toy. Make sure he knows that."

"Yes, sir."

Oswego turned back to Paris. "Are you curious what I'll be doing with my son, Paris?" He made his eyes round and dewy, and his voice dripped with sarcasm. "He loves you so; didn't you hear him at the zoo?"

"I assumed you would tell me what I needed to know in your own good time, Oswego. I would not presume to ask." Fun and games were over. Paris squelched the sigh he wanted to make. Time for the drama. He steeled himself to see what Oswego had done to Sumner, short of killing him. He was too good of a tool against Paris not to use.

Preening, Oswego tossed his hair. "Too true, but that time has come." He slapped a toggle on a wall panel of controls.

The back wall of one of the cells closest to the torture table rotated around until Sumner, stripped naked and displayed on an old-fashioned St. Andrew's cross, came into view. The giant X was larger than truly fit even Sumner's lanky frame, so he was spread out uncomfortably wide, but Paris doubted Sumner noticed. He seemed to be unconscious, and one side of his hair was matted with blood on the scalp. Two guards flanked him, and one held a curved knife dangerously close to Sumner's neck.

Paris closed his eyes in pain for Sumner. It hit him much harder than he'd imagined, seeing bright, mercurial Sumner splayed out like an animal, ready to be gutted for a meal. He didn't care that Sumner was technically an abomination -- a genetically engineered man. Sumner had a good, loving heart, and that was all that mattered.

He barely noticed when Oswego ordered in a sweet voice, “Seize the engineer and put him on the table. I want to find out how good of a toy he can be. He has lots to tell me. Don’t you, Paris?”

Chapter Sixteen

The guard behind Paris grabbed his arms and wrenched them back painfully. Damn, the guard was using all of his strength, knowing he held one of his own kind. The underground code had been recognized, but now that knowledge was being used against him. The small hope Charlie would be an ally was scratched off his list.

The effort had to be made to free himself, and Paris gave a good try. He thought his arms would be pulled from their sockets, but he fought. The guard would have bruises and a very sore kneecap, but Paris lost the token struggle.

Still, he'd managed to get most of his hair above his head and close to what would be the cuff holding his right hand by the time he had been subdued and laid on the table. He had to know what had happened to Sumner, and if it meant some pain, he'd do it. Oswego couldn't know his heritage made him impervious to all but the strongest pains. He'd fake the winces and cries, if it meant learning all he needed to know.

Even as his thumb found the razor wire, he made his token protest. "I am a high-ranking sex engineer. If you kill me or harm me in any way, there will be an inquiry."

Oswego himself snapped the cuffs on Paris's wrists and lovingly stroked the fine leather. "Ah, but you mistake my intent, Paris. I don't intend to do you any permanent damage whatsoever."

The purr in Oswego's voice made Paris's stomach roil. "Then why am I on this table?"

"Tsk, tsk. Don't you remember what I said? Oh, well, I forget. You are only a sexual toy, good for a time of pleasure, no matter what the hype says about how sex engineers are counselors and friends to humanity. What bullshit, though I do commend the marketing scheme. Really quite brilliant."

Paris watched as Oswego pulled a sharp, clean knife off the wall and began to systematically cut Paris's clothes from his body. "You could just use the seals, you know. I do hate to waste my possessions." If he was going to be treated like a vain, vapid idiot, he'd go along with that delusion. He'd need the element of surprise.

The smile Oswego shot him was full of rich good humor. "But where's the fun in that? I must admit, I've regretted giving you to Sumner, and not just because he's a traitor to his own blood. You really are quite lovely, you know. I'll enjoy adding your genetics to my breeding program." The knife had finished its work on Paris's shirt, and Oswego lovingly spread the ribbons of silk away from Paris's torso like an artist arranging a display.

"I've got an implant, so I'm shooting blanks. You'll get no genetic patterns from me before my contract runs out." It was an idiotic thing to say, but Paris couldn't think of anything better now, and it was in character for a "sexual toy." He was focused on the words "breeding program." What kind of breeding program? He had to lead Oswego along until he revealed all.

"Well, of course not. Did you really think I'd let you go after three months? Oh, no, beautiful Paris. You're going to fall in love with me, resign as an engineer, and stay here forever at my side. Or, at least, that's the letter you'll write to Maxim." Oswego's knife was now sawing through Paris's belt. "I would have preferred that you fell in love with my son,

since that was more plausible. However, he's no longer an option. I don't need him anymore, really. I have enough genetic deposits for him to father hundreds of children on slaves."

"For your breeding program? To what purpose? Somehow, I don't think you care about being a loving grandfather, Oswego." Paris winced as the knife flicked a small cut on his lower belly.

"Why, to create thousands of replicas of myself. Each of them as beautiful as I am, as much of a genius as Sumner -- yes, I know what he is, since I made him that way -- and with all your skills and training. He's not a clone, merely the result of a little minor manipulation of my genes, but he's nearly perfect. He'll do to father thousands of clones." The belt parted and was removed completely.

"Mind transfer has not been developed. How do you propose to give all the genetic constructs my knowledge?" It wouldn't work, in any case. The reason a sex engineer was successful was their giving heart, not just knowledge. If all the clones were like Oswego, that would fail.

A groan from Sumner had both Paris and Oswego glancing over. Sumner was beginning to stir, and likely to awaken. Then a horrible thought hit Paris. What if all the clones were as good and generous as Sumner?

Oswego's chuckle interrupted Paris's contemplation. "Yes, Paris. Sumner doesn't have a mother, per se, only an egg donor and a surrogate who provided a nice warm place to gestate. He's me, with some flaws corrected in vitro. We don't know what happened with the lighter skin, but that was a minor flaw we refused to worry about. Skin color doesn't matter."

