

CENTAUR

A muscular man with a chiseled physique stands in a lush green forest, wearing camouflage pants and black boots. He is looking towards the camera. In the foreground, a woman with long brown hair, wearing a tan hat, a black strappy crop top, and denim shorts, is looking down at something in her hands. The background is filled with tall, moss-covered trees and dense foliage.

NOBILIS

Centaur

By

Nobilis

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*To D, for understanding, to S, for support, and
to A, for encouragement.*

Chapter One

It took three men to bring him into the little clinic. He would stand seven feet tall if he'd been upright, and his limp arms bore the muscles of an olympic weightlifter—dense, not bulky like a bodybuilder. The green and black camouflage paint on his face and chest gave his features a sinister cast. His square, powerful jaw and hairy eyebrows gave his face an extremely masculine edge. His reddish-brown hair was more like fur, short and thick.

Opal checked him over quickly. He had two gunshot wounds to the chest and one in the abdomen; his vital signs were weak. "Internal bleeding. Prep him for surgery." The men lay the injured man on a gurney and started pulling off his pants.

Opal stepped into the prep closet and hit the control. She stripped off her brown long-sleeved jungle shirt and bound her long chestnut hair behind the back of her neck while the ultrasonics destroyed any pathogens on her skin. The sonic

cycle finished and she readied herself for the sterile seal by placing a breath mask over her face. Robotic nozzles sprayed a flexible plastic film over the skin of her hands, arms, and upper torso.

By the time she entered the surgery, the orderlies' job of stripping the man's clothing and gear and sterilizing his body was complete. Patches of paint still adhered to his body here and there. The ell-ess hooked up to his neck, gently pumped synthaheme into his bloodstream. Opal checked the display and shook her head; his blood pressure dropped in spite of the artificial blood.

"Ell-ess, start surgical program alpha." The life support machine, in addition to monitoring blood pressure and heartbeat, would maintain the proper levels of anesthetic, and warn Opal if any dangerous conditions appeared. A quick scan showed Opal the locations of the bullet fragments, extrapolated their trajectories through his body, and warned her which organs and arteries suffered the worst damage.

Despite decades of medical robotic advances, a substitute for the trained human hand still eluded engineers. Opal took up the scalpel, a device unchanged in its essence since the Stone Age, and the man's flesh parted under her hand. Finger-like appendages from the ell-ess probed the wounds, draining the blood and fluids for analysis and purification. The blood would then be given back

to him to reduce the need for synthaheme.

Opal spoke as she repaired broken blood vessels and ruptured organs. The ell-ess recorded her words without rendering judgment on the emotional tone that crept into her voice. She couldn't believe he still survived. The ell-ess beeped an alarm. The synthaheme, it reported, was nearly gone. She threw off all pretense of objective demeanor.

"Shit. Big man, stay with me, here... just keep beating that heart a little longer, okay? Just keep beating that heart, keep working those lungs." The headband of her mask drew a heavy flow of sweat away from her face.

Searching for the last bullet fragment and the last few ruptured arteries, she probed with her fingers amidst the man's intestines. Her fingers brushed something hard, something that her scans missed. She explored it, tracing its outlines. Her brow furrowed in concentration. A jagged edge startled her, and she gingerly removed the object. She spared it only a moment of attention before setting it aside in a specimen tray.

It would wait. His life hung by a thread.

* * * *

The little LCD screen illuminated the small corner of the tent where Opal sat. The report stared back

at her, mocking her. She poured herself another shot of bourbon and sat back in the canvas chair. The liquor gradually transferred itself from outside her body to inside, but it failed to do her any good.

The patient's unusually large frame is only the beginning of a long list of anatomical abnormalities. The patient's hair is unusually thick and short, more like fur than human hair, extending down along the spine to the third thoracic vertebra. The patient's dentition is highly robust, even considering the development of the rest of his body, and seems to contain four extra molars. His fingernails and toenails are extremely thick.

All of this is incidental, however, compared to the biochemical differences.

The report went on in further detail, listing the numerous anomalies that the ell-ess discovered in the strange man's blood. Opal even began to wonder if she could truly use the word "man" to describe him.

Shouting broke Opal out of her reverie. Through the open flap of her tent she saw the light inside the recovery room swinging wildly. Silhouettes of grappling figures danced crazily on the fabric walls. She grabbed her medical bag and dashed across the little compound, fumbling inside for the air hypo. At the entrance she paused

to pop in a cartridge of sedatives.

Inside the tent the huge creature, who so recently lay helpless on her surgical table, stood in the middle of the room with all four of her assistants hanging from his arms and body. They struggled to bring him under control, without much effect. Opal jumped in close, held onto his arm, and jabbed the hypo against the veins on the inside of his arm. He roared and thrashed, and she flew across the room. She landed against the wall, tearing it free of the straps that held it to its supports.

By the time she fought free of the heavy entangling sheet, the drug did its work. The big man fell, sprawled across an upturned bed, a red stain spreading under his bandage.

Opal gathered her wits. She pointed to one of her assistants. "Natago! Get the closure kit. He's torn open his wound."

"Let him bleed," he said, in his native tongue. "He's not worth the trouble, lady."

"Do as I say!" Opal held her hand to the wound. Blood squeezed out from the dressing, soaking her hand. She put her other hand to his neck. His weak pulse weakened. "And wheel in the ell-ess as well!"

Opal and her assistants worked feverishly to get the big man back onto his bed and hooked up to the ell-ess machine. She cut away the dressing

and quickly reassembled the failed bindings with strips of bio-adhesive plastic.

By the time she finished, the ell-ess displayed several alarms. The bleeding left his blood pressure at a perilously low level. He needed blood, but the synthaheme had run completely out. Even with the ell-ess providing pure oxygen for him to breathe, his brain starved.

She tapped the screen. The ell-ess confirmed her suspicions from its own analysis. There was only one option remaining, and she was the only one who could do it.

A sterile hypodermic, attached to a length of plastic tubing, popped out of the side of the machine. While she fitted the heavy needle into the vein in the crook of her elbow, Natago brought over the gurney. She climbed up onto it, and allowed the machine to pump the life-giving fluid into his body.

The ell-ess monitored the flow of blood carefully. It already knew her maximum blood volume of somewhat more than four liters, and calculated the recommended amount of blood that she could afford to donate. Tick by tick, it counted off the milliliters. One hundred. Two hundred. Three hundred. When it reached five hundred milliliters, it flashed a warning on the screen. Opal acknowledged it, checked the indicators for his pulse and blood pressure, and ordered the pumps

started again.

Six hundred. Seven hundred. She started feeling lightheaded, and lay back on the gurney. Eight hundred. She felt her heart thud in her chest. Nine hundred. The ell-ess beeped an alarm and shut down the pumps. Opal turned her head and focused on the screen. She reached out, tried to touch the screen and make it start again, but the machine refused to transfer any more blood. Reluctantly, she initiated the cycle that would flush the blood that remained in the machine back into her veins, adding enough saline solution to bring her blood pressure back to a normal range.

The ell-ess's alarms quieted, and it returned to normal operation.

It was enough.

Opal sighed and lay back, listening to the comforting rhythm of his heartbeat.

* * * *

When he awoke a second time, he found his massive arms and legs bound to the side rails of his bed with thick wrappings of fabric, courtesy of Natago's skill with knots. He tested his bonds, but they permitted him no freedom, no matter how much he grunted and strained. The faint greenish light from the luminous tent fabric gave his skin an unnatural cast.

Opal sat up in the bed next to him, propped up on a small pile of pillows.

"Let me go," he growled.

"Are you going to start savaging my staff again?"

"If I leave, I can't attack your staff. *Release me.*" His deep yet mellow voice possessed confidence and poise even in his weakness and constrained circumstance.

"Who are you? Why did the villagers bring you into the clinic with bullet wounds?"

He lay back, silent, and stared at the ceiling. His nostrils flared.

"Alright, fine... don't answer. I'll make my own suppositions. Since you won't tell me your name, I'll give you one. I'll call you... Pholus. You're a soldier, probably a mercenary. You went to the Caribbean, or Beijing, and got some crazy genemods. You're here because of the oil. You might be here to protect the rigs and pipelines, but I doubt it. Is that about right?"

Pholus remained impassive.

"Alright, how about this?" Opal tossed the cracked plastic casing onto Pholus's chest. "I found that inside your body, nestled up between your kidneys. What is it?"

Pholus looked down at the mysterious device. His brows knitted and his lips tightened to a grim line. He took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly.

"It means something to you, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"You were very lucky. The bullet that destroyed that... whatever it is... narrowly missed killing you in about six ways. So... what is it?"

"I can't tell you." He rested his head back against the pillow.

"Well, Pholus... if you can't trust me, then I can't trust you. You're going to stay right there for now."

* * * *

After a fruitless morning in the recovery tent, Opal gave up on coaxing Pholus to talk. With the help of one of her orderlies, she made her way back to her personal tent. If weakness kept her from practicing medicine, she would tend to her administrative tasks instead. Opal knew well that the list always got longer, especially during crises.

Opal allowed herself few luxuries in the wilderness, chief among them her bed. The villagers slept in hammocks or on the ground; patients in the recovery tent slept on camp beds. Opal's tent housed a huge mattress and box spring, wrapped in a waterproof cover. She would have liked a set of four hundred thread count sheets to finish the set, but a light sleeping bag served more practically in her isolated

circumstances.

She rested on her bed and spoke in the general direction of the computer screen propped up against the tent pole. "Computer, open voice communications, keyword HAT." It beeped three times, and then a voice crackled to life.

"Harry's Air Transport, Harry speaking... Hey! Opal... I was about to lift. What's on your mind?" His tenor voice carried a thick Australian accent.

"I need a couple extra canisters of synthaheme."

"No problem. I'll roll 'em on board as soon as we're done with the call. Anything else?"

"Have you heard anything about military action in the area?"

"Nah, all the action's way south. The rebels are boxed up and they're negotiating surrender terms. You ought to listen to the 'casts, everyone's talking about it."

"Of course, Harry, you know I keep my ear to the ground. But there's more than what comes out in the casts, right?"

"True, true. I haven't heard about anything up your way. Why do you ask?"

"A soldier showed up at the clinic yesterday, all shot up. Some kind of commando."

"Weird. Any idea who he's working for?"

"He wouldn't say. Definitely not a local. He's got an American accent."

"Doesn't mean much. Lots of mercs outta the 'States these days."

"Yeah. Let me know if you hear anything, okay?"

"Sure. Anything else you want me to bring you?"

"Nothing that isn't already in the order. See you tomorrow."

"Aye-aye, Doctor."

"Computer, close voice communications, please." It beeped assent. "Computer, open news scanner, please." Beep. The screen displayed headlines and short snippets of articles.

"Computer, read articles one, two, three, six, eleven, and, hmm... fourteen, please."

Opal lay back in her bed, listened, and tried not to let it get her depressed. Flooding in Florida. Troops stationed on oil platforms off the coast of California. A malaria epidemic in Eastern Europe. New developments in stem cell therapies. Papal condemnation of genemod treatments. An artificial intelligence set up to monitor elections in Japan.

"Computer, display investment summary page, please."

