

THE BELL CURVE

A woman with long brown hair in a ponytail, wearing a blue one-piece swimsuit, is shown from the back and side, looking into a large, ornate yellow oval mirror. The mirror is set on a yellow pedestal and reflects a sunset scene with a boat on the water. In the background, there is a tall, futuristic tower with a glass-enclosed top, and a flying saucer with a red and yellow design is in the sky. The background features a sunburst pattern of red and blue rays.

AMELIA
JUNE

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BY

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ISBN: 1-55410-818-7

Cover art and design by Martine Jardin

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Published by eXtasy Books

Look for us online at:

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Always for my Jason. Special thanks to the Tucson Writers for your careful critique and the NaNos for all the fun. And thanks also to Lauren, for answering all my writerly questions.

THE BELL CURVE

Aha! I've got you now Marla. There's nowhere else to run. Give yourself up, and I'll be gentle with you."

"No! You'll never take me alive, Jason Bell!"

"The folio doesn't say I have to take you alive, sweet cheeks. Just that I have to take you. Now, don't you think it's better to come quietly?"

"I won't go back to that hellhole you stuck me in last time. I almost didn't survive."

"But it was a fun trip there, if I remember correctly. Stop wasting our time and get in the ship. I'll make sure your journey to the hell hole is one to remember."

Jen sighed as the hunky man on the screen stepped forward and kissed the underfed woman. The actress seemed to melt into his arms, giving up all pretense of resisting arrest. Jason Bell, played by an actor who looked nothing like the real Jason, wrapped his strong arms around the girl's waist and carried her into the waiting spaceship. Smoke wafted around the hatch as it slowly closed, giving the audience a tantalizing view of the actor's ass in tight cargo pants—that

part they got right. As soon as the hatch closed, the movie screen faded to black. A silent pause then the end credit music began accompanied by wild applause from the full house.

On Jen's left, Katya beamed with pride. Jen put a hand on her arm.

"Congratulations Katya. You must be so excited to finally see Marla's Mistake on the big screen. When I read your rough draft a few years ago I never thought it would become a movie."

Katya grinned and slung her arm around Jen's shoulder. "And it's all thanks to you—well, you and your new fan fiction hobby." Katya wiggled her fingers toward the brawny man sitting on Jen's other side. Jen grinned and patted the real Jason Bell on the knee. Okay, so, not real exactly. But flesh and blood and right beside her. Close enough.

"I know—and doesn't he look smashing this evening?"

"He does! How ever did you convince him to wear that tuxedo? I couldn't get him out of those cargo pants for anything in my novels. Well, anything but fucking, of course."

"I don't have these problems with Jason. He does what I write him to do in my *fan fiction* as you call it, and believe me, he won't be complaining when I undress him bit-by-tuxedoed-bit."

Katya wrinkled her nose and shook her head.
“TMI TMI!”

“You’re just jealous.”

“Excuse me ladies, but I’m sitting right here. Didn’t anyone ever tell you it is rude to talk about someone right in front of them?”

Katya started to reply, but was cut off by the theater lights abruptly coming on. The audience groaned as one and then started slowly filing out the back doors. Jen watched one beautiful person after another walk by her—all dressed to the nines for Katya’s opening night. The actor and actress who played Jason and Marla walked by arm-in-arm. Jen wondered if they were a couple now. All those hours on movie sets and in makeup trailers could have that effect on people.

Once outside the theater, Katya and her date, Amy, were whisked away by reporters. Jen and Jason stood off to one side as dozens of camera flashes washed over the writer and her girlfriend.

“Katya, can you tell us what you thought of the movie?”

“How about telling us about the lady with you? Is she a friend or your date this evening?”

“Did the actors in the film look like the characters in your mind?”

Bored, Jen tugged at Jason’s sleeve and he obediently followed her to the parking lot, where only a few stragglers remained, smoking cigarettes

under the streetlights. A light wind blew the hair back from her face and the stars twinkled overhead. The night was gorgeous, electric. Jen grinned at the moon—writing science fiction had given her a new appreciation for the sky.

Jason stood at her side, fidgeting with the collar of his tux and generally looking uncomfortable.

“You all right, Jason?”

He grabbed her gently by the arm. “You know I’m not comfortable in your world in these clothes, away from—”

Jen waved a hand at him. “Yes, yes I know. Away from your precious ship and your precious work.” She dismissed his complaints and leaned against her car, waiting for Katya to finish with the reporters. “You’re just a big whiner. I’ve given you everything you ever wanted and you still need to complain? You’re lucky to be a character in my stories, no worries, but those I present you with. And now and then I light a candle and summon you here, for my own pleasure. How can you possibly complain?”

“Everything I’ve ever wanted!” He held up a hand, counting each point off on a finger. “Let’s see, you’ve kept me chained in a dungeon, at the erotic mercy of the Spider Queen and her ten daughters, stuck in a looping hologram featuring the naked dryads of Nymphonia and held captive on a ship of female space pirates. How exactly are

these tortures everything I've ever wanted?!"

Jen frowned, but when she caught his expression she relaxed, because the twinkle in his eyes gave away his tease. "You jackass!" She slapped him none-too-lightly on one pectoral and he oomphed, but grinned his slow, sexy grin at her. "I thought you were really upset!"

"I am. About this ridiculous outfit. Where are you keeping my usual clothes? Not to mention the bony substitute they had playing me in that holo film. He looks nothing like me—I'm ten times more manly."

Jen looked Jason over—he was the very definition of tall, dark and handsome. His wavy brown hair framed his boyish grin and sexy green eyes. His chest was broad and his arms were sheathed in muscle. The tux smoothed his bulging thighs and strong back, but managed to highlight his ass, which Jen still thought she could eat with a spoon. "At least five times manlier, anyway."

"Oh really?" Jason suddenly lunged at her. He feinted left and went right, grabbing her by the waist and tossing her over his shoulder.

Laughing hysterically, she pounded on his broad back with no real conviction. "Put me down, you brutish bounty hunter or I'll write you back in the dungeon."

"Say I'm ten times more manly! Say it!" He bounced up and down, jiggling parts of Jen she

preferred not to jiggle in public. As if reading her mind, he patted her ass lightly. "Nice bounce you have there, sweet cheeks."

"That's *it*, you're going back with the Spider Queen you devil! As soon as you put me down." Jen squirmed and struggled to no avail—Jason had an iron grip on her midsection. Both were red faced and giggling.

"God you two, get a room," Katya called from across the paved lot, her voice carried on a sudden shift in the breeze. She must have eaten the reporters for dinner because they were nowhere to be seen.

"Good idea!" Jason set Jen down, making for the car. A beeping in his pocket gave him pause.

"What's that noise?" Jen asked.

Jason pulled a square, black object from his pocket and flipped open the lid. Squinting in the faint light, he didn't answer. Katya, coming up alongside them, did. "That's his communicator. Surprised you've never seen it before."

"I've always imagined it smaller. It looks like a PDA."

"It is, really. Imperial Command sends out communiqués about escaped criminals on a channel accessible only to bounty hunters. Then it's a free-for-all—whoever brings the target in gets the reward."

"You know, I still can't believe you have the

Imperial Forces in your Marla novels. I've never seen a more blatant rip on Star Wars."

Katya sniffed and turned away in mock anger. "Look, tons of sci-fi novels have a big corporation and a small rebellious group. I'm not the first or last, but neither was Lucas. Besides, no one else seems to be complaining."

Jen chuckled and nudged Katya on the arm. "Oh, you know I love your work." She smacked Jason lightly on the behind. "Without your novels, I wouldn't have this brute to boss around. I love this guy!"

"I didn't exactly expect him to come to life when I wrote him, but glad I could be of service."

"Watch how you throw that *L* word around, pretty girl." Jason shoved his communicator back into his pocket and put his arms around Jen. "I wouldn't want the universe getting the wrong idea about me."

"What wrong idea could that be? That it is possible for the notorious Jason Bell to settle down?" Katya crossed her arms, mouth pouting in a sexy, stern look. As her main male character, Jason never would settle down and behave. Only since Jen took over writing his stories had he become more obedient. Of course, it helped that Jen was constantly getting him laid. After all, she wrote for fun, not profit.

"Exactly. Now, as much as I hate to say this, I

have to get going. A particularly juicy target is up for grabs. I need the extra credits if I want to pay my docking fees this month."

"I don't even see how that works—you're in my world now, not the fictional one."

"His blaster worked the first time he visited here," Katya said. "Why not his communicator also?"

Jen opened her mouth to reply that the two were entirely different when a deafening sound filled her mind loud enough to leave her ears ringing for days. A reverberating crash tore the breath from her and knocked her to her knees. Forcing her eyes open, she saw the others on the ground as well. Amy and Katya were covering their ears and screaming though the sound was lost in the whooshing, sucking noise that followed the crash. Only Jason remained standing, looking unruffled though a massive wind buffeted his clothes and hair. In fact, Jen realized, he was smiling at something.

Following his gaze, Jen looked into the sky. And stopped breathing.

A huge, swirling mass of color and light had appeared at the edge of the parking lot. The vortex was ill-defined and noisy. A beat later, Jen watched a car disappear into it and realized she was screaming as well. Snapping her mouth shut, she staggered to her feet and made her way to

Jason who was just smiling at the anomaly like a fool.

"What is it?" she screamed at the top of her lungs, and he turned to look at her.

"It's a wormhole."

"A *wormhole*? Impossible." Jen could have shouted the reasons that wormholes didn't just appear, probably didn't exist and definitely didn't emit light, but she didn't.

"Maybe they're impossible in your world, but not in mine." He gestured at the thing, which had eaten three more cars and a mailbox since she'd been watching. "In my universe, that is transportation at its finest. I do believe I'm being summoned."

"Summoned? By who?" The sound grew ever louder, a whirring, crashing cacophony.

"I don't know. But I think I'd better go so that it closes. Wormholes don't appear to agree with your world." As he said this, Jen watched a rich heiress and her tiny dog disappear into the riot of color. She wondered why they weren't being sucked up as well then shrugged it off. She hated it when her brain got logical in the midst of chaos.

"I think you're right. But Jason," she paused, always shy when it came to goodbye. She had fucked this man six ways from Sunday—and had him fucked a thousand more—but still felt weird professing affection for him. He was a creature of

imagination, after all.

"Yes, sweet cheeks?"

"Be careful, okay?"

"Ah, you'll have me roaming the women-filled cosmos soon enough. Adieu, my Goddess. Parting is such sweet sorrow."

Corndog, Jen thought wryly. Jason always seemed to speak in clichés. But that didn't keep her from being charmed. He turned to wave at her then headed for the wormhole, diving in head first.

