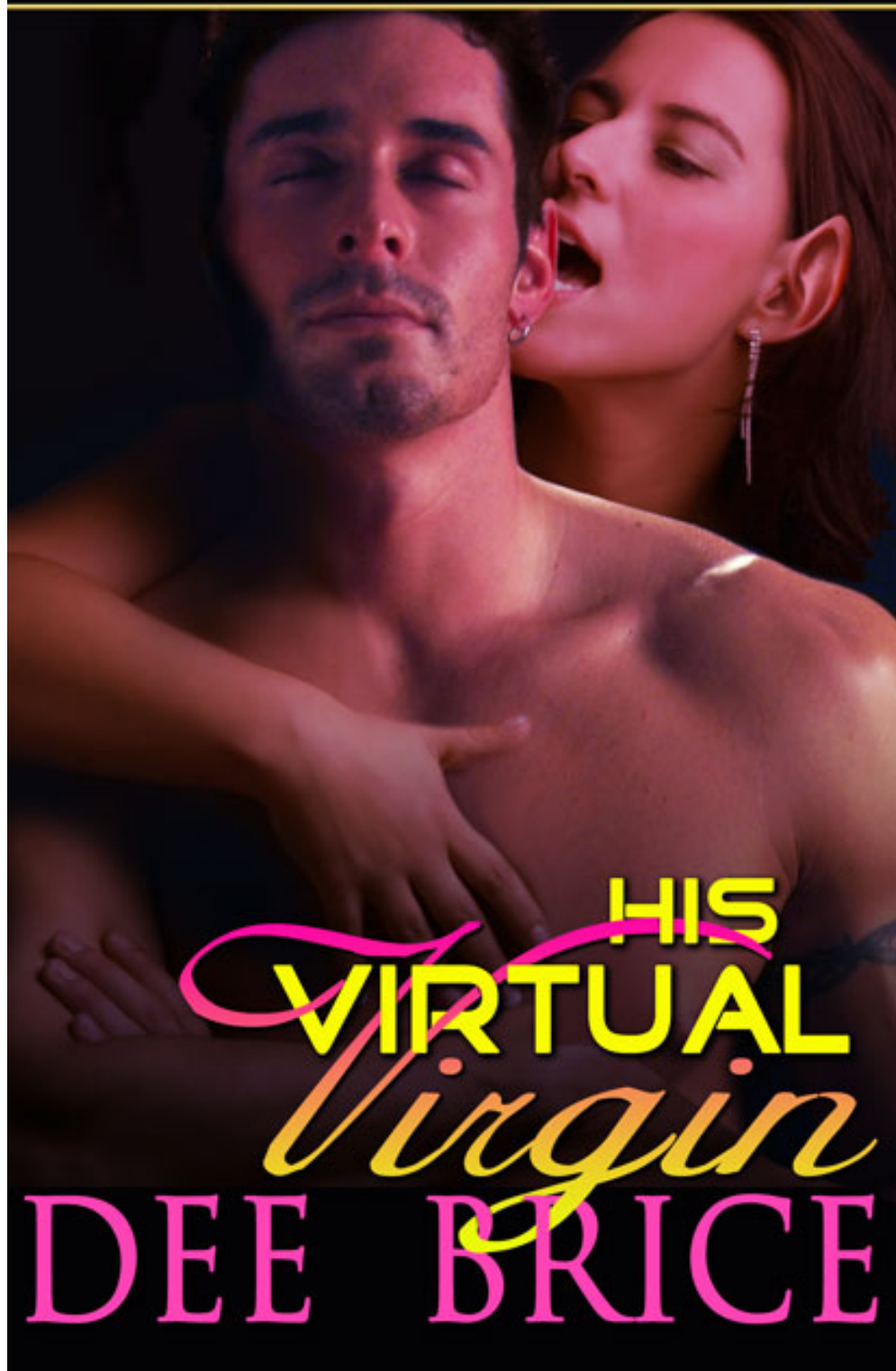


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



HIS
VIRTUAL
Virgin

DEE BRICE

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



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His Virtual Virgin

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HIS VIRTUAL VIRGIN

Dee Brice

Dedication

To my mother. Even though I expect she'll never read this book, she says she's proud of me.

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Prologue

Mars sat brooding, his mood so gloomy and far-reaching it disturbed Jupiter. Jupiter, who preferred his citizens to call him Jove, risked waking Venus from her beauty nap.

Venus was especially fond of Jove. For one thing—make that two of everything important to a goddess like Venus—he seldom pouted and he never took advantage of her. Blast him!

Her fondness for him and the hope of passing a decade or two making love with him immediately improved her grumpy mood when he woke her. She greeted him in the manner he most enjoyed, full of praises of his powers, but he cut her off.

“Can’t you hear him?” he rumbled, his voice so furious it shook Venus’ mountains.

“Hear who, dearest Jove? And please don’t rumble at me again. My people have just finished restoring the damage you and Mars did the last time you two fought.”

“Mars is who! You’re closer to him than I am and you can’t hear him?”

She took a moment to listen carefully then sent a mental shrug in Jove’s direction. “He’s sulking but he’s been that way for centuries. Ever since the interplanetary wars ended in—”

“Twenty-one twenty-three. I know. I was there and so were you.”

“So we were. And we’re both used to his moods.”

“This is different. I think he’s considering starting another war.”

“Well, I suppose a few skirmishes here or there won’t hurt and if it improves his mood...” She gave another shrug and smiled invitingly at Jove.

“Mars never stops at skirmishes.”

Resigned to listening, Venus sighed. "You're right. And with the purported Doomsday Alignment approaching, he'll feel obligated to create some kind of uproar. Mustn't disappoint the psychics or keep them from predicting the end of the galaxy."

They fell into a brooding silence of their own.

"Perhaps we can distract him," she said a year or so later. "On a small scale."

"Will that satisfy him?"

"If we make it interesting enough. And if he thinks it's his own idea, he'll focus his energy there and forget about war."

"For a while, anyway." Jove sighed then said, "Do you have any citizens on Earth right now?"

"A few," she said cautiously. She had no intention of allowing Jove to preempt her women. "Do you?"

"A few," he echoed, amusement in his voice. He had no intention of letting Venus control his men. "I suppose Mars has a few there too."

"I'm sure he does but he won't involve them. He promised when he signed the interplanetary treaty that he wouldn't let his people *start* a war."

"But if someone else starts it?"

"That's a war of a different color," she misquoted. "What are you thinking, Jove?"

When he finished telling her his plan she laughed aloud.

"Perfect. Since it will have to involve more than a few people, it should distract him for quite some time."

"I'll leave it to you to plant the idea and get back to you with the name of my — what is that old-Earth word? Something from jousting, I think."

"Champion? If so, that's an ancient-Earth term, from their middle ages."

"You're showing your age, Venus, my love."

"Never!" she protested, holding up a mirror and reassuring herself that he was only joking.

“Never, my love,” he agreed and reached out to touch her as only he could.

Chapter One

January 2225

"How do you feel about your alleged repeated loss of virginity, Miss Celine?"

"Objection, Your Honor. A Venusian female's ability to regenerate her hymen is a medically accepted fact."

"Medically accepted but not legally proven," Judge Joren mumbled, feeling his cock stir when the witness smiled sweetly up at him. She seemed to grow even more beautiful, her skin glowing with the kiss of youth. Her impossibly green eyes greened until they looked like twin emeralds. He wondered if he could take her into his chambers and prove the allegation once and for all, conflict of interest be damned! "You may answer the question, Miss Celine."

She seemed reluctant as she refocused her gaze on the middle-aged attorney standing before her. Small, even white teeth raked over her lower lip. Every man in the courtroom sighed, some out loud, some only to themselves. Joren considered himself one of the latter, though he'd barely restrained his groan.

"As with Earth women," she said carefully in her husky contralto voice, "it depends on the man." Before either attorney could object, she continued. "Most times, the very first penetration is painful and...messy."

"Which you attribute to what?"

"Inexperience and eagerness on the part of the man."

"Youth?" the attorney asked, his expression saying she would find neither pain nor mess with him. Or, for that matter, inexperience.

Impeccably dressed in a moss-green suit that seemed to mix the colors of his light brown hair and his hazel eyes, Michaels leered at the lovely witness. Joren almost banged his gavel and ordered the attorney to cease and desist his lechery. Since he was

having difficulty keeping his own lusty feelings and expression neutral, he set his gavel aside.

“Not always,” she countered mildly.

The attorney straightened and frowned as if her response were intended to insult him personally.

The opposing counsel stood-squatted at his table. “Is there a point to this line of questioning?”

“Get to it, Mr. Michaels,” said Joren.

“Yes, Your Honor. Miss Celine, Miss Alyson claims she has lost her ability to regenerate her hymen because of Mr. Garven’s repeated roughness with her.”

Miss Celine, the judge noted as a snicker rolled through his courtroom, merely quirked a dark eyebrow and waited for the question. Had Michaels coached her or was she naturally this imperturbable? he wondered.

“Is this possible, Miss Celine?”

“I suppose it’s possible, Mr. Michaels.”

“But?”

“Objection. Anything the witness might say –”

“Have you experienced such an inability?”

“No, but –”

“No further questions,” the attorney said quickly.

“Mr. Keefe,” Joren said.

Mr. Garven’s counsel rose. A man in his mid-thirties, Keefe lived up to his name with black-Irish handsomeness. Dark hair and aquamarine eyes. Eyes that could cut a witness to shreds or evoke confidence in that same witness. With Miss Celine, confidence seemed in play, though Joren sensed an underlying current ebbing between them.

“What might cause this regeneration loss?”

"Objection."

"Overruled. You've established Miss Celine's credentials as a healer as well as a sex surrogate, Mr. Michaels."

"May I say that I've not personally experienced the condition but I've seen the results of Mr. Garven's assaults on—"

"Objection. Prejudicial," Keefe said.

"Sustained."

"It occurs when the woman is not allowed sufficient time between assaults. Encounters," she corrected before Garven's attorney could object yet again.

"How much time is needed?"

"It varies, depending on the age and ability of the woman. But, generally, between one and twenty-four hours. Alyson is still very young in Venusian terms, so her recovery might take even longer than a day."

"How long does it take you, Miss Celine?"

For the first time Celine looked directly at Keefe. Joren noted the attorney's breath caught. A light blush tinged the witness's cheeks and her eyes darkened as if a shadow fell over a forest of sapling pine trees.

"Are you asking my age, Mr. Keefe?" Under the coyness lay a blade of steel.

Mr. Keefe's hand rose to his heart. "A gentleman never asks a lady, especially a Venusian lady, her age."

"Perhaps His Honor should rent a hotel room for counsel and witness," Michaels sneered.

As usual, Joren thought, Michaels had misread the situation between counsel and witness. They seemed more inclined to kill each other than to make love.

"My contracts call for a minimum of two hours' recovery time and a maximum of one full day."

"Who decides how much time is needed?"

"I do. I can also change the rest time between encounters whenever I wish."

"Why?"

A soft sigh lifted her breasts and drew Joren's gaze from her magnificent eyes.

"One of the reasons a man comes to a sex surrogate is to learn what pleases a woman. If I think the man is too eager to satisfy himself..." She shrugged then added, "I teach him ways to please a woman and himself without intercourse. Sexual intercourse, that is."

"Did Miss Alyson's contract with Garven have those stipulations?"

"Yes. All surrogates' contracts have these stipulations. But—" She fell silent and looked down at her hands.

Michaels stood. "But?"

"Objection," Keefe said as a matter of form. Michaels would get to it, sooner or later.

"Overruled," Joren said, as expected.

"The recovery times may vary. If the surrogate agrees," Celine said, still apparently focused on her hands.

"Mr. Garven's contract shows Miss Alyson's agreement."

"Garven is a liar! No surrogate would allow herself less than a full hour's recovery time," she insisted over the attorneys' shouting and the judge's banging his gavel and yelling for order.

When the courtroom quieted at last, Keefe said, "What is your *actual* recovery-regeneration time, Miss Celine?"

"Objection. Relevance. Miss Celine is an experienced surrogate and healer. Miss Alyson is neither."

"I'll allow it. Please answer the question, Miss Celine."

"Twenty minutes," she muttered, "but —"

"Thank you. Dismissed."

"Any more questions, Mr. Michaels?" Joren said.

"No, thank you, Your Honor."

Keefe paced to the witness stand and held out his hand to Celine. She looked up at him with eyes like spring grass drenched by rain. Her full lower lip quivered but she firmed her chin and tilted it to a proud angle.

"We'll adjourn until ten o'clock tomorrow morning," the judge ordered in a stentorian voice. "I'll see both counsels and Miss Celine in my chambers at nine."

"Get away from her!" Celine yelled and bolted for Garven who had his fist cocked at Alyson's tear-drenched face.

"She attacked me!" Garven shouted, opening his hands and attempting to capture Alyson's flailing fists.

"Venusian women don't—" Celine began, then held up her hand, palm toward Garven and Alyson.

Keefe felt a mild shock race through his body but Garven and Alyson froze in place like two combatant statues.

"Nine tomorrow," the judge repeated and banged his gavel. He looked unconcerned at the new disruption in his courtroom.

"All rise," the bailiff announced unnecessarily. Everyone was already on their feet. News media with smuggled cameras caught the melee for the evening vidcasts and for the morning papers.

Great! Keefe thought. The public, already in frenzy over the salacious details in this case, would feed like sharks on this.

No fool, the armed sheriff's officer circled behind Celine and slanted a half-questioning, half-fearful glance at her. She shifted her hand and Garven staggered into the officer's grasp. Alyson sank into a chair and buried her face in her hands. Her shoulders shook like leaves in a stiff wind.

"Remind me never to get on your bad side," Keefe muttered, going to his own chair and retrieving his briefcase.

"I haven't one," Celine quipped, laying her hands on Alyson's shoulders.

The young Venusian woman lifted her head, brushed a lock of pale blonde hair from her face and accepted Celine's proffered handkerchief. Nodding her thanks, she dabbed at blue eyes fringed by tear-spiked black lashes.

Poseur, Keefe thought, then dismissed the idea. Garven's animosity had rubbed off on him. Keefe liked Alyson. She simply lacked Celine's unstudied naturalness. Or maybe Celine was the *poseur* and Alyson the true innocent. The thought unexpectedly disturbed him. He dismissed it as being unworthy of them all.

"What do you think Judge Joren wants to see us about?" Celine said, patting Alyson's shoulder.

Keefe watched her swirl her black jacket over her emerald-colored sweater and caught himself before he ogled her generous breasts. Despite his usual caution with clients and witnesses, he said, "He probably wants to verify your virginity. Then he'll fuck you on his desk and time how long it takes you to recover."

Alyson gasped but Celine merely raised a brow. "The old coot," she said mildly before she retrieved her purse.

"He's still breathing."

"I don't fuck for free," she said, deliberately crude.

"Not even for a friend?" he said, watching Alyson instead of Celine. He heard the girl mutter something that sounded like, "You don't fuck at all."

"Not even for a friend." Celine sounded cold but her hands trembled before she rested them again on pale Alyson's shoulders.

Keefe silently bet Celine would change her mind if the judge demanded that Alyson replace her on Joren's desk. And for a moment he wondered if *he* had *paid* Celine would

she have shared his bed? That thought led him back to Celine's almost constant harping that even now men thought of surrogates as whores.

Did he?

How the hell had things gotten so out of hand?

Chapter Two

June 2224

On the final stroke of midnight all the lights in the ballroom went out.

"Damn lightning bugs have gone on strike again," the host complained in an injured tone heard throughout the great house.

"Nonsense, Peter," the hostess contradicted sweetly, her voice carrying as far as her husband's. "As usual, you refused to pay them overtime so, as usual, they've quit for the evening."

Major Peter made no reply. A second or two later the orchestra began to play an old-Earth tune that coaxed the glowworms out of hiding. They cast their blinking golden lights in various locations and the murmur of the guests' conversations rose to their previous levels.

A group of men stood near one of the bars placed strategically around the huge room. One said to his nearest companion, "Who's that girl?" He gestured with his brandy snifter toward two young women who seemed enchanted by the glowworms' courtships.

"I don't know who the dark one is but the blonde's called Alyson. She's one of those Venusian sex surrogates Major Peter invites to all his parties." Wyatt's sneer added derogatory emphasis to the statement.

"Best stay clear of that one, Garven. Wyatt here says she gave him a severe case of the clap." Ryan chuckled and slapped Wyatt's shoulder. "No offense, old boy."

"Bull," said Keefe, dismissing the blonde and eyeing the dark-haired woman. "Venusian women can't contract any kind of sexual disease, let alone pass it on."

"Says who?" Wyatt's tone left no doubt he thought Keefe a liar.

"The Galaxy Surgeon General, for one."

"Hah! A woman and a Martian at that."

"Marsienne," Keefe corrected, his gaze never wavering. He wondered why he found the pixie-like point of the woman's ear so intriguing.

"What's the difference?" Garven said, looking at Keefe with interest.

"An old-Earth distinction, one insisted upon by Mars' ambassador. He knew Earth's leaders were expecting little green men with antennae for ears and squid-like appendages."

"Good God," said Ryan, signaling for another drink.

"Whatever," Wyatt said dismissively. "You still ought to stay clear of Alyson. She's nothing but a whore." With that, he stalked off.

"Sounds like Wyatt bears a grudge," Ryan observed.

"I'd still like to meet her," Garven said, his gaze returning to Alyson.

"Do it through the Venusian Guild," Keefe advised. "And have a plausible reason for needing a sex surrogate." He felt disinclined to reveal his own interest in the brunette. Garven sometimes poached on another's territory.

"Can't I just introduce myself?"

"Venusian custom requires a formal introduction by someone the woman trusts. Which is probably why Wyatt's shorts are pinching his balls."

"Huh?"

"He probably tried to pick up Alyson and she took umbrage."

Ryan leaned toward his two companions and lowered his voice. "I heard Wyatt got a little rough with her, grabbed her shoulders and shook her. The next thing he remembers was that dark-haired Amazon glaring at him. He said his hands felt burned to the bones and he peed in his pants. One of his lady friends told me he couldn't get a hard-on for over a month."

"Jonathan Jacob Jones!" Garven said, turning pale.

"Be careful," Keefe said, wondering how in the galaxy he could get an introduction to Alyson's friend. He'd always liked women with an edge.

Maybe he'd go to the Guild himself.

* * * * *

"Come in, Mr. Keefe. I'm sorry to have kept you waiting." Celine motioned the tall, impeccably but oddly dressed man to her barrel-back visitor's chair, then went to her own chair behind her desk.

Her prospective client seemed to prefer twenty-first-century clothing and had chosen a shirt that was the color of the Caribbean, black slacks and neon blue sneakers. The style was casual but fit his wide shoulders and narrow hips like they'd been tailored especially for him.

To her surprise, he waited until she sat before sitting. Innate good manners or merely putting his best foot forward? she wondered, noting he had to squint against the bright morning sunlight beaming directly into his eyes. It gave her the opportunity to test those old-world manners and size him up. It also meant she could not discern the color of his eyes.

Dark hair, a little too long, capped a nicely shaped head. His dark brows slashed his high forehead and long black lashes shaded his eyes where they rested along the tops of sculpted cheekbones. An arrogant nose and chiseled lips completed a face most women would consider breath stealing. In no aspect was he a man in need of a sex surrogate.

"I didn't mind waiting, Directress Celine. Your waiting room is very comfortable."

Horse pucky, she almost said. The parson's bench was no more than fifteen inches deep, the horsehair cushion slippery. But his voice, a deep baritone and sort of raspy, melted over her skin like butter on toast, ending her compunction to express her doubts and tell him her real title.

Manners, plus one point. Looks and voice, minus one each. Sleeping while she deliberately kept him waiting? Minus three. She'd played the waiting game with countless potential clients and none of them had ever fallen asleep before.

"How may I help you, Mr. Keefe?"

Holding up his hand, he stood and moved the chair a foot to his left. Then he sort of stood-squatted before sitting down again. "That's better. Now we can both see."

Blue, she thought. His eyes were the color of the Caribbean, a deep aquamarine rather than sky blue. Catching herself staring into his eyes, feeling like she could sink into their depths, she folded her hands on her desk and cleared her throat.

"Mr. Keefe? Your reason for coming to the Venusian Guild?" Adding emphasis to the question, she glanced at her watch.

"Before you begin questioning me, Celine, I must confess I'm here on a friend's behalf."

Get up, she thought. *Show him the door*. She hadn't given him permission to eliminate her title, fallacious though it was, or to use her first name. Sex surrogates had to be especially careful about overly familiar men. Which, given their occupation, seemed an oxymoron.

Instead, she sat motionless, curious to know why his supposed *friend* needed a surrogate. She'd heard so many stories about *friends* that she usually shut down the interview at that point. If a man couldn't be honest with himself about his own sexuality, the Guild couldn't help him.

"Why isn't your friend here on his own behalf?"

"He's shy." Leaning forward, he braced a muscular forearm on her desk and said, "He's about to propose to a young woman and expects they'll engage in a little premarital hanky-panky."

"And that's a problem because...?" She met his eyes.

A hot blue gaze caressed her face, her breasts. She felt like a solar wind had swept through the room, leaving her breathless and hotter than she'd ever felt in her life. This man definitely did not need a surrogate but she still didn't believe in his *friend*.

Desperately needing her next breath, she swallowed carefully and leaned back in her chair. She wanted to run from the room and hide in the depths of the Guild's wine cellar. Reminding herself she was an adult, a sex surrogate for Goddess' sake, did nothing to relieve her growing panic. She hadn't felt this afraid for nearly three years.

As if he too needed space, he leaned back in his chair. Studying his hands, or so it seemed to her, he said, "I think you should meet him. My friend," he added, looking up and obviously seeing her frown. "It's only fair."

Goddess, if she never heard another fairness speech it would be too soon. Still, she might have misjudged him. If he wanted her to meet his friend, maybe Keefe hadn't lied.

"Since he's shy, perhaps we could get a group together. Garven always feels more comfortable in small groups."

"A group," Celine repeated, her horse pucky alarm going off in her head.

"Small groups, Celine. Say a group of four."

"Four." Leaning forward, risking going up in flames beneath his intense blue gaze, she said, "Are you suggesting a date, Mr. Keefe?"

He blinked and turned a lovely shade of sienna. "I suppose. If it makes you more comfortable to think it's a date..." He shrugged.

"Do you have a more appropriate word?"

"Well, we could pretend you and I are lovers who want our best friends to share in our...in our... Could you let me off the hook? Please."

His boyish grin flashed twin dimples in his cheeks. She laughed. She couldn't help it. Charm seldom worked on her but his did.

"Before I agree to a little get-together, I'll need more information about your friend's—Garven's?—taste in women."

For the first time Keefe seemed uncomfortable, a subtle shift of his wide shoulders, a tensed hand over his knee, an infinitesimal narrowing of his eyes. One corner of his mouth lifted, as if he apologized for being caught off-guard.

"I guess I thought—"

"That I have only one best friend?" Where had her good sense gone? This interview had nothing to do with her, for the Goddess' sake.

"'Best' does seem to suggest one," he countered, seeming at ease once more.

"Mr. Keefe, will you describe—*can* you describe—Garven's ideal woman?"

Once more his hot blue eyes seared her.

Goddess, she thought, *deliver me from this man*. She had lost her mind since he first started to flirt with her. She seldom flirted with men she dated and never flirted with potential clients—hers or any other surrogate's.

Keefe cleared his throat, drawing her attention back to him. "Garven—"

"Wait!" Raising a hand, she stopped Keefe in mid-declaration. "You may be familiar with the term transference." He nodded. "What the surrogate wants most is for her client to learn how to please his lover and himself. What she wants least is for her client to think he's in love with *her*."

"It's a delicate balance, Mr. Keefe. My primary role is matching the client to a surrogate who is attractive to him but not too attractive. So, rather than describing physical attributes, tell me what personality traits Garven likes in a woman."

