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Fling

Implosion Zone

BARBARA KARMAZIN

THE ZONE: IMPLOSION ZONE

Barbara Karmazin

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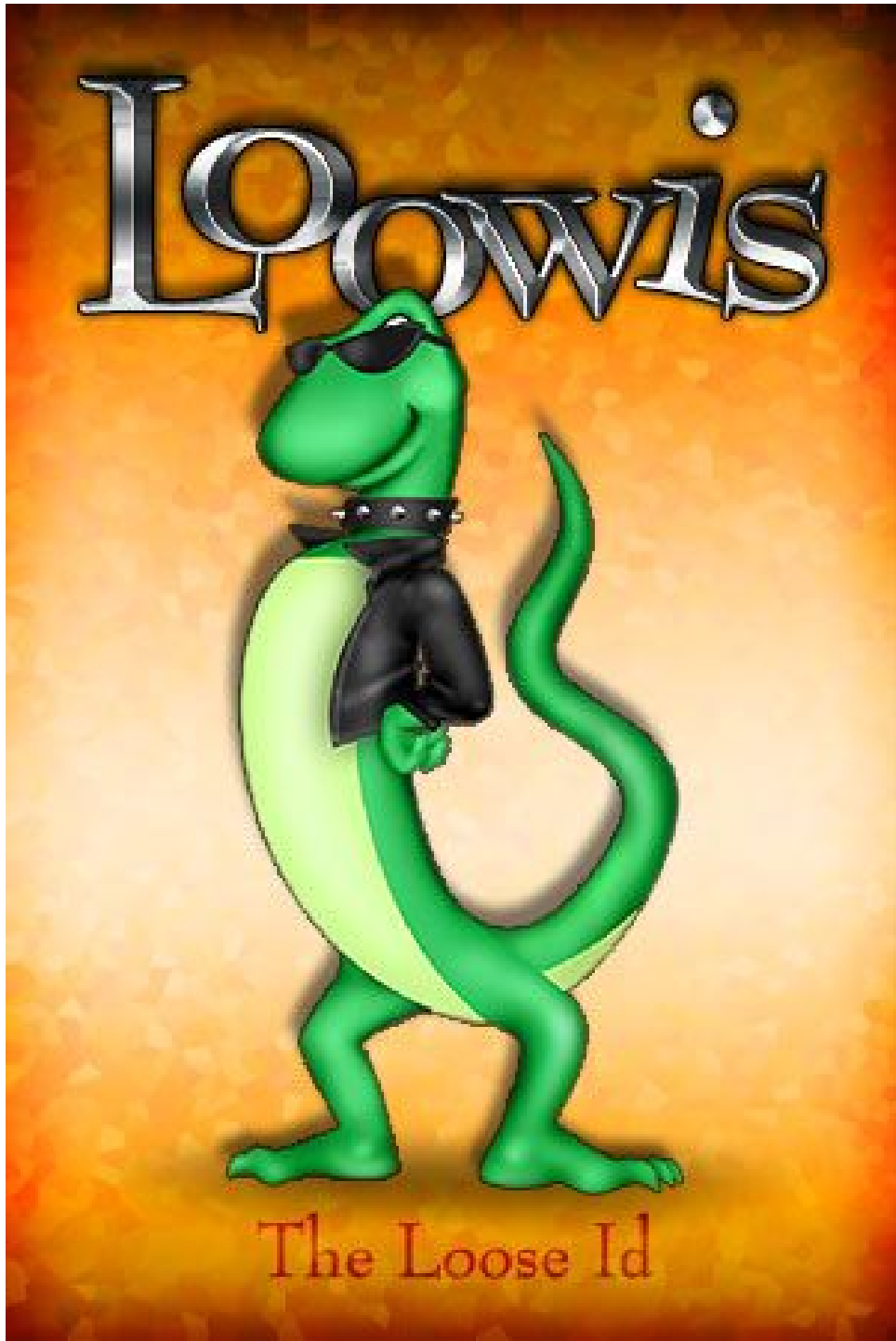
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The door to Maris's apartment snicked open. She nodded at Pierce and glanced around for his usual companions. Her eyes widened with shock. "Where's Kayle? Don't tell me you left him in your apartment without adult supervision?"

Pierce winced. Not exactly the kind of greeting he expected. Did this mean that after a week, she was thinking about ending their relationship again? Just like she did three years ago. Those three years without her had felt like an eternity. He didn't know if he could face that kind of loneliness again.

She leaned forward and blocked the half-open door to her apartment with her body. Her voice swooped to the heights of incredulity. "How *could* you? He's only a week old."

He took a careful breath, put on his best poker face, and muttered under his breath. "The darling little creature is doing fine."

She gave him the exact same look his mother used to give him when she caught him in a lie.

Bad move.

If he made another disparaging remark about the cybernetic monster spawned by their A.I. partners, she'd start yelling for sure.

A quick glance up and down the corridor showed two entry lights already turned to green over adjoining doors -- a clear indication that they would soon open. Having her neighbors report him for child neglect and abuse was not the way he wanted to start his morning. He had enough on his plate already, trying to track down a serial killer on this station before another body showed up. "Let me in. Please. I can explain."

She cut him off with a wave of her hand. Her shoulders sagged and she raked her hand through her hair. "All right. Come inside."

He obeyed with alacrity and breathed a relieved sigh when the threshold sealed shut behind him. As stationmaster, Maris had top-of-the-line soundproofing in her residence.

She crossed her arms and looked him over with a dangerous glint in her eyes.

Damn, she looked delicious with her soft brown hair still tousled from sleep. The silky white nightshirt clung to her curves and ended at mid-thigh. The fluttering pulse beating under the fragile skin of her throat teased his senses.

His mouth ached for the taste of her life instead of the dry, reconstituted excuse for blood he normally drank. Heat rushed to his groin with carnal anticipation of the raw pleasure he gained each time she gifted him with her blood, and his cock responded with keen interest. If she calmed down within the next five minutes, maybe they'd have time for a quickie before they went their separate ways and attended to their respective job duties for the day.

And, if nothing else, keeping her sexually satisfied should keep her from thinking about dumping him again. He took a deep breath and gave her a bright smile.

She tapped her foot on the tiled floor. Silver glitter flashed on her toenails. "I'm waiting for that explanation."

He might as well get it over with. She was like a bulldog. Once she got her mind set on something, she wouldn't let go. "Kayle was driving me nuts. I needed a break. If he asked me

‘why’ one more time, I was going to dismantle him with my bare hands. Besides, he needs to learn how to socialize with humans of all age levels, right? I left him with his friends.”

A sardonically arched eyebrow assessed his fumbling attempt to shift the blame. “And...”

“Suli Kwan is twelve going on thirteen. She’s a very responsible young lady. It’s not like I left him alone.”

Maris pursed her lips. “Just Suli?”

Pierce shook his head. “Suli had her six-year-old brother Jin tagging along with her, of course. A few minutes later, Jason Poole, her best friend, and Abrized nur Oujo, their Avey friend, strolled up and joined her at the door. I couldn’t say no, could I? All they want to do is play with Kayle for a couple of hours. It’ll be a good learning experience for all of them. I’ll check in on him when I take my lunch break. I promise.”

She dropped her arms. “Jason’s twelve years old too, isn’t he?”

It looked like Maris might be changing her mind about him leaving Kayle behind. Pierce crossed his fingers behind his back. “Yeah.”

The tension lines disappeared from her face. A small smile materialized in a gradual softening at the corners of her lips. “I guess it’s all right then. When the first body showed up on the station, I authorized full security links for every child under age sixteen because Station Day Care only takes kids up to age twelve. That way Lilith monitors and tracks every child twenty-four/seven, no matter where they go on the station, even within private residences.”

He held his hands out. “See. Everything’s copasetic. Lilith is keeping tabs on them. Besides, I don’t think we need to worry. So far, every victim has been an adult. Whoever this killer is, he or she isn’t targeting children.”

Maris bit her lip and stared at him. Her shoulders sagged as if she carried the weight of the entire station on her shoulders. She walked the two steps that separated her from him,

flung her arms around his waist, and snuggled her cheek against his chest.

Sweet and familiar, her body burned against him like a torch beneath her nightshirt's silken fabric. "I'm sorry."

He hugged her close and breathed in the clean scent of her soft hair. *Keep it simple. Don't rush her. Don't blow this chance.* "There's no need to apologize."

She shook her head. "My nerves are shot. Not knowing when and where this killer is going to strike next has the entire station on edge. Fights, brawls, and domestic disputes have increased two hundred percent during the last seventy-two hours. I want this killer caught. This is my station and the safety of all inhabitants is *my* responsibility."

"I know."

Her gusty sigh battered his chest. She melted against him. "Tell you what. I'll take off work early. That way you can bring Kayle to me right after lunch. After all, I am his godmother. It's not fair to leave him with you all the time. I'll keep him out of your hair for the rest of the day and you can focus on your investigation without worrying about him getting into trouble."

Oh, yes. This was a much better way to start out his morning than dealing with the frightful and all-too-numerous responsibilities foisted on him as designated godfather to Lilith and Caliban's cybernetic child. He tilted her head back with his thumb and flashed a wicked, fang-filled grin. "If you wish, there is time for me to reassure you."

She laced her fingers through his hair, exposing the fragile column of her neck in instinctive surrender. "Remember our first time." A sultry laugh burbled in her throat. "I made you promise not to bite me. I wanted to make sure you wanted me for me, not just for my blood."

Oh yes, he remembered. Three years ago, his entire body had trembled with the strain of showing her he didn't need the blood for arousal and climax. They'd collapsed in a tangle

of arms and legs after the tremendous release of a mutual orgasm. He'd held her, traced the blue lines of the veins curving around her breasts until he fell asleep. The reassuring beat of her heart had pulsed through him all night long. No one had ever trusted him the way she did. He'd never betray that trust.

Pierce growled and fastened his mouth upon hers in greedy demand. The taste of her, the heat of her body under his hands, fuzzed his mind.

He pushed her against the wall and yanked her nightshirt to her waist.

She returned his kiss with fierce intensity and opened her legs to his probing hands. Her sweet, firm flesh waited for him to explore at his leisure. His cock jumped behind the constricting fabric of his pants, eager to plunge into the hot, welcome grip of her wet pussy.

He peeled his shirt off and tossed it on the floor.

Maris ran her hands over his chest. Her face commanded attention. She had high, wide cheekbones, a short, jutting nose and a wide, beautifully shaped mouth. He never tired of looking at her.

"I love the way your dragon tattoo ripples every time you move." A sultry grin softened her mouth.

He unbuttoned her nightshirt. Soft and full, her breasts filled his hands easily.

She opened her arms and slid her nightshirt the rest of the way off. The shimmering fabric fell into a silken puddle on the floor. "Damn you. All you have to do is touch me and I let you do anything you want."

Pierce grinned. He tweaked her nipples.

She sucked in a startled breath. Color flooded her face with the rich, teasing glow of fresh blood.

Her lovely nipples awaited his attention. He squeezed her breasts together and sucked on them one at a time, slowly and carefully, bringing the tips to swollen peaks of arousal.

Maris sighed deep in her throat with a little mewling catch that made him ache for release. With a wickedly devious twist of her body, she pushed her hands down his stomach and unzipped his pants.

His cock sprang out. She wrapped her strong fingers around the thick shaft. Pierce lifted his head, braced his hands on the wall, and stared into her lovely eyes while his pants slipped down and fell to his ankles. "Vampires," he growled the words out past the tightness in his throat. "are bigger, better, stronger, and do it longer."

She flung her head back and laughed, exposing the fragile column of her throat in a move that was both vulnerable and incredibly sexy with her trusting and fearless acceptance of him as a vampire. Her hands moved with carnal familiarity over his cock. Up and down, she stroked him, slicked her thumb over the soft tip and spread the drops of precum over his glans.

She was perfect. All woman, eager and ready to love him.

He lowered his mouth to hers. Soft lips.