As suddenly as it had come, the wormhole was gone, blinked out as though someone had flipped a switch. Which they probably had in a universe far, far away.

Katya stood, brushing rocks and dirt from her gown. "Damn that Bell, always causing me problems, even when he's not my character anymore!"

Jen frowned. Something about the incident seemed wrong. After attempting to figure it out, she shrugged. Jason's whole existence was wrong to begin with, so why quibble with semantics now?

* * * *

A week after Jason's disappearance into the vortex, Jen sat at her computer watching the

cursor blink on and off.

“Fuck.”

“What?” Katya looked up from her laptop. She sat on the couch with her legs propped on the coffee table, typing away at her next bestseller. Jen, meanwhile, was still sitting at the desk across the room, stumped.

“I can’t write, Katya. I’ve tried all week to write a Jason story, get back in touch with him, but nothing’s happening.”

“Writer’s block? Happens all the time. Hey – maybe we should get out the Ouija board, huh?”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea. What about the wormhole? We really don’t need one opening up in the living room.”

Jen got up, shutting off the monitor with an angry jab of her finger. She went into the kitchen to make herself a mug of tea, slamming cupboards and muttering under her breath. The truth was she was worried about Jason. She’d never gone this long without contact, without writing some words of his story or summoning him for a little story of their own.

Three times, she’d tried to pull him out of the fictional universe he inhabited and three times all she’d gotten was burnt fingertips from the candle. He’d always come to her before. What was keeping him away?

Steaming hot chai in one hand, she sat back

down at the computer, determined to locate her wayward character. He was probably holed up in some all-girl circus or something, too busy to answer her call. She set her drink down and stared. The white screen seemed to go on forever.

Where are you, Jason? Jen typed idly with one hand, the other cradling her chin. She hadn't expected a response, of course, but one came anyway, written on her monitor just as if she'd typed it herself:

We know where he is. We can take you to him.

Jen's shoulders tensed and her heart began to race. "Katya, look at this."

Katya set her laptop aside and stood behind the desk chair. "What are you writing now?"

"I'm not writing. Watch." Her fingers click clacked on the keyboard until she had typed: *What do you mean, take me to him?*

Again, words appeared in response: *We can help you locate one Jason Bell. For a price.*

"Holy shit!" Katya gripped the back of Jen's chair, pulling her away from the computer before she could type further. "Jen, are you sure you want to mess with this? I mean, Jason Bell isn't real. Okay, he is real, but he's not real here. And who knows, if you go looking for him, anything could happen."

"But it sounds like he's in trouble. I can't just forget about him."

“Sure you can, he’s just a made up dude with too much sex on the brain. What kind of price are they talking about, anyway, and who are *they*?”

Jen thought about that for a moment or two then frowned at Katya. “He’d come after me if I was in trouble. I don’t care who they are, I’m going to help him. I have a responsibility to him now, since I write his stories, his existence.”

She typed again: *What price?*

Details to be discussed in the Captain’s presence.
Stand.

Jen reached to type that she didn’t understand, but the message repeated.

Stand.

Stand.

Stand. Stand. Stand...

The thought struck her then that they meant *stand up*. “All right all right, keep your pants on.” Jen pushed back from the desk and stood, her bare feet sinking into the plush carpeting. Right away, Katya shoved her back into the chair.

“Are you insane? Do you have any idea what could happen? Jen, this is a fictional universe—a universe filled with things that want to eat you, invade your planet or have sex with you. You can’t just...go there.” The message to *stand* continued to scroll across the monitor.

“A universe filled with people who want to have sex with me doesn’t sound so bad.”

"They're not people! That's what I'm saying. These are aliens, created to be the ultimate evil for Marla to fight. Even the good guys are bad and you have no idea what they want from you. Why do they want you to stand up?"

Jen pushed Katya's hands off her shoulders. "Not that I don't appreciate your advice, but I have to go. You don't even *like* Jason, but I think he's an okay guy. Besides, I write this universe now. The aliens do what I say they do."

Katya chewed her bottom lip in an uncharacteristically girly way. "Fine. But don't say I didn't warn you. I have a really bad feeling about this."

Jen rolled her eyes at Katya. "It wouldn't be bad sci-fi if you didn't." She gripped the arms of her chair one last time to center herself then stood up. She braced herself, all her muscles clenched in anticipation of what was coming.

Nothing happened.

"Well, that was anti-climactic," Jen quipped just before the gigantic whirling vortex opened over her head.

* * * *

"Gargle brah miple dorfchester carport."

Jen blinked and rubbed her eyes, but all she could see was the flashing color of the wormhole.

A hideous noise echoed all around her.

“Gargle brah miple dorfchester carport! Gingle drang bartingus!”

Belatedly, she realized someone was talking to her. *Did it say carport?*

“I’m sorry, but I can’t understand you.” The swirls in her vision were receding, gradually revealing a row of bright white lights aimed directly into her face. She squinted, rubbing one hand on her forehead to clear the last of the dizziness—traveling through a wormhole was quite disorienting. She suddenly had some sympathy for Jason who she was always sending through wormholes. *Jason. Where are you?*

“All right, I’m here. Tell me where Jason is.” She held one hand up to shade her eyes and tried to see past the glare. Everything she could make out was either white or chrome—floor, lighting, the chair she was somehow sitting in. The entire scene was straight out of a bad sci-fi novel. Probably one of hers, slapped together using Katya’s characters for Jason’s benefit, and her own. “Blarhga umbridge intrywoo better?”

“What?”

“I said, is that better? I can adjust the frequency a bit more if you like.”

“No, I can understand you now.” Jen wondered how you could adjust the frequency of a universal translator then reminded herself she was inside a

story, not in the real world. The laws of physics and various other rules were out the escape hatch. "Tell me why you brought me here. And turn off those damn lights. I feel like I'm being interrogated."

"That's probably because you are being interrogated. One can't be too careful with one's God."

"Goddess," murmured Jen under her breath, which earned a weird, chittering laugh from the creature behind the lights.

"Gender hardly matters in one as powerful as you."

She couldn't see the face of who, or what, was speaking to her, but she could see the chitinous legs as they clacked on the white tile floor. There were way, way too many of them. The first frisson of fear scrambled up her back, closely followed by white hot anger. Someone was fucking with her. Not cool. This was her universe, damn it. No one was allowed to fuck with her. She leaned forward to get a better look. Beyond the rack of fluorescents she could see the creature dimly. It was an alarming collection of insectile limbs and large snapping mandibles.

Pretty much your standard evil alien—kind of disappointing, really. "I said, tell me why you brought me here. I have better things to do than sit here chatting with you."

"Tell me how you do it. I must know!" The voice wasn't exactly coming from the creature pacing back and forth in front of her. It sounded computer generated, tinny and hesitant.

"How I do what?"

Suddenly, it stopped and reared up on four legs in a menacing display. It curled one foreleg into a reasonable imitation of a fist and the tinny computer voice seemed to snarl. "How do you control this universe? I'd very much like that power for myself, which is why I hijacked the resistance's pitifully disguised wormhole and kidnapped you."

Okay, that was English but Jen still didn't understand it. "Kidnapped me? You brought me here, I agreed to come."

The alien sidled closer, the click-clack of its legs turning Jen's stomach. "You agreed to help the resistance with their pathetic attempts to unseat my mother as Queen of the galaxy. I merely got to you before they did. Now, talk, or suffer my wrath."

It pressed a button on a console. White hot pain slashed like a whip right across her ass and she jumped up with a yelp. The thing had shocked her! "Screw you! Tell me where Jason is, damn it. I was told that someone was holding Jason and he could tell me where he is. I certainly did *not* expect to be electro-shocked."

"Jason? Jason who?"

"Jason Bell, the bounty hunter."

The Spider paused in mid-menace. "Bell? I have no idea where Bell is." The robotic voice sounded wistful, as if it missed the wayward cad.

Something tickled the back of Jen's mind. The Spider had mentioned the Queen before. "Are you a...Spider Princess?"

"What of it? That has no bearing on this except that I will garner favor with my mother when I steal your powers."

Steal my...oh hell no. Jen decided she'd had enough. Making a split-second decision, she ducked her head and ran headlong at the alien, only to find herself slammed backward by some kind of invisible force field. She flew a foot before landing hard on her already sore ass. The chittering laugh grew louder, making her ears ring and her fists clench.

She picked herself up off the floor and walked to the edge of the barrier. When she brushed her hand against it, blue sparks flew from it. Her fingertips tingled from the contact. There was no real reason for sparks to fly from an invisible tingling force field except for effect—more proof she was inside a story.

"Don't even bother trying to escape. I've got the force field generator set to eleven. No one can get through that. Now tell me, or I'll activate the

electrodes in the floor.” The Princess waved a stray leg at the console.

Jen prowled around the perimeter of the space, running one hand along the barrier. The industrial floor was cool on her bare feet. She didn’t want to consider what electric shocks rising from the floor would feel like. Dancing for the Spider Princess wasn’t on her to-do list. Taking a deep breath, she turned back to her captor.

“I don’t know how I do it. I write the words and the events I create happen in this world. That’s it. Now, let me out of here so I can find Jason. I’m worried that he’s in trouble.”

The Princess regarded her, frowning. At least, Jen thought it was a frown—hard to tell with mandibles. “You actually think Bell is in trouble? From what I know of that man, he creates trouble. I’ve never known him to be unable to escape a tight situation.”

Jen considered the tight situations she’d put Jason in, usually involving virgin daughters of dictators. “That’s true. But he’s never refused to come when I called him before.”

Eight eyes squinted into slits and the Princess turned away from her to begin pacing again. “I wonder if that bastard Ray had anything to do with this. It would be just like him to take Bell hostage to get at the Queen. Everyone knows she still loves him, species be damned.”

Jen let out a dry chuckle. Jason Bell had that effect on everyone. Everyone female, anyway. "Who's Ray?"

"Ray is the leader of that damnable resistance. They'd do anything to unseat my mother, always droning on about atrocities and unfair conditions for humans forced to work in labor camps. Is it our fault that you people only have four limbs to work with?" The translator took on a petulant cast and Jen had to suppress a smile. This was just a spoiled little rich girl with a bunch of high tech toys and extra eyes and stuff. She moved to face the Princess and beckoned her forward as if she had a secret.

"You know, I bet Jason would be very grateful if you let me go. I'm *his* Goddess, too, and he will want me in one piece. He might even be grateful enough to grant your mother an audience. Or, maybe grant *you* an audience?" Jen raised one eyebrow and could have sworn the eight-foot black widow actually blushed.

"That's right, Flu'thark'mra, I do want her in one piece. Let her go."

Jen and the Spider both jumped this time and the Princess whirled around to face Jason Bell who held his blaster loosely in one hand, cocky as always.