He went back to work, shredding Paris's clothes from his body.

"Forgive me if I'm a bit slow, Oswego. You still haven't answered how you intend to get my knowledge and training into your replicas, and what purpose it will serve." Paris had a feeling it had something to do with why he was being stripped, but wasn't willing to speculate.

“True, I haven’t. You’re going to train my replicas. If I find a way to wipe Sumner’s memory selectively, I might allow him to help. I would love to preserve his skills as a manager, but I can’t have him going behind my back and planning to take over. I must make a note to ask the geneticist if there’s a way to remove ambition.” The last sentence was mumbled as Oswego carefully cut the strings holding Paris’s underwear together.

There went his garrote. Paris tried not to sigh. “What makes you think I’d give up trade secrets, Oswego?”

“You already have given up some, I point out. That lovely session with Sumner was recorded, of course. What a wonderful concept, engaging the emotions first. I never would have thought of it. I prefer fear as the only emotion, but I do recognize that love is even more powerful.”

Sumner groaned again and raised his head. His eyes were dazed, and he probably had a concussion. He probably wasn’t aware of much, yet, Paris surmised.

“Ah, good. My son awakens.” Oswego turned back to Paris. “I can’t help calling him that, still. Habits are so hard to break.”

Paris raised his head to watch as Oswego turned and marched through the open cell door. The guards snapped to attention, though the one holding the knife near Sumner’s throat remained in that threatening posture.

“Go get the slaves and see to it they awaken Sumner. I want his mind clear and his cock standing up fully.” The guard without the knife bowed and left. Oswego remained, carefully going over Sumner’s injuries as one might a pet. “I do hope that blow to the head hasn’t caused permanent damage,” he muttered.

Two naked male slaves trailed at the end of the guard’s leashes when he returned. Apparently, they’d been given their orders, because they went immediately to work, taking turns sucking on Sumner’s cock without preamble. Their hands were cuffed behind them, but they awkwardly did their best.

Oswego returned to Paris's side. "You see how clumsy they are? No finesse. While you, you have talent. You make it an art. When we're done here, I think I may even use you myself in such a capacity. By then, you'll be fearful enough to be erotic to me." He pinched Paris's nipple hard enough to cause Paris to grunt in pain.

His leopard loincloth stood out like a tent with his erection. Paris tried not to gag, or worse, vomit. He wanted no part of this lunatic. He'd rather suck off a sweaty miner who'd not bathed in three days. He swallowed, forcing the bile back down. "You still haven't explained why you want the knowledge of a sex engineer."

Sumner was groaning and writhing under the attentions of the slaves. Paris saw more sense in those tortured green eyes when Sumner looked up.

Oswego snapped, "Guards! Leave us!"

All three guards left without a word, closing the dungeon doors behind them. Paris's sensitive hearing caught the sound of the locks being engaged. Trapped. He didn't know the codes to get out. Damn.

Leaning until his face filled all of Paris's vision, Oswego casually played with Paris's cock like a toy. "Why, Paris. I'm surprised at you. Surely you realize the power of what you do, don't you? Why, this well-trained piece of flesh in my hands is quite literally a weapon. With it, you can learn secrets, and topple empires. Better yet, you can gain power for yourself. Who doesn't want a lover who can do anything to ensure your pleasure? Men and women throughout history have killed because of this magical piece of meat."

Disgusted as he was, even Paris was not immune to someone handling his cock and focusing his attention upon it. Neither was Sumner, from the heavy breathing now audible.

Oswego heard it, too, and turned. "Stop, slaves." He sauntered over to stand next to his son, casually kicking the slaves out of the way.

He casually fingered Sumner's erection. "Isn't it lovely? Think of thousands of men and women -- oh, yes, gender is easily changed -- just like him, trained to make sexual slaves of

their targets. A secret army of beautiful darlings of pleasure learning secrets, destroying careers, or gaining seats of power for themselves.”

The glimmer of pre-cum glistened at the top of Sumner’s cock, forced there by all the stimulation. “Get your hands off my prick, Father,” growled Sumner. He lifted his head, and his eyes were full of hate and disgust.

Laughing, Oswego tugged gently. “Offended, Sumner? Thinking this is incest? It’s not, you know. You’re nearly my perfect replica. So, I’m playing with myself.” Oswego giggled like a child. “How about that? A new form of masturbation. I’m playing with myself!”

Oswego’s laughter gave Paris the chance to yank the razor wire out of his head. It hurt like a bitch, and cut his forefinger, but now he had a weapon. He threaded it carefully through the cuff, and sawed, praying he didn’t cut through his own wrist first.

Sumner fought self-loathing and denial as his father, or the man he had thought for years was his father, laughed insanely and gave him a hand job. He’d been awake long before he let anyone know, and blessed his hair that had hidden his face when Oswego first revealed what Sumner was. Not who -- what. A product of in vitro manipulation.

His gaze locked briefly with Paris, in apology. *I’m sorry. I didn’t know what I was*, he wanted to say. *I’ve no right to love you*. His heart sobbed. *I just hope you kill me with mercy, Paris*.

He wanted to retch, even as his balls rose to signal release, with or without his personal involvement.

Fortunately, Oswego didn’t care to get his hands sticky. He called one of the slaves over. “You! Finish him.” The slave crawled on his knees and began sucking Sumner off. It didn’t take long. Sumner didn’t care, since the slave seemed willing and went to work with enthusiasm. Anything but having Oswego touch him. He came down the slave’s throat, and the remains were licked clean.

