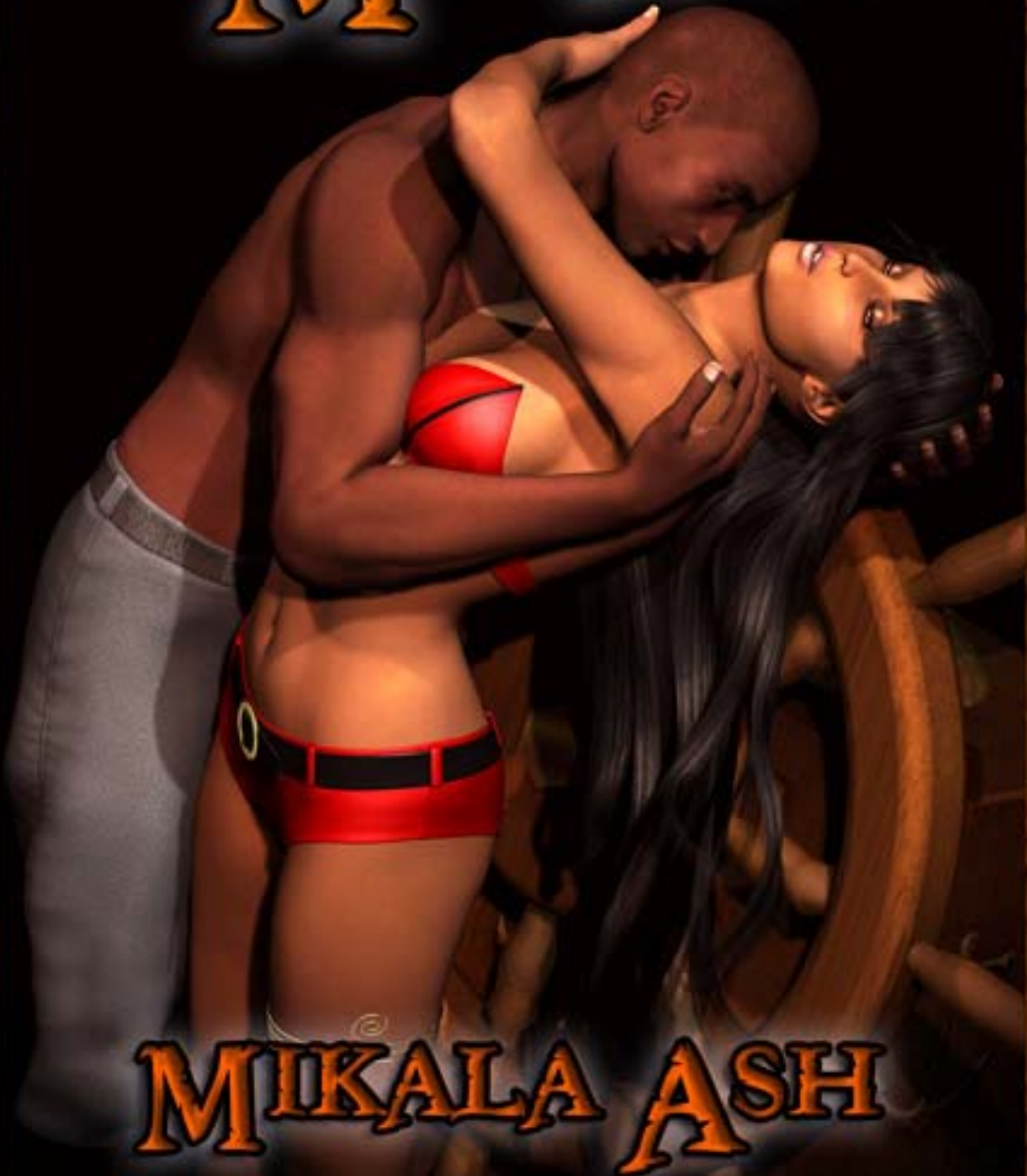


RAUNT'S MISTRESS



MIKALA ASH

Changeling Press

Rain Catcher: Rauni's Mistress

Mikala Ash

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Rain Catcher: Rauni's Mistress

Mikala Ash

In 2147 the world is devastated by global warming. Pollution has poisoned the earth, the seas and the air. Fresh, clean water is as precious as gold.

Tasmania is the center of the southern hemisphere's fresh water distribution industry and in the squalid red light district of Hobart Town, Roxy Talia earns her living as a porn star to make ends meet, but yearns to attend university.

Tobin Kane is an out of work captain of the *Rauni*, an independent rain catcher. He follows the monsoon rains across the ocean, collecting the precious fresh water before it falls into the polluted seas. He and his crew have been blackballed within the industry, but Tobin is determined to find a way to keep his ship.

Keeping his beloved *Rauni* involves Roxy. The sexy vixen holds the key to saving his future and has been the star of his lusty fantasies for years.

Tobin will do whatever it takes to realize his goal -- even if he has to kidnap Roxy to do it...

Chapter One

With wide eyes and a madly beating heart, Roxy Talia watched the tall, good-looking stranger enter the crowded hotel bar.

He was absolutely perfect.

His crisp uniform proclaimed him to be an officer, non-military, a merchant mariner of some sort. Standing in the doorway, silhouetted against the street lights, he presented an imposing figure, broad shoulders, trim waist, nicely shaped legs. Once he'd removed his face mask, he'd scanned the dimly lit bar room with barely disguised distaste. His chiseled features wore a sad, resigned expression.

When his dark, intense eyes settled on her where she sat at the bar and the spare stool beside her, Roxy's heart fluttered. Her nipples had hardened the instant his eyes met hers. That warm feeling in her belly she'd thought she'd never feel again washed through her like a spring tide.

He fit her needs exactly, but what was it about him? Her response was as bewildering as it was desired. She'd often thought these last few years that she'd become anesthetized to good-looking men. After all, she had her pick yet here he was, the man she had assumed didn't exist, shattering her jaded expectations.

He strode toward Roxy, fixing her with an unwavering gaze.

Roxy gasped, and her sudden intake of breath surprised her. She was actually nervous at the approach of this man. She took a deep breath to calm herself and tamped down the fear that her disguise was not good enough.

That afternoon, Roxy had taken considerable steps to prepare her deception. She'd dressed in a conservative business suit with a white blouse and knee-length gray skirt. She'd chosen platform stilettos to give her height, a tight bandeau to minimize her bust and a platinum wig to disguise her natural jet hair. For her face, she'd applied

ivory foundation and powder to hide her golden skin, blue lipstick to alter the line of her lips and a fake mole on her right cheek. To hide her trademark green eyes, she'd inserted blue contacts and added azure eyeliner and turquoise shadow to alter their shape.

The hodgepodge of styles, business and tart, created a jarring amalgam of looks that would confuse any observer. At least that was what she'd intended. She believed herself to be unrecognizable and the three drunks who had tried to pick her up so far tonight hadn't seen her for who she truly was.

This man, however, was sober. It would be the test of her preparation and acting skills to fool him. He towered above her, his face impassive, his attitude commanding. "This seat taken?"

His voice was like honey. It flowed into her ear like sweet syrup, warming her all the way down to her fluttering belly.

"No," she said. The voice she'd decided on was deeper than her own, husky with a faint European accent to hide the Australasian nasal twang. She'd been practicing all afternoon, intending it to lead any listener to think she was just another environmental refugee trying to fit into Hobart Town and not quite succeeding.

The officer sat down. There hadn't been even a flicker of recognition. If anything, he displayed total indifference.

Roxy relaxed. Surreptitiously she gazed at the stranger in the bar's mirror. In between the bottles of imported and domestic Aqua and Hydra water and the ubiquitous range of Gills Beer, she considered his heavily defined features, trying to get a handle on his personality, as if facial lines told you anything about the inner workings of the mind.

His ebony skin, wearing the sheen of perspiration which was unavoidable in Hobart Town's enervating humidity, glowed in the bar's dim lighting. His short, black hair was closely cropped, exposing a nicely shaped skull. His face was heavily textured and seemed to attract the shadows.

"I'm Tobin," he said and she jumped in surprise.

He was staring back at her reflection. "I'm Su Sha Xie," she said, quickly adopting the name of her worst enemy in kindergarten, a petulant little girl who once had stolen her crayons.

His dark eyes narrowed. "Funny, you don't look Chinese."

"It's a long story."

Tobin signaled to the barman. "I'm not into long stories today. Want another?"

"Why not?"

He fished out his card, scowled and flicked it to the barman. "Wanna sit?"

She followed his gaze to a newly vacated table in the corner. "I thought we were."

"Something more comfortable."

"I'm not a hooker," she said.

"I didn't think you were." He stood up and waited, looking down at her. "Coming?"

Tobin's self-confidence was staggering. Then she figured out what it really was. He didn't care if she came with him or not. She was just a woman to him, one of thousands out on this hot Hobart night. Roxy quelled her momentary annoyance by reminding herself that this was exactly why she was here in disguise. She wanted, for once, to be just an ordinary woman.

"Sure."

The barman returned with two beers. Tobin took his card, picked up the bottles and, weaving through a group of drunken marines, strode over to the table.

Roxy followed. The view of his physique from behind was as impressive as from the front. His broad shoulders gave way to bulging biceps which were barely contained by the short sleeves of his shirt. He sported a trim waist, slim hips and oh so tight buns atop sturdy but shapely legs. The musculature of which screamed both stamina and strength.

Roxy approved. Unlike the men she knew, Tobin's body lacked the artificial contours gained in the gym. He was used to real work, and hard work at that.

Tobin sat down without waiting for her. "I meant it. I'm not a hooker."

"I believe you." He took a swig of his beer, his eyes fixed on hers. "I'm not looking for a hooker."

"What are you looking for?"

He took a swig of beer and motioned to the chair.

She sat.

"So, keeping it short, what's your story?" she asked finally, putting an amused tone in her voice.

He looked into his beer. "No potted histories, please. Let me tell you who you are and then I'll tell you who I am."

Her heart stopped. Damn it, he'd recognized her after all. She'd hoped she could have at least one encounter with someone who didn't know who she was. Her anticipation of the night she'd planned collapsed and the despair in the bottom of her chest stirred.

"We are two of a kind," he said slowly. "You tell me you're not a hooker, I say I believe you. Then you tell me again to make sure. You are balancing on stiletto heels to make you appear taller than you really are. You are wearing an appalling wig and, geeze, to apply all that makeup you must have used a bricklayer's trowel. So, I'm assuming you don't want to be recognized."

His eyes trapped her in an inescapable gaze and she felt like she was falling into their dark depths. Within her chest her heart thudded like a prisoner beating against prison bars and in her ears, her blood roared. She could barely breathe waiting for him to say her name and shatter her desire. She so much wanted this stranger not to recognize her.

"You don't want to be recognized," he repeated. "Well, that's fine by me. I don't want to know who you really are, and I'll believe whatever you tell me."

Confusion roiled inside her mind. What game was he playing? Did he recognize her or not?

Roxy cleared her throat. "You said we are two of a kind."

"Well, you see, Su, I don't want to be me tonight either. So the reason I'm here, in this bar in this dodgy hotel in this stinking rotten town, is to be anyone but me, okay? Like you, I want to be someone else, if just for the night."

The silence, despite the inexorable jazz band in the corner, was long and complete. It was as if she had plunged into the pool of his eyes and the only sound she could hear as she sank to her doom was the rapid pounding of her own heart.

Roxy sensed he was somehow dangerous, though not in a physical way. Tobin couldn't hurt her bodily, she could handle herself, but there was something...

I should just get up and leave. Don't say anything. Just get up and leave.

She tried to think of a witty exit line, but was distracted by how her body stirred under his silent gaze, the warm hollowness in her belly, the tingling between her thighs, the nubs of her nipples hardening against the bandeau.

It had been a long time since she'd reacted that way. She savored the sensations and the glorious promise of things to come. She missed that feeling. It was as if her body had been dead all these years and now, under this man's unrelenting gaze, was coming to life.

That disturbed her. Why was she responding so powerfully to this stranger?

She cursed her capriciousness; questioning something she had so desperately needed was nonsensical. She'd come to this bar specifically to find a man, a Prince Charming, to awaken her sleeping body with a kiss.

This guy was no Prince Charming. He was too locked up in himself to save her or even bother to hurt her. But he could wake her, she suspected, and that was all she needed. So why was she so suspicious of him? Why question the possible achievement of something she so desperately wanted to happen and had gone to such lengths to *make* happen?

She was fast losing control. That's what troubled her. Her body threatened to go its own way. That in itself was a new sensation. For so long, she'd controlled her body's reactions like a puppeteer guides a marionette, tug this string and that arm moves, pull this string that moves the left leg, this string...

So, what was it about him that threatened her self-control in what, five minutes of walking into the room?

If anything, his dark face was a little too chiseled to be thought traditionally handsome. Both cheeks were creased by long dimples as deep as canyons. He had a small cleft in his chin that even a sonic shaver would have trouble reaching and his nose was bent in three directions, so he'd seen some violence in his time. That was not unusual for a sailor, but it gave his countenance a very textured, and in this light, a certain malevolent look.

He certainly had the body of an Adonis, but she'd seen hundreds of men with great bodies and had become inured to physical form alone. So, if it wasn't his face and it wasn't his body, what was it about Tobin that stirred her so?

There was something vaguely familiar about the way his shadowed eyes scanned the crowded bar. He seemed to hold himself separate from the world about him and plainly didn't like what he saw. She guessed he didn't like people, and that she could relate to. Maybe it was like he said. He and she were kindred spirits. That's when she got it.

He looked like she felt.

She suddenly became aware that he was studying her with those penetrating eyes, just as she'd been studying him. She smiled uncertainly, her eyes dropping to gaze at his firm lips.

There was an angry shout from the other side of the bar and the sound of smashing glass. Two marines were locked in the early stages of a scuffle which threatened to engulf the whole bar.

Tobin frowned. "I'm staying in this hotel," he said.

"It would be quieter away from the band," she agreed to his unspoken and, she thought later, perhaps unintended proposition. "We could hear each other better."

"That we could."

"Does it have a view?"

"It does."

Roxy took a deep breath to quell the thrill of excitement that buzzed through her body, leaving her tingling with a warm sultry heat. She rose on unsteady legs. "Well, Tobin, are you going to show me the view?"

He gazed at her as if he was trying to decide if she was the one who could make him forget himself. For her part, she'd already decided that in his arms she could forget the whole world.

He downed his drink and stood up. "It's not much of a view."

"Let me be the judge of that."

He was a gentleman. At the elevator he let her step in first, with a gentle hand in the middle of her back to guide her. A slight gesture, but few men in her life had shown her such courtesy.

Standing so close to him, she felt completely dwarfed. Even with her heels, she only came up to the level of his pecs. If he was to turn and envelop her in his arms she was sure she would disappear completely.

His silence was comforting. The last thing she wanted was banal small talk, particularly when they were both trying to be someone else. Better to be in silence and at one with their own desires.

She wanted him to make love to her. That was the only reality. She wanted him to have her as a simple person, albeit a stranger with a false name and fake appearance. Better to be loved as a cipher than the person she really was. It would be the closest to real love she could ever expect to have.

The elevator jerked to a stop. The door slid open and there was that hand again, guiding her into the corridor. Somehow, through his lingering touch, she felt his aloofness collapsing and she prayed it would hold.

He swiped his card through the lock and pushed open the door. The room's lights flickered on and she reached past him and shut off the lights.

"I prefer it this way."

"I understand," he said, closing the door behind them.

Lurid red and greens of the neon lights outside filtered through the worn blinds and gave barely enough illumination to guide her past a small writing table, a chair and the double bed. She turned and tossed her bag onto the table.

Tobin remained in the shadows at the door, lit only by the oily colors playing across his face.

Roxy kicked off one shoe, balanced unevenly for a moment then kicked off the other. Slowly, step by step, she walked toward him, shucking off her coat and dropping it to the floor. Her skirt followed. With trembling fingers she began unbuttoning her blouse, got halfway then peeled it over her head and threw it onto the floor.

Roxy reached behind her back and undid the catches of the bandeau, freeing her full breasts that had been screaming for release. She came to a stop a few centimeters from Tobin, her painfully erect nipples grazing his shirt. He hadn't moved.

She looked up into his face, searching his dark eyes.

Without warning he scooped Roxy into his arms and hungrily claimed her mouth, mashing his firm lips into hers, forcing them open so his insistent tongue could enter her willing mouth.

Holding her off the ground and with their mouths still locked in a hungry embrace, he carried her toward the bed.

Roxy felt herself falling and clung to him, desperately holding on to the hard muscles under his shirt. She wasn't falling, she realized. He was lowering her gently to the bed. He'd followed her down, propping himself on his elbows to keep his massive bulk from crushing her.

She held him tight and opened her legs to allow his thigh to edge between them. Through his trousers she felt his erection, long and hard, pressing against her naked flesh.

With their tongues dancing inside their mouths she pulled up his shirt and unbuckled his trousers. She pushed his pants down far enough to grasp the hot thickness of his cock.

She wanted him inside her. Now.

His mouth moved to the corner of her lips and then onto her neck, the sensitive skin behind the ear and then to her throat. She arched her back beneath him, thrusting her breasts into his chest.