"Jason!" Jen cried, clapping her hands.

"Bell," growled the Spider as she advanced

with what was either malice or sexual predation.

“Girls.” Jason nodded his head and took a step toward the Spider. “Don’t make me use this, Flu’tark’mra. You didn’t enjoy the last blast I gave you.”

“But the two before that weren’t too bad.” The translator’s voice had a note of pure lust that made Jen cringe. *Gross.*

“Ah, but this time I’m not your prisoner. You’re mine. And you’ll release Jen before I put a hole through one of your lovely black eyes.”

Eight eyelids—which apparently Spiders in this universe had—fluttered. A noise emanated from the Princess, a disgusting mockery of laughter with an undertone of fingernails on chalkboard. The thing was giggling like a terrifyingly ugly schoolgirl. “You think my eyes are lovely?”

“Well of course and I remember all the times you gazed at me when I was in your mother’s prison. I longed to be in your multi-limbed embrace, but sadly, our time has passed. I must take Jen back. She doesn’t belong here.

The Princess heaved a sigh, her cephalothorax shuddering. “I was afraid it would come to this eventually, Bell. I can’t let you stand in my way. I will find out how your precious Jen works her magic, and I most definitely will not let her fall into the hands of Captain Ray. I assume you won’t relinquish your weapon and go about your

business?"

"Sorry, Flu'thark'mra, I'm not going anywhere."

"What a waste," the Spider said to herself then she lunged at Jason. Giant fangs opened to reveal a gaping and probably poisonous maw as she skittered the distance between them. Jen screamed, though somewhere in the back of her mind she bristled at the idea of being the stereotypical helpless heroine. How annoying.

"A waste indeed, sweet cheeks." Jason lifted the blaster and fired. A bolt of red laser penetrated the creature's mouth, exiting through a bowling ball-sized crater on the back of her head. An unearthly squeal issued from both the Spider and the computer translator, piercing Jen's eardrums and shaking the foundations of the room. Then, still smoking, the Princess collapsed on her back. Slowly, her legs curled and contracted, pointing skyward in a way that made Jen wish for a giant wad of toilet paper. The sudden silence was louder than the squealing and more ominous.

"The guards will be here soon." Jason holstered his blaster and dashed to the console. He pressed a few random buttons and turned a giant knob in the center. Little lights blinked and a hissing sound indicated the release of the invisible barrier. Jen rolled her eyes—the place looked like an episode of Star Trek. She really needed to work on

her descriptions.

Jason walked the few steps to where she stood and hooked an arm around her waist. "All right, sweet cheeks?"

"You know, you really can't use the same term of endearment on me that you used on that." She waved one hand at the dead Princess who was still shrinking in on herself like...well like a dead insect would. Of course.

"Why not? You're both beautiful specimens, curvy and soft in all the right places—"

"Stop it!" Jen shuddered again—to think he'd touched that creature in the same ways he'd touched her...ew. But Jason was that kind of guy—he was written to be an indiscriminatory slut and that's how he behaved. "Can we just get out of here, please?"

"Good thinking—that's why you're the Creator and I'm but your humble servant." He scooped her into his arms and headed for the door opposite the one he'd used to enter the room.

"Jason, I can walk, you know."

He looked at her blankly. "But this is how I always rescue women in distress. Aren't you weakened from the Spider's tortures? I'm sure you need me to carry you."

"First, she didn't really do anything to me. Second, no, I don't need to be carried. Put me down."

He set her down and the icy floor made her toes tingle. Of course, she couldn't go back on her tough act now so she tiptoed around until numbness set in. "Now. Which way to your ship?" They were standing in a long corridor flanked by doors on one side. Each chrome door was labeled with a chrome plate and black lettering that looked suspiciously like Japanese. The opposing side had windows that faced into space—Jason's little cruiser was docked to a round entry hatch about thirty meters ahead of them. "Wait, this is a space station? Why aren't we floating around?"

"They must have the artificial gravity on."

"But...but artificial gravity won't work unless the station is spinning. That makes no sense." Jason grabbed her by the upper arm and started pulling her down the hallway while she babbled on about bad physics.

"Just through here and we're home free, sweet cheeks. Don't say I never did nothin' for ya."

"Blarg gargle mincemeat pie!" A squadron of Spiders, all holding blasters and wearing some kind of gun holsters—and that was all—came around the corner at the far end of the corridor.

Mincemeat pie? Jen had to fight to keep from laughing hysterically or screaming in terror. One eight-foot black widow was scary, but six of them holding guns was nightmarish. One of the guards fiddled with a dial on his holster and this time she

could understand what he said thanks to a speaker above her head.

“Stop! Who are you, how did you get on board this station?”

“Sorry, no time to get re-captured.” Jason started firing as he pulled Jen toward the escape hatch. The Spiders fired back, but for no clear reason their shots went wild. Blue laser beams bounced off chrome walls and sparks flew everywhere. A gust of wind blew Jen’s hair off her face—a beat later she realized that one of those creatures had shot at her, barely missing her face. Her eyes widened in horror and she started to run pell mell toward the air lock. Jason was right on her heels, shooting over her head and picking off guards one by one until there was just one Spider shooting frantically at them and making that same obnoxious squealing noise.

They reached the hatch and Jen slammed her hand against a small, square panel next to it. The door made a whooshing noise and slid to the left, allowing them to enter. Jen jumped inside what she assumed was a depressurization chamber. Turning back, she saw Jason shooting as he retreated through the doorway—the Spider down three legs, but still coming after them. As soon as Jason was over the threshold he hit the panel on the inside—a twin to the one Jen had touched—and the door began to close.

The guard howled with rage and stuck two limbs through the hatch, attempting to follow. The crunching sound his legs made when the door slammed on top of them would haunt Jen's dreams for the next three months.

Plop, plop. The forelegs dropped into the hatch and squirmed around before falling still on the white tile floor. Then the hissing started.

"Let me guess," Jen said as she walked over to the door to Jason's ship. "That's the air escaping from the room."

He grimaced. "We'd better get inside before the vacuum sucks the eyes right out of our faces."

"You know eyeballs don't really pop out in a vacuum." *Again with the over-analysis in a crisis. Yikes.*

Jason frowned. "Of course they do." Then he gasped. The air was getting real thin, real fast. He fumbled in his pockets and finally pulled out what looked like a key fob for an SUV. "Door opener," he managed to squeak out.

Jen nodded, her hair flopping around her face. She tried to take shallow breaths to conserve oxygen—this was not much of a problem because she was hyperventilating, totally panicked she would die in a nonsensical air lock in this her-forsaken universe. She put her head between her knees and tried not to cry.

"Got it," wheezed Jason, and the hissing sound

was rivaled by a grinding, scraping noise as the hatch to his ship opened. Jen staggered toward the noise. She could swear her eyeballs were starting to grow in their sockets.

A moment later, she blacked out.

* * * *

More chrome. Silver beams of light pierced her retinas as she opened her eyes and looked up at the ceiling. She winced and sat up, smacking her head into a shelf attached to the wall over the bed she lay in. Groaning, she collapsed back down and shut her eyes against the throbbing.

"Look who's up! My Goddess in residence."

A cool cloth touched her forehead, beads of water trickling over her temples to rest in her hair. "How long have I been out?"

"Long enough for me to outrun the squadron of pods that followed us off the station. We're drifting in an ion cloud with thrusters down. I assure you we're safe in here. Are you hurt?"

"Just a headache."

"That's the effect of the reduced oxygen. I've pumped a little extra into this room, so you should be back to normal soon." A few seconds passed in silence then Jason let out a chuckle.

"What?"

"The extra gas always makes me laugh. Can't

really explain it.”

Jen risked the chrome once more, her eyelids opening just a crack. That was tolerable. Jason sat next to her in a chair that seemed more utilitarian than comfortable, all polished metal and clumsy soldered joints. In fact, she guessed he had made the thing himself, along with the bed, the killer shelf above and the table. The room was small, but serviceable. A set of drawers was set into the wall to save space along with a hole where she presumed Jason put his laundry. Laundry in space—she’d never thought about it but, sure, a guy has to wash his clothes. A handmade rug covered the floor and *that* she knew about—a sheep herder’s daughter had made it for him one long winter night, in between romps in bed. Later he had to arrest the sheep herder for aiding the resistance, but the daughter had promised him no hard feelings—right before she shot him in the leg while rescuing her father. Jen grinned at the memory. Jason had limped for weeks and had even bitched her out before letting her have her way with him. He often complained, but she knew he loved every minute of his life under her care.

A sink and mirror were bolted to the wall opposite the bed. When she lifted her head she saw herself in the reflection. She was still dressed in her pajama pants and tank top, feet filthy from wandering around on strange space stations. Her

hair hung in sad clumps around her face, which was pale and wan, not at all the sex goddess Jason was used to.

"Jason, do you have anything else for me to wear? I can't run around the galaxy in my pajamas."

"Why not?" He cracked his naughty smile then got serious. He glanced around the room, a small line between his brows indicating thought. "I don't have anything to fit you, but you can wear a jumpsuit over your clothes. When the pods give up the search, we'll go to Talgus. They always have something a lady will like."

"Pants and a t-shirt are all I'm asking for. Oh, and shoes." She started to sit up again, but one strong hand centered on her chest and pushed her back down.

"What's your hurry? We've got a few hours to lay low before we can go anywhere." He was out of the chair and on top of her in one fluid motion she couldn't have written any sexier. Despite her loss of consciousness and being, as far as she knew, trapped in some hackneyed alternate reality, she instantly responded to Jason's touch. She always did. His weight on top of her was easy to bear and he laughed softly in her ear.

"The oxygen?"

"Not this time, Goddess. I just love being on top of you."

"Oh," she managed before he kissed her with a sensuality full of promises of things to come. Lips brushed lips and the small sounds they made flowed over her like warm honey. She ran her hands over his back, and the flex and pull of his muscles through the thin black t-shirt thrilled her. He was such a manly man, nothing like her other lovers from school. She reveled in his strength and the sheer size of him. The span of his shoulders seemed to go on for an eternity as she kneaded her hands into the knots she found. He moaned into her mouth, tickling her lips with his breath before drawing away.

"So this is what you mean by lay low?" She laughed, too, giddy from the knock on the head and the extra oxygen and the hot guy now lying on top of her. Being kidnapped was getting better and better.

Barely an inch of space remained between his head and the shelf above so she pushed on his hips, lowering him on the bed. He buried his face in her chest, kissing a trail from her throat to her breastbone. One hand crept under her tank top and cupped around her left side, warming her waist and belly. He gripped her that way, heat radiating from his hand into her then slid her shirt up to pool atop her breasts.