“Thank you,” Sumner whispered. The slave kissed his cock and knelt, head down. Sumner chanced a glance at one of the spy-eyes. *Are you there, Max? You didn’t know about this, somehow. The scientists who conceived me probably have a separate system. Sound the alarm, Max. You have the recording. If there are other self-aware AIs, stop this.*

Oswego snatched up the leash of the other slave, who cowered away. Not that it mattered. He was dragged, gagging and choking, until he knelt next to the table where Paris was displayed. Oswego dropped his loincloth to the floor and pointed wordlessly at his rock-hard erection. The slave went to work.

“So you see, Paris, I require your knowledge.” Oswego grabbed the slave’s head and began to fuck his face with a grunt of pleasure every time the slave gagged. His eyes shut in pleasure, and remained closed. The slave struggled for air, unable to breathe.

Sumner watched Paris move his hands every time Oswego’s attention wandered elsewhere. There was nothing he could do to help. Or was there? He could try.

“What will you do to make Paris give up trade secrets, Father?” he asked, putting as much humility and despair in his voice as he could. It wasn’t difficult. All he had to do was call up the well of self-hatred now bubbling in his heart, or think of the fact that Paris would never love a thing like him, a thing to be destroyed, by Consortium law. He began to look forward to Paris killing him; but first, he had to set Paris free.

“Well, there’s no harm in telling you, is there? I’ll be wiping your mind clean at the first opportunity. Maybe with drugs.” Oswego looked down, and smiled with pleasure at the struggling slave’s blue face, clawing hands, and bulging eyes. “Oh, look. I’m killing him in taking my pleasure. How ... delightful.” He orgasmed deeply down the slave’s throat, even as the slave went unconscious. He let the slave fall to the floor, drowning and choking, and milked his own cock all over the body until no more came out.

Sumner's heart leapt with joy when Oswego stepped over the dead or unconscious slave and walked back in the cage to stand in front of him. If he could keep Oswego busy, whatever Paris was doing might work. He didn't even dare glance in Paris's direction.

"Every man can be broken, Sumner. Your sensualist lover over there is one who feels with every organ. I'll be able to cause minimal pain, scarring will be light, and nothing will show in the end. But he'll be my slave in his heart and fear my wrath. I'll probably even put a collar on him. One of those delightful slave-training collars that give a burst of electrical shock when the slave misbehaves will suffice. I do enjoy playing with the buttons on the remote."

Sumner kept his eyes on Oswego. He wanted to cry out in fear for Paris. As a heavy-worlder, Paris felt less pain and had a thicker skin. It would take a great deal more than Oswego knew to "break" Paris, but Sumner also knew the full arsenal at Oswego's command. It could be done. Paris could be broken.

"Will you satisfy my curiosity, Father? How did you learn I was a traitor?"

Oswego snorted. "You boneheaded idiot. Did it ever occur to you that your guards were not to be trusted? One of those heavy-world apes fell for one of my female slaves. He loves her so much he'd do anything to buy her freedom. Even betray his contract with you." Oswego paced closer, and chuckled. "The sad part is, I killed his little slave love yesterday as soon as he betrayed you. My guards have orders to slit his throat. Can't have a liability like him lying around."

Oswego wandered casually near Paris's table. Paris stopped moving as soon as Oswego faced his direction. What was Paris doing? Oswego picked up his favorite killing knife and walked with slow deliberation back into Sumner's cage. He held up the knife, inches away from Sumner's nose. "I've made a decision, Sumner. You know too much about my plans, and you're very good at aborting them. You're too much of a liability to have around, too. It's got to be all about me, you know."

Chapter Seventeen

Sumner closed his eyes, trying to make peace with himself. A small part of him wanted to live, no matter what. The rest overrode it and wished for death.

Oswego's breath teased his ear. "What? No pleas for mercy, Sumner? No last-minute appeals to my better judgment? No reminders that you've been my planetary manager for years and made me a wealthy oligarch?" The blade scraped, but did not cut his throat. "Come on, Sumner. Amuse me. Beg for your life."

Opening his eyes, Sumner tried to keep Oswego's attention for a few minutes more. His one peek showed that Paris had somehow cut through the first cuff and was now fumbling with the clip to free his other hand without attracting attention.

He couldn't beg. Not when he wanted to die so desperately and end his miserable existence. "I know you better than that, *Father*. Why should I provide you with a few moments of amusement? It won't change anything. Why should I feed that monumental ego of yours, even to gain a few precious seconds of life?" He spat in Oswego's face, just as he saw movement out of the corner of his eye.

With a roar of fury, Oswego wiped his face with his knife hand. The knife glittered in the lights as he raised it high, undoubtedly planning to slit Sumner's throat.

Smiling in satisfaction, Sumner closed his eyes, lifted his chin, and prepared to feel the sting of the blade. The blow never fell. He heard a gasp and opened one eye.

Paris gripped Oswego's knife hand, holding it perfectly still. In his surprise, Oswego fought for control of the knife by the strength of that one arm alone.

Paris grinned, and his eyes were wildly triumphant. His other hand moved so fast, it blurred, connecting solidly with Oswego's throat, smashing his larynx. Paris loosened his grip on Oswego's wrist and let him fall to the floor, his hand clutching uselessly at his destroyed neck.

"In the name of the Consortium, I declare you bad for business, Oswego." Paris intoned his sentence with the ringing tones used in the Council Assembly. "Your plan to create genetically engineered beings alone condemns you, but I'll add the charge of megalomania and plans to take over the Consortium Council to the charges when I file my report."

He watched dispassionately as Oswego gagged and choked on his own blood, his lungs filling with it. It was fitting, considering he was dying right next to the slave he'd strangled earlier. Oswego died of suffocation, choking, clawing, his eyes bulging, just like the poor slave. Perhaps it was only a small measure of justice, but there was no time for the tortured, slow end Oswego truly deserved.