He bent his head and brushed her nipples with his lips. She thrust them into his face so he could take them full into his mouth. His tongue flicked them back and forth and she shivered with the pleasure of it.

Tobin hooked his thumbs under her panties and pulled them down over her hips. She grasped the thick shaft of his cock and brought it to the exposed lips of her pussy.

"Wait," he said. He pushed himself away and she moaned in disappointment. He pulled off his boots and trousers and then began rummaging in his pockets.

Hungrily, Roxy watched his thick cock bobble between his muscled thighs. He was fiddling with something and it took a moment before she realized what it was. "Let me," she said, taking it from him and pushing him onto the bed.

Roxy straddled his legs and bent over his cock. Her nipples brushed against his upper thighs and she sighed with desire. She ripped open the plastic with her teeth, extricated the condom and placed it over the head of his cock. Then, with a delighted giggle, she peeled the condom down the length of his shaft with her lips.

Tobin raised his hips to meet her and gave a long soft groan as her mouth engulfed his cock and slid down his shaft.

Roxy was not used to condoms and was glad he had the new ultra-thin nano sheaths. Activated by his body heat the single-molecule-thick material molded itself to his flesh so that after only a moment she could not tell it was there.

Her pussy was aflame and all she could think of was having him inside her. Without ceremony she lowered herself onto him. The bulbous head nudged open her moist slit and filled her completely as she sank downward. Raw heat rolled through her body, burning her flesh, melting her around the shaft of his cock.

Tobin cupped her full breasts, rasping her erect nipples between his thumb and forefinger, sending shivers of pleasure cascading through her quivering flesh. His gaze

burned deeply into her and she closed her eyes to concentrate on the pulsing sensations radiating from her pussy.

She rode him fiercely, rising and falling like a thing possessed, groaning as if in pain each time his shaft reached her inner depths. Using his hands on her breasts as a point of balance, she raised herself on her knees to alter the angle of his cock and he touched those spots so rarely caressed.

Their thighs slapped against each other with ever increasing urgency. Tobin groaned from deep within. Then, grasping her tightly by the waist, he flipped her over so that now he was above her, his cock still embedded deeply within the silken sheath of her pussy.

His lovemaking became feral, animalistic, each thrust an attack upon the world. She recognized that feeling and returned each thrust with a counter push of equal strength and together they battered each other's sex.

Roxy clung to him, digging her fingers into his back, raking her fingers along the hard slate-like muscles. She sensed the half-remembered tingle starting low in her belly signaling the approaching orgasm. She reveled in the anticipation and locked her ankles behind his back to drive him onward.

His thrusting cock was generous, withdrawing till the helmeted head was poised just outside her hungry lips, then plunging deeply into her until his balls slapped wetly against her ass.

She grunted like an animal with each glorious thrust.

The tingling in her belly had become lost in waves of flushing heat that enveloped her. Like drowning sailors, they clung to each other so tightly she could hardly tell where she ended and he began.

Roxy's belly filled with a deluge of sensation. The pressure was building and she feared her body would explode with each jolting thrust of his cock.

Suddenly Tobin stopped. Lifting his head, he groaned as if his life force was being ripped from his body.

Inside she felt the first powerful contractions of his shaft.

That was enough to take her over the edge.

Spring-like, her tightly coiled muscles tensed until she thought she would surely break and then, in an explosion of energy, they suddenly let go in a flash of ecstasy so great she cried out.

Roxy held him so tightly she imagined she was sinking into his flesh. Tiny moans escaped her lips as her pussy clenched around the pumping shaft.

Slowly and somehow synchronized, their pulsing spasms subsided and finally stilled. Roxy snuggled into his chest, tears wetting her eyes. She'd achieved what she had set out to attain. She'd been loved as a woman and not for what she was. She was so grateful to this gorgeous man that she never wanted to leave him.

Tobin was gently caressing her shoulder. He kissed her forehead. She kissed his neck and then straddled him.

She was hungry for more.

Chapter Two

Su was gone when Tobin awoke.

The sheets beside him were still warm. He ran his hand over the spot where she had lain. She had cried, the last time. Her tears, hot as wax, had dripped onto his face. He had kissed her face dry, not asking what troubled her, not wishing to break their covenant of silence.

He had dreamed of her too. Even though his physical body could love her no more, their lovemaking leaving him drained and empty, still his mind had loved her in his sleep.

Tobin wondered who she really was beneath that ridiculous disguise, behind the outrageous name. The one certainty he had was he had never made love to someone so fragile yet feral in her needs, insatiable in her lust.

Despite her being a total stranger, Tobin had a persistent feeling that Su was somehow familiar. It was a foolish notion, he knew. If he had ever met someone like her he'd surely remember. A woman like Su would be etched indelibly in his mind.

Her need for anonymity had been extreme. In the darkness her breasts had been much larger than he'd anticipated, their fullness overflowing his palms when he'd expected bee stings. The clothes she'd worn, like some corporate secretary, had hidden the curves of her hips, the waspish waist and the athleticism of her thighs.

Somehow, in his dreams, Su had morphed into his fantasy lover, the sex goddess that had gotten him through so many lonely hours and, inevitably, caused him so much guilt. The lover he had never met, yet had grown to hate with all his being.

It was past midday and the sick, insipid light tried to break through the faded curtains. He lay back and replayed their lovemaking, his cock rising to the memory. He touched himself and groaned in frustration. He had to have Su again. He just had to.

Later, when evening fell, he returned to the bar hoping she'd be there. He sat alone for four hours, nursing a dozen beers. Finally he got sick of the god-awful band and left the hotel.

With beer souring his gut, Tobin wandered aimlessly through the streets of the Lilley District of Hobart Town. The air was thick, cloying and, even through the double strength filter mask he wore, stank like nothing else. Tobin hated the land. He'd only been ashore forty-eight hours and already he longed for the freedom of the open sea.

The Lilley was teeming with hookers, dealers and their customers, boisterous sailors and marines on shore leave. Tobin had no doubt some of these bastards had traded shots with him over their respective bows. Furtive eyes peering over their masks offered minimal contact. They were on shore now and at peace. They owed their respective corporations nothing on dry land. Though they'd kill and be killed with impunity on the high seas, Hobart Town was sanctuary.

Tobin's balls ached from the draining of the night. The pleasant discomfort brought back the perfect symmetry of Su's face, the sweetness of her voice, her invigorating scent.

He wanted more of her. He wanted more than a memory of a single sensuous interlude to take with him out to the turbulent oceans. Wanting is not having and he resigned himself to the cold fact that a memory was all he'd have in the solitary hours of those endless watches in the dark.

That's when his plight suddenly struck home. He reeled at its impact and steadied himself against the dirty, poster-covered wall of a strip joint. There would be no more night watches, no more yellow sunrises over the ocean's far horizon, no more riding out a force ten gale.

The sea, that harsh mistress which had been his life for the last twenty years, was now closed to him forever. His life was over.

The time with Su, those paltry few moments of pleasure, had temporarily wiped the enormity of his loss from his consciousness.

But now the bitterness returned.

He had lost his ship.

He had lost himself.

* * *

Slough cleared his sinuses with a raucous inhalation and threw down the clipboard. "I've finalized the shooting schedule."

Roxy Talia considered her manager with a mixture of disgust and resignation. Disgust because he was a slimy, fat-gutted bastard who took eighty percent of everything she earned and resignation from the fact that without him, she would have no work at all and her dreams would die.

"When do we start?"

"It's called *Cock at Twelve O'clock High*."

"I don't care what it's called."

"It's a war story."

"With ninety minutes out of a hundred devoted to me getting fucked within an inch of my life."

"We need more anal too, babe. The reviewers panned *Sin Cycle: Roxy's Laundrette's Dirty Linen* because."

She hated it when he called her babe. It suggested a degree of intimacy she would prefer not to imagine possible. "Anal isn't my favorite thing," she protested.

"We are slaves to our audience," Slough said. "It's going to be eighty minutes of anal."

"Fuck. You're kidding, right?"

"Nope. And the talent is Mark, Charlie and Stephano."

"Not Stephano again."

"I owe him."

"I don't and I'm the one fucking him."

"What's wrong with Stephano?"

"He has BO!"

Slough shrugged. "He can't help it, babe."

"Don't call me babe."

"I'll call you whatever I want. Remember, I have a couple of up and coming starlets to replace you with when the audience gets tired of your bouncing boobs and quivering ass, so don't push my buttons."

Roxy almost wished his up and coming starlets would finish upping and coming and just arrive. But that would be the end of her income and her dream of going to university. Everything she'd done the last three years would be for nothing if she didn't raise the exorbitant tuition fees. She needed another couple of years at least. If Slough dumped her in the mud, with that contract he'd tricked her into signing still in action, he'd be able to keep her out of the business completely.

She'd be well and truly fucked.

Her nipples still tingled from last night and her pussy gave the occasional pulse of longing. Tobin had filled her thoughts since she'd left him sleeping that morning. She still wanted him. She wanted to lie in his arms again and feel loved. She had been right. He was dangerous. He'd threatened her peace of mind.

"When do we start shooting?" she asked tiredly.

He laughed. "Shooting. That's very funny."

She skewered him with a hot glance.

The grin abruptly dropped from his face. "Day after tomorrow, so start fasting today."

Fasting was only the first thing she hated about anal scenes. Enemas were the second.

She whispered the old industry joke, "Doesn't anyone just plain fuck any more?"

Slough heard her. "Not on holo-vid they don't."

* * *

Tobin fought down the rising bile.

He had lost his ship. He had lost the *Rauni*. He'd failed his crew. Rachel, Axle, Wetspot, Bluey and Doc. He could never forgive himself, though he could not have prevented it.

He had no future. At least none that afforded any dignity.

An unallied ship's captain was unemployable and since Tobin Kane had been blackballed by the corporations, his name was worse than mud. It was shit. The best he could look forward to now would be working as a deuterium jockey at a desalination plant and ending up with rad-poisoning.

A barker, dressed incongruously in a clown costume, was haranguing the passing throng, urging them to enter Juice Review, a dowdy-looking strip joint indistinguishable from the other two dozen dives lining the alley.

Tobin stepped away from the wall, meaning to find a bar where he could drown his despair. He stopped short, his breath frozen in his chest. Beside the peeling doorway framed by flashing green neon strip lighting was a full-length poster of the world's sexiest woman.

She was naked, squatting over an impossibly big dildo, her pussy lips spread wide over the tip. She was smiling seductively, her red lips curved in her signature "come hither" invitation and her iridescent green eyes flared provocatively.

It was her.

Roxy Talia.

Impossibly, the poster advertised her appearances live on stage at Juice Review. He closed his eyes and opened them again expecting it not to be the sex goddess herself, but simply a look-alike porn star. But no, she was still there, smiling at him.

It was actually her.

It seemed unbelievable that she would be a stripper in this god-awful dive. She was the star of over a hundred holo-vids and was the most sought after porn star in history.

"That's right, mate. Roxy is here every Friday, Saturday and Sunday night."

The booming voice in his ear jolted him out of his reverie. "What night is it tonight?" he asked stupidly.

"Friday night, champ. You're in luck. She's on in just ten minutes."

A multitude of confused thoughts struggled for dominance in his alcohol-drenched mind. He'd stopped breathing trying to grasp the enormity of what her presence might mean. He took a deep breath and coughed at the acrid stench rising from the footpath at his feet.

Roxy Talia. Over the years he'd alternately loved her, hated her and loved her again. The fact that she hadn't answered his letters and emails angered him. How could someone so beautiful be so callous?

He rested his forehead on the top of the poster and stared into her hypnotizing green eyes.

"Hey champ, don't smear the glass. You can see her in the flesh."

"Huh?"

"Inside." The barker nudged his shoulder and held out his meaty palm. Tobin fished out a fistful of notes and dropped them into the hand which closed like a Venus Flytrap.

"Roll up, everyone," the barker yelled to the passing crowd. "The world's greatest vid star is here, live, at Juice Review. Yes, you'd better believe it. Here, in the flesh, the delectable Roxy Talia."

The depression, anger and frustration were all mixing together in Tobin's mind and what came out was a grim determination.

This bitch owed him.

His mind was awash with possibilities. Roxy Talia could save his life. But he had to think this through. To do that he had to sober up and where better to start down that long road than in a strip joint watching the world's most beautiful woman?

Tobin tightened his jaw, shouldered past the barker and strode through the door. He stumbled his way down a long, dark corridor guided by pale green strip lights stuck on the floor. Eventually the passage opened up on a small stage. He waited for his eyes to adjust to the pulsating lighting before stepping in.

Tobin's boots stuck to the floor and he shuddered at the thought of what he was walking through. Juice Review consisted of a simple raised platform, a bar and fifty-

odd steel pipe chairs facing the stage. A revolving globe in the ceiling reflected a kaleidoscope of colors and every few seconds a pulsating strobe erupted, bathing the room in a flood of actinic glare.

Tobin took a seat at the back corner in the shadows. A bikini-clad beer wench appeared out of nowhere and demanded an impossibly high price for a bottle of Gills, usually the cheapest of beers.

He shook his head.

"You wanna beer?"

He shook his head again. He had to get sober.

"You have to have a beer to watch the show."

Exorbitantly priced it might be, but it was still cheaper than fresh water.

Tobin frowned and fished around in his pants for some notes. He paid up.

A young hooker sidled up to him. Her practiced hand fell into his lap and stroked the inside of his thigh. His cock thickened at the touch. She was a pretty thing with long blonde hair and small rosebud breasts which poked through the loosely knit gauze of her top. She was naked below the waist except for a triangle of transparent plastic at the juncture of her bare, thin legs. From beneath the plastic her pussy lips sparkled with iridescent glitter every time the ceiling strobe flashed.

"Wanna take a lady upstairs?" she breathed into his ear. He detected a mix of spearmint chewing gum, stale cigarette smoke and cheap perfume.

He considered the pale flesh of her neck which glistened with the sheen of stale sweat. "No thanks, luv," Tobin replied. "I'm all shagged out at the moment."

She abruptly removed her hand and moved on to the next gent, an almost comatose marine the size of a bear. She struck gold because he nodded and grunted something unintelligible. The girl looped his arm around her neck and tried to lift his bulk out of the chair. The pair almost fell and another working girl, taller and stronger, came to her assistance. Tobin could hear the two of them arguing about how they could divvy up the spoils as they led him toward the staircase.

Tobin took a swig of his Gills and gagged. God it was awful stuff. Made from recycled industrial water, there was no mistaking the brackish tang that no amount of filtering could remove.

The PA system crackled into life and the oily voice of the MC thundered through the darkened room. "Put your hands together, gents, and welcome to the stage the incomparable, the unpredictable, the unbelievable sex goddess, yes, you know who I mean, yeah! Give it up for the sensational, the sexy, the surreal Roxy Talia!"

Tobin sat bolt upright. He still couldn't believe she was here. What could the odds be that he'd find her here stripping in this flea pit? There was standing room only now. The joint had been steadily filling and he figured there must be a couple of hundred guys waiting in anticipation for her entrance. He craned his neck to see between the heads of the men sitting in front. Finally he gave in and stood up, leaning against the damp wall.

The PA system squealed then erupted in a chest thumping drum rhythm. The lights went out and a circle of light appeared on the stage. The music died suddenly, leaving an expectant hush over the audience. Tobin realized he wasn't breathing and his heart thudded in his chest in agonizing anticipation.

A soft thrumming rhythm grew in intensity and suddenly, from among the dimmed overhead lights, a rope descended and then, with a thunderous clash of noise, she appeared.

Or rather, her perfectly formed foot appeared from out of the darkened ceiling. The spotlight narrowed and centered on her delicate ankle which was followed by a curvaceous calf, a cutely dimpled knee and a golden-tanned thigh.

The spotlight's circle widened and from the shadows her other leg descended. The foot wrapped the rope around itself and, in a flash of golden flesh, Roxy Talia herself plummeted out of the darkness to hang, suspended artistically by that one foot.

The crowd burst into spontaneous applause, whistles and appreciative yells. Roxy stretched out her hand grasping the rope at waist level and, with seemingly no

effort, began to spin about it so that her rapid rotation flung out her long jet hair like a fan.

From a projector off stage petals of green and yellow light burst onto the floor. Suspended a meter above the kaleidoscopic display, Roxy spun herself into a blur, her diaphanous capes swirling above her like a butterfly's wings so that to the enraptured audience, she seemed to hover above an open flower.

Tobin was completely mesmerized.

She was so beautiful. His cock throbbed, reminding him who she was and what she meant to him. How many times, he wondered, lying in his single bunk had he stroked his cock while watching her perfect body being plundered by cocks and dildos, fingers and tongues.

How often had he stroked his cock while he'd imagined fucking her like the studs that pleased her on screen? Then after he'd come, he'd feel incredibly guilty, she being who she was, and he'd shove the vids into the cupboard, never able to toss them over the side.