He thought for a moment then said, "I've only met his young woman once. She works on Pluto as a medical researcher."

"Intelligence." Celine made a note.

"She didn't talk much but she and Garven held hands a lot. Garven hasn't said but I think he thinks she's a virgin."

"Uh-huh. Doesn't mind physical contact but may be innocent, sexually speaking. Is Garven sexually inexperienced?"

"Jove, no!"

She glanced up and saw that Keefe was blushing again.

"The problem is that Garven's never been intimate with a virgin."

"I see." She wanted to ask if Keefe shared Garven's sexual expertise and was attracted to *her*. She smothered the impulse. She found Keefe far too attractive for her own peace of mind. Besides, she hadn't taken on a client in more than three years, hadn't even dated or used any of the Guild's droids to relieve her sexual needs. Maybe, hopefully, her attraction to Keefe merely reflected her need to get laid.

"Do you think you can help my friend?"

"Me personally, Mr. Keefe?" She couldn't resist teasing him. Or was she flirting with him?

"Definitely not you, Celine." His remarkable eyes stroked her face and that cold place inside her seemed to crack, leaving heat and lust in its wake.

Striving to regain her professionalism, she said, "I believe the Guild can help your friend. And I agree, given Garven's shyness, we should meet in less clinical surroundings."

"I find these surroundings very comfortable."

"Would your friend also find them comfortable, Mr. Keefe?"

His dimples flashed. "No. Shall we pick up you and your friend here? Say at seven this Saturday evening?"

"We'll meet you."

"All right. The transpoport at *Chez Marianne*."

"Will you tell your friend why we're meeting, Mr. Keefe?" If she maintained the illusion of formality, perhaps she could get rid of these aberrant, sexual feelings.

"Given Garven's shyness I prefer we play the part of lovers, Celine. That way our 'get-together' won't seem like a blind date."

Not knowing what to say to that she said nothing and headed for the door.

He caught her hand and, standing, raised it to his lips. Mesmerized by his eyes on her face, feeling like a rabbit with a raptor descending upon it, she stood perfectly still. Could he feel her trembling? Did he know that her legs felt unable to support her and that his touch made her want to lead him upstairs to her private quarters? Could he see that in her eyes? Did he realize that his scent, mint and something she couldn't identify, drove her crazy with need?

"Do you mind being touched, Celine?" His voice sounded husky, the promise of a thousand delights.

Willing her voice not to shake, she said, "If I minded being touched, Mr. Keefe, I wouldn't be a surrogate." There, that should remind him this was simply business for her. It should also remind her.

He chuckled then placed a gentle kiss on her palm. "Until Saturday," he murmured and released her hand.

She folded her fingers over her palm as if folding in his kiss. "Until Saturday," she repeated then showed him out.

Closing the front door, she leaned against it. The man definitely did not require a surrogate. *But*, an insidious little voice asked, *did he want one?*

Did he want her?

* * * * *

Descending the wide stone steps, Keefe restrained the urge to whistle. The interview had gone better than he'd expected, although at a couple of points he thought she would throw him out. But she hadn't, he silently celebrated as he swung a leg over his motorcycle and started the engine.

He felt the vibration against his balls, felt his half-erect cock swell. Jove! He'd been semi-hard the whole time he'd spent with her. That hadn't happened to him since he was a randy teenager.

Did she realize that her eyes, those incredible green eyes, told stories she might never tell? They spoke of a vulnerability her outward composure denied. Maybe that's why he was drawn to her, beyond the fact that he wanted to fuck her senseless.

Jove, he admired the gentle sway of her hips when she led him into her office, loved the way her calves flexed in her high heels, the way her jacket nipped in at her slender waist and gaped when she sat, revealing the slope of her chest and the rise of her breasts above the scooped neckline of her dress. He wanted to feel her hair—those ebony curls that caressed her shoulders—all over his body.

When she ended the interview and he stood at her side, he appreciated again her height and how perfectly their bodies would fit. More, he enjoyed the slight flush that tinged her cheeks, the confusion in her eyes, the cool but husky timber of her voice when she responded to his question.

Do you mind being touched, Celine?

How long had it been since a man had touched her, not as a surrogate but as a woman? She might know everything about pleasure but he doubted she knew much about passion. Something about her remained innocent. Like her light floral scent—virginal.

He wanted more than fucking, he thought as he steered the powerful motorcycle away from the curb. He wanted to make love to her, watch her eyes darken with passion, feel her body sing to the melody his body played for her and only her.

Jonathan Jacob Jones, he was half in love with her already, so dazzled by her that he hadn't even asked who she intended to bring with her Saturday night. Garven would probably blacken both Keefe's eyes if Celine brought anyone but Alyson.

Keefe didn't care. He intended to seduce Celine and take her to bed as soon as possible.

Could the student teach the teacher? He intended to find out.

* * * * *

July 4, 2224

Celine shaded her eyes with her hand and tried to see what Garven and Alyson were doing. They had swum out to the deck in the middle of the lake and appeared to be smearing sunscreen all over each other's bodies—even places each could reach without help.

Feeling something icy cold hit the base of her neck, Celine yelped.

"You're turning red," Keefe explained, rubbing sunscreen over her shoulders and up her nape. He massaged more than rubbed, his skillful fingers doing their part in raising her temperature.

Her swimming suit straps slid off her shoulders. Her top sagged to her waist. She yelped again. Trying to put her top where it belonged, she felt Keefe's lips on her back, kissing and licking up and down her spine.

"Keefe," she protested through a breathy little laugh.

"You don't want a tan line."

"I don't?"

"Nuh-uh. Relax."

"Can't. Garven and Alyson—"

"Are doing exactly what they should be doing. The children," he murmured, his breath tickling her ear, "are fine. I, however, am in need of a full body hug."

He pulled her top out of her hands then kissed his way from her waist to her breasts. He lapped her nipple, blew on it until it puckered and she arched into his greedy mouth.

"This isn't hugging, Keefe."

"These gorgeous twins don't seem to mind. You have the most sensitive breasts I've ever had the pleasure of touching."

"You're...not...supposed to be...ahh...touching."

"Mmm." If he said anything else, her breast in his mouth smothered it.

He held her breast in one hand. With the other he caressed her side, her arm, her fingers.

Goddess, what he could do to her with his lightest touch, with his lips! She wanted him in her, buried to his balls then sliding inch by inch even deeper. But...

"Stop thinking," he ordered, sliding up her body and nuzzling her neck. Arms around her, he pressed their bodies together. His body felt hot. Hot from the sun, hot from his own internal heat, hot from her. His chest hairs felt silky against her breasts. She ran her fingertips over his shoulders, up his sides, delighting in the texture of his skin, the way his muscles flexed and bunched under her hands.

He slid his knee between her legs and rubbed it against her mons. Every ounce of restraint, of embarrassment, flew out of her mind. She tugged down his swim trunks and took his tumescence in her hand. Even his cock was hot and leaked hot precum along her thigh.

"Gods, I've wanted you to hold me like this for weeks!"

His tongue parted her lips and teased them open. She took him in then rode his knee until her body seemed to fly apart. He pumped his hips and spilled his cum over her fingers.

Splashing and laughter made them jerk apart. Keefe handed her the top to her swimsuit, then pulled up his trunks. He grinned down at her and shifted his balls and cock, still half erect under the shiny blue fabric.

"Garven's timing has always sucked. And this," he pointed to his cock, "is what happens when a man has waited five weeks for only partial relief."

Celine sighed and imagined penciling in yet another appointment with her vibrator. She wouldn't—absolutely would *not*—give in to any more unprofessional behavior. She was Alyson's chaperone! But damn, she was tired of cold plastic!

* * * * *

September 9, 2224

Keefe placed the ice cold beer can against Celine's nape, delighted by her shiver.

"Brrr," she said then flipped two dozen steaks and what looked to Keefe like a gross of sausages and hot dogs. She wiggled her hips in time to the reggae music some of the droids, surrogates and other humans were playing. She knew just how to make him hot without seeming to get hot herself—an attitude he both admired and loathed.

Reaching over her shoulder, she took the beer can and rolled it across her sweat-damp forehead, down her neck and over her chest. He stared at her breasts in the modest but tantalizing halter top and watched her nipples pucker. He wished his nearness had cause that response but suspected the cold can had done it.

The woman was driving him crazy! All he could think about was how easily he could strip away her shorts, unhook her halter, lay her down on the grass and make her beg him to fuck her. Well, he could get her naked easily. As for the rest... Hell, he'd been trying to get her prone for two months and hadn't gotten anywhere near what had happened the Fourth of July. She'd barely let him kiss her.

He'd hoped today would change his luck. But with close to a hundred people running around all over the Guild House and grounds, Lady Luck had fled to quieter surroundings. Celine seemed totally content while Keefe's balls felt like they'd explode if he didn't get her into bed. Soon.

"Are all these people ever going home?" he said, watching Alyson, Garven and a dozen or so droids carry laden trays to the serving tables set up on the flagstone terrace.

"Yes, all you people will go home. Eventually. This is the one day all summer staff gets to play."

"Yeah, while you work your gorgeous ass off."

"Thank you but I don't mind. Cooking for the surrogates and also the culinary arts students keeps my culinary skills sharp."

“What about your surrogacy skills? You don’t seem to want to keep them sharp. Or is it just me you don’t want to have sex with?”

She didn’t even look at him. Inching away, she waved her tongs and invited the crowd to come forward. Despite his interest in Celine and sex, Keefe’s stomach growled. Someone had opened the foil surrounding a half-dozen pork roasts and their succulent aroma mixed with those of the other barbecuing meats. After the enormous breakfast Celine had served him, he’d expected he’d never be hungry again. For food, at any rate. He was still hungry for the gorgeous chef with ebony ringlets escaping from her flirty ponytail and curling around her flushed, pink-tipped pixie ears.

Those fascinating ears, he’d learned over the last three months, told more about her mood than a barometer did about the weather. They never glowed unless she was aroused. He just wished he could learn whether that flush meant she was angry or wanted sex as much as he did.

Garven, who was getting enough sex for himself and a dozen more—Jove blast him!—handed Keefe a plate. With a fulminating glare at Celine’s back, Keefe stalked away to stand in line for meat, for a warm smile from the chef, for...something more. Any sign that would tell him how Celine felt about him.

Or was he just wasting his time?

Around midnight Keefe said, “I think I’ve finally figured out why your droids came to this party.”

He and Celine were sitting on a double-wide *chaise longue* and studiously trying not to touch. Someone inside the house had turned off all the lights, leaving a million stars as the only illumination. If he squinted, Keefe could just make out the crescent curve of the new moon.

“Hmmm?”

“Yeah. I noticed them pairing off with some of the surrogates. Isn’t that like...a busman’s holiday?”

"Even droids and surrogates need company. Who understands better what we—*they*—do, what they need and want than someone who shares their lives on a daily basis? And sometimes we have female clients who want to learn how to please their lovers or—sometimes—indulge in their own fantasies. Fantasies they're too shy to ask for at home."

"Hmmm."

Celine slanted him a small smile. "What?"

"Double standard. I got the impression your male clients don't get to indulge in fantasies."

She chuckled. "Having a surrogate *is* a fantasy, Keefe. When a man goes to his wife or lover or both, he knows he can make her want him in all the ways he wants her to want him. In my book, they both fulfill their fantasies."

"What about you? Do you have fantasies you'd like fulfilled?"

"Plenty of them. I even fantasize about you sometimes."

"Tell me," he demanded, feeling his cock swell with anticipation.

"Nope."

"Why not?"

"Because my telling you would be unfair. I don't intend to have sex with you, Keefe. No matter how much I want you, I will not make—I won't go to bed with you."

Keefe sighed then laced his fingers through hers. "You won't mind if I try to change your mind, will you?"

"It's your time. If you want to waste it, who am I to complain?"

Raising their linked hands, he kissed hers. "Then prepare to be besieged."

Laughing, she said, "Prepare to be withstood."

* * * * *

October 31, 2224

Halloween arrived and Celine felt herself growing more and more tense. Halloween used to be her favorite holiday. She'd loved selecting a theme for the house decorations and helping all its inhabitants decide on their costumes. Now everything had become a dreaded chore, one she hated.

Still, directing the staff and decorators kept the memories of that Halloween three years ago at bay. With everything in orderly chaos, she frowned when Alyson came into her office and without preamble said, "He calls his penis Uncle Doodle." Then she burst into tears and collapsed on the settee.

Celine's laughter died as she rushed to Alyson's side. Not knowing what to do for her sobbing friend, she hunkered down and took Alyson's hands. That only made the younger woman cry harder.

Desperate, Celine retreated to her desk and handed Alyson a full box of tissues. Sitting beside the girl, she eased Alyson against her and just let her cry.

At last, Alyson straightened, wiped her eyes and blew her nose. Still looking miserable, she shrugged and smiled wanly. "Sorry."

"That's okay. Do you want to talk about it?"

Alyson's delft blue eyes filled with new tears but she brushed them away and nodded. She drew a shaky breath then blurted, "Garven said he loves me! What kind of man is he? He has a fiancée, for Goddess' sake!"

Celine bit her tongue to hold back her suspicions about Garven's supposed bride-to-be. "I think what's important here is how you feel about him."

Unheeded, more tears spilled down Alyson's cheeks. "Goddess help me, I love him too."

"Goddess help us all," Celine muttered.

"What?"

"Have you told Garven how you feel? Not only that you love him but how you feel about...about him declaring himself when he's already declared himself?"

Or something like that, she thought when Alyson looked at her blankly.

"He hasn't given me a chance to think let alone talk to him. Every time we see each other, kiss hello—" She shrugged and went back to drying her eyes with a soggy tissue.

"Alyson, you didn't—"

Alyson looked down then nodded miserably. "I gave him my true virginity."

"Jonathan Jacob Jones!" Celine fumed, borrowing Keefe's favorite swearwords and imagining his neck between her hands. None of this should have happened because Garven and Alyson were perfect for each other.

Goddess! Deliver me from fools and lovers. And run-on sentences!

Chapter Three

January 2225

The next morning, Keefe and Celine stood side by side in Judge Joren's chambers. They glanced at each other then looked straight ahead. They'd become two wary strangers sharing a tumbrel on the way to their beheading.

Judge Joren wasted no time in apprising them of his ruling. "Miss Celine will submit herself to Dr. Jaap there," he nodded at a dark corner of his chamber, "and allow, willingly allow his gynecological examination of her —"

"Vagina," the doctor provided in a medically superior voice. He emerged from the shadows into a faint outside light supplied by a single window.

His height was average, his hairline receding, his mud-brown eyes muddy. A hawkish nose dominated his otherwise unremarkable face. Like Michaels, he wore a suit somewhere between green and brown, rumpled and seedy-looking — a far cry from what one expected in a galaxy-renowned gynecologist. Keefe found himself staring at the doctor's hands and praying they were clean.

"*Virgo intacta* state," the judge corrected, his own voice equally pompous.

"And after?" Celine asked as if she couldn't care less.

"She — *You* will make yourself available for *seduction*," he stressed, "by either or both counsels. *I* will ensure there is no conflict of interest issues."

"My fee for seduction —"

"Will be paid at the minimum rate. It's your pubic, er, public duty."

She bowed her head, seeming to accept Joren's proclamation, but Keefe saw her fingers tighten with rebellion. He tried not to cringe at the memory of what those hands could do, then looked at Judge Joren.

The judge also had seen what she could do with those delicate-seeming hands. Yet he stood his ground and glared at the fall of ebony curls that hid her face and thoughts.

At last she raised her head. "You, Judge Joren, must name the first of my would-be seducers."

The wily old fox let his gaze drift between the two attorneys. "Keefe," he said, his gray eyes focused on Michaels.

"Objection!" Celine and Michaels shouted in unison.

"Overruled!"

"She fancies him," Michaels said, his voice reasonable but his expression furious.

"Exactly. Which means she'll fight harder to resist him. On the other hand, you'd have no difficulty getting her into bed. She'd want to get it over with as quickly as possible." *And who would blame her?* hung in the air, unspoken but heard nonetheless.

"What's the point, Judge?" said Celine.

"To prove Mr. Garven's claim that even sex surrogates can be compromised."

"How does Miss Celine's seduction prove or disprove that claim?" Keefe wanted to punch Judge Joren's bulbous nose but shoved his hands into his pants pockets instead.

"We'll all find out together." Joren's wide grin showed the ridges of his gums. He took Celine's hand and patted it. "Run along now and pack something seductive."

"Right!" she snapped. "How long is my sentence?"

Joren's smile widened. "I think a week should do it. And no regeneration," he cautioned. "We don't want to make this harder, er, more difficult for Mr. Keefe than is absolutely necessary."

"Fuck!" Keefe muttered.

"Exactly!" Joren made a shooin' gesture and herded them to the door. "My clerk has Dr. Jaap's address. Go on now. No dawdling. Your incarceration starts as soon as the good doctor finishes his examination."

"Oh joy! Do I get a sentence reduction for good behavior?"

"Not one second. Unless you get really creative."

"How will we know," Keefe said, "if we've been really creative?"

"Miss Celine will know."

The judge turned away. Celine stuck out her tongue at him then turned bright red when she found Keefe staring at her. He looked solemn enough but his Caribbean-colored eyes sparkled with suppressed laughter.

* * * * *

Two hours later, Celine wanted nothing more than a shower and a day of solitude. But first she had to get rid of a lurking Dr. Jaap and find her clothes.

Clutching the green silk bed jacket his nurse had provided—no disposable plastic for this renowned gynecologist—she slid off the exam table. *To hell with modesty*, she thought, wrapping the matching silk sheet around her hips and glaring at the doctor and his nurse.

Go! she thought.

The nurse jumped like the doctor had goosed her. The doctor frowned but opened the door. Finally!

"It's been a pleasure," he said, leering at Celine.

"Not for me," she said and gave him a mental shove that spun him outside the room. Another thought slammed the door in his face and locked it.

"Thank you, Goddess," she muttered, sweeping off the offensive sheet and jacket and dumping them into the cleaning bin. She hoped the bin would never get out the wrinkles.

She took several deep breaths to rid herself of anger, then looked around for her clothes. Somebody had taken them! Rage swept through her and she raced to the door, modesty forgotten.

"Looking for these?" asked a voice laced with amusement.

She spun around and saw Keefe standing in a doorway that hadn't existed seconds earlier. Like every woman since Eve, her first impulse was to hide her breasts and mons from his lazy inspection. Her second impulse had her hands dropping to her sides and her spine stiffening.

Look your fill, she thought, strolling to him and lifting a bustier and bikini panties off his fingers.

"Where's my suitcase?" she said, forcing serenity into her voice.

He shrugged, drawing her gaze to wide shoulders. Naked shoulders above a wide chest with silky-looking dark curls between his nipples. Those curls directed her attention down, over washboard abs to what resembled a tiny jockstrap. It barely held him and seemed to shrink when his cock twitched. On the Fourth of July she had tried to ignore his overwhelming masculinity. Today she could not.

"Involuntary response to a naked...a beautiful naked lady."

"Likewise," Celine said, wishing her hardening nipples would vanish.

Keefe stepped back and half-bowed. She frowned at him but curiosity apparently got the better of her. She strode passed him, affording him time to enjoy the view of her backside. She had a swimmer's body, sculpted rather than heavily muscled. Her shoulders veed into a narrow waist, gently curved hips and firm buttocks. Her legs, long and slender, seemed to go on forever, yet she was perfectly proportioned, like the goddess whose name her home planet bore. Venusian women were reputedly the most beautiful in the universe and Celine seemed the most beautiful of all.

"If you think me too skinny, I can add a few pounds," she said, not looking at him.

"Not necessary, thanks. I wonder, however, if you can do something about our clothes? Our lack thereof, I mean."

"No. Unfortunately I can deal only with animate objects." She worried her lush lower lip then said, "I take it these are all we have?"

"In every color possible. The judge's imagination lacks breadth."

"Goddess help me! A split crotch!"

"But it's long in lasciviousness," Keefe added, unable to stop his laugh.

Her rich contralto joined his. They looked at each other, surprise mirrored by each others' eyes. Their laughter faded.

"Is there a shower?" Her voice carefully polite, she seemed focused on the carpet.

"Only a tub for two engaged in vigorous activity."

"I guess that'll have to do. I need to wash away his stench."

"I take it Dr. Jaap is aptly named?"

"Let's just say he wouldn't mind supplanting you and leave it at that. Food?"

"Oysters up the... There's a replicater. I'll see if I can scare a couple of steaks out of it."

"*Pommes frites* too, please. Extra crispy and salty. Oh and lots of ketchup and garlic aioli."

Shuddering, he said, "For the steaks?"

Her gem-bright gaze drifted over him and heated when it reached his crotch. "Hopefully your imagination's broader than the judge's," she said. Looking up, she winked and strolled out of the room.

His cock throbbed. "Down, boy," he muttered then wondered who the hell was seducing whom?

* * * * *

The bathroom was a sybarite's dream. The walls of pale marble with a pinkish cast gave Celine's olive-tone complexion an ethereal glow. The floor looked cold but felt warm under her bare feet. Towels, thick-napped and soft to the touch, hung on a towel warmer. She took one, so black it looked like a starless, moonless night, and shook it out. Opened completely, it easily could hold both Keefe and her. Shaking her head, she vowed not to think about him.

The commode had its own private area shared only with a bidet. Celine refused to think about the bidet's purpose and stared, instead, at the bathtub. As Keefe had said, it was huge. It might even hold a water polo match.

The only luxury missing was a shower.

Celine had prayed for a cold shower to bring her senses under her control. She had to settle for a warm, too warm, bath. The computer-driven tub disallowed her request for plain cold water but magnanimously offered a choice of scents. It even provided brief sample sprays of rose, lavender, lilac and an overwhelming variety of perfumes.

Giving up arguing with the disembodied voice that sounded suspiciously like Dr. Jaap at his oiliest, she chose *Sin*. She eased into water that smelled pleasantly of apple and cinnamon with an underlying hint of musk.

Damnation, she thought, *I'm not a pie for Keefe to eat!* But her body found the image of Keefe's dark head between her thighs irresistible. Her own juices seeped into the scented water. Wavelets, gentle as a lover's tongue, lapped at her nether lips. She spread her legs, welcoming the persistent watery probe.

Goddess, please, don't let me... The prayer went unanswered. Her breasts swelled. Her nipples hardened, responding to the matching wavelets that caressed them like a lover's fingers. Her legs opened wider and she took the gently probing water into her. All the while, she imagined Keefe piercing her, destroying her conjured hymen and rupturing her true one.

She struggled against the unwanted images but they swamped her. Wave after wave of pleasure stormed through her and left her limp.

"Hey! You okay in here?" Keefe came through the bathroom door, the door she would swear she'd locked. "Jove! You look like you've been ravished and had a damn fine time."

"Jove?" she echoed sleepily. "Ravished?"

"All right, fucked."

"What are you doing?" She sat up abruptly, expecting water to slosh over the sides of the tub. But the tub had disappeared or had transmuted itself into a wide, satin-covered exam table.

"Let me down, damn it!" She squeezed her eyes closed and muttered, "I am not on an examining table. I am not suspended in the air.

"Keefe, damn you, get me down from here!"

"Can't," he said, his voice choked with laughter.

"*Merde!* This thing is shrinking. And growing legs."

"I believe Dr. Jaap would call them stirrups."

"Damn!" She tried to bat away the mechanical hands but, afraid of falling off her precarious perch, could only yell for help. To no avail. When the cursed metal fingers closed around her ankles and forced her feet into the cold stirrups, she shrieked a protest and gave up.

"Interesting view," Keefe said.

Celine opened one eye then grunted at this newest embarrassment. Her torso, especially that part of her she'd once thought of as her working end, was suspended even with Keefe's mouth.

"Do something," she pleaded, flinging her arms over her blush-heated face.