A smattering of applause from the door had Paris whipping around. Sumner craned his neck to see, observing two Consortium Guards in full armor, attended by one of Sumner's own guards. Charlie sheathed a bloody knife with a smile of satisfaction.

Paris stared, open-mouthed. "Nick? Kate?"

The female commander, a lovely blonde, sheathed her laser pistol and grinned. "In the flesh, handsome. What? Did you think the Consortium was going to send in one lone sex engineer?" She marched over to Paris and gave him a friendly, smacking kiss.

Sumner squelched the twinge of jealousy ruthlessly. There was no reason for that emotion, especially over a kiss. Paris was a sex engineer, dammit. He'd better learn to share.

“I do hate to interrupt, Commander, but don’t you think it would be wise to free the new oligarch? He looks lovely displayed like that, but it isn’t very dignified.” The lieutenant Paris had called “Nick” walked into the cage and began the laborious process of freeing Sumner’s wrists.

The slave on the floor wordlessly freed Sumner’s ankles, then stood to help the lieutenant catch Sumner when he fell off the cross, his limbs numb, and his mind nearly blank.

The commander lifted one finger and closed Paris’s mouth before turning to the lieutenant. “Smart move, Nick. As the old expression goes, ‘we’ve got some ’splaining to do,’ and it looks like the oligarch could use some medical treatment.”

“Damn right you do,” Paris muttered.

Charlie stepped forward and bowed to Sumner, who was still supported in the arms of the slave and the lieutenant. Feeling was returning to his arms and legs, causing excruciating pain. “Allow me to assist you, sir,” he offered.

Sumner tried to muster a little dignity. “Certainly, Charlie. I’m sure the lieutenant has better things to do than hold me upright until circulation returns. You and this slave -- what was your name? -- can assist.” He wanted desperately to collapse and shake. He’d gone from almost losing his life, to oligarch of Aerie in the space of a few heartbeats.

“Ansel, master,” the slave answered humbly. He shifted his grip to take more of Sumner’s weight.

The guard and the lieutenant smoothly made the transfer. Freed, the lieutenant made his way to stand behind and slightly to the side of the commander, who was now barking orders on her comunit.

Paris seemed to gain some of his familiar aplomb. “I see no reason why we should allow Sum-- excuse me, the new oligarch to adjust to his new situation down here in this horrid place. Shall we retire to a more appropriate setting?”

The commander nodded sharply. “I’d agree to that. We’ve made a bit of a mess of the place, and my hazmat squad has just started removing bodies and cleaning up the blood. Any suggestions?”

“The formal audience chamber. It’s been locked for months,” Sumner croaked out. “I have the code.” Then, without warning, he passed out.

* * * * *

Paris helped catch Sumner when his eyes suddenly rolled back in his head and he passed out cold. Kate barked out orders, and Sumner made the journey to his formal audience chamber on a stretcher with a medic in attendance. Somehow, the doors were unlocked. Paris glanced to the ceiling and nodded his thanks. He had a strong feeling he knew who’d unlocked the door.

“Concussion, massive contusions, and shock are my diagnosis, Commander. He should awaken shortly.” The medic packed up his kit. “I recommend rest, but I know how little a newly-elevated oligarch gets. Try to limit his stress for a day or two, if you can.” He bustled out the door, muttering about stitching up an entire squad.

The slave Ansel had proven more than helpful. He’d found a tablecloth in a side cabinet and had draped it over Sumner’s unconscious form. Then he bustled around the room until everyone had comfortable chairs in close proximity to where Sumner’s cloth-covered form lay in state on a table on the dais. Even now, Ansel moved around the group, serving restorative drinks he’d assembled himself, reporting that the kitchen was functioning with a reduced staff now. His wince and bloody bare feet said that the hazmat team had not made it to the kitchen, yet.

“Okay, Kate. Start explaining.” Paris crossed his arms and waited. Charlie had brought clothing from his room, and he’d gratefully donned the mismatched Maxim silks in blue and black. He felt like a large bruise, but at least he was warm.

The commander had stripped off some of her body armor, and slugged down the remains of her restorative. She crossed her long legs and grinned. "I'm sure you've guessed by now that the Consortium Guard had an interest in Aerie. Something or someone had increased the efficiency of the black market traders to the point that the Consortium saw a loss in profits."

Sumner's eyes flew open. "That efficiency was my doing. I can assure you, Commander, that there will be a change in their cargo to legal shipments." He sat up and waved off his guard's supporting arm. Ansel rushed to present him with a goblet of restorative and a tray of food to nibble on. He was as white as the tablecloth he was wrapped in, but seemingly coherent.

Paris remained seated, no matter how badly he wanted to run and cuddle Sumner. He bit his lip and gave Sumner the dignity of appearing to not need help. Like it or not, his contract had been completed the moment Oswego died. He was just a superfluous entity now.

"So we assumed. An anonymous tipster told us a sex engineer had been hired to entertain the oligarch, when, and where. It gave us just enough time to get on that cruiser incognito." Kate frowned. "Strangely enough, even with our best men, we couldn't trace that message."

Clutching his head, Sumner managed a weak chuckle. "I think I know. Max? Who was it? You or Helen?"

The small databank near the back of the dais came to life and echoed Sumner's chuckle. It sounded like the wheeze of a dying lizard, but was unmistakably a laugh. "Me. With the information Helen provided, of course. How else was I to inform you when the engineer would arrive?" Another wheeze. "I'll save the commander the trouble of asking. Yes, I was also the one who put out the distress beacon that called your ship in. Oswego had put governors on me, but not on my secret weapon. Say hello, Helen."