One of the companies in her portfolio showed a striking increase, due to the announcement of new pharmaceutical factories in Poland. "Computer, transmit a sell order for Niezawodny Pharmaceuticals,

five thousand shares, please.” Opal felt a small pang of guilt for making money from the malaria epidemic, but practically speaking, she knew that her substantial investments made the project possible and those extra factories would make treating the epidemic easier. She felt no guilt at selling high, either; the speculators jumping in to grab it now would reap further rewards, or not.

She reviewed the performance of her other investments, noting where to add money after the Niezawodny shares sold. She took a nap and had a quick lunch taken from her supplies, then dictated reports and letters to her colleagues in Port Moresby, Sydney, and San Francisco. Pholus figured prominently.

A voice called from outside the tent. “Doctor Opal?” The evening choir of frogs and insects sang in the background.

“Come in, Natago.”

He came in carrying a large wooden bowl. “Dinnertime, Doctor Opal.”

“Thank you, Natago. How is the big man?”

“Still sleeping. The machine has not made any noise. There are three sick ones who have been brought from Kopiago. I will give them a place to sleep; you can see them in the morning.”

“No, no, I’ll see them. Just make sure I don’t fall down on the walk over.” Opal swung her legs out of the bed and started to rise.

"Eat first, Doctor Opal. They will not die while you eat."

Opal sighed. "You're right." She took the bowl, and put it in her lap. Chunks of yam and a few pieces of roasted meat jostled on some green leaves. "You are generous, Natago. Your family has enough tonight?"

"You always ask, Doctor Opal, and I always tell you, you are a blessing on our village and it is good that you are not hungry."

"Yes, but I do not want more than my share. I will eat the yams. Give the meat to Lina." Lina, his wife, anticipated giving birth to their third child very soon. Opal took a leaf from the bowl, and picked out the meat. Even a hundred grams would make a difference.

Natago nodded and took the leaf. "Good night, Doctor Opal."

Opal smiled. Their little ritual, played out every night at dinnertime, comforted her. It highlighted her membership in the community. She ate the bland tubers and listened to the forest sounds.

* * * *

The last patient of the evening, a middle-aged woman suffering from an infection in her foot, yawned widely as Opal finished dressing the wound.

Opal fought the impulse to yawn too. "Okay, you're all set." As the woman limped out of the clinic tent, she sighed heavily and slumped against the examining table. She felt like lying down right there, but managed to keep herself awake and made her way across the little compound and into her sleeping tent.

She peeled off the long, form-fitting brown shirt and pants, her daily protection against insects and the elements, and hung them from a line hanging between her tent's corner poles. A fine dust fell from them as they shed, automatically, the day's grime and residues.

She drew her mosquito net around the bed and snuggled down into her sleeping bag.

* * * *

Opal jerked awake. The pale glow from her tent's fabric gave enough light for her to make out a form standing at the foot of her bed. She could not mistake him. She gasped. "Pholus."

"What is 'Pholus'?" He pulled the netting up and crawled onto the bed. "It sounds like you're calling me a dick."

"No, that's 'phallus.'" Opal sat up, holding the sleeping bag against her naked breasts. "Pholus was a centaur. A Greek myth."

Pholus knelt at the foot of the bed. "Tell me

about Pholus."

Opal hoped the story would forestall the fate Pholus seemed to have in mind for her. "He was a friend of Hercules. One day, when Hercules was visiting his cave, Pholus opened a jar of magical wine for his friend. The smell of the wine drove the other centaurs mad, and they attacked the cave. Hercules defended the cave with his poisoned arrows, and chased the centaurs away. While he was gone, Pholus picked up one of the arrows, was pricked by it, and died."

He grunted. "So you named me after an idiot?"

"It's the only centaur name I know besides Chiron."

"Why did it have to be a centaur?"

"I don't know. It just came to me. I guess, in some ways, you seem a lot like... a horse."

That seemed to satisfy him. "I came to tell you that I'm leaving."

"That's kind of you."

He grunted and crawled forward on the mattress. The light shifted, and Opal saw that he was impressively naked.

"I'll scream." Opal's hands started to tremble.

"No, you won't. If you were going to scream, you would have already." He laid his hand gently on her thigh, just above the knee.

His hand barely gripped her but it felt like an iron clamp around her leg. She whispered, "What

do you want?"

"I want you. All of you, before I go." He leaned in close.

He smelled musky. "And if I say no?"

"You won't."

"Won't I?"

"So say it."

Opal drew a deep breath and summoned all the confidence she could muster. Her voice quivered. "Pholus, take your hand off of my leg."

Pholus sat back and removed his hand, but kept his gaze locked on hers, burning.

Opal cocked her head and squinted. "You obeyed me."

"Yes." He looked away.

"Why?" She reached out and lifted his chin with the tips of her fingers. "Tell me. Why did you obey me?"

His gaze darted over her face. "I don't know. It doesn't make any sense. You shouldn't be able to command me. No woman should. It's impossible. You don't... it's not possible."

"Chauvinism? Well, impossible or not, here we are."

Pholus started to back away off the bed.

"No. Wait. *Stop.*"

Pholus halted with one leg off the bed.

"As long as you're obeying me, you're going to answer my questions. Sit down."

He sat cross-legged on the foot of the bed.

"Who are you?"

"Pholus is the name you gave me, isn't it?"

"Which military do you serve?"

Pholus took a deep breath. "Blackstorm."

Opal frowned. That didn't sound good to her, not at all. The Blackstorm mercenaries enjoyed a worldwide reputation, none of it good for ordinary people. "Why are you here?"

Pholus swallowed. "I can't tell you that."

"Why not?"

"Orders."

Opal looked towards the tent flap.

"Are your comrades going to come looking for you?"

"Yes. No one is left behind."

"What will they do when they find you? To me, I mean, to the clinic."

"We have secrets to keep. They will make sure those secrets are kept."

Opal nodded gravely. The medical data she gathered, those files were exactly what he was talking about. She could understand how they would be useful to Blackstorm's enemies. "Pholus, can you protect me?"

"I don't know. If I'm found here... no."

"Then we have to go." Opal climbed out of the bed and pulled on her pants. Pholus didn't say anything, but she could feel him watching her.

Opal usually didn't feel ashamed of her body—living in the bush one couldn't really be very modest—but a thrill ran down her spine. She heard an appreciative grunt from Pholus's direction.

"We?"

She pulled the shirt over her head and turned around. "Yes. If they're going to find you, I want it to be somewhere else. If your comrades are going to look for me, I don't want to be here, either. They have enough trouble just getting by day to day. They don't need a bunch of mercenaries stomping around. Pholus... you're going to get me off the island."

He scowled.

Opal spread her hands pleadingly. "Pholus. Get me off the island. I can't be safe here. Once I'm on the plane to Sydney, you can go back to your unit."

Pholus put his palms over his eyes and took a deep breath. "Alright." He got up and pushed open the tent.

"Where are you going?"

"I need some clothes."

"Oh... right." She smiled sheepishly, as if just noticing his nakedness for the first time. "Your pants are in the storage shed. It's..."

"I know where it is. Get your things. Shut off anything that can transmit a signal. Burn anything

you can't carry. Don't carry any more than you can handle all day." He vanished into the darkness.

A pair of socks and a heavy pair of boots completed her attire. Opal stuffed her laptop into a backpack and started gathering food and survival gear. She tried to focus on the strange obedience she seemed to command from Pholus, but her mind kept drifting back to the faint image of his naked body, burned into her memory. She shook her head. "What's wrong with you, Opal?" she asked herself. "It's not like you to fall for someone this way."

Natago's voice brought her attention back. "Doctor Opal? What is this?"

"I'm leaving, Natago. There's big trouble coming. Burn everything after I'm gone. Pile it all up and burn it."

"But...?"

"It's all replaceable, Natago." She turned and put her hand on his shoulder. "You and your family aren't. I'll be back after this is done. I promise."

"We will miss you, Doctor Opal."

"I'll miss you too." She hefted the pack. It felt heavy, but Opal felt confident that she'd be able to handle it, even with more gear hanging from her belt. She sighed and touched the bed. As much as she would miss the village, she would miss the

bed more. "Ah, well."

She stepped out of the tent. "Remember, Natago. Burn everything. Oh, Harry is going to be here tomorrow. Tell him I'll catch him in Port Moresby."

Natago grunted assent. "Goodbye, Doctor," he said, in English.

Pholus's massive form loomed in the darkness. She spotted the handle of a machete poking up over his muscular shoulder, and for a moment she worried that he intended to do violence to Natago. His calm voice eased her fears. "Time to go, Doctor."

Chapter Two

Opal lay bruised and bloodied. Rough encounters with rocks and branches left her shins and forearms scraped raw. Her shoulders ached from carrying the pack, and she kept banging her head on the overhanging rock that sheltered them from the downpour. The memories of the flight from the clinic swirled through her blurred, exhausted mind. She reminded herself that she was still recovering from the loss of the blood she had given Pholus.

Opal checked Pholus's dressings to make sure he wasn't doing himself damage. Luckily, he seemed to be healing well, and the danger of ripping open his wounds had mostly passed.

"Sleep, Opal," said Pholus. "We're safe for now."

"I can't. I'm sore, I'm worried about the village..."

"And you're not sure you can trust me." He lay back, under the rock, and folded his arms over his

stomach.

"I can't forget what you came into my tent to do last night."

"I didn't..."

"Oh, please. Don't deny it. You didn't even bother to get your pants."

He sighed. "What did you expect when you came with me? When did you think you were going to sleep?"

"I don't know. This isn't rational, alright? I'm having trouble sleeping with you here."

Pholus moved like lightning. His body pinned her against the dirt. His thigh, as thick as a tree trunk, pressed against her sex. His hand clamped over her mouth, and his voice felt hot in her ear. "If I wanted to rape you, I could have done it whenever I wanted. I could have done it back at your clinic. Things would have been a lot less complicated if I had. Instead I'm leading you across three hundred miles of the worst terrain in the world. We can't even use roads. Telling me you don't trust me isn't exactly going to make me the most grateful guide in the world, now, is it?"

He released her and rolled back to his side of the rock. She lay panting, trying to calm her hammering heart.

"Don't...ever...do that again."

"I won't. I have made my point though?"

"Yes." Opal rolled onto her side, away from

Pholus, pulling her legs up protectively.

Get your head together, Opal. This is no time for a breakdown! For now, at least, he's not going to hurt you and you need his help. You have to find a way to trust him.

Opal steeled herself and uncurled, stretching out and returning to her back. "So, um... where are you from?"

"What?"

"I'm making small talk. I'm trying to get more comfortable around you."

"Oh." Opal felt Pholus shrug. "I was raised at an orphanage in Nevada. When I was twelve they sent me to military school. They called me a 'discipline problem.' There was never any question about joining up when I graduated."

"What do you do for fun?"

"Fun? Sims. Football. Cards. Usual stuff."

"You have a girlfriend?"

He snorted derisively. "No."

Opal turned to face him. "Why not? You're a good-looking guy. You ought to be able to get any woman you want."

"We're pretty busy. No time."

"What do you want to do when you retire?"

"Retire?" He shrugged. "That's a long way off."

"You don't want to settle down somewhere, maybe raise a family?"

"What is this, some kind of proposition? I

wouldn't be a good husband and I wouldn't be a good father."

"Why not?"

"Because I *kill* people. It's what I do."

Opal lay back in the dirt. "You're not making it easy for me to trust you."

"I have to be a father type for you to trust me?"

"No, but..."