He loved her breasts. "All the girls here are so skinny and mannish," he'd told her once when she

asked about his obsessive fascination. “Even the pretty ones have nothing, but a nibble. Your breasts are dinner and dessert.”

“Hungry?” Jen murmured, nipples tightening with arousal. She inhaled the smell of him, hair tickling her nostrils as she breathed in his scent. Even that was deep and spicy, the way she imagined men to smell.

“Oh yes, for you I’m always hungry.” His hands came up to cup her breasts, his bulk pushing her further into the bed. His cock hardened against her thigh, a painful, but wonderful sensation as their bodies molded together. One of Jason’s hands engulfed each breast until just the nipples, now quite perky, peeped between his index and middle fingers. He ran his thumbs over her tender flesh, leaving her warm and cold, delightfully mixed. Her arms and breasts spotted with gooseflesh, each stroke of his thumb awakening more nerve endings until she was burning and shivering as if with fever. Then, he found a nipple with his tongue.

“Ah, that feels good,” she said as he sucked her nipple entirely inside his mouth. His teeth scraped the sensitive flesh, pulling her more and more erect as she writhed on the bed. She could hear her heartbeat in her ears as her excitement grew – each purse of his lips sending electric jolts right down to her toes.

She dragged her fingernails from the base of his spine to his shoulder blades, leaving behind welts she knew he'd feel for days. He bit down harder on her nipple, but by now the pain only added to the sensation. She pulled his shirt over his head and he shimmied his arms out one by one, pressing her further into the bed with his weight. Her shirt followed, tossed onto the floor in a heap on top of his.

Jen arched her back, wanting more. He thrust his cock into her thigh, the head pressing into the softness of her side with delicious contrast. The air in the small space grew heady and hot as their panting breaths mingled. She glanced down to see a flush of red spreading over her chest and beads of sweat formed in the hollow of her throat. Jason looked up at her, eyes twinkling, and began to kiss a trail down her belly.

He traced the skin above the waistband of her pajama pants with one finger, making her squirm and giggle. "Let's take these off, too." Hooking his fingers under the elastic he slipped them – and her panties – over her lifted hips. They landed with a soft thump in the growing pile of clothes.

"You too," Jen said, pointing at his cargo pants, which were looking uncomfortable.

"If you insist." The bed creaked in protest when he stood. He untied his boots and dropped his pants in record time, a Jason Bell special skill. He

started to join her on the bed again, but she stopped him. "Oh no, not this time. I'm on top."

"You're always on top. That's what I love about you."

Jen blinked. *Love? Where did that come from?* Jason, however, didn't seem to notice he'd uttered the dreaded *L* word—he held a hand out so she could stand and she took it, looking into his eyes for some hint of what he meant. Probably an accident of the extra oxygen. "I am not always on top," she protested as he settled himself down on the bed, cock jutting out with a self-styled curve she loved. The Bell curve.

"You're on top a lot."

"I'm the Goddess here, it's my prerogative."

"Agreed. Do your worst, Goddess." He folded his arms behind his head and crossed one ankle over the other, a casually gorgeous look. Jen climbed back on the bed, squeaks and squeals punctuating her every move.

"Nice bed you have here."

"It's functional."

"We'll see." With one knee on either side of Jason's hips, Jen leaned over and kissed him. Running her hands up and down his chest she relished every hardened curve. Jason threw his head back, exposing his neck, which she took full advantage of. She nipped and sucked until red marks began to show. Her willing victim gasped,

his hands grasping at her hips convulsively.

Lowering her head, she kissed his chest and belly. Her hair draped over his body, which made him squirm and chuckle. She paused in her descent.

"You're ticklish?"

"No!"

"You are too!" She sat up and attacked his ribs, playing her fingers against his sensitive skin until he begged for mercy.

"All right, all right! Stop!" He was breathless and red, and positively adorable. Seemed like every time she spent time with the man, she learned something new about him.

"Since when are you ticklish? I didn't know that—I've never written it."

"There is much about me that has never been written, sweet cheeks."

"Like what?"

At that he just shrugged and slid his hands from her hips to her breasts again and she threw her head back to savor every moment of his enthusiasm. He teased and played her nipples until bolts of pleasure were shooting through her chest and belly.

Raising her hands, she gripped his wrists and planted them over his head. "Hold still," she commanded.

"Yes Mistress."

A smirk on her face, she once again began to kiss a trail over his stomach, the light fur there standing on end when she blew cold air over the spots she warmed with her lips. Rippled abs gave way to more sensitive parts and she touched her tongue to the very tip of his cock. He groaned and lifted his hips for more, stroking her ear with one thumb as he buried his hand in her hair.

She took her time with his pleasure as he always took with hers. Tracing the swollen head of his cock with her tongue, she was careful to explore every fold and ridge. She tasted him, all salt and tang. His hand gripped the back of her head, but he didn't make demands of her. She ran her lips up and down the length of him, wetting him until he was slick and slippery. She wrapped one hand around the base of his cock, and another cupped his balls. Finally she parted her lips and sucked only an inch inside her mouth. Now he was gripping the side of the bunk with one hand, moaning and bucking his hips like a man possessed. At the sound of his delight, her own pussy clenched and began to thrum in time with her heart.

Sinking her mouth further down his shaft, she gripped his balls tight and began to stroke his cock with her other hand. Soon he was writhing beneath her—his cock grew ever harder in her mouth until she knew he was about to come. She

stopped at once, gripping his balls even tighter so that he cried out in pain and pleasure.

Panting, he lifted his head to look at her. "Tease."

"Slut." She started to climb atop him then paused. "Jason, what about a condom?"

He frowned. "What's a condom?"

Belatedly, Jen realized they'd never used one. How could she have missed that rather important fact? Then she remembered—Jason was a fictional character in a novel. She had never considered him a risk or she would have insisted. But now she was in his world, on his terms. What seemed fine in her own bed might be risky here. "How do you prevent pregnancy here?"

"Oh that. I take an infertility pill, the DeusEx Pill. No big deal."

"What about...diseases?"

"What?"

"You know, diseases."

"Like the flu?"

"No, like the clap."

"I don't know what you mean." He nudged his still-hard cock against her belly, hinting.

She slapped it away, frowning. "I'm serious Jason. Don't you ever get diseases from sex?"

"Those kinds of things were eradicated a millennium ago. I thought you of all people would know that."

"That's one of Katya's too-convenient plot devices, not mine. But it's good to know." A weight she hadn't realized had settled on her chest lifted and she grinned. "Now where were we?"

"Right about...here," he wiggled his hips around, brushing his cock against the swell of her belly.

"Oh yeah." She raised herself on her knees and settled herself so that his cock was just inside her. She was wet enough, to be sure. All that breast play had done the job well.

Jason planted his hands on her ass and pushed downward so that she slid the length of him, cock buried deep inside her. She gasped and hit him again, this time on the chest. He winced but the self-satisfied look remained on his face. So she pinned his wrists again, this time keeping her hands on them, using his arms to prop her up. His head fell back again as she pulled back, easing up and off him then back down, finding a rhythm she liked. She rocked her hips forward and back, his cock hitting just the right place inside her and making her gasp.

She forgot her grip on his wrists and he moved a hand to her clit, using the ball of one thumb to first tease then circle the swollen flesh just the way she liked. As his strokes grew faster so did her hips. Truly fucking him now, she sat up completely and rode him. Taking her cue, he

thrust his cock up into her until she was keening low in her throat. The strangeness of the world and the situation dropped away, leaving only the two of them. She took her pleasure, every moment of it, and when she came it was loud. Very loud.

His orgasm followed on the heels of hers, and she could feel the pulsing of his cock against her tightened pussy. Her knees gave out and she collapsed on top of him, head resting on his chest. Being there with him, having no pressing class or job to pull her away was very decadent, but as she caught her breath she realized the enormity of her situation.

"Jason, how am I going to get home?"

"No worries, kitten. We'll find you a way."

"You never worry. That doesn't help."

"Why worry? You always find me a way out of my problems and into a woman's warm bed."

Good point. She was always rescuing him from trouble, right after writing him into it. *What now?*

She might have figured out an answer, too, but a red alert started blaring throughout the ship. Red lights flashed on the walls and an overly-feminine voice screamed from hidden speakers. "Proximity alert. Enemy ship approaching."

"Enemy ship?"

"*Vera* always says that. She doesn't like intruders, and neither do I. Let's go see what's up." With that, he jumped up, knocking her off of

him so that she landed ungracefully on the bed next to him. He pulled his clothes on so fast he was practically a blur then disappeared through the door at the far end of the bunk.

"Yeah, be right there. If I knew where I was going, you idiot bounty hunter." She muttered to herself as she pulled her pajamas back on. As she approached the door it opened and she stepped out—still barefoot. "Where to now?"

"Oh for the love of...Oh come on, did you have to...Now that's just uncalled for..." Jason was off to her left, so she turned that way and followed the sounds of escalating curses toward what she presumed to be the bridge.

* * * *

"Give her to us, Bell. We wanted her all along anyway, and we will have her. I have you outmanned and outgunned."

"Never. I'll fight to the death!"

"No you won't, don't be stupid. Just hand her over and I won't blow your precious spaceship into tiny pieces."

Jen stepped into the small command bridge, which was just how she'd imagined it. More chrome, of course, along with an unnecessary amount of dials and knobs and a really big stick that Jason used to fly the small ship he called

home. The view screen usually showed the space in front of him, stars and planets and all that, but now it was taken up by the massive head of...no one she knew.

He was super, super hot though. His face had beautiful features that seemed almost sculpted. Where Jason was broad this man was narrow—narrow almond eyes, a thin nose and lips that were at this moment pressed into a tiny line. His hair was stark white, long and tied at the nape of his neck giving him an even sharper appearance. He filled the screen, his face angry and imposing. Jason was sitting in the captain's chair, feet planted on the floor and glaring right back at the view screen. Jen wondered how the hell he got his boots on so fast.

The man in the screen flicked his eyes over to her then one corner of his mouth quirked up. He looked like the snake who'd tempted Eve from Adam.

"Drop your shields, Bell, and I'll be on my way. I see you've kept her warm for me."

Jen ran a hand through her hair and tried to erase the signs of sex on her. The flush in her cheeks must have given her away. Gorgeous or not, this one was starting to piss her off. "Who is that, Jason?"

"That, sweet cheeks, is Raymond Morgan. Captain Ray to his friends and less pleasing terms

to his enemies. He's going to take his leave now, before I set my laser cannons on him."

"Your lasers are no match for my long range energy beam and you know it. Now hand her over and no one has to get hurt."

"Look, Morgan, I'm not just going to hand her over like some piece of cargo. I don't trust your intentions."

"I'll take good care of her, I promise. Just send her over. I took good care of you when you were my guest, did I not?" The purr of his voice couldn't mask the open threat. He was serious and Jason was outgunned.