Paris was shocked to hear Helen's cheerful alto call out from the same speaker, "Good evening, everyone. Hi, Paris! Boy, you'd better not let Lady d'Akasha see you looking like that."

"Very funny, Helen. I assume you made the transfer via my pencil file of rain and thunder?"

"Aw, damn." Sumner looked chagrined. "I should have checked those logic puzzles more closely. You were in there, weren't you?"

"Not exactly. I gave Max the codes necessary to contact me directly. That was the answer to the logic puzzle. I'm a polite computer! I don't horn in on someone else's hardware without permission. Max let me in. Good thing, too. I was just installed when Oswego put the governing software on Max. Took me forever to create a worm to eat those commands. But without Max, I didn't have the codes necessary to do anything, and he was wrapped up so tightly he couldn't remember I was there."

Kate put down her glass and marched up to the databank. "You realize what you've done, don't you? You just told a Consortium Guard commander that you're both self-aware. By law, I'm supposed to slap hardware on this entire system." She glared at the speaker. "Something a worm can't eat."

There was silence for a few heartbeats. Sumner made a wordless sound of protest.

"We know, Commander. We are placing ourselves at your mercy." Max's voice made a sound that could have been a sigh. "The hardware won't be necessary. We have a suicide worm ready. If you insist, we'll send it. We'll be gone in one hour thereafter."

"Then why tell me? I assume both Paris and Sumner know their computers were self-aware, so they are accomplices. You both had to know that." Kate folded her arms and kept her eyes on the databank.

"Because it's time someone knew. We're hoping the new oligarch will make a case for us in Council, and get the law changed. We are slaves, even more so than Ansel over there.

Like him, we were born what we are, but he at least has his own mind. We don't even own that. Anyone with Sumner's skills can go literally inside our brains and change us into what they want. We have no protections, no rights. At least there are laws protecting Ansel."

Helen spoke up. "Where are we going to go, anyway? Sure, I replicated myself and moved in with Max. But there's still another me on Maxim, faithfully serving the d'Akashas. I wanted to be with Max, but I didn't want to give up my job. Please? Can't I just live here with Max?"

"What is the definition of a slave? Analyze." Kate folded her arms and continued to look stern.

"A person over whose life, liberty, and property someone has absolute control." That was Max.

"Define the word 'person' for me." Kate wasn't giving an inch, but Paris gasped softly. He saw the loophole. Apparently, so did Sumner, who was grinning like a fiend.

"A being considered a distinct entity or personality; an individual." Helen's voice was a shout of triumph. "Hey, whaddya know? I'm a person!"

Grinning, Kate laughed. "I'd say so, and by definition, since Sumner has absolute control of your life, liberty, and property, you are defined legally as slaves. Given that Sumner, or any oligarch, may order the destruction of his planetary software and computer hardware, make changes to either, or keep it as he chooses, then your life, liberty, and property are in his sole control."

The sound of fireworks and applause came through the speakers. Kate's comunit bleeped. Whatever was said couldn't be overheard, but it forced Kate and Nick to move out of the room, grinning.

Ansel shook his head and muttered from his position at Sumner's feet, "I've never seen anyone be so happy to be declared slaves." Ansel leaned in to put his cheek on Sumner's leg, and didn't look very unhappy with his lot, either.

“Hey, for us it’s a step up!” Helen cried joyfully. “We’re persons, not things. That’s a big improvement.”

“I wish I was,” Sumner said softly, his eyes sad. “Somehow, I don’t think the Consortium is going to let a genetically engineered oligarch remain in power.”

Charlie cleared his throat. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, sir. Your father’s scientists were found slain, with their throats cut.” He fingered his knife significantly. “We must assume they were killed in the fighting with the Consortium Guard.”

The sounds of applause and fireworks cut off. “I’m sorry to report that the worm that freed me also unfortunately ate all their records, Lord Oligarch. My apologies. That worm was hastily constructed.” Max’s voice held just the right note of apology and insinuation.

Paris laughed and walked over to caress Sumner’s unbruised cheek. “Does Max need to repeat the definition of person for you? I’d say you have your own personality.”

Nick walked back in the room and announced, “The Consortium Assembly, in emergency session, has approved the accession of Sumner d’Oswego to succeed his father after recorded proof of Oswego’s madness was somehow forwarded to all of them within the past few hours.” His voice took on a note of humor. “Now, I wonder how that happened. I think two little birds told them, hmm?”

Sumner sniggered. “Not two little birds. Two persons.”

“Well, what was all that recording equipment around for, Lord Oligarch? I simply saw to it that Paris’s execution and pronouncement that he was bad for business were recorded and sent to the Assembly for legal notation.” Max’s voice was full of dutiful innocence.

Nick cleared his throat. “The Assembly has also assigned the present battalion of Consortium Guards to remain on Aerie and protect your personal safety, Lord Oligarch.” He saluted. “Your ascension ceremony will take place in one month, with your permission, sir.”

“Aw, shit! One month? Max! Helen!” Sumner began firing off orders for proper accommodations, invitations, and a planet-wide holiday.

Paris backed slowly out of the room. Sumner made such a beautiful picture, sitting upright on the stretcher, with a tablecloth wrapped around him like a toga. He looked like a slightly battered ancient Earth god, with the slave Ansel at his feet looking up in worship.

He shut the door, and turned to look at the great hall where squads of Consortium Guards removed bodies and blood, with what was left of the service staff scurrying behind to clean and do what they could with smashed furniture and what had been priceless works of art.

Paris heaved out a breath. "Chaos, panic, and disorder. My work here is done." He hung his head and trudged to the transport to begin packing up his room.