Pholus rolled onto his side and fixed his gaze on Opal's. "Listen to me. I don't know how you managed to make your command stick, but now that I've got a mission, I'm on it. I won't do anything else until it's done. Right now, you can trust me better than your own mother, but I can't do this job right unless you figure that out."

Opal nodded.

"Now sleep. If you don't get some sleep, you're going to slow us down. I'm not going to do anything."

Opal's interrupted sleep the night before and the morning's exertions had left her exhausted, and as the adrenaline from Pholus's mock attack drained away, she felt a wave of fatigue wash over her that defied resistance. She didn't bother to try.

* * * *

Pholus woke Opal with a gentle hand on her shoulder. "Opal. Rain's stopped. We need to get

moving before it heats up."

Opal moaned and tried to pull away from Pholus's touch.

"Let's go." Pholus crawled out of their hiding place, and unceremoniously hauled Opal out by her ankle. She shrieked and scrambled.

She picked herself up, sputtering. "What was that for?"

"No time to waste. A float went over a few minutes ago. They may have spotted us, we need to get moving."

Opal composed herself quickly, scanning the breaks in the tree cover. "That's probably Harry. He was going to bring in a shipment today."

"Doesn't matter." Pholus hefted his duffel and handed Opal her backpack, then set off.

Opal swung the backpack over her shoulder and winced. Her muscles still hurt from sleeping on the hard packed earth, and she knew that the upcoming exertions would only make them worse. "Harry's a friend. He wouldn't sell me out."

Pholus just kept walking.

The heat and tedium soon drained any desire for conversation out of them. Opal trudged behind the massive mercenary, allowing him to chop through the undergrowth with his machete.

Around noon they reached the edge of the canopy forest.

Opal sat down on her haunches and looked up at him.

"Have a rest," he said. "We're going to have to cross this at a run." Pholus peered out across a valley covered with cycad palms. Their thick hairy trunks stood about six feet tall at the most, crowned with disk-like clusters of spiny fronds.

"That's gotta be three miles or more," said Opal, peering out at the opposite side of the valley.

"Doesn't matter. Gotta be done."

Opal scanned the sky while she dug out a protein wafer and unwrapped it. "Who's going to see us?"

"Satellite, camouflaged float, drone, solar glider, doesn't matter. There isn't enough cover. We just want to be across it as quickly as possible, in case they're looking away right then."

"And if they aren't?"

"Then they might take us for a couple locals out for a jog, but I doubt it."

Opal washed down the food bar with some bottled water and stood up. "I'm ready." She cinched her pack's straps.

Pholus counted to three. They raced down the slope, weaving between the spiny dwarf trees. Not for the first time since leaving, Opal wished she had worn a sports bra. Her legs pumped, and she concentrated on breathing deeply and evenly

and conserving her energy. Too soon, she was winded, and by the time she reached the river her heart pounded in her ears and her steps faltered. Pholus was quickly outdistancing her. With a splash, she fell into the rain-swollen river.

The water wasn't deep, only a meter or so, but it easily carried her downstream on its rushing flow. The water closed over her head, and the rushing torrent and the bubbles drowned out all other sounds. Rocks scraped her arms and legs. Her lungs ached for air, but her strength failed her against the chaotic, powerful water. It poured into her mouth, and blackness with it, stealing away the edges of her vision around splashes of colored light. Cold and overpowering, it promised a terrible peace.

Light and air and pain burst through the black shell. Lips pressed on hers, firm lips, filling her lungs. She coughed and sputtered and the lips pulled away. She rolled on her side and vomited water and bile into the dirt.

She finally focused. Pholus knelt over her, his mouth set in a grim line and his brows knit. "Breathe," he said. "We have to get back under cover."

Opal nodded and tried to get up, but her limbs wouldn't do as they were told. Pholus shook his head. "Hold on," he said softly, and scooped her up in his arms. Opal wrapped her arms around his

shoulders and did her best to maintain her grip as Pholus scrambled up the gentle slope towards the far side of the valley.

"Shit," she heard Pholus mutter under his breath, and through the pounding in her ears she could hear the drone of a small, high-speed turbine. With a groan, he set her down in thick brush on the edge of the cycad grove and collapsed next to her.

"What's happening?" she managed to whisper between gasps.

"Drone. Flying down the valley. If it didn't see me, it sure as hell saw my duffel bag. We're going to have visitors if we don't get out of here."

"How long have we got?"

Pholus gritted his teeth. "An hour. Probably less." He put his hand to his side.

"Are you alright?" Opal sat up.

Blood seeped into the bandage on his abdomen.

"I'm going to have to check that." Still a little breathless, she took her medical kit from her backpack. Luckily, the damage was minimal, and she managed to seal the wound, in between ducking down in the foliage to avoid patrolling drones. Pholus had lost minimal blood, but the time they lost was irreplaceable.

Pholus got to his feet. "If we're done saving each other's lives then we need to go."

Opal stood, her hand against the tree trunk for

stability. "Wait... look." She pointed out towards the cycad grove. "That's Harry's float."

The big, disc-shaped lighter-than-air craft hovered over the valley, its engines barely running in the still air.

Opal started to walk out into the open, but stopped when Pholus put his hand on her shoulder. "No. You can't trust him."

"Yes, I can. I know it's a risk. But if you're right and those drones spotted us, Blackstorm is going to catch us anyway, and running risks your wounds opening up. We're too weak to run anymore. Our chances are better with Harry." Opal stepped out into the open, between two of the thick palms. "Harry!" she shouted, "Over here!"

Pholus watched warily from behind cover.

Harry's voice boomed from a loudspeaker mounted on the rim. "Opal! Good to see you. Natago said you might be out this way. Need a ride?"

"Yes, please!"

The huge dirigible maneuvered slowly downwards, until it hung about thirty feet up from Opal. A panel opened in the underside and a winch inside lowered a cargo cage. Opal climbed in. She waved to Pholus. "Come on, let's go."

Pholus climbed in, warily. "I don't like this. Even if he talked to Natago, he could still be

working for Blackstorm."

The cage swayed as the winch drew it back up into the belly of the airship.

Harry, a lanky fellow with a mop of dirty blonde hair, waited on the cargo deck to greet them. "Opal!" He wiped his hand on his grubby coverall and offered it to Pholus. "Who's your big friend?"

"Harry, this is Pholus."

Harry's hand disappeared in the mercenary's huge mitt. He quailed at the glare Pholus gave him.

Opal put her hand on Pholus's arm. "Harry, Pholus is worried that you're selling me out to Blackstorm. Did they hire you to find me?"

"Opal! I'm shocked." Harry climbed the ladder leading up towards the control cabin. "Don't you trust me?"

"I trust you, Harry," said Opal, following behind. "How much are they paying?"

Harry turned at the top of the ladder and helped Opal up through the hatch into the bridge. "Ten thousand." He smiled.

"See?" Pholus pulled himself up and advanced on Harry menacingly.

Opal put her hand out as if to hold Pholus back. "Hold on." She gave Harry a serious look. "Harry, don't fool around. I'll give you twenty thousand to bring us to Port Moresby."

Opal spun around at the sound of a door opening behind her. A chrome-plated sidearm glinted, grasped firmly in the hand of a sharply uniformed man. "I'm afraid your money won't be any good here, Doctor Schild." He had the bland midwestern accent newscasters strive for. A pair of reflective sunglasses concealed his eyes, and he had a blond crew cut. The bars on his collar proclaimed him a lieutenant; the embroidery on his uniform named him Clarke.

She felt Pholus tense behind her.

Lieutenant Clarke shot Pholus a glance. "Sergeant... you have a lot to answer for."

"Yes, sir."

He stepped away from the door, keeping his weapon trained on Opal's midsection. "Sergeant, restrain Doctor Schild in the cabin."

"Yes, Sir."

Opal started when Pholus took a firm grip on her arms. She looked up over her shoulder, and searched for sympathy or regret in Pholus's face.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get this over with."

Four beds hung from the walls of the crew cabin, supported by strong stanchions anchored to the ceiling and the floor. Pholus guided Opal to the closest and firmly laid her on it as the Blackstorm officer watched from the doorway. She mouthed the word, "Please."

"I'm sorry," he replied voicelessly.

The Lieutenant Clarke tossed a cluster of handcuffs on the floor next to Pholus. "Be thorough."

Pholus put one pair on Opal's wrists, and then another from the handcuff chain to the stanchion near her head. He gently stripped off her boots, and put another pair on her ankles. With a fourth pair linking those to the stanchion near her feet, it would be impossible to get out of the bed, but she wouldn't be terribly uncomfortable.

Pholus sighed, straightened up, and faced the lieutenant at attention.

"Very good, Sergeant. Now come with me."

The gigantic mercenary ducked through the hatch and was gone. Opal heard his heavy boots on the ladder leading back down into the cargo bay, until the hatch closed, leaving her in silence.

Alone, Opal's mind raced through one possibility after another, none of them good. She found herself worrying more about Pholus than herself. The lieutenant seemed intent on punishing him. Would he be shot? Thrown out of the ship to fall to his death? She strained her ears.

Audible but unintelligible voices tormented her. She pulled at her chains to try to get closer to the sound.

She looked up to see Harry looking over his shoulder at her from the pilot's chair. He looked away in shame.

"Harry," she whispered, "have you got a microphone down there?"

He nodded.

"Turn it on! I have to hear what they're saying."

He paused. "I guess it doesn't matter." She heard the clicking of Harry's keyboard as he tapped out a command on his console, and a small intercom in the crew cabin crackled.

"—lain yourself, Sergeant."

"She had command, sir."

"Impossible. How could you have gotten her imprint?"

"I don't know, sir."

A pause. "Tell me what happened. Start from when you were injured."

"Sir. I woke up in a surgical recovery tent. Standard for the type. I attempted to leave and make my rendezvous, but the personnel tried to stop me. There was a fight. Op—Doctor Schild gave me an injection and I collapsed. When I woke up, Doctor Schild was lying in the bed next to me."

"She was in bed with you?"

"No, sir. She was in a separate bed."

"Why was she there? Was she just sitting there, or was she recovering from something?"

"She seemed to be recovering, sir. She was weak. Pale."

"Had she been injured in the fight?"

"It's possible, Sir, but not badly, if at all."

"Noted. Go on, Sergeant."

"When I woke up again, I was tied to the bed. Doctor Schild attempted to question me about my activities in the area. That was when I found that she had command. I don't know how she got it, I hadn't..."

Clarke cut him off. "Did you tell her anything?"

"No, sir!"

"Why not? She had command. It should have been instinct for you to obey her."

"She was not cleared. I resisted the instinct to obey."

"Excellent. Go on."

"She left after lunch. The rest of the day they left me pretty much alone. That night, I slipped out. I was going to see if I could make my rendezvous, but..."

"But what?"

"I was... drawn... to Doctor Schild's tent. I... wanted to say goodbye."

"I see." The officer sounded dubious. "You went there, knowing that she was not authorized to command you, and knowing that you had her imprint."

"Yes, sir. I..."

"Continue. You went to her tent."

"She commanded me to bring her to Port Moresby."

"How did she find out that she could do that?"

Pause. "I was... advancing on her."

"You were going to fuck her?"

"Yes... I..."

"You were not to blame, Sergeant. Don't you see? Her blood was in your veins. The reason she was recovering in the bed next to you, was that she had given you a transfusion. It's the only logical conclusion. If she was able to command you, then you had to have her DNA in your system. And since you couldn't have gotten it the usual way, it had to have been by means of blood. Of course you were fascinated by her. She probably saved your life. I might even have to thank her for that."