Still unable to accept that she was here in front of him, live in the flesh, he shook his head to clear his uncomprehending senses. Her slim body twisted and bent around that rope like she was making love to it. Like every man about him, Tobin too was leaning forward in fevered anticipation of a glimpse of her firm upturned breasts beneath the flimsy capes. His eyes jumped from her breasts to the juncture of her thighs, drinking in her pure carnality.

She was so beautiful.

Resolve hardened in Tobin's mind. He had to make her live up to her responsibilities.

Chapter Three

As she prepared for her next act, Roxy looked over the crowd, the same old sorry bunch. Different individuals for sure, but the demographic seldom varied. Each week brought a different lot of seamen and marines on shore leave, all hopelessly drunk.

She wondered what they expected to see, sitting there in the dark. Her body had been public property for over three years now. What could they possibly see that they hadn't already? She sighed tiredly. How she wished to be rid of this.

Her heart jumped. There, in the back corner, standing in the shadows was Tobin. Even through the darkness, for she had intimate knowledge of his body in the dark, she could discern his large frame with that broad, hard chest and that narrow waist. His ebony skin glowed strangely in Juice Review's frenetic lighting. He was nursing a Hydra, his large hands encircling the bottle of water like it was a miniature toy.

"Hey, Gerry," she said to the ex-jarhead who ran security for Juice Review. Though he was technically in charge of the whole show, his principle mission was to protect Roxy.

She didn't know much about her protector. He was in his fifties and had seen a lot in the wars. But he was steady, didn't drink or do drugs. She didn't know much about his family life except he had a young daughter who he doted on. Other than her, he didn't talk much about his private life, if indeed he had one. He had never hit on Roxy and appeared to be a straightforward and rational soul. He did a great job in keeping her quarantined from the riffraff and for that she was grateful.

"Yeah, babe?"

Everyone called her babe. She pressed down her irritation. "That guy in the back."

Gerry nodded. "You have a real fan there. He's been here the last three nights."

Uh-oh.

"Do you know him?" Gerry asked.

"What does he do?"

"Just sits and drinks, doesn't cause any trouble."

"Taken any of the girls upstairs?"

He eyed her quizzically. "You interested in him, babe? What about your rule?"

"Don't worry. I'm not going to break my rule. I don't fuck the punters."

"So why the interest?"

Her heart was fluttering.

The other night Tobin had given her exactly what she'd wanted. No, he'd given her much more than that. She'd wanted to be touched, caressed, loved as a normal woman, not as a piece of meat under the camera lights, where each move was choreographed and executed with the precision of open heart surgery.

That night, she had needed to be treated as a person, as a woman. Tobin had done that and he'd delivered with interest.

"The last three nights?"

"He must like you," Gerry said.

Her heart gave another unexpected flutter. "How do you know?"

"He's picked himself up. First night he was pissed as a fart but he's been sober ever since. Drinks water, would you believe. Tonight I noticed some musky odor coming from him that I hope was aftershave. I think he's going to ask you out for a date."

She ignored Gerry's good-natured chuckling. "Just watch him, will ya?" she said, not really knowing why. Tobin was dangerous, but not physically. It was what he could do to her delicate balance that worried her.

Then she noticed the suit stride in. He was very tall, stick thin with slick black hair which caught the light. His olive skin glowed darkly, giving his countenance a distinctly malignant aura.

"Don't get many suits," Gerry said.

"Slough's upmarket advertising might be working at last."

"Wish Juice Review went upmarket to match it."

Her eyes returned to Tobin standing in the corner. Her pussy pulsed. She hadn't had the hots for a guy in years, ever since she'd got into the business. Her natural libido had been quelled by the constant sex her job required. But Tobin had something, exactly what she didn't know, and she wasn't sure if she wanted to find out.

"Roxy." Slough's booming voice made her jump. "You ready?"

She glanced at Gerry and rolled her eyes.

"What has he got you doing now?"

"Apparently we're a head job short on the last vid. I have to give ten minutes of head and wear the money shot."

Gerry frowned in a commiserative manner. He'd been her bodyguard for so long he seemed to empathize with her. "A job's a job," he said.

"That it is," she agreed. "Ever get tired of guarding a fuck slut?"

He laughed. "If you were a fuck slut I wouldn't be here. You're one class act, Roxy, a true professional."

She stood on her tip toes and gave him a peck on the cheek. "Thanks, Gerry. I think you're the only sane person I know."

"I doubt that," he said. "Now get to work. You're on stage in twenty minutes."

"Don't tell Slough you're the real manager here."

He laughed and punched her lightly on the shoulder. "Get in there before the talent wilts."

The talent was a newbie. He was young, maybe twenty years old, tall, reasonably well built with a tangle of red hair like a halo around his head. He was naked, of course, and his slim cock was incredibly long, ten inches at least.

"Oh, sweet Jesus," she muttered.

Slough was gesticulating to the three scantily clad holo-cam girls. He preferred female camera operators because he could get close to them while he pretended to

direct and could brush up against their tits. She figured he'd fucked all three at some stage because they were regulars.

The girls wore G-strings only. Slough had told her once it helped keep the male talent hard and they rarely looked into the camera lens when beneath it was a bobbling breast and a camel toe showing in the crotch of the panties.

The blushing talent introduced himself. "Peter, um, as in Peter Penetrator." His voice broke, and he had to say the line again. Slough cursed him because he would have to edit the scene back in his little, smelly booth. Peter's young eyes devoured her with reverent awe, a common reaction from men working with her for the first time.

Tobin's dark eyes flashed in her mind and for the first time in her career Roxy pulled the pin on a scene. "I don't feel so well," she said. "Must have been the tacos at lunch. I'm going to be sick."

She rushed off to the bathroom, wincing at the tirade of invective that followed her. She made some coughing noises and flushed the toilet. She didn't care if Slough believed her or not, though he probably would. She'd never ducked a scene in her life.

Roxy splashed water on her face and considered her reflection. "Damn you, Tobin."

She ignored Slough's pounding on the bathroom door. He finally stopped and she waited ten minutes before opening the door.

One of the camera girls was on her knees blowing the redhead. Slough gave her a baleful glare as if to say this was one of the up and coming starlets he kept telling her about. She shrugged and went to her dressing room to prepare for her dance routine.

Tobin. What was she going to do with Tobin?

Her stomach fluttered in anticipation. In ten minutes she was going to dance in front of him. She'd been doing so for the last three nights and hadn't noticed him. Had he recognized her? She hoped not.

Gerry poked his head in through the door. "Five minutes, Roxy. You okay? Slough said you were sick."

"I'm fine, mate," she said to his reflection. "A star's work is never done."

"Better believe it, babe."

* * *

Tomlinson!

Tobin recognized the tall streak of misery entering Juice Review. He would've been hard to miss. The bastard's head stuck up at least half a meter above the crowd. His beady eyes scanned the room and Tobin took a swig of his Hydra to cover his face. Tomlinson was flanked by two goons wearing jeans, T-shirts and suspicious scowls.

Tobin caught Axle's gaze and indicated with a tilt of his head the new arrivals. Axle mouthed a curse. As ship's engineer, Axle had an almost intimate relationship with the *Rauni*. Its loss had devastated him and he'd almost decked the corporation lawyer when Tomlinson had delivered the papers that had impounded the ship.

Tomlinson's presence here indicated the Aqua Corporation had tracked down Roxy too, either to deal with or, if she refused, kill her. A bit of murder had never deterred the corporation from pursuing its expansive goals.

Tobin's plan to regain the ship began to unravel in his mind.

He gritted his teeth. Had the risk been only his own he would have acted without further thought. But his crew was involved. If this scheme went wrong, they'd all go to the de-sal plant with him. It was an awesome burden. *Give me a hurricane any day*. At sea, life and death decisions came naturally to him.

"Do it," he muttered angrily to himself. "Or we all live on the streets." He gave Axle the signal that would set the mayhem in motion.

Axle returned a grim smile.

It was a simple plan. Tobin had been casing the joint for the last three nights, studying the comings and goings of the staff. He'd also seen Roxy's monstrous security guard take her persistent admirers to a serious level of pain. He had broken the jaws of at least three guys last night when they tried to follow Roxy backstage.

Tobin knew he wouldn't be able to get close to her out in the open either. He'd tried to follow her that first night, but the security guy had stuck to her like glue and

had taken her in a black limo to an apartment complex with security that was tighter than a fish's asshole.

So, he had to get at her this way.

He'd contacted the crew and one by one had told them his plan. They'd humored him at first, thinking their skipper had finally lost his course and was coming up hard on the jagged reef called insanity. But when he showed them the proof, the poster he'd torn off Juice Review's wall, they had reluctantly accepted this might be their only way out.

Axle was all for taking action. Rachel, the *Rauni's* navigator, was against it, on the grounds that it just wouldn't work. Wetspot, the hydrologist, was undecided and Bluey, Axle's red-haired apprentice, followed his master everywhere like a devoted puppy. Doc, the gray-haired medic, had nursed his whiskey and said he had no wife, no family, no life at all except for the *Rauni*, which, for the taciturn Doc, was saying a lot.

So after a lively argument, they'd nailed down the details.

According to plan, Axle and Bluey had positioned themselves strategically near the main bar of Juice Review. They were close enough to the big security guy that when their staged fight erupted, he'd have to respond himself. Rachel was waiting in a back alley with Wetspot and a "borrowed" car.

With a yell and an insult designed to offend just about everyone in the room, followed closely by a fake punch, the fight between Axle and Bluey erupted and quickly ensnared the drunken marines and the security guards standing near. In just a few seconds two dozen drunken men were trading punches and smashing glasses.

In the confusion Tobin skirted the wall and slipped behind the bar, through a crimson curtain and into a corridor. In front of him were three doors. The first, he found, to his chagrin, was a broom cupboard. The second led to a flight of stairs which, he guessed, were the staff entry and exits for the brothel on the second and third floors.

That left the third which had to be the backstage door. Tobin cautiously pushed it open and peered through the narrow slit.

"Oh, my God," he muttered.

Sitting at a mirror with just a satin shawl draped over her shoulders, was Roxy Talia. God, she was beautiful. Her golden skin glowed with the patina of sweat that covered the bare flesh of her arms and back.

Tobin's cock swelled in his pants. He cursed his reaction and tried to ignore it. Too much was at stake to be distracted by her incredible sexual beauty. But that was simply impossible. He had a history with her. He'd masturbated to her countless times, locked away in his cabin, watching her fuck on screen.

Tobin shook his head to clear his thoughts. Sweat ran into his eyes and he blinked away the salty sting. *Get a grip, for God's sake.*

He hesitated. He was a pathetic son of a bitch, he thought, in more ways than one. Who else but a fucked-in-the-head dip-shit would choose to spend his life out in the middle of nowhere, chasing storms and catching water, fighting off water pirates and the fucking corporations?

Roxy swept her glossy mane away from her slender neck and commenced brushing with a rhythmic casualness that was striking in its innocence. The private act struck Tobin as being far more sensual than any of her sexual escapades on stage or vid. He feared if he went into that room his resolve would fail him, that he wouldn't be able to do what must be done.

This is stupid. I'm not so pathetic I can't keep my mind on what's important. My ship and my crew, they are more important than a hundred Roxy Talias!

He had to finish what he started. In the back of his mind Tobin knew that if he did take the next step there was no going back. For years he had fought the corporations, even killed during gun battles with pirates, but always in self-defense. He and his crew had been branded criminals by the corporation-owned media yet he had never broken the strict moral code his friend Archie had taught him. Tobin was about to cross a line here. *Sorry, Archie.*

Tobin eased the door open a little bit further. There were shouts and footsteps down the corridor. He had to be quick.

He pushed the door open all the way and stepped inside.

Sitting in front of her mirror Roxy brushed her hair and thought of Tobin. Her nipples were painfully erect and her pussy was very moist. In her mind she replayed their lovemaking, as she had a dozen times already.

Tobin was a consummate lover. Certainly the first time was hurried and mindlessly passionate. The second and third times were more restrained, considerate, and they'd explored each other's body in delectable detail.

She enjoyed his cock, or rather, since Tobin's cock was no different from the hundreds she'd had over the last few years, it was Tobin himself she'd enjoyed. She recalled his reaction when she'd squeezed his balls as she sucked him into her mouth and the groan that seemed to be ripped from his soul when he came.

She wanted him again. She wanted to smell his sex, she wanted...

There was no warning. A large hand covered her mouth and another gripped her shoulder before she even realized there was someone else in the room with her.

"Please, don't struggle, don't scream." The deeply timbred voice she instantly recognized was tense and strangely apologetic.

She stared wide-eyed at him in the mirror. Tobin or not, this was outrageous. She bit the palm of his hand.

"Yeow!"

"What the hell!" she shouted when he jerked his hand from between her teeth. She sprang from the chair but the hand on her shoulder forced her back down. He replaced his hand over her mouth before she could utter another sound. She tasted his blood. "Don't do that again," he said.

His grip on her shoulder convinced her of the futility of struggling any further. She concentrated on catching her breath and racing thoughts. Fear, her father had taught her, was always the greatest enemy. Control your fear, control your destiny. She closed her eyes and counted to ten. Her wildly beating heart calmed itself and the fear was replaced with anger.

She glared at him in the mirror but it took only a moment for her anger to soften. This close up and in the mirror's border of spot lights, Tobin's face had a boyish charm, a certain innocence. His dark eyes, actually a deep brown, still bore that sadness she'd noticed the night they met. Now, however, they were tinged with desperation.

He smoothly twisted her arm behind the back of the chair, held it in place with his knee and grabbed her other arm. She felt the cold steel of handcuffs closing around her wrists and heard the click as they locked.

Fear returned for a moment and she watched, wide-eyed, while he pulled a roll of duct tape out of his pocket and plastered a piece over her mouth. His expression was apologetic. Though he obviously meant business, he was trying to be gentle despite her struggling.

"I'm sorry to be doing this," he said. "But I have to talk to you before Tomlinson gets his filthy claws into you. I'm actually saving your life."

What? "Let me go!" she shouted into the duct tape.

He was staring at her reflection. Apart from the shawl she was naked and his eyes flicked over her heaving chest. But his determined eyes did not display lust, well, not much anyway.

Roxy focused on Tobin's wide generous mouth and very kissable lips.

What the hell? He's attacked me and I still find him... No, calm down, he's saving my life? No, that's just plain stupid. Why is he doing this?

Oddly, despite being cuffed and gagged, she didn't feel in any serious danger. Tobin's diffident manner, his apologetic smile, the shrug of helplessness and the twinkle in his eye gave her a reassuring feeling that he didn't really mean her any harm. Calm settled around her again and she studied him more closely.

She tilted her head, trying to put a volume of expression into her eyes and forehead. "Well, what now?" she said into the gag.

"Sorry," he said. "I'm going to carry you out to a car now. Don't struggle because I'm afraid of dropping you. I'll try and be quick."

"Where are you taking me?"

"What?"

"Where the fuck are you taking me?"

"Home."

Chapter Four

She was incredibly light. There was something familiar about the way she felt in his arms and the way she curled within his grasp and it took him a moment to realize she weighed about the same as Su.

He'd wrapped a coat he'd found around her to hide her from any bystanders and through the thin material he felt the steel-like musculature beneath Roxy's golden flesh. Of course she would be strong, her strenuous dance routine demonstrated that. But still, her lightness surprised him.

Tobin breathed in her scent. The exertions of her struggle had brought out her natural sweetness and it made his head swim. Again he felt that sense of familiarity and wondered how one woman could be so intoxicating. His cock hardened inside his pants, making it uncomfortable to walk.

He headed for the back door. Behind him in the bar at the other end of the corridor the fight still raged. There were shouts and cussing and he could imagine the fun Axle and Bluey were having.

Tobin kicked open the door and carried Roxy's slight body out into the darkened alley. Rachel was waiting beside the car and behind the wheel, Wetspot, the ship's anxious hydrologist, waited.

Rachel, dressed in baggy overalls with a floppy, yellow hat pulled low and an oversized filter mask across her face, held open the car door. Her long black hair was piled up beneath the hat and to any observing infrared security camera she would be unidentifiable.

She helped Tobin bundle the struggling Roxy into the back seat. He climbed in after her and Rachel got in on the other side. She spoke quickly into her com-link advising Axle and Bluey they had the "parcel" and they were to withdraw to the *Rauni*.

Tobin pulled the coat away from Roxy's head and wrapped his arm around her to better control her struggling. Rachel shone a torch into her face. "So this is Archie's daughter?"

Tobin nodded.

"There is a faint resemblance, I guess."

Roxy struggled some more and Tobin hugged her closer to his chest. Her body radiated a sensual heat that rolled through him and sank to his cock. How often had he dreamed of having Roxy Talia in his arms, caressing her, pleasuring her in every way imaginable? He would never have imagined it to be possible, but here she was, the world's sexiest woman.

Yet, that claim Roxy could no longer hold alone. Su seemed to haunt Tobin's every thought. She was everywhere. Despite not having a clear image of her in his memory, her outrageous makeup and dowdy clothes ensured that Tobin's mind clutched at mere traces of her essence. In his room Su had kept to the shadows, denying him any visual sense of her nakedness, though her sensual touch was something he'd never forget. Memories of her husky voice, her smell, the way she held her head would dance fleetingly through his thoughts.