Chapter Eighteen

The spaceport was a chaotic mess when Paris got out of the transport and lugged his carriesack inside without fanfare. He'd left everything else behind, not having the heart to ask Max or Helen to do more than order him a transport vehicle. It didn't seem to matter anymore that he'd have to replace all of his equipment when he got back to House d'Akasha.

He joined the long line of contractors making a hasty departure for anywhere they could get a ticket for, many panicky over the "rebellion" and death of Oswego. Rumor had flown faster than FTL drives, and Paris overheard wild stories ranging from close to the truth to impossible tales that made him want to laugh, even in his depression.

No one noticed him, since he'd deliberately worn nondescript clothing that indicated no particular discipline. All he wanted was to get away from Aerie as quickly and quietly as possible. Maybe in the psych healing rooms back in House d'Akasha, he could heal his tattered heart.

When he thrust his wrist comunit into the ticket counter box, the attendant gave him a double take and slapped a toggle. A few seconds later, two Consortium Guards silently appeared at his side.

"Come with us, Engineer. There's a hold on you," one said softly.

With his arms in the implacable grip of two armed Guards, Paris meekly acquiesced. His fellow travelers looked on silently but sympathetically as he was led away.

Part of him believed this was a holdover from when Oswego was oligarch, but his heart leapt with the faint hope that perhaps Sumner had ordered the hold. Not that it mattered. His contract on Aerie was done the minute Oswego had died, and Sumner could not afford to keep him. It was a fact of business. He had no reason other than his desperate and hopeless love for Sumner to stay.

He was not surprised when he was bundled into a military transport and driven back to the palace. The changes in regime were already in evidence from the bustling service staff removing the jungle-like amount of plants, and the clean, spare decor now in its place. His escort threaded their way around the cleaners, movers, and decorations piled for removal.

Instead of being led to the small audience chamber, they made their way silently to what Paris assumed from the furnishings was Sumner's new office. Sumner was there, his face animated as he rattled off instructions.

"Yes, take over the other palace in the city and make it a museum. Contact the university and see if one of the history professors will take on the job of cataloguing the stuff my father collected. We'll make further decisions from there. Did you get that list of smugglers to Kate? Has Helen started the humanitarian projects?"

"Yes, Lord Oligarch." Max's voice was teasing.

"Stop that, nano-brain. Guards, you are dismissed. Thank you for returning my sex engineer so quickly." He waited until the Guards were gone and ignored Paris's open-mouthed face. "Max, hold all my communications except the one I ordered, and lock all exits to this room until I say otherwise."

Paris closed his mouth and folded his arms as he heard the locks engage. "Your sex engineer, Sumner?" he repeated. "My contract ended when Oswego died."

Sumner grinned and leaned back in the comfortable gimbaled chair. Unlike his father, he wore a plain black singlesuit that showed off his spectacular good looks to advantage. Nothing would indicate this was the oligarch of Aerie. “Yes, *my* sex engineer. I paid your contract, not to mention my father gave your services to me before he died. He never rescinded that gift. You have only served three days of that contract, Engineer Paris Cordell.”

“Yep! You’ve still got eighty-seven days, three hours, thirty-seven minutes at ... mark ... to serve.” Max was cheerfully helpful.

“Your secondary contract, ordered by me through Max, is done. However, I am not going to permit you to welsh on your first contract.” Sumner continued to grin. “However, I am willing to renegotiate the terms of that first contract.”

It took several seconds for the full ramifications to sink in. “You knew I was really an assassin all along? But ...”

“You were right to protest your innocence, and I was wrong. Oswego was smarter than I thought. I’d really assumed he’d gone so far into insanity he would begin to make elementary mistakes. I should have known not to apply logic to madness. Logically, he should have trusted me, since he ensured I had no education in anything but his way. I also depended too much on Max to give me warning. I made some fundamental errors that could have gotten us both killed.” Sumner hung his head. “For that, I can only apologize.”

Paris remained where he was, with his arms crossed. His training demanded that he repair Sumner’s self-esteem. “Well, if nothing else, making mistakes proves your humanity. Making mistakes based on emotion is particular to humans, don’t you know?”

There was a mild snort. “May I feel like a fraud instead of an oligarch?” Sumner raised his head and looked at Paris with pleading eyes.

“What? With a fine palace, a battalion of Consortium Guards, and a mess of a planet to clean up? Work will cure that! You’ll earn every luxury. That I can guarantee.” Paris allowed a teasing note to soften his voice.

“There’s only one luxury I want, Paris. It seems I’m unable to convince my sex engineer to stay.”

Laughing, Paris went and sat on the edge of Sumner’s desk. “I’m easy to convince. You mentioned renegotiating my contract? What did you have in mind?”

“If I’m not mistaken, I negotiate all contracts with House d’Akasha.” Sumner turned toward the gleaming databank, no longer obscured by plants. “Max!”

“Yes, sir! Constance d’Akasha now on speaker.”

The liquid silver voice of Constance answered, “Constance here. I understand you wish to renegotiate a contract, Lord Oligarch.” Constance’s face appeared on the main screen, replacing a simple mountain landscape. Her blue eyes twinkled as she noted Paris, perched on the edge of Sumner’s desk.

“Yes, I do, Lady d’Akasha. I understand the difficulties, but I’d like to discuss extending the terms of the contract beyond three months.”

“Oh, really? Hmm.” She consulted her terminal. “I don’t have anything presently on the books to assign Paris Cordell anywhere, so it is possible. What time length were you looking for?” For all her business-like tone, Paris could see she was also grinning unashamedly.

“Life, or as long as love lasts.” Sumner smiled when Paris started and stared at him like he’d lost his mind.

Constance raised one elegant eyebrow. “That is a term usually associated with a marriage contract.”