His fangs elongated. Molten heat rippled between them and swirled across his skin to his cock. His balls tightened with the weight of his seed. His tongue found hers. Demanding and caressing, he savored her sweet surrender.

She released her grip on his cock, arched her back, and lifted her leg alongside his in open invitation.

He accepted that invitation by grabbing her ass with one hand and sliding his cock into the hot, tight embrace of her pussy. She gasped under his mouth. Her entire body shivered with the shock of his entry.

Mine. All mine. My woman. My lover.

Pierce lifted his head. Desire flushed her face. Her pupils had dilated so far her eyes looked black instead of brown. Slow and easy, he pumped his cock inside her, letting her pussy adjust to the size of him first.

She groaned, wrapped her arms around his neck, and tightened her leg around his. Her voice came out in a sultry lament. “Stop teasing me. I want to feel you slamming into me hard and fast.”

He forced the thick length of his cock into her, stretching her already stretched flesh to full capacity.

She whimpered and twisted her hips against him.

He slammed into her over and over again. Each hard stroke lifted her foot from the floor and slid her back higher on the wall. Her fingernails dug into his shoulders, drawing blood. The hot metallic scent of his blood mingled with his sweat.

Harder and harder, faster and faster, he fucked her.

Her fingernails dug harder into his shoulders. Her voice scaled up into a gasping moan while her pussy squeezed and milked his pounding cock.

With a cry that came out as a growl and a groan, he bent to her neck and bit into the pulsing vein. Her body flinched under that bite. Hot blood flooded his mouth and slid into the molten hunger waiting inside his belly.

She screamed. Her pussy clenched around his cock with the rippling contractions of her orgasm.

His cum exploded into her in a long, gushing stream that seemed to go on forever.

An unexpected ping of contact from Caliban rang inside Pierce’s implant. Maris jerked under his hands at the exact same moment.

He pulled back and stared at her. “What the hell?”

She grimaced and raked her hands through her hair. “Lilith just pinged my implant. This better be important.”

He braced his hands on the wall and resisted the temptation to bang his head against the hard surface. What was it about Sara’s Laws that said trouble always came at the most inopportune time? “Caliban just pinged me, too.”

Maris sighed. “We might as well find out what they want.” Her face went blank while she accessed her connection to Lilith, the station’s Artificial Intelligence.

Pierce sighed and sent an inquiry over his implant link to Caliban, his mobile A.I. partner. *What’s the problem?*

The response was immediate. *Security found a brand new body. This one is in Sector Four, Level Eleven.*

* * * * *

Kayle sat on the pewter gray carpet and twisted his nano-alum legs into the lotus position for maximum stability. He selected the parts he needed from the broken cleaning bots Suli and Jason had appropriated from the recycling bin.

Connecting him to KidNET on his second day of life had given him ample opportunity to find friends with compatible interests. Today, they approached a critical point in their mutual project. If his plan succeeded, he’d show his cyber-parents he had the capability and maturity to carry out an investigation on his own. He hoped they would reward him with equal access to the data, sensors, and comp functions of AdminNET instead of restricting him to KidNET level.

Suli’s young male sibling, Jin, plopped onto the floor and peered at the first completed bot. The non-sentient device looked like a fifteen-centimeter, fat-bodied dragonfly with flexible tank tracks for locomotion. “Can I play with this one, Kayle?”

“Sure.”

Jin squealed, grabbed the bot, and ran behind the sofa.

Suli and Jason rolled their eyes at each other, indicating their mutual attitude that they were so much more mature at their chronological age of twelve Earth Standard years versus Jin’s six Earth Standard years. Suli dumped two SecureKid discs on the carpet and tucked a

strand of hair behind her ear. Shiny and black, her hair fell, unrelieved by wave or curl, to an inch below her shoulders.

Her dark brown eyes appeared almost black in contrast to the smooth golden tint of her skin. She smoothed out her black tunic and shorts, sat back on her heels, and clasped her hands in a posture of patience.

Jason plopped down beside her and added his SecureKid disc to her pile. Dark red hair clung in tight curls to his scalp. The pale brown specks dotted across his nose and cheeks were a natural, random pattern based on his DNA, not the facial art Kayle had mistaken the freckles for the first time he'd seen them. He'd also chosen black tunic and shorts for his attire today.

Abrized bent his legs under him and sat cross-legged on the floor. He'd chosen dark gray for his tunic, matching pants, and soft boots. A series of shiny silver clips confined the unruly mass of blue feathers on the Avee child's scalp into a neat tail trailing down his back. He cocked his head to the side and watched the rapid movements of Kayle's multi-tooled fingers. The cat-slit pupils split the light at odd angles that made his pale green eyes look like they were glowing.

Kayle completed an extra bot just in case Jin decided to keep the first one as his new toy. He clicked his repair tool extrusions back into his fingertips and extruded a pair of dark blue bat wings from his shoulders to make his appearance more agreeable for Abrized. Now the meeting could begin. "As the chosen leader, before I hear your reports, I will read the minutes of the last meeting."

Jason wrinkled his brow in an expression of annoyance and exhaled a loud sigh. "Do we have to?"

Suli shrugged. "Look it up on your comp. Meetings always start with the reading of minutes."

Abrized clicked his tongue in Avee agreement. He twisted his long, agile fingers together in his lap.

Kayle nodded. "Okay. Here are the minutes. I will keep them brief rather than repeat everything word for word. Our first meeting occurred two days ago. We agreed to keep all proceedings private by not making any recordings other than our memories. Introductions were completed. Our primary goal is to learn the identity of the serial killer terrorizing this station. Our secondary goal is to help our Avee group member honor the memory of his second-father's unnecessary death by bringing his killer to justice. This death is a very important clue because the manner of his death is totally different from the human deaths that have occurred thus far. We assigned investigative and scavenger tasks to the meeting participants. Minutes are concluded."

He extruded a miniscule claw from his forefinger and pointed the gleaming tip at Suli. "Begin your report."

She pursed her lips. "I divided the rumors about the deaths into three categories. Impossible, possible, and probable..."

* * * * *

Pierce clipped the one-hour air bottle to his belt and snaked the breathing tube to his mouth. He lifted his arms over his head and spun in a slow circle under the spray of protective sealant. The nano-fabric clung to his hair, face, hands, and clothes like plastic wrap. Whisper-thin and flexible, the fragile material eliminated possible DNA cross-contamination at the crime scene.

The forensic technician had the caramel-colored skin, hazel eyes, and dark blond corkscrew curls typical of mixed-race heritage. She aimed the nozzle of her spray can lower. "Lift your feet one at a time, please."

Two quick squirts sealed the bottom of Pierce's shoes. He jerked his thumb at the temporary jury-rigged partition of trans-alum blocking the corridor. Fresh weld marks sealed

the edges to walls and ceiling. The words CRIME SCENE, DO NOT ENTER glowed in blazing yellow across the partition. “Did anyone touch the body?”

The technician sucked in a deep breath and stood ramrod-straight. An angry scowl darkened her face. She spoke in short, clipped tones, devoid of emotion. “No one touched the body. The station A.I. scanned for life-signs, found none, and partitioned the area within seconds of the body’s discovery.”

Idiot! He’d just insulted one of the staff-persons whose critical knowledge and training he needed to rely on in this investigation.

Blasted interagency politics.

Pierce sighed. “My apologies. I phrased the question wrong. My concern was over possible contamination of the body by the witness. There was no intent to disparage Station Security’s professionalism in this investigation. Where is the witness?”

A flush reddened her face. She twisted the cap shut on her spray can and clipped it to her belt along with the rest of her tools and datapad. “The witness is in Admin.”

He damn well better mend the bridge between him and Station Security before the situation degenerated into an interagency war of contradictory lies and back-stabbing reports.

Pierce aimed a puzzled frown in her direction and gestured at the empty corridor. “Where are the investigators for the previous homicides? Shouldn’t they be here by now? I need their unbiased opinions and impressions for today’s crime, not sanitized data snippets pinged to my implant from Admin.”

The technician’s eyes widened. “Yes. Of course. sir.” Her face went blank for a few seconds while she accessed her implant and contacted the investigators on the station’s SecurityNET. She focused on Pierce again and gave him a gratifyingly respectful smile and nod. “They’ll be here shortly, sir.”

“Good.” He turned to the partition. “Send them in as soon as they arrive.” No need to insult her intelligence a second time by telling her to do her job and spray seal-suits on them just like the one she’d applied to him. The partition hissed open at his approach and sealed behind him with quiet precision.

The crumpled shape lying on the floor lacked all dignity, like a discarded toy tossed aside by a child during a tantrum. He moved a full meter away from the entrance and squatted down on his heels beside the body.

Cold, bloodless flesh gleamed under the harsh, unforgiving utility light, giving the broken body the appearance of a statue rather than a corpse. A male this time, his head turned at an odd angle, half torn off where his attacker had ripped a gaping wound at his throat and feasted on the sudden outpouring of blood.

At first sight, the body was a classic example of the grotesque mutilations inflicted by an undead vampire during its feeding. There was no sign of the discreet puncture wounds left behind by a living vampire like Pierce. Plus, he always took care to leave his companions happy and alive.

The only problem was, undead vampires didn’t bathe and disinfect their victims’ bodies after feeding. Neither did they have the mental capacity to hide and wait for more victims to devour. They were mindless feeding machines easily spotted, tracked down, and killed like the rabid animals they’d turned into after their resurrection from true-death.

Even stranger yet, there were no defensive wounds on the victim’s hands and arms. His face remained remarkably calm despite the sudden and horrible means of his death. A typical victim had his or her face frozen in an endless scream of pure terror.

No pool of blood. No splatter. Nothing. Just a clean and bloodless corpse dumped on the floor. Whoever did this must be a living vampire who’d gone rogue. This was too cold, too calculated, a jaded mockery of the tender heat, the total trust he shared with Maris each time she gifted him with her blood.

The partition wall hissed open. A man and woman stepped into the secured section. They stood at attention while the partition sealed behind them. No bland security uniforms for these investigators. Their seal-suits covered sober dark gray business tunics, pants, and gel shoes. The man's slanted eyes and coal black hair proclaimed his pure Asiatic heritage while the woman's blonde hair and blue eyes proclaimed her Caucasian roots.

Pierce rose to his feet. He plastered a smile on his face and extended his seal-suited hand. "Hello. I'm Captain-Pilot Pierce Grinaldi, Interstellar Investigator, Zone Three, Jurisdiction Homicide. I'm here to work with you in special consultant capacity due to the unusual aspect of recent murders on this station. My apologies for not having the chance to properly introduce myself when I arrived last week."

Ouch! What a load of bureaucratic bull crap. That lousy intro he just spouted made him sound like a corporate suit with a stick up his ass.

The man shrugged. "No problem. Last week's terrorist attack disrupted everyone's schedule. My name is Lieutenant Michael Nguyen. Special Investigative Unit, Homicide." He shook hands, stepped back, and waved the woman forward. "This is my partner, Lieutenant Chris Anderson."

The woman shook hands with Pierce, stepped back, and turned to the corpse. Her voice bespoke crisp efficiency. "Now that we've gotten our introductions completed, I'd like to proceed with the investigation."

* * * * *

Primary Admin pinged Maris's implant. She winced, closed her eyes, and sorted through the morning data dump. *Domestic disturbance in Sectors 16 and 23. Two drunken brawls in Sector 19. Riot in Sector 25, Entertainment District, alterday shift. EMT and damage reports attached, subfolder 19. Civil appeal and damage claim files attached in subfolder 19a.* Visual data blurred and shifted into a mélange of angry stationers, rampaging spacers, harried security, and frustrated emergency medical personnel.

She flagged the riot reports to the top of the duty list for Legal Affairs. Authorized hazardous duty pay for the five security teams who responded. Approved overtime pay for the six damage control cleanup teams.

Incendiary explosion Deck 12, Dock 3, Sector 29. Cause identified as fuel line overload. Structural damage moderate to hull and interior feed junctions. Pedestrian and motor traffic rerouted to docks 11 and 13. One security team and one damage-control team rerouted from Sector 25 to dock 12, Sector 29. Intersystem freighter Atlantis Rising towed to dock 39 for repairs.