Roxy was yelling into the duct tape.

"We'll get you safe on board and then explain," he said.

Rachel touched his arm. "I owe you an apology. You know, we all knew you were hoarding those vids, but we just thought you had some sort of sick obsession with her."

His whole body flushed with shame. "You knew?"

"Of course, Skipper. Can't hide nuthin' on the *Rauni*."

"I didn't want Archie to find out," he said quietly, feeling the need to explain himself. "You know how he was about moral issues."

Rachel's laugh had a sad edge to it. "Yep, silly old bugger."

Her com-link buzzed. "Good job, boys. Meet you back home." She turned to Tobin, her face beaming with relief. "They're out of there, no problems. They'll meet us back at *Rauni* as planned."

"I didn't think we'd pull it off," Wetspot said. She expertly weaved the car in and out of the narrow lanes deftly avoiding parked cars, bikes and garbage bins.

Rachel tapped her playfully on the arm. "We can do anything we put our minds to," she said.

Tobin gazed into Roxy's questioning eyes. He hoped she'd understand once he had a chance to explain. He'd rather not have kidnapped her like this, but how else would he get to explain the situation to her? How else would he keep her out of the corporation's hands? She had to understand. She had to help them. She owed them, after all.

As Wetspot sped through the back streets of Hobart Town his adrenaline was subsiding. It seemed to him he was stepping outside of himself and could reflect on the madness that had possessed him the last few days. The momentary respite given to him by Su had been completely overshadowed by this mad scheme to secure Roxy Talia.

He had become a stranger to himself. He had told Su that he didn't want to be himself the night they met. Be careful what you wish for, Archie had always said. Archie was always right.

Su had shown him that there may have been a life after *Rauni*. Tobin had even started to think constructively about what he could do with his life, drag himself out of the depression and take control of his destiny.

Then he had seen that poster on the wall of Juice Review and everything had changed.

He had stepped over that line. Sure, he could justify it to himself that he was saving Roxy's life. That if Tomlinson got hold of her she'd be mincemeat before the day was over. That was true; if he had found her so easily, the corporation would have tracked her down as well, and they had.

But it was too convenient an excuse to justify kidnapping. He would have taken her anyway. He had no other way of talking to her and convincing her of what she must do.

It was too late to turn back now. He glanced at Rachel. She and the rest of the crew relied on him to make the right decision. If he let Roxy go, they would all go to prison and nothing he could do would prevent that. They had thrown their lot in with his.

Now, it all depended on Roxy.

He hugged her closer and she snuggled into him, fitting into the curve of his body like they were two pieces of the same jigsaw.

The impound wharf, where the courts had moored the *Rauni*, was surrounded by a high wire fence and an imposing wire gate. The guard on duty had already been bribed. The security camera covering the gate went fuzzy for a minute while the gate was opened and Wetspot drove through and onto dock forty-five.

There she was, waiting for him. To Tobin, *Rauni* was a work of art, a beautiful piece of maritime engineering. Almost four hundred meters long and fifty meters wide, she had a fifteen-meter draft. The processing plant at the stern, the bridge assembly at the bow and the water collection assembly amidships created an elegant silhouette against the dock's sharply broken skyline.

Tobin knew every circuit, every bolt and rivet. He had, at some stage over the last seventeen years, crawled over every centimeter of her bulk. *Rauni* was capable of twenty-five and a half knots and was powered by a mini fusion engine. Her propeller was ten meters wide and weighed a hundred and thirty tons. Even her anchor weighed twelve tons. She was a real beauty.

The fact that she was almost sixty years old, rusting and in bad need of an overhaul didn't matter. She was his ship in all but name.

He'd loved her, caressed her through calm seas and pulled her through horrendous storms. He'd chased the rain and, in her glory day, they'd harvested over ten million liters of clean, fresh water in a single run.

Rauni was his home, his lover, his life.

She was smaller than the corporation behemoths, but she was big enough to capture one point eight million liters an hour at full capacity, though those times were rare. Usually it was a far more modest harvest, but that was enough to pay the bills and keep them alive, if not rich.

Wetspot brought the car to a halt beside *Rauni's* gangway. Tobin clutched Roxy to his chest while Rachel opened the door. She dropped the coat over Roxy's head and together they lifted her out and hoisted her over Tobin's shoulder.

Wetspot reversed the car out the gate and would take it back to where she'd *borrowed* it from. Rachel secured the gangway after Tobin and Roxy climbed on board and went to man the portside three-inch gun. If they had been followed she was prepared to defend the ship to the very end. Like Tobin, Axle, Bluey and Wetspot, without the *Rauni*, Rachel had nowhere else to go.

Roxy twisted and squirmed over his shoulder, making each step to the bridge difficult and he took great pains not to bump her head on the steel railings and bulkheads. Rachel and Wetspot had previously removed the impound locks on the hatch so Tobin was able to push it open with the toe of his boot.

He carefully lowered her into one of the chairs and removed the coat from her head. She blinked against the harsh overheads and Tobin flicked the switches to soften the lighting. He went to the hatch and secured it from the inside.

Without looking at Roxy, who was protesting inaudibly, he went to the com-unit at the bridge controls. "Rachel, everything okay?"

"All clear here, Skipper. Axle and Bluey are at the gate."

"Wetspot?"

"Just dropped off the vehicle and is on her way back to position."

Tobin nodded contentedly. Wetspot would take up position at the bow underneath the dock. If things went pear shaped she'd sever the links to the Port Control tower, allowing *Rauni* to pull out into the harbor. After that, the plan got a bit

hazy. They'd be hijackers, pirates and fair game for anyone. But if it went right, that wouldn't happen.

It all depended on Roxy.

He turned back to her.

He could tell that she wasn't afraid, just mad as hell. She was just like her father who never felt a moment's fear even in the tensest standoff with water pirates or the corporation marines. He didn't scare easily, and neither did she by the look of it.

"Just listen to me for a minute. My name is Tobin Kane, Captain of the *Rauni*, and I was a friend of your father's. We need your help."

Roxy thought Tobin looked like he belonged here. He was a different man than the aloof officer who'd walked into the hotel bar and the kidnapper who'd nervously abducted her from Juice Review. Here he exuded confidence and competence.

On the journey she had succeeded in quelling her fears of being abducted and considered what was happening logically.

She could not possibly imagine what was motivating Tobin. He said he knew her father. She couldn't imagine that. Her dad was a retired clerk from the city council.

Tobin had said he was saving her life. She couldn't believe that either. Saving her from what?

He wasn't abducting her to sexually molest or kill her, she was sure. In her mind, the fact that there were two women helping him minimized that possibility.

The idea that he'd kidnap her for ransom was laughable. So why was he doing it?

Roxy considered what options she had. She was angry at her helpless situation, but the energy of that anger had translated to heightened physical arousal.

Being angry or aroused wasn't going to help. She had to be smart.

Granted, she didn't know anything about the Tobin she'd met the other night but this was the last thing she would have expected. She could not believe he was a demented sex fiend. There was something bigger at play here. There just had to be.

The night they'd met he'd said he wanted to forget himself. Obviously something bad had happened to him and her kidnapping was somehow a solution to that problem, whatever it was.

Roxy decided she needed to understand what he needed from her if she was going to get to the bottom of it and get some sort of control over the situation. To do that, she had to control her anger.

Leaning against the control panel, his feet crossed casually at the ankles, Tobin cut a very fine figure. She studied the lines of his thighs and the bulge where they met. She'd noted his arousal ever since he first appeared in her dressing room and during the car ride, she had been very aware of his body heat and even the beating of a powerful heart within his broad, hard chest.

She glared at him, trying to convey, as best the duct tape gag allowed, that she wanted to speak. He seemed to comprehend.

"If I take away the tape you'll want to scream. It won't do any good anyway. This ship is ours. There is no one to hear. But I want to make this absolutely clear. I will not harm you. My crew will not harm you. There is absolutely no cause for distress. When you hear what I have to say, you'll realize that." He shrugged. "I know this is... unorthodox and I apologize. But believe me, I had no choice. Tomlinson and his goons don't mess about."

She nodded her understanding, though she understood nothing. All she knew was that she was angry, bloody angry, but she didn't want to be angry at Tobin.

He approached her slowly until his bulk overshadowed her. Her head was level with his groin. She couldn't mistake the bulge that lay not five centimeters from her face. His fingers grazed her cheek, leaving a trail of fire as he lifted the corner of the duct tape.

"This may hurt a little. I apologize." He gently pulled the tape away from her face. It stung and her anger overwhelmed her.

"What the fuck do you think you are doing?" she shouted.

He stepped backward and leaned against the console beneath the wide bridge window. It was dark outside and the glass reflected back the interior of the room. She saw herself cuffed to a chair, almost naked except for the coat he'd draped over her shoulders. Nevertheless her breasts were plainly visible.

"I understand you are very angry," he said softly. "I would be too. Why don't you swear at me for a minute and get it out of your system."

"You fucking patronizing prick, you..."

His arrogant smile stopped her.

"Very funny, you fuck." Roxy took a deep breath. She had to calm down. She had to be smart, she told herself again. The Tobin she had made love with four nights ago was an honorable and courteous man. The memory of that night comforted her.

He had made love to Su.

She decided he still hadn't recognized her as Su. She wanted to keep it that way, for a little while at least, until she was sure of his motivation. There was only one way to test him, she decided.

He had kidnapped the sex goddess Roxy Talia and that was who she had to be, at least for a little while.

She took a deep breath. "Okay. Did you kidnap me just to ogle my breasts?"

He coughed in embarrassment. "I am not ogling your breasts."

"Come off it. Are you going to fuck me or what?"

He held up his hands. "This is not about sex."

"Everything is about sex," she said.

The shock on his face was genuine.

"You're good looking enough," she purred. "That's a nice package you have there too. If you want to fuck me, I wouldn't mind."

She laughed as he shifted uncomfortably. "I could feel your dick in the car. You want me bad, so bad. So have me. Then let me go."

She watched the parade of emotions crossing his dark face; surprise, uncertainty, embarrassment, frustration, anger and finally disappointment.

"This is not about sex," he said firmly.

"You *do* know who I am, don't you?"

He nodded.

She thrust out her breasts. "Why else would you kidnap me? With a body like yours you could probably get a job on one of my vids, or even a couple. Talk to my agent and I'll get you a gig."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Your cock is as hard as a rock, you can't hide it. Come over here and I'll put you out of your misery."

His face hardened. "I admit I've dreamed of having you."

"Well, here's your chance."

Her pussy pulsed under his steady gaze. Surprisingly she was having fun with his discomfort.

"You're taking a chance talking to me like that. What if I was a..."

"Sex-crazed maniac who kidnaps naked women? I think we've established what you are. I just want to know if you're stupid too. I can get you a job in the film industry. You'd be a household name in months."

He strode over to her till his bulging cock was dead in front of her face. Her nipples hardened as she recalled what that organ had done to her body the other night.

She looked up at him as coyly as she could and licked her bottom lip. "It will be better if my hands are free."

"Don't you realize the danger you are in?"

She ogled his crotch. "I think I can handle it. No offence, but I have had bigger. You are impressive, though, I'll give you that."

"Have you no idea why I've brought you here?"

"To have your wicked way with me?"

He opened his mouth but no words came out.

"A bit of danger makes sex better, didn't you know? You've got my pussy so wet and my nipples are so hard." Talking dirty like this was turning her on, no doubt about it. Funny, when she was saying her lines at work, she never felt aroused, never.

His expression was of total bewilderment. He stepped back. "You have no idea where you are or who I am?"

It was her turn to be uncertain for a moment. "Should I?"

"Didn't you get my letters, my emails?"

Uh-oh. This changed things. Maybe he was a demented fan after all. But the Tobin she knew, or thought she knew, wouldn't be a sexually frustrated nut case.

"I don't know what you think is going on," Tobin said, "but I'll tell you the facts."

"Please do," she said, her rising doubt and fear putting an edge in her voice.

His expression turned serious. "There's no easy way of doing this."

"What?"

"I'll just come right out and say it."

"Well? Tell me, for Christ's sake!"

"Your father's dead."

A cold blade sliced through her chest. "Oh, my God!"

"I sent you messages but you didn't reply."

"Dad?" Her eyes misted over and a strange numbness settled in her chest. "Dad is dead?" He was all right when she'd called him that morning. He'd only had a checkup yesterday. That could mean only one thing. She glared at Tobin. "How the hell do you know that?"

"I was with him."

She came to the obvious conclusion. "You bastard! You killed him?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he snapped. "Sorry. Your father was my best friend. I couldn't hurt him in any way."

"I need to call home."

"I can't let you do that, not just yet."

"Because you kidnapped me, you're afraid that I'll call the cops."

"No, you'll call home. But Tomlinson will have tapped your phone by now."

"Listen, Captain Nemo, I don't give a fuck who this Tomlinson guy is. I want to call home."

His expression suggested he was weighing up if he could trust her or not. "My dad is at home watching the vids," she said more confidently than she felt.

Momentary confusion swept across his face.

"Listen," she said slowly, calming herself as much as she could. "There's obviously been a mistake. You've mixed me up with someone else. I can clear it up by calling home and letting you speak to my dad."

He gave a frustrated sigh and pulled out a small com-unit. "The number?"

She gave him her home phone number.

He made the connection, waiting for it to be answered, his eyes not leaving hers. She heard a man's voice; it was Dad's. She gave a sigh of relief. He put the unit next to her cheek.

"Dad?" She turned on the captain, her face contorted in a scowl of hatred. "It's nothing, Dad. No, I'm sorry to disturb you. No, I'll be home soon. I promise."

She handed the phone back to him. "All right, you bastard. That was a hell of a bad joke!"

Confusion washed over his face. "You are Roxy Talia, star of *Lust in Space*, aren't you?"

"Who the hell are you?"

"Your father's Captain."

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"Your father, Archie Church."

"Who?"

"You don't know your own father?" His voice was incredulous.

"My father is home watching the holo-vid."

"Oh, fuck."

"Oh, fuck, is right. So untie me and take me home!"

He took a deep breath, his expression sad. "Your father was Archie Church. He owned the *Rauni*. He was my friend."

"Listen, I don't know who your friend is, but he's not my father."

"Your mother's name was Evangeline?"

Uh-oh. How did he know that? "So?"

"She was Archie's wife. You are his daughter."

"I don't know what you're taking, but you're seriously unhinged. My mother was married to my dad." The fact that her parents hadn't officially been married was beside the point.

"Was?"

"She died last year."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know. Archie didn't know."

"So, now that we got that cleared up you can let me go."

"Twenty-eight years ago your mother was married to Archie."

"Bullshit!"

"Archie doted on you. He had pictures. Your mother left him when you were little. Didn't she tell you?"

This is stupid. This is what I get trying to find myself. I find a madman instead. Where the hell is Gerry?

"That explains it," Tobin continued, more to himself than her.

"Explains what?"

"You were never told."

"What?"

"Your mother never told you. She wrote to him and told him you didn't want anything to do with him. For twenty years he believed you despised him."

"This guy you're talking about is not my father."

"Archie didn't know you were a porn star. I had to confiscate all your vids the guys brought on board in case he accidentally saw what his daughter did for a living."

"This is stupid."

"We'd go out for six, seven months at a time. So the guys would get holo-vids to pass the time and a hell of a lot of them were of you. It would've killed Archie if he found out what you did."

"What's wrong with what I do?"

"Nothing. I'm a fan, believe me. But Archie had... well, he had old fashioned views about that sort of thing. He thought you despised him and would've thought that your career choice was a sort of rebellion on your part, punishing him for his beliefs."

"This is bullshit." She struggled against her cuffs. "Listen, I don't care if your friend Archie was a card carrying Luddite, he was not my father."

"Let me get this straight. Your mother was married to the guy living at home watching the holo-vids?"

Well, no. But that wasn't important. "That's none of your business."

"I'll take that as a no. Ever wondered why?"

"Marriage is an outmoded custom. I don't know anyone who is married."

"It's because she was married to Archie and bigamy is still a crime. Roxy, believe me, you are his daughter."

"Rubbish."

"But you are. You look just like him."

Roxy thrust out her breasts. "I do, do I?"

Chapter Five

This explained a lot. All the anger Tobin had felt toward her for the last few years dissipated. Now he knew why she hadn't responded to his calls and emails, why she hadn't come when Archie got sick and died. It explained why she wasn't at the funeral and why she didn't come to claim the *Rauni*.

It all made sense to him now.

Tobin sat heavily onto his command chair. "I thought you were just the biggest bitch in the world, treating your father like that. But now I know it wasn't your fault. You didn't know him at all."

He started fishing about in the pockets of his jacket. It fell open, exposing his chest.

"I don't care what you've been smoking or whatever," she said. "Can you just let me go and I won't cause you any trouble."

Her bravado had collapsed. Maybe now she would listen to him. He held out a small holo-pic. "Look at this."

"Listen, it won't help. This Archie fella is not my father."

"Look at it!"

His voice, though quiet, clearly meant business. She lowered her eyes to the picture cube. "I'm sorry your friend is dead, but..."

"Look at it."