Another pause. "Thank you, Sir."

"Now we must counteract that fascination."

"Yes, sir."

"I don't have a genetic sample prepared, so you're going to get it directly from the source." A zipper made its characteristic sound. "She probably gave you something like a liter of blood, but blood wouldn't be as efficient. This should work nicely."

Harry gasped. "Bugger."

"What?" Opal whispered desperately.

"The big guy's gonna suck him off."

"How do you know?"

"Got a camera down there. If they find out, I'm

dead. Now quiet."

Opal listened to the soft, wet sounds coming from the intercom. She couldn't see Harry's screen, but her mind's eye painted the picture. She imagined the lieutenant with his trousers down, Pholus kneeling before him, mouth wrapped around the officer's hardening cock.

Her breath came quicker. Emotions poured through her—lust at the barely restrained sexual power of the scene—horror at the means by which the officer maintained discipline—curiosity at how such a thing could be possible—jealousy that Pholus's attentions found a target in that slimy mercenary officer. The last surprised her, but as she lay listening, she realized that she truly wished that she could be in Lieutenant Clarke's place.

A groan of pleasure pierced the quiet.

"Harry," Opal whispered again.

"Yeah."

"He's going to kill us both, you know. We know too much."

Harry swallowed audibly. "Yeah."

"Harry, you have to get me out of these cuffs."

"They're going to be coming up any minute."

His desperate whisper hissed in the little cabin.

"So hurry."

"It's too risky!"

The sound of a satisfied male emanated from

the speaker, and Opal bit back her reply. She closed her eyes and steeled herself. Whatever fate awaited her, she resolved to meet it with courage.

A minute or so later Opal heard the officer's voice. "Alright, Sergeant, at ease. I'll come get you later, after your system has had a chance to absorb my fluids."

"Yes, sir."

Harry hurried to shut off the microphone.

Chapter Three

The hatch opened and Lieutenant Clarke stepped up onto the deck. He sauntered through the door, closed it behind him, and pulled up a chair opposite Opal. With a flourish, he pulled a pack of cigarettes from his pocket and slapped them against his thigh.

Opal eyed him warily.

Clean fingers with tightly clipped fingernails drew a cigarette from the pack, lit it up, and offered it to his lips. He spoke, blowing out puffs of smoke with each word. "Now then. Doctor Schild. You examined my soldier, yes?"

Opal fought down her panic. The officer held the cigarette between thumb and forefinger, the way one might hold a pencil, or a scalpel—or a torture instrument. The sound of Harry's fingers tapping on his antiquated keyboard brought images of rattling bones to Opal's mind.

"Yes."

He took another drag, and tapped off the ashes

onto the deck, leaving a gleaming ember-like tip. "He's quite an unusual specimen, is he not?"

"Yes."

"One might even go so far as to say he was noteworthy. One for the textbooks."

Opal swallowed. Clarke didn't wait for an answer.

"You will tell me who else knows what you found out yesterday. It would be a very, very bad idea for you to lie. When we decrypt your computer we will find out, and that will not go well for you."

"I don't see why I should cooperate. You're going to kill me anyway."

"Why, Doctor Schild! You shouldn't believe everything you hear in the netcasts. We're not barbarians." Another drag, another tap. Another red-hot ember. "I'm sure we can work something out that doesn't involve ending your career prematurely. A skilled trauma surgeon like you? Far too valuable a commodity to destroy – without good reason." He flashed a predatory smile.

Opal fought to calm the trembling that threatened to break out in her limbs. "What are you going to do if I tell you?"

"I'm not in a position to make deals, Doctor Schild, but my superiors will be much more willing to make accommodations if you're cooperative." Drag. Smoke. Flick. Ember. Smile.

"I *mean* to my colleagues."

"I don't think you should be worrying about them right now, Doctor Schild. You should be worrying about yourself."

"I'd rather die than put them in danger."

"Well, Doctor Schild... there's dying, and there's dying." Clarke looked down at the cigarette and rolled it in his fingers. When he looked up again, his face was cold and hard. "And there are things worse than dying." He reached out and yanked the sock off her right foot.

"You said you're not a barbarian!"

"Civilized men are sometimes forced to do barbaric things, Doctor Schild." He put his hand on her leg and pushed. The chains stretched to their limit and the cuff bit into her leg. Opal struggled but she had no leverage and couldn't shift his grip. "But I *am* touched at your concern for my cultural welfare." Drag. Smoke. Ember. Lieutenant Clarke held the burning butt close to her foot, close enough for her to feel the heat radiating from it.

"Names, Doctor Schild. Let's not get ugly."

"I'll scream."

"Go ahead. Your Australian friend knows what will happen if he tries to interfere. Now. Last chance, Doctor Schild. Let us avoid this unpleasantness."

"Go fuck yourself."

Lieutenant Clarke pulled the cigarette away, and for a moment Opal imagined that she had called his bluff. Then, it made contact.

The pain burst through Opal's brain in a rolling crescendo, and she managed to hold it back, for a second. Then it was too much, and with tears sneaking past eyelids screwed shut, she let out an agonized howl.

Lieutenant Clarke chuckled and let go of her ankle. "Ah, will you look at this? My cigarette has gone out."

Opal strained at her chains, shrieking. "You're enjoying this, motherfucker!"

"My, I do believe that bothers you more than the humiliation of being at my mercy, or even the pain itself. I'll tell you what... tell me what I want to know, and..."

Lieutenant Clarke never got the opportunity to finish his offer. The door burst open and Pholus was on top of him, roaring, smashing the chair to flinders and knocking the officer to the deck. Pholus rammed his right forearm across Clarke's throat while his left slammed into the officer's abdomen. Gurgling and choking, Clarke drew his sidearm but before he could bring it to bear, Pholus batted it away. The pistol slid across the floor.

The distraction was enough, however, for Clarke to pull the knife out of the sheath behind

his back.

"Pholus!" screamed Opal. "Knife!"

Clarke brought the knife down into Pholus' bare back. The huge man threw himself aside, releasing the officer from his deadly grip, and rolled into a crouch.

Clarke stumbled to his feet, holding Pholus at bay with the point of the knife. "You'll go... in front of... a firing squad... for this, Sergeant," he croaked.

"Maybe so, sir." Pholus ignored the dripping wound on his back. "But I'll see you in hell when I get there." Pholus advanced.

Clarke fell back. "Stop! That's a direct order, Sergeant!"

Pholus's nostrils flared. Another step.

Clarke's back hit the wall. "Stop, damn you! Why aren't you obeying!?" His voice quavered with the first hint of fear.

"I may not be a man, Lieutenant Clarke, Sir, but I'm not an animal. There are feelings stronger than instinct, and loyalties higher than money."

Clarke lashed out desperately with his knife. The point scored a thin line of red across Pholus' chest before his huge hand caught Clarke's wrist.

He twisted. There was a sharp snap. Pholus drew back and delivered a hammer-blow to Clarke's jaw. The lieutenant slid down the bulkhead to lie in a heap at Pholus' feet, his head

twisted at an unnatural angle.

"Well, shit," observed Harry, from the doorway. "You didn't have to kill him."

Pholus let it go. "Change course for Port Moresby. We don't have much time. They're watching us, and they'll have helicopters headed our way."

"Aye, aye." Harry sprang back into his chair to comply with the order.

Opal watched in stunned silence while Pholus retrieved the keys and freed her from the handcuffs' cold clutches. He laid the chains aside and cradled her injured foot in his hand. "Are you alright?"

"It... hurts, but I'll be alright. It's a small burn. I should clean it, put on a dressing."

Pholus retrieved a first aid kit from the wall and handed it to her. "Here."

Opal took it and sat up on the bunk. "No, I should dress your wounds first. Let me see your back."

"It'll keep."

"Pholus, I'm the doctor, and I'll do the triage, thank you! Now turn around."

Immersing herself in professional detachment, Opal put the throbbing pain in her foot out of her mind and examined the wound. "Looks like it's fairly superficial. Most of the blow just bounced off your scapula."

"See?"

"Yes, you were right." Opal slapped Pholus lightly on the back of the head. "Now quiet." She cleaned and dressed the wound with practiced skill. "Now let me see that scrape across your chest."

The wound on Pholus's chest was less severe, a mere scratch that had already stopped bleeding, but Opal inspected it anyway. Her hand traced the skin along the cut, checking for any place where the knife bit deep enough to require special attention. Her fingers lightly brushed his nipple, and it tightened under her touch.

He cleared his throat lightly.

She looked up into his eyes. "Why did you save me? You've thrown everything away for me—possibly even your life."

"I couldn't sit there and listen to him torture you. It's dishonorable. Despicable."

"Soldiers do despicable things all the time." Opal searched his eyes, hoping to find a reflection of the emotions that boiled up within her.

Pholus swallowed. "There are things you need to know."

Opal nodded. Her foot throbbed distantly, a forgotten memory. "You said you're not a man."

"I'm not."

"You didn't get genemods. You were born this way."

He nodded. "Born to be a soldier. Made to obey. Created to win."

"That sounds like an advertising slogan."

"Something like that. Opal... we can't be together."

"Don't be silly. Why not?"

"There's no place for me in your world. Look at me; imagine me on the streets of Los Angeles. I'd be a freak."

She chuckled. "Clearly, you've never been to Los Angeles."

"Opal! Be serious. I'm not *like* you." His hands found her shoulders, as if ready to push her away.

Opal slowly raised her hands up to Pholus's face. "I've seen inside you, Pholus. Your heart is human... in more ways than one." Opal felt her own heart thumping. He let her pull his face down to hers. Their lips met in a moment of promised bliss.

Harry's sharp interjection sliced the moment off. "Here they come, big guy! I hope you have a plan!"

Pholus leapt to his feet, leaving Opal to whimper at the loss of his touch. He strode into the control cabin and scanned the sky outside the windows.

The blond pilot pointed to a display, where two angry red lights blinked. "We're on their radar. Looks like we're being followed by a couple of

drones."

"Are you putting out any signals?"

"Just air traffic control."

"Alright, keep it on for now. If they hail you, ignore them. We have to get out before we're within range to get a good infrared picture. They'll be able to see inside, and when that happens..."

"Boom."

"Exactly."

"So what's the plan?"

"We're going bungee jumping."

"WHAT?!"

Pholus patted him on the shoulder. "Trust me. I've done it dozens of times. It almost never goes wrong." With a chuckle, he turned and opened the hatch leading down into the hold. "Be right back."

Opal finished bandaging her foot and tested it on the deck. The pain had subsided a good deal, but her foot still wouldn't take any weight without sending a jagged spear of pain up her leg. Gingerly, she put her socks and shoes back on.

"Did he say what I thought he said?"

"Yeah, he did. I don't know what he's talking about. I haven't got those giant elastics."

Opal made her way gingerly across the cabin and knelt down next to the limp form of her torturer. Two fingers to his neck found a weak pulse. "He's still alive, Harry."

"You saw what your boyfriend there did to

him. Is he going to live much longer?"

"We have to bring him to a hospital."

"You're going to have to talk to the big man about that, honey. I don't think that's part of his plan."

Opal sighed, and pulled herself upright and leaned over to the little intercom panel. She touched the control for the hold. "Pholus, Lieutenant Clarke is alive."