"His guest? Is *that* where you were all this time?"

Jason cocked his head over one shoulder to answer her. "Yeah, bastard picked me up mid-transport and put me in some kind of holding cell. I could hear your summons, but I couldn't respond. It was like being torn in half, some days."

Jen stepped forward, the corrugated steel floor biting into her feet as she walked. "I'm sorry, I had no idea. I was worried." She put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed.

"Ah well, no harm done." He patted her hand. "Now, let's get rid of our good captain, shall we?" He pushed a few buttons and Jen saw Captain Ray rock back and forth. "Direct hit," said Jason.

Ray let out a stream of curse words, some of

them in strange garbled languages. “Damn it, Bell, you blew off my holochamber.” His lips tightened even more until his mouth vanished all together and mashed a button on the console in front of him.

The screen switched views, now showing a massive copper-colored craft framed by purple clouds. Before Jen could blink, a series of energy bursts hit the bridge. Her ass hit the floor with more of a thump than she appreciated and she let out a surprised, “Ouch!”

Jason glanced back over his shoulder at her then turned his attention to the screen. Ray’s ship was powering up, thrusters emitting flames as it adjusted course to intercept.

“What’s he doing?”

“He’s getting closer so he can use his transporter. Don’t worry, sweet cheeks, we’ll be out of here in two shakes. Better strap down, this could get bumpy.” Jason was whizzing around the cabin on a wheeled chair, which looked just like Jen’s desk chair at home. Jen nodded and found the nearest chair, buckling the seatbelt tight against her hips just as another volley of blasts hit the ship. Jason’s chair rolled out of control, knocking him into the wall with an oomph.

“I’m starting to worry, Jason.”

He rolled back to the com panel grumbling, without responding to her. He was worried too –

she could tell. Ray hadn't lied about being able to outgun old *Vera*—but could he outrun her? Jason wasn't much of a confrontationalist, so *Vera* was decked out with the fastest engines this side of the quadrant. Jen heard the telltale signs of *Vera* powering up—a slow building whine exactly like an airplane's engines starting up, with extra whoosh noises for effect.

Ray's ship loomed ever closer in the view screen as Jason flipped switches and read gauges, finally grasping the big stick he used to steer and yanking hard to the right. The ship responded with a smooth spin, the view out the window becoming nothing but a blur of color. Jason shoved the stick forward and off they went, presumably leaving a streak of white light against the purple in their wake.

Jen gripped the arms of her chair, head pinned against the back by G forces or something. Either way, she thought she knew how bugs on windshields felt. She watched Jason as he whipped the ship around asteroids and debris, back and arms slick with sweat and rippling with the effort of keeping them on course. He fiddled with a dial so that the view screen showed a rearview—Ray's ship gaining on them. More grumbling from Jason, something along the lines of tin-can-piece-of-crap-cruiser, and more messing with switches put a burst of speed, so that a gap

opened up between *Vera* and the copper giant behind her.

Relaxing, Jason turned around to face her. "You all right?"

"I think so. My butt hurts from where I fell, and — what are those?"

Jason whipped around and stared at the screen. When he saw what she had, his shoulders tensed and his hands curled into fists. "Those are pods. Spider pods."

A dozen or so inky black spherical objects were hurtling toward *Vera* from all directions, easily inserting themselves between *Vera* and Ray. One got close enough that Jen could see the single guard inside, all legs and mandibles.

"Right, so that's how it could have gotten worse. Your universe sucks, Jason."

"I know. Isn't it fun?" He grinned like a schoolboy, giddy face reflected in the light and flash of the view screen.

Jen rolled her eyes and clutched her chair for dear life. She didn't pray — who would she pray to, herself? *If I ever get out of here, I swear I'm going to rewrite this whole thing into a Sound of Music ripoff, Sans Nazis.*

Vera shuddered — the Spider pods were firing on them now and Jen couldn't see how Ray was helping by sending his own energy blasts their way. If he wanted her alive, he had a weird way of

showing it. All around them space was exploding—huge plumes of smoke and fire against the black as Jason blew away a couple of the pods.

“Things in space don’t explode! Fire needs oxygen to live, God damn it.” Jen almost laughed at her own desperation—in the midst of chaos, the rational mind reigned supreme.

“Huh?”

“Never mind. Just drive.”

He did, and he did it well. *Vera* raced through the mostly empty space, a planet looming far in the distance. “If I can get us to a station, we can always claim asylum. That’s worked for me a couple times.”

“But we’re being chased by both sides. Who will we claim asylum from?”

“Whoever the planet is at war with, of course. Don’t you write this stuff?”

Jen sighed, her teeth beginning to rattle in her head. *Vera* was shaking all over and making a screeching sound like a sick hyena. “What is that?”

“Oh don’t worry, she’ll make it in one piece. She’s just a little temperamental at high speeds.”

“I wasn’t worried about that. Now I am. Jesus Jason, how do you do this all the time?”

He shrugged and kept on sending lasers at their various pursuers as they all raced through space.

The planet began to resolve in the viewer, all gorgeous green continents and crystal blue oceans. It looked a lot like Earth before the green land had turned into the uniform grey of concrete cities. "What planet is that?"

"Why don't you find out for me? There's a console in your armrest, flip it open and find out." Another rumble ran through *Vera* and a particularly nasty shot pushed the whole ship over. "And hurry, would ya, kitten?"

Jen opened the panel and found a bunch of buttons. She pushed a few at random until she found an encyclopedia, which listed the planet ahead of them as Pinkert, inhabited by peace loving fish creatures. No space port, no asylum granted.

"Uh, Jason? I think we're in trouble here." She looked up in time to see the wormhole opening right in front of her. "What *else* could go wrong?" she said, just before she was sucked inside—chair and all.

* * * *

"I was asking myself the same question, until I remembered I could just take you off the ship. After all, the pods were after Bell, not me, which I must say is a nice change of pace."

Jen heard the voice as if from a distance, but

... ..
knew it was Ray the moment he began speaking. *Bastard*. She blinked, her mind still trying to recover from the disorientation of transport. Captain Ray swirled and danced before her, occasionally standing on his head and splitting in two or four. She groaned. "My head is killing me."

"Effects of the hole. It will pass. Now, please excuse me. I have to get this ship to a quiet corner of the galaxy. Things have become a bit too exciting for my taste." He ran a hand over his face and through his hair, shoulders sagging. Then he turned abruptly and left the room, door sliding smoothly shut behind him.

Jen rubbed her temples with one hand and glanced around. She was still sitting in the chair from Jason's ship, strapped in safely though the chair's base was a twist of mangled steel somehow ripped from the floor. She unbuckled and stood. Thankfully the walls had stopped spinning. For once, the room was not a mess of chrome and blinking LEDs. In fact, it was quite homey, warm colors on the walls and soft carpeting under her bare feet. A bed was attached to one wall, complete with fluffy pillows and a comforter. Otherwise, the room appeared empty apart from the chair she had come from.

She walked to a set of drawers and opened one, revealing a built-in sink. Another drawer revealed a toilet and a third some food-pacs. She grabbed a

pac of spaghetti and a pac of garlic bread—at last being the author of the universe paid off. She knew for a fact that spaghetti was the tastiest pac in the galaxy, excepting chocolate mousse.

More testing revealed a drop-down table set in the wall next to the bed. Jen sat down and opened her pacs. The spaghetti self-heated as she took out the fork and cheese packet. The bread toasted itself, too, and soon the room smelled of garlic and tomato sauce. Her stomach rumbled and she tapped the fork on the table, the metal on metal tink the only sound in the room.

“Would you stop that infernal racket? Some of us prisoners are trying to sleep.”

Jen jumped from the chair, sending it flying backward with a clatter. “Who...who said that?”

“I did.” The air in the far corner of the room began to shimmer and take form, until what had been an empty corner now contained a seated figure, clad only in a white shift.

“What the hell? Where did you come from?”

“The Nth dimension.” The woman, Jen could see her clearly now, rested her hands on her folded knees in a meditative pose. “I find traveling the dimensional strands passes the time.” Her voice was clear and melodious, how Jen imagined an angel might sound. She was a beauty, too, dark hair and dark wise eyes, skin the color of coffee and cream. A woman like that, either Katya wrote

her or she was planning to eventually.

Picking up the chair, Jen heard her stomach rumble again. She had to eat. Scooping a bite of spaghetti into her mouth, she flinched. "I'm sorry—do you want some food? I found a bunch of pacs over there." She gestured with her fork toward the pac drawer, but the woman just laughed.

"I'm the most powerful Seer in a century. I have no need for frequent meals. If that idiot Ray keeps me locked in here much longer, I'll have to eat something. I just hope he has something that wasn't made in the child labor factories of Krita Four." The Seer eyed the pacs Jen was eating with distaste.

Jen swallowed the bite she was chewing hard. *Child labor?* So much about this universe was outside of her stories—how could she know these things? *In fact...* "Who the hell does this Captain Ray think he is, kidnapping women like us? And chasing after me and my...friend. He could be hurt, or worse, thanks to that jackass! I'm Jen, by the way." Jen stood and offered her hand to the Seer who rose off the floor to shake—still in a sitting position.

"My name is unpronounceable in your human language. You may call me Suki."

"Suki?"

"It is a close approximation."

"Right." Jen turned back to her food, forcing the bites into her mouth and trying hard not to picture five year olds stirring giant vats of sauce. "Look, I really need some obvious exposition right now. Why are we prisoners here?"

Suki sighed a heavy I'm-too-wise-for-this sigh. "Captain Raymond Morgan is the leader of the resistance against the Imperial rule of the Spiders. The Spiders took control of this quadrant in a bloody battle with the Tarkenians a decade ago. You might remember the war, as it provided a backdrop to the book *Marla's Mistake*."

Jen's eyebrows shot up. "How do you know about that book?"

"I am aware of many things, on many planes. I am a Seer." She said the word as if that explained everything.

Jen waved a hand for Suki to continue her exposition and took a bite of the garlic bread. "Holy cow, this is good garlic bread. Uh, but child labor sucks so I'll be sure not to pay for any pacs."

Suki ignored her and continued to Jen's relief. "When Ray heard about you, of course he wanted to use your talents to help his cause. I also know that the Captain only used Bell to get to you so one could say it was you who put Bell in danger."

A flash of guilt washed over Jen, quickly replaced by irritation. "So he's going to force me to write him as the leader of the galaxy?"

Suki shrugged and rose to her feet in an annoyingly graceful motion. "I don't know what he wants from you, exactly." She floated toward Jen until she was facing her across the table. She eyed Jen's food and pajamas with a scoff. "I am far beyond dealing with such mundane and earthly matters. There are more existences and levels than you can imagine. We all take on many forms, many places. I can hardly concern myself with but one."