She approved Lilith's request to reassign three security teams to secure and visually inspect fuel lines at all docking ports, commercial and tourist. Then she assigned the request to visually inspect private dock facilities to Legal Affairs. The legal secretaries should be able to download the appropriate forms and contact the individual ship owners for permission to inspect their fuel line hookups.

A final skim of the message headings in her inbox showed routine reports, pay raise requests, job function reassignment requests, and two interdepartmental meetings to be scheduled within the next ten days. She shunted that stack of messages from her inbox to Clerical Support to handle. The spam inbox, situated behind its special firewall, was full, of course. Maybe later she'd sort through those message headings before wiping and dumping the contents.

Just another day in Admin Central.

She opened her eyes.

A four-armed Hindu goddess clad in a golden sari waited on the other side of her desk. Maris sagged back in her chair and waved at the holographic manifestation of Nexus Station's Artificial Intelligence. "Hi Lilith, I'm glad you're here. We have a lot to discuss."

A soft chime came from the closed door behind Lilith.

Maris sighed. "What?"

The speaker embedded in the door transmitted her administrative assistant's response. "Miss Claxon, I know you specifically stated you were not to be disturbed for two hours, but a gift showed up and requires your thumbprint as proof of delivery."

A gift? Who'd be sending her a gift? Not Pierce. That wasn't his style. Maybe it was a thank-you gift from the Avee delegation. For it to get this far meant it had already passed Admin Central's auto-destruct scan for bombs, poisons, and nano-viruses. "Why couldn't you wait until I'm available?"

Her assistant's voice had a definite pleading tone. "It's set to transmit an auto-ping every five minutes for delivery confirmation. I can't get any of my work done with it disrupting my dataflow like that."

Maris dumped a stack of printouts into the recycle slot and cleared a space on her desk. "Bring the gift in, please."

The door irised open. Alexis Dree, her administrative assistant, stepped inside carrying a bonsai tree. The tree's container looked like carved mother of pearl. Normally pale, Alexis had changed his skin color to a pale green shade that went well with his maroon tunic and bright silver hair, which curled tight against his scalp. Probably had his eye on a new boyfriend if he was trying out the newest fashion shades.

He placed the potted bonsai tree on her desk.

Maris pressed her right thumb to the green ID sensor glowing on the left side of the pot. The auto-responder chirped. "Delivery confirmed. Have a nice day." A slot opened in the quartz stone artfully placed at the base of the tree and spat a creamy white gift card into her hand.

She turned it over. The card was totally blank on both sides.

Alexis backed away and hustled out of the room as if he were afraid the pot might bite him. The door sealed behind him with silent efficiency.

Lilith's holographic avatar circled the desk. The A.I. peered at the plant from all angles. "Why would Pierce send you a miniature tree? Aren't roses the traditional courtship ritual gift?"

A sharp-edged memory flashed into Maris's mind of Pierce's chocolate brown eyes glazing over with carnal expectation as he lifted her hand, turned her wrist to the light, and traced the line of her vein. Every hair on her body had stood on end. She'd swallowed against the sudden dryness of her mouth. Her skin throbbed under the furnace heat of his hand. *And I haven't even taken off any of my clothes yet.*

She remembered the way Pierce blinked and focused on a point over her shoulder. A fierce frown darkened his face. He dropped her hand, strode over to the thick-barreled cactus plant perched on the nightstand, pointed at the door and said, "This is private. Get the hell out of here."

At that point, the cactus had shivered and morphed back into Caliban's familiar shape. The A.I. flashed a mischievous grin at her and scuttled out of the room with commendable speed.

Maris shut out the memory, tossed the card into the recycle slot, and sat back in her gel chair. She folded her hands in her lap and glared at the bonsai tree. "What brings you here, Caliban? I thought you'd be down in the morgue recording the autopsy."

The gnarled trunk and twisted branches with their bright green foliage twisted and melted. It took about fifteen seconds for the A.I. to complete the transformation from tree to a gargoyle with shimmering, metallic, blue-black skin and matching bat wings.

Caliban kicked the mounded dirt off his feet and jumped from the pot onto the desk. "I don't need to be physically present for the autopsy," he said. "I can upload the data and keep a running tab on the investigation through my link with Pierce's implant."

He sat down on the edge of her desk. “Plus, I know he’ll ping me when he needs my specialized talents.”

Maris grinned. His specialized talents were the reason why Lilith and Caliban created Kayle as their newborn child A.I. An independent and fully mobile cybernetic personality would augment Station Security tremendously without disrupting the current sensor system. The only problem was Kayle needed specialized training and maturity before he could work with Lilith and help her guard the station. “Why the disguise? Were you keeping in practice?”

Caliban shook his head. “Have you seen admin’s waiting room today? It’s wall-to-wall people. Rather than inflict unnecessary harm just to get through the crowd, it was simpler to let the delivery droid carry me inside.”

The uproar he’d cause in her waiting room if he strolled through in his tiny gargoyle shape, poking ankles and legs with his index finger to make people move out of his way, flashed into her mind. She shuddered at the thought. “I see.”

He folded his stubby legs into the lotus position and clasped his hands together. “Right now, Pierce is forming a working relationship with his new partners in the homicide division. Rather than distract the delicate mechanism of his bonding procedures with my presence, I decided to work with you today.”

Maris thought it over for a few seconds. Having two A.I.’s studying the problem with her was an excellent idea.

She turned to Lilith who had propped her hip on the edge of the desk. “Give us an overview of the weak points in the station’s security that this serial killer is exploiting to his or her advantage.”

Lilith rose to her feet and lifted her hands, all four of them. Streamers of light flowed from her fingertips. She molded the light into a three-dimensional, transparent, scaled-down image of Nexus Station.

Maris went around the desk and stopped beside Caliban. "I can carry you while I do the walk-through," she offered.

"No need for that. The holoview is more for your benefit than mine. I already have the images incorporated into my database."

This was true. Walking through the visuals like this was an easier way for her to comprehend the overall scope of the problem instead of wading through a huge data dump of architectural renderings. Visuals had always been her personal frame of reference instead of the tactile and auditory informational models that other people preferred.

Data extrapolated from body-heat sensors showed up within the display as red dots, either stationary or moving through the corridors and different decks. Blinking blue numbered dots indicated direct links with SecureKid tags. Dark green dots indicated security personnel and light green emergency medical and fire staff; yellow for damage control, teal for the alien visitors, and orange for administrative staff. Dark swatches covered areas blocked off for public access, either because they were crime scenes or under repair.

"The placement of heat sensors only in the main corridors and public decks is very inefficient," Caliban's voice interrupted her thoughts. "Why don't you have sensors covering the entire station for a complete and accurate record of every person's whereabouts twenty-four/seven?"

Maris sighed. There were too many holes in the security net. Holes she dared not plug because of privacy laws that blocked any form of monitoring in private residential areas. The only exception she'd found involved the usage of the SecureKid tracking discs.

Caliban spoke again. "Disregard my previous question. Lilith updated my database with a download of one hundred and ninety-eight court cases and the subsequent rulings dealing with invasion of privacy suits and countersuits."

“That’s all right.” Maris muttered. *Garbage in. Garbage out.* Even though both Lilith and Caliban were independent A.I. personalities and sentient beings, they still needed accurate and up-to-date data in order to apply their intelligence to solving problems.

Lilith’s avatar appeared in the middle of the projection beside Maris. “Normal security procedure calls for the placement in all the public corridors and concourses of body-heat sensors set at human norm temperatures. Another critical piece of data we have to consider is the fact that the housekeeping and maintenance droids have no sensors or tracking devices to monitor their activities. Our killer combined knowledge of basic security procedures to conceal his or her activities.”

Maris blinked. *Lilith was right.* She’d pinpointed the flaws in station security.

As long as the serial killer waited for the core body temperature to drop sufficiently, dead bodies wouldn’t register on the sensors. If the killer used one of the housekeeping or maintenance droids to transport and dump the bodies to a secondary location, that explained why security couldn’t find the actual crime scenes.

On top of that, the graphic and easily recognized method of killing the victims had thrown the station into a panic with everyone jumping at shadows looking for an undead vampire on the rampage. Which didn’t make any sense at all because an undead vamp was a mindless killing freak that lacked the intelligence and control to hide its existence let alone transport bodies around without anyone noticing them.

She tapped her finger on the five blue SecureKid dots numbered 23, 24, 712, 635, and 96 glowing inside the holographic representation of private residences on Deck 4. “At least we don’t have to worry about Kayle and his friends getting into any trouble. They’re staying put inside Pierce’s apartment.”

* * * * *

Kayle risked a quick visual check of his reflection in the shiny metal grille on the wall. Head, torso, and extremities matched the required parameters of his detailed disguise. He’d

morphed his body into a smaller version of Abrized's alien humanoid shape and chosen lime green for the Avee feathers on his head to further differentiate his appearance from Abrized's blue-feathered crest. A minor loop program kept the golden skin color, softer flesh texture, and body temperature at the proper levels.

Clothing was the hardest body morph alteration to achieve. Making his dark green pants and tunic appear as separate layers of fabric over his torso and legs demanded constant attention whenever he performed the physical actions of walking, bending, or sitting. Facial expressions and random fluffing movements of his feathered crest required another series of subprograms to maintain continuity.

"Are you sure this is going to work?" Suli kept a tight hold of Jin's hand and edged closer to Jason and Abrized, who were standing at the edge of the crowd. The next tube-train was due to arrive in three minutes.

Kayle damped the volume of his voice to match Suli's whisper; a crude but effective method to keep the content of their conversation unheard by nearby adults. "Don't worry. It's a foolproof plan. I calculated all possible scenarios down to the second. As long as we return to the apartment before lunch, no one will know we affixed our SecureKid discs on the bots I created."

* * * * *

Pierce peeled his seal-suit off and dumped the wadded mass into the recycle slot. As soon as they indicated they were finished with their preliminary examination of the victim, the crime scene technician had sprayed and sealed the corpse against cross-contamination and shipped it to the morgue for a full autopsy.

Anderson wiggled out of her seal-suit. "My theory is that the killer is a living vampire."

Slamming her against the wall would not be the best way to cement interagency cooperation. "It's a logical conclusion but it's *not* the only logical conclusion. In fact, it's a very off the wall theory."

Anderson shoved her discarded seal-suit into the recycle bin. “Going by the book and interviewing the residents within two decks of the newly discovered victim is a huge waste of our time. Plus, you’ve already agreed that this isn’t the work of an undead vampire. It’s too calculated and obvious. The only other possibility is a rogue living vampire mutilating the bodies to look like an undead vamp’s kills.”

She spun around and planted her hands on her hips. Her heart rate increased along with her blood pressure, turning her face bright red. “I collected and correlated all the complaints. I made up a list of every person fingered by his or her neighbor as a living vampire, and I believe that we should focus our attention on ruling them out as suspects.”

Pierce retracted his fangs. Hell of a time for his body to react to the sound and sight of her increased blood flow. He folded his arms and snapped. “Bite me.”

She reared her head back and gave him a snaky glare. “Hell, no. The odds of surviving the vamp virus if I get a taste of your blood are ten thousand to one. I’m not stupid enough to risk those odds.”

Nguyen shoved his seal-suit into the recycle bin. “We already eliminated you as a suspect. You have the perfect alibi. You were on assignment at Crab Nebula Research Station when the first seven deaths occurred.” He turned and pointed his finger at Pierce. “Unless *you* killed this last victim just to throw a new curve at us.”

Pierce snorted. “Yeah. Right. Bite me twice.”

The set of Anderson’s shoulders visibly relaxed. She sighed. “Unless you have a better theory, I suggest we work with mine first.”

He rolled his eyes to the ceiling for heavenly guidance, found none, and said in dry, sardonic tones, “If you insist.”

“Great. Give me a few seconds to retrieve the list from my implant and ping it over to you.” She closed her eyes and a frown of deep concentration formed on her brow.