They heard Pholus' footsteps approaching "Good."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, that means he'll be warm for a while longer."

"What are you going to do, Pholus?"

"Lieutenant Clarke is going to be a decoy."

"How is one man going to decoy all three of us?"

"He's not. He's going to decoy you."

"What are you talking about?"

"On infrared, through the walls of the float, they aren't going to be able to tell us apart... except for me. If you've got Clarke's transponder, they're going to think you're him. If you're collapsed in the float, and they see me leaving with someone they think is you, they'll think we overpowered him and escaped. You and Harry will be able to get away while they chase me."

Chapter Four

“Pholus, no...”

“I can’t think of any other way you’re going to get out of this, Opal.”

“How do you plan on getting his transponder out?”

“You’re going to take it out.”

“I can’t. It’ll kill him.”

“There’s no other way, Opal.”

Opal paused. “No, I think there’s a better way. How well will they be able to see through the walls of the float?”

“Blurry, but they’ll be able to tell one person from another.”

“And as long as they think Clarke is in charge, they’re not going to fire on us?”

“Yeah, for a while at least. They know something is up, though, because we changed course.”

“Alright. So how about this? We prop Clarke up in the control cabin, in the copilot’s chair. You

stand behind them. I'll stay back in the crew cabin, as if I'm still tied up."

"And then what? What do we say when they call and ask for Clarke's report?"

"You tell them his throat was injured in a fight with me."

"They're not going to believe that."

"Why not? I'm tougher than I look, and coming from you, they'll have to accept it. You saw how Clarke reacted. They can't conceive that your loyalty may have turned. They're overconfident."

A grunt. "Alright, we'll do it your way. At least, win or lose, we'll go together. We had better get into position. It won't be long until they're here."

With Pholus manhandling Clarke into position, it took only a minute to get everyone where they belonged. Clarke slumped in the chair, Pholus behind him wearing Harry's spare radio headset.

It was only a few minutes more until helicopters came over the hills to flank Harry's craft. The radio crackled.

"Alpha Six Niner Zebra Eight Eight, change course and return to your designated rendezvous point."

Pholus took a deep breath. "Negative, control. Lieutenant Clarke is badly hurt. Won't survive diversion. Our course is for Port Moresby Hospital."

A different voice came on the radio. "Sergeant

Haffner?"

"Yes, sir."

"Sergeant, this is Major Smith. Was Lieutenant Clarke able to get the information he was looking for?"

"No, sir. He was injured before he managed it."

"How the hell did that happen?"

"She got him with a lucky shot to the throat, sir."

"Fuck. Alright. You're going to have to get that information yourself, soldier. You know what we're after?"

"Yes, sir."

"If you need us to coach you through it, give us a yell. We'll be right here. And hurry. We need to track down anything she has sent out before it gets loose."

"I don't think that'll be necessary, sir." Pholus put the headset down and turned to Harry for a quiet word. "Shout when you make contact with Port Moresby air traffic control."

Harry nodded.

Pholus walked back to the crew compartment and closed the door.

Opal whispered. "Can they hear us?" She lay on the bunk where she had been restrained before, lying on her side as if still chained.

"No. But they've almost certainly got the infrared on us by now. They'll be able to see us, at

least in the broad outlines. The walls of this thing are pretty thin."

"How long do we have to bluff this?"

"An hour or so. After that we'll be close enough to Port Moresby that they wouldn't dare fire on us. We'll be in range of the airport radar by then. If they fire on us then, it'll be an international incident; Harry has Australian registry."

"So we have to pretend that you're torturing me for that long?"

"Yes." Pholus retrieved the handcuffs from where he had set them aside.

"Wait, are those necessary?"

"You're going to need to thrash against them. It won't look realistic otherwise."

"No, really, I only just..." Opal whooped as Pholus hauled her out of the bunk and with offhanded certainty handcuffed one wrist and then the other to the stanchions holding up the upper bunk, leaving her standing with arms spread between them. "Pholus! This is entirely unnecessary."

"Quiet. I'm saving your life, don't argue with me." The huge mercenary knelt at Opal's feet and handcuffed her ankles to the stanchions where they met the floor.

As he stood up, Opal caught sight of Pholus's slightly quirked smile and gritted her teeth. "You pig! You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

"I'm going to pretend to slap you. React." Pholus waved his hand at Opal's head and she tossed it back and to the side as if he had landed a heavy blow on her cheek.

Pholus pulled a knife and put its tip to the fabric between Opal's breasts.

"No! Wait... this is my favorite shirt. Don't cut it. It repels bugs, keeps me warm and dry, hardly ever needs to be cleaned... you don't know what I had to go through to get it."

"It can be replaced." Pholus pulled the fabric away from her skin with one hand, and drew the knife across with the other, a bare millimeter above her skin. The brown fabric parted under his blade, making a long horizontal slash. Her breasts spilled out when he released the material from his fingers. He smiled and sheathed the knife. Taking her full breasts in his hands, he looked into her eyes and grinned. "Act like I'm hurting you." His fingers were gentle, squeezing and kneading as if caressing a kitten.

Opal thrashed against her chains. She didn't need to add much to the performance. Pholus's handling made her bite her lip, arch her back, and rattle the chains that held her hands. To keep them from hurting herself in the handcuffs she grabbed the stanchions with her hands. "Pholus," she gasped, "What are you doing?"

"Helping your act."

A low moan, barely audible, drifted through the thin door from the control cabin. Harry's voice was unmistakable.

"Oh, god, Pholus..." Opal's face and chest began to flush. Opal felt a warm flush rising to her face and neck. "Harry has a camera in here somewhere!"

"Does it matter? Half the company's probably watching you on the infrared anyways. What's one more?"

The thought that those men were watching her wasn't bad. They were strangers, and she knew an infrared picture wouldn't show them much detail. But Harry... Harry was an old friend, a *platonic* friend, someone with whom she had never imagined anything sexual... and the thought that he was on the other side of that door, watching her on his little monitor, turned up the fires that were already burning inside her. Humiliation, fear, arousal, anger; the emotions boiled and blended into a potent brew. Opal whimpered and closed her eyes, focusing on the feelings that Pholus's powerful hands were exciting in her body.

Pholus drew his blade again, and knelt between her legs. With great care, he made another cut in the crotch of her stretchy pants. The fabric pulled away from the moist, swollen lips of her pussy. She felt the cold blade of the knife flat against her thigh.

"Careful..." Opal managed to say between short, gasping breaths.

"I know how to handle a knife." The fingers of Pholus's free hand explored her vulva, stroking, spreading, probing.

Opal's breath caught as Pholus's finger pushed up against her clit. "Ooh! Not too hard there..."

"What, this?" Pholus pressed a finger against the nub.

"Aah! Yes! Not so rough! That's my clitoris... Just... just run your finger around it... not right on it."

"Like this?"

"Oh... oh yes... like that."

"I didn't mean to hurt you."

"It's okay... you're... making up for it." Opal leaned her head back with a long, low purr. "Mmm, yes, now stroke down to... ohhhh..."

Pholus learned quickly, experimenting with pinches and pokes, twists and tickles. Opal gripped the stanchions desperately, wishing she could embrace the huge man at her feet. A fine sheen of perspiration broke out on her forehead.

Suddenly, Pholus stopped and stood up.

"Mmm, no, don't stop now!"

"Quiet!" whispered Pholus, as he clamped one hand over her mouth. "Hear that?"

Opal could hear nothing over the pounding of her heartbeat and the quiet sounds of the float's

machinery. She looked up and gave Pholus a worried look.

"Someone's walking around on top of the float. They must have dropped down from a helicopter."

"Oh, god, Pholus, get me out of this! Don't let them find me this way!" Opal squirmed in her bonds.

"No time."

Pholus opened the door to the control cabin just as the upper hatch was opening. Opal couldn't see Harry; he had abandoned his control chair, no doubt to cower in a corner, but she could see Pholus. A Blackstorm trooper, identical to Pholus but for the camouflage paint on his face and chest, dropped through the hatch and stood in the middle of the control room, submachine gun aimed at Harry. A second dropped down through the hatch and turned to Pholus. "New orders. We're taking the woman and her computer back to base. You're going to escort the lieutenant to the hospital." His voice sounded eerily like Pholus's.

Pholus nodded. "Computer's down in the cargo bay. Black backpack with red trim."

Out of view, she heard the wet sound of spit hitting the floor. "Traitor!" Harry growled.

"Can't blame a guy for having a little fun, eh?" He reached into his pocket, and tossed a set of keys to the trooper holding Harry at bay. "Go get

the woman. I can handle this guy.”

As one trooper dropped into the cargo area, Pholus swung around on the man passing him to enter the crew compartment. Pholus drove his elbow into the back of the trooper’s neck, driving him down to his knees. With a wrench, Pholus tore the weapon out of his hands and brought its butt down on the trooper’s skull. He collapsed like a bag of potatoes.

Pholus sent a burst of gunfire down into the hold, then pointed at Harry. “You! Get on the radio to air traffic control. Tell them we’re being boarded by air pirates. And get out from under that chopper!”

Harry scrambled back into his control chair, near panic, and fumbled with the controls.

Pholus ripped the radio headset off the trooper at his feet and wrapped it around his skull. “Captain! Unit Haffner went berserk... but we got him. Want us to send up his body?” There was a pause. “Affirmative.” Pholus stepped under the hatchway and sent another long burst of gunfire up into the air. Pulling the hatch closed, he pulled off the radio headset and tossed it in the corner. “That ought to keep them guessing for a few minutes.”

Harry shouted into his microphone. “Air pirates! Yes, I said air pirates! Two helicopters, send help fast!” Harry smacked the console with

his hand. "Dammit!"

"What?" Pholus moved behind him, glancing at the screens on the control console.

"They're jamming. I don't know how much got through."

"Alright... bring us down low. As far down as you dare."

"Aye aye, big guy." Harry punched buttons, and pushed on his control stick. The ship tilted slowly, nosing into a shallow dive.

Pholus scooped up the handcuff keys where they had fallen on the deck and returned to Opal. "We're over some rice paddies. We need to get ready to bail out." He worked quickly, freeing her limbs from their steel bindings.

"Are they going to shoot at us?"

"If we're lucky, they'll just shoot holes in the gasbag and force us down."

"And if we're not lucky?" Opal rubbed her wrist where the handcuff had bitten.

"Then they shoot at us." The last handcuff released its grip and Pholus pulled Opal into the control cabin. "How far up are we?"

Opal tried to pull the shredded ends of her garment together to restore some semblance of modesty.

"Ten meters," said Harry. "Any lower and we risk running into a tree or a pole."

"Are they still jamming?"

"Yeah, no letup."

"Well, that by itself is going to draw attention, and not just from ATC. They must be desperate."

A muffled explosion shook the airship. The floor lurched, and red lights blinked in a half dozen spots on Harry's board. The cabin lights flickered and died.

Opal rolled her eyes and groaned in frustration. "What now?"

"They just shot out the main engine." Harry reached under his board and yanked on a big red knob. "That's the emergency vent. We're going down... brace yourselves."

Chapter Five

Pholus reached down through the hatch towards Harry. "Come on! I'll pull you up." The float was deflating, but its upper surface was still somewhat firm.

Harry shook his head. "I'm staying with my float." He threw a suspicious look at the menacing helicopter circling the crash site. "Safer in here, I think."

"Don't argue! Grab my hand..."