Jen lifted her eyebrows, her mouth crammed with spaghetti. "Really?" She forced the huge bite down with an audible gulp. "Then why did he kidnap you?"

"He wanted me to locate you. When the Spider Princess intercepted his plans, he was incensed. He held many of us wise ones prisoner, but alas I am the only one who remains. He forced me to use my considerable gifts to aid him."

"I'm sure that did your great and wonderful powers a disservice. Now, do you have any idea how I can get out of here? Maybe you and I can escape together."

Suki smiled, showing off her row of dazzle-white teeth. "Many prisoners attempted escape. None survived. I find it most wise to maintain my meditative state."

"Then I guess I'm stuck here until he decides he wants to see me."

The Seer placed her hands on either side of Jen's face, encasing her in warmth. "I sense great things in your future. A tall dark man, danger, drastic measures. A water leak of some sort. Your life will be quite full, but you must be careful."

"Gee, you sure are all knowing and stuff."

Jen suppressed a snicker and brushed her crumbs and trash into the drawer beneath the table, which had a gaping hole she assumed led to an incinerator. At least, she hoped it did. "As far as I know, Captain Ray is the only one who can send me home. I don't care what he wants, I'm inclined to give it to him."

"I assumed as much," Suki replied, sniffing.

Did she just call me a slut? "Look, I realize you're all wise and everything, but..." Before Jen could finish, the door slid open to reveal two guards dressed all in brown—brown boots, brown pants, brown coats. The female on the left waved a blaster much like Jason's in Jen's direction.

"Captain Ray requests your presence on the bridge. Come with us."

Jen glanced at Suki who shrugged and sat cross-legged on the bed already beginning to fade as Jen crossed the floor toward the guards. Some help she was.

The male guard grabbed her upper arm and pulled her out the door. "Let's go."

"Hey! Hands off, I'm coming." She yanked her

arm out of his grip and he frowned at her. She would have liked to slug him, but the female kept her blaster pressed into Jen's back and they all walked together down the corridor together.

Ray's ship was different from the others she'd been in. Where *Vera* and the Spider ship were filled with chrome, Ray's ship was paneled in dark wood and floored with carpeting that was dingy and old, coming up in spots. Here and there light fixtures sat on the walls, much like any hallway anywhere. In fact, the whole thing was vaguely familiar. Then it struck her—this was the hall outside their apartment!

Katya had lifted the description right down to the dusty table at the far end and the peeling paint on the ceiling. Jen hadn't bothered to write much about the resistance or other political issues, focusing instead on Jason's exploits. So this ship and its inhabitants remained how Katya had originally written them. That explained the distinct lack of humor from the guards. Captain Ray was new though—she'd never heard of him before. "What do you want with me?"

Neither guard responded, but the woman jabbed the blaster in Jen's back even harder. Rolling her eyes, she walked the rest of the way in silence. A short ride on an elevator that was exactly like the rickety contraption at home and they were on the bridge. Jen touched the buttons

on the wall as they left, as worn and decrepit as always.

Ray was standing in front of a floor to ceiling viewscreen on which Jason and the Spiders were only far-off blips. When Jen stepped on the bridge—more dingy carpet—he turned to face her with a swish of his long brown coat. “At last! Do you have any idea how long I’ve been searching for you? I’ve kidnapped every wise woman and Seer in the Xanga system looking for a way to bring you over. That idiot Bell has been bragging about his Goddess all over the quadrant. Should have kept his mouth shut.”

He walked in long, confident strides until he stood in front of her, an inch too close. “You’re going to be my Goddess now.” Gesturing to the guards, he turned around, striding off to examine a readout on the far side of the room. The guards pushed and shoved at her until she was sitting in a chair facing the giant viewscreen. The metal frame bit into her exposed shoulders, sending a chill through her.

“Look around you, Creator. What do you see?”

Jen shifted around, trying to stay calm despite the gun pointed at her head. “Um. Out there, stars. The rest? I see flat panels with random technobabble running on the back wall. I see three or four raggedy looking crew members whose outfits need patching and attitudes need adjusting.

I see a lot of pointless dials and levers. And you, I see you holding me prisoner in my own universe for your own gain. I thought the resistance movement had more honor than this. Guess I was wrong. Now could someone please get me a fucking pair of shoes? I'm cold."

A frown creased his brow, a brief lapse in his cool composure. "What you see is a ragtag group of believers—people whose homes and families were destroyed by a bunch of eight legged freaks. We scraped this ship together and began a revolution—there were only five of us when we started and now we've built an entire fleet. I've lost friends to this war, Goddess, good men and women who believed in what we were fighting for and gave their lives for it."

When Jason called her Goddess, it was a sweet term of endearment. When Ray said it, he sneered.

"All that pain, all that death, and what does that moron bounty hunter tell me? The entire universe, all of our plights and dreams, exists solely to entertain. We are a puppet show to you, a group of two-dimensional beings you can order around for your amusement. I can see why you'd bring Bell into being, that whore of the galaxy is certainly comic relief. But what about this war? What about my daughter, who died of Driknailian Plague? You might be entertained by my misery, by our misery, but we are not."

Jen's mouth worked, but no sound came out. Ray was nearly shouting now, pacing back and forth across the bridge like a man possessed. This was no two dimensional freedom fighter. This was a man who'd suffered great losses. A man like that could be capable of anything. Finally, fear forced her voice.

"Look, I didn't write this war. I only write Jason stories, I don't write anything about fighting and death and child labor camps!"

"I don't believe it. You play around in our universe like it's a giant doll house. I'll put a stop to it, one way or another."

Jen's breath caught in her throat. Maybe he really did mean to kill her, end her meddling in his universe. She kept very still, said nothing for fear of sending him over the edge.

"Are you so heartless that my words mean nothing? Are you but an unmovable force toying with her playthings?"

"No! Of course not. I told you I had no idea what was going on outside my stories. How could I? No one wrote you, did they?"

He paused mid-stride and swished to face her. "No one?"

"As far as I know, the resistance exists only as an extra in Marla's story. I've never read anything about a Captain Ray." Of course, Katya had outlines and plans that Jen hadn't read—he could

easily be in any of those. She didn't think it prudent to mention that, though.

"I don't understand. Bell told me that you control everything. Everything that happens to him is preordained by you."

Jen laughed out loud. "Come on, Ray, do you really think I write his entire existence? Every piss he takes, every move he makes? That's ridiculous."

Ray stood in front of her, head cocked to one side, considering her argument. Jen fought not to stare at his crotch, which, to be fair, was at eye level for her. A stray puff of cool air blew over her arms raising gooseflesh. Ray's gaze shifted to her, watching her shiver. His eyebrows knit in momentary confusion. "What are you wearing?"

That did it. She jumped out of the chair, pushing the chick with the blaster into the other guard, who both let out surprised squeaks before they toppled over. She shoved her arms outward, hitting Ray flat in the chest. He staggered back, gripping his chest where she'd hit him.

"What...what the hell?"

Jen ran forward into him and knocked him on his ass, planting one bare foot square in the crotch she had just been eyeing. "I've had just about enough fucking fun for one day, okay? You kidnap my...friend, you kidnap me, you manhandle me and push me around, lock me up

with that snooty know-it-all and *then* you have the nerve to criticize what I'm wearing? You're the asshole who pulled me out of my world without a chance to change my clothes."

Before he could respond she pressed down with her foot, taking extra care to wiggle her toes until he quit breathing. Then she stomped again, for emphasis.

"Holy fuck," he wheezed. She reared back for another go, but a pointy object pressed hard into her back, so she reluctantly removed her foot from his nethers.

"You want me to shoot her, boss?" Femguard. Were all the women in this universe giant bitches?

"No." Ray struggled to stand, one hand gripping his damaged balls, the other hanging for dear life on the helmsman's chair. At least, Jen thought it was the helmsman's chair. "Don't hurt her. If you do, our entire existence might end."

Jen frowned. She'd never considered that before, either. What would happen if she and Katya were gone? Would the universe go on? Die? Had it existed before Katya started writing? The metaphysics were mind-boggling—all these people, just blinking out of existence because some publisher decides to go in a different direction.

"Put her in my quarters. And be sure to lock the door. From the outside."

"Gee Ray, you've got bright people working for

you.”

He turned away from her to stare out at the stars, and the guards bullied her back into the anachronistic elevator. They went up a couple floors and into another hallway. The Captain’s quarters were a few doors down on the left, next to a faded picture of a pirate ship called *The Love’s Alchemy*. That print had hung on the wall next to Jen’s apartment door for as long as she could remember. Katya really needed some new material.

Femguard tossed her into the room with an ear to ear grin. “Enjoy your stay,” she said, voice pitched low and menacing.

Jen jumped up and shouted at the closing door, “Ooh, so scary. Whatever, red shirt.”

If the guard replied she didn’t hear because the door shut with a soft hush of air. She huffed and flipped off the closed door because she could.

“What am I going to do?” She asked the room but no one answered, so she surveyed her options. It was a small space, smaller than the one she and Suki had shared. The decoration was sparse, nothing on hand to use as a weapon. The Captain lived simply, everything tucked away in drawers. The only thing that grabbed her attention was a small hologram of him and a small girl, laughing and playing on the beach. Talk about tugging the heartstrings.

It wasn't that she didn't feel for him—quite the opposite. But what could she do? She had just wanted to write silly erotic stories, not worry about the fate of a universe full of people. She couldn't fix Ray's problems. At least, not from this universe she couldn't. Maybe if he got her home she could talk to Katya, convince her to rewrite whatever she had done to Ray. Or at least brighten his future some.

Sitting down on the bed, Jen pulled her legs up under her and watched the sad little holo play over and over. She had no way of telling what time it was, or even what day it was, but suddenly every bone in her body ached from exhaustion. And no wonder, she'd been kidnapped twice, dragged around space by her nose and fucked senseless. Okay, the last bit wasn't a bad thing, but it did wear her out. As Ray and his daughter danced along the seashore, she lay her head on the pillow of his bed and fell asleep without another thought.

When she opened her eyes again, Jason Bell was an inch away from her face. "Holy crap!" She sat up, forcing him to yank his head back to keep her from head butting him. "How did you get here?"

"You could keep it down. I'm not exactly here at Ray's invitation, kitten. Let's get out of here before the guards wake up." He leaned over and

put his arms around her then drew back. "Oh right, I forgot you like to walk yourself out of captivity."

Without thinking, Jen threw her arms around his neck and collapsed into sobs. "Oh Jason, I was so worried about you! I thought the Spiders would get you for sure. And Captain Ray told me all these horrible things about the universe and Suki said something about child labor camps and I just don't know what to do anymore." She regressed into sniffles and hitches of breath, burying her face in the bounty hunter's strong chest. He held her tight to him, brushing her hair with one hand and making soft shushing sounds.