Roxy focused her eyes on the holo-pic. Inside the quartzite cube a white-haired, ruddy-faced man with a crooked smile gazed out at her.

"Look at the flip side." He turned the cube over.

She instantly recognized the picture. It was a baby photo. She was only a few months old, sitting on a blanket covered in horses and cows and other extinct animals.

She was playing with a blue rattle, happily waving it about with a wide, toothless grin splitting her chubby face. Her dad had the same photo in his collection.

"How the hell did you get this?"

"How do you think?" he asked irritably. "Archie carried it around with him all the time. He cherished the fact that he had a beautiful daughter somewhere."

She stared at it again, the deepening furrow on her forehead hinting at the difficulty she was having making sense of what he was saying.

"Skipper," Rachel said over the com-link.

"Yep?"

"Doc's arrived."

"Ta." He gazed at her, his dark eyes burning into her. "I know this is hard, but you have to believe me that Archie was your father."

"You're bonkers! Mad as a cut snake."

There was a knock and Tobin strode to the hatch to let in a short man with snow white hair. Tobin had known him for fifteen years and he hadn't changed in all that time. He was carrying his medical bag and he rested it on the console.

Tobin dropped back into his command chair. "I'm sure you are Archie's daughter. You look like him, act like him, fight like him. But Doc insists on some physical proof."

Doc gazed at Roxy for a long moment. "Miss, let me say one thing first. You're a fine physical specimen."

"Get on with it, Doc."

"Keep your trousers on. My friend at the university came through, gave me the access code for both the analyzer and database."

"Well done."

Doc gave Roxy another glance and whistled. "Archie did good work," he muttered and opened his bag to extract a syringe.

"Hey!" Roxy yelled. "What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm going to take a blood and skin sample and compare it with Archie's. The DNA database will give us a match in no time."

Roxy struggled against the cuffs, spearing Doc with a poisonous glare.

"Don't squirm," Doc advised. "I can't be held responsible if it hurts when you squirm." He looked at Tobin. "Can we release her for a second?"

"Not yet. She doesn't believe us and I'm afraid she'll do herself some damage."

"Sorry, Roxy."

Roxy gritted her teeth.

In a straightforward professional manner Doc stroked her arm, found a vein, swabbed her skin and inserted the needle. He extracted a few CCs of blood and held a piece of cotton wool against her flesh.

"Can you hold this while I do the analysis?"

Tobin went over to her and put his forefinger against the cotton wool. "I'm sorry we have to be like this. But you won't believe us otherwise."

"Fucking right I don't believe you."

"Tomlinson was at the club," Tobin said to Doc.

"Fucking hell, they're closing in. At least we have her safe here."

"All right," Roxy said, gazing up at Tobin. "Who the hell is this Tomlinson?"

She was so beautiful, Tobin thought. With her face so close, his cock once again filled with blood and strained against his pants.

"Tomlinson, my dear," Doc said, "is the closest thing to Satan you'll find in the world today."

She frowned in confusion.

"He's a lawyer," Tobin explained.

"For the fucking Aqua Corporation," Doc said vehemently. "Bastards."

"This means nothing to me," she said. "What has a water corporation lawyer got to do with me?"

"You are Archie's daughter."

"How many times do I have to tell you? I am not your friend's daughter."

"As such you stand to inherit the *Rauni*. Tomlinson represents a corporation that would like to see the end of independent contractors like us. They have been known to kill people who get in their way."

"As opposed to you, who just kidnap people and forcibly take their blood."

"I apologize again for that but we had to keep you from Tomlinson."

"Apologies don't fucking cut it."

"Okay," Doc said. "I've patched in the scanner into the university database. It's collating now. I'll throw it up on the screen."

The screen set above the bridge windows split into two. Rows and columns of figures flashed across it. The first column was headed *Archibald Church*, the other *Roxy*? The figures stopped suddenly and flashed green.

"Well, I'll be," Doc said. "It's a match!" He turned to face her. "Pleased to meet you, Roxy Church."

* * *

"That proves nothing," Roxy said defiantly. "You could've faked all those numbers. How the hell would I know the difference?"

"Well." The Captain motioned to the man he called Doc and said quietly, "We could look at the man you call Dad. What's his full name?"

Roxy suddenly decided, against her better judgment, to play ball. She told him her dad's full name and Doc tapped in the details. Rows and columns of figures scrolled onto the screen. She read out loud her dad's medical history. It was all there. She'd read it often enough.

She could see her DNA didn't match at all. It was clear from that analysis she was not his daughter.

She'd always guessed the truth. Since she was ruled out of being a kidney donor for him, she'd suppressed the realization that maybe she was not blood related to him at all. That realization had been the motivation to set her dream in motion, to go to university, to study hard and long to become a doctor.

The truth was cold though. Dad was not her father. Not her biological father, at least. But he was her father in every way that counted. And he was alive!

She took a deep breath. "So, just say I accept what you are telling me. I'm this Archie guy's biological daughter."

"That's right."

"And he's dead?"

"I'm sorry to break the news like this. But I did send letters and emails."

"I didn't get them."

"I think your mother gave Archie a dummy address."

Roxy nodded. *She probably did. Why didn't she tell me?* All Roxy knew for certain was that her mother loved Dad and Dad loved her back. That's all that counted.

"So why am I here again?"

He looked around him and she followed his gaze as it swept around the room. "This ship."

"And what about this ship?"

"The *Rauni*. It was impounded. Archie died and didn't leave a will. Because of that my crew and I have no livelihood. We are blackballed because we served your father and fought the corporations."

She had no idea what he was talking about. But a question forced itself into her consciousness. "What's it worth?"

Her question obviously surprised him. "What?"

"It's mine now, you say. I want to know what it's worth."

He shrugged, his face wary. "A couple of mill."

"In good condition?"

"It's sea worthy."

"How do I sell it?"

"What?"

"You heard me, sailor boy. How do I go about selling it? That way I can pay you what's owed and I can go to university and everyone's happy."

"You don't understand."

"I understand enough."

"No you don't. We have nothing without the *Rauni*. Your father treated us like family. This vessel is not just a ship, it's our livelihood."

"I can't help that."

"Yes, you can. Claim the ship as yours, we'll operate it and you rake in the profits."

Yeah, right. She'd heard that one before from Slough, and look what happened with that money spinner. "Was Archie rich?"

"Well, no."

"Where did the money go?"

"It was his life. He put his money back into the ship."

"And the rest?"

"Wages and..."

"And?"

"Well, he owes money, you see."

"Who to?"

"The bank."

"So, he really didn't own the boat at all."

"Ship."

"Ship, boat, what the fuck do I care? The point is he didn't own the fucking thing, did he?"

He shrugged. "The bank does."

"A corporation bank?"

"And if we don't move quickly they'll take it and the corporation will just add it to their fleet."

"So, what you're telling me is that I've inherited a debt."

"But you can make a living out of it."

"But not much of one it seems. Listen, you make it sound a noble and exciting calling and all, but what it comes down to is this. You people don't mean shit to me. If I sell this boat and only get twenty bucks for it, I can give that twenty bucks to my dad. That old man, who apparently isn't my father at all and never has been, means more to me than this Archie character ever could."

"Archie was a good man," the captain said defensively.

"And my dad is a great dad."

Chapter Six

"Skipper," Rachel's voice broke an uneasy silence.

"What?"

"Action down on the dock."

"Axle and Bluey back?"

"Beat them by thirty seconds. Yep, they are in position."

"Who's down there?"

"A limo with suits on board, two battle wagons with marines, and... uh oh, some new guests, a stack of motor cycles, street gang by the look of it."

Tobin wondered who they belonged to. Motor cycles didn't seem like Tomlinson's style.

"You'll like this," Rachel said. "There's a standoff. Guns drawn. Tomlinson is speaking to a big guy, ex-marine by the look of it."

"I know him," Axle's voice cut in. "That's the guy from Juice Review. Bluey and I knocked him down with a table. He's a strong son of a bitch."

"Can you get me some vision?" Tobin asked and the columns of numbers flickered and were replaced with a view of the dock. The dock was peppered with armored vehicles and men with guns. Only some were in marine uniform.

He picked out Tomlinson and Roxy's bodyguard.

Tobin glanced to Roxy who gave him a smile and a slight nod, as if to say her protector was going to skin him alive.

"Okay, this isn't good," Rachel said. "They have stopped pointing guns at each other and they are now both looking up at us."

"Time to play ball," Tobin said.

He thumbed the com-unit. "You on the dock, Tomlinson and..." He glanced at Roxy.

"His name is Gerry."

"Tomlinson and Gerry. Roxy is safe and we will not harm her. Gerry, I have to warn you that Tomlinson will not be upset if Roxy is killed. So keep that in mind when you listen to whatever he says. It is in his best interest that Roxy disappears."

"I just had an idea," Doc said quietly.

Tobin killed the mike. "What is it, Doc?"

"If Roxy wrote her will and left the *Rauni* to her dad and we showed Tomlinson the will, he'd be less inclined to kill her because he'd then have to kill her dad as well. I reckon it would be just too much trouble for him."

"I won't bring him into this," Roxy shouted. "Besides, you could kill me and then pressure my dad."

Tobin was amazed at how quick on the uptake she was. He would never have thought of that angle so quickly, but then again, he wasn't looking at it from her point of view.

She was impressive all round. In her vids, of course, she played the dumb sex kitten with little to say and much to do, namely fucking. Her publicity didn't do her justice. She was much more than sex personified. "I understand. Good idea, Doc, but I'm with Roxy. We'll try and contain this."

Doc shrugged. "It was just a notion. Roxy, is there anyone we could call to watch your dad?"

She eyed Doc suspiciously. "He's safe at my manager's. It's a closed community."

Tobin nodded, remembering the security at Roxy's place. It wouldn't hold out Tomlinson for long, but he'd have to cause a real kafuffle to get at him, so Roxy's dad would be safe for the time being. Tobin hoped the lawyer would decide it posed too many risks of exposure to do anything nasty. "Okay. We'll handle this here and now."

"Bluey here, Skipper. I've got the reactor idling and feeding into the primary drive."

"Well done, lad!" Axle cut in.

"I'm powering up the batteries."

"Good work, Bluey," Tobin said. "Wait for my word if we need to get underway in a hurry."

"Aye, aye, Skipper."

"Wetspot, you in position?"

"Aye, aye, Skipper, ready to cut the cables when you give the word."

Tobin glanced once more to Roxy. "This wasn't meant to happen. Tomlinson appearing on the scene has brought it all to a head. I had hoped to convince you that taking over the *Rauni* could satisfy all of us and keep Tomlinson and the corporation out of it."

"You can't expect me to take you seriously while you keep me cuffed."

She was right, of course. In her position, being trussed up wouldn't make him amenable to helping his kidnappers.

"She's right," Doc muttered.

"Skipper," Rachel's voice was tinged with alarm. "We have marines taking up positions both forward and aft. They have heavy weapons."

A cold shadow swept over him. It was all happening too quickly. He had expected to spend some time with Roxy, convince her to take over the *Rauni* and let him run it and they could thumb their noses at the corporations like they used to.

"Another limo. Big fat guy in a floral shirt."

Tobin saw Roxy react.

"Who is he?"

"I'll tell you if you let me go."

"I agree with the lady."

"Okay, Doc. But watch her. She bites."

He tossed Doc the keys. Once he released her she rubbed her wrists dramatically though he knew for certain that they had not been too tight. She was staring at him while she went through her act. There was something in the tilt of her head that seemed so familiar.

I shouldn't have watched so many of her vids. I think I know her.

"So, who's the fat guy?"

Her gaze softened and she pulled the coat tightly about her shoulders. "My manager, Absalom Sylvester Slough."

Tobin thumbed the com-unit. "Mr. Slough. Roxy is safe and will remain so. We will not harm her."

Roxy came and stood beside him, looking up at the screen. The fat man was talking to Tomlinson who was making short emphatic motions with his hands. She motioned to him to kill the microphone pickup. He did so.

"Slough will negotiate with Tomlinson," Roxy said. "He likes the idea of playing in the big league. He's probably wetting himself with the possibility of doing business with them."

Tobin considered her with surprise. She'd flicked from indignant outrage to co-conspirator in a matter of a moment. He thumbed the com-unit back live. "Mr. Slough, we are discussing a business matter with Roxy. Please be aware that Mr. Tomlinson, the legal representative of the Aqua Corporation, wishes your client harm as suggested by the armed marines that are moving into offensive positions around this ship. We will defend ourselves and the property of Miss Church, who you know as Roxy Talia. Be mindful of his ulterior motives, Mr. Slough. I believe you to be in just as much danger as Roxy."

"Well, that put the cat among the pigeons."

Tobin killed the mike. "What will Slough do now?"

"He'll negotiate with Tomlinson, but more carefully."

"What will you do?"

"I haven't decided."

Doc sat in the bridge command chair. "I don't think my captain explained the situation as clearly as he could have."

"Go on," Roxy said.

Tobin admired her calm demeanor. Though he had, in fact, kidnapped her, she had not run screaming to the hatch and tried to escape.

She was standing beside him calmly waiting for Doc to speak. God she was sexy. His cock stirred inside his trousers. He tamped those feelings down. If he hadn't met Su, Tobin figured he'd be thinking about Roxy in a completely different manner about now.

He thought it peculiar how he could hardly think of Roxy without Su entering his thoughts at the same time.

"An independent rain catcher like *Rauni* is something of a poisoned chalice. While it is an adventurous life and we are free to roam the great oceans of the world on a noble mission to supply the thirsty world with clean drinking water, we are players in a much bigger game. We are a thorn in the side of the corporations. They'd like nothing better than to sink us all so they can go on their merry way. The hundred or so private operators supply the bottled fresh drinking water to the cities. It's enough to moderate the price of drinking water in the market. Without us, the price you, your dad, everyone, would pay for water would be much higher. For that reason, the corporations pay pirates to hunt us down, disrupt our voyages and collection activities. They send marines to puncture our bladders -- that's what we store the fresh water we collect in for pickup -- and we have to pay for security to protect the bladders."

"I didn't realize such an industry existed."

"After the climate crash midway through the twenty-first century and the resulting population crash of 2077 the water industry was created. Independent water harvesters flourished during the corporation wars of 2110. Since the corporations came to a truce we've been an annoying thorn in their economic sides."

"I thought water came from recycling and desalination."

"That water is used for industrial, sewage and domestic use, but most of the fresh drinking water, usually purchased in bottles, comes from rain catchers."

"But bottled water is so expensive. How come you don't make any money out of it?"

"Taxes mostly, the cost of security and of course, the debt your father owes the banks. We have a month left before it forecloses."

She turned on Tobin. "How long before today had you been planning this?"

"A few days. I only found you accidentally."

"That explains it," she said.

"Explains what?"

"How you botched this. Geeze. This is a disaster."

"When Archie got sick I couldn't find you anywhere," he said defensively. "I only had the address that your mother gave Archie, but that turned out to be a dead end. I didn't know you danced for a living. Which prompts the question, I thought you made millions from your vids and merchandising?"

Her face hardened. "Slough got my signature on a bad, bad contract." She held up her hands. "Don't ask."

"So, will you help us?"

"What, and give up my career?" She held his gaze for long seconds before bursting out in laughter. "The look on your face is priceless."

Activity on the dock drew his eyes back to the screen.

"Uh-oh, they've reached an agreement," Roxy said. "Tell me, what sort of income could I expect from this?"

Doc brought up some figures on the small screen. "Here is last year's profit and loss."

Tobin waited silently while she considered the figures. He knew they weren't all that encouraging.

"Hardly a cash cow," she said. "Wait, I have an idea."

Tobin felt his jaw tighten. "It doesn't involve selling the *Rauni*, does it?"

"Not yet."

He took a deep breath. He'd have to be happy with that. He had no other choice.

"All right."

She motioned to him to activate the microphone. "Slough, honey, call me on this ship's number. I'm sure Mr. Tomlinson has it."

They watched the two men, one short and fat and the other tall and skinny, gesticulate at one another before the com-link hummed. They stopped talking and looked toward the bridge.

"What?" Slough said, suspicion thickening his tone.

"I have a business proposition for you."

"Business? What sort of business?"

"You've always said that we needed something new in my vids. That they were going stale."

"Yeah."

"Well. I have a set you wouldn't believe. A rain catcher, Slough. A real rain catcher."

Tobin watched the big man mull this over. He was, no doubt, considering all the angles, the costs and the possible profits.

"Go on."

"It will be a money spinner, Slough. At last you can compete with those sods that went up to the space station and filmed their vids in zero G."

Tobin realized the import of what she was considering. The image of a bunch of studs fucking her on his bridge flashed through his mind. He didn't like that image at all.

"I'll be her stud," he said suddenly and felt incredibly stupid. He avoided Doc's startled gaze.

Roxy shot him a surprised glance. Doc tried unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh.

"Who the fuck are you?" Slough demanded.

"He's the captain of the ship," Roxy said. "If we want to use the ship we need his permission."

"Has he fucked on a vid before?"

"No, he's new talent. But that's okay, you've said yourself that there are too few guys available for shoots. You even test drove a newbie today."

"Well..."

"This could be big, Slough."

"I'll think about it."