Gunfire erupted from the side of the helicopter, and Pholus dove to cover Opal with his body. Miraculously, neither was hit, though the backpack slung over Opal's back sported a smoking bullet-hole.

"Fine, have it your way." Pholus took Opal's arm and ran for the nearest cover, a small cluster of buildings. They didn't look like they'd provide much protection, being little more than plywood boxes mounted on stout wooden stilts, but it was better than nothing.

With the bottom part of her stretchy shirt folded up over her breasts and the top of her pants folded down over her crotch, she didn't feel quite so exposed, but that was small comfort compared to the vulnerability of running across an open field under the threat of automatic weapons fire.

They dove behind a cluster of oil drums in the space under one house and another fusillade of bullets cracked and whined around them.

"Those guys looked just like you."

"Yeah." Pholus peeked around the rim of an oil drum.

"You're a clone, aren't you?"

"Yes, but this isn't a good time to discuss things!" Pholus unslung the submachine gun and sent a few bullets in the direction of the field.

"I thought so. I've seen this movie... it doesn't end well." Opal adjusted her shirt and cautiously peered over the barrels. The helicopter had landed, and a half-dozen troopers were spreading out, firing short bursts in their direction.

Pholus held his gun above the barricade and sprayed bullets at the approaching soldiers, and then hauled Opal to her feet. Crouching, they scurried away from the approaching assault, into a small copse of trees and brush. Pholus pushed through, and within a few seconds they burst out into a dirt road. Panting, Opal pointed to a pickup truck parked on the side of the road.

Pholus ran to it, opened the door and quickly scanned the interior. "No keys."

Opal pushed past him, into the driver's seat. "Don't they teach you anything useful?" Grabbing the knife from his belt, Opal fished underneath, pulled out some wires, and within seconds had the ancient machine running.

Shouts came from the trees, followed quickly by gunfire. Pholus swung into the back of the truck as Opal gunned the engine and accelerated away from the approaching soldiers while Pholus sprayed bullets at the troopers boiling out of the trees, making them dive for cover.

Laughing and hooting, Pholus reached down, opened the passenger door, and swung down into the passenger seat next to Opal.

"Do you think we're safe?" Opal glanced nervously at Pholus.

"Not yet." Pholus stuck his head out the window and scanned the sky briefly before ducking back inside. "It's going to take them a few minutes to get back in the helicopter, and airborne again. The radio jamming is going to set off alarm bells; all we need is a place to hide until the authorities chase them off. That means hiding the truck first."

"Alright then..." Opal swerved off the road to stop amidst another cluster of small houses, scattering chickens and a couple of milk-goats.

Frightened faces peered at them from doorways. Opal got out, took a quick look around, and then pointed underneath one of the houses.

"Ten dollars," she said in Tok Pisin, the Papuan trade language, "hide us, hide the truck under your house."

The woman pursed her lips. "Twenty."

"Twenty dollars." Opal reached into the truck, unzipped one of the pockets of the backpack, and produced a small wad of bills.

The woman took the money and started calling out to her neighbors. In a matter of minutes the truck was under the house, hidden by tarps and brush and garbage. Pholus and Opal were hurried off to another house, and shown to a shadowy back corner where a hammock hung.

It wasn't her luxurious mattress, but to Opal it was the most inviting bed she had ever seen. Opal wanted more than anything to climb into it and sleep, but there were still things to do. She took the medical kit out of her backpack, and cleaned and re-dressed Pholus's wounds, then sat down on the floor and attended to the burn on her foot.

While she was working on it, she heard a cough at the door. A small child, thin and clearly ill, stumbled into the hut followed by his mother, cradling his arm.

"My son is sick," she said, leaving unasked the obvious need for help.

Opal beckoned the child closer. He held out his hand to display a badly infected wound. He winced as she probed the wound gently. Pus oozed from the open wound. Two of his fingers, if not his whole hand, were in danger of needing amputation. Opal rummaged in her bag for an air injector. "This will make it feel better," she said, injecting anesthetic in several places near the wound. "What's your name?"

He looked up and nodded weakly. "Afa."

"You might want to look away, now. I'm going to clean out the wound."

The child didn't avert his eyes, in fact he was quite curious as Opal cut away the ruined flesh, lanced the pustules, and applied an antibiotic cream. When she dressed the wound with clean bandages from her kit, he helped her hold the ends in place while she secured them.

"You're very good at this." She prepared an injection of antibiotics and some vaccines.

"I'm going to be a doctor."

"That's wonderful!" With the last dose injected, Opal ruffled the little boy's hair. "Maybe some day you'll be taking care of me instead."

Opal turned to the boy's mother, hovering nervously nearby. "I did what I could, but you need to take him to the clinic."

"We have no money."

Opal retrieved a few bills from her pack. "This

ought to cover anything he needs."

"Thank you," she said, with a somber nod, clearly torn between needing to see her son thrive and taking so much charity.

"Is there anyone else in the village who is hurt or sick?"

"No... at least, no one as sick as Afa."

Opal sensed that there was more. "And...?"

"You are hiding from someone. They will not come. They are afraid."

"I understand."

The woman escorted her son out of the dark hut.

Fatigue that had been waiting for hours to claim Opal finally fell in its full weight. She climbed into the hammock, and fell asleep before it stopped swinging.

* * * *

Opal awoke in complete darkness and near total quiet.

"Pholus?" she whispered.

"I'm here."

Opal opened her eyes wide, willing them to make sense of the darkness around her. "Are we safe?"

"For now. We still have to get to Port Moresby, but we're past the worst of it."

"Do you need to sleep?"

"I'm good."

Opal's eyes adjusted to the gloom enough to make out Pholus's profile, leaning against the wall near the entrance. "Come here," she said. "I want you closer."

"Will the hammock take both of us?"

"This one's made for a whole family. It'll take both of us."

The fibers creaked as Pholus carefully transferred his massive form to the hammock. Opal cuddled up close to his side. She ran her hand over the dressings that criss-crossed his chest and abdomen. "How are you feeling?"

"I heal fast."

"I can stay up a while to keep watch, if you need to sleep."

"No, I'm good. Really. I don't need to sleep as much as you hu—as much as you."

"You were going to say 'humans.'"

Pholus lay silent.

"You may not have been born the normal way, Pholus, but you're a man as far as I'm concerned. A lot more man than that bastard who burned my foot and a lot more man than the ones that shot up a village full of innocent people trying to catch us."

Pholus's whisper was nearly inaudible. "What's going to happen to me, Opal?"

"What do you mean?"

"When we get you to Port Moresby... what's going to happen to me? Are you going to bring me to a lab, parade me for the cameras?"

"We'll figure something out, Pholus. I've got money. Money solves lots of problems."

"I don't know, Opal. Everything is going to change when we get to Port Moresby. The police are going to have questions about me. It's going to be very hard to get me out of the country."

"I know people, Pholus. Don't worry." Opal slid her hand up and touched Pholus's cheek, and found wetness. "You're crying."

"I'm sorry, Opal. I..."

"You're afraid, Pholus. Don't be. Don't think about tomorrow. Even if everything goes wrong, even if we are separated... we have tonight." Opal shifted and pulled herself up to kiss Pholus's cheek. "Have you ever had sex in a hammock?"

"No. I've... never had sex with a woman."

"Never?"

"... and with a man?"

Pholus took three long breaths before answering. "We have... a way..." He swallowed, and started again. "Discipline is maintained among my people by swallowing semen. Our bodies processes it, makes us recognize the scent of the giver... as one who is to be obeyed."

"Which is why you obeyed me while my blood

was in your veins."

"Yes... at... at first."

Opal slid her hand down to the waist of Pholus's pants. "Do you want to?"

"Do I want to... what?" Opal felt Pholus's belly quiver.

"Do you want to make love with a woman?"

Pholus's answer was as quiet as a mouse's sigh and yet it echoed through Opal's soul like the blast from a trumpet.

"Yes."

Opal undid Pholus's pants and pulled the wings of his fly aside. Underneath, no underwear hid his uncircumcised manhood from her touch. It twitched, responding to her gentle caress, and as she wrapped her fingers around it, she felt it start to swell.

"How big does it get?"

"I don't know. Nine inches or so? I've... ohhh.... I've never measured it."

"That's very big, Pholus. Bigger than any man I know of."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't think it will be a problem." Opal smiled to herself. In the darkness, Pholus's organ seemed to be growing to enormous proportions. "You know... I'm almost glad you ruined my clothes today."

"Hmm?" Pholus's cock throbbed in her hand,

hard as tense muscle.

"I don't have to take them off."

Carefully, Opal slid her leg up and around Pholus's body and then pushed up on top of him, holding her body close to avoid unbalancing the hammock. She felt the tip of his cock nuzzling around in the folds of her pussy. She slid one hand down between them to guide him in. She was still horny as hell from her tantalizing treatment aboard the float, and her juices were flowing freely. Inching downwards, she pressed, letting the head squeeze her lips apart until the head of his huge cock slipped inside. It hurt, just a little, but the fullness more than made up for it. A pause, relaxing, then she slid just a little further down. A pause, and then a little more. And again.

When she had taken his cock as far as it would go, she took Pholus's hands in hers and guided them to her body. "Touch me," she whispered.

Pholus gently caressed her hips and belly, and ran his hands up her shirt. He pulled the fabric down from her breasts and let them slip out into his palms.

"Yes," she said. "Touch me. All over."

Opal moved by millimeters, feeling her pussy start to relax around his massive shaft. She had had a few lovers in her life, but never anyone who was as big as Pholus. In that moment she knew that this could not be the last moment that she

would have this bliss. Whatever it took, she would see Pholus to safety. He had brought her safely this far; from here, it was her responsibility to do the same for him.

As her body gradually adapted to his, Opal was able to start a shallow rhythm. She stifled her moans, not knowing if any of the villagers would be sleeping nearby, but nothing could hide the shaky breaths she was taking, or the musky scent coming from her body. Pholus's hands were unskilled but gentle and untiring, and the feel of his fingers on her nipples laid another layer of ecstasy on top of the sensations coming from her cunt.

Pholus groaned softly. Opal recognized the throbbing pulses coming from his cock, knew that he was getting close to orgasm. She doubled her pace, letting out small cries of pleasure as his massive cock buried itself inside her. He let out a loud groan, and she felt his cum erupting inside her.

Quickly, desperate to achieve release while he was still hard, Opal drove herself down onto Pholus's cock, and to her immense relief she felt the tremors radiate from her cleft. She buried her face in his chest to stifle her cry of ecstasy.

She crawled up, using her fingers to locate his face in the darkness. Her lips met his, and she felt his strong hand gently stroke her back.

"Nice," he murmured.

She purred and nuzzled his cheek, letting her body conform to his. "Are you tired?"

"No. Like I said, I don't need much sleep."

"You don't know how happy that makes me."

Pholus froze mid-caress, and she felt the tension in his body return. She started to speak but he shushed her sharply. After a few seconds, she heard it too—a humming sound, a motor, growing slowly louder and more ominous. Opal felt the freezing grip of terror that had been broken by Pholus's touch refresh its grasp on her stomach.

After the sound had completely faded again Pholus broke his silence with the barest of whispers. "They're still looking for us. That was the command float."

The silence stretched.

Opal slid down alongside Pholus and held him. He wrapped his arm around her body and squeezed her lightly.

"I'm so tired of running," she whispered.