Gentle metal fingers took her hands, pressed them against padded arm rests and strapped them down. She realized her back support consisted of more satin padding, padding that molded her, arched her back and presented her breasts like twin melons ripe for Keefe's picking.

"I'll give Doc credit. His imagination is a helluva lot better than the judge's."

"Chair?" a sexy female voice purred.

"Goddess-cursed computer," Celine said, her voice dripping venom.

"Think I'll stand for now. Thanks anyway."

"Now what are you doing?" Celine closed her eyes and tried to will away the memory of her fantasy about Keefe.

Keefe, testing her resolve, waited to answer. At last he said, "I'm trying to decide which part of you I want to taste first. Here, perhaps?" He stroked her nipples and chuckled when they puckered and seemed to beg for more attention.

"Or here?" He nuzzled her neck then nipped her earlobe. He laved the pointed tip when she moaned softly and arched her neck. "Maybe here." He brushed his lips over hers then groaned. Her lips felt softer than silk, more welcome than the first bite of the most forbidden fruit. More than he wanted her tongue in his mouth, he wanted her juices as his first taste of her.

As if he'd spoken the wish aloud, the stirrups spread her feet until she couldn't hold her knees together. She lay still as death but he saw her pulse pounding at her wrists and ankles. He breathed with her rapid, shallow gasps, inhaled her scent—that combination of fruit and woman that had enthralled him since he first entered the room.

"Chair," he muttered. One appeared and bumped gently at the backs of his knees. He sat and discovered that Celine still lay level with his mouth. With trembling hands he parted the silky curls and touched his tongue to her clit.

She tried to jerk away but the chair-bed held her firmly in place. He licked again then sipped the juices from her womb. Moaning, she surged upward, pressing his face against her.

"Oh Goddess, don't," she pleaded, her passionate voice contradicting the words and her undulating body.

She wants this, someone whispered to him in Celine's voice. She wants you!

"Touch my breasts, Keefe. Please. Eat me, eat me. Eat me!" she screamed and he gladly plunged his tongue deeper, tasting her juices, swallowing them as if he could take her convulsing body into his mouth.

"God, you're hot." He burrowed his nose into her opening and inhaled her. "You smell hot." He lapped at her, ignored her sighed protest and heeded only her irresistible scent and taste. "Taste hot, hot, hot. Come for me, Cel. Let me have your cum in my mouth again.

"Yes!" Stroking her clit, he eased his tongue into her. Her core seemed to tighten around his tongue and she bucked, sobbing his name until her voice faded completely.

He looked up and found her gazing at him from the bathtub, her eyes sated, her smile helpless.

"Wow," she said, yawning.

"What the hell just happened?" His voice rasped in his throat, more growl than words. His hands shook as he tore the towel he carried into ragged ribbons. He didn't remember picking the damn thing off the warming rack.

The bathtub elevated her, then tipped her upright until they stood toe to toe, glaring at each other.

"What did you *do* to me?" she shouted, so furious he almost could see smoke spewing out her ears.

"What did you do to *me*?" he yelled, his fury matching hers.

She stepped back then clutched his wrist so tightly he yelped.

"Let's get out of here." At the door she commanded, "Computer, seal this room. Allow no one in."

"Okeydokey. But you'll be sorry when you need to pee."

"We'll use the kitchen sink," Keefe growled.

"Not in my lifetime," Celine hissed and punched his shoulder. Hard. "No peeing around the food. There *is* food, isn't there?"

"There was." He rubbed his aching shoulder as he led the way to the kitchen.

To Keefe the kitchen looked like his grandma's, big yet homey. Grandma hated food replicaters and loved to cook. Her kitchen, like the one here, had double ovens, a

prep island and what looked and functioned like a gas cook top. The food replicater looked like an old-fashioned microwave. In fact, the whole kitchen seemed taken from a twenty-first-century home decorating project.

"Great! Cremated steaks and limp fries."

He turned, fully expecting to see lava flowing out the top of Celine's head.

"At least the ketchup and aioli aren't ruined." She swiped her finger through each then sucked the mixture into her mouth. "Yummy. Want some?"

"No!" he shouted but couldn't help grinning back at her, even though the image of his cock replacing her fingers made him nuts.

"Think you can reconstruct dinner?"

"Don't know how I did it the first time," he confessed with a sheepish smile. His cock softened.

"Hmmm. Try thinking 'steak'," she suggested, looking hopeful.

Closing his eyes, he imagined the thickest, juiciest T-bone he'd ever eaten. All he could see was Celine's lithe body. All he could taste was her cum.

"Steak," he said but her image and taste only intensified. "You try."

"I told you I can't control inanimate objects."

"You controlled the damn bathroom computer." He sighed. "If you want to eat you'll see what you can do."

"Oysters," she said and blinked. Two dozen oysters on the half-shell appeared on a silver tray in her hands. Spicy-smelling sauce and fragrant lemons materialized on a tray on the countertop.

"Rockefeller," said Keefe.

"Maybe we have to order it exactly as we want the first time," she said when the raw oysters just sat on their half-shells.

"Okay. Oysters Rockefeller."

"Clams casino, seafood fettuccini and...lobster. Whole Maine, steamed, with lots of lemon butter and garlic butter. And Caesar salad with—"

"Lots of lemon juice and garlic."

"Are you nuts? With lots of crispy croutons and parmesan cheese, the real stuff."

"Do you have a hollow leg?" he asked wryly, watching dish after dish appear on a black-lacquer table set for two.

"I'm hungry," she said, sitting on a Chinese-red chair and picking up her fork.

"Since you're on a roll, how 'bout some—" He gestured at his body then hers.

"Clothes!" she said. "*Merde*, I'm more comfortable na—"

"Don't say it. Don't even *think* it," he warned. Focused intently on her face and trying not to look at her breasts in their barely there bra, he touched her lips with his.

"Lord love a duck!" Even that brief contact drove every thought from his brain. *Sex. I want sex, fucking, now!*

"We have to do something about that...that damn computer," he whispered.

"Right," Celine whispered back. "Computer, no more interfering."

"Not interfering. Help Celine and Keefe to fornicate."

Keefe shrugged. "At least it didn't say—"

"Don't even think it!"

"Fuck!" the computer shouted, its voice full of glee. "Help Keefe fuck Celine."

"Pipe down!" Keefe roared.

A sniff preceded absolute silence.

"I think you made her—it—cry."

"Maybe tears will rust its voice box closed."

"You're a hard man, Mr. Keefe."

"Look, lady, I know you're pissed about being here. I know you blame me for everything that's happened since Garven and Alyson met—because of me. But I

consider myself a gentleman. I usually don't get close to fu—to having sex until I've dated a woman for a couple of weeks."

"Fourteen days or fourteen dates?" Considering herself heroic for not reminding him they'd *dated* for months without sex, Celine folded her arms across her chest and glared at him.

"I don't know. Either. Both. What difference does it make?"

"We only have a week, Keefe. One week, seven days, one-hundred sixty-eight hours, waking or sleeping or...fornicating. I have a feeling your lascivious judge won't let us out of here until we've completed our—"

"Homework?" Keefe suggested, dipping lobster into butter and popping it into his mouth. "What's your point?"

Frowning, she muttered, "Computer, may I have a pen and some paper?"

"Hmph!" it said but complied.

"Thank you," Celine said, looking into the shadows behind Keefe.

"What are you doing?"

"Making a list. What do you usually do on these dates of yours? Something different from what we did on our non-date dates."

"Swim, play tennis, take in a pro game or two. Wine, dine and... Well, you get the idea. How 'bout you?"

"I don't date." All right, she'd dated Keefe. Sort of. More chaperoning than dating. For all the good she'd done! Alyson and Garven had behaved like rabbits and all Celine had gotten were dates with her vibrator. By her own choice but still...

"What about Fourth of July?"

"That was one of those 'small groups' Garven supposedly prefers."

"You and Alyson act like perpetual virgins," he sniped, not knowing where the thought came from or why he felt irritated.

"Virtual virgins at any rate." She wiped her lips then gulped a glass of wine. "In your dating scheme, when do you get to the first kiss?"

"Depends on the woman. *Usually* by the third date but sometimes not until the fifth or sixth."

"Then you go — What is that old-Earth military expression? Oh yes, Four-F."

"Pardon me?"

"You know. 'Find 'em, feel 'em, fuck 'em, forget 'em. Four-F." Standing, she threw her napkin on the table. "I'm going to bed. To sleep."

"Oh yeah? Just where do you plan on doing that?"

Turning, she gaped at the totally empty space. Even the carpet had vanished. Cold concrete offered only cold comfort.

"Computer, help!"

Finding themselves in an elegant bedroom, complete with mirrored ceilings and candlelight, they blinked at each other then shrugged.

A bed appeared, barely large enough to hold one body, let alone two.

"Two beds, please. Computer?"

"Cuddling good. Good night."

"By the Goddess, I'm going to kill that judge!"

"I might help you. Right after I destroy that computer."

Keefe suggested Celine lie down first. She did, flat on her back and leaving no room for him.

"Try lying on your side." When she complied, he slid in beside her, his back to hers. They fit, barely but couldn't move without knocking each other off the bed.

Keefe stood up then got back into bed, spooning her back to his front. At the apex of her firm buttocks his cock throbbed.

"Pardon me," he said, slipping one arm under his head and the other over her shoulder. He couldn't decide what to do with his hand. He thought he would die happy if he cupped her breast but figured he'd end up on the floor if he did.

She solved the problem for him, entwining her fingers with his and resting their joined hands on the cool satin sheets. "Necessity makes strange bedfellows," she muttered, sounding cross. "Don't make any more out of our sleeping together than that."

"Cuddling *very* good," said the computer with a happy sigh.

"Good night!" Keefe and Celine yelled together.

But as sleep descended, Keefe thought he'd missed something. Something critical. Virtual...what?

Chapter Four

Morning light filtering through jalousies made Celine open her eyes. The scents of freshly brewed coffee and frying bacon made her stretch her arms over her head and wiggle like a puppy wanting its tummy rubbed. Warm hands obliged her then closed over her breasts.

She shrieked and rolled off the edge of the bed. A bed that only a heartbeat before had seemed as wide as the ocean was now as narrow as a gymnast's balance beam.

Keefe groaned, loosened his grip on the narrow beam then joined her on the thick carpet. Glaring his displeasure at this rude awakening, he got to his feet.

Celine ignored his offered hand, stood and surveyed her surroundings. They were now in a living room.

The excuse for a bed transmuted into a wide, pillowed divan, like something out of a sheik's palace. A low, hammered-brass table hovered a foot above the grass-colored carpet then settled in front of the divan. The pillows plumped themselves as a diner-waitress voice asked, "How'd ya want your eggs?"

"No eggs," said Celine just as Keefe ordered his sunny side up.

"Oatmeal," she said, "with raisins, brown sugar and skim —"

"Start with cereal and cream and fruit," the waitress said. "Finish with coffee, bacon, eggs — cooked how?"

Celine felt a gentle shove and fell backward onto the divan. Keefe's "oof" announced his arrival a nanosecond before he landed on top of her, his hips firmly planted against hers. His morning erection grew until it rested at her opening and a single thrust would have buried his rigid cock deep inside her.

"Oh my," she said in a breathy voice while her body – the traitor! – prepared to take him in. Every muscle in her body loosened. Her juices gushed. Her mind pleaded silently like a maiden in a medieval romance, "Take me, take me, take –"

"By the Goddess, get off me!" She'd never known a man who could make her want him this fast. Want him at all. She didn't like feeling out of control, like her body belonged to him and he could use it however he pleased.

Instead of doing as she'd ordered, he just grinned. *Asked*, she mentally corrected. She never ordered a man to do anything. She asked until he thought his gentleness, his need to please her more important than his own satisfaction, were his own ideas.

"I like it here," Keefe whispered in her ear, his breath hot and moist against her skin. "You're soft and warm. You even smell different than you did last night. Like –"

"Bacon and eggs?" she suggested. Goddess! Even her voice sounded different, breathless and wanting. Like spring rain pattering gently on a windowpane and murmuring, "I'm lonely. Come play with me. I'm warm, you're warm. Together we could be –"

"Well, hell!" He shoved himself away then plopped down next to her. The divan had shrunk until it would hold them both only if they sat thigh to thigh. "Yeah, you smell exactly like bacon and eggs."

"Protein good," the computer announced. An insubstantial wisp floated two plates above their heads then gently placed them on the table. "Give energy for fucking."

"I thought you'd decommissioned that thing," Keefe grouched.

"And I told *you* –" Biting back a nasty retort, Celine said to the lingering wisp, "Computer, do you have a name?"

The cloudlike substance dissolved then reappeared, seeming more substantial.

"Herma," said a decidedly female voice.

"Frodie," a deep basso added.

"Well, Herma and Frodie," Keefe growled.

“Good Goddess!” Celine swore, digging her fingernails into Keefe’s thigh. He jerked but didn’t yelp, for which she was grateful. “I think it’s a hermaphrodite,” she whispered to Keefe.

“Jonathan Jacob Jones!” he said, calling out his favorite swear words. “Does that mean we could tell it to fuck itself?”

“Is there a way out of here?” Celine interrupted, ignoring Keefe’s attempts at crude humor.

“Not until fucking complete,” Frodie said. “Joren order, Jaap agree.”

“Reluctantly agree,” Herma volunteered. “Not like giving up playpen for seven days, one hundred sixty-eight hours, ten thousand –”

“Got it, Herma. Thanks.”

“Keefe welcome.”

Celine looked at Keefe.

He shrugged. “Guess we might as well get it over with,” he said, raking his rumpled hair with his fingers then glancing hopefully at Celine.

She shook her head. “Judge Joren said we couldn’t leave until the week’s up. And I’m not spending the entire time on my back,” she muttered *sotto voce*.

“Triple J! Does that mean you’ll spend some of the time on your back? Does that mean we – Guess not.” He turned to the half-man, half-woman figure.

They looked like two separate people. Each had two arms and hands and each had two legs. But they were joined from their waists to their upper thighs, like conjoined twins. Herma reminded Keefe of Tinker Bell, all blonde, blue-eyed and perky. On the other hand, Frodie resembled Keefe’s idea of Heathcliff – dark-eyed, dark-haired and broody.

Herma must have her clothes made specifically for her since her long skirt flowed smoothly from her waist to mid-calf. Likewise, Frodie’s slacks didn’t bunch but fit him as well as Keefe’s own. When he had slacks to wear.

By Jove, I'm an idiot! he thought. He'd viewed them—he-she-it—like a real person when in all probability they—he settled on “they”—were nothing more than a holographic illusion.

“Well? How many times do we have to...do it?”

“Times not important to Joren,” Frodie said.

“Jaap only one think number of couplings count.” Herma giggled. “Satisfaction of partner not matter for him.”

“Sounds like Dr. Jaap could use your services, Celine,” Keefe said, chuckling.

“Ugh!” Celine shivered. “If we ever get out of here, wherever *here* is, I’m going to burn this place to the ground.”

“No!” the hermaphrodite cried in both its voices.

“Destroy us.”

“Kill us.”

“Jaap collect insurance, rebuild elsewhere.”

“Keep hurting girls.”

“What?” Celine and Keefe said together.

“Girls of age.”

“Barely.”

“Jaap use us to arouse girls.”

“Make them beg him to—”

“Gotcha.” Keefe cut off the recitation and the sickening images that flooded his brain. If these...these machines could make an experienced woman like Celine beg, Jove help those girls.

“I’m going to kill that son of a bitch. No, first I’ll castrate him and feed him his balls. *Then* I’ll kill him.”

“No, you won’t,” Keefe said, looking around.

"Pen and paper, please, Herma-Frodie," Celine said.

"Not need. We make audio record."

"Which, if we burn this place to the ground, will go up in smoke," Celine said.

"As will any written notes," said Keefe. Standing, he circled the ever-solidifying computer figure. "I sense a deal coming to the table."

"Deal? Five-Card Stud? Texas Hold 'em? Strip Poker?"

"Jonathan Jacob Jones, don't you ever give up on the sex stuff?"

Herma's voice held tears. "All we know."

"Could be reprogrammed for nobler purpose," Frodie said, sounding grim and hopeful at the same time.

"Aha!" Keefe said, turning an "I told you so" smile on Celine. "So? What do you want from us?"

"When you leave—" Herma began.

"Before burn down building," said Frodie.

"Take us with you," they said together.

Celine felt her mouth gape and closed it so fast she heard her teeth click. "I-I thought you were..." She shrugged both shoulders, her hands held palms up in helplessness.

"Built in walls we are," Frodie volunteered.

"Yes," Herma agreed, "but moveable too."

"Great! Pack yourselves up and let's blow this joint."

"Cannot," the hermaphrodite said. "You must complete sentence. Can leave in six days, twenty-two hours, thirty-one minutes. Exactly."

Time must run differently here, Celine thought then buried her face in her hands. Keefe sighed.

"Isn't there any way we can get out of here sooner?" Keefe said.

"*She* know," Frodie said accusingly.

Celine could only gape at him-her. "I don't," she protested, her voice squeaking. "I don't!"

"Cannot admit," Herma sniffed.

The statue-like figure grew fuzzy then turned misty. It finally blew away in the soft breeze wafting through the open sliding glass doors.

"Eat," the disembodied voice ordered.

"Swim," said Frodie.

Herma's giggle surrounded them. "Cuddle." The plates, silverware and napkins settled on their laps. Steam rose, wafting scents of sizzling bacon and still-hot eggs to their nostrils.

"I didn't realize I was so hungry," Celine said, biting into a strip of perfectly cooked bacon, crisp but not burned. Just the way she liked it. She cut into the omelet and discovered buttery, lemony lobster lightly sauced with tarragon-scented béarnaise. The huge bite she took melted on her tongue, the lobster sweet and slightly chewy. Just the way she liked it.

"Neither of us ate much last night," Keefe said, then chomped on his own bacon.

It looked underdone to Celine but Keefe seemed in heaven—of the porcine kind.

"Did Frodie say swim?"

"Yeah. Why?"

"This place must be enormous. There's got to be a way out."

"If you're planning to search, leave me out. I'm about to eat, swim and cuddle."

"Uh-huh. Who ya gonna cuddle, counselor? Herma and Frodie?"

"Point taken." He sighed. "I doubt we'll have much luck finding a way out but..."

"But what?"

"Never mind."

"Come on, Keefe. We're in this together, like it or not. So if you have a contribution you'd like to make, make it."

He grinned, waggled his dark eyebrows and eyed her appreciatively.

"Other than sperm," she amended, laughing despite herself.

Leaning against her, he whispered in her ear, "It's illegal."

"And arson isn't?"

"Shhh. We don't want our new friend, er, friends to overhear."

She craned her neck and looked into every corner she could see. Laughing at herself, she said, "We'll never know if they do overhear. For that matter, everything we see may be happening in a four-foot square room. We'll never know *that* either."

"Damn! I thought we'd toss the place. See if we can find anything about those girls. Jerk Jaap's medical license and put his ass in prison for the rest of his unnatural life."

"Well, why didn't you say so in the first place? Once we put him in prison, I'll hire someone to castrate him and stuff his balls down his throat."

"Celine, please don't say things like that to me. I'm an officer of the court. If anything like that happens to Jaap, in or out of prison, I'd have to report this conversation. You'd be arrested, tried, sent to prison. You might even have to share a cell with Doctor-Do-It."

"By the Goddess, you don't fight fair!"

"I'd defend you. Hell, I'll even visit you in prison."

"Doesn't say much for your lawyering skills, counselor."

"Made you laugh though, didn't I?"

She nodded, still laughing and leaned against him. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to stroke his cheek and look into his deep blue eyes—those mesmerizing eyes that seemed to see into her soul. His stubble felt soft against her hand, against her cheek, against her chin. His lips touched hers, a tentative foray she deepened. His taste

was unlike any she'd ever known. More than breakfast, not quite dessert. Delicious. Promising. Exciting.

"You have the most sensitive breasts," he murmured, stroking one nipple and suckling the other.

Celine opened her eyes and gazed down at his dark head. "Hmmm," she sighed, arching her back and pressing herself against him. The divan rocked, making them aware they were floating on a swimming pool mattress.

"Damn computer," Keefe said as Celine tipped them both off their perch and into crystal clear, cold water.

"Swim and cuddle you not like?"

"No!" they shouted together.

Faces flushed, they realized they both had lied. They *had* liked it. Too much.

Chapter Five

"Let's play doctor," Keefe said, coming into the living room, or what was furnished like one, anyway. For the moment.

Celine looked at him as if he'd lost his mind. Which, given their situation, he probably had. It was damned hard, *he* was damned hard, looking at a nearly naked, beautiful woman and not being allowed to touch her. And after his newest, brilliant suggestion, she might kill him before she ever let him touch her.

"I mean, let's try to figure out where the doctor might keep his records on the girls he, you know..."

"Raped?" She waved off his objection. "I know that, legally, it wasn't rape. Emotionally, it feels like rape to me." She took a deep breath that lifted her breasts.

Keefe prayed they'd pop out of their lacy confines so he could help put them back. Or not.

"He's probably stored his records in a computer and password protected them up the wazoo," she said.

"You have a really colorful vocabulary, Celine. 'Four-F'. 'Wazoo'. Where'd you collect 'em from?"

"Early twenty-first-century vids and books. You?"

"Never heard them before you said them."

"Maybe not heard but you know what they mean. Even though you pretended not to understand 'Four-F'."

"I'll bet Jaap has quite a colorful collection too."

She set aside pen and paper and stared at him. "Meaning he made his own vids? Jonathan Jacob Jones! I don't care if I go to prison for the rest of my life, I'm going to kill that bastard!"

"Computer!" she snarled.

"Hold on," Keefe countermanded, earning a glare from Celine.

She blushed nearly the color of her hot pink bustier.

"Do you think it's fair to order Herma and Frodie not to interfere, then call on them when we need information?"

"Spit in one hand, put 'fair' in the other and see which one fills up first."

He couldn't help but laugh. "*That* didn't come from any book or vid."

"Not exactly," she admitted with a sheepish grin. "Some Venusian ancestress was monitoring twentieth-century newscasts full of 'It isn't fair' and 'Is that fair?' She got so fed up, she recorded her remark for Venusian posterity."

"I like it. Mind if I use it?"

"Be my guest." She looked at him thoughtfully. "Are you a lexicographer?"

"I collect the odd word or phrase, especially ones that amuse me."

"Me too."

He didn't know what to say and just smiled at her. She smiled back, blushed and refocused her attention on her paper and pen. Curiosity got the better of him.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to cram fourteen days of your dating ritual into six days, twelve hours and fourteen minutes, exactly. We're not wallowing in things to do around here. No books, no vids."

"Lots of wine and dine, though. Maybe we could ask our friends to provide some music."

"What for?"

"You mean you don't dance?"

She shrugged. His palms itched, wanting to cup those satiny shoulders, slide down her chest and surround her breasts.

"I don't date. Why would I dance?"

"What if your client likes to dance?"

She shot him an amused glance. "My clients usually have other things in mind."

Keefe stood and held out his hand. "Herma-Frodie, may we have some music?"

"Now who's being unfair?" Celine asked but took his hand and let him help her to stand.

A blast of raucous heavy metal shook the room.

"Something softer, please," Keefe said, laughing. "Something cuddly."

A vocal about it being cold outside replaced the speaker-shaking tune. Snow began to fall outside the windows and a cheery fire began to burn in a free-standing fireplace. The lights dimmed until only the fire's glow remained.

Keefe opened his arms and sighed when Celine nestled against him as if they'd danced like this a thousand times. Her head rested on his shoulder. He inhaled and smelled pine and apple wood in her hair. Against his naked chest her nipples hardened. His cock throbbed, held captive between their mated bellies.

"I thought one moved one's feet when dancing," she said in a dreamy, sleepy, sexy voice.

"Sometimes. Sometimes one simply sways in place and enjoys the feel of one's body against another's."

"Hmmm. Swaying's nice."