"Come on. What can go wrong?"

"Okay, twelve vids a year."

"Fuck, Slough. You'll wear me out."

Tobin wondered what he'd gotten himself into.

"Twelve a year for the next three years."

"Okay, but I want an extra five percent and the usual venue hire fees."

"Fuck off."

"And fifty percent of the merchandising."

"Fuck off."

"It's either that or I go into the water catching business and those corporation goons over there shoot at us and maybe kill me, in which case you get nothing."

She made a throat cutting motion with her hand and Tobin killed the mike.

"That will make him think."

"I'm not sure about making this a vid studio while at sea."

He heard Doc chuckling to himself and, when he shot him a smoldering glance, the medic pretended to look for something in his instrument bag.

"It will keep Slough on our side, and with him on board, there'll be too much exposure for Tomlinson to risk doing anything."

It was sound thinking, Tobin knew. But the idea of Roxy fucking on the *Rauni* would cause Archie to turn over in his grave.

"What will Tomlinson do?" she asked him.

"He'll try and stop this before it gets out of hand. He won't want the notoriety of pornos being made on the high seas when he tries to sink this ship." Tobin thumbed the com-link open. "Tomlinson. You there? Call me."

The com-link buzzed. "Okay, Tobin. You have five minutes left before I let these guys loose."

Tobin heard Slough protest. The marines turned their guns on his goons. It was about to get very nasty.

"Hold your dogs back, Tomlinson. I have a proposition."

"Go on."

"You guys have wanted to get rid of the independent contractors for years. I know Archie was a thorn in your side. He had his own private beef with you guys. But we don't. You understand? We don't have any crusade to risk our lives on. We just want to work. But you bastards won't let us. But I think we can work something out."

"Go on."

"We are water catchers, three generations in some cases. We want to carry on. If we agree not to go into competition with you for water collection, will you let us alone?"

A slight hesitation. "Of course."

"So, can we sell our water exclusively to you?"

Tomlinson considered the idea in ominous silence. "Exclusive rights?" he asked after a long minute.

"Absolutely, at the going market price."

"Less ten percent, otherwise there's no money in it for us."

"Five percent."

"Eight."

Tobin glanced at Roxy. "We can live with that," he whispered to her but to Tomlinson he said, "Seven and half."

"Eight," Tomlinson said firmly. He had the weight of the corporation on his shoulders. Tobin decided to let him save face. "All right, eight."

He cut the mike and let Tomlinson think it over.

"That must've hurt," Doc said.

"Tomlinson won't let us live any other way. By doing business with him, on the other hand, we become part of his vested interest. He'll actually make sure it works."

"Will he go for it?"

"Killing us and destroying the ship just creates a mess and exposes the corporation to risk. This is a safer option. I think he'll go for it." He glanced at Roxy.

"Will Slough go for your plan?"

"There's money in it, and fame. He'll go for it."

On the dock Slough and Tomlinson were on their respective phones. Tobin watched them, wondering what deals were being done, what decisions were being made.

Twenty tense minutes later the troops on the dock settled in behind makeshift shelters. No one had made any sort of move to withdraw, none trusting the others enough to be the first to leave.

"Making deals is all very well," Tobin said. He handed her a steaming cup of coffee. "But the moment we walk out of here, they can still shoot us without too much trouble and no one will care."

"I was thinking that myself. Give me the com-link."

He listened while she made a couple of calls and was impressed with her cool solution to the dilemma.

Fifteen minutes later, two independent news crews arrived in coptors, holocams floating beside them on their tiny gossamer wings. The independent newscasters had been the only source of true news for years and, despite government attempts to silence them, their audience was astronomical. Neither Slough nor Tomlinson could afford to look bad in front of them.

Tobin reveled in the surprise on Tomlinson's face as the journalists asked him about the ground breaking deal he had just struck with the crew of the *Rauni*. Slough had filled his chest with bloated self-importance and announced the new series of adult

holo-vids to be shot entirely on location on a rain catcher. "They will be the hottest series ever produced," he added triumphantly.

"Captain Tobin, when do you expect to set sail?" a reporter asked via the com-link.

"Immediately the Port Authority releases the *Rauni* from impound, my crew and I are ready to set sail."

"Are you pleased with the agreement between your ship's owner and the Aqua Corporation?"

"I am. It's a very workable agreement and my crew and I are pleased to once again be able to bring fresh water to the people of the world."

Chapter Seven

"Why did you help us?" Tobin asked.

Because of you, she thought.

They were sitting in the quiet bridge. The screen showed just a couple of marines, and a pair of Slough's goons lazily keeping watch to make sure the *Rauni* didn't slip port.

Gerry and one of Tomlinson's assistants were in the mess. It was a condition Slough and Tomlinson insisted on if they were to remove most of their respective forces. Both were being entertained by Doc who took great delight in taunting the corporation man with sly comments and caustic jibes.

Roxy studied Tobin, her lover turned kidnapper turned employee, and wondered what had brought her to this point. Her stomach gave a little flutter every time he looked at her and each glance raised her body to a new level of desire she'd not known since she was a teenager.

Tobin was manifestly sexy, but more importantly, now that she had seen him in action, he had a personality she could respect. He was strong, decisive and, in his boyish way, compassionate. She hadn't noticed anyone in the same way before.

His crew was loyal, loyal to the death. That they followed him in this harebrained scheme showed not only their own desperation, but their confidence that he would get them through.

He was gazing at her intently, his dark brown eyes questioning. She shifted uncomfortably. It was as if he was looking deeply inside her, raking for an answer. For some reason her answer to this question was important to him.

"Because this ship is my father's," she said. It was a lie, of course, but she guessed it was what he would want to hear and she wasn't yet ready to tell him about Su.

She wanted to tell him about Su, but couldn't, not yet. There was too much going on right now to explain it properly and she decided to keep up the masquerade for a little while longer.

She was in one sense pleased he wanted to be her stud, as he put it, but disappointed as well. He wanted to fuck Roxy, when she wanted him to make love to Su.

"Archie would be pleased if he could have heard you say that."

That hurt. He was studying her face, still searching, and she knew that he knew she lied. She suddenly resented his intrusion into her heart. No one had been deep inside her like this, never, and she wasn't sure she wanted him there.

A vindictive urge bubbled up through her anger. "Why did you volunteer to be my stud?"

"I honestly can't say."

"You're a fan, I believe."

"For many years, I've dreamed of making love to you."

"I want you to know that I'm not the tease you saw when you first brought me on board. I was acting, trying to get you to un-cuff my hands."

"I gathered that."

"I'm glad. I didn't want you to think I was a wanton slut."

He was silent.

"I'd like to get to know you better," she said, tracing the line of his jaw with her fingernail. "If you know what I mean."

"Roxy, a week ago I'd have jumped at the chance."

"What's stopping you? Rachel?"

"No, she's my friend and she's crew."

"Is there someone else?"

"I don't know," he said.

She trailed her fingers down the line of his shirt buttons, only stopping when she reached his belt. "We'll be at sea a long time," she said. "Will she wait, whoever she is?"

"I don't know."

"But you hope she will."

He nodded silently, his dark eyes glimmering. *Were they tears?*

"You realize, Tobin, don't you? That you only get one shot at Roxy Talia. I don't beg any man for sex."

His jaw tightened. "I'm sure."

"I just wanted you to realize what you are missing."

"I know it. Thank you for your kind offer, but I must say no."

She cupped the bulge of his erection "Of course, you still get to fuck me, don't you, as my on camera stud."

He disengaged her hand. "With all respect, Roxy. It's my duty."

She frowned. "It is?"

"It's an issue of discipline."

She frowned again.

"It would be bad for the morale of the crew and the reputation of the *Rauni* to have its owner fucked for the entire world to see, including our enemies, by porn-jockies. It's important to keep this in-house, if you know what I mean."

She was flummoxed. "So, fucking Roxy Talia is just a job for you?"

"Again with respect, it is."

Roxy's heart leapt. *Perfect answer, my Captain.*

* * *

Slough had rustled up a dour faced lawyer by the name of Lovis, who brought the relevant documents to the *Rauni's* bridge. In attendance were Tomlinson, Slough, Gerry, Doc and Tobin, who sat morosely in his command chair. The rest of the crew were in their defensive positions, watching on closed circuit vid in case there was treachery.

Roxy had caught Tobin staring appraisingly at her several times. Not just at her face, but her body too, tilting his head as if he was imagining her from different angles. He was, she guessed, trying to decide if he really could live with the idea of her being his boss.

She was sure this was not exactly what he imagined or wanted to happen.

Lovis spread the papers out across the map table and began explaining the details when Tomlinson picked up one of the documents. Lovis, a street lawyer who dealt with murderers and other assorted scum every day, stopped speaking and fixed the corporation man with an icy glare. Tomlinson gritted his teeth and dropped the papers back onto the table.

Roxy handed over her proof of identity, an official DNA test this time, and Lovis gave her a pen. She hesitated, the pen poised over the paper. "I sign this and this ship is mine?"

"This paper transfers title to you. The debt to the bank, of course, transfers along with it."

She looked to Tobin. He was gazing steadily at her. She would, in a moment's time, officially be his employer. He should be relieved. The ship was out of the corporation's reach and he and his crew had a job. That's what he had wanted.

The pen scratched its way across the paper and her heart gave a flutter. It was the biggest contract she'd ever signed. This was her new future. She had suddenly become a person of standing, of consequence.

Her dad was pleased with her and not at all shocked when she had explained the situation. He'd known that he wasn't her biological father, of course, but had never thought to mention it to her, especially after her mother had died. He hadn't seen the point of upsetting her, he'd explained. She wasn't sure how she felt about that, but hadn't pressed him for the full story. That could come later, when they'd both had more time to digest this strange turn of events.

"I'll witness it, if you like," Lovis offered.

"No," said Tobin from his chair. "I'll witness it."

He climbed out of his command chair and walked determinedly toward her. She admired him for that. He was suspicious of her intent, naturally. There was still a possibility she'd sell the *Rauni*, but he was taking responsibility for his actions, if only symbolically.

Roxy held out the pen and he took it. He stood right next to her, his bulk overshadowing her, his masculine scent washing over her like an aphrodisiac, setting her heart pounding and her pussy pulsing with insistent lust.

He bent over and his lips brushed her ear. "Keep my crew. The kidnapping was my idea. They were reluctant accomplices. Sack me, if you like, but keep them. They'll do you proud."

Her admiration for his gesture was destroyed by a surge of irritation. It was an empty gesture and he knew it. If she sacked him, his crew was so loyal they'd jump ship too, and she didn't know the first thing about hiring replacements. The ship would sit here uselessly in port getting her into the biggest debt imaginable.

No. Tobin still had the real power here.

She watched him sign, the signature without flourish, straightforward and plain.

"Congratulations, Miss Church," Lovis said. "You are the new mistress of *Rauni*."

"Master," Tobin corrected him. "Ships have masters, not mistresses."

"I should've warned you," Doc said to her from the corner. "The skipper already has a mistress, *Rauni* herself."

Tomlinson mumbled something under his breath and shoved a pile of his papers under Tobin's hands. "Our agreement," he said.

"Mr. Lovis," Tobin said. "Can you look over these papers and make sure that your client is not being screwed by the corporation?"

"Gladly. Let me see." He took the papers and sat down at one of the bridge chairs.

"Captain," Roxy said to Tobin. "Can I see you for a moment?"

Tobin followed her away from the others until she stopped next to the bridge windows. "Captain, now that I am officially the owner of the *Rauni*, I wish to conduct interviews of the crew to assess for myself their suitability."

She watched the fury rise through Tobin's body. His fists clenched and he stepped closer so that he towered above her. "What the fuck do you know about rain catching? How the fuck can you assess the skills of my crew?"

"I am the owner and I reserve the right to employ who I wish. I can sack you all, if that is what you desire and I'll employ someone to hire a new crew."

She thought he was likely to explode. She laid her hand on his arm. "Breathe, Captain. Breathe. All I want is a quiet chat to get acquainted. This is all new to me and I want to satisfy my... well, satisfy my fears that I may not be in safe hands."

He glared down at her. She rolled her eyes and, deciding now might be a good time to withdraw, spun around and strode over to Doc.

"Yes, Roxy?" he asked, his smile offering her a very welcome safe haven.

She quietly asked him to arrange interviews with the rest of the crew. She imagined Tobin's baleful glare on her back, but she was determined to satisfy her fears. He could lump it or leave it. "Please, Doc?"

Doc gave a chuckle and said he would and, to her absolute delight, called her boss.

Chapter Eight

"Hey, Skipper," Rachel said over the intercom. "You might want to come down here." There was a hint of disbelief in her voice. "I'm on the loading deck."

"On my way."

"What's up?" Roxy asked.

"No idea."

At the loading deck Bluey was hoisting a pallet of equipment from the dock. He was surrounded by a collection of long haired dirty looking types who were shouting instructions, gesticulating wildly and complaining to Rachel who blessed them with a patronizing smile.

Tobin glanced down onto the dock. Beside a flatbed truck there were more pallets. Two stretch limos pulled up followed by a couple of news vans.

"It's Slough and the other cast members."

"How many?"

"There are nine actors and seven crew."

Tobin's face became an angry scowl. "That's too many. We don't have the bunks or the food to feed this many people."

"We'll make do. We have been in some pretty cramped localities in the past. Last year we did a three-part epic in Hobart's old sewer system."

He looked at her to see if she was joking. She wasn't. "Slough has to provide food."

"I think he has already. He likes his delicacies. We'll eat like kings for the next few weeks."

It occurred to Tobin that Slough would also bring on board alcohol and drugs. He had better set the ground rules. A rain catcher was a dangerous place when chasing a storm.

"We'll be casting off with the tide tomorrow at dawn. There's a level one squall five hundred clicks off the coast. We'll use it to blow out the cobwebs, check the equipment and get ready for the real thing."

"You mean we'll be really chasing rain while we film?"

"Absolutely. This ship is an operating rain catcher, and we need to make money, or had you forgotten?"

Her brows furrowed. "How long will we be off shore?"

Tobin considered the rabble of scantily dressed women milling about Slough's limo and shaved a week off a rain catcher's customary shakedown cruise. "Three weeks."

"Fuck."

"What is it?"

She laughed. "I think he thinks they'll be away for a week at most."

"Then tell him to order in some more food. I can't cut it any shorter than that. We need to put the ship through all its paces before we hit the big ones."

"The big ones?"

"Level ten storms. Up round the equator is the cleanest water. Since the population crash last century, there's less air pollution up there now."

"No acid rain?"

"Yep. The local water we'll collect next week is not of a high quality. It will need to be processed to clean it up. Equatorial water on the other hand is pretty clean. We get the best rates for that water."

"I didn't realize the complexities," she said. "Though it means I'm going to be very busy."

Tobin cocked an eyebrow.

"It will be nonstop fucking, I'm afraid. Slough wants value for money. He'll want at least six vids out of this trip. That's at least thirty-six scenes, and if past vids are any indication, he'll want me in most if not all of them."

It was like a knife had sliced through his heart.

"I hope you're up for it," she said, a smile curling her lips. "Or have you changed your mind?"

He almost had, a dozen times, but the thought of her being with other men churned his guts into an agonizing ball. Despite his dreams of Su, he didn't want Roxy to be with anyone else but him. Besides, what he'd said about duty was true. It would be unthinkable for the owner of *Rauni* to be screwed by just anyone. "Of course not!"

"Slough has been burning the midnight oil writing the script incorporating the captain of the rain catcher and me, the hapless heroine, a virgin who doesn't know the carnal needs of men, and so must be taught by a willing captain." She studied his face for a long moment, those jade eyes reaching deep inside him and clutching his insecurity. She reached up and caressed his cheek with her finger. "What can you teach me, oh Captain?"

"Very little, I imagine."

She smiled, gazing up at him, her finger tracing the corner of his mouth.

He wanted to kiss that finger, then her hand, her wrist, her arm, every single centimeter of her flesh. This was becoming a nightmare.

"Our scenes should be memorable." With that she kissed him quickly on the cheek and skipped across the deck to the gang plank to say hello to her fellow actors.

* * *

Roxy licked her lips. Watching Tobin at the wheel of the *Rauni* had made her unquestionably horny. There was something very erotic about the dominant way he stood with his legs braced apart and how his forearms flexed when he adjusted the ship's course. She squeezed her thighs together and imagined what she would like to do with him, if only they were alone and he wasn't so busy.

Rachel was standing beside him, busy at the control panel, reading out some numbers to Tobin. Roxy had no idea what the numbers referred to. One more thing she'd have to learn before she could hold her head up in the presence of the crew.

Rachel said something and Tobin laughed. He was happy, no doubt about it. That contrasted with the last twenty-four hours. He'd been angry and aloof ever since Slough had come on board with the cast and crew of *Mistress of Rauni*, the title he'd given his new six-part epic.

Tobin's mood had soured considerably when Tomlinson had insisted on coming on board and supervising the first shakedown cruise. "To ensure you obey the conditions of your contract with Aqua Corp."

Every time she caught him, Tobin was too busy to talk to her, attending to the seemingly endless minute details necessary to get a rain catcher out to sea.