He angled a perturbed stare at her partner.

Nguyen lifted his hands in the air. “Hey! Don’t look at me. She likes to do it with her eyes closed. Says it makes her dizzy and that only geeks and techno-nerds access data on the implants with their eyes open.”

A soft warning buzzed behind Pierce’s ears. He sighed, kept his eyes open, relaxed the firewall, and waited for Anderson to dump her list into the cybernetic implant inside his brain.

His vision blurred. A security icon flashed in front of his eyes.

The words, *Red alert! Red Alert!* blared inside his skull implant. *Undead vamp sighted on Deck 10, Sector 13. Four unconfirmed casualties reported. Unarmed civilians and children trapped behind emergency partitions. All units report immediately to Deck 10, Sector 13.*

He blinked, caught his balance, and glared at Nguyen and Anderson. *Cop humor. Gotta love it.* “Very fucking funny. Ha. Ha. Ha.”

The two homicide detectives pulled out their stun guns and checked the charges. Nguyen shook his head. “That wasn’t a sick practical joke. It’s a real alert.”

Pierce’s blood went cold. An apt description for the sick feeling that surged out to his extremities so fast he came damn close to upchucking. Pierce yanked his stun gun out and dialed the charge up to lethal. “Fuck!”

“My sentiment exactly.” Anderson’s quiet voice mirrored the controlled rage simmering in her ice blue eyes.

* * * * *

Admin Central had turned into a madhouse. Staff raced back and forth between workstations, implementing orders and trying to contact friends and relatives known to be on Deck 10, Sector 13.

Lilith's holographic avatar and the station map she'd created shimmered and vanished into thin air. The A.I.'s circuits were so busy now that she couldn't spare the data-time or energy to maintain those images.

Maris braced her hands on a nearby desk and shunted reports and orders as fast as she could through her implant to the various departmental units within Station Security and Damage Control. Public cams on the main concourses showed panicked mobs clawing and beating bloodied fists on the section seals that had slammed down and partitioned the station. An isolated security vid showed shaky shots of a gore-splashed corridor and a gutted female corpse.

Oh, God. When had an undead vamp appeared on her station? How the hell had it managed to survive and operate for so long without anyone spotting it before now?

She turned to Caliban. "Go. Find Pierce. Help him."

Caliban jumped to the floor and whirled away. His gargoyle shape zigged and zagged through the chaos of human legs and feet like an Olympic marathon racer.

* * * * *

Kayle hadn't anticipated this vast warren of space where the five-level-high ceiling curved into the distance. Gantries loomed two and three levels high, holding the lopsided weight of the massive robotic cranes that loaded and unloaded cargo. Every fifty yards, holographic message boards rotated and showed constantly changing data updates about arriving and departing ships, stock market reports, prices of commodities, and job openings.

Dockworkers monitored the loaders. Ship captains, cargo masters, and stationers exchanged loud and raucous discussions over availability of passenger and cargo space. Assorted spacers on shore leave strolled to and from the side corridors where various shops, restaurants, sleazy bars, gambling parlors, and sexual entertainment houses catered to their needs and vices.

Suli stood beside Jason. Her straight black hair flipped over her shoulder while she moved her head back and forth to watch the sights. Jason's red hair and pale skin kept him readily visible in comparison with the normally dark-haired and dark-skinned population of the station.

Cataloging the immense variety of human coloration and body type still kept Kayle occupied each time he wandered about the station. He looked forward to increasing that visual database even further when Lilith and Caliban decided he'd matured enough to upgrade to AdminNET instead of KidNET.

Suli kept a tight, white-knuckled grip on Jin's hand. He'd wandered off in the wrong direction right after they exited the tube-train. She'd freaked out when Jin disappeared from view, and wasn't taking any chances on him getting away again.

Jason jammed his hands in his pockets. "This is fragging! I always wanted to see the docks, but my dad never had the time to take me here."

Kayle turned to Abrized. "Are you sure this is the right place?"

The Avee child spun around in a circle. "Deck 10, Sector 13 is where Station Security said they found my second-father's body." He stopped. His nostrils flared and the blue feathers on his scalp rippled. He pointed to the left. "Och-Eoce blood scent is very faint in that direction."

A high-pitched scream of endless fright scaled up. Echoes bounced off the walls in confusing tangents. Kayle damped down the background noise and turned his audio sensors up to full power in an attempt to pinpoint the source of the scream.

People stopped. Heads swiveled in every direction.

Hooting sirens wailed overhead. Suli, Jason, and Jin stuck their fingers in their ears. Abrized sank down to the floor and covered his head with his arms. Ramps retracted into docked ships. Machines loading and unloading shipping cans ground to a stop, their flexi-metal grips and extensions frozen in mid-motion.

The words RED ALERT! RED ALERT! followed by PLEASE PROCEED TO THE NEAREST EXIT POINT IN AN ORDERLY FASHION flared inside Kayle's head. The same bland and frustratingly noninformative instructions scrolled across the holographic message boards in flashing red letters.

He opened his illegal backdoor link to Security Central to find out what information the police and station administration were holding back from public links in order to avoid any panic. His link shunted to an automated reply node. *All lines are busy. Please hold until the next available line is open.*

The booming, bone-shaking crash of emergency seals closing at both ends of Section 13 reverberated through the metal-plated deck. Garbled screams and yells exploded from around the left-hand curve of the dock. The cascading logic of chaos math failed to encompass the sudden storm of frightened humanity that exploded from every side corridor onto the dock.

A very faint whisper of smoke tainted the airflow. A mass of adult humans, all sizes and shapes, stampeded around the curving line of the corridor straight for Kayle and his friends. Approximately forty-six percent of the panicked mob waved work tools and jagged lengths of pipe over their heads.

Sara's Combat Law #6: Mobs are bad news. Panicked mobs are worse news. Avoid them at all costs.

Kayle blinked. *Who programmed Sara's Laws into my brain?* Sara wasn't even a sentient being. She was a minor science fiction vid heroine with a cult following that encompassed eighty-four star systems. He discarded the thought as irrelevant to the present situation.

Jason pointed at the rear wall. "Go that way. We have to get out of their way. Fast."

Obviously Kayle wasn't the only one with a working knowledge of Sara's Laws.

Suli tugged Jin along with her and ran toward the wall. Jason pulled Abrized to his feet. They raced after Suli and Jin.

Jin's toy clattered to the deck and rolled backward. He yanked his hand free from Suli's hold, ducked under Jason's arm, and barreled past Abrized's grasp to retrieve his prize.

Adult legs blocked Kayle's view. He pelted at a sharp angle that cut across the deck a few feet ahead of the river of panicked humans and caught sight of Jin.

Tears streaked the little boy's face. Eyes wide with fear, he squatted down on the deck and hugged his toy to his chest, making his body as small as possible.

Sara's Combat Law #2: Don't be a hero, but if there isn't any other choice, go for it.

Between one step and the next, Kayle morphed from his Avey shape into a shimmering flexible panel with feet. He lunged forward, grabbed Jin, and wrapped his flattened body around the little boy in a protective bubble. The mob crashed into them. Legs, hands, and feet kicked and pushed Kayle and Jin in random directions like a soccer ball bouncing across a playing field.

He rolled to a stop. The thundering roar of feet slamming against the deck damped down to a faint vibration. He unfolded his body from the bubble shape, released Jin, and morphed back to his default form of a two-foot-tall silver humanoid.

* * * * *

Bloodied hands and desperate bodies pounded and shoved against the thick glass porthole in the emergency access door. Pierce snatched the keycard from the trembling hands of the Security staffer and jammed it into the slot. The door beeped. An old-fashioned touchpad appeared and the words PLEASE INSERT SECURITY OVERRIDE CODE scrolled over the lock-plate.

He shot a look at the staffer. "What's the blasted access code?"

The staffer shook his head. "I don't know. They change the code every four hours."

A quick info request from his implant to admin bounced right back into his skull. Static screeched behind his eyes. “Fuck!” Overloaded communications nodes had automatically blocked all incoming calls.

A long, metallic arm stretched and reached over Pierce’s arm, resting its hand on the keypad.

He sagged against the deck seal. “Caliban! Do you know the code?”

Caliban rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Of course I know the code. I have a direct link to admin’s security node. Maris sent me down here to help you.” The A.I.’s fingers blurred as he inputted a long -- very long -- series of numbers and letters.

The door slid sideways. People spilled through the narrow opening, yelling and screaming. A few of them fell to the floor, others climbed over the fallen struggling bodies, stampeding over them in reckless disregard of polite behavior. Within seconds, the fleeing people jammed in the bottleneck of the doorway.

Their eyes, deep-socketed with shock and pain, stared in blank incomprehension at their surroundings. Pierce snarled and exposed his fangs at the frightened fools blocking the exit. They flinched, screamed, and struggled to back away from him. He pushed and helped their retreat until they cleared the doorway. Then, for the next ten minutes, he grabbed and shoved people through in a bizarre parody of “pass the bucket” to the line of security and medical staffers who formed a double line behind him.

* * * * *

So far. So good. Standing with a solid wall at their back had increased the overall prognosis for survival for Kayle and his friends by five percent. Now all he had to do was focus his visual and auditory sensors within a radius of 180 degrees instead of 360 degrees in order to scan for the source of danger.

“Which way should we go?” Suli whispered.

Screams, thumps, and bangs echoed from both directions.

Jason pointed to the left. "The smoke's that way. Maybe we should go the other way."

Abrized leaned his head around and sniffed. "The smoke is from a flare signal. It's not an active fire. I smell human blood; a large quantity of human blood beneath the smoke."

Sara's Combat Law #4: There's no such thing as friendly fire.

Why would anyone shoot a flare gun off inside the docking zone? If one of the fuel lines ruptured and the fire suppressant foam couldn't handle the flameout, Admin Central would have to blow the entire section to vacuum in order to protect the rest of the station. He aimed his visual sensor at the nearest message board. No new data available there. "We should go to the right and follow the others. There must be a valid reason for their panic."

An adult human male shambled from the left and stopped between the dangling skeins of fuel lines.

Kayle increased his vision to super-magnification and secured a close-up view. Fresh blood soaked the man's face, neck, hands, and clothing. His blank-eyed stare lacked any vestige of intelligence. The stranger moved his head from side to side in an obvious search pattern.

An adult human female lying face down on the deck inched backward. Moving with uncanny speed, the blood-drenched man jumped fifteen feet sideways. The woman yelped a terrified and high-pitched scream.

The man yanked her from the floor with one hand. Ignoring his victim's frantic cries, punches, and kicks, he lowered his mouth to the woman's neck and tore her throat open. Blood spurted out like a fountain and he greedily gulped and drank his fill from that horrific and deadly wound.

Kayle faced his friends. They stood frozen between the conflicting impulses of flight versus fight responses to danger. He'd made a major error convincing them to follow his lead today. An error he must correct immediately.

A revised calculation of odds projected an eighty-nine percent probability of death for all four of his friends if they remained at their current position. “I estimate twenty-three seconds before he finishes his feeding.”

Sara’s Combat Law #9: If you can see the enemy, the enemy can see you. Run!

Kayle pointed to the right. “You’re not fast enough to outrun him if we follow where the others fled. There’s a side corridor up ahead. Duck into there. Our situation will improve if we can locate a secure hiding place within the next sixty seconds.”

They turned and ran.

Open doors of hastily abandoned shops, eateries, bars, and overnight sleepover slots lined the smaller corridor. Kayle swooped ahead. The fourth store on the right had a cheap manual override lockplate inside the doorway. He waved at his friends. “Hurry!”

They piled inside in a flurry of arms and legs. He extruded a data sensor from his fingertip, inserted the tip in the narrow lockplate slot and inputted a clear command. The door crashed across the opening and locked with a resounding click. Pressure-tight and fire-proof, the double-thick metal slab guaranteed a temporary refuge in case of explosive decompression.

Boom! Boom! Boom!

Apparently, the vampire had spotted the movement of their fleeing shapes and followed them to their hiding place.