"Yeah." He kissed her cheek then laved the shell of her ear. The pixie-point began to glow a reddish-gold. "I think your ears are beginning to like me."

The images in his mind turned torrid. Celine writhing as he plunged his tongue into her, her nipples rising, hardening as his fingers plucked them. Then they were lying on the floor and it was real. Her mouth hot and moist as she licked his balls then

swallowed his cock. He felt like he'd buried himself in her throat, so deeply did she take him into her mouth. Her juices flowed over his tongue. He thought he'd never get enough of her taste—apples, cinnamon, musk. He thought he'd never have enough of her mouth—teeth, tongue, lips.

"Too soon," he muttered, his hips thrusting him deeper into her mouth. Her hips bucking, her cum gushing, his sperm spewed into her throat.

"Triple J," he said when he could draw enough breath to speak.

Celine sighed and settled her ass on his chest. "Sixty-nine," she muttered against his now-limp cock. "I never imagined it would feel so...good."

Shifting, he drew her to his side. Now face-to-face, he said, "Why do I get the feeling you've never done it before?" Fascinated, he focused on her flushed face. He sifted her damp corkscrew curls through his fingers and arranged them around her neck and shoulders.

She opened one very green eye and, blushing, grinned. "Because I haven't. Have you?"

My turn to blush, he thought, feeling heat spread from his chest to his hairline. "Tried it a couple of times but it felt...counterproductive."

Laughing, she sat up and retrieved the blankets from the foot of the bed. She shot a puzzled frown at the bedding—one of those "Where the hell did you come from?" looks—then resettled against him.

"Counterproductive?" she said, her fingers toying with his nipples.

"Guess I can't multitask. Can't concentrate on the lady's pleasure and focus on my own at the same time."

She licked his nipple, blew on the rigid peak. "You seemed fine just a minute ago."

"I was. More than fine. Wanna do it again?"

"Mmmm. Counterproductive. Of the self-conscious kind."

He nodded but tightened his grip on her waist. "Is cuddling okay?"

"Hmmm. Cuddling is great." She twined her fingers through his and eased one leg over him.

His cock pulsed. Sighing, he said, "Yeah, great."

Her soft laugh reverberated along his rib cage. Her sigh echoed his and, together, they drifted to sleep.

* * * * *

He awoke, several hours later if his internal clock still worked properly. He felt cold and reached for Celine to warm him. Her side of the bed felt cool. Sitting up, he wished he could see better. The room brightened, revealing a delectable derriere inching alongside the bed.

"Celine?"

"Ouch!" said the derriere, a second before Celine's dark head appeared at the mattress edge. "Damn bed."

"Digging for gold?" he drawled, watching her rub her head and wince.

"In a way. *Grandmere* always hid her valuables under the mattress."

"And you think Dr. Jaap is that stu—old-fashioned?"

"Stupid, no. Arrogant, definitely. I bet we're the only people who've been in this sex den for more than a few hours."

"Yeah." He rubbed his chin and wished for a shave. Frodie's half of the hermaphrodite floated into Keefe's view, complete with straight-edge razor, strop and soapy boar-bristle brush. The half that was Frodie looked solid. The part that usually was Herma seemed fuzzed around the edges, like a virtual placeholder.

Virtual? As in virtual reality? As in virtual virgin? Whatever that meant, he thought, motioning Frodie forward and watching Celine through Frodie's insubstantial body. Solid and insubstantial together. *Like a virtual virgin?*

Hearing Celine's gusty sigh, Keefe quirked a brow at her then tilted his head, allowing Frodie access to his neck. "What?" he said when she sighed again.

"I kinda liked the beard. It gave you a buckwasher's look."

"Swashbuckler," he corrected, chuckling. "You like pirates?"

"I don't think so. Lice-infested, vermin-laden, bloodthirsty blackguards." She shivered. "Foul breaths and rotten teeth. Ugh."

"But I like the idea of... I don't know. Douglas what's-his-name rescuing whosit, the redhead, from pirates. Burt Lancaster flashing his dimples and all those buffed muscles in— What was that old, old vid?"

"*The Crimson Pirate*, if I remember correctly."

"A lexicographer and a vid-buff too. We have more..."

"Have more what? Have more in common than you thought? Thank you, Frodie. Best shave I've had in...ever."

"Have you noticed," she began in a tentative voice that strengthened when Frodie disappeared around a corner, "that every time we start to think about searching this place, we get distracted?"

"No but now that you mention it, yes. If we're serious about bringing Jaap's games to light—"

"We need to tag each room we search. Some subtle way, so our *friends* won't know but we will."

He'd thought in terms of fighting distraction but liked Celine's idea almost as well. He didn't mind the distractions at all but if Herma-Frodie was controlling the physical environment, he and Celine had to discover that. And find any "souvenirs" the doctor may have kept from his seductions.

"Herma-Frodie?" Celine called out.

"Hmmm?" Was that passion in the blended voice? Keefe wondered, catching Celine's raised eyebrows and surprised moue.

"Sticky notes? May we have some?"

"Moment, please," said Frodie, his voice sounding like he was well into his short-strokes.

"By the Goddess!" Celine fanned her flushed face with both hands.

"Remind me to ask them how they do that," Keefe said. He chuckled then got out of bed, his back turned toward Celine. His cock wanted what Frodie was getting. No matter how many times he told himself he could wait until Celine was ready, his body had other ideas.

He glanced at Celine, now sitting in the middle of the bed. Today, right now, her bustier and bikini panties were lime green. So was his minuscule jockstrap. Herma-Frodie apparently thought matching apparel, such as it was, would bring them closer.

"Colors?" Herma asked, definitely sounding sated.

"What?" Celine's nipples peaked through the cutouts in the bustier.

Keefe felt his cock grow and pulse. Smothering a groan, he too sat on the bed but pulled the sheet over his lower body.

"Sticky notes. What color you want?"

Keefe risked another glance at Celine. She quirked her eyebrows and gestured at their skimpy outfits. He nodded.

"Lime green," she said.

"Why want?" Frodie said, sounding suspicious.

Seeing that Celine was struck speechless by the challenge, Keefe improvised. "We...we don't like not having real clothes and —"

"Clothes real."

"Outer clothes," Celine said, nodding her approval of Keefe's tact.

"Jaap say clothes hindrance to fucking."

"Jaap wrong! Dr. Jaap is incorrect. Most humans enjoy undressing each other, or for each other, when they're ready to make love. Er, copulate," Keefe corrected. Celine's eyebrows could write novels, he thought, noting her surprised expression.

"Copulate same as fucking?"

"It's a more socially acceptable word," Celine said. "Although human beings usually don't talk about sex."

"Why not? Think about it all the time."

Celine and Keefe looked at each other and laughed their agreement.

"You want Sticky Notes to make clothes?"

"Yes," Celine and Keefe said together.

"Clothes make you feel sexier?"

"We think so, yes," Keefe said.

They held their breaths while the hermaphrodite apparently conferred with itself.

Two sweatsuits, one a faded blue, the other bright green, appeared on the bed.

"You think these rags sexy?"

"Well," Keefe began.

"Yes!" Celine said, clamping her hand over Keefe's mouth.

"Okay. Can keep."

"Thank you, thank you, thank you!" Celine pulled on her sweatpants then reached for the top.

"How 'bout the sticky notes?" Keefe asked, donning his own clothes.

"Have clothes. Not need stickies," the computer said, snickering.

"Hoist with our own petard," Celine observed dryly.

"Yeah. Whatever a 'petard' is."

* * * * *

Celine tried to ignore Keefe's pacing but couldn't. His lion-like stride from one end of the living room to the other added to her own caged feelings. Knowing what lay beneath the worn sweatsuit—silky body hair and smooth, hard muscle—made her

twitchy. She considered treating him like a client but didn't trust her self-control. When it came to Keefe, she didn't have any.

"What are you doing?" he said, coming up behind her. Leaning over, he rested his chin on her shoulder and peered at the vid screen, a new acquisition Celine had gotten by promising Frodie she'd teach him how to cook.

"Studying. Sort of." She resisted shutting down the program she had running and focused on the undulating belly dancer. "It was this or the *Kama Sutra*," she explained, taking a deep breath and inhaling Keefe's scent, aftershave of a subtle sort and Keefe's own flesh, slightly musky from arousal.

She suspected her own skin held the same scent of arousal but, fortunately, she couldn't smell herself. Keefe apparently could.

"You smell good. Good enough to—"

"I've always wanted to learn how to belly dance." Goddess help them both if he said the "eat" word!

"And I've always wanted to see Salome's veil dance."

"Hmmm."

He kissed her neck, nipped her earlobe, then stepped back. "Maybe we can fulfill both our fantasies."

"I should have warned you when we danced. I have, um, let's see." She did a quick mental calculation. "Three left feet."

Keefe laughed and waggled his eyebrows. "Sounds interesting. Make that kinky. I like kinky."

He pulled the chair out from under her and said, "Salome."

"Damn it, Keefe." Laughing, she pushed at the sheer fabric around her head and heard chimes coming from her wrists.

She scanned her body, now completely covered in opaque, brightly colored scarves. The fabric lost its opacity when she held out a single layer. Her ankles and hips jingled when she moved.

Revenge, she thought and said, "Sheik."

Keefe's sweats transmuted into yards and yards of pantaloons, tunic and headgear that included a swatch of fabric across his lower face. Not what she'd had in mind. She wanted him to feel as uncomfortable and as vulnerable as she did.

"*Emir*." Better. Much, much better. He now wore pantaloons of a single, sheer, multicolored layer and his matching tunic barely covered his magnificent chest. A gold chain spanned his pecs, its sapphire clasp matching his deep blue eyes.

"Eliminate harem," she said, noting her own frown at the bevy of lovelies surrounding him on the pillow-laden divan. Settling back and spreading his arms along the divan's back, he grinned. Daring her to begin his seduction or her own?

Music played, slow and seductive.

"This won't be pretty," she warned, discovering her face veil was now fastened across her nose and chin.

"I'll take my chances."

To Keefe's untrained ear the instruments sounded timeless. He couldn't tell if the low, throaty tones came from an alto saxophone or an ancient wooden flute. Were the higher notes from a clarinet or from a simple reed?

When Celine circled her hips, he forgot about the music and focused completely on the woman. Jonathan Jacob Jones! How could she believe she couldn't dance?

Eyes closed, her arms, legs and torso moved in perfect synchronicity with the music. Fingers cymbals chimed. She reached for the veil covering her hair and half her face. A frown creased her brow, leaving Keefe to surmise there was a ritual sequence to the veils' removal.

A pink and lime-green scarf unwound from her shoulders, chest and hips. He couldn't see much skin but her body looked minimally slimmer.

A drumbeat joined the flute, setting the tempo faster than before. Celine's body matched the rhythm, still languid and sinuous. Another veil, red and orange, slid off her body. Keefe thought he could see the shadow of her pubic hair, the outline of her rigid nipples. His cock twitched, appreciation or anticipation Keefe neither knew nor cared.

The drumbeat set a faster, more frenzied pace that Celine matched. She shimmied. The coins at hips, wrists and ankles rang in harmony. Two more veils, pale gold and pale blue, flew from her whirling form.

Three to go, he thought and licked his dry lips. His hands fisted. He wanted, desperately wanted to strip her and plunge deep into her hot, wet channel. She must feel as ready for sex as he did. *Please, Jove*, he pleaded silently and wished the sheer white veils gone from her breasts and hips.

They unwound, leaving a single ivory scarf to flow from the top of her head to her toes.

Panting, Celine flung herself onto Keefe's lap. "Take it off, Keefe. Take me."

His pants and vest had vanished. His cock was more than ready, more than willing. With Celine straddling his crotch and seeping her juices onto his cock, she felt equally ready and willing.

The divan transmuted into a bed. Lunging, Keefe put Celine on her back and plunged deep. *Jonathan Jacob Jones, she's coming!* So was he, damn it all.

"Too fast. Too soon," he grumbled, collapsing over her and feeling like he'd run a marathon in under a minute.

"Perfect," she murmured, sounding as winded as he felt. "We've been heading toward this for—"

"Seventy-two hours, twenty-three minutes and—"

"Seconds not important," Herma cooed, obviously pleased.

"Exactly," Frodie agreed.

"Plus seven months," Keefe griped. "But who's counting?"

"Go away," said Celine.

"Yeah," Keefe whispered against her nipple, "I think I can do this again."

"Already?" she squeaked, her green eyes wide with astonished pleasure, her nipple hardening against his lips.

"Oh yeah." Wondering if she was as ready as he was, he said, "Did I hurt you?"

"If you did, I don't remember. Goddess, you make me hot! I can almost understand why Alyson..." She looked into his eyes, hers pleading. "Let's table her for now. Please."

He laughed. "I don't think I can think about anything but you."

"Goodie." She sighed and milked his enlarging cock with her vaginal muscles. "How do you do that?"

"Do what?" He laved her nipple then gently sucked it into his mouth.

"Pulse inside me. Grow inside me."

"How do you? Milk me. Make me want to go deeper until...until we're truly one, like Herma-Frodie."

He saw something—unpleasant?—flash through those depthless green eyes. Then she smiled at him and he forgot how to breathe.

"If we were like our friends, I'd miss this view of you. All of you."

"Ditto." He rolled to his back so she sat atop him. "I like this view of you. And," he added, suiting action to words, "I can suck your nipples while you ride."

"Hi ho, Silver!" She laughed and rode until they both reached climax. Again. Collapsing against his chest, she slid to his side. "Cuddle."

"Cuddle *very* nice," he said in Herma's voice.

"Fucking nicer," said someone.

"Oh yeah," he and Celine said in unison.

Celine sat up and looked down at him, a hopeful smile on her lips. "Think you can go again?"

He was pretty sure he could. But he wasn't ready to show her how he could match her orgasm for orgasm—no recovery time required. "I'll need a couple of minutes."

"Only a couple?" she challenged, her eyes both amazed and yearning. Then she blushed. "You probably think you've found yourself a nymphomaniac."

He spooned her, savored the warmth of her buttocks against his crotch, the softness of her skin, her small sigh of pleasure when he laved her ear. "I would never think of you that way, Celine. I think it's been too long since you've let a man touch you like a woman needs to be touched."

He felt his cock grow. She looked back at him with that astonished anticipation that made him so hard he hurt.

"Don't move," he murmured. "Just," he moved her leg then eased his cock inside her slippery heat, "like that. You okay?"

"Perfect. I'm having a little difficulty picturing you so randy but... Goddess! Are you even bigger?"

"Is that how I feel to you? Bigger?" Sliding one arm under her torso, he stroked her nipples. His other hand parted the nest of silky curls and stroked her clit.

She moaned. Wiggled on his shaft. Thrust her hips against his teasing fingers.

"Yes... No... Maybe. You feel so good, Keefe. I... Oh yes! Keefe! Harder. Harder. Hard-er!"

She reached back. Her hands urged his face to hers, his lips to hers, his tongue to hers. Her body—every muscle—tightened like a bowstring drawn to loosen a deadly arrow.

Plunging so deep he felt like she would suck his balls into her sweet core, he released them both to fly free and true to that welcomed little death.

Much later, Celine sighed and stretched in Keefe's arms.

"Not that I'm not grateful," Keefe said, stroking her back and buttocks, "but why now?"

"Why did I give in? I don't know. I guess I got tired of fighting the attraction. Of fighting you. Of fighting myself."

"I was beginning to think you didn't like me."

Leaning back so she could look into his eyes, she said, "You equate sex with friendship? What did they call it early twenty-first century? 'Friends with benefits'?"

Keefe chuckled. "Let's just say I don't have sex with women I dislike."

"Not even when they do a striptease then throw themselves on you and beg?"

"Weeeeelllll."

She gave him a gentle right cross on his chin. He caught her hand then placed a tender kiss in her palm. He yawned. She suppressed a longing sigh then said, "I'm sleepy too."

They shifted. Spoons in a drawer, she willed her body to relax until Keefe's even breathing told her he slept. Easing from his arms, she donned her sweatsuit and padded to the living room.

Moonlight filtered through the sheer curtains. It gave her enough light that she could make her way to the divan without breaking her toes on the furniture.

She sensed Herma-Frodie lurking in the shadows, an oddly comforting presence. "I'm okay. Just need a little private time here."

She thought she heard a reluctant sigh then she no longer felt their presence.

How much had Herma-Frodie influenced today's events? Celine mused. If she were honest with herself she'd admit the hermaphrodite hadn't influenced her at all. She and

Keefe had been heading toward sex from the minute they met. So maybe she should have succumbed sooner. The delay had only made her needier and far less cautious than she would have been with a client.

But Keefe wasn't a client. He was...her lover. And Goddess help her, he was the lover every Venusian woman dreamed of. Tender. Lusty. Knowing when to draw back and when to rush on. And the laughter! Had any man ever given her the gift of his laughter? Not that she could remember.

But...she'd never been with a man—been sexual with a man—who was not a client. Now she knew she could never go back to being a surrogate. Even the events on Halloween three years ago had not persuaded her to give up her chosen profession. She'd thought eventually she would go back to it. Surrogacy was in her blood.

And yet today...when those veils had wound themselves around her body...when those same veils had unwound while she danced... She'd felt her blood singing in her veins. She'd felt like Salome's dance was in her blood—a blood memory passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter.

By the Goddess! Had Jynx danced for Celine's *grandpere*? Had Clarice danced for Celine's father? And if they had...did that mean Celine and Keefe were destined to become more than *friends with benefits*?

* * * * *

Sometime during the night, questions prodded Keefe awake. Accustomed to this, he blinked his eyes open then lay utterly still and listened to Celine's even breathing. She was still deeply asleep, allowing him to ease his arm from under her neck. Wishing for a dim light, seeing it spread over a path to the bedroom door, he padded into the living room and softly closed the door behind him.

"Herma-Frodie, a dictionary please."

"Want light to read by also?" Frodie queried, sounding sleepy.

"Of course Keefe want light," Herma said. Frodie's grunt made Keefe think she'd punched him. "Cannot read without light."

"Could ask Herma-Frodie for de-fin-i-tion." Frodie sounded aggrieved.

"Thanks, I should have thought of that. But I'm unaccustomed to having such excellent assistance."

"Keefe still want dic-tion-ary?"

"Please. I don't know precisely what I'm looking for but...I'm just looking."

A heavy tome, suited for an intergalactic library, dropped like a boulder then rose and settled on a nearby table. A chair, yellow legal tablet and pen appeared on the table's top.

Wondering how he'd ever managed without this anticipatory servitude, Keefe strode to the table and sat. "Good night, Herma-Frodie. And thanks again."

"Keefe welcome," said Herma, her mutters suggesting she herded Frodie along.

Even though Keefe knew the definition, he looked up *counselor* first. *An advisor* was listed first, later followed by *an attorney*. He read every subsequent definition, making sure he understood every nuance. He knew people used counselor and attorney interchangeably but the dictionary left no confusion about *surrogate*.

When they'd non-dated, Celine insisted her grandmother had worked as a sex counselor, yet she raised no objection when Keefe referred to *her* as a surrogate one time, a counselor the next. He knew she knew the difference, so why hadn't she corrected him?

And wouldn't a sex surrogate have experienced sixty-nine?

While Keefe preferred to focus on one pleasure at a time—his partner's first, then his own—he knew most of his friends liked the mutual pleasure aspects the position afforded its participants.

Leaning back in his chair, tapping the pen against the pad, he sorted through Celine's behavior since the day they met. Finished, he felt like banging his head against the hardest wall he could find.

Realizing Herma-Frodie could easily oblige him, he said, "Just kidding."

He made a list, disgusted when every entry began, "I assumed..."

Because she'd sat at the directress's desk, he'd *assumed* she was the Venusian Guild's directress. Because she'd chaperoned Alyson's surrogacy with Garven, Keefe had *assumed* Celine was a surrogate as well. Because he'd *assumed* she was a surrogate, he'd *assumed* she'd fall into his arms, his bed, without a second thought.

Jonathan Jacob Jones! He'd been—hell, still was—an idiot. "Has she ever been a sex surrogate?" he wondered aloud.

"Keefe pardon Herma intruding?"

"Sure." He stood and offered her his chair.

"Herma stand but thank Keefe. Keefe sit, please."

"Thanks." When Herma remained silent, he said, "What's up?"

"Herma sense Celine upset Keefe. Keefe no longer want to fuck—to copulate with Celine?"

"Jove no! I mean, I still want her but... I think she's lied. Not only to me but to a judge after she'd sworn to tell the truth."

"About what Celine lie?"

"Well, I'm not absolutely certain she has lied but..." He raked tense fingers through his hair. "I think she lied about her regeneration time. You know about Venusian women? How long it takes—?"

"To make new hymen, Herma know."

"And you know surrogates are..."

"Substitutes, yes. Surrogates stand-in for absent partner or nonexistent partner. Herma also know surrogates teach partner what please *their* partner. Not surrogate but real partner. Not what please surrogate partner."

Keefe, not fully understanding that last statement, held up his hand to silence Herma. "If I understand correctly and may use a female surrogate and a male—let's say *client*—the surrogate teaches the client what pleases her?" Herma nodded. Keefe continued. "But the surrogate does not indulge in acts that please the client?"

"Except for stroking client penis, leading to copulation."

"So, it's possible Cel—the surrogate wouldn't know about—"

"Sixty-nine," Herma supplied, giggling like a shy Geisha and covering her mouth.

"That helps a lot. Thanks, Herma."

"Keefe welcome. Oh, one thing more. Some men think surrogates whores. If surrogate want man to want her as woman, not whore, surrogate not make having sex easy. Might even want making love."

Groaning, Keefe plunked his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands. When he raised his head, he scrubbed his hands down his face and said to the room at large, "Okay, I understand why Celine might hesitate about having sex with me. But a few years ago why did she seem to want me in July and despise me in October?"

Silence.

Something had happened to her in October. Had he done something? Not that he could remember but, with women, who knew? They came with trunks full of all sorts of garbage.

If he could prove someone else had hurt her in October, he could make her believe he wanted her as a woman, not a surrogate. And, one way or another, he'd make her believe he wanted more than "having sex". He wanted—had in fact—made love with her.

Chapter Six

They slept. She was almost certain they had slept. Between contests of who could make who come faster, harder, longer. Thank the Goddess, she came faster and more often but they tied in the other categories.

Why had she waited so long? She could have given in at any time, from the day they met to Halloween. Why hadn't she? Had what happened with Wyatt made her afraid of her own sexuality? Or had she only been trying to set a good example for Alyson? Show her that a surrogate and a client could have fun without sex.

Garven was Alyson's first client and the silly girl had not only given him her virtual virginity but her true virginity. And Celine had felt...what? Jealous of the growing attachment between the two? Yes. She'd tried so hard not to see that Garven and Alyson were falling in love that she'd let Alyson go too far. Celine should have insisted that Alyson break up with Garven, tell him the terms of their contract had been met. It would have broken Alyson's heart but it wouldn't have forced her back into culinary arts.

Spilt milk, Celine thought. Last night, after more than three years of self-denial, she'd started to take back her life. From this second on, she would savor every touch, every kiss, every word she and Keefe shared. She'd remember every sigh, moan, shout—every nuance of every look he gave her, every second of desire and fulfillment they gave each other.

When this interlude ended, she'd miss the sex.

Be honest, her conscience murmured.

I'll miss him. He's god-handsome, like Mars on that vid series about Hercules but with blue eyes. He's intelligent.

Why? Because he likes the things you like?

Partly but he also has a law degree, which proves he's smart, I think. And he's kind. If I were in his shoes, I'd have strangled Alyson and me, a dozen times, at least. He's smart and intuitive. He knows we've lied but he hasn't called us on it.

Not yet, anyway.

Goddess, I hate lying to him!

Imagine how he'll feel if you don't tell him you've lied and he finds out.

No! I don't want him to hate me.

Or think of this *interlude* as just another copulation. On your part, at least.