And now the day had arrived.

The three vid-cam girls, ordered by Tobin to "stay the hell out of my way," stood at the back of the bridge and filmed as Rachel and Tobin eased the *Rauni* away from the dock and, with the guidance provided by the harbor master's control tower, pressed on through the busy harbor toward the empty ocean.

The sun was rising over a scalloped horizon. Rays of yellow light pierced the sullen clouds and cast a golden glow around Tobin, giving him a god-like appearance. Roxy licked her lips again.

"I've watched some of your vids," Tomlinson said quietly.

Roxy stiffened. A sliver of fear sliced through her. Tobin had been sure that Tomlinson would've had her killed without a second thought. He might well have been at Juice Review that night to do just that. His presence on this voyage was like a spear of ice in her belly.

She set her jaw and lifted her eyes. "Is that right?"

"Your performances are, how do I say, very enthusiastic."

She looked up into his saturnine face and saw only malignancy in those dead eyes. She'd never met someone so tall before. She barely came up to the bottom of his rib cage. He reminded her of a vulture.

"I'm a professional, Mr. Tomlinson. I know what it is to work hard. I'd say you throw yourself into your work with equal enthusiasm."

"I do indeed." He motioned toward Tobin. "This will never work, Miss Church, or may I call you Roxy?"

"Miss Church will be fine."

"As you wish," he said, the anger in his voice barely restrained. "This crusade Tobin is on will only lead to disaster. Your father was barely surviving and this silliness will only extend the misery another few months."

"Tobin is very determined."

"He's obsessed with a dream, Miss Church. The problem with dreams is that they all too often end in nightmares."

The threat was obvious. "I don't understand you. We have a contract with you. Aqua Corp will buy our water for almost full market rate. You get what you want. Water, without any effort or risk. Surely you'll be satisfied with that."

The vulture shrugged. "But we are not the only corporation involved in the water market, Miss Church. That's what you've failed to understand. Without our protection, you'll be at the mercy of pirates and the other corporations not to mention the weather. Working outside our protective umbrella will, inevitably, prove fatal. I feel sorry for you, Miss Church. I really do."

"Why won't you protect us, protect your investment?"

He ignored her question, though his eyes, dull like those of a dead fish, fixed her with an unsettling stare.

"The cameras wish me to do a bit of acting now, Mr. Tomlinson."

He gave her a wink and an oily smile before walking over to the opposite bridge windows to peer out at the docks.

Roxy shivered in revulsion at the odious man and his unstated threat. She hadn't considered all the ramifications of going into the water business. From the bits and pieces she'd gleaned from the crew during her so-called interviews, the water catching business was fraught with danger. Was she so naïve not to consider these dangers more seriously?

It seemed that the crew was more than happy with Tobin's ability to keep them safe. She didn't doubt his competence. The interviews had given her a consistent picture of a man devoted to his ship and her master, her biological father. Tobin was the most loyal of men and he inspired loyalty in all who served with him. Each of the crew would easily risk their lives for him and they'd passed that test only yesterday.

To receive that sort of loyalty could mean only one thing. Apart from being a natural leader, Tobin was, it seemed, a genuinely decent man, probably the first truly decent man she had ever met.

"Roxy." Cleo, the primary camera girl, motioned toward Tobin.

Roxy straightened the brief transparent top and pulled the tiny shorts out of her ass crack. She slinked toward Tobin and wrapped an arm around his waist. "All proceeding normally?" she asked.

"What?" he asked, a mystified expression on his face.

Roxy rolled her eyes. He hadn't read his lines, not that they were good lines. Slough was a minimalist when it came to dialogue, but at least they were something to link the sex scenes together. It wasn't the first time an actor fluffed his lines and Roxy knew exactly what to do. She improvised.

Looking up into Tobin's confused face she cupped her breast with her palm. "I'm so looking forward to our voyage, Captain," she said seductively.

"You are?" he replied.

He was doing this on purpose. Bastard.

"We can finally get some privacy," she continued.

"Won't my crew get in the way?"

"I'm sure we can manage some time alone, don't you think?"

"The midnight watch, you mean?"

Ah, he'd thrown her a lifeline. "Yes, perfect. The midnight watch where we can get to know each other better."

"I'll look forward to it. But now, I have to negotiate us out of the harbor."

Fuck, just when it was getting good. Roxy's pussy was very, very moist.

"Later, my Captain," she said, reaching out and cupping his cock, which she noticed was nice and hard inside his pants. "I look forward to midnight."

"As do I," he said and took his eyes back to whatever was so important outside the bridge windows.

Roxy smiled and slinked back to one of the empty chairs. Sitting back, she opened her shorts, exposing her hairless pussy. With the vid-cam girls hovering over her she peeled open her dewy slit and fingered the moist opening. Her clit was erect, poking from beneath its hood like a miniature penis. She rubbed her thumb over it and gasped.

She was actually horny. While she played with herself she kept her eyes on the back of Tobin's head. Masturbation was something she only ever did on vid and it was usually cold and calculated, playing to the camera and in no way considering her own pleasure.

Her clit was singing with electricity, a tune of lust, and each thrum of her thumb sent a new note of pleasure to join the symphony that was inexorably building to orgasm.

Tobin turned, his dark eyes settling on her. Lust etched itself across his face. She came, suddenly, crying out, and when she opened her eyes everyone else on the bridge had turned to look at her. Tobin's face was unreadable, though the bulge in his pants was very noticeable.

"Shouldn't you be watching the road?" she said, suddenly embarrassed. "I mean the ocean?"

Tobin turned away. Tomlinson, she noted, continued to stare at her, his malevolent eyes glowing with malignant desire.

Chapter Nine

Roxy found Tobin in his usual habitat, the bridge. He was poring over some satellite images with Wetspot. Roxy stood very close to him, but he was so absorbed in the hydrologist's information he didn't notice her at all.

"What's the probability it will develop into a grade three?" he asked.

"Seventy-five, I reckon."

"Good enough. Give Rachel the projections and set a course for it immediately."

"Aye, aye, Skipper." Wetspot bundled up the images and turned. "Oh, hi there, boss. How are you?"

"I'm fine, Wetspot. And you?"

"Pretty good. Just found a grade three. We'll make more cash out of this trip than we thought."

"That's good."

"Sure is."

"Wetspot?" Tobin said. "The figures? To Rachel?"

"Oh, yeah, sorry, Skipper."

"I like her," Roxy said. "How old is she?"

"Didn't you ask her at her interview?"

"Come on, you're not still sore about that are you?" His glowering eyes told her he was. "Listen, Captain. I've forgiven you for kidnapping me and destroying everything I thought I knew about my life, so why can't you just lean back and enjoy our new relationship?"

"You have?"

"Well, mostly. You hurt my back, you know. When you put me over your shoulders. I think I wrenched a vertebra."

"Get Doc to take a look at it for you."

"I'd rather you did. It was your fault, after all."

His face was a mass of emotions. At that moment Roxy contemplated telling him she was Su. Not telling him had been playing on her mind. She found that the longer she went without telling him, the harder it was becoming to broach the subject. She decided she might as well tell him now.

"Where's your shadow, Gerry?" he asked suddenly, breaking her resolve.

"Shadowing my other shadow, Tomlinson. I don't trust that man."

"He's not a man, he's a vulture."

"That's exactly what I think of him. It's uncanny, that we both used the same word to describe him."

"Hardly surprising. He looks like one."

She laughed. "I guess." She reached out and touched his cheek. "So, will you forgive me?"

"Of course. You're my employer, the owner of *Rauni*."

"Is that all I am to you? The Mistress of *Rauni*?"

He rolled his eyes at the vid's title. "I hardly know you."

"Am I not Archie's daughter?"

"There's no denying that."

"So, give me the benefit of the doubt."

He did not reply. She sighed in frustration. He was infuriating. "Don't forget our rehearsal tonight."

"What do you mean?"

"I like watching you get all flustered. It's cute."

"What do you mean rehearsal?"

"Don't get all anxious on me. Remember, we arranged it this morning. Our date, the midnight watch. It will give us a chance to... talk."

He cleared his throat and changed the subject. "What's Slough doing?"

"He's camming the fuck scene in the engine room."

"If he gets in Axle's way I'll throw 'em overboard."

"I'll go warn him." She turned quickly and escaped, knowing he stared after her all the way outside the bridge.

* * *

Roxy helped Slough set up a couple of scenes, the first in the mess and the second in Axle's cabin, which the engineer had kindly given up to Lisette and Lauren, the look-alike actresses who pretended to be twins.

"So," she said, "are you glad we did this now?"

"So far so good," he said, gloomily. Now that she looked at him closely, she could see that his pudgy face was without its customary ruddy complexion and was green instead. He was seasick!

"This will make you famous," she said encouragingly. "You'll go down in cinematic history."

He brightened. "It just may be the making of us. I've got the marketing guys on the job already."

She didn't have the heart to tell him that she intended this to be her last vid series. She'd wear whatever costs he exacted for breaking the contract, but she figured once he was famous he wouldn't put up too much of a fight.

After a nap in Rachel's cabin Roxy went looking for Gerry. It was also a good way to get her bearings and find her way around the boat. Ship, she corrected herself. Tobin was particular about what people called the *Rauni*.

She'd mispronounced it once and when he'd corrected her, she'd asked him where the name came from. *Rauni* was, Tobin had explained, a fertility goddess of Finland. Roxy had looked it up on the ship's computer. The name literally meant woman, and she was the goddess of sexuality. No wonder she'd been horny since being carried on board.

Gerry was nowhere to be found. On her way back to the bridge she ran into Tomlinson in the starboard companionway. The bastard had the audacity to grope her.

"Touch me again and I'll cause you great pain," she said.

He held up his hands in mock surrender, laughed and gave her one of his disgusting winks. She shuddered.

Roxy found Tobin alone in the bridge. Outside the bridge windows it was pitch black. "How are we progressing?"

"Ploughing through the waves like a hard cock in a wet juicy cunt," he replied with the lines he was supposed to say that morning.

She laughed. "I knew you were playing with me."

"I read the script like you asked me. I just can't say stuff like that."

"You did a good job just then."

"Well, I don't want to say the lines Slough has written."

"Fair enough, we'll work around them. What would you like to say?"

He kept his eyes on the dark outside. "That I've wanted you ever since the first time I saw you. That you are Archie's daughter and I wish you'd give up the vids, that I've met someone else and..."

"And..."

"That I wish you'd stay on this ship, with me."

She stopped breathing.

He turned to face her, reached out and took her into his arms and drew her to him. He bent his head and claimed her lips with his. The kiss was long and hard, his lips urgent, his tongue insistent. Pressed close, she could feel his cock swelling against her thigh. Feeling it so close she wanted to hold it, feel it, take it in her fingers and caress it. Her pussy pulsed with desire.

It seemed to her that over the last couple of days something had been stirred to life within her. She'd become aware of a rising need, an increasing urgent desire to be in exactly this situation, wrapped tight in his enveloping arms, soaking in his warmth. She was melting within those comforting arms. She felt safe, secure. She was home.

She was starting to feel schizophrenic. She wanted him to make love to Su and reject Roxy.

It was madness to delay telling him. If he made love to her as Roxy, she knew it would never be good enough for her. If she told him she was Su, he might reject her for making a fool of him.

It was a risk she had to run and now was the time.

The hatch swung open behind them. He released her.

"Ah, sorry," Rachel said.

"All clear ahead," Tobin said. "Radar is clear, Sav-Nat is clear as a bell."

"Thanks, Skipper."

"I'll see you in four hours."

"Aye, aye."

Grasping her hand Tobin led Roxy to the hatch. "I'm taking Roxy on a tour of the ship."

"Aye, aye, sir."

He took her down the companionway. "I'm sorry I haven't shown you around so you can see what you've signed up for."

"There is time, surely," she said, hoping to do something much more interesting than take a guided tour. "I want to talk to you."

"Sure, on the tour. No probs." His tone had become clipped and she put it down to enthusiasm. She knew how much he loved his ship and he wanted to show off. Once again the moment had slipped away.

Tobin stopped mid-stride and pulled her to him. His lips claimed her and again, she melted into his body. Time stood still.

Roxy ground her breasts into his chest, her pussy into his thigh. She couldn't help herself. She just wanted him.

He wanted Roxy as well. His cock was tenting his trousers, pressing into her flesh. She reached down and stroked the solid shaft through the thin material.

He broke the kiss. "Come on, there is much to see."

She opened her mouth to protest, to say she had something to tell him, but she sensed that this tour was important to him. He wanted to show her the ship. She

guessed it was some sort of bonding process. Perhaps he wanted to gauge her real interest in the ship, to make sure that she was one of them, to be sure that she belonged on the *Rauni*.

Or maybe it was a test that she wasn't just a slut. If a test was what he wanted to give, then it was a test she'd have to pass. "I want to see and understand everything," she told him. "But remember, I am new to this, so you might have to tell me some of the details again. It won't be because I wasn't listening."

His broad smile creased his face. "I'll just show you the main processes. It will take years to get to know it like your father did, but you don't need to know every valve or pump, not yet at least."

"Thank goodness for that."

Grasping her hand, he hurried her down the companionway. "The collecting array is stowed at the moment. Tomorrow we'll unfurl it to ensure it is functioning. Wetspot will then test the filters, Axle will prime the pumps and we'll inspect the first couple of bladders to ensure there are no fabrication errors."

Though she'd never been involved in rain catching, she was suddenly impatient to get started. Tobin's enthusiasm was contagious. "When will we strike some rain?"

"A couple of days."

He showed her the control unit that unfurled a collection array of over forty-five thousand square meters.

"Just a light sprinkle of rain will yield forty-five thousand liters an hour which, at the going rate of fifty bucks a liter, is good money."

"So, explain why we don't make money out of this?"

"Over ninety-nine point nine five percent of that money goes to costs, mainly to taxes."

She was astounded. "Bloody hell!"

"To make it pay we have to chase the monsoon rains at the equator. It's also the cleanest rainwater on the planet."

"So, how much rain do we get at the equator?"

"A lot. The storms are smaller than they used to be and they move pretty quick, so we need to follow them. We have a safe working capacity of about one point eight million liters per hour. That's ninety mill gross dollars, of which we clear..."

"Not very much."

He laughed. "Wetspot's job is to watch the weather sat data so Rachel can plot a course that captures the heaviest rain for the maximum period of time while we dodge other rain catchers, fixed corporation facilities and pirates."

Their tour had brought them to the stern of the *Rauni*.

"Below us is the ejection ramp. Once we collect the water, we filter it and pump it straight into bladders that we seal and drop behind us."

"Like eggs?"

"Yep. There is a fleet of private tugboats that string the bladders together and tow them to water processing and bottling facilities. Wetspot's other job is to monitor the quality of the water in each bladder so we get the best price on the open market."

"Will the deal with Aqua Corp hurt us?"

"It sure will. But we'll survive. We are taxed on what we make selling the water. So the slice Aqua takes is before tax."

He was leading her down a flight of steps and they were in a large empty room with a wide conveyor belt in the center. "This is where the bladders are filled from that." He pointed up to a large pipe assembly in the ceiling. "And that," he said, pointing to the hull, "opens out to form a ramp. The conveyor belt extends out at an angle and the full bladders travel down it and are gently deposited onto the surface of the sea."

"Incredible."

"We'll test all this tomorrow."

She opened her mouth to ask a question but his mouth had covered hers and he pulled her to him once again. Without breaking the kiss he hoisted her onto the conveyor belt and laid her back. The rubberized rollers were surprisingly comfortable against her spine.

His urgent tongue explored her mouth and his hands ran over her breasts, caressing them through the thin material of her blouse. She opened her legs. She wanted him so bad but she had to tell him before his lust for Roxy ruined it all. "Stop!" she said, pushing him away.

He put a fingertip to her lips. His eyes glittered mischievously. "I told you there was someone else," he said.

She nodded slowly, dreading what he was about to say. He was going to say he couldn't wait for Su, his Miss Right. She knew he was going to give the platinum blonde up for Roxy, his Miss Right Now. Damn it!

"Wait!" she said, wanting to beat him to it.

"No. I have to tell you this before we go any further. I fell in love with a girl I met when I was at rock bottom. I have to tell you, she saved my life. When Archie died and *Rauni* was impounded it was the end of the road for me. But this woman, this goddess who came from nowhere and just as quickly disappeared, gave me hope that maybe life could be good again."

"Tobin, I..."

"Sssh, I have to say this. For years I've dreamed of you, Roxy. I've dreamed of holding you just like this, but it was always just the fantasy of a lonely sailor. Now that I have you, I also have a big dilemma. This other woman, I'll tell you her name, she's called Su, she's very special, and I don't want to risk losing her. I hope I haven't upset you. I know rejection is hard to take."

Roxy opened her mouth but words refused to come. She was so happy.

"Having said that, I just can't keep my thoughts away from you. I want to kiss you, I want to make love to you. Three years of dreaming about you, about Roxy, well, it's turned out to be more powerful than a single night of passion with a stranger."

"What?"

He reached below the conveyer belt. "Can you do me a favor?"

She couldn't speak. Her mind was in a whirl of confusion.