His heavy blows rattled the flimsy knickknacks stacked behind thick plastic display cubes. No telling how long the door would hold against the vamp’s enraged and insane strength. Rows of clothes racks bulged with an assortment of recycled garments and aged spacesuits with lighter patches on their sleeves marking the spaces where the ship patches used to be.

Suli sank to the floor and propped her back against one of the display cubes. Jin climbed into her lap. She hugged her brother close and rocked him in her arms.

Jason squared his shoulders and matched gazes with Abrized. "Should we look for a rear exit?"

Sara's Combat Law #13: Exits are good.

Kayle inputted having an exit into the data run. Projected probability of survival increased to thirty-seven point ninety-nine percent. "That's an excellent plan."

Jason and Abrized ran to the rear and disappeared behind the racks of clothing.

Suli raised her hand. "Can you call for help, Kayle?"

He considered her suggested plan of action. Tapping the knowledge, skills, and resources of his cybernetic parents and human godparents into the matrix boosted probability of survival to sixty-three percent. "Yes."

His first attempt bounced back to him in a long, squealing burst of static. The next attempt via the security override communication node also failed.

The pounding blows against the door altered their pitch into a harder, heavier bell-like sound of metal against metal instead. *Clang! Clang! Clang!*

Sara's Combat Law #1: Always carry a big gun -- and grenades.

Good advice, but irrelevant since he didn't have *any* conventional weapons with him.

He pulled Suli and Jin to their feet. "Go. Run to the back and join Jason and Abrized. I'll be right behind you."

The next call for help he routed via his direct link with Caliban. He estimated a fifteen percent higher probability of successful connection using that circuit.

* * * * *

“What the fuck? Are you sure that message is legit?” Pierce snapped at Caliban. The last terrified stationer staggered through the open section seal door past him into the waiting arms of the emergency medical technicians.

This wasn't happening. No way. It's a mistake. Or a prank. “I left Kayle and his friends in my apartment. Check their SecureKid discs. That will give you their correct location.”

Caliban cocked his head to the side. The A.I.'s eyes flickered red for a nanosecond. “ID confirmed for message source. Kayle states he left the discs behind on mobile bots in order to bypass SecureKid monitoring.”

Nyugen exchanged a wary look with Anderson. “Who's Kayle?”

“Kayle's a newborn A.I.” Pierce muttered. “He's trapped in there with three human children and an Avee child.”

He unbuckled his shoulder holster, rolled the leather harness around his stun gun, and handed it to Anderson. “Caliban and I will take point. You provide rear guard. I can't take the risk of hitting the kids with the backlash from my stunner. Not with an undead vampire on the rampage. If he's anywhere near the kids and a stun blast knocks them down, he'll rip them apart before I can take him out.”

“Fuck!” She buckled his harness over hers. Then both she and Nguyen dialed the settings on their weapons down.

Pierce faced the security team prepping their weapons. He raised his arm to get their attention and messaged their implants. *There are children inside Sector 13. Set stun to disable instead of lethal and follow my lead.*

He turned to Caliban. “Did you tell Lilith and Maris the news?”

“Yes, of course I did.”

Great. Now he could look forward to both of them tearing his head off for not keeping Kayle on a tight leash.

* * * * *

With five ship captains on the wall screens in direct visual and audio link yammering for immediate departure from Deck 10, and with ten more on hold, Maris struggled to keep her professionalism intact and remember not to snarl at them. The news vid channel kept replaying the same blasted images of Pierce grabbing and shoving bloodied and frightened men and women through the section seal door and passing them over to the security and emergency medical personnel.

She bit her lip and took a couple of deep breaths. Pierce was a grown man and a vampire. He could take care of himself. Instead of worrying about him, she needed to focus on her job and help him from this side by keeping the rest of the station from panicking.

Babble from two supposedly “expert” commentators droned in the background. “Dr. Martinez, what is your theory behind today’s rampage and the unsolved killings during the last thirty days? Are they from the same vampire or do you believe there’s more than one vampire behind these vicious attacks?” The only reason she’d left it on was because it kept the crowd in the waiting room occupied.

Captain Juanita De La Rosa’s normally soft voice held the confident snap of command. She leaned forward in her seat. “You’re risking the safety of my ship and crew members. I demand that you allow us to leave immediately.”

De La Rosa was the calmest one. Probably why they’d chosen her as their spokesperson.

Maris shook her head. “I cannot allow a mass departure. You’ll destabilize the entire station. There’s no need to panic. You’re perfectly safe and secure as long as you stay put. No one can board and no one can leave any ship during the course of this emergency lockdown.”

“The vampire virus is a symbiote. In order to coexist in the host body, the virus triggers a complex set of DNA changes and alters the body’s chemistry. These changes give the host body extreme sensitivity to UV light and strong odors like garlic, a need for blood as the

primary source of food, acute night vision and increased strength and stamina. The virus also triples the average human lifespan from a hundred years to three hundred.”

The reporter flashed a thousand-watt smile. “This is all very interesting, Dr. Martinez, but what does this have to do with today’s rampage at Nexus Station?”

Dr. Martinez’s face darkened with an angry flush. “In order to explain my theory, I must detail the transformation process first. Only one in every thousand men and one in five thousand women survive the thirty-six-hour transition from human to living vampire. Those who do not survive the change awaken as mindless undead vampires, go on berserk feeding frenzies, and must be destroyed as vicious killers.”

Maris arched a sardonic eyebrow. Sounded to her like Martinez actually knew what he was talking about if he knew that for every living vamp who survived the change, there remained 999 undead vamps who had to be terminated because they’d died during the change.

The reporter turned to the second expert. “Dr. Yatamoto?”

The elderly oriental man on the screen spread his hands and gave a depreciating smile for the camera. “Ingesting the virus as a form of Russian roulette is the newest fad for the bored youth of today.”

Idiots. A cold chill danced up her spine and raised the hair on the back of her neck. When had this fad surfaced? Why hadn’t she been told about it? How many undead vampires did she have on Nexus Station?

“Stationmaster Claxon.” Captain Erza Lee shouted from his screen. “What’s going to stop me from leaving if I do a manual undock?”

Maris pulled up a visual of the station’s external defense nodes with their heavy-barreled laser cannons. The holographic presentation rotated beside her in silent and deadly beauty. “Unauthorized undocks and departures will trigger an automatic reaction from the station’s A.I. Lilith. She will deploy the full defensive array to disable and stop those ships. I

direct you to the signed docking contracts and copies of station regulations uploaded to your Legal Affairs sector upon arrival at my station. Repair costs resulting from damage inflicted by the A.I. on illegal undocks and departures will come from your pockets.”

Instead of snarling, she composed her face and managed a crisp, impersonal smile for all five disgruntled captains. “Now, if you will please stop blocking my lines, I have work to do. I will keep you informed of our progress in securing the rogue vampire in Section 13. As soon as that occurs, a departure list will be posted and requests to undock will be cleared in an orderly fashion.”

One by one, the captains closed their screens until only Captain De La Rosa remained. “Thank you, Stationmaster Claxon.” She tabbed the cut-off button and her face disappeared next.

Not that it did any good. The new screen showed the Avee queen, Zumestre Nara.

Not good. The Avee/Human trade compact had only been signed two days ago, after months of prolonged negotiations. If Nara saw her as a weak leader, no telling what she might do. Maris folded her hands and presented a calm face to the queen. “The situation is under control. Pierce Grimaldi, my zembra leads the hunt.”

The feathers rippled across Nara’s scalp. She gestured and two heavily armed Avee moved onscreen beside her. “My zembra are ready to join the hunt. I will place them under your zembra’s orders.”

Maris inclined her head in acknowledgement while she tried to think of a polite way to refuse this offer without throwing diplomatic relations into total discord. “Thank you. Please have your zembra suit up. I may need them to enter Sector 13 from an exterior air lock.”

Getting them suited up for EVA work should keep them occupied while she tried to punch through the communication nodes busy signal, link to Pierce, and let him know the Avee were joining him.

In the meantime, on the news vid, the reporter's voice had a smug overtone, as if she'd caught the expert making a mistake. "If the serial killings on Nexus Station are the result of an undead vampire on a rampage, why hasn't he been spotted until today?"

Excellent question. Maris cocked her head. How would Dr. Martinez explain that discrepancy?

"I don't know. An undead vampire has no mind and no control over its urge to kill and feed. It would not be able to hide its presence for weeks at a time. One possibility is that this serial killer is a living vampire with psychopathic tendencies. Today's rampage may not have any connection whatsoever to the previous deaths."

Maris folded her hands into fists and counted to ten.

Great. Instead of defusing the situation with facts, the news vid reporter and her experts were formulating new rumors and raising suspicions against all vampires, living and undead.

Another data dump pinged through Maris's implant. *Evacuation continues on Deck 10, Sector 13. Total evacuees: 674. Injured: 278. Hospitalized: 89. Full list appended: folder 1, subfolder 1a. Unconfirmed reports: incendiary explosion. Heat sensors: 10 percent deterioration. Visual sensors: 23 percent deterioration. Structural, smoke, and fire damage reports unconfirmed. All unconfirmed reports appended in folder 2, pending completion of evacuation. Number of deaths: unknown, subfolder 1b, also pending updated information.* She did a quick sort through the folders, shunted the list of evacuees, injured, and hospitalizations to the Legal Affairs and Medical Aid desks to handle the paperwork, and pinged an order to her desk to print out hard copies of all folders to review later.

The air shimmered in front of the desk and coalesced into Lilith's four-armed Hindu goddess avatar. If Nexus Station's A.I. had to shunt extra power to use her goddess avatar

instead of pinging the primary admin implant link, the overloaded communications nodes must be close to full shutdown mode.

Frag it all to hell!

Maris didn't bother to turn around and check. She knew everyone in Admin had stopped to stare.

Lilith's avatar drifted closer. She leaned over and whispered in Maris's ear. "Caliban advised private delivery of this message. Kayle, his three human friends, and Avey friend are trapped inside Deck 10."

Caught in that moment of clarity that occurs just before puking or facing imminent death, Maris groaned. "Oh...fuck."

* * * * *

"Hey! You can't restrict the press. I'm coming along too."

Pierce stood as still as possible in deference to the *hunger* coiled inside his gut. The siren song of fresh blood and fear from the wounded stationers had triggered the predatory instincts inherent to the symbiotic vampire virus embedded within every cell of his body. He focused his attention on the angry reporter confronting Detectives Nguyen and Anderson.

The reporter had bleached blond hair and a classically proportioned face that had been surgically altered so many times he couldn't move his eyebrows anymore. He opened his mouth to yell again. Three matte black news vid drones swooped around his head and shoulders like two-inch-long, fat-bodied wasps recording everything he said and did from every possible angle.

Nguyen shook his head and jerked his thumb over his shoulder at Pierce. "I'm not in charge. You want to go inside with us, talk to the Special Investigator."

The blond strutted over with a condescending expression on his face, as if he expected everyone to fall at his feet in absolute adoration.

The idiot moved into my kill zone. Totally lacking any survival instincts. Pierce's raised eyebrow conveyed the worst kind of disdain. "Security rating for Deck 10, Section 13 is Red Alert. That means if you enter against the Stationmaster's direct orders, I'm not responsible for your safety."

Blondie blinked. Once. He straightened his shoulders. "I'm a civilian. Of course you're responsible for my safety."

Pierce widened his smile into a fuck-you grin, fangs at full extension. "Nope. The law is very precise and clear on that point. I'm responsible for the safety of my team and the rescue of any endangered civilians within the Red Alert area. Transporting civilians without a waiver into a Red Alert zone leaves me open to Internal Affairs disciplinary action."

Caliban flowed into his gargoyle form. The A.I. extended a clawed forefinger and said, "I can secure the required DNA sample as confirmation of your agreement. Do you prefer a hard copy of the waiver or a download of the document to your implant?"

Blondie shrugged, held out his hand, and let Caliban prick his finger for the DNA sample. "Download the waiver to my implant and send copies to whoever needs one."