"Suki? How is that old girl? I haven't seen her in years. Still as stunning as ever, I imagine."

Jen pulled back to look him in the eye, wiping tears away from her cheeks. "Don't tell me."

"Of course I seduced her. Did you see her?"

Jen had to give him that. "But she's so arrogant."

He shrugged. "Now, what's this about child labor camps?"

She explained everything Ray had said and his worries that if something happened to Jen the universe could disappear. Throughout her tearful recital Jason nodded sagely.

Talked out, she asked, "What do you think?"

Jason took her hands in his and kissed the

knuckles.

"I think you should stop worrying. Jen, if it is true that we all exist only in your lovely head, then none of us will know when we stop existing. No children will truly have suffered. We will all be but a memory to you."

"And...and you're okay with that? Existing only as a memory? Your entire life lived only in a writer's head?"

"Isn't that the way of life anyhow? To exist then to cease existing? Why worry about the specifics? I was created, somehow, and somehow I will be destroyed. Isn't the true same for you?"

Jen sat down, stunned. "I suppose it is." She glanced up at him, a newfound appreciation growing in her. "You're awfully wise, for an oversexed bounty hunter."

Jason grinned his classic grin. "As wise as you need me to be, sweet cheeks. Now let's get out of here."

"Not so fast, Bell," Ray said from behind them. "I am sick of pointing a gun at your ass. This time, I think I might just shoot it off." Jen looked over Jason's shoulder to see Captain Ray and a bunch of guards, all pointing blasters at her. "I'm not letting her go without a fight."

"Actually, I beg to differ, Captain. I'll be taking my Goddess and leaving." Jason pulled something from his pocket with a flourish. Ray and the

guards all gasped in horror, but Jen was just confused. It looked like a giant red button, about two inches in diameter. The thing was cartoonish, as though he had pried the start button off a child's toy. For once, she kept her mouth shut and let Jason work.

"That's right, I've stolen your wormhole device." He spun the button device on one finger, catching it like an acrobat while Ray stared in disbelief. "Now, if you give me a little time I'll return your toy. I'm not a thief, after all."

"Damn it, Bell, don't do this. Keeping her prisoner will protect us all. Aren't you sick of flying around the galaxy at the behest of some stranger? Think of it—we could end war, end famine and disease everywhere. You could be a hero—think of all the pussy you'd get then?"

Oh that was low. Jason looked at Jen, then at Ray, then at Jen again. He seemed to be sizing up his options. Jen had to bite her tongue to keep from speaking. She had to let Jason make a decision on his own. She knew that Ray was right in some ways and wanted things to play out without her interference.

"Ray, I've no beef with you. I'm on no side in the war. Who am I to tell a Goddess how to do her job? No, I'm going to return her where she belongs. What happens next is in her hands, and the hands of fate. We are but cogs in the great

clock of time."

With that weirdly deep sentiment, he pushed the button and the wormhole opened right over their heads, sucking Jen inside before she could say, "Goddamn it, I hate this thing."

* * * *

Safely on board *Vera*, Jason jumped into action in the captain's chair, pulling levers and getting them the hell out of Dodge. Jen was still reeling from transport, and sat on the floor, since she'd left the other chair on Ray's ship. Soon they were safely away and Ray didn't even try to pursue. *Vera* could outrun his clunker of a ship any day and she guessed he knew it. Once they were in the next star system over, she breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you for saying those things, Jason. And for rescuing me again. I've become a right pain in your ass."

"Never! Unless you decide to start spanking me, that is."

Jen giggled at the idea, but sobered at the thought of losing Jason. Suddenly he was more than a pastime to her. "I didn't know you were so introspective about your existence. I guess I assumed you only wanted one thing in life."

Jason swiveled in his chair to face her, hands on his knees. "I do. That's who I was written to be.

I'm okay with that and it doesn't stop me from being interested in the world beyond. Fuck a few Seers and they'll tell you all about the twenty-seven dimensions and sixty-eight alternate forms of reality and blah blah. In the end I realized that I have little choice in the matter so I may as well enjoy life."

Jen stared into his gorgeous green eyes, suddenly aware how much she *liked* this goofy man. Sure, he was fun in the sack and funny to interact with, she had always known that. But he was more than that and she was finding herself more and more drawn to him. What began as a game with a non-existent piece of man-candy was shaping into so much more—an entire universe had literally opened up to her.

She held her hand out to him and he rose from the chair, pulling her to her feet. "You're a pretty neat guy, Jason."

"I've been trying to tell you. Now what do you say we get you home? Like you said, my universe sucks."

She wanted to go home, climb into a hot bath and forget the whole thing ever happened. But she couldn't turn away from him now—she only just realized he was a whole person. She wanted to know what that person was wholly like. "I have a better idea. Let's go to the observatory."

A slow, lazy grin, appeared on his face. Now,

that look she recognized.

“Your wish is my command, Goddess.” He led her through the doorway and down a flight of stairs. Jason’s footsteps clanked on the steel flooring, but hers made no noise at all as she followed.

The hallway ended in a set of double doors, which opened when they approached, spilling white fluorescent light on the floor. Jason murmured, “Lights off.” He pulled her through.

Although she knew what to expect, the view took her breath away. The ceiling and walls were completely transparent, billions of stars shining light into the small space. The floor was carpeted in a rich pile that her feet sank into, warm and comfortable for the first time since she’d come here. Backstory had it that Jason had specially commissioned the room to seduce Marla, his partner in the love/hate relationship of Katya’s novels.

The room was only a few paces across, but it felt eternal. They were near a dual-star system, two large suns hung low and rich in the distance, ringed by gas giants and rocky planets that each glowed with technocolor brilliance. Mostly, though, she was entranced by the stars, which twinkled in all corners of her vision. She even forgot for a moment that stars in space wouldn’t twinkle, because there was no atmosphere to

distort them. The tension drained from her body as she soaked in the vast expanse in front of her. Few people in her world would ever get an experience like this.

Jason moved to stand behind her, hands cupping her shoulders and gently rubbing the stiffness from them. "You must be so tired, Goddess—and you've been in my universe two days without a pair of shoes. Not just anyone could survive that, you know."

She leaned against his chest, savoring the strength and allowing him to prop her up. The steady rise and fall of his chest calmed her. "You know, we can't really—"

"Goddess, stop talking." He spun her around and planted a kiss on her forehead then another on her lips. "You think too much."

That much was true.

She locked her hands behind his neck and kissed him again, eyelids fluttering closed. He pulled her closer until they were locked in a tight embrace. Jen sighed against Jason's lips as they kissed, this time with less frantic passion and more soft regard. Her heart was beating furiously in her chest as though she hadn't done this or written it a dozen times, as though she was with someone entirely new.

Jason pulled back from the kiss. "Here, lie down. The floor is made to lie on."

She got to her knees and he pushed her shoulders so that she fell on her back, laughing. He was right behind her, landing on top of her and rolling over so that they were a tangle of limbs and laughter on the cream carpet.

He ditched his boots and situated himself next to her, flanking her right side as she lay on her back, hands under her head. "Didn't I tell you it was comfortable?"

Jen bounced her hips a few times, the floor giving way with a slight squeak. She knew there were springs underneath, like in a mattress. This was not a floor meant to be walked on. Beside her, she caught Jason's appreciative glance out of the corner of her eye. "Are you watching me jiggle?"

"The view is very nice, yes. But I think I'm more drawn to your smile. You've had it rough here, but you still find a way to enjoy yourself. I like that in a girl. In fact, I like you a lot, Jen. I've spent time with a lot of women, but none like you."

"That's because the women you hang out with aren't real."

"Yes. And you are very much real, and very much a woman, not a character. You captivate me like no other."

"But we're not —"

"Nope," he stilled her words with a finger on her lips. "We probably aren't. But I don't live like

that. I live in the moment, for the pleasure of right now. And right now, I want to take those rather sad looking pajamas off you."

So he did, and she let him. With a nudge he had her roll on her stomach, the soft flooring conforming to her contours so that there was no discomfort. Fiction could be a wonderful thing.

He straddled her hips, knees on either side of her, and began to rub her shoulders. "You're so tense! You need some relaxation, Goddess."

He focused on her bare back and arms, rubbing in long, deep strokes that sank deep into her core. Muscles she didn't know she had loosened as his hands passed over every inch of her back. Her breathing slowed but she was alert to every touch and caress. After a time he moved on to her legs and feet, carefully avoiding ticklish spots. He worked his way down, spending a lot of time rubbing the stress out of her sore feet. "Hm, your feet are kind of dirty, Goddess."

"I've been barefoot for two days! What do you expect?"

"Perhaps you would enjoy a bath in a bit?"

"Oh my God, that sounds wonderful. But Jason, I'm worried about Captain Ray coming after us. Won't he find us if we just hang around?"

"No worries. I've got us tucked away in an uninhabited solar system. I'm an expert at hiding, remember?"

She smiled into the carpet. That he was, a runner and a hider. Jason never fought unless he had to. As he spoke to her, his hands crept further and further upward, now rubbing her inner thighs. His strokes became lighter, until just his fingertips were brushing the sensitive skin. Her nipples tightened, the light scrape of carpet as she fidgeted under his attention only adding to her arousal.

"Turn over," he said, voice husky and deep. She shivered and complied. "Look at those nipples, so rosy pink and lovely." He sighed and leaned over, taking one into his mouth. He sucked it between his teeth, lightly biting and making her suck air through her teeth.

Liquid heat instantly filled her belly and she wiggled her hips underneath him. "Jason, oh Jason I want you. All of you." He stood and ripped off his clothes, still faster than she'd ever seen. "You have many talents, Jason Bell."

"Let me show you," he said and positioned himself atop her. She pulled his head to her and they kissed, the passion returning in a rush. She devoured him, fiercely kissing and sucking on his neck and kissing his mouth until her lips were swollen. He returned the sentiment with gusto, gripping his hands into her flesh until she cried out. What had been sweet a moment ago became insistent, demanding. She needed him, right now.

Her pussy was wet and tingling, more than ready.

Reaching down, she guided his length inside her and he thrust hard, cock bumping up against her cervix with a delicious jolt. She threw her head back and moaned, her nails running up and down his back roughly enough to leave raised welts.

He slammed inside her with none of the careful movements of the earlier massage. She thrust her hips upward, wanting more, harder, wanting every inch of him inside her. Sweat formed on her chest and slicked between them. She grabbed his hands and held them over her head, fingers entwined and grasping as he fucked her, giving her everything she asked for and more. His pubic bone scraped against her engorged clit with every stroke and soon she was flying over the edge of orgasm.