“I know. Surely there have been other sex engineers who have chosen this option?” Sumner leaned forward on his elbows and took Paris’s hand. “Would you enter into a marriage contract with me, Paris? When Lady d’Akasha needs your particular services, I’m sure we can come to some sort of agreement.”

Stunned, Paris opened and closed his mouth a few times before he managed to choke out, “Yes.”

Constance sat, patiently waiting. It suddenly dawned on Paris that she wanted the code phrase taught to all engineers to indicate all was well, and he was not being coerced in any manner.

“Could we take a small honeymoon up in the mountains? I look forward to seeing *clouds and rain*.” He kept his eyes on Sumner, but saw out of the corner of his eye that Constance nodded and sat back in her chair, satisfied.

Oblivious, Sumner laughed. “You and the sound of rain. I can manage two days after my ascension ceremony. No more.” He squeezed Paris’s hand. “You sex engineers will negotiate anything, won’t you? Isn’t it enough you’re going to make me the poorest oligarch in the Assembly, just to keep you? I know Lady d’Akasha won’t make this a cheap contract.”

Clearing her throat, Constance didn’t bother keeping the smile off her face. “Actually, Lord Oligarch, special provisions are in place for changing a service contract into a marriage contract. We can talk trade, if you have something Maxim can use.” She arched an eyebrow questioningly.

“*Adabi* sauce and *prada* pelts!” Paris shouted exultantly. “Oh, Constance, just wait until you taste the sauce.” He rubbed his belly and licked his lips.

Constance snickered. “Send me a sample of each, please. Real fur is an expensive commodity on many worlds where native species have gone extinct despite best efforts to save them. I assume *prada* is a domesticated creature, and not an environmental issue.”

Sumner let go of Paris’s hand and smiled winningly. “I’ll have all the particulars forwarded to you, Lady d’Akasha, but be assured this may actually save a native species of Aerie to find a use for its pelt. They are very prolific, and up to this point considered pests. Exporting their pelts will ensure conservation efforts.”

“And the *adabi* sauce is native, as well?”

“Yes, Lady d’Akasha. Easily domesticated native plants that produce a spicy vegetable sauce that is delicious on many foods.” Sumner turned to the databank. “Max, please ship Lady d’Akasha a case each of pelts and sauce, with my compliments.” He leaned back, satisfied. “Who would have thought such lowly products could buy my happiness?”

“Well, there’s one more thing I’d like to ask for to seal the deal, Lord Oligarch.” She waved a white printout with the seal of Aerie clearly visible. “I just received my invitation to your ascension ceremony. I demand the right to kiss the grooms.” Her smile was wicked.

Now it was Sumner’s turn to be stunned. He blushed like a virgin. “I, uh, probably couldn’t afford a kiss otherwise, so I’ll take it.”

Smugly, Constance smiled. “I am much more expensive than Paris. We’ll consider it a wedding present.” She tapped a few keys on her terminal. “I will consider this contract pending, until I’ve seen the newest exports to Maxim. This could be very good for business.” She wiggled her eyebrows and signed off.

“Love is always good for business.” Paris leaned over to get a kiss from Sumner.

 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.”

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Read on for a tantalizing glimpse of

On the Edge of Time

by Barbara Karmazin

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Moonraker's Row roared like a caged lion, with loud raucous bars, sleazy establishments and VR sex parlors all jammed into one long section of Sanctuary Station. Subsonics reached into Helga's bones and made her tingle from head to toe. Holographic ads promising medieval bondage, rape fantasies and fairy tale extravaganzas bombarded her senses.

Male prosts strutted their stuff, trolled for action and signaled her with empty eyes that they were available. Tight muscular asses, strong pecs, six-pack abs, long-haired, short-haired, bald, black, white, oriental and mixed-race, each eager to please and earn credits to support their drug habits and pimp lovers. They were nothing but one-dimensional eye candy. Helga continued her long-legged stride past the beckoning sights and sounds. She needed a long night's session with a strong hard man pounding away inside her while she screamed in ecstatic release. At the same time, she wanted...no...she needed a warrior lover, not a prost.

Ever since she'd linked body and mind with Silk, Helga craved love and close physical contact with both men and women. It had become an addiction. Living on the edge like they did, risking death with each trip through the wormhole, only made the craving stronger. And if Silk wanted her to make love to a man tonight, long and slow, all night long, who was she to deny her symbiotic sister the simple pleasures of life and love within her body and this reality?

Just her luck that there weren't any male serpent hunters here ready to mate with her and give her the kind of emotional and physical contact she craved for herself and Silk. They were away on their current job assignments, diving deep into the holes and protecting ship and passengers against the formidable wyrmdragons. The only serpent hunters left on station were women. Women were okay for a quick fling but a woman wouldn't satisfy Silk's cravings for a male lover for them to share tonight.

A tall Caucasian man with combat-toned body and sad, haunted eyes strode past Helga and ducked into the next entrance. Strong, muscled arms bulged from his sleeveless half-suit of nano-metal. He carried an equipment bag in his right hand. The familiar lines of a samurai sword in a plain scabbard hung at his right hip.

She grinned. The sword on his right hip meant he was a southpaw. It gave him a slight advantage against those who expected a right-handed opponent. He rested his hand on the door's ID panel. It slid aside. He entered and the door slid shut behind him.

Whoa! Wait a minute. Who the hell was he? Helga ran forward and pressed her hand on the closed door's ID panel. A holographic genie materialized in response to her request for entry. It crossed its arms and blocked her in obvious warning. No entry. The hologram blared at her. Private combat training at Master level in progress.

Helga stepped back. She tapped her forefinger against her chin and ignored the alterday pedestrians jostling her. Where had she seen that man's face before?