"Great." Pierce grabbed his hand, squeezed a few additional drops from the pricked finger, and smeared a line of blood across the front of his tunic top. "I want you to lead the way and draw the rogue vamp out for a clean kill. You'll be the perfect bait."

Blondie's face went corpse white. "B-bait?" The word came out in a horrified squeak.

His brow tried to furrow but couldn't because the skin was too tight from plastic surgery. He sucked in an outraged breath and announced with pompous dignity, "My talents would be better utilized if I stay here and interview the escapees for a more personal approach to this emergency."

Assorted snickers and derisive catcalls greeted his sudden change of plans.

He flushed. “But I can send my drones along for an ongoing live transmission.” The triplet of holovid drones spiraling around his head straightened out and swooped through the open doorway into Deck 10.

A minor annoyance. He didn’t even have to look at Caliban to know the A.I. would take the initiative to capture and neutralize the drones within the next sixty seconds.

“Fine.” Pierce looked over his shoulder. He gestured at Nguyen and Anderson to take position behind him. They moved into place, calm and precise. The security team lined up in double file behind them with practiced and deadly efficiency. “Follow my lead. Fan out behind me. Hold your fire and make sure what you’re aiming at before you shoot. Okay? We don’t need any accidents.”

Hopefully, they’d remember his orders during the critical moments of first contact with the rogue vamp. Hell of a way to go.

* * * * *

Six lopsided and deep dents marred the door’s metal surface, which bowed at a disturbing angle from the frame into the room. The hinges creaked and showed every indication that they’d pop within the next few minutes.

Kayle factored into his calculations the probabilities of delaying entry by blocking the door with debris. Only one percent increase in survival, the time spent piling up the debris would be better spent fleeing. The only item that dramatically increased the odds for success would be if Jason and Abrized had found a more secure and defensible refuge in the rear of the shop.

Sara’s Combat Law #22: Retreat is always the best option.

He turned and ran through a maze of shipsuits, gloves, helmets, sensors, EVA suits of every size and style, mounds of heavy magnetic boots, vacuum-sealed food pacs, crates, and some very odd-shaped packages. Judging by the variety and quantity of items he passed, the

shopkeeper must be an obsessive-compulsive personality type, a pack rat of major proportions.

An ominous cracking sound vibrated through the floor.

He bounded over a lopsided pile of spacesuits and used a ceiling fixture to swing past the last four rows of shelving and boxes.

Jason stood and waved his arms beside a crude airlock door cobbled together from at least three different components. “Kayle! Quick. Over here. We need your help.”

He raced over to Jason. They ducked inside the airlock together, pulled the door shut, and spun the old-fashioned but still functional locking wheels to seal the flexible gasket around the frame. A short scramble along the umbilical led to a second open airlock door. They raced into the next compartment, slammed the triple-thick metal door shut, and spun the matching set of wheels to lock it.

An inactive control board and empty pilot seat filled up one side of the tiny compartment. Contoured foam pods lined the walls. They were inside a standard miner-craft escape shuttle.

A human male with the white hair and wizened features of advanced age, wearing a nano-fabric spacesuit, lay in a slumped position against the bulkhead. Abrized, Suli, and Jin crouched on their heels beside him.

Suli scrunched up her face and spoke with breathless urgency. “He’s not dead. I think he bumped his head getting inside and got knocked out.”

Kayle pointed at the label on the right shoulder of the nano-fabric suit. “This is the newest XT model.” He turned the man’s wrist over and peered at the data scrolling across the diagnostic panel. “When his heart rate and blood pressure zoomed past the recommended parameters for a man his age, the suit’s medical functions kicked in and tranq’ed him.”

Kayle moved behind the man. “Hurry. The control board is locked to his DNA and palmscan.”

With all five of them holding arms and legs, pulling, pushing, and shoving, they carried the man's limp body to the pilot's seat. Kayle sat down on the unconscious man's lap and slapped the touchpad control in the chair's arm. Thick safety webbing automatically deployed and secured both him and the unconscious man to the contoured chair.

Kayle extruded a third arm from his side. He unsealed the unconscious man's hand from the suit and positioned the limp palm on the control board's ID sensor plate. The matte black pad gave a sucking sound, then a click. Lights flickered across the control board. Holographic external sensor screens materialized.

"Hurry up," he yelled. "Get into your seats."

The children ran to the pods. The transparent tops opened at their touch. They scrambled inside and laid back on the padded surface. White foam spun in a protective cocoon from neck to feet, leaving their heads free while immobilizing their bodies. The tops lowered and sealed.

Kayle extruded a nano-fiber line as if he were a spider spinning a web. He jacked the flexible filament into the control board and linked with the ship's navigation, life-support, and communications systems. Data flowed into him in a kaleidoscope of intersecting grids, tumbling through the cascading numbers and code strings, his perceptions meshed with the ship.

He became...clunky, clumsy, heavy, squared-off. No arms or legs, umbilical cord connecting to air lock, motive power dependent upon liquid oxygen and limited by angle of nozzles. Ability to morph shape blocked. Visual scans also limited to line of sight. Heat sensors and biological sensors glowed inside his shipbody showing the placement of fragile human and alien passengers.

A huge, booming clang reverberated through the emergency escape shuttle as if it were a bell. *Not good.* The hinges on the front door must have popped.

The concept of death, of never seeing and communicating with his friends ever again, rushed through him in a sharp burst of emptiness. *No! I must escape. Keep them safe.*

He retracted the air lock's umbilical and broke the flimsy connection to the station. Sent a pulse to trigger the auto-undock procedure. Small pre-set incendiary devices detonated and removed the dock door. Explosive decompression spewed his shipbody on a current of escaping air into the cold, gaping vacuum of space.

Scan auto-focus. Lilith loomed over him, the immense silver wheel of her body impossibly huge and close. Proximity alert screamed through his nerves in a crimson flare. Two trajectory curves overlapped in his mind's eye. One promised collision; the other, escape. He fired the directionals in short, controlled bursts of superheated fuel.

Visual scan swept, a blur of stars flashed past. Scan refocused on Lilith, on Nexus Station.

Heat sensors squealed in his head. Plasma cannons, their nozzles swinging around and heating up for a massive discharge of ionized gas similar to the interior of a star; energy that would force explosive decompression of his shipbody and his passengers. Targeting him, locking on him.

Sara's Combat Law #7: There's no such thing as friendly fire. It kills you just as dead as enemy fire.

He ignited the mains in a long, desperate flare, spiraling out past the docked ships, out into the open on a new trajectory. He flashed his docking floodlights in the universal distress signal, and screamed past the static arcing across every communication channel he could find, *"Mama, don't shoot. It's me. It's KAYLE!!!"*

* * * * *

Pierce crouched beside an overturned freight loader and relaxed the tight hold he normally placed on his senses. The jumbled thump of ten steady heartbeats pulsed in his ears. The hot, siren call of living blood flooded his lungs, full on, like a light switched on in the

dark. *Hunger* coiled in his belly, fierce and ready to pounce, knowing the exact placement of each human positioned in a wide half-circle in the shadows behind him.

Excellent bait. Armed and forewarned, but bait nevertheless.

Caliban leapt from the top of the loader, snagged the third news vid drone, crushed the hard plastic shell between his clawed hands, and discarded the remains. Old age must have finally crept up on his A.I. partner. He'd taken a sedate thirty-five seconds to snag three drones instead of his usual twelve point two seconds. Either that, or the latest technology upgrades had made this particular drone model a lot faster and smarter during the last six months.

Red warning lights along the curving edge of the dock told of ships with their ramps sealed against entry. Gantries and loaders abandoned by fleeing dockworkers dotted the concourse. Thick umbilical lines for fuel and life support snaked between long rows of canisters either newly unloaded or awaiting loading. Holographic message boards positioned at each docking port rotated in slow motion and flashed identical warnings: RED ALERT! RED ALERT! PLEASE PROCEED TO THE NEAREST EXIT POINT IN AN ORDERLY FASHION.

The scent of spilled blood, stagnant and sour, wafted from the pitifully small huddled clumps that dotted the abandoned docks. A steady pounding of metal against metal, insane bellows, and the familiar blood-scent of Kayle's friends coming from the side corridor seventy-five yards ahead readily pinpointed the location of the rampaging serial killer he hunted.

He looked over his shoulder, raised the metal bar he'd confiscated from a fleeing dockworker, and pointed at his objective. The jagged end of his weapon glinted under the dim red glow of the emergency lighting. Detectives Nguyen and Anderson and the eight security personnel adjusted their weapons and nodded their understanding of their assignment as his rear guard and backup.

Pierce ran. Not human slow. He ran so fast that human eyes would perceive him only as a blur. No longer did he have to conceal his true nature by suppressing the genetic changes of inhuman strength and speed seared into every cell of his body by his survival of the vampire virus.

Caliban kept pace with him easily. At the same time, the A.I. made sure he stayed three meters away from his partner's kill zone.

Pierce raced past the warped remains of a door into a used-goods shop, jumped over the sales counter, bounced off the ceiling, and landing on the opposite side of the cluttered display area. The strong blood-scent of the children spun away into nothingness, as if they'd jumped off the station into the vast vacuum of space.

The undead vampire spun around from the air lock he'd been battering with the mangled remains of a heavy-duty pulsar rifle and screamed with defiant rage. He resembled a human in shape and proportion only. Long fangs jutted from the corners of his gaping mouth. Insanity burned in the deep sockets of his eyes. Blood coated the matted black hair that hung in disreputable tangles around his face.

Blood and gore soaked the tattered remains of the sleeveless shipsuit he wore. The joints of his arms had swollen to grotesque size. The undead vampire's skin stretched so tight over his warped and oversized bones that muscle, sinew, veins, and arteries stood out in bold relief.

The rogue's gaze skittered around the room. He sucked in great gulps of air. His heart thundered at insane speed along with the fever-hot flow of freshly stolen blood coursing through his veins. A rapid and erratic tic rippled across his shoulders and arms. He charged forward.

Pierce swung his broken pipe so fast the move appeared as a blur to normal human sight. He tore the vampire's crumpled rifle from his hand and sent the weapon flying

through the air with a deadly whistle until it embedded half its length in the metal wall behind them.

Their bodies collided with brutal force. Sharp fingernails raked at Pierce's face. Teeth gnashed at his throat.

Boxes and racks of clothing exploded and tumbled in all directions, as if they were a tornado spinning through the store. They crashed against the opposite wall. Bones snapped. Internal organs burst. Sharp, sudden agony shuddered through Pierce. The pipe spun away from his broken fingers.

Healing began immediately in excruciating pain. Bones knitted. Skin and organs expanded and sealed.

Pierce struck hard at the bottom of his attacker's nose. Cartilage crunched and bone shattered and splintered up into the rabid brain. That blow would have slain any normal human.

The rogue vamp reeled backward two steps. He shook his head. Blood, torn skin, and snot flew from his rapidly healing nose.

Pierce's legs shook under him. He sucked in a deep breath and jumped the twenty-foot distance to his discarded pipe. The rogue howled. His body blurred with the sudden ferocity of his insane charge.

Caught in the split second between then and now, Pierce lifted his pipe and decapitated his berserk opponent with a blunt force blow that cut through flesh and bone like butter. A fountain of bright red blood gushed from the torn neck, splattered against the ceiling, and rained over his bald scalp, face, and clothing in a sick parody of a shower.

As the rogue toppled to the floor, Pierce plunged his hand through the shipsuit fabric, under the rib cage to the left. The heart shuddered in his grip. He tore the pulsing hand-sized muscle out with one vicious wrench of his wrist and tossed the oozing brownish-red pulpy mass aside.

He stepped back. The body plopped onto the floor like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

A brand new silence descended upon the room.

Nguyen and Anderson, along with the rest of the security team had apparently arrived just in time to watch the entire thirty-second battle between him and the rogue. No matter how hard Pierce tried to pretend otherwise, he never got used to the sick horror in everyone's eyes when they realized the full extent of his capabilities as a living vampire.

Hunger reared inside him. The vivid smell of their blood; the rich, strong pulse of their hearts pulled at him and drummed through his body in a dark, sullen appetite. It took all his control to look away from them.