Chapter Six

Opal dozed fitfully in Pholus's arms, troubled by vague nightmares of pursuit and separation. She awoke with a start and found herself alone in the hammock. An erratic rain patted the roof with fat drops. She called out softly but desperately. "Pholus?"

Pholus spoke quietly. "I'm going to take a look around."

"Did you hear something?"

"I'm still worried about that float that went over. Either it was Harry taking advantage of a favorable wind, or it was a Blackstorm command ship out looking for us. I'm betting on the latter. If they spotted anything suspicious they would drop a platoon to hunt on foot."

"Anything suspicious... like the truck."

Pholus slowly peeked out the front door of the hut. "Yep. The engine is probably still warm enough to pick it up on infrared."

"Won't they have seen us, too?" Opal pulled

the hem of her shirt up over her breasts.

Pholus ducked back inside. "Yes, but we were in the hammock. They probably mistook us for a family of locals piled up together. The rain probably fouled things up some, too."

"Is anyone out there?"

"I didn't see anyone. If we go moving around out there, though, we're definitely going to look suspicious, so we'll have to stay here."

"Come back into the hammock. Please?" Fear left her voice weak and tentative.

Pholus hung his weapons on the wall nearby and maneuvered his huge form into the heavy net. "We'll get through this. We're almost there. In the morning we'll hire someone to drive us to Port Moresby." He stroked her back lightly, and the touch of his strong hand soothed her. Within a few breaths she succumbed to her fatigue and fell into a dreamless sleep.

* * * *

A thin band of sunlight fell between the seams in the ramshackle hut onto Opal's face. She awoke, blinking, to see Pholus climbing into the hut. "Everything looks clear."

Opal rolled out of the hammock and onto her feet. She stretched, growling a little. "Is there any water around? I'd like to wash up a little." The

remains of the night's lovemaking had turned into a sticky mess.

"There's a rain cistern out there." Pholus nodded in the direction of the open doorway.

Opal rearranged her clothing, regaining what modesty she could, and climbed down out of the hut. Overhead, heavy clouds hung low in the sky. The cistern water was cold but it got most of the residue off of her body. Around them, the little village was already awake and going about its business.

The little woman who had taken her money the day before approached, offering a basket of boiled yams, fruit, and greens. Opal's stomach growled in a most unladylike manner. Opal bought the basket with another dollar from her backpack, and handed the food to Pholus.

"We need a ride to Port Moresby," she said, in Tok Pisin. "We can pay."

The woman smiled and nodded, and chattered some instructions.

Opal thanked her, and turned to Pholus. "She says there's a bus every day at the store down the road. If we hurry we can get there in time."

"Then let's move."

"One thing first." She turned back to the woman. "You know who owns the truck we came in?"

The woman nodded.

Opal handed the woman a twenty dollar bill. "Tell him I am sorry I borrowed it, and I hope this money is enough that he is not angry."

The woman smiled and tucked it under her waistband. "I will give it to him."

They finished their breakfast quickly and hit the road.

Pholus walked alongside Opal, in the center of the road. He scanned the undergrowth on either side of the muddy track, and the clouds above them.

Opal tok Pholus's hand in hers. He gave her a firm, comforting squeeze. "So, uhm... how did you wind up with Blackstorm?"

"They owned the military academy where they sent me when I was ten. That's where I learned what I was. Blackstorm hired all of us as soon as we graduated."

"What was that like? The academy, I mean."

Pholus shrugged. "It was military training. In between classes in math and history, we had physical training, tactics, and more physical training. Have you ever been to a training camp?"

"Actually, yes. My family didn't have much money, so I went into the military after high school. I trained as an OR nurse and served in the Zagros campaign."

Pholus whistled. "I read about that. Some nasty action, there."

"I didn't see much combat. I spent most of the war at a field hospital in Abadan. That was bad enough."

"Still, that explains why you've been able to hold it together through all this."

"What do you mean?"

"Military training is what keeps you sane in the face of death."

"Oh, I don't know about that. I've always been a pretty stable person, but I'll grant you that it helped a lot."

"So how did you get from Abadan to here?"

"I saved up enough money in the army to go to medical school. I met my husband there."

"You're married?"

"I was. He died about six years ago."

Pholus nodded and made another scan of the sky.

Pholus and Opal continued to chat as they walked, and with each step she felt more sure that she wanted to spend time with him. The combination of confidence and vulnerability, the raw sexual power of his body and the naiveté of his mind combined into a cypher she found incredibly compelling.

A warm, gentle rain began falling.

* * * *

They reached the store just as the bus was pulling up. A small crowd of people piled out to meet another crowd of people waiting to meet them. Crates, bags and cages were unloaded from the pile atop the bus in a chaotic tangle. Opal and Pholus stood back from the fray, waiting for things to calm down before approaching.

The driver eyed Pholus and his weapons suspiciously, but took Opal's money and gestured for them to board. Pholus gently guided Opal towards the first seat, near the door. "This is pretty much their last chance to catch us," he said quietly. "I don't see any sign of them."

It took a solid hour to get everyone and everything that was going onto the bus crammed in. It was cramped, smelly, and noisy, but Opal was happy to be there.

Pholus got curious looks from everyone coming onto the bus. People pointed and muttered to each other, but no one gave them any trouble. The driver took out a cell phone, spoke into it briefly, and then climbed aboard and got into his place behind the wheel. He wiped his brow and smiled at them, then cranked the old engine into life and started down the road.

Pholus nudged Opal and nodded in the direction of the driver. "The driver looks nervous. He's up to something."

Opal shook her head. "He's got a huge

mercenary with a machine gun sitting behind him. Of course he's nervous."

Pholus nodded, but Opal could tell that his head was still very much 'in the game.' He constantly searched the road for signs of a threat, and his hand stayed on the gun in his lap. Opal adjusted her clothes and wished silently that she had bought something in the village to wrap around her. To preserve some morsel of modesty, she pulled her battered backpack up onto her lap.

"Pholus... any reason to keep the computer shut off? I want to set up our flight."

"Blackstorm will pick it up. They'll know where we are."

Opal looked around the bus. "There's a good half dozen people with cell phones in here, not to mention the driver. Are they going to pick my signal out from all these?"

"Yes. Wait until we're in the city."

Opal sighed. "Alright. I guess you'd know." Opal pulled bottles of water out of the backpack and handed one to Pholus. In spite of the gradually increasing rain falling on the roof, the interior of the bus was getting hot, and Opal could feel the sweat running down her neck.

Pholus chugged his down and handed the bottle back. "Thanks."

Opal took a sip and leaned down to put the backpack on the floor between her feet. The

movement brought the slit in her pants into contact with the rough surface of the seat. She took a sharp breath.

Pholus turned. "What?"

"Nothing." Opal shook her head and readjusted her hips, rolling back to put the weight closer to her tailbone.

Pholus smiled crookedly. "Right." He resumed his careful scan of the windows, and gently laid his hand on her knee.

Opal snickered. "Pholus, you're not going to do what I think you're going to do, are you?"

"Hm?" His hand moved up her thigh.

"You're not even being subtle about it."

"I'm not big on subtle." He pushed past the stretchy fabric and rubbed the outer lips of her pussy.

Opal grabbed his wrist and tried to push him away but his hand wouldn't budge. "Pholus! Not here! Not now!" she hissed. She clamped her legs together but it only served to hold his hand in place.

"Why not?" He wiggled his fingers deeper, slowly finding the tender tissues inside.

"People may not be able to see what you're... ah... doing, but when I cum they're going to damn... damn well fig... figure it out. Dammit... oh, God..."

Pholus strummed her like a guitar, two fingers

dancing within her dampening folds. "So what? What are the chances we'll ever see these people again?"

"I'm going to... I'm going to come..."

"Yes, that's the idea..." The pressure on his hand eased a bit as Opal's resolve started to melt.

"Dammit! Oh... I'm... coming... back here... when this all... oh, God... blows over..."

"Do you really want me to stop?"

Opal tried to screw up the willpower, but the word wouldn't come to her lips. "Pholus... please... don't..." Her hands stroked the thick hair on his upper arm.

"Please don't what?" He pushed, and two thick fingers slid inside.

Opal moaned softly, and she squeezed her thighs together again, driving the knuckle of his thumb into her clit. Words entirely failed her. She spread her legs and slid down the seat, giving Pholus complete license, complete access to her throbbing, soaking pussy. Her mind flashed with the memory of being handcuffed to the float's stanchions, breasts and pussy poking out of her clothes, as Pholus mercilessly manipulated her.

What happened to the savvy financier? The skilled surgeon? How could she possibly be getting so turned on by this situation? She felt the blood rushing to her face and chest, and knew that it was as much from arousal as humiliation.

Thunder rolled in the distance and the intensity of the rain suddenly increased. The sound of the downpour battering the bus's steel roof served to conceal Opal's moans. Her consciousness barely registered the squeal of air brakes as the driver brought the bus to a stop to wait out the storm.

As thick and strong as it was, Pholus's hand caressed her as gently as petting a sleeping cat. A rolling wave passed through her body, the first hints of a building orgasm. Opal pulled Pholus's face closer. "Kiss me," she hissed. "Or... or I'm going to scream."

Pholus bent down and placed his mouth over hers, letting her fill him with the sounds of feminine ecstasy. Writhing, she searched for sensations yet more intense. Another wave shuddered through her. She would have pulled his whole hand, his whole arm inside her if she had had the ability. She wanted to engulf him, devour him with her pussy.

The thought unlocked passions that had been confined to her most secret dreams. She rolled the fabric down from her breasts and kneaded her bare flesh. Her shame melted away in a flood of hormones. She wanted to be seen, to be on display. Lightning crashed, throwing quick, bright flashes she could see even with her eyes closed. She pulled away from Pholus's mouth to groan openly as her body finally reached its climactic

crescendo. Great shuddering gasps racked her body, and her pussy spasmed around his fingers.

When it passed and her mind returned to something closer to normal, she curled up and quickly repositioned her clothes. "Oh, God, Pholus, I can't believe you just did that to me." Looking up, she caught the leering eye of the driver.

He smiled broadly, and gave her an "OK" sign.

She moaned, feeling the blood heat her face, and turned away towards the window. Outside, the rain was slacking off to a desultory drizzle.

Pholus chuckled low in his throat and she heard his mouth making wet sounds as he licked his fingers clean of her juices. "It serves you right, you know."

"What?"

"Well, not only are you constantly tempting me with your beautiful body, but you're bringing me to America to make a spectacle of me... the least I could do is make a spectacle of you before we go."

Through the trails of water dripping down the window, Opal caught a glimpse of movement. She watched carefully, and saw it again.

"Pholus, wait..." She waved him closer, and pointed. "I think someone's out there."

Pholus peered over her shoulder. Without a word, he sprang to his feet and pulled the protesting driver out of his seat. "Hang on,

everyone," he shouted, starting the engine, "It's going to be a rough ride!"

Pholus ground the bus into gear and slammed the accelerator. The behemoth lurched and gravel spat from the wheels but the machine started moving.

Shouts called out from the rain. Someone leapt in front of the bus and raised a weapon, but Pholus didn't flinch, and the trooper was forced to throw himself out of the bus's way at the last second.

Gunfire slashed the air. Passengers screamed and threw themselves down behind the seats. Pholus accelerated. More shouting.