Herma's voice whispered in Celine's ear. "If Celine want to get out of here early, have two choices. Tell Keefe truth about Alyson or go all the way. Let Keefe hit homerun, score three-point hoop, serve multiple aces."

"What, no football similes?" Celine grouched, relieved her conscience had shut up, for the moment at least.

"Touchdown!"

Imagining Herma-Frodie throwing up their hands to signal the score, Celine laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" Keefe said, coming into the living room.

"Just discussing sports with Herma."

"Bedroom sports?" He waggled his eyebrows and grinned. He dropped a kiss on her forehead then plopped on the divan. Drawing her into his arms, he planted another kiss, on her lips this time. A kiss that would have knocked her socks off if she'd been wearing any.

When he released her, Celine said, "And here I was telling myself how much I admire your intelligence."

"Oh yeah?" Looking pleased, he puffed out his chest, pounded it with his fists and hollered, "Ouch!"

Celine couldn't help laughing but when he nuzzled her neck she inched away.

Keefe frowned, looking puzzled but unoffended. "When I'm around you, I can't keep my mind off sex."

She stroked his clean-shaven cheek. "Likewise but...I've been thinking."

"Uh oh."

"Yes and no *uh oh* until you hear me out."

"Okeydokey. Can we cuddle? I promise I'll still listen."

"Too distracting. In fact," she gave him a shove, "being anywhere near you. I can't think when you're around."

"This must be *really* serious.

"It's about the girls, the ones Jaap —"

"I'm listening. And for what it's worth, so far I agree with you. About this place."

"Good. Well, Slimebucket has probably preached, *ad nauseum*, to our friends about doctor-patient confidentiality but... Isn't his patient list a matter of public record?"

Keefe grinned. "Back in the good old days, mid-twenty-first century, even patient names were confidential. Nowadays, since our governments provide healthcare from conception to cremation, anybody can access a doctor's list of patients. As soon as we get out of here —"

"No, now."

"What? Why?"

Celine licked her suddenly dry lips then blurted, "Let's ask Herma-Frodie."

"Why would they tell us?"

Striving for nonchalance, she shrugged. "They want to leave with us, don't they?"

"That's blackmail," he said, frowning. Then he let out a whoop that almost shattered her eardrums. "That's brilliant!"

He scooped her into his arms, stood and whirled them around the room. Kissing her, making her feel lightheaded and needy, he headed for the bedroom.

"Aren't we going to see Herma-Frodie?" she asked when she could speak.

"Later. Right now I want to celebrate."

Putting her down but keeping her close, Keefe ran his hands up and down her arms.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, except... I'd like to take you on a real date. A date where you wear a sexy evening gown like the one you wore at my—er—Major and Mrs. Peter's. The green silky thingy that looked like it might fall off at any second."

"Oh *that* green thingy," she said, laughing, then tugged gently on his earlobes. "I didn't think men noticed what women wear."

"Well, it *did* look like it—"

"Might fall off."

"Yeah. And if it didn't... Well, I'd really like to see if I could figure out how to get it off you."

They both looked at her green sweatsuit. When it just stayed as it was Celine chuckled.

"Our friends apparently can't translate *thingy*," she said.

"In that case I'll just pretend. Let's see... Yeah, I think the first thing I'd do is remove your earrings." He pulled her lobes, pocketed her imaginary earrings then caressed the tips of her ears.

She shivered. "You really know how to get a girl going."

"*This* girl at any rate. I pay attention to little things. Like the way your ears get warm and kinda glow when you're aroused. Do other men... Never mind."

She grasped his wrists and he stopped toying with her ears. "If any other man made my ears glow he never mentioned it. But then I don't think any other man... Forget it," she said, feeling her entire face heat.

"Has made your ears glow," Keefe finished, looking smug. "Admit it, Celine."

"Nope. Your head's already swelled to extraordinary proportions. You'll never wear another hat."

He shifted her hand to his cock. "My head's not the only thing that's swelling."

"Hmmm."

"You just...ahh...keep on rubbing while I...figure out how to get you...outta this." He cupped her breasts. Felt her nipples pearl against his palms. Saw her eyes darken and her ears turn an even brighter pink.

"Well, look here. There's a zipper right here in front." He pulled it down then slid his hands inside. "No bra?"

Her breath catching, she shook her head. "Can't wear one with this green thingy."

"Lucky me."

She eased her hand inside his sweatpants. "I'm lucky too. No briefs."

"Hmmm." Sliding her top off her shoulders, he simply stared at her breasts. They seemed to swell and her nipples hardened to peaks that begged him to taste them.

"Goddess," she sighed, arching into his mouth and hand.

Her fingers tightened around his cock. He moaned and pressed her hand firmly. He didn't want her to stop squeezing him.

"What about this fancy dinner jacket of yours? Don't you think you'd be more comfortable without it?" She jerked his zipper down then tugged his top down his arms, effectively handcuffing him. "Much better," she murmured, flicking her tongue over his nipples and bringing them to rigid points. Cupping his balls, she squeezed gently.

"Jove! Don't do that, Cel. You'll make me come."

"Isn't that what you want? To come?"

"Oh yeah. But I wanna be in you when I do. I want those gorgeous legs wrapped around me. Your juices hot on my cock. Your tight, sweet pussy muscles milking me until I *do* come."

Tugging on his cock, she backed toward the wall-to-wall bed. "And I want you buried in me. I wanna hear your balls slapping my pussy's lips while you suck my nipples. I wanna feel *your* juices pump into me, have you so deep in me I can feel you in my throat."

His dimples flashing, he turned that lovely shade of sienna she adored.

"Yeah, big boy, you feel that huge. Like your cock touches my throat and my g-spot at the same time."

"Oh yeah," he agreed, his arms around her as they fell on the wide bed. "And for once our friends have given us a generous playpen." Having slid his sweats down his legs, he toed them off then reached for her ankles.

She squirmed away. Laughing, he caught her, tugged her pants off then sucked her toes.

"Tickles," she protested through her giggles. "Tickles... ahh...good."

"You smell good," he muttered then buried his nose in the curls of her mons. He kissed her clit, lapped it, sucked it.

"Keefe," she said, tugging his face up and gazing into his sapphire eyes.

"Celine." He sounded serious but his eyes blazed. Merriment or lust, she neither knew nor cared.

"Hmmm. How'd you feel about a little...sixty-nine?"

"I'd feel like the best multitasker in the galaxy." He shifted. His cock pulsed against her cheek. She lapped away a drop of precum. Groaning, he asked, "How 'bout you? Too embarrassed?"

"Not any more." Easing back his foreskin, she licked all around his cock's head, laved the length of him, sucked gently on his swollen testicles.

He lapped her clit then slid his tongue from her anus to her slick opening. Then—as she enveloped his cock in her mouth—he buried his tongue deep inside her pulsing core.

"Salty," she sighed then blinked up at him.

"I didn't give you all of it," he managed to say, willing himself not to spew all over her skillful fingers. "Thought I might tickle your throat from down here."

"Hmmm. Want that too. Come into me, Keefe. Want you. Need you. In me. Now."

Her voice, low and husky with need, drove rational thought from his mind. He grabbed her buttocks. She grabbed his cock then guided him home. Hearing his balls slapping against her wet nether lips, they both started to laugh.

And that laughter took them to completion.

* * * * *

Colorfully dressed, Herma-Frodie stood before them, looking stern. Herma wore short-shorts and a halter top of eye-popping, neon green. Frodie sported shorts and a tank top of glaring day-glow orange.

"Not fair you demand Herma-Frodie betray Dr. Jaap."

"We're not demanding," Keefe said in his most reasonable voice. "We're *asking* you for a list of his patients. All we want are names. No medical records or anything like that."

"Besides," Celine added, "was Dr. Jaap fair to you when he used you to arouse those girls? When he gave them no chance to give their virginity to men they love? When he virtually *raped* them?"

"You fine one, talk about virtual," Frodie snarled.

Herma hushed him then said, "We, maybe, mislead Celine and Keefe. Dr. Jaap not copulate with girls."

"Then who did?" Keefe sounded as furious as Celine felt.

"Lovers. Like Celine and Keefe."

"We're not lovers! We're prisoners!" Celine yelled.

Herma-Frodie cringed.

Keefe shot Celine a hurt glance then refocused on the hermaphrodite. "If the girls had lovers, what were they doing here? At Jaap's, I mean."

"Fantasies. Want perfect first cop-u-la-tion." Frodie tried out the new-to-him word and smiled when Keefe nodded.

"So, what Keefe and I experienced was what?"

"Hurried. Jaap call when Joren tell him what he want. Mean, tell Jaap what Joren want."

"Gotcha," Keefe said.

"Celine should ask Alyson," Frodie said, now sounding sullen instead of hateful.

"What does Alyson have to do with... Jonathan Jacob Jones!" Keefe swore. "Are you saying Alyson and Garven..."

"Willing. More, wanting, *needing* fantasy."

They fell silent. After a long, eternity-stretching moment, Keefe said, "You've given us — *me* — something to think about. Thanks."

Sensing dismissal, the hermaphrodite vanished.

Celine stood and wiped her clammy hands on her sweatpants. "Think I'll go for a swim."

She looked like she wanted to run but Keefe was having none of that. He caught her wrist. Using his best imitation of a truly ancient vid character, he said, "'Lucy, you got some 'splainin' to do'."

"Who's Lucy?"

"Sit down," he said, tugging on her wrist, leaving her no way to escape. "Now tell me about your fantasy."

"I don't — It must be Alyson's or Garven's."

Keefe folded his arms over his chest and glared at her, his laser-blue eyes reflecting none of the lover and all of the attorney. "Garven's fantasies, and by association Alyson's as well, center on sex in public places."

Celine's jaw dropped. "You're kidding, right? You *have* to be kidding. I don't know about Garven but Alyson's the shyest, most *private* person I've ever met."

"A private and shy sex surrogate? I think that's an oxymoron. Or is it a conundrum?" He sighed then said, "I suppose you blame me. I *did* claim that Garven was shy."

"None of this is funny!" Celine snapped. "Garven's shyness was just the first of many lies. No, I take that back. Your first lie was pretending to come to the Guild on a friend's behalf."

"I don't think any of this is funny," Keefe snapped back. He ran shaking fingers through his hair and expelled an impatient-sounding breath. When he looked at her his eyes were cold, his mouth grim.

Maybe she wouldn't save every memory.

"You can tell me what I want to know, here, now. Or you can tell me, under oath, on the witness stand. Judge Joren would get a kick out of your description of Alyson."

"I used to like you."

"Ditto."

"You're driving me crazy!"

"Ditto!"

They glared at each other. Celine's stomach churned and adrenaline spurted through her veins. Flight or fight became an imperative, one she knew she wouldn't, couldn't, follow.

Sighing, she forcibly relaxed her shoulders. "Ask your damn questions. I'll answer them."

"Honestly?"

"Yes." *As honestly as I can.* Behind her back, she crossed her fingers.

"Describe your doctor-patient fantasy."

"That's not a question."

"You're right. Hmmm. Okay, when did you first start fantasizing about fuck—copulating with your doctor?"

"When I turned sixteen. *Grandmere* wanted to ensure I could follow in her footsteps. If I wanted to, of course."

"Of course," he said dryly. "Your grandmother was a sex surrogate?"

"A sex counselor," she corrected caustically.

"And your doctor was another Dr. Jaap."

"Not exactly." Keefe's quirked eyebrow demanded she continue. "He was some kind of *wunderkinder*. A twenty-five-year-old who already had completed medical school and his internship in ob-gyn."

"Go on. I'll rephrase. What happened?"

"Gynecologically or personally?"

"Both."

"Well, he examined me, of course. Then, while I got dressed, he and Gran had a private conversation. She never told me exactly what he said but conveyed his instructions to me with a sternness quite unlike his..."

"Bedside manner?"

She grinned.

"What were his instructions?"

"To me?"

"No, to your grandmother."

Sarcasm she could handle. Poker-faced, she said, "That she should have sex every day and twice on Sundays. Okay, so that wasn't funny. According to Gran, his instructions to me were not to let anybody touch me, anywhere, until I was of legal age but it was all right for me to touch myself."

"Is that when you started fantasizing about *him* touching you?"

"Well, he kissed me first. In my fantasy, that is."

“While you masturbated, did you imagine him making love to you? Did he eat, er, perform cunnilingus on you?”

Long-suppressed memories flooded her mind. Fantasies about her eighteenth birthday and losing her virginity, both virtual and real, to her doctor. But all those old fantasies had become fantasies about Keefe. Even this one.

She felt butterflies and hummingbirds chase each other in her belly. Behind a screen, she shed her clothes and donned a lavender, one-piece, form-fitting teddy. It snapped at the crotch, so easy for Dr. Dick – she smiled at her nickname for him – to open when he wanted.

She knew she was his last patient of the day. Knew his nurse had left for the weekend. Knew his apartment lay just across the hall. Knew exactly how he’d furnished it and how she’d look against his charcoal gray satin sheets. She knew everything about him, wanted to share everything she was with him.

Sliding onto the examining table, she stared at the door and willed him to come through it. He knocked as he always did. She pinched her nipples to show him how ready she was for him and called for him to enter.

His Caribbean-colored eyes swept over her, then darkened from turquoise to navy blue. Smiling, he extended the metal stirrups and motioned her to scoot down to the end of the table. Then he did something he’d never done before. He raised the head of the table so she sat rather than lay on it.

“Happy birthday, Celine,” he whispered against her ear, his breath warm and moist.

Her breath caught and she risked touching him. His ebony hair felt like silk between her fingers. He kissed her gently then pulled away.

“Before we begin, I have a few questions I need to ask you.”

Her eyelids felt heavy but lifted at last so she could gaze at him. Her mouth felt dry so she only nodded for him to continue.

“Have you let anyone kiss you?”

“Only you,” she murmured.

"Good," he said and kissed her again.

"That stethoscope's cold," she said when he placed it on her chest.

"Sorry. Is this better?" His tongue replaced the disk then slid down to her hardening nipple and sucked it into his mouth.

Breathless she gasped, "Much better."

Sliding the teddy straps off her shoulders, he cupped her naked breasts and thumbed her nipples into twin peaks. "And no one's touched you here?"

She moaned and shook her head. "Tony tried but I punched him."

"Have you touched them?"

"Y-yes. Sometimes, when I...you know."

"When you masturbate."

She nodded, mute with desire.

"But no one else has touched you here?" He slipped his fingers between the snaps, popping them open and touching her clit. Too soon for her, he stopped stroking her.

"What's wrong?" She half-whispered, half-sobbed the question.

"Nothing. Come on, Celine, slide down so we can get started on what we both want." He eased her feet into the stirrups then spread them and gazed at her...there.

It felt like the blush started in her toes and raced itself to the ends of the hairs on her head. "Get started on what?"

"Guess," he said and unzipped his trousers.

"Goddess," she breathed, "you're so...enormous."

"Ah yes. Which tells me I need to prepare you before I..."

"B-before?"

"Before I fuck your brains out," he said. Chuckling, he touched her clit with his tongue and lapped at her until she screamed his name. Her entire body shook.

"Did he, Celine? Did the good doctor eat you until you screamed? Did he eat you like I just did?" Keefe's venomous voice called her back to the present.

She felt red—blazing, fiery red and orange and white-hot white—gush from her toenails to the top of her head. "You bastard! You're a voyeur! The ultimate voyeur! Dr.... He was the best thing that could have happened to me—to any Venusian girl on the brink of becoming a surrogate!

"He cared about me. He knew the path I chose would be difficult. He l-loved me!"

"I love you and I'm real!"

"Goddess! So was he," she said, far too late to convince Keefe of her truthfulness. Would he believe her if she echoed his declaration of love? Probably not. But if she told him the rest of her history, would he believe *that*?

Merde! She didn't believe it herself and she knew it was true. Venusian women could regenerate a virgin's hymen until they surrendered their true virginity to the only man they would ever love.

And that Goddess-cursed hermaphrodite knew all her fantasies!

"I have fantasies too," Keefe said, his voice now soft and reasonable.

"Considering what happened to us just now, do you think it wise to even *think* about fantasies?"

Despite the warning, she looked interested. Interested enough to indulge him?

"Can't you order—" Heeding her frown, he said, "Ask Herma-Frodie to take a break, or not interfere, or something?"

"Why would I do that? Assuming I could, of course."

"We're on day four here and, apparently, haven't come close to complying with the judge's orders. Although I don't know how we could get any more creative than we have been. Do you?" She shrugged and shook her head. "I wouldn't put it past him to extend our incarceration. Or he could let me go and send you Michaels."

She quirked an eyebrow, seeming to ask if that's what Keefe wanted – for Michaels to replace him.

"How long a break do you recommend for our friends?"

"I'd hate for us to feel... For the situation to feel contrived."

"I agree. That might seem too much like work. For me, at least."

Her smile, soft and kind of shy, made him smile back.

"For me it would be my first time. Making love to a virgin, I mean. Our first time was so rushed, I can't remember what it felt like. I'd like to know. To remember."

Both her eyebrows rose and her lips, ripe and lush, formed a surprised "O". Then she said, "So you want me to disobey Joren's orders and regenerate my hymen."

"For the purposes of this fantasy, yeah."

Just when he thought she would remain silent for the rest of his life, she said, "Let's say I'm willing to indulge your fantasy. What would you choose?"

"Only one? Damn, I have so many. A menage-a-trois –"

"Unlike Herma-Frodie, I can't conjure a third person, of either sex."

"A tough guy rescuing a maiden in distress," he continued then waited for her response.

"Do I strike you as a 'maiden in distress'?"

Sighing his reluctant agreement, he said, "I guess not. That leaves one. My favorite."

"Which is?"

"Strangers meeting in some exotic location. The *Orient Express* has always figured in my dreams. In the days when passengers dressed to the nines for dinner." And undressed in leisure, he added to himself.

"We'll need help. I don't know if our friends can create a scene then butt out."

"If they can, would you...indulge me?"

"I guess so. Yes. We'll need clothes and someplace private to... You know."

"Yeah, I know. First, we'll need to decide when."

"Since we're running out of time, I thought you wanted to leave, er, begin now."

"I meant what era. And from where to where?"

"It's your fantasy. You pick."

"You may regret it," he warned.

"I trust you. Up to a point."

"All right. Herma-Frodie, I choose the year 1889. Route us from Istanbul to Paris. And make sure Mademoiselle Celine has a stateroom with a bath."

"You have to specify all that?"

"The later-era trains only had basins in the compartments. The toilet was at one end of the sleeping car."

"I don't suppose they had showers in 1889," she said, her expression hopeful.

"I don't suppose they did."

"Celine and Keefe leave everything to Herma-Frodie."

"We take care of everything."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Celine murmured.

Chapter Seven

Before they left on their “trip”, Celine insisted that Herma show her the clothing she would wear. The pit of excitement in her stomach became a pit of dismay.

“No! I will *not* wear a corset. Nor will I wear that ridiculous ass-enhancer. My butt is big enough, thank you very much.”

“Called bustle, not ass-enhancer. Is latest fashion for Earth-year.”

“I don’t care! Conjure me something simpler, something that doesn’t require my wearing an Iron Maiden.”

“Iron Maiden not garment. Was instrument of torture.”

“Exactly. Just like corsets and bustles were instruments of torture.”

“Herma show Celine choices. She make. Herma not responsible if Celine not fit in.”

“I swear I’ll hold you blameless,” Celine said, her hand over her heart.

“What means blameless? And how does Celine hold it or not?”

“Never mind.” She computer-paged through the choices of costumes, including nightwear, and finally settled on a variety of outfits for day and one for evening.

“Keefe not like one evening gown. Celine need at least two more. Trip last three days if weather not snow bind train.”

“Snowbound,” Celine corrected, frowned at her own incorrect English, then said, “Tough. Celine—I’m only taking one evening gown. After all, Keefe only needs one tuxedo.”

“Herma give up.”

“Good! I mean, thank you, Herma.”

“Enjoy fuck, er, trip.”

Keefe came into the living room. Herma sidled up to him and whispered something in his ear.

"Are you sure you can't fix it?" he said.

"Will try. Cannot guarantee."

"Okay." He shrugged then said, "*Hamam*."

Finding herself half-naked and kneeling on a terrycloth-like mat, Celine yelped.

Keefe grinned down at her. "Welcome to the *hamam*, Mademoiselle Celine. Enjoy your bath."

With that, he vanished.

Resigned to her fate, Celine decided to enjoy this experience as much as possible. So she questioned everything. Her garb, such as it was, consisted of a large towel, fringed at both ends, that covered her from her armpits to the middle of her thighs. Called a *pestemal*, hers was a green-and-pink stripe made of silk and cotton.

Donning exquisitely carved wooden pattens, called *naline*, she followed her female attendant to the *tepistarium*, where the woman used a brass bowl called the *tas* to pour water over Celine's hair and body.

The torture began with the application of the *kese*, a rough cloth mitt the woman used to scour unseen dirt from Celine's pores. After an initial discomfort, it began to feel like a bracing massage or the lapping of a rough-tongued cat. No! she silently pleaded. She wasn't going anywhere near *lapping*.

The soaping mitt, made of date-palm fibers, felt soft and soothing. Celine closed her eyes and reluctantly imagined Keefe stroking the mitt down her neck and spine, along the backs of her legs and up to her neck once more. Over her shoulders, avoiding her swelling breasts and hardening nipples, then skimming her ribs. Her laugh turned to a moan when the mitt grazed her mons before it continued down the length of her legs then returned to wipe the juncture of her thighs and torso.

Her juices began to flow. Her skin heated with embarrassment and need. She tried to open her eyes but her lids felt weighted and glued to her cheeks. Every nerve ending tingled but she couldn't move. Not a finger, not a toe obeyed her silent commands to twitch or curl. But when the mitt flitted through the hairs of her mound, her thighs fell open. When it stroked her labia then rubbed her clit every muscle in her body clenched against the onslaught of her orgasm.

A tender kiss brushed her lips then a rough baritone murmured at the tip of her ear, "Just something for you to look forward to, sweet Celine."

She opened her eyes and realized she was alone, except for the woman who was bathing her.

At last, the woman used the *tas* again to rinse her, then swathed her in towels, one around her hair like a turban, one around her shoulders and one around her waist. She then applied makeup and attar of roses at all Celine's pulse points, even those near her mons.

Every implement, used or not, was returned to its original wooden box or brass case. These were then packaged for transport in an outer bundle of heavily embroidered red velvet. She was dressed in a vest and loose trousers, called the *shalvar*, made of fine felt cloth. A sheer white muslin cloth edged with *aga* crochet was placed over her hair.

"To soak up any remaining moisture. The *shalvar* will bring you happiness on your wedding night," the attendant explained before she and the entire *hamam* vanished.

Celine found herself, *hamam* bundle still in hand, standing in front of an imposing edifice. Odd, she could read all the squiggly figures above the high Moorish arch and knew she had at last arrived at the Sirkedje railway station.

An enormous hat, perched precariously at a jaunty angle over her right eye, kept her from gawking at the dome and minaret-like columns. Her narrow skirt, fortunately, flared from knee to ankle and allowed her to walk without impediment. But every step aroused her. Was that how Edwardian women aroused themselves? Did the form-

fitting skirts and gowns enhance their pleasure when their legs, their labia rubbed together?

A little breathless at the thought, she followed a man in an *Orient* uniform of royal blue and arrived at the train itself. She was handed off to a porter and traipsed along the distinctive royal blue cars until they reached her compartment. The conductor and porter helped her up the stairs and a steward led her to her compartment.

Her stomach felt like a thousand butterflies had taken up residence, she was so excited. Because of this journey or because of Keefe's fantasy?

The Orient Express was legendary for its luxurious appointments, impeccable service and breathtaking route through the European countryside. Passengers weren't even disturbed when the train passed from one country to the next, only stopping long enough to change engines. Everything else was handled by the conductor who had taken her passport.

"Would Madame care for tea or an *aperitif*?" the steward asked while she removed her hat and gawked.