He slicked the blood from his face, flicked the excess onto the floor, and finally jabbed his thumb at the battered and illegal air lock at the rear of the store.

“What happened to Kayle and his friends?”

Caliban jumped over the body, landed in front of the air lock, and thumped a hand against the reinforced metal door. The bat wings of his gargoyle shape flared behind him in sudden parody of a second-rate horror vid. “I patched into traffic control for the most recent update. They lucked out. Shopkeeper had a miner-craft escape craft on the other side of that air lock.”

Pierce shrugged. “Good. Not our problem now. Station Admin can handle their retrieval.”

He wiped his hands on a semi-clean section of his pants and aimed an uncompromising look at Nguyen and Anderson. “Three from the security team can stay here and do the official forensics work, recordings, and reports for Internal Affairs. Everyone else follow me. This is only the beginning. We still have to backtrack the undead vamp's trail and hope it leads us to the real serial killer, the one who carefully cleaned and dumped all the other corpses.”

Nguyen and Anderson exchanged startled glances. Sudden comprehension flickered across their faces at the same time. They gave one crisp nod and hardened their mouths into tight lines. No questions needed.

* * * * *

The surging power inside the exhaust tube spluttered and died.

Kayle used the few remaining droplets from his side nozzles to stop the skewed spinning motion. The ship would continue along this trajectory until it either collided with another object or another ship intercepted and retrieved them. He wrenched his mind out of the ship's controls and sensors, uncoupled the hardline link he'd hooked into the bridge control panel from his fingertip, and dropped back into the familiar confines of his A.I. form.

Jason called out, "Kayle! What happened? Why did you stop the engines?"

He wiggled out from the safety harness, stood on the unconscious shopkeeper's lap, and looked at his friends. "I ran out of fuel. There was just enough to flee the general vicinity of the station."

Sara's Combat Law #20: Always fill up before you go into combat. Running out of fuel puts a big hole in your options.

Jason, Suli, and Abrized exchanged worried looks. Then Suli said, "Oh. We are so screwed now, aren't we?"

"No, we're not screwed. Traffic Control knows our course. All we have to do is wait until they send someone out to pick us up."

They would be fine, as long as the retrieval occurred within the next thirteen hours, ten minutes, and three seconds. At that point, life support would initiate the auto-shutdown sequence due to lack of oxygen. No need to mention this very critical piece of information since there was nothing he could do to change those figures. As for his anticipated database

access upgrade from KidNET to AdminNET level, he might as well discard that plan as zero probability of success.

* * * * *

A brilliant red dot streaked out from the middle of Deck 10, Sector 13 on the holographic representation of Nexus Station. Technicians scrambled to their boards, requesting scans, trying to get an exact fix on the anomaly.

Maris stopped with her heart feeling like it was going to jump out of her chest.

Station Defense node pinged her implant. She accepted the data flood. *Explosive decompression, shop district, Deck 10, Section 13. Unauthorized undock. Standard miner-craft escape vehicle. Registration unknown. Tracking initiated per Red Alert procedures. Collision alert.* The room blurred. She blinked. The room stabilized around her.

Navigation comp threw up a visual of possible plotted courses for the spinning vehicle. The escape pod jinked to the left. Numbers spilled across the screen while navigation plotted the course change.

Static squealed across all open traffic communication channels along with Kayle's high-pitched plea for Lilith not to shoot him.

Lilith's avatar appeared and turned to Maris.

"Override red alert!" Maris yelled. She sucked in a deep breath, opened the emergency link to Station Defense, and resent the required command through her implant. *Override. Override. Cancel Red Alert. Vehicle in distress. Do not fire.*

Station Defense node responded. *Red Alert canceled. Vehicle in distress. Scan records and course information forwarded to Search and Rescue.*

Lilith's avatar flashed a relieved smile and vanished.

The idiotic reporter on the news vid held her hand to her head. “Breaking news. Breaking news. A child named Kayle is stranded outside the station in a miner-craft escape shuttle.”

Great. Just great. Too bad she couldn’t arrest every news vid reporter for spreading false information and generating new rumors.

“Stationmaster.”

Maris turned and faced the screen where the Avee queen waited for her response. She gave a respectful inclination of her head. “Zumestre Nara, how may I assist you?”

“We can assist. Our tracking scans and computer have calculated the errant vehicle’s position and trajectory. My *zembra* await your orders. They will pilot a shuttle and retrieve the wayward vehicle now that it has run out of fuel. Per my orders, my navigator has plotted our course and forwarded the data from my computer to Nexus Station’s navigational link.”

Maris pinged a request to Search and Rescue’s database for an in-depth analysis of the situation. A holographic map appeared over the main board, highlighting Nexus Station, the positions of all docked and undocked vehicles within a three-hundred-mile radius, and the current location of the Avee ship and Kayle’s escape craft. Curved colored lines flowed from all points showing the trajectories of estimated course plots. The Avee shuttlecraft’s estimated course was twenty minutes faster than anyone else’s.

She pursed her lips and thought about mentioning the Avee child with Kayle. *No. Not over an unsecured link. Bad public relations move.* “Yes. Please. Retrieve that vehicle.”

* * * * *

Twenty-two bodies littered the back trail, each lying in a pool of red-black congealed blood. Gaping holes had been ripped in their throats with flaps of skin hanging down around the crushed windpipes. Defensive wounds and bruises stood in bright relief on hands and arms. Their mouths stretched in frozen screams of fear and agony. Discharged flare guns,

broken pipes, and crumpled tools dotted the floor, tossed aside during the short, swift battles for life.

Each corpse was a classic textbook example of an undead vampire's rabid rampage. Totally different than the scrubbed, blood-drained bodies dumped in various locations of the station during the last month.

He followed the smeared line of bloody footprints to a temporary residential corridor favored by spacers during their two-or three-week layovers between trips. The fifth apartment door on the left hung askew, half-torn from its hinges with a red palm print in the center.

Pierce held up his hand to the team of men following him. They stopped.

Half-dried bits of blood flaked off from the stiff folds of his tunic sleeve. He sucked in a deep breath and listened. The bitter stench of old, stale blood seeped into his lungs. No heartbeats greeted his hypersensitive hearing from that direction either. He motioned at the rest of the security team to wait in the corridor, and gestured at Nguyen and Anderson to accompany him. "We have at least two more corpses inside the apartment. Do you have a can of seal-suit spray on you?"

* * * * *

After the first startled realization by the Aves that Kayle was the A.I. in charge of the wayward vehicle, the rescue progressed quickly. The larger ship eased forward and matched their relative speed and velocity. Grapples latched the exterior with loud thuds and thumps. A sudden bone-rattling lurch shook the frame and feet dropped to the floor with the acquisition of the rescue ship's mass and velocity

The five-minute wait until the entry light over the air lock turned green gave him more than enough time to help his friends climb out of their seats and line up to face adult scrutiny. A quick march through the lock while the adults carried the shopkeeper's unconscious body brought them to a corridor that led them directly to sickbay.

Kayle jumped to the countertop out of everyone's way. He sat on the edge, folded his wings and clasped his hands while the Avee medical specialists swarmed over the shopkeeper and the four children, checking them over from head to toe. He swung his legs back and forth and recorded the musical trills, clicks and whistles of their alien speech. Maybe not now, perhaps in a month or two, he'd request a software upgrade for the Avee language.

Would he be banned from any further contact with his friends after today's fiasco? He didn't want to know the answer. Facing that outcome left an empty space inside of him. Better to never have been born sentient if he couldn't have friends anymore.

Another outcome, the image of their deaths today as a direct result of his faulty choices, loomed inside his mind as an even bigger void, a gaping hole of deprivation and loss. Now, more than ever, he wanted to ask his parents, Lilith and Caliban, how they functioned and adapted to the complex responsibilities and consequences of close interpersonal association with humans, the Avee, and other sentient beings.

* * * * *

Pierce kept his distance from the two mutilated bodies inside the apartment. Even though the seal-suit covered him from neck to foot and he'd scrubbed his head and face with sani-spray, there still remained a small risk of contamination for the crime scene from him. "Do we have any ID for them yet?"

Anderson crouched beside the first body. She kept her face cold and distant, but that didn't stop the way her heart raced while she spoke. "I accessed the lease on file in admin's database. There were three residents. The woman is Ginele Dane." She gestured at Nguyen snapping holo-pics of the second body. "Blondie over there is Lief Jarlsburg. His face matches the one on the lease. I also found a triple co-habitation, ten-year contract filed in their names under marital status that verifies their legal relationship as long-term lovers. "

Pierce jerked his thumb at the shattered door of the steel flex cage bolted to the floor in the corner. "That leaves the third resident as the undead vampire. What was his name?"

“Danfoss Manfred.”

Nguyen turned to take holo-pics of the woman’s body. “Idiots. They already knew he hadn’t survived the change. That he’d died and become a brain-dead vampire whose only desire was to gorge on human blood like a rabid animal.”

Anderson sighed. “My guess is they loved him so much, they couldn’t bear to see his body destroyed even though his brain had died during the change.”

Pierce crouched by the twisted remains of the padded manacles in the cage. “So they chained him up and stuck him in a cage. They’d go bar-hopping every couple of days, spike the prospective victim’s drink with one of the date rape drugs, and dump the unconscious body in the cage for his feeding.” He jerked his head toward the adjoining shower. “Afterward, they’d stun him with the tazer so they could remove the corpses and scrub them to eliminate all traces of forensic evidence. The victim’s clothes and ID, they probably dumped them into the recycle bin. The only catch was they couldn’t block the recycle bin’s programming to notify the Station Security of any attempt to dispose of a body there.”

Anderson rose to her feet and stretched her arms over her head. “Of course, because they lived near the docks, they chose the simplest way to get rid of the evidence. They packed the bodies into temporary canisters, grabbed a dock bot, and input orders to deliver the victims at random locations. The Avey they killed must have stumbled across them while they were loading up one of the corpses. They staked and decapitated him to eliminate a potential witness. That was their first mistake.”

Nguyen shook his head. “They were fools. They risked their lives and killed strangers to feed the monster their lover had become. They did it all for nothing.”

Pierce sighed and leaned against the wall. He sucked in a deep breath.

The vibrant scent of fresh blood pulsing inside Nguyen and Anderson only a few feet away from him flooded his lungs. A sharp pang of fierce *hunger* twisted and cramped his gut.

Looking away from their necks almost brought him to his knees from the raging *need* to feed.

Smelling them, hearing the beat of their hearts was pure torture. Rather than disrupt the fragile accord he'd achieved with the two detectives, he knew better than to mention the fact that he needed to replenish the energy he'd expended healing the life-threatening injuries the rogue vamp had inflicted on him during their brief but vicious battle.

He pushed his *hunger* away and locked the aching blood-thirst down under tight control. "What they failed to consider was the fact that each victim they fed to their friend only made him stronger."

Nguyen gave a crisp nod at this. "It also explains why none of the victims fought back or tried to call for help using their implants. They were unconscious when the undead vamp's lovers fed them to him."

"I wonder if in the end, Ginele or Lief simply came to his or her senses about the fact that they had turned into serial killers and released Danfoss," Anderson murmured, brows drawn into a deep V.

Nguyen went to the cage. Soft flashes of light flared out with each click of the holo-pic recorder snugged over his left eye like an ancient pirate's eye patch. Small gold hoops in his earlobes glinted when he moved to another angle and took another series of shots. "Suicide by undead vamp, instead of suicide by cop. Still a stupid way to die, no matter how you slice it."

Pierce raised a skeptical eyebrow. "It's possible. We'll never know for sure." He waved a hand at the bodies and grimaced at the dried blood sticking to his clothes and skin under the seal-suit's transparent covering. Not that it mattered. His clothes were headed to the recycle bin along with the seal-suit, right after he finished here. "All we can do now is clean up the mess they made of their lives and their victims' lives."