Opal looked out her window and her heart leapt into her throat. An old jeep was rapidly pulling up alongside. The gunner, sitting behind a massive machine gun, shouted and waved his arms, motioning them to pull over.

Opal glanced back at the dozens of panicking Papuans cowering between the seats, and then at Pholus. The big mercenary was spending all his attention keeping the massive machine upright and on the road.

She scooped up the discarded submachine gun and flipped off the safety. "I'm getting *real* tired of you assholes," she growled. A kick to the lever on the dashboard opened the passenger door. Bracing herself against a pole, she spun into the

doorway and pulled the trigger. The weapon bucked in her hands, jerking more than she had expected, but she got it under control and aimed the stream of lead downwards.

The jeep's tire shredded and the driver violently wrenched the wheel, trying to keep the vehicle under control. Pholus whooped and swerved, driving the bus's massive bulk sideways, into the jeep's path. It careened off the road.

Pholus checked his mirrors. "Any more of them?"

Opal scanned the windows. "I don't see anyone, but keep going."

* * * *

Directed by the driver, Opal and Pholus found a police station a mile or so down the road, and reported that they were being pursued. They didn't tell the whole story, that would have raised too many questions, but with some careful diplomacy and the application of some carefully directed money, Opal arranged for police protection the rest of the way to the airport.

Chapter Seven

Pholus looked around the interior of the luxuriously appointed corporate jet as he boarded.

Opal gave him a gentle shove and he moved down the little aisle and took one of the wide, comfortable seats. Opal sat facing him, and put her hand on his. "Don't worry. I know it's unfamiliar, but you're smart. You'll adapt."

Pholus smiled and looked out the window.

"Doctor Schild, do you need any help with your seat belt? We will be taking off in a few minutes."

It seemed a bit silly to have a flight attendant on just for the two of them, but Opal believed in enjoying life's pleasures. Between the fuel, the flight crew, the charter fee, and the carbon offsets, this flight was costing a hefty sum, even for her. A flight attendant didn't add that much to the bottom line from that perspective. She nodded to the handsome, dark-skinned man and took the straps in her hands. "No, we'll be fine."

As soon as the plane reached cruising altitude, Opal took out her computer and set it on her lap. She touched the startpad, but nothing happened.

"Oh, no..." She touched the startpad again. Still nothing.

"Turn it over."

Opal glanced at Pholus. He was looking out the window at an impressive bank of clouds, orange and purple in the slanting evening sun. She turned it over.

A bullet hole graced the center of the black metal case. Inside, shreds of wrecked plastic and severed wiring could be seen around the remains of a rifle bullet. Opal let out a deep groan of disappointment.

"Doesn't look like they got your hard drive," he said. "You should be able to get back all your data."

"Pholus, I have investments to track, email to answer. I haven't been connected for days!"

Pholus took the ruined machine from her lap and threw it onto the seat behind him. "There's nothing to do about it now. Forget it. Get some sleep."

Opal sighed. "You're right. Of course." She waved to the flight attendant, sitting in a seat near the front of the plane. "Could you darken the cabin, please?"

"Of course, ma'am." He spoke a few soft words

to the ship's computer, and the lighting dimmed to a soft glow. Another command turned the plane's windows opaque. "Would you like a blanket, ma'am?"

"Yes, please."

Snuggled down under the blanket, enfolded by the seat, and finally free of hounding threats, Opal found sleep coming easily.

* * * *

When she awoke, Pholus was watching her, leaning forward in his seat. "Good morning." His voice was low and calm, almost a whisper.

"Someday I'm going to wake up, and you'll still be asleep." Opal yawned and stretched. "What time is it?"

"We're about four hours from landing."

"You spent that whole time just watching me sleep?"

"I dozed a bit."

Opal raised her seat. "You're not wearing the same clothes."

Pholus fingered the black cotton t-shirt stretched over his broad chest and shrugged. "Better to get changed now. We'll have enough trouble getting through customs."

"Yes, yes, all very logical... but that means I missed it." Opal winked.

Pholus raised an eyebrow. "Well, in that case..." A few words with the flight attendant sent him up into the cockpit. In smooth, efficient motions, he pulled off his tee shirt, doffed his boots, and shucked his tan trousers, leaving himself completely naked in the seat. He crossed his arms and gave her a challenging look.

"You call that a strip?"

Pholus shrugged.

"Let me show you how it's done." This performance was for Pholus alone. The attendant's computer controls were simple enough. In a few seconds she turned up the lights a bit at the front of the cabin, as if it were a private stage. The soft, rhythmic strains of a solo jazz saxophone drifted from the cabin speakers.

There, in the little space near the hatch, she danced. Turning her back to Pholus, she twisted her spine in sinuous, snaking movements, raising her arms above her head and letting them carry the motions out to the ends of her fingers. Opal let the music guide her as it flowed over and around her.

Opal glanced over her shoulder, and caught Pholus craning his neck for a better view. She smiled a crooked smile to herself.

Her hands drifted downwards again, reaching the buttons of her blouse. It dropped from her shoulders, revealing a plain white sports bra

underneath. In another smooth movement, she pulled the stretchy undergarment up over her head and twirled it around.

Pholus chuckled low in his throat. She could almost feel the pressure of his attention on her back. She felt naughty. She felt rude. She felt playful and fun in a way that she hadn't felt in a long time. Covering her nipples with the palms of her hands, she turned around and looked Pholus in the eye. Amusement and lust played over his face, and his hand was drifting downwards towards his cock.

Slowly, in time with the music, Opal pushed her breasts around on her chest. Under his hand, Pholus's cock twitched as the first stirrings of arousal appeared. She slid her hands upwards, slowly, letting her breasts spill out from underneath the bra, one inch at a time, until they swayed freely with her undulating body.

"You like this?" she asked, swinging her hips slowly side to side.

"Mmm."

Opal hooked her thumbs in the waistband of her skirt and inched it down slowly over her generous posterior. Pholus's gaze was glued to the widening expanse of skin appearing above the fabric. She stopped, teasing, just at her hips, allowing only the barest wisps of pubic hair to appear. She wondered if he knew, before this, that

she wasn't wearing underwear. He stroked his cock generously now, the thick organ full in his hand, still twitching with his heartbeat as it swelled. Small murmurs of appreciation welled up from his chest.

"Tell me how much."

"You're gorgeous."

Opal tilted her head back with a broad smile. "Such eloquence." She dropped the skirt and danced closer, just out of arm's reach, letting his hungry gaze devour her but denying him touch.

"If you'll excuse my interruption," came the pilot's voice over the loudspeakers. "We're about to encounter some..."

A violent shudder ran through the ship, pitching Opal towards the floor. Pholus caught her and pulled her into his lap.

"...turbulence. If you'll please take your seats and put on your seat belts, we should be through it in a few minutes."

Opal tried to get up, but Pholus's arms pulled her tighter. He shifted her behind to get her sitting on his lap. "I've got you."

"I don't think this meets FAA regulations," Opal whispered. The plane trembled again, and she felt an echo of the vibration lodge in the pit of her stomach.

A thick, hard cock pressed against her tailbone. Pholus wrapped a powerful arm around her body,

binding her elbows in a pythonic grip. "Don't worry. You won't go anywhere." The chaotic motions of the plane rubbed his cock against her.

His assurances did little to calm her down. She felt her pulse start to rise. Turbulence always made her a little nervous, and the unsteadiness of her position made it even worse.

"When we get back to the 'States, you're going to be in charge a lot of the time," said Pholus. His free hand stroked her thigh, then moved, gently, to her arm, up past her elbow. "That's fine. I'm used to doing what I'm told, especially when I respect the person in command."

"That's..."

"Shh." Pholus squeezed her arm for emphasis. "When we're having sex, though... I'm in charge." His hand found her breast; held it, fondled it, caressed it. "I've watched you. I've listened to you. You like it when I take charge." He dipped his head and gently bit the fleshy part of her neck.

"Yes," she breathed, unable to deny the thrill running through her. She flexed her hands, shifted her weight, but Pholus held her tightly. The jet pitched violently.

Opal's anticipation blazed. Her heart raced, and the air suddenly seemed to lose all its oxygen, leaving her gasping. "Please... I'm... let me go..."

"No." His mouth felt a slight inch from her ear. His voice was low and soft. "It's not safe." He

drew her thighs apart with the gentle guidance of his hand and knees. "You need to stay right here." A finger drew lazy spirals in the thick forest of her pubic hair, edging ever closer to her slit. How could he have learned so quickly how to make her so hot?

"You still have a lot to teach me." His fingers invaded her slit and sank into the sodden terrain. "But I'm going to learn it on my own terms." She twisted her head, desperately seeking to bring her lips to his, but instead he drew her earlobe between her lips and held it briefly between his teeth. "You are my jewel," he whispered. "And I will never let you get away."

His finger churned her flesh, up and around and down and in, coaxing a long groan of pleasure from her throat. She let her head loll back against his shoulder. "Please," she moaned, "please..." The turbulence faded and died, but Opal was too far gone to notice. She rolled her hips forward, trying to get just a little more stimulation from his fingers. "Please... oohhhhh... put it in..." Her hunger was almost unbearable. She tried to push up off his lap, lean forward, anything to get his cock inside her.

"Tell me. Tell me what you want," he insisted.

"Dammit... Pholus... ohhhh..."

"Ask nicely." He shifted his hand and plunged deeper, with his thumb stroking her clit directly.

"Fuck me," she whispered. "Please. Give me your cock."

With effortless grace, Pholus nudged Opal forward, lifting her off his lap just long enough to guide his cock to her hungry slit.

He pulled her back down on top of him, and she cried out in ecstasy. With her upper arms firmly in his grasp, his massive arms lifted her up and slowly brought her back down. She tried to speed the process but her body was a doll in his hands, totally under his control. With each slow-motion cycle, she let out a deep moan. Again and again his cock spread her, his girth a welcome pressure within her.

Over her shoulder she heard his breath starting to come deeper and sharper. Opal gasped with relief as he finally stepped up the rhythm, driving her on what she knew would be a final assault on orgasm.

"Touch... touch my clit," she gasped. "I'm so close."

"Go ahead," he said, releasing her arms. "You do it." Opal obeyed. The tension that had been building since the moment he entered her tent detonated. Her pussy clenched, rippling up and down his shaft, sending echoes through all the muscles of her body. Short, guttural sounds boiled up in her throat.

Only after the spasms passed did she realize

that he hadn't come.

He wasn't done.

Pholus picked her up, turned her around, and set her down on her seat. He knelt before her, his heavy member glistening with her juices. "I think I like it better this way." His voice was thick with desire. "I want to see your face." His gaze boring into hers he pushed forwards in a single motion. He spared no exertion, thrusting powerfully, pulling himself into her with his hands on the seat's wide armrests.

Opal caressed the powerful, bunched muscles of his chest and shoulders, and felt the thin sheen of sweat under her fingers. As much as she wanted to close her eyes and arch her back, as much as she wanted to thrash with pleasure, she controlled herself and matched his gaze with her own. More than anything she wanted to return the pleasure she had gotten from him in kind. "I love you."

He had no answer for her. He convulsed, throwing back his head in an atavistic roar. His cock found her deepest center and flooded her with cum. When his gaze found hers again, his expression was warm and languid.

"I love you too, my treasure."

About the Author

Nobilis cares for a disabled spouse, two children, and two cats. A background in defense research and software engineering has been of no use at all in launching a writing career.