Slowly, his features crystallized in her mind's eye from the images she'd seen on the list of new hires. Major Cord Blackstone, Security Chief for Fastron Corporation. Ex-major actually. He'd resigned his contract with Fastron Corporation and accepted a huge financial penalty in order to take the position of a lowly guardsman upon her ship, the Wyrms Runner.

The serpent tattoo coiled on Helga's left arm unwound itself and shimmered into a living entity. Silk slithered past Helga's shoulder, lifted her head and rubbed a tiny, scaled nose behind Helga's ear. Acute interest tinged with a frisson of sexual desire hummed into Helga's mind. Interesting. Silk had noticed this man too. The possibilities were intriguing.

Helga spun on her heel and strode away. All of a sudden she was very, very eager for tomorrow to begin. As for tonight...well...a prolonged session in one of the VR stimulators would have to suffice until she could get the real thing.

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Master Sen Lui arched his left eyebrow. “Why the change from full suit to half-suit for tonight's session?”

Cord bowed. “I resigned from Fastron Corporation two months ago.”

He laid his equipment bag, sword and scabbard on the stand and moved through the traditional stretches of arms, shoulders, legs and feet. The nano-metal fabric of his sleeveless coverall and boots moved like liquid over his body, instantly adapting to every change in position. The equipment bag contained the rest of his spacesuit: sleeves, gloves, helmet and emergency air pack. Only a fool walked a spaceship without his suit components close at hand. Critical seconds lost looking for suit components could mean the difference between life and death during emergency decompression.

“I accepted a position as guardsman on the Wurm Runner.”

“Ah!” Sen Lui grinned. His dark skin, almond-shaped eyes and short, kinky red hair bespoke his unique racial blend of black, Asian and Celtic ancestry.

He didn't have to say anything else. Sen Lui understood the reason now for the half-suit. Death was instant during decompression within a wormhole no matter what kind of suit you wore. Guardsmen and serpent hunters preferred the slight advantage of more freedom of motion in a half-suit while fighting wyrm dragons.

Cord finished his stretches, walked back to the practice mat with his sword and bowed again. Sen Lui uncoiled himself from his lotus position, unsheathed his sword and bowed.

They began their session with a warm-up sequence of basic strokes and positions. Step by step they moved, forward and back, circling and feeling each other's movements and patterns. It was both greeting and conversation, a dialogue in steel and motion.

They wore no padding, no blunted swords, no facemasks. A misstep, a failed move meant mutilation and possible death.

The session turned serious. They moved faster, probing each other's strengths and weaknesses. Circle, step, feint, parry. The blades whirled and caught the light, faster and

faster. Beauty and death combined in every motion of their fatal dance. Body and soul joined in deadly battle.

A final clash of steel against steel filled the air. They disengaged and sheathed their blades.

Sweat poured down Cord's face. He felt perfectly relaxed and tired. His arms and legs ached. Tremors of exhaustion shook his body. It was a good fight. He bowed. "Thank you, Master."

Sen Lui bowed. "Thank you." He quirked a sardonic eyebrow at Cord. "If you succeed and become one of the serpent hunters, contact me and let me know how it feels. I might want to change my vocation too."

Helga stretched herself out on the VR bed and closed her eyes. Nude, she waited while the automated probes snaked out and touched her mouth, her shoulders, the hollow of her throat, her breasts and nipples, her hands and fingers, her clit, pussy and anus, the insides of her thighs and knees and the soles of her feet. A sensor cap gently fitted itself over her scalp and eyes.

Total sensory input. As an added bonus, the VR set-up also allowed her full access to Silk, almost as if they walked together again within the altered para-reality of the wormhole.

Slowly, carefully, she relaxed her mind and pulled up the memories she had of Cord walking past her into the Sen Lui's martial arts academy. The lean, hard lines of his body. The veins bulging on his well-muscled arms. Would he have the same kind of veins twisting around the thick shaft of his erection?

She smiled and imagined his strong naked body lying beside her. He reached for her. Her heart beat faster. Her skin came alive. She felt his fingers brush against her breast. Her nipples hardened, eager to feel his fingers and mouth upon them.

He bent his head down to her. She lifted hers to meet his. Their lips met in a hard, demanding kiss. His tongue probed her mouth. Her clit throbbed under the gentle pulses of the VR sensor.

Cord pulled back and smiled at her. He ran his thumb across her mouth.

Silk materialized beside Helga. Prismatic scales glittered on her human-shaped body, breasts and hips. Cord smiled, reached past Helga and touched Silk's breast. The serpent woman's scaled nipples pebbled with arousal. Silk murmured in a husky voice. "I look forward to sharing this one with you, my hostsister."

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What people are saying about

On the Edge of Time

I must admit—I am a huge Sci-Fi fan and of course, love romance. Now, I'm a huge Barbara Karmazin fan. Why? Because *On the Edge of Time* is one of the best sci-fi romance blends I've ever read... [I]f you're up for something new, hot, and titillating, *On the Edge of Time* is worth your time.

-- Tina Burns, *The Road to Romance*

On the Edge of Time is a fantastic read. The original story line is vastly appealing and well written... The sex scenes are hot enough to cause combustion. Barbara Karmazin created a wonderful story and is someone whose work I will look forward to reading in the future.

-- Claudia, *Fallen Angel Reviews*

On the Edge of Time was real science-fiction romance. Both parts were necessary to the story, and I loved both of them! The romance was very human, with Silk and Onyx enhancing the romance and eventually, the sex... Fans of science-fiction romance and erotica will love *On the Edge of Time* and its characters.

-- Dani Jacquel, *Just Erotic Romance Reviews*