Out of habit she glanced at the diamond-encrusted watch pinned to her shirtwaist bodice. She laughed at herself. The time did not matter. She was "on holiday" as the Brits said. Besides, somewhere in the galaxy the sun had fallen over the yardarm.

"A *Campari* cocktail, please. Up, not on the rocks, with a lime twist instead of lemon."

"*Oui, Madame*," he said and stepped outside.

She looked around the compartment, savoring the marquetry inlaid with ivory, the multicolored tapestry covered banquettes, the art deco glass doors that hid the overhead shelf containing her overnight bag and *hamam* case. A faint scent, cedar perhaps, lingered in the air along with ageless perfumes and pipe tobacco. She found the scents intriguing, redolent of more than a thousand years of history.

Her steward knocked and came in, holding a tray with an ice bucket, cocktail shaker and two ice-frosted glasses.

"Monsieur wishes to share Madame's aperitif. And her company."

"He does, does he?" She glanced behind the steward and saw another man, a tall, dark-haired, blue-eyed specimen of the attractive kind.

She said, "This is a private compartment, m'sieur, and I wish it to remain so."

"But, Madame, there is nowhere else for me to sit," said the stranger, easing past her steward. He took her hand and brushed his lips over her knuckles.

The butterflies in her tummy began to hum and her fingers tingled.

"There is always the baggage car." She strove for cool indifference but her voice trembled. So did her hand, which she reluctantly withdrew from his.

"Alas, Madame, the baggage car is stacked to the rafters," the steward said. He released a table between the two banquettes, placed the tray on it then paced to the door. "I shall see if I can find another place for Monsieur, if Madame wishes."

"Madame wishes."

The steward bowed then closed the door.

"Shall I pour?" the stranger asked, gesturing at the cocktail shaker in its icy cocoon.

"I suppose," Celine said as ungraciously as she could.

"By the way, my name's Keefe." When she grunted, he added, "And you are Madame... Feel free to fill in the blank."

"First, it's Mademoiselle. Second," politeness forced her to say, "my name is Celine." She carefully took the glass from his hand. She didn't want to touch him again. Touching him did strange things to her nerves. Sighing, resigned to his company, she sat.

He sat as well and raised his glass. "To new friends."

"To our steward's success in finding you alternate quarters."

He chuckled, a low, rumbling like the sound of faraway thunder.

She'd always loved the sound of thunder on her home world of Venus. That and the wind and rainstorms that infrequently swept the natural mountains and manmade rivers and lakes.

"Are you traveling on business?" she asked. The slightly sweet, slightly tart cocktail relaxed her. She leaned back and enjoyed the view of her companion's craggy features and delightfully masculine physique.

Quite the country gentleman, he wore a herringbone jacket over what appeared to be a blue cable-knit sweater, trousers that hugged powerful thighs and brogues polished to a high shine.

"One doesn't normally take the *Orient* on business. You?"

"Oh, this 'one' travels for pure pleasure." She slipped off her shoes and tucked her feet under her. Again compelled by politeness and, she silently admitted, his beguiling smile, she said, "Are you from here?"

"I live on the North American continent. You?"

"Yes." She laughed. "I have the feeling I'm talking with someone in the legal profession."

"Why's that?" He looked amused and a little surprised.

"Could it be that, one, you don't volunteer information and two, when you do answer, you pose another question?"

His hand over his heart, he said, "Guilty as charged, Celine."

Her name on his lips was whisper-soft. It raised the fine hairs on her arms and nape. Shivering, not from chill but from heat, she pulled an afghan over her lap.

"Should I consider you a hostile witness?" she said.

"Why would you?"

"You only answer direct questions."

His smile only touched the corners of his chiseled lips. She missed the wider one that revealed his even, brilliantly white teeth and his dimples. More, she missed the

appreciation in his sapphire blue eyes when he stared at her, although she envied his thick black lashes now resting against his cheekbones.

"Maybe you should continue asking direct questions," he suggested, opening his eyes.

When that discerning gaze focused again on her face, she licked her dry lips.

An inconvenient chime sounded from an invisible speaker.

"I believe that's our first summons to dinner. Which gives us just enough time to change."

"Ch-change?"

He swept a hand from his wide shoulders to his feet. Evening wear replaced his casual clothing, transmuting them to a traditional black tuxedo and a red cummerbund. Even his brogues morphed into patent-leather shoes.

Standing, mimicking his sweeping gesture, her arm crossed her body without result.

"May I try?" Once again amusement laced his voice but his eyes showed only helpfulness.

"Please." She wanted asperity but found only a plea in her voice.

She turned her back and waited for him to unfasten her dress.

He turned her to face him and placed his hands on her shoulders. Looking deeply into her eyes, he said, "Evening gown, Grecian, red. No, make that emerald-green and make my cummerbund match."

"No," she countermanded. "Too wedding-ish. Black for both."

A full-length Cheval mirror on an oak stand appeared and reflected their images. They looked so perfectly suited, Celine sighed. Even barefoot, her head could rest comfortably on his shoulder. Heels didn't change the image. They remained a striking-looking couple.

Opening the corridor door, Keefe held out his arm.

"Après vous, Celine."

She shut her eyes, drew a deep, courage-seeking breath and stepped into the corridor. The train hit a rough spot on the tracks and nudged her into his arms.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"I'm not." He tightened his grasp on her waist then kissed her.

She sank into him, breast to chest, thigh to thigh. He reached for the door handle to her compartment but rubbed her back instead. He wanted, needed, to bury his cock in her but sensed she wasn't as ready for sex as he was. Besides, he told himself, getting there was almost as much fun as being there. Almost.

Easing her to arm's length, he nodded at an approaching couple then took Celine's hand and led her toward the dining car. They arrived to find diners halfway through their appetizers. The maître d' seated them and recommended a bottle of champagne.

"Dom Perignon 'ninety," Keefe said while their waiter laid a linen napkin in Celine's lap. Her eyes widened then shifted toward the man hovering at her shoulder.

"Oui, Monsieur. Dom Perignon, 1880," said the maître d'.

"No, m'sieur. Old-Earth 1990. My wife is particularly fond of that year. You do have it."

The maître d' looked confused. *Damn*, Keefe thought. He should have remembered that 1990 had not yet occurred in this reality. Still, this was a fantasy and anything should be possible.

"But, Keefe, it's so expen—"

Taking her hand, he said, *"Darling, it's our anniversary. Nothing is trop cher."*

"Right away, Monsieur. Madame," he added, bowing and snapping his fingers at the waiter. *"You will treat our guests with all respect, Marcel."*

"But she wears no ring. Neither does he," Marcel whispered as they sidled away like Tweedledum and Tweedledee.

Celine blushed. "He blew in my ear," she whispered and lowered her gaze to the menu.

"Can't say I blame him." Several minutes later, Keefe asked, "Have you decided?"

Her long, dark, feathery lashes lifted to reveal her incredible green eyes. "Too many choices."

"May I order for you?"

"Please!"

The sommelier arrived with their champagne, poured it and bowed away. A different waiter approached but, waving him away, Keefe said loud enough to be heard throughout the dining car, "Send Marcel, please."

"But, sir... Yes, sir."

When Marcel appeared, Keefe patted his breast pocket and removed a velvet box. Opening it, he took Celine's hand and slipped an emerald and diamond ring on her marriage finger.

The emeralds were crudely cut but polished to a high shine. They fell like an avalanche with the diamonds interspersed and glittering like snow on a sunny day.

Thank you, my friends, he thought, blessing Herma-Frodie. Then he said, "Happy anniversary, darling." Leaning across the table, he kissed her. All the diners applauded, some called out their congratulations.

"*Ma femme et moi* will begin with a small cup of French onion soup, sherried *au Careme*. For our entrees, we'll have *Magret de Canard et fois gras* with *fricasee de legumes printaniers*. Ask the chef to prepare the vegetables— No, I'm sure he'll do them just right."

"*C'est une femme, monsieur*. Our chef is a woman."

Keefe felt his jaw drop. In this era a female chef was rare and treasured.

Celine clapped her hands and said, "*Tres bien! Vive l'egalite!*"

"We'll finish with a small *salade endive*. And, Marcel, please check with me between courses. We don't want to be rushed."

"Very good, Monsieur. Do you wish wine with dinner? We have an excellent old-Earth Chateau —"

"The champagne will suffice, *merci*," Celine said. Her eyes told Keefe she had no intention of getting tipsy. When Marcel was out of earshot, she asked, "Do you think I am *trop grosse*?"

"That's a term I'm unfamiliar with."

"See if you can guess. A *small* cup of soup, a *small* salad."

He laughed. "No, I don't think you're fat. In fact, I think you're perfect, possibly — *non, sans doute* — the most beautiful woman I have ever met."

"Flattery," she said through her own laugh, "will not get you a bed in my compartment, Keefe."

"Then I'll have to try something else, won't I?"

She hummed then turned her attention to her soup. "Such as?" she said finally.

"I'm thinking of seduction."

Chapter Eight

Standing in the corridor outside her compartment, Celine looked up and found Keefe's gaze focused on her forehead. Brushing at her brow, she said, "Have I missed a spot of butter or something?"

He caught her hand, drew it down, then traced a feathery path across her hairline. "These little corkscrew curls have driven me crazy ever since I first saw you today. I suppose that is their purpose, to drive men crazy." He fingered another curl at her ear as if testing its texture.

A shiver, hot with yearning, ran down her spine. She thought, *Were I a sensible woman, I'd send him away*. But she wasn't feeling terribly sensible at the moment—not with that blue, blue gaze caressing her face, like butterfly kisses applied by his long, thick lashes.

"Would—would you like to come in for a nightcap? I think I have some cognac in my case."

"I'd like that. Very much."

Opening the door, she felt his hand on her back then at her waist, large and warm, his touch far too brief. He moved into the compartment, leaving her to shut the door or leave it open as she chose. Discretion being the better part of *indiscretion*, she admitted to herself, she closed it, turned and found him looking at her like he'd like to devour her.

"I've changed my mind. I want—" Oh, Goddess, the "eat" word again.

"Champagne instead? Or we could combine them into a champagne cocktail."

"No. I think I'll ring for the steward to turn down my bed. Then he can escort you to wherever he's found for you to sleep."

"You *think*? I don't. I think you'll sit here." Holding her shoulders, he guided her to the banquette and pressed her down. "On the other hand, I shall pour our nightcap," he did, "and sit here, across from you."

She bolted to her feet, intending to toss him out on his ear. He sat and quirked an eyebrow. She sat and rested her tension-tight shoulders against the banquette's back.

"Do you enjoy word games, Celine?"

"I don't know that I've ever played a word game, Mr. Keefe."

"Just Keefe. We are, after all, married."

She tried to remove the ring he'd given her at dinner but it wouldn't come off. "I believe you have enchanted this ring, Keefe. But if you think this will gain you access to my bed, um, my compartment, think again. And you can count on my returning this ring. As soon as I can remove it."

"Constantinople."

She looked at him, her confusion obvious.

"What do you think of when I say 'Constantinople'?"

Sighing, she said, "*Hamam*."

"Did you enjoy your bath?"

Fighting a blush, she told him about her experience in the *hamam* but left out the more prurient details. They continued talking about a variety of subjects. Celine found herself relaxing even when Keefe occasionally threw in a word in his game.

Looking out the window—or was he only studying their reflections in the dark glass?—he said, "Intercourse," then pinned her with his laser blue gaze.

She felt a blush creep up her neck to her cheeks. "Talk," she said at last.

"That wasn't the first thing that came to mind. Tell me." His soft voice soothed her nervousness and increased the level of intimacy in the compartment.

"S-sex."

"Cock."

"Rooster."

He tsk'd at her. "Stay with me, Celine. Cock," he repeated.

"P-penis."

"Quim."

She frowned then shrugged.

"Quim-sticker."

"I don't understand," she confessed.

"You will," he promised. Standing, he took her hand and pulled her to her feet.

Without seeming to move, he opened a door between her compartment and another.

The subtle scent of roses wafted to her. Candlelight cast a soft, golden glow over the room. The muted clickety-clack of the train wheels along the tracks added a musical sound. Keefe's hand on her naked shoulder raised her awareness of him. The warmth of his body along her back surrounded her in a cocoon both comforting and stimulating. When he turned her to face him, the touch of his lips on hers felt gentle but insistent. She could smell the heady cognac on his breath and taste it on his tongue when he mated it with hers.

Her mind sprouted the words he'd sown there. Cock, quim and quim-sticker. Cock, she understood. The others she still did not but hoped he would tell her. Soon.

She could feel his cock against her pelvis. It pulsed and lengthened. She felt an answering quiver in her womb.

"I've wanted to do this all day too." His hands drifted over her neck to her hair. "The Gibson Girl style is exquisite on you, Celine, but I prefer your hair down."

Where he put the hairpins, she had no idea. With her hair cascading over her shoulders and down her back, her head felt several pounds lighter. His fingers massaged her scalp. Her gratified growl sounded like a kitten's purr.

"I could get used to this," she murmured, feeling like every curl he stroked had nerve endings, nerve endings that tingled and wanted his hands on her skin.

Against her arched neck, he muttered something she couldn't discern.

Now kissing her lips, his tongue persuading hers to part and allow him entrance, his hand moved down her back. Her bodice slid like silken water over her sensitive breasts. He inched his lower body away and the gown pooled at her feet. Somehow, he'd removed his own clothes.

"Have you read the *Kama Sutra*?" he asked, holding her at arm's length.

She wrinkled her nose, making him laugh. "No but I believe it's some fantasy about how women should behave when having sex. Of course, it was written by a man."

"To advise men how to ensure their women achieve bliss. If I remember correctly, when first married, the man and woman do no more than talk and hold hands for the first three days. They don't actually have intercourse until day ten. Hindi men, obviously, have a great deal of control."

As he talked, he drew her to the turned down bed. He sat and tugged her down astride him. Wrapping his arms and legs around her, he lay back, leaving her no choice but to follow.

"This is called the Milk and Water Embrace," he whispered.

"I feel like we're melting into each other's skin."

"Me too. Which is the purpose of this exercise. It instills trust."

Gazing into her eyes, he rubbed her back. She rubbed his, until all the tension left their bodies. And yet she was very aware of his erection between her nether lips and her own juices seeping over him. Cocooned in his embrace, she felt cherished and safe.

She closed her eyes and felt as though he was touching her all over. An old-Earth phrase ran through her mind. "Roman hands and Russian fingers". She didn't mind, even though she wondered if he had two sets of hands to stroke her in so many places at once.

"Mmmm," she sighed and relaxed completely in his arms.

When she revived, she lay on her stomach, purring like a cat. She could feel his weight on her thighs and his hands moving, gliding, up and down her back.

"Turn over."

Complying, she watched while he poured something viscous and subtly scented into his palm and rubbed his hands together. He massaged her neck and shoulders, arms, hands and belly.

"M-my breasts are feeling neglected," she complained, her voice a mere whisper. They felt swollen, her nipples distended and achy.

He merely grinned and moved his hands in sweeping strokes over her belly and rib cage. His fingers touched the underside of her breasts, taunting them but never enveloping them completely.

He shifted and captured her foot. He pulled on each toe, rubbed between them then kissed his way from the sole of her foot to the apex of her thighs.

"Please." She spread her legs and pressed his head between them.

His hair felt like sable, cool and soft between her fingers.

"To hell with taking time," he said, his warm breath flowing over her clit. His tongue lapped at her then plunged deep inside.

"Goddess, Goddess, God –!" she cried as wave after golden wave washed over and through her.

He slid up her body and kissed her. Mating his tongue with hers, she could taste her cum on his tongue, on his lips. She couldn't believe how quickly he could arouse her again. Still kissing her, he stroked her nipples, paying homage to each in turn, groaning deep in his throat as if her own moans, her sensitive and reactive nipples gave him equal pleasure.

"Keefe."

"Hush, my love. I'm going to make you come again just by stroking your nipples. Your beautiful, sensitive nipples. Don't be shy, Celine. Don't deny either of us the pleasure of your climax."

His magical voice, his hot breath, his tender yet passionate kisses, his relentless stroking fingers, all of him brought back those golden waves.

"Come for me, love. Come for me."

Sobbing his name, she rode the waves once more.

Why does it feel so different? she wondered, so relaxed she could barely think. Once she gave in to his lust—to her own needs—they'd humped like rabbits. As if neither of them had ever had sex before and would never have it again. They'd indulged so many times she'd lost count.

But this time... It felt like making love. It seemed they had all the time in the world. That they could touch and kiss, bring each other to the edge of frenzy then let it subside. Then, without regret, without fulfillment, start the process all over again.

A touch. A tender kiss. A feeling of safety she'd never felt. Was this what lovemaking *should* feel like? Was she falling in love with Keefe? Did she want to fall in love with him?

The thought almost banished her euphoria. She needed to think, not give in to these wondrous emotions. His fingers gliding gently over her breasts, down her belly, into her. His lips warm against her ear. His voice husky with tender yearning.

"To hell with taking time," he whispered again then filled her.

Still that feeling of completion, of a connection so deep it touched their souls.

"Keefe." *I love you, Keefe.*

She was still spasming when he entered her, plunging deep. Her hips rose to meet his. She felt a brief stab of pain unlike any she'd ever felt. Then she took him, willingly, into her body. Into her soul.

"It was *you* in the *hamam*!" Her voice sounded giddy with relief and satiation. With love.

"Who else would I allow to bring you such exquisite pleasure?"

* * * * *

In the middle of the Pont Neuf they kissed for the last time. The Bridge of Sighs in Venice would have better matched Celine's mood as she watched Keefe leave. He paced away in one direction, she in the other. She looked back. He did not.

They said goodbye in Paris.

That's the way strangers-meeting fantasies always ended. They walked away and never saw each other again.

But she would see Keefe again, she reminded herself. She didn't know if giving him her true virginity would unlock the doors of their prison but she suspected it would. Frodie's harping that Celine held the key to freedom couldn't mean anything else.

And she and Keefe still had to get through Alyson and Garven's trial and decide what to do about Dr. Jaap and Herma-Frodie. Yes, she'd see Keefe again.

The thought gave her little pleasure. The next time they said goodbye would truly be the last time. And there'd be no farewell kiss.

* * * * *

Back in Dr. Jaap's sex den, Celine pulled clothes out of her miraculously recovered suitcase. Herma floated behind her like an anxious dresser on opening night at the opera.

"Celine not like trip? Accommodations not to Celine's standards? Herma-Frodie try to make bathroom with shower but could not. Is lack of shower what make Celine upset?"

"Good Goddess no. Herma-Frodie provided beautiful everything. Even the *hamam* was wonderful." All her period clothing had vanished with the *Orient*, but she still had her *hamam* bundle. And the ring Keefe had given her at dinner.

Herma sighed, a relieved gust of breath. "Keefe worry Celine not like room with no bathing facility. Have Herma send Celine to bathhouse so Celine start trip fresh."

"What I don't understand, among many other things, is why I still have *that*." She pointed at the red velvet bundle sitting on the bed beside her suitcase.

"*Hamam* real for thousands of years," Herma said as if that explained everything. Celine must have looked puzzled because the hermaphrodite continued. "Not virtual. Celine can go back there, bring home new bath bundle in real time. Celine understand?"

"Sort of. As much as Celine—as much as I understand anything that's happened in the last week. But I still don't understand about the ring."

Herma shrugged then said, "Five days, three hours, twenty-seven—"

"Gotcha." Keefe's favorite interruption made Celine's throat and eyes burn.

"Celine miss Keefe."

"No. Yes. Maybe." She pulled on her own underwear and sighed at the bittersweet memories. No more bustier with cutouts for her nipples. No more split-crotch panties to ease Keefe's penetration. No more Keefe. Which, probably, was for the best but felt a lot like dying. She'd get over it. Somehow. Someday.

"Keefe say he see Celine tomorrow at courthouse. He bring Frodie so Herma-Frodie be whole again. Celine take Herma home with her, yes?"

Maybe Keefe was sorry he'd left without really saying goodbye. Maybe he'd decided that keeping Herma separated from Frodie would prevent Dr. Jaap's misusing them anymore. Maybe Keefe had taken Frodie so he had an excuse to see Celine again. Maybe pigs *could* fly.

"Celine take Herma home with her, yes?" the computer repeated, now sounding anxious.

"Yes," Celine said, tugging a sweater over her head and smoothing it over her hips. "If Herma will tell me how Herma-Frodie..."

"Copulate?" Herma supplied in a cheerful voice.

"Make love," Celine corrected with a wistful sigh.

"Is easy. Frodie have cock like barnacle. *Very* long. Once Frodie's cock find Herma in collection of other females, Frodie very certain of welcome in Herma's quim."

Laughing, Celine picked up her belongings and said, "Goddess blast him, Keefe never did explain that word."

"Herma bet Keefe *show* Celine what word mean."

"You'd win. I think."

* * * * *

Keefe looked around his apartment and sighed, relieved to be home. True, compared to Dr. Jaap's sex den, his home felt spartan. But at least the couch was a couch, the chairs were chairs and all of them would remain just what they really were. Flinging his suitcase on his bed, he released the locks and jumped back, startled, when Frodie sprang forth like a bee on the search for honey. Or someone to sting.

"Where Herma?" his Jeeves-like valet for the night demanded.

"You'll see her tomorrow," Keefe reminded him. "Herma's with Celine, remember?"

"What is tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is..." How could he explain? Ah, the computer understood time but not the concept of today, tomorrow or next week. "Tomorrow will arrive in three hours, seventeen minutes and twenty seconds. Frodie will see Herma eight hours later."

"Why so long? If tomorrow arrive in three hours, why Frodie not see Herma then?"

"Because we won't see Celine until eight o'clock tomorrow morning and Herma's with Celine."

"Why not Herma with Frodie and Keefe? Why Celine not here?"

Keefe suppressed a groan. "We—I already explained all this, Frodie."

"Celine and Herma having sleepover. Why not having sleepover with Keefe and Frodie? Herma-Frodie can sleep. Not need as much as Celine and Keefe but can sleep."

"The problem is when Celine and I are together, we don't sleep. We—"

"Make love," Frodie supplied gleefully. "Keefe love Celine. That why Celine not able to remove ring Keefe give her. Ring bound to Celine by Keefe's love. Is true, yes?"

"God and Goddess help us. Is true, yes."

Chapter Nine

At home, Celine faced her grandmother's image on the vid screen then opened the audio link between them.

"Bon soir, Grandmere," she said, smiling fondly at the older woman. Ms. Jynx, known as Hyjynx in her days as a sex counselor, smiled back.

"Bon soir, ma petite." The Pekinese on her lap obviously thought she was talking to him. He surged to his feet and lapped puppy kisses over her chin and cheeks. Making kissing noises, she put the pup on the floor and shooed him away.

Some things never changed, Celine thought. Ms. Jynx always had a pet of some kind or other—in her lap, around her feet or on her bed. Celine forced the grin from her lips. Judging by the look in her grandmother's eyes, neither levity nor memories were on this evening's menu.

"I heard your Miss Alyson has rescinded her own surrogate license."

My *Miss Alyson*? Celine thought but said, "She has." More than she wanted to excuse her own culpability, she wanted to know who had snitched to Ms. Jynx.

"I assume she did so because of Mr. Garven."

Statement, not question. Celine answered with matching nonchalance although her heartbeat speeded up. "I agree with that assumption."

"The same Mr. Garven who has donated his painting of 'Venus Rising from the Sea' to the Venusian Museum of Art? The painting that is obviously of your Miss Alyson?"

Son of a bitch! Celine vowed she would kill the man! The same man who'd promised, his hand over his heart, that he would never display a nude portrait of Alyson—on Earth.

"I don't know of any other Garven who also paints nudes," Celine said.

"Neither do I. So what are you going to do about this debacle?"

"Cut out his heart?" Celine suggested, only half-joking. "Fine Alyson?"