* * * * *

Maris didn't want to think about the backlash and lawsuits she'd have to deal with from the survivors of today's rampage, let alone the family members of the deceased. She strode as fast as she could through the back corridors, avoiding eye contact with everyone she encountered and kept her fingers crossed that she'd bypassed any stray news vid reporters wanting to trap her into an interview.

At least she didn't have to worry about Kayle or his friends right now. The children were all safe and sound with their parents again, and Lilith had specifically requested Kayle's presence at Station Core. Tomorrow morning would be soon enough to sort out the exact details of his punishment for risking his friends' lives in such a foolish and ill-conceived fashion.

The Avee had the right idea. They understood the need for their hunters to cleanse their minds and hearts from the acute stress and emotional overload of tracking down and killing criminals. Sexual healing played a major role in their cultural programming.

Pierce needed her now. He needed her to help him remember what it meant to be alive instead of dwelling on the morbid horror of the undead vampire's demise. As a living vampire he knew all too well the dangers of the virus embedded in his DNA that waited like a time bomb to turn him into a mindless, rabid beast twelve hours after his true death.

Maris had never believed in love at first sight. Not until the day she saw him for the first time. Three years ago, she'd gone to the concourse to take a quick lunch and browse in the stores. He stood to the side watching the shoppers and alterday workers going about their business.

The harsh, masculine planes of his face and the way the long slabs of his muscles rippled under his light brown skin when he crossed his arms caught her attention first. She'd stopped in mid-stride to take another longer look at this stranger on her station.

No one dared to approach him. Pedestrians sucked in startled breaths, increased their pace, and ducked their heads to avoid eye contact with him. Wrapped in his pride, he stood, distant and aloof, in the middle of the crowd.

Then, it was as if he'd sensed her gaze upon him from thirty feet away. He'd turned with uncanny accuracy and looked at her. That's all it took, one look and he'd claimed her heart.

No one had ever affected her, had ever loved her like he did, and if he left her, no one else would ever take his place. It never mattered to her that he was a living vampire. She'd given away a piece of her soul when she fell in love with him and she could never, *ever* take that missing piece back again.

Strong wills and sharp tempers were just another part of what they shared between them. They belonged to each other in uncanny symmetry; the jagged edges of their souls had meshed perfectly and made each other whole.

Was he getting ready to leave now that the case was solved? Was he avoiding her because he believed she'd see him as a potential monster? Did he think she'd be crazy enough to walk away from him again like she did three years ago because of her fear that he'd leave her? She knew his body carried the same seeds of insane and violent death as that fool he'd hunted down and killed today. She'd already accepted the cruel necessity of dismembering and destroying his body after his true death.

Maris headed down the last corridor and staggered to a stop at his apartment. She laid her hand on the lockplate and waited for the door to ID her and swing open. Surely he hadn't changed the door's entry programming to reject her print, had he?

* * * * *

Pierce opened the refrigerator, grabbed a handful of foil-wrapped packets from the shelf, ripped them open, and gulped the contents down. Thick and rank, the dark red

artificial blood flooded his mouth and throat, and coated his tongue and teeth with a harsh, salty copper residue.

A shudder of revulsion twisted his gut. He swallowed the bitter taste of vomit in his mouth, grabbed another packet, and deliberately drank every last drop.

The lingering pain of his healing body slowly resolved into a dull ache inside his bones. Unsated, he walked away. Artificial blood always left him wanting, even though the thick slurry served its purpose and blunted the edge from the burning *hunger* coiled inside him.

He peeled off the seal-suit, stripped his stiff, bloody clothing off and dumped everything, boots, into the recycle bin. The gleaming white ceramic walls of the shower cubicle welcomed him. Cool tiles soothed his battered feet.

He closed the cubicle door and turned the shower on to full force. Hot water sluiced over his skin. Steam billowed around his feet, wrapped around his chest, and fogged the air. Pink, blood-stained water swirled down the drain. He reached for the soap, closed his eyes, and lathered his skin with deliberate slowness, as if that would be enough to cleanse the memory of killing the rabid remains of what used to be a foolish young man filled with hopes and dreams.

A slight change in air pressure triggered an alert in the raw boundaries of his senses. He stepped out of the running water. A familiar and potently female scent, the hammering pulse of her heartbeat drummed through him. His cock surged into a full and immediate erection.

Maris. His.

Seared into his heart from that first moment when he saw her standing on the other side of the concourse with a half-melted ice cone in her hand. One look and he knew she was his. No one had ever struck him dumb the way she did with her smile of complete acceptance.

He grasped the wet, slippery length of his cock. Water splashed against the wall and gurgled down the drain. He rubbed the sticky white drops of precum slicking the tip over the glans before fisting his hand about the thick barrel.

She slid the cubicle door open, stepped inside, and let it slide shut behind her. Naked. Beautiful. Soft, fragile skin; ripe, full breasts balanced by the lovely dip of her waist and sweet curve of her hips.

He skimmed the underside of her breasts with his hands. Felt her nipples peak under his touch.

She wrapped her arms around his neck. A soft sigh escaped her parted mouth. Her eyes glowed in her face, dark and wide with arousal.

He pulled her close. Skin against skin. Steam billowed around them. Water beaded and sluiced over their bodies.

“I came here as fast as I could,” she whispered. “I was so afraid you’d decided to leave without saying goodbye.”

“I would never do that.” Settling his mouth by her ear, he breathed in the heady scent of her skin. “I love you. Always have. Always will.”

He drew her earlobe into his mouth.

Her body quivered, tense with anticipation. “I love you, too. All of you, without fear, without hesitation.”

Pierce tilted Maris’s head up. With his thumbs, he stroked her face.

Steam spiraled around them from the shower still spilling hot water into the cubicle. He bent his head and flicked his tongue across the throbbing pulse at the juncture of her neck and shoulder, the hollow below her veins and arteries. In this moment, there existed only the salty taste of her skin.

Blood.

His cock ached. His belly quivered.

She shivered. That shiver echoed inside him with toe-curling anticipation. Her natural startle-response flood of adrenalin sent her heart pounding against her ribs.

Heat licked along the base of his cock. Pulled the loose skin around his balls into drum-tight readiness.

He fastened his mouth upon hers in a long, greedy, demanding kiss. The solid column of his cock slid along the sleek, wet skin of her belly. The soft weight of her breasts bumped and flattened against his chest. She clung to his neck and deepened their kiss into an affirmation of shattering tenderness.

Her heart hammered in his ears. She whimpered and humped her hips in a frantic plea for him to plunge the stiff, hard length of his cock inside her.

He released her mouth, pinned her waist with his hands, and moved to her breasts. Hard, sweet nipples swelled under his tongue and teeth. He bit and sucked them to ruddy soreness. Went to his knees.

She opened her legs with carnal awareness. Her round thighs trembled on either side of his face. He placed his hands over her crotch and parted the soft lips of her pussy with his fingers. Smooth and slick, her clit waited, swollen and ready, for his attention, no curls to muffle the taste of her sex.

His. Every brutal thing, every painful moment, every ugly thought faded under the pure knowledge of her love, the totality of her trust, heart and soul.

He shoved his fingers inside the tight wet center of her sex. Sweet, hot woman flesh. He licked and sucked the tender skin of her engorged clit. She bucked and ground her hips in wild, almost vicious jerks under his seeking tongue. Her moans grew louder and turned into harsh whimpers and sobbing cries. Her vagina squeezed his fingers in long, hard shuddering contractions.

She sagged against the wall, weak and shaking from that first orgasm.

Now!

Moving with the uncanny speed built into every cell of his body, he surged to his feet, lifted her to his waist, and rammed his cock into her all in one, hard, glorious slam. Her eyes rolled back in her head and her breasts jiggled with the sudden force of his entry. She tightened her arms and legs around his neck and waist, accepting him without reservation.

He cupped her buttocks. Braced her against the wall. With slow, relentless moves he pulled out and plowed his cock with deliberate force into her tight cunt in a steady slapping of skin against skin.

Her eager cries scaled up toward the peak of pending release.

He bent to her neck and slipped his fangs through her skin. She yelped. He held her tight against her reflexive recoil.

Hot, fresh blood flooded his mouth. *Her gift of life to him.* The pure, metal-sweet tang of her saturating his senses...

Pleasure rushed through him, filled him with heat and energy. The last aching weakness in his body disappeared under the healing touch of her blood and flowed out in long, bursts of cum over and over again.

She clung to him. Her body jerked and convulsed under the force of his merciless cock ramming into her. She screamed, "Yesyesyesyes..."

* * * * *

Maris lay quietly for a few minutes. Sweat soaked her scalp. Her legs trembled with the aftershocks of too many orgasms. She snuggled against Pierce's chest and focused on the slow, steady beat of his heart under her cheek.

As long as I don't say the words, I can pretend he's not going to leave. Just enjoy what I have now. Don't think about the future. Don't think about the last time when I left him because I didn't want to be hurt. Three years it took before I saw him again. I don't want to think about waiting another three years to make love to him.

Pierce traced light swirls around the soft curves of her breasts and let his fingertip follow the blue lines of the veins beneath her skin. He'd already sprayed wound-seal over her neck. Instant bonding, antiseptic, and skin-color matching of the foam spray concealed the bite marks in a discreet guarantee of her personal privacy. "I'll have to leave soon."

A heavy sigh escaped from her. "I know."

"I'm going to have to continue the next stage of this investigation in a more covert fashion. We have to set up a meeting place for us."

She rolled over and braced on her elbows. "What are you talking about? You found the killer. He was an undead vamp and you executed him according to the law. The investigation is over."

Cold anger glittered in his eyes. "You know the law. Anyone who wishes to undergo the transformation and have access to the virus must file an "intent to change viral DNA" petition in court, undergo the change under strict medical supervision, and sign release forms for immediate euthanasia if the change fails."

He shook his head. "Prosecuting the idiots who play Russian roulette with the virus isn't going to help me track down the source and stop the illegal trafficking. I need to contact other living vampires and set up a massive undercover investigation of the club scene across multiple star systems."

He's right. The ramifications of today's sordid mess are just the tip of the iceberg. This illegal trafficking has to be stopped before it mushrooms into thousands, maybe even millions of deaths across interstellar borders.

Happiness blossomed into a warm glow throughout her body. "Because the Nexus Station wormhole routes traffic from over a hundred star systems, you have to keep in touch with me in order to coordinate your investigation."

His mouth curved into a carnal grin. “Correct. We could schedule two to three monthly meetings at Xanadu. That’s only one star system over from here. Stationmasters need regular vacations too.”

She nodded. “It’ll be good training for Kayle, too. Are you taking him with you?”

Pierce slumped back onto the bed, a look of sheer horror on his face. “Fuck. I forgot about him. Damn it. Yeah, you’re right. I’ll have to take him with me.”

She grinned. “Lilith and Caliban will agree. They’ll see it as an excellent learning and training experience for the little guy. He’s going to be jumping all over the place when he finds out.”

Pierce’s warm brown skin blanched into a sick yellowish shade. He groaned. “It’s bad enough I’ll have Caliban with me. What did I do to deserve Kayle on top of it? He’s a trouble magnet.”

Maris snorted. “I’m sure you’ll do fine with him.” She trailed her fingers down the warm solid flesh of his taut stomach and traced the line of coarse curls that led to his crotch. “In the meantime, I took the rest of this week off. Let’s put that time to good use now.”

Pierce stretched his arms over his head. His cock swiftly hardened under her touch. “Sounds like the perfect plan.”

 THE END 

Barbara Karmazin

With twenty-nine and a half years of experience as a bilingual (Spanish/English) caseworker under her belt, Barbara Karmazin utilizes a unique blend of multicultural knowledge for her Science Fiction. She incorporates the same sense of adventure and wonder to her SF/Erotica stories.

Barbara loves new ideas and is willing to write about all versions of sexuality, both human and alien, while maintaining a fast paced SF adventure plot that will leave you gasping in more ways than one. Affectionately known by the nickname of “Chainsaw” by her many critique partners, she brings a fresh look and enthusiasm for “out of the box” SF/Fantasy and Paranormal Erotica and Romance stories.

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