"I asked one of your fellow actresses to find your stuff for me."

"What are you talking about?" she managed to ask.

"These." He produced a plastic bag and dumped its contents onto the belt beside her; a platinum wig, a bandeau, stilettos, blue makeup and an eye contacts case.

"What do you say, Su? Want to relive old times?"

She looked at his grinning face and twinkling eyes. "You knew?"

He nodded with his body convulsing with suppressed laughter. She pushed him away. "How long?"

"I have to have some secrets," he said and kissed her.

He popped the buttons and opened her blouse, exposing her breasts to his roaming hands. He broke the kiss so he could look at her. "Su or Roxy, who would've thought a name would mean so much? Whatever your name, you are the most beautiful woman alive," he said.

He squeezed her nearest breast and kissed her erect nipple. It was like zapping her with an electric spark. He extended his tongue while he kept his eyes on her. He licked the very tip of her hardened nub. She gasped and arched her back so she could thrust her whole breast into his warm mouth.

He released her, gazed into her eyes for a moment then kissed her nipple again. Her breasts were afire, and his hot mouth, teasing tongue and firm lips made her delirious with desire.

One of Tobin's hands had wandered down between her breasts to her stomach. She gasped and her flesh quivered in anticipation. She just wanted to drag him up on top of her and pull his cock into her...

He was deftly unbuttoning her shorts and flicking her nipple with his tongue, making it ache between each teasing touch. His fingers snaked inside her shorts and she lifted her buttocks so he could pull them along her thighs and over her knees. His fingers immediately found her moist slit. She wasn't wearing panties.

"Am I wet?" she asked teasingly.

"Very." With a deft movement of his thumb and forefinger he separated her swollen pussy lips, exposing her inner flesh to the cool air. She shivered in absolute delight.

"What about condoms?"

Thank God he means business, she thought. His finger entered her and she gasped. She threw back her head and adjusted her pelvis to the gentle invasion. "You mean the bareback sex on camera?"

A moan escaped her throat and a second finger entered her. His thumb rasped against her flesh, surrounding her hardened clit.

"Well," she continued when she regained her breath, "we are dosed up with anti-venereals, so that we are the safest sexual partners in the world. I'll get Doc to give you a shot if you like. Lasts six months, then have a booster that will do you for life. It's a retroviral broad spectrum variant that mutates to match the invading virus. I've not had a single cold or flu in the last three years."

"That's a relief," he said and kissed her on the lips.

"So why did you want to be my partner in the vids?"

"Do we still have to do that?"

"Slough won't be happy."

"Let me handle Slough."

His fingers moved inside her and she lost her train of thought for a few seconds. She was so wet, could hear the juices being churned by his busy fingers. He inverted his fingers so the pads were facing upward and he found that spot that sent her over the edge.

She thought she screamed, though she wasn't sure. She felt her body suddenly tense, release with a series of violent shudders that had her convulsing in pure pleasure. When she came to herself she found she was clinging to him.

Wow!

He gazed into her eyes. "I think you know the real reason I want to be with you, and no one else."

"Are you a jealous lover?"

"I don't know. I've never been in that position."

A warm sensation washed over her and settled beneath her breast. "No one's ever cared about me enough not to want to share me."

"That's the past," he said quietly and kissed her. His kiss became suddenly urgent, wild, feral. His fingers resumed their insistent actions inside her. Her juices flowed around them and she felt herself sinking once again into an ocean of pleasure.

"Stop," she said, barely able to break away from his lips. "I want to feel you inside me. Your fingers are wonderful, but I want to have your cock there."

He withdrew his fingers and stepped back. She sat up and fumbled with his belt, ripped at the buttons, pulled nervously at his zipper. He shucked off his shirt and his masculine scent washed over her. She peeled his trousers back, revealing that hard muscled stomach above his groin.

He hooked his thumbs in the waistband and pulled them down to his knees. She heard his boots hit the deck and he stepped out of his trousers.

Roxy flicked her gaze down to his cock.

Oh, my. It was an impressive organ. Thick and long, it was a work of art.

"Get up here," she said.

"Is sixty-nine one of your set moves?"

She gave a husky chuckle. "I want to suck your cock and I want to feel your tongue on my clit. Sixty-nine is not camera worthy, so you don't see it a lot in the vids."

He smiled and climbed up onto the conveyer belt. She twisted around and straddled his face. Tobin's cock was ramrod straight. She wrapped her hand around the thick, warm girth. Her fingers barely touched he was so thick. The helmet atop the shaft was spongy to her lips. She stretched her mouth wide to take him in.

His tongue had licked its way along her slit up to the hood of her clit. Roxy resisted the urge to grind downward on his face, but let him flick her clit with the tip of his tongue.

The jolt of pleasure shot through her and she took his cock further into her mouth. The solid shaft stretched her lips, but felt so warm and silky smooth.

He spread her pussy lips with his fingers and ran his tongue inside her slit then flattened it to pressure her clit. Roxy shuddered in pleasure. His tongue flicked along the flesh, surrounding her clit, sending shivers of sensations scudding through her body.

He moved his hands to her breasts, rubbing her aching nipples between forefinger and thumb. The combined action of fingers and tongue sent shivers of pleasure rippling through her quivering flesh.

Roxy felt her climax building, an increasing tension in every sinew. She didn't want to come on his tongue. She wanted him inside her.

"Fuck me," Roxy gasped. She climbed off his face and scrambled along the conveyor belt to give herself room and laid down. She opened her legs wantonly. Her pussy was so wet, from his saliva and her juices. She held the lips apart in open invitation. "Fuck me now."

Tobin had followed her up the belt and was kneeling between her legs. His cock, slick with her saliva, pointed like an arrow at her lust swollen pussy.

He lowered himself over her, pausing with the head of his cock at the entrance of her sex, his eyes fixing her with an earnest gaze.

"Fuck me."

He adjusted his hips. The head of his cock nudged her lips apart and slipped in. He tortured her, sliding it in centimeter by glorious centimeter. His shaft stretched her pussy wide and she grunted as she accommodated his girth.

He closed his eyes and sank deeper inside her. When his balls settled against her ass, Tobin stopped and opened his eyes. She was drawn into his loving gaze and surrendered whatever conscious thoughts she had left. He bent his head and hungrily claimed her lips. She ran her fingers through his hair, holding his head close and tight.

He withdrew slowly, letting the ridge of his cock rub against the sensitive spots inside her pussy. He left his shaft hovering at her opening for a moment before plunging in again.

Tobin quickly increased the pace, from a slow, tantalizing entry and withdrawal to a more rapid, frenetic fucking. She grunted at the onslaught. Then he slowed, adjusted his hips and the angle of attack, resuming a more leisurely fucking. The sensations, contrasted with those of only a moment ago, made her body sing.

He changed the angle yet again and a whole new wash of sensation swept through her. Her orgasm was building, inexorably, with each thrust, with each change in angle. Her muscles clenched and her pussy walls closed around his shaft in a powerful embrace.

Suddenly she was coming. Tobin's thrusts were becoming more frenetic and his thick cock swelled. He cried out as he came, his cock pumping in synchronicity with the clenching pulsations of her pussy.

Roxy clung to him until the spasms passed. They were both slick with sweat. He kissed her and she felt his cock swell again inside her. This time, he fucked her slowly. She moved beneath him, meeting each of his thrusts with a gentle tilt of her hips. With eyes locked in a mutual, loving gaze they built to another orgasm.

It was gentler, this time, more prolonged, so she could savor each glorious pulse of carnal energy sweeping through her body.

"Oh, my Captain," she whispered.

Chapter Ten

Later that evening, Roxy was out on deck, catching some fresh air and trying to figure out when Tobin had realized she had been Su. She couldn't pinpoint the moment and smiled to herself, thinking what a good actor he was.

Above her the stars shone down on a calm, dark ocean and the breeze was cool on her skin. Roxy had never been so happy. She breathed deep, thinking for the first time in her life that everything just might work out.

The sea was flat and the *Rauni* was making good progress. She peered down at the foaming water, thinking that never would she have dreamed of ending up the owner of a rain catcher.

She was suddenly aware that someone was standing behind her. It was Tomlinson.

"Hello there, Miss Church."

"I have nothing to say to you, Mr. Tomlinson."

She shivered in revulsion when she noticed his intense stare. She looked past him and saw that he was alone. "Have you seen Gerry?" she asked him.

He ignored her and gave her an oily smile. "Though I prefer to call you Roxy Talia, the slut whore that a hundred dicks have skewered, or is it a thousand? I guess an extra one won't matter any."

Before she could react he'd grabbed her by the wrist.

"Let me go, you bastard."

"Not till after some fun, you little slut."

His grip was incredibly strong and she kicked out at him, connecting with a shin. Tomlinson grunted and tightened his hold.

"You son of a bitch!"

It was Tobin.

He launched himself at the lawyer. Tomlinson grunted in pain and surprise. Tobin struck him across the jaw and sent him careening to the railing. A lightning fast left, followed by an equally fast right had Tomlinson flat on his back on the deck.

Tobin picked him up by the collar and thrust him against the railings and balanced him by the hips over the thirty-meter drop to the sea. Tobin steadied himself, ready to flip Tomlinson over the edge completely.

"You're dead meat, Tobin. Dead meat," Tomlinson laughed.

There was something in the way he said it. His angry voice held a degree of certainty that didn't herald some future threat of revenge. It was much more immediate than that. "Tobin," she whispered, her hand on his arm.

Tobin had noticed it as well. "What have you done, you bastard?"

"Go to hell."

Tobin grabbed him by the ankle and in a fluid motion flipped him over the railing. Tomlinson screamed.

Roxy thought Tobin had dropped him over the side, but he was holding the lawyer by the ankles.

"Tell me what you've done," Tobin said, leaning over the railing looking down at the suddenly rigid lawyer. The foamy waters beneath washed noisily past the *Rauni's* hull. Tomlinson was softly whimpering.

"Threatening to kill and facing it are two different things, aren't they, you sniveling piece of shit."

"Gerry, find Gerry," Tomlinson screamed. "I've done nothing."

"I doubt that. Where is he? Where's Gerry?"

"I don't know. I don't know! He's acting alone."

"Skipper? What's going on?" It was Axle's young apprentice.

"Bluey, help me pull him up."

"Aye, aye, Skipper."

Together they hoisted a blubbering Tomlinson back over the railing. Tobin questioned him more but Tomlinson was a quivering mass of terror. He gave up in disgust. "Lock him in the head."

"The smelly one, Skipper?"

"Absolutely."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Bluey secured his hands behind him with a length of cord he pulled from his overall pocket. He led him away with a wry smile on his young lips.

"It can't be true," Roxy said. "Gerry wouldn't do anything against me."

"I'm sure he wouldn't. He's very protective of you. I saw that at Juice Review. There's no doubt about his loyalty. But if Tomlinson got a hold over him..."

"He wouldn't kill us or harm us."

"Tomlinson doesn't necessarily want to kill us. Sink us, maybe. We have a number of corporation ships within an hour's sailing. He may be planning to sink the *Rauni* and has arranged a rescue."

"But why? We have a contract with them."

"There's more than one corporation."

"You mean he works for someone else?"

"Stranger things have happened." He took her hand. "The most vulnerable part of the ship is the aft ramp. There we are close to the water line and an explosion would not only destroy our propulsion system but open us up to the sea."

"Would Gerry know that?"

"Possibly. If he served during the war he'd know about rain catchers. Tomlinson certainly would."

Tobin contacted Rachel and instructed her to get everyone to the forward life boats while they set off for the aft ramp. They found Gerry there, crouching between the bulkheads, wiring a series of packages to the inside of the hull.

"Gerry, what are you doing?" Tobin asked calmly.

"Leave me be. Get to a life boat," he said, his usually strong voice quivering with emotion. "I have enough explosives here to blow the aft right off *Rauni*."

"Why, Gerry?" Roxy cried. "Why?"

"He has my daughter. The bastard has my daughter."

Roxy's heart broke. "Oh, Gerry, I'm so sorry."

"You don't have to do this," Tobin said. "We have Tomlinson and we have friends on shore. We'll set her free."

"They'll kill her if I don't blow up the ship on schedule."

"They'll kill her even if you do. You know that."

Gerry wiped away the tears from his eyes. "I can't risk it."

"We'll save her," Tobin repeated. "I promise."

Roxy reached out her hand. "Trust him, Gerry. I do."

Gerry's finger hovered over the detonator switch.

"Don't do anything rash, Gerry," Roxy said. "There has to be another way." She considered their options. She assumed Tobin was preparing to rush him, but that would surely end in disaster. He knew Gerry was doing this for his daughter's life. There was nothing she could offer that would beat that.

"It's not just Tomlinson," Gerry cried, tears streaming down his cheek. "The corporation has her."

Axle was at Tobin's side, whispering in his ear. "Gerry. Think about this. Tomlinson has spilled his guts and Slough has it all on vid. I know where your daughter is. We'll send the news crews there. The corporation won't risk the bad publicity. We can save her. Let us save her."

Gerry glared at them, searching for reassurance.

"Trust Tobin," Roxy said. "Trust him, Gerry."

She experienced a frozen moment of terror as Gerry's eyes dropped to gaze questioningly at the detonator in his hand.

Roxy reached for it. Gerry let the detonator slip out of his grasp and into her palm before slumping against the hull, weeping.

Roxy handed the detonator to Tobin and went to him, kneeling between the bulkheads, hugging her friend to her chest.

Tobin delicately unscrewed the detonator's actuator. Only when the switch was completely dismantled did he sit on the floor beside her and wipe the sweat from his forehead.

Epilogue

Life had never felt so right.

Though Tobin's bunk was narrow Roxy savored the fact that it ensured their lovemaking had more complete body-to-body contact than she'd been used to for the last three years.

So entwined, flesh drenched in sweat and sex, they slid together in an intimate embrace that massaged and inflamed every inch of her body.

"What now?" she panted after the waves of her last orgasm had subsided enough to allow rational thought.

"I'm going to make love to you again."

"Mmmmmmm, I like the sound of that." She propped herself onto her elbow and traced the curly, sweat-slicked hair on his chest. "Though, I meant, what now with us?"

He took a long exaggerated breath. "If you're asking can I marry you, then the answer is no."

"What?"

"I may be captain of this ship," he grinned, "but I can't marry myself."

She beat him softly on the breast. "You bugger." Then the full import of what he said became clear. "Marry me?"

"Well, of course."

"I love you," she said and kissed his lips.

"I love you too." And he kissed her back. "There is something that troubles me."

She kissed him again. "I know. That's what I was going to tell you."

He nodded in understanding. "Are you sure?"

"Absolutely. There's no point making a new beginning and dragging along a lackluster past."

He twisted beside her, his insatiable erection pressing into her inner thigh. "And you'll stay on *Rauni*?"

"Wild seahorses couldn't drag me off her."

He kissed her lips. "That's how I feel," he said, raising his body so that he hovered above her and once again pushed open her moist pussy with his cock.

She encircled his head with her arms and drew his face down so she could kiss his mouth, his chin, the line of his jaw, the flesh of his neck.

His shaft slid deeply into her with familiar ease, filling her completely. She adjusted the angle of her lips to take him even deeper. He groaned in appreciation.

Her sensitized nipples brushed his chest and in response, she arched her back and surrendered herself once again to his knowing thrusts.

Tobin bent his neck to take one tingling nipple between his lips, teasing the hard nub with the tip of his agile tongue. The root of his cock ground against her clit and a tidal wave of warmth flooded through her.

"Oh, God," she moaned and the frisson of orgasm took her breath away.

* * *

Slough was peeved at having his editing interrupted. "Well, what is it?"

"I'm finished," Roxy said. "No more vids."

"Like hell," Slough hissed.

"Hey, Slough," Tobin said, his steely glare full of incipient violence. "I've got an idea for you to consider."

Slough swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing nervously. "What's that?"

"A new direction for Slough Industries' holo-vids."

"And what's that?"

"You're going to be an award winning documentary producer. Your first will be a ground breaking series on the rain catcher industry. You have episode one already on tape. Gerry is your witness, you have our testimony and you have Tomlinson confessing to murder on tape as well. This has blockbuster written all over it. This could mean the big time for you."

Roxy stared at Slough challengingly. "What do you say?"

Slough licked his lips. "We can still use your boat?"

"My ship," Roxy corrected him. "*Rauni* is my ship."

Mikala Ash

Mikala Ash wakes up every morning to the sound of the crashing surf and has her first coffee of the day on her verandah overlooking the wide Pacific Ocean. It's a double-edged blessing, she says:

I have to drag myself away to do anything at all -- like work. I'm a Management Consultant and I don't think Ricky (my beautiful Border Collie) fully understands the economic necessity of me working to keep him in the lifestyle he's become accustomed to (typical male). He just wants me to run with him along the beach all day chasing those pesky sea gulls. He's good company though and, if there are shape shifters in the world, I think I'd like him to be one -- loyal, trustworthy, obedient and protective. A voracious reader, I've been writing in one form or another since I was little. I'm so lucky that I've found a way of sharing my passion for spicy romance and the more fantastical realms that hover just beyond our grasp.