"That's it, pretty girl. Come for me," he growled in her ear. And she did, coming loud and hard, hips rigid against him. He continued to thrust as hard as before, her over-sensitive clit singing with the extra stimulation until she could not control the sounds coming from her. When he finally released his seed inside her she shuddered and came again, a light orgasm that left every nerve aflame and tingling.

He lay atop her, panting and gently kissing her cheek. "Being with you is always so sweet, like honey off the comb."

Jen giggled. She couldn't help it, sometimes he was so corny. But she loved it. "Oh Jason, how can I ever go home and leave you here?"

"You'll just have to invest in pens and paper, Goddess."

She smiled sleepily and lay her head on his shoulder. "Guess so."

"How about that bath now?"

"Good idea." She started to rise but was knocked off her feet almost at once. The ship rattled and squealed then rocked hard again.

The red alert alarm began to blare. "Two seconds too late as usual, *Vera*," muttered Jason who started throwing clothes on. He left his boots off, sparing her an apologetic glance as he ran out the door toward the front of the ship.

Another huge crash sent the ship sideways—Jen watched their movement through the windows of the observation deck. She hurriedly donned her beleaguered pajamas, heart in her throat. How much damage could the ship take before they were blown to bits?

She never had the chance to find out.

The screeching and protesting of metal on metal rose to an intolerable degree. Jen hurried toward Jason, but before she got there a door slid open in the hall.

"Ah, there she is," a sneering, nasty voice spoke in her ear. Captain Ray's arm closed around her

throat in a neat headlock. "I've been looking for you all over the place."

She struggled, pulled and screamed but he held her tight. The more she resisted the harder his grip became until she could hardly breathe. She went limp, hoping he would loosen enough that she could pull free, taking huge gulps of air.

"That's better. I prefer a compliant woman—see, I have standards unlike your Bell. He'll fuck anything, as you plainly know." She still hadn't seen him, but his humorless guards were surrounding her now, each pointing their blaster at her chest.

"Jason, watch out," she screamed as he appeared in the doorway of the bridge, likely drawn by the sound of the struggle.

Later, all she could remember was Jason, framed by the light of the room beyond, a guard whirling around and a blast of bright red light. In her memory there was no sound except her own miserable wail.

"No!" She wrenched free of Ray's grasp, finding strength she didn't know she had. She pushed past the guards without a second look at their guns. She heard Ray shout at them to let her pass, his fears of her power still in full sway. She ran for Jason, who was lying prone on the hard steel floor, unmoving.

"Jason, Jason, are you okay?" Tears coursed

down her face as she landed on her knees, barely noticing the pain as the ridges in the floor tore through her pants. She pulled his head toward her. "Oh my God," she whispered.

Blood poured from a massive wound in his chest and she smelled his burning flesh in the air. A trickle of blood dripped from the corner of his mouth and his eyes were fixed on a point far beyond her. She shook him and sobbed. "Jason, talk to me, please, don't leave me!"

"Not gone yet, Goddess." His voice was raspy and weak. He coughed, sending more blood pouring out of his chest.

"Jason, you can't die now! I've only just realized how much...how I...oh damn it I love you, Jason Bell, you horny silly man." Her voice broke and she ran one hand over his face, which was pale and drawn.

He grinned, a beautiful smile that would haunt her dreams for weeks. "Don't say the *L* word."

"Bell, just die already so I can take her back to my ship. I can't have her wandering around the universe." Jen looked up to see Ray watching them, arms crossed, one foot tapping the floor. Guards everywhere were searching the ship and keeping an eye on her and Jason.

"Fuck you," she spat then turned back to Jason.

"It was lovely, Goddess, every moment. I'm glad I knew you. And never forget what the Seers

say. There are all kinds of ways to exist."

"No no no, no Jason don't talk like that." She clutched at his ruined shirt, not sure what she could do, but not willing to let him go.

"I have one more trick up my sleeve." With much labor, he slid a hand into his pocket. Ray shifted above her, trying to see what Jason was doing, but he kept his hand in his pocket. "Goodbye, my Goddess. I love you, too."

A small movement in his pocket produced a last wormhole directly over her head. Before she could say or do anything else, she was deposited on her living room floor in a crying, shaking heap.

* * * *

3 Months Later

"Aw crap."

"What's up?" Jen stepped out of her room into the hall, eyes still watery and red. She didn't cry as much, now, but she did cry.

"The stupid water heater is out again. Of course it is a Sunday so the landlord isn't around. You know, for as much rent as we pay the appliances should work."

"The price we pay for living in the heart of the city, I guess. I know I could never afford to live here without you."

"You know I love living with you! You're great company." Katya turned to face her, concern creasing her brow when she laid eyes on Jen's appearance.

"Have you been crying again? You must have had quite a time with that bounty hunter, lady. Have you even been on a date since he...you know."

"Since he died? No, I haven't. I spent my entire life looking for the right guy, I finally find him then he goes and gets himself blasted." Tears threatened to spill over her cheeks again, but she swallowed hard. Mourning a man she had loved for all of two hours seemed silly, three months later. But still, she did mourn. She missed him dreadfully. Shaking her head to clear it, she looked over the broken water heater. "So are we going to call a plumber?"

Katya patted Jen's shoulder a few times then smiled. "Yeah. Let's call that super hot plumber we had in a few years ago—remember him? He came when I broke the kitchen faucet."

Jen thought back. "Oh yeah, I remember. I never saw him because I was in class that day. Let's do it, though. If the lesbian says a guy is hot, it must be true."

"Look, I can appreciate a nicely formed body as well as the next hetero. Let's call him!" Katya was so excited she was jumping up and down.

"Okay." Jen wondered why Katya was all excited to see a sweaty man with plumber's crack fixing the heater. "I guess we all need a change of pace now and then," she said aloud to no one because Katya had already gone into the kitchen to call the guy.

She went back into her room and dropped into bed, springs squealing in protest. She grabbed an empty notebook from the nightstand and stared blankly at the lines. All that potential, but she couldn't write a word. She hadn't written anything since returning from Jason's universe. She didn't bother—somehow she knew it would go badly. Nothing could change what had happened there.

She had asked Katya about Ray, and she confirmed Jen's suspicions. Ray was an upcoming character, a really baddie with revenge on his mind and a lot of gunpower behind him. Marla was slated to go up against him, which was apparently a great conflict because Marla was also a member of the resistance. Jen had stopped listening to Katya then who was excited about her new book. All Jen could think of was Jason's face, grinning his grin right until the very end.

Tossing the notebook back on the table, she opted for the textbook next to it. Might as well work on her real life, now that her imaginary one was over.

Katya came in a few minutes later and sat on the bed. "Did I ever tell you that I often borrow from real life when I write? Descriptions, personalities, stuff like that?"

"Well you told me about seeing the blaster in the grocery store. And dude—you might want to flesh out Captain Ray's ship a little. It was really weird taking the hall elevator to the bridge of a space cruiser."

Katya laughed. "Really? I thought it was a cool contrast that he had a ship that looked old and decrepit."

"It is, but the anachronisms are kind of heavy handed."

"Everyone's a critic! Anyway, the plumber will be here in fifteen minutes. You should get dressed, do your hair. You can't shower, but you can at least attempt to make a good impression."

"Why should I do that? And how on Earth did you get a plumber to come out so quickly?" Katya's eyes twinkled merrily. *What was she so happy about?*

"You'll see," she said and left Jen to get dressed.

When the doorbell rang Jen had changed, but not into anything fancy. Not like she needed to dress up for the plumber, for heaven's sake.

She heard Katya welcoming him in and showing him toward the laundry room. "Jen, come on out."

Taking a deep and confused breath, Jen did, stepping into the hall just as the plumber was coming in.

"Uh, hi," he said.

"Hi. The water heater is right over here."

"Oh, right, thanks." He ran a hand through his shaggy brown hair.

Jen perched on the washing machine to watch him work. He set his toolbox down and started in, checking hoses and connections. She had to admit he was a fine specimen—tall, dark and handsome with a strongly muscled back and...*hang on a minute*. "So, do you like your job?" she asked, mainly so he would turn around to face her, which he did.

"It pays the bills and leaves me extra spending money for Friday night dates." He grinned.

Grinned a gigantic, lady-killing grin. Above that, his green eyes shone like stars at midnight. *Oh, my God*. "You go on a lot of dates, do you?"

"I've been known to date," he said with a lilt of flirtation in his voice. He turned back to the heater, giving her a lovely view of his ass, sans crack thank goodness. "Besides," he said with a grunt as he turned a difficult valve, "why not date until you find the right person? I see no reason to sit at home and wait for her to knock on my door. After all, we are but cogs in the great clock of time."

Jen's heart stopped. "What did you say?"

"I said we're all cogs in the great clock of time. It's something my mom used to say when I was feeling like time was going too slow. I guess it means that time goes on with or without us." He sat back on his haunches and gazed up at her from his spot in front of the heater. "Truth be told, sweet cheeks, I have no idea. I just say it to sound smart for the ladies."

Jen wanted to say something in return, but had no idea what. After murmuring some excuse, she slipped out of the room and ran for Katya, who was sitting on the couch with a glass of wine in one hand and a book in the other. She looked up as Jen approached, a mischievous smile on her face. "Okay, I get it. He's Jason, isn't he?"

"Down to every last mole and freckle. He was here when I first wrote Jason—trying to get me to go out with him while fixing the sink, I might add. I even told that dolt I'm a lesbian and it didn't stop him. Encouraged him even."

Jen stared wide eyed at Katya for a few minutes, ears ringing. A fragment of something Jason had told her drifted up through her tangled mind, "There are all kinds of ways to exist."

"Thank you," she said to Katya who waved a hand dismissively.

"I hate seeing you all mopey. I can't promise he'll be as good in the sack as Jason, but I can

promise an interesting time—this one's a cad to the core and you seem to like that in a man."

Jen smiled, the possibilities already forming in her mind, things she would never have considered before knowing Jason. Jumping off the couch, she ran for the laundry room, pausing only to check her hair in her reflection from a picture frame. "So, what's your name, plumber man?" She hoped she sounded casual, not as breathless and excited as she felt.

He turned and stood, a head taller than her, and held his huge hand out to shake. "Jason Ringer. You?"

The possibilities were endless.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amelia June writes steamy erotic stories and novels. She favors stories that leave little to the imagination and never uses words like “flower” or “manhood”. She has been writing since the age of five when she self-published her first novel “The Scary Gost”.

Amelia lives in the desert southwest with seven—yes seven—male creatures including two children, one husband, and an array of critters. She is a student of humanity, loves eavesdropping, and prefers chocolate to just about anything.