"No matter how *just* those options seem, neither is viable. I love you, child, and I won't see you imprisoned for murder. And since Alyson no longer has the means to support herself," she shrugged, a purely Gallic gesture that seemed to deny her Venusian heritage, "who would pay her fines?"

"Garven," Celine said with no hesitation.

"Will Mr. Garven pay *your* fines as well?"

Celine blanched. She couldn't see herself but she felt her blood freefall from her brain to her feet. She knew she looked pallid and pasty.

"I doubt he'd be so generous on my behalf," she said, struggling not to show her grandmother how scared the words had made her.

"You're frightened," Jynx said. "Good."

"I charged you with Alyson's care, yet you introduced her to a known womanizer, an infamous womanizer. Don't tell me you didn't know Mr. Garven's reputation. You should have checked him out before you let them meet. Careless and not at all like you, Celine."

Jynx raised her hand, forestalling any response Celine might offer. Since she didn't know what to say, she kept quiet. She wanted to hang her head but her grandmother had trained her to face adversity head-on.

"Which means, since I know you so well, that you were afraid for Alyson. Afraid of someone other than Mr. Garven."

Her severe expression faded, the loving grandmother replacing the Guild's directress.

Celine brushed away her tears and met her grandmother's eyes.

"It's time, Celine, for you to tell me about Wyatt and what he did to you."

"I can't. I promised —"

"Wyatt is out of control. Mrs. Major Peter told me she's afraid of what he might do, who he might hurt next. He hasn't done anything since you refused to see him anymore. But she's afraid whatever it is that makes him cruel is building up inside him. When he breaks this time, he'll explode."

She sighed, a shaky sound Celine had never heard before. "Wyatt's grandmother is afraid he'll kill someone. That he'll *murder* someone. Soon.

"It's time, past time, for you to tell me what Wyatt did to you."

Celine nodded in agreement. Before Wyatt, she'd shared everything with Jynx, the directress as well as her beloved *Grandmere*. She *did* have to tell Jynx but she hated the thought that her grandmother might never forgive her for what she'd done to Wyatt. Worse, that Jynx couldn't forgive her for what Celine hadn't done for him.

"He," Celine began, her lips, her mouth, her very soul arid. She felt as dry as a single grain of desert sand. "He buried me. Drugged me first, then put me in a coffin and buried me.

"On Halloween." She laughed, a bitter sound. "It was Halloween, three years ago. He kept yelling at me through some sort of air pipe, 'Trick or treat, trick or treat. Fuck me, Cel, and we'll have our treat. No fuck, no treat, no life for you, Celine.'"

"You could have burned your way out," Jynx said, her expression calm but her voice trembling with outrage.

"Could have and would have, except," Celine licked her parched lips, "except he buried his niece with me.

"So I made a deal with the devil. When he set us free, I burned him. Burned him so badly, he spent weeks in recovery."

"The child? What happened to the child?"

Celine's gaze lifted from her hands. Hands that were meant to heal, not to destroy. "She was a 'bot, some *thing* he'd made to force me to have sex with him. I tried...tried to warn his grandmother but she —"

"She thought it was just another of his childlike jokes." Jynx snorted. "Childlike. Not childish. Not dangerous. And —"

"She blamed me for his burns. Said I was lucky he didn't file charges."

"Which *you* should have done."

Celine tried to shrug but her muscles hurt too badly to make the gesture as casual, as indifferent, as she wanted. "We made another deal. I wouldn't charge him and he'd leave Alyson alone."

"And you believed him? Poor darling, you've always trusted too easily."

"Not anymore." Celine drew a deep, unsteady breath. "Can you convince Mrs. Major Peter to get Wyatt some help?"

"I'll do better than that. She'll agree to get him help or I'll have him arrested."

"Grandmere," Celine began, a warning tone in her voice.

"It seems some of my favorite jewelry went missing after one of my parties. Wyatt's fingerprints are all over my bedroom safe."

"Blackmail, Grandmere? What party? Where?"

"The one I'm going to throw next Saturday night. To celebrate Mr. Garven's magnificent painting of Alyson."

"I don't want Alyson anywhere near Wyatt."

"Although they're cousins—Wyatt and Garven and Keefe—I'm sure Mr. Garven will protect Alyson. And Keefe will protect you."

"Cousins?" Celine sputtered but Jynx had already cut their connection.

* * * * *

Sitting in the almost empty witness room that Monday morning, Celine watched Alyson's tears stream down her pale cheeks. Odd, she felt no sympathy for the woman until Garven's fingers pressed then released her shoulders. His comfort made Alyson cry harder. If his concern was an act, he was damn good at it.

"Goddess, Celine, I'm sorry. Please believe I never meant this to go so far."

Celine lifted her gaze from Alyson's shoulders to her tear-ravaged face. Her own eyes, she suspected, were empty of any emotion. She'd already done her share of crying. She'd given her true virginity, her heart, to a man who'd sought only physical gratification and revenge for what she'd done to Wyatt. As if her conscience hadn't punished her enough over the last three years!

"It's all right, Alyson. It *will* be all right, once Keefe gets done crucifying me. Which he has every right to do." At least in his own mind and, to a lesser extent, in her own.

"Not as far as we're concerned," Garven said, hunkering down in front of Celine and offering a wrinkled but clean handkerchief.

"Keefe won't call either of you as witnesses. I don't think he ever intended to let either of you testify. He respects you too much to let anyone, especially Michaels, humiliate you."

Celine saw Garven's darted glance at Alyson. So much respect and support and love were in that brief look, Celine sighed. Should she tell Alyson what she suspected about Garven? That he and Keefe had designed this farce to punish Celine and Alyson for Wyatt's physical and emotional pain? No. If Garven truly loved Alyson, telling her would only make Alyson hate her. And if he only pretended to love her?

"It isn't fair. Keefe has no right to question you, especially in front of Michaels."

Celine sighed and shook her head. "We—I gave him the right when I agreed to testify for you, Alyson."

"There is a way out of this," Garven said. "Alyson and I will withdraw our complaints against each other."

"That might work, as far as your attorneys are concerned. But I doubt Judge Joren will shrug it off so easily.

"Michaels may be curious about your dropping the charges but won't care as long as he's paid. Joren will demand to know why, after all the acrimony between you,

you're both giving up. Keefe—" Tears stung her eyes and clogged her throat. "Keefe will demand his pound of flesh."

"Then let him carve it out of me," Alyson said, sounding stronger and more determined than Celine had ever heard her sound.

"No!" Garven shouted, making Alyson jump and Celine flinch. "I'll take him on." His clenched fists told them exactly how Garven would handle Keefe.

"I don't think assaulting an officer of the court will add anything to a work resume. Not that you need one. You might have told me you're *that*—" Breaking off, Celine shivered. "Speaking of work, Alyson, have you considered what you're going to do now that you can't, um, you know."

"Yes," Garven said, taking Alyson's hand and smiling down at her.

Despite her suspicions, Celine found this gentle side of him rather attractive.

"Yes," Alyson echoed, turning pink. "I'm going to stay home and raise lots and lots of Garven's and my babies."

Smothering her envy, Celine stood. "Before you two fire your attorneys, I think I'll see if Judge Joren will talk with me in private."

"Are you sure you want to see him alone? The way he looked at you while you testified gave me shivers," Alyson said, shivering.

"He's more tolerable than Dr. Jaap. Talk about creepy!"

"I could go with you," Garven offered, looking and sounding sincere.

He rose another notch in Celine's estimation, a fact she wished she'd realized sooner. Before she let Alyson convince her to testify in this mess.

"No thanks but...thanks."

When the door clicked closed, Garven stood and strode toward it.

"Don't lock it," Alyson said softly.

Garven stared at her. Her delft blue eyes seemed even bluer, lit by anticipation and lambent desire. Underneath lay fear and excitement, both, he knew, from the thought of getting caught.

"Are you sure? Keefe will string us up if a bailiff finds us *in flagrante delicto*."

She smiled a smile that combined shy maiden and siren. It made his cock throb.

"Remember that old-Earth car show we had Herma-Frodie create for us?"

Garven grinned. "People all around us, we snuck into that old Whippet and did it. I remember we had a lot of trouble getting your panties off."

She giggled. "And I remember going back to find them the next day."

"Some guy, probably Dr. Jaap, took them home and masturbated while smelling the crotch. You always smell sweet and ready, especially there."

"We won't have those problems today." She stood, smoothed her long skirt then began to inch it up her legs.

"No panties," he said hopefully.

"No crotch. C'mere."

"I don't think I can walk, I'm so hard."

"Then I'll come to you."

By the time they reached each other, she'd tucked her skirt into her waistband and he'd freed his swollen cock from his trousers.

"Table?" he said.

"Wall," she replied. "Goddess, I've missed you."

He chuckled and lifted her onto his erection. "Us too. Uncle Doodle and me."

She began to hum. Knowing she neared her climax, he kissed her hard and swallowed her shout of release.

Chapter Ten

Leaving the witness room, Celine literally ran in to Keefe.

Celine's purse began to whir and buzz. So did Keefe's jacket pocket.

"Herma," Celine whispered, her voice warning of mayhem, "be quiet!"

"Just give us a minute, Frodie. We'll get you two back together as soon as we can."

Keefe looked at Celine and nodded at the witness room door. "How 'bout in there?"

"No! I mean, I think someplace else might be better."

Keefe glared at her. "Tell me Garven isn't in there with Alyson. Tell me they aren't fucking — er, copulating their brains out. What few brain cells they have between them."

"I can't. I suspect they're doing exactly what you think they're doing."

Seeing Keefe's thunderous expression, Celine instinctively placed a soothing hand on his arm. Some of his anger bled away but he still looked fierce, like he wanted to beat someone. Which he obviously already had, judging by the bruises and scrapes on his hands and the reddish-purple-blackness around his left eye.

"They're reconciling," she added, unable to squelch the envy in her voice. She wanted to hate Keefe but couldn't. She'd known she risked everything when she gave her heart to a man who said he loved her but betrayed her at the first opportunity. She and Keefe would never reconcile.

The whirring and buzzing began again, insistent and threatening mayhem of the hermaphroditic kind.

Celine sighed. "One of us could take them into the restroom."

"No!" A grim smile tweaked the corners of Keefe's lips. "They need privacy for their rejoining. Frodie told me."

"Herma didn't say anything, just that they'd never been apart this long."

Keefe frowned then grinned, a smile of pure mischief.

"Give me Herma," he demanded, holding out his hand.

"Keefe, what are you going to do?" Celine did, however, hand over the small makeup compact containing Herma.

Keefe took out the cigarette-case-size container holding Frodie. Grinning like a mad scientist, he strode to the witness room door, thumped on it once and opened the door. He tossed the two cases inside, then slammed the door shut.

Alyson shrieked. Garven swore. Keefe grabbed Celine's hand and tugged her down the long marble hallway.

Panting from running, Celine gasped, "We can't just leave Herma-Frodie to fend for themselves."

"They're among friends. Garven or Alyson, or both, will bring Herma-Frodie home."

Home? Celine thought. *Whose home?*

"Where are we going?" she said.

"Somewhere we can talk," Keefe said, again looking grim and transferring his grip from her hand to her arm.

"Someplace public," she insisted.

"Yeah, someplace public.

They agreed to lunch at the bistro where they'd had their first date. How appropriate they part where it all began!

* * * * *

"So I asked Ms. Jynx how she knew about...about how she knew you and Wyatt are friends," Celine corrected, avoiding Keefe's intense gaze on her face. She was lying to him and feared he'd know it if she let herself meet those discerning blue eyes.

Instead she gazed around at the stone walls and hand-hewn beams supporting the ceiling. Drying herbs hung down, lending their fragrance to the scent of roasting meat. Candles on tables and in rustic chandeliers cast a hazy golden light over the room.

"You were going to say something else," Keefe said, leaning back against the banquette and twirling his wineglass by its stem. "Maybe something about how I beat him up, put him in the hospital and would gladly go to jail for murdering him?"

Oh wow, Celine thought. Somebody else feels guilty about hurting poor, depraved Wyatt!

She looked around the crowded bistro then urged Keefe to lower his voice.

"Your grandmother and mine are friends, confidantes of long standing," Keefe said, his voice dripping sarcasm. "Wyatt and I share a grandmother. The one who bailed him out of every scrape while insisting Garven and I should take responsibility for every one of our...I think she called them 'indiscretions'.

"Oops. Guess I forgot to tell you that the three of us are cousins. Which, in your mind at least, cuts us from the same cloth. Makes Garven and me animals too. Just like Wyatt.

"But," he went on before Celine could say a word, "*you* forgot to tell me what dear Cousin Wyatt did to you."

"It's none of your business."

Celine expected Keefe would jump across the table, shake her until her teeth rattled out of her gums and then strangle her. To death. In front of a restaurant full of eyewitnesses. But no, she thought while he stared at something behind her left shoulder, he was master over his emotions. She, on the other hand too often gave way to hyperbole. At least she had since meeting him.

"None of my business," he repeated amicably and opened his menu. "Have you decided what you want?"

Your head, along with Garven's and Wyatt's, on a platter, she sniped in her mind but said, "French onion soup, a cup, not a bowl. A small salade endive and half, only a

small half-rack of lamb. After all, I have to fit into whatever ridiculous bridesmaid dress Alyson will pick out for me."

The corners of Keefe's mouth twitched but he said indifferently, "I'm sure you'll look beautiful. You always do."

"Thank you. I think."

"I'll have the same as the lady," Keefe said to the suddenly hovering waiter. He handed off their menus then fixed Celine with a gimlet glare. "Why didn't you tell me about Wyatt?"

"I told you it's none... No, I suppose it *is* your business. You gave him a beating I couldn't have given him." She toyed with her silverware then met Keefe's unwavering gaze. "Give me your hands."

"Why?" His voice held nothing but suspicion.

"Your knuckles are still raw. The least I can do for my defender—that's you, knucklehead—is heal them."

He laughed. "Knucklehead, eh?" he said then held out his hands and showed off his scabbed knuckles.

"This may sting," she warned, hovering her hands over his without touching him.

Keefe watched her expressive face, her intense concentration as she focused on his bruised hands. He felt her warmth flow into him. It did sting but only a little. Then she took his hands in hers and heated them until all the pain on his skin, in his bones, around his heart, seemed to burn away. And when she touched him, the awkwardness he'd been feeling fell away too.

"I didn't tell you because I promised Wyatt I wouldn't tell anyone. He promised he'd stay away..."

"From you?"

"Yes."

"And from Alyson."

She looked up sharply then returned her gaze to his hands. "Yes."

"And despite what he did to you, what he intended to do to Alyson... Today, after I beat him, you healed him."

Releasing his hands, she looked at him. "Yes."

"Why?" His calm voice surprised him. He wanted to rage at her, unleash on her all the fury he'd expended on Wyatt. The fury had stayed with him, made him want to beat Wyatt again and again and again. Celine's healing had taken away his anger, had healed his heart as well as his hands.

"I never should have promised him I wouldn't tell. If I couldn't get his—*your* grandparents to listen to me, I should have gone to the police."

"You felt guilty because you kept your promise?"

"As guilty as you felt after you pounded his face into pulp."

"I see."

"Do you? I don't think you do. Not yet. You see, after I burned him three years ago, I didn't heal him. I didn't even stay long enough to check that he got medical attention. That ugliness, *my* ugliness, stayed inside me. It grew until it nearly destroyed what and who I am.

"Besides, I broke a promise I'd made long before I met Wyatt."

"First do no harm."

"Yes." She smiled briefly at the waiter then focused on her soup. "*Grandmere* expected me to replace her as the Guild's directress but, after what I did to Wyatt, that dream died. For both of us."

"Healing Wyatt this time made you feel better about yourself."

"In part. Healing his wounds seemed to heal his mind a little. The doctors he's needed for years will do the rest. They'll give you back your childhood friend."

"I never liked him. I should have beaten him up years ago," Keefe said. "Damn, that soup's hot!"

Celine laughed briefly, grimly. "That's what lying does. It burns the liar."

Garven and Alyson nudged their way into the booth, forcing Celine and Keefe to sit side by side, thigh to thigh.

"Thought we'd find you here," Garven said, helping himself to a chunk of sourdough bread and slathering it with butter. He held it out to Alyson who looked at it longingly but shook her head in refusal.

"He wants me to look like a pig on our wedding day."

"Don't," he said.

"Do," she said.

"What are you doing here?" Keefe said, ending the friendly argument.

"You forgot something. Or rather, *someones*." He took two gold cases out of his jacket pocket and slid one toward Celine. "The two of them are in there," he added, nudging the larger case toward Keefe.

Goddess, Celine thought. *Who gets custody of the kids?*

Garven swallowed another bite of bread before saying, "Judge Joren wants to see us, all of us, in the morning."

"Why?" Keefe demanded.

Alyson giggled nervously. Garven shrugged.

"Jonathan Jacob Jones!" Keefe swore.

"Old coot. Wonder what sexual games he's going to play this time," Celine said with a grim smile.

* * * * *

Arriving at the courthouse the following morning, Celine spotted Judge Joren's clerk and handed him a note for the judge. Fifteen minutes later, the clerk bowed her into the judge's chamber.

Spying Keefe sitting at the judge's desk, she turned to leave. They hadn't resolved anything after lunch yesterday and after what Celine had done to his cousin, she doubted Keefe wanted anything to do with her.

Joren's clerk stood in the doorway, his arms folded across his narrow chest.

Judge Joren frowned at her and squinted over the tops of his wire-rimmed glasses. "Sit down, Miss Celine. It appears we have a lot to discuss."

"I hoped to see you in private, Your Honor."

"Mr. Keefe has a vested interest in that he represents Mr. Garven."

"What I have to say has nothing to do with Garven," she said icily.

"Doesn't it? Mr. Keefe has learned, from Miss Alyson herself, that she wishes to withdraw her complaint against Mr. Garven. What, if anything, do you know about that?"

"She told me the same thing. Garven was with her and said he was going to withdraw his complaint as well."

"So this waste of time—Mr. Michaels', Mr. Keefe's and mine—is due to what? A lovers' quarrel?"

"Neither of them said so but yes, I believe that's what it was."

"So they duped you, along with the rest of us?"

"No!"

"Sit down, Celine. We'll be here awhile," Keefe said, voice and expression devoid of emotion.

"No they didn't dupe you? Or no—"

"They fooled themselves, Judge. At least that's what I think. They let anger and fear escalate until those emotions got out of their control."

She desperately wanted to look at Keefe and gauge his reaction. She meant the words for him more than for Alyson and Garven but she was afraid she'd cry if his

expression said he didn't care, that he'd gotten his revenge and that was all that mattered to him. But if that were true, why had he beaten Wyatt?

"What's to stop those emotions getting out of control again? And again and again?"

Celine felt like her lungs had morphed into bellows, she was sighing so much. Focusing on the judge, trying to keep Keefe out of her peripheral vision, she said, "How much do you know about Venusian women, Judge Joren?"

"Not much. Other than the virginity regeneration thing, of course."

"Of course," she said dryly. Judging by Joren's frown and Keefe's cough, she must have sounded caustic. "In addition to the *virginity regeneration thing*, Venusian women, once they commit to a man, are completely, utterly and ridiculously faithful."

"Have you proof of this unreasonable, er, remarkable condition?"

"There are countless records. On Venus."

"Getting them here in a timely manner is impossible," the judge mumbled. "I want to clear this up quickly. Today, preferably. Tomorrow at the latest. Don't you know someone here, on Earth, who could testify to your allegation?"

Celine shook her head but Keefe—Goddess blast him—said, "Is your grandmother still alive? During our incarceration, Celine told me that her grandmother was a sex sur—counselor," Keefe explained, looking at Celine rather than the judge.

"Is that true, Miss Celine?"

"Yes but—"

"You will give her particulars to my clerk. He'll arrange for her transport and overnight accommodations."

"That's not necessary. She can—"

"Stay with me," Keefe said, grinning like a villain in an old-Earth melodrama. Any second now he'd waggle his eyebrows and twirl his nonexistent mustache.

"Can you... No, never mind. Just don't let Miss Celine talk with Mrs.— What's your grandmother's name?"

"Jynx."

"Got that, Fabi? J-I-N—"

"J-Y-N-X," Celine corrected automatically. "And she prefers Ms." She wanted to scream but shrugged instead. "She's of that generation. Burned her bra and all that."

"On Venus, the 'Age of Aquarius' occurred about forty years ago," she explained. Their expressions revealed they'd calculated Jynx's age in hundreds of years, based on Earth's history.

Keefe laughed. Judge Joren cleared his throat then shot a stern look in Celine's direction.

"*You*, Miss Celine, are to have *no* contact with Ms. Jynx until after I've met with her tomorrow morning. Mr. Keefe will ensure you follow my instructions."

"Fabi, reserve a suite for them at the Del Mar. Two bedrooms, I think," Joren added, obviously seeing Celine's murderous glare at Keefe and Keefe's smug grin.

"By the Goddess," she began, the threat of mayhem in her mind.

"'By the Goddess' what? Thinking of murder, Miss Celine?" Keefe drawled.

Turning to the judge, Celine said, "May I go now, Judge? I need to pack."

"Fabi, have the bailiff drive Miss Celine home then deliver her to the hotel. *You*, Mr. Keefe, will meet her in the lobby and escort her to your suite."

"Constant surveillance, Your Honor?"

"Don't let her out of your sight."

Jonathan Jacob Jones! she thought, trying to decide what weapon she'd use when she murdered him. Or maybe she'd have Jynx kill him for her. She nodded at the judge, shot a murderous smile at Keefe and took Fabi's arm.

"Save the court some money, Fabi. Make it a one-bedroom suite. Mr. Keefe can sleep on the couch."

* * * * *

So this is what Keefe has to look forward to, Joren thought when Fabi ushered Celine's grandmother into his private quarters and seated her.

"Can I get you anything, Mrs., er, Ms. Jynx? Coffee, tea?"

"Thank you, no, Fabi," she said, smiling at the clerk as if he were the most important man in the world. Her voice held a trace of France.

"That's all, Fabi."

"You want anything, Judge?"

"That's *all*." Having to repeat himself was Joren's least favorite thing, especially when he had a beautiful woman's attention to capture for himself. He'd found Celine lovely, with her dark hair and catlike green eyes. But her grandmother was a stunning green-eyed redhead with curves in all the right places and perfect proportions. She didn't look a day older than forty.

"Thank you for coming here today, Ms. Jynx. Especially on such short notice."

"I welcome any chance to see Celine," Jynx said, her voice the same throaty contralto as her granddaughter's. "Your quarters are lovely, Judge. So comfortable and homey."

"Please, call me Joren. And thank you. I spend so much time here in the courthouse that creature comforts have become necessities." He glanced around the room and tried to see it through Jynx's eyes.

Recessed ceiling lights cast pools of gold over furniture groupings and his collection of ancient masters' oil paintings. They belonged in museums and, after he died, would go where the public could view them. The furniture upholstery consisted of jewel-bright synthetics that duplicated old-Earth fabrics like velours and brocades but were even more indestructible.

The wide window afforded a breathtaking view of lakes and forests that lay within the huge metropolis. Now the view was partially obscured by a privacy screen that allowed minimal sunlight in and lessened the outside glare.

"I suspect you have some questions regarding our former occupation."

"Our, Ms. Jynx? Does that mean Miss Celine is no longer a sex surrogate?"

A secret sort of smile curved her lips. "Please, call me Jynx. You mean you have never heard the stories about Venusian women? Not that they *are stories*, mind you. What you'll find most interesting is the fact that everything I'm about to tell you is the Goddess' own truth."

Leaning toward her, getting lost in her remarkable green eyes, he'd believe anything she said. Reminding himself that "Jynx" meant "spell" did no good, especially since he knew Venusian women couldn't lie. Not when asked a direct question.

"Why aren't you still a practicing sex counselor, Ms. — Jynx?"

"Well, were I a vindictive woman, I'd blame Celine's *grandpere*."

"Really?" Joren said, incredulity in his voice. He leaned back in his chair and fixed his gaze on her lovely face. "Why would you blame your husband?"

"Because he took my true virginity. Not without my consent, mind you. More because he made me *want* to give it to him."

"B-but I thought... What is your 'true virginity', Jynx?"

"First, it's not mine alone but every Venusian woman's true virginity. We can all regenerate our hymen, can be the *virtual* virgin so many men enjoy seducing. But once we find the man who captures our heart and willingly surrender our 'true virginity' to him..." She shrugged, eloquent in what she left unsaid.

"Is that what happened to Alyson and Garven?"

"You'd have to ask them. Their behavior, however, supports that conclusion."

She smiled, making him want to ask if Venusian women ever remarried. Assuming she was free to marry again.

She continued. "It seems to me that Garven rushed Alyson to make a commitment to him but I don't doubt she made it. We cannot be forced — raped, if you will."

"Never, I imagine. I've seen what your granddaughter can do with her hands. Without touching anyone," he hastened to add. He didn't want this beautiful woman thinking he'd taken advantage of a witness, let alone one related to her.

"Goddess bless you, Joren. Many men do not share your views, especially since so many consider sex surrogates whores. As for Celine, the healer part of her sometimes goes a little haywire." Seeing Joren's gray eyes darken with anger, she said, "She isn't dangerous to anyone and it only happens when she's really pissed." Jynx blushed. "Please, pardon my language. I meant no offense."

"None taken. Some words give greater meaning than others." He took her hand and patted it, expelling a soundless sigh when she didn't pull away.

"You're a very attractive man, Joren."

Joren preened at her praise. Catching himself before he smoothed his full head of silver hair, he firmed his smile and studied his notes. "How did you feel when you realized you'd lost—"

"I didn't lose my virginity, Joren, I gave it to my husband. Unexpectedly, true, but of my free will."

"Did he... Did he know? Is there something physically different between a 'virtual virgin' and a true one?"

She laughed, a lovely trill of merriment that traveled from his head to his cock and settled there.

"No, Joren, there's no real physical difference. What tattles on us is our own behavior.

"For example, I became a shrew in every aspect except sex. When we made love, I felt free to show Celine's *grandpere* how I felt about him. He seemed the densest man in the universe, never understanding what I was trying so desperately to show him. You see, he hadn't ever *said* he loved me, so I felt I'd made the biggest mistake of my life.

"What I failed to understand was that he was even more uncertain than I was. He'd sought me out to help him make love to a young woman he thought he could love. *Should* love. And there I was, a woman—*virgo intacta*—and yet experienced with men. Many, many men, as far as he knew. The virgin whore, so to speak."

Joren grunted. "I begin to see the problem. Your future husband didn't know about the virtual versus the true virgin. Therefore, he didn't realize you'd blessed him by willingly surrendering yourself to him."

Her smile blessed *him*.

"Precisely. Which leads me to a question for you, Joren."

"What? I'll tell you anything you want to know, Jynx."

"How are you going to explain all this to Keefe?"

* * * * *

True to his word, Keefe had kept his focus on Celine. She, on the other hand, seemed intent on attracting every man in the courthouse. What was the old expression? "Doctor, lawyer, Indian chief"?

The only doctors he knew were his own and that slimebucket Dr. Jaap. He knew most of the lawyers and warned them away from Celine with his fiercest scowl. And he wouldn't recognize an Indian, chief or otherwise, but if scowls worked on lawyers...hell, they ought to work on anybody.

"Are you practicing making funny faces for Halloween?" Celine said, intruding on his murderous imaginings. She smiled and waved at a phalanx of sheriff's officers.

Keefe scowled at them too but with less success. They grinned at him like they enjoyed his proprietary interest in Celine. They winked at her then went off to their courtrooms. Good riddance!

"Hello? Anybody home?" She wafted a cup of coffee under his nose.

He straightened in the chair, blinked at her and gratefully took the cup. "I was thinking about..." Something. Something other than Celine and how damn sexy she looked.

Not that there was anything overtly sexy about the black-on-black pinstriped suit she wore. The jacket fell in a straight line from her shoulders to her waist. It didn't cling anywhere. Neither did the charcoal gray blouse with its mother-of-pearl buttons, the buttons he wanted to tear open so he could touch her breasts. The skirt hit about an inch above her knees and didn't cling to her hips or butt, like he wished he could cling.

But, damn, if he didn't get a hard-on just looking at her. Maybe his arousal was because he knew what she had on under the ultraconservative suit. Her taste in underwear ran to the conservative too. Black bra that covered her breasts—her high, firm, palm-fitting breasts. Black bikini panties, sans split crotch, encased her curvy lower body. Black thigh-high hose that rode her go-on-forever legs, the "garters" festooned with hot-pink roses.

Today she wore her hair up in some fancy figure eight. The only touch of femininity there, a couple of those mind-stealing corkscrew curls around her ears. He wanted to tear the pins from her hair and sift his fingers through the silky curls, inhale the unique scent of her and carry her off to bed.

Should have done that last night, old friend, he thought, staring at her and aching with need.

But last night, she'd wanted nothing he had to offer. She refused to watch vids but played a rousing game of a still-popular board game with Herma-Frodie. She ate with Keefe, their only conversation consisting of "Pass the salt, please" and "Are you finished?"

She'd called housekeeping and ordered a half-dozen pillows. At bedtime she placed them down the center of the bed like a bunting board. To him, those pillows felt as wide and deep as the Grand Canyon, an insurmountable barrier. But, no hypocrisy in her,

she hadn't banished him to the couch. But the couch might have been a more comfortable punishment. Lying next to her, not allowed to touch her, felt like pure hell.

"Why did you bring Herma-Frodie with you?" she asked finally, drawing him into the present.

"I thought Joren might want to question them," Keefe said, patting his breast pocket to assure himself the hermaphrodite was still there. He-she fit perfectly in their traveling cigarette case and barely made a bulge in his suit coat pocket.

"Ask questions about what?" Celine said, her voice low but full of suspicion.

Keefe shrugged. "Haven't a clue. But we did promise we'd bring them home with us. Can't leave the kids alone, you know. Difficult to get a sitter on such short notice."

"Goddess, this feels like a divorce!"

Celine surged to her feet and strode away. She expected Keefe to follow her and sagged against the marble wall, relieved, when he didn't. She wanted to cry. Worse, she wanted to fling herself into his arms and stay there for the rest of her life.

She'd almost done that last night. She'd stared at the pillows for a long time before she slipped into bed. She lay there, staring at the ceiling, wanting desperately to toss those bags of goosedown on the floor and snuggle against him. Pride held her, unmoving, empty, lonely.

What could she say to him? "Hey, sailor, one last fuck for old-times' sake?" Given what she'd done to Wyatt, how could Keefe ever have made love—had sex—with her at all? On the other hand, wasn't that the perfect vengeance?

She knew she could arouse him. Goddess! She could smell him across the ocean she'd made with the pillows. That subtle scent of him, musk and Keefe, would haunt her for the rest of her life, brand her as his so that she would know, forever, where he stood in a crowded room. She'd become a she-wolf, howling silently for her lost mate.

Tears seeped from her closed eyes. Hiccupping, she swiped them away with the backs of her hands and thanked the Goddess for small favors. Were she an Earth

woman, she'd look like a red-eyed raccoon. Tears and runny mascara made poor bedfellows.

Oh Goddess! Bedfellows? She shivered, not cold but hot. Hot with need. Hot with want. Hot for the only man she would ever love.

Scenting him, she turned and took the handkerchief he offered. It smelled of him, of his barely there aftershave, the faint traces of aroused male, his own unique odor. Keefe. Home.

"What's up?" she said, blotting her eyes then tucking his handkerchief into her jacket pocket. A souvenir of him for her to keep forever.

"The judge wants to see you in his chambers."

"By the Goddess, if that old fart – old coot – wants to copulate, I'll put his head on a platter and serve it to Jaap for dinner."

Laughing, Keefe took her arm and steered her toward the judge's chambers.

"Aren't..." She licked her desert-dry lips and saw Keefe's gaze sharpen. "Are you coming in with me?"

"No. Scream if the bastard even *suggests* something unseemly."

She clung to Keefe's arm like some flighty, terrified ninny in a novel. "W-where will you be?" How many more goodbyes would they have to say?

"Next door. It seems I have a rendezvous with your grandmother."

Jonathan Jacob Jones! Celine thought as he pushed her through the door and into the lion's den.

Looking more judgmental than she had ever seen him, Joren motioned her to him and pointed to a chair. Like a marionette, she obeyed.

Chapter Eleven

So this is what Celine has to look forward to, Jynx thought as Keefe entered Joren's sitting room. A bit stuffy, perhaps, given his button-down shirt collar and navy blue suit. But maybe not too stuffy, she amended, noting his fire engine yellow tie and matching sneakers.

Sneakers, by the Goddess! Fighting a grin, she held out her hand and introduced herself.

His grip neither too weak nor too strong, he held her hand and bowed over it, like some knight of old meeting his queen. She ought to feel outrage at this shameless flummery but she sensed this old-fashioned courtesy was innate with him. She liked it, liked him, even though he made her feel...grandmotherly.

"You have her eyes," he said in a voice somewhere between baritone and basso. She wouldn't mind hearing that voice in her ear, murmuring delicious descriptions of what their bodies would do to and for one another.

"That is, Celine has your eyes," he corrected, turning a lovely shade of sienna under his tan. That blush made his cerulean eyes seem even bluer, his sable locks more like fur than hair. Wanting to test its texture, she folded her hands in her lap to keep from touching him.

"Let's say Celine and I share a family resemblance and leave it at that," she said and waved him to sit. "Joren—Judge Joren was kind enough to order tea for us. Shall I pour? One lump of sugar or more?" She looked at him quizzically, as if inviting him to refuse tea altogether. Which, of course, was not her intention at all.

He read her well. "Lemon only, thanks."

"Does that describe your character, Mr. Keefe? Your disposition?"

A small smile tweaked the corner of his mouth and revealed the hint of a dimple.
“Until recently, no.”

Droll. She could fall in love with droll. She cleared her throat then said, “I take it Celine is responsible for your turning sour.”

“Not completely.”

“Oh for Goddess’ sake! Am I to pull information from you like a dentist at a bad tooth or shall we talk like friends?”

He went owl-eyed for a second then blinked. “I’d like us to become friends,” he said slowly.

“I like caution in a man. Until it becomes stupidity and keeps him from what he wants most.” She leaned back in her chair and regarded him over her gold-rimmed teacup. She sipped then put aside the cup and saucer.

“Do you or do you not want Celine?”

“I do but —”

“Tell me this. How did you and Celine, two seemingly intelligent adults, get in the middle of what appears to be a domestic squabble between two idiotic children?”

He stared at her so long she considered rephrasing the question. She could cut it into smaller bites that he might better understand. Then he laughed. She sighed her relief. He wasn’t slow but merely surprised by her straightforwardness.

Lawyers! she thought. Always trapped by deviousness when plain speaking would get them what they wanted.

“It started out simply enough, then turned into a debacle of major proportions.” Lie one, he explained, came from... Well, to him it came from Alyson when she told Garven she wanted a will drawn up and asked him to recommend an attorney. What she really wanted was a pound of Garven’s flesh.

“No,” he said, shaking his head and meeting Jynx’s green eyes, eyes so like Celine’s it made his heart ache. “The first lie in this mess came from Wyatt.”

"When he made Celine believe he'd buried her with his niece?"

"That and when he didn't tell her that—" Keefe drew a deep breath to suppress his renewed outrage. "What Celine thought was Wyatt was actually another one of his jokes. An android he'd made in his own image. That's what she burned. Not a human being but a bunch of metal and wire.

"Wyatt let her believe she'd almost killed him."

Jynx sighed and nodded, pieces of a puzzle falling into place. "Still, Celine betrayed her healer's oath. She should have tried to heal the android or, at least, get it help."

Keefe glared at her. "She'd been buried alive for over an hour! She'd been forced to listen to a child's sobs and racing heartbeat for all that time. To Wyatt's taunting her, making promises she doubted he ever intended to keep.

"What would you have done?"

Jynx laughed. "I? I would have burned the bastard to a crisp and trounced what was left of him into the dirt. But I'm not Celine. I haven't her gift for healing, nor do I have her conscience."

"Will you tell her the truth?"

"No."

"No?" Keefe yelled, surging to his feet.

"I think Wyatt should tell her. It will help both of them heal, although Celine will have a harder time of it."

Jynx motioned Keefe back to his chair and gazed at him. "You could help."

"By killing Wyatt?" He sounded like he'd welcome any excuse.

"No," Jynx said, chuckling. "I'm fairly certain there's something in the Healer's Code that deals with extenuating circumstances. Celine probably knows what it is but can't accept it. She truly believes she hurt another human being."

"You want me to find that specific section of the code?"

Jynx nodded. "And show it to her after Wyatt has told her the truth. It may take some time but that should help Celine forgive herself."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, then Jynx said, "You were telling me about Alyson's wanting a pound of Garven's flesh."

"His most prized flesh," Keefe said, that lovely blush again staining his cheeks. He seemed to suffer the typical human male's reluctance to *talk* about sex but obviously didn't mind sex itself.

"Did she say why she wanted that particular part of his anatomy?" Jynx asked, unable to suppress the amusement in her voice.

"Not clearly. She went on and on about how she couldn't work anymore, how he'd stolen the most precious part of her, robbed her of her livelihood."

"But you took the case anyway."

"Not exactly. Garven being my cousin, I didn't feel right representing Alyson. I referred her to Mr. Michaels."

"Without explaining why?"

He shrugged, momentarily drawing her attention from his handsome, craggy features to his wide shoulders. Nice shoulders, perfect for a woman to nestle her head on.

"It seemed like one of those old palimony suits. Since Alyson and Garven had been together only a few months, I told her she shouldn't expect much in the way of remuneration. She screamed at me, claimed she didn't want remuneration. She wanted revenge – full caps – with fireworks and sirens.

"Garven got wind of what Alyson was doing and came charging in, shouting at the top of his lungs. He said he took her virginity because he didn't want her to work, that he loved her and..."

Jynx watched Keefe assimilate missing information. No, not missing but information he'd missed nonetheless.

"Would you explain something for me?" he said.

"If I can, of course."

"What's the difference between a 'virtual virgin' and a 'true virgin'?"

With an inward smile Jynx patted Keefe's hand and leaned back. She told him about Venusian women. And their true virginity.

* * * * *

In his chamber, Joren let Celine stew for a few minutes before he deigned to speak to her. "Herma-Frodie, er, the hermaphrodite explained that it let you out after only five days," Joren said from between his teeth. "*I ordered* you incarcerated for a full week."

He looked so furious Celine started to shake.

"I—we thought we were a day late." Jaap's sex den apparently made time hinky.

"We explain," said the gold cigarette case resting on Joren's desk.

"No!" Celine cried. She leapt to her feet and snatched up the case.

"Not hurt! Celine not hurt Herma-Frodie. We friends, yes?"

"Y-yes," Celine stammered, clutching the case to her heart and glaring at Joren. If Herma-Frodie explained, Joren might destroy them. She had no intention of letting that happen.

"Celine not lie? We true friends?"

Joren, she noted, scowled but leaned back in his chair.

"I'd like to ask you some questions, Miss Celine," he said.

"Do I need a lawyer?" She gratefully sank into her chair.

"Do you want one?"

The twinkle in his eyes made her laugh.

"Desperately. The real question here is does he want me?"

* * * * *

Joren and Jynx looked at each other, chuckled and raised their champagne flutes in a silent toast. They sat side by side in a lounge that allowed them to look at each other without straining their necks.

"Do you think two days will do the trick, Joren?"

"Were you and I locked in a room together, Jynx dear, it wouldn't take me two minutes to reconcile with you." He took her hand. "Am I going too fast for you?"

Her soft laugh thrilled him. Many a year had passed since he'd thought of himself as clever or attractive to women. Jynx had a knack for making him feel both.

"Venusian women make up our minds quickly. We're notorious for it." She half-sighed, half-chuckled. "I made up my mind about Robert," she gave it a French pronunciation, "Celine's *grandpere*, an hour after we were introduced. My daughter Clarice decided on Andrew, Celine's father, in half that time.

"Celine seems the only one in my family to take so Goddess-blessed long making up her mind about her true love."

"I sense a story here. Does it upset you to talk about him? Robert, I mean."

"Not at all. I don't live in the past, Joren, but I don't mind talking about it."

"Then tell me how you met."

"We met at a garden party on Jupiter. We were all dressed in antebellum costumes. Being the only green-eyed vixen present, I played Scarlet O'Hara and flirted with all the handsome men."

"Fan and parasol put to excellent use, I'm sure."

"'Fiddle-de-dee!' Of course I noticed Robert right off. He watched me constantly, even when I caught him at it. At length, he convinced a mutual acquaintance to introduce us."

"Not very Rhett Butler-ish of him."

"Not at that moment but later... Well, he propositioned me. I told him he couldn't afford me and laughed at him. To his face. Most cruel of me but I was young and very sure of my powers over men.

"He left me standing alone under a weeping willow tree. His kindness—"

"Kindness? How can you call him kind when he treated you like a trollop?"

"He thought I *was* a trollop. You Earthmen have such odd opinions about everything to do with sex."

A gentle chiding, yet still hurtful to his pride, both as an Earthling and a man. "Go on."

"His kindness was in leaving me where no one else could see my embarrassment and my shame. I decided to punish him by dancing Salome at dinner.

"When he saw what I was wearing—"

"Or not," Joren observed wryly.

Jynx grinned. "Yes, well, he dragged me off, locked us in a room and ravished me." Delighted she sounded. Delighted she looked. "It wasn't until much later that he told me why he'd approached me. By then, of course, it was too late for the other young lady."

"You gave him your true virginity?"

"Oh yes!"

Joren wished he'd been that lucky scoundrel Robert. Then he realized they might not have gotten on so well as they did now. Love, like so many things in life, had its own seasons.

"How long were you together?"

"Are you asking my age, Joren?"

"I have it on very good authority that a gentleman never asks a Venusian lady her age."

“Good. We shall continue to get along famously.” After a moment she said, “We were together for forty years. Forty wonderful years.”

They fell into a companionable silence and sipped their champagne.

“Speaking of getting along,” he said, “how do you think the youngsters are doing?”

“They’ve either killed each other or they’re fuck – copulating their brains out.”

* * * * *

“You what?” Celine scream-whispered as Keefe trundled her down the icy courthouse steps and into a waiting limousine. “You left *Grandmere* alone with that dirty old lecher?”

“Jynx insisted. Now shut up and think about where you’d like to go.”

The chauffeur closed the curbside door. Celine tried to get out the opposite door but discovered it had no handles.

“Hmph!” She shot a furious glance at Keefe, folded her arms beneath her breasts and glared at the privacy screen.

Keefe opened the waiting bottle of perfectly chilled champagne. The cork came out with an apologetic cough, just as Jynx had said it should. No danger of putting someone’s eye out or wasting a single bubble.

Celine took the glass without looking at him. Keefe half expected her to pour its contents over his head and sighed his relief when she didn’t. Venusian women with a touch of French frugality didn’t waste fine wine, no matter where or who it came from. Or so Jynx had said.

“Go?” Celine asked, finally looking at him. “Go where?”

“We have several choices. The beach – ”

“In January? Are you out of your mind?”

“The mountains.” He quirked an eyebrow and waited for her denigrating observation, which wasn’t long in coming.

"And risk getting snowed in? No way. Besides, I don't ski. Do you?"

"I don't think skiing is what our benefactors have in mind, Celine."

"I really don't care what they have in mind, Keefe." Unspoken but readable in her viridian eyes was, "It's what you have in mind that troubles me."

"Where else?"

"The honeymoon suite at the Del Mar."

"Over Judge Joren's dead body! That's it? The beach, the mountains, the hotel?"

"There's one other option but I don't want to go there."

She looked at him fully. She even eased her body toward him so their knees touched. "Why don't you want to go...wherever it is you don't want to go?"

He let her think he was thinking, which he was but probably not what she *thought* he was thinking. Triple J! He sounded like Jynx!

"Well?"

"I don't want to insult you, Celine." She gave an unladylike snort. "You see, there's this old-Earth statute about men transporting women across state lines for immoral purposes."

"Must have been written by a bunch of Puritan males," she snipped. "Males who lacked the courage to say *sex*. 'Immoral purposes' indeed!"

"Anyway, that law, the Mann Act, is still on the books. As much as I love you, Celine, I won't risk our livelihood by transporting you interplanetically for *highly* immoral purposes."

The corner of her mouth twitched. A rippling laugh followed, allowing Keefe to expel his held breath.

"*Highly* immoral, eh? Mann Act? Figures." She chuckled then her face blanched. "You love me?" she said an eternity or two later.

"I told you so before we left Jaap's sex den."

"I guess I wasn't listening." Her cheeks flushed pink and she looked down at her hands.

"No. You were too busy fantasizing about your doctor to listen to anything I had to say."

"And you're still so jealous of my ancient fantasies you don't care—!"

Keefe took her hand and, forcing her fingers open, kissed her palm. She shivered but didn't pull away. The tightness in his chest eased.

"I care about everything that affects you, Celine. That's why, before we go anywhere else, we're going to see Wyatt."

Glaring at Keefe, she said, "I have even less to say to Wyatt than I do to you."

"Good! Then for once you can listen. Wyatt has a lot to say to you."

"Oh yeah? Who's gonna make me listen?"

Keefe quirked an eyebrow and her shoulders slumped. "When you're done listening I'll take you anywhere you want to go."

"Home," she said immediately. "I want to go home."

And never see you again shone in her viridian eyes. Keefe felt like she'd sucker-punched his gut. He settled back as if it didn't matter. But once Celine was settled in with Wyatt, Keefe intended to put into action a plan of his own.

* * * * *

The problem with loving a Venusian woman, Keefe decided an hour later, was he could never tell if she'd been crying. If he hadn't seen her tears at the courthouse, he would never have known she *could* cry.

Now, as she came out of Wyatt's hospital room she looked completely exhausted, drained of all emotion. Her smile wan, she slid her hands into her jacket pockets and started for the exit.

Needing to show her she wasn't alone, Keefe cupped her elbow and matched her snail-like pace. She didn't even look at him but as long as he could touch her he didn't mind. Much.

Once they'd settled in the limousine, she finally did look at him.

"When Wyatt and I started yelling at each other, I expected you to come charging to the rescue," she said.

"I was busy keeping the no-neck security hulks at bay. Besides, I knew you could take care of yourself. As for Wyatt, he deserved whatever you wanted to do to him."

The corner of her mouth twitched like she wanted to smile. She didn't and Keefe didn't push. Sooner or later she'd tell him what she wanted him to know. Or wouldn't tell him anything at all.

By Jove! He should have stayed with her and not have to rely on her edited information! But no, Wyatt wouldn't have said a word in Keefe's presence and Keefe would have wanted to beat Wyatt all over again. Better that he'd left them alone, even though he suffered Celine's silence now.

"I guess...I guess revenge really is a dish best served cold," she murmured. "I mean Wyatt waited more than three years to tell me about his damned android. If it weren't for you, Keefe, he might never have told me."

"Probably. And you'd have spent the rest of your life feeling guilty for something you didn't do. Making Wyatt's revenge all the sweeter."

She sighed then said, "What I don't understand is why he didn't tell me when I healed him yesterday. If he had, we might have regained a part of our friendship. But now... I feel like I should hate him but I only feel sad."

She lapsed into silence. Keefe followed her lead and kept quiet as well.

She looked at him then, as if she were seeing him for the first time. Her hand brushed his but quickly withdrew, like she thought he'd push it, push *her* away.

He captured her hand and entwined his fingers with hers, holding on gently but firmly. No matter how she struggled or what she said next, he wouldn't let go. Not of her hand, not of her.

"May I ask you a question?"

Her voice sounded small, so unlike his Celine that he expected to see tears in her eyes.

"I guess. Sure."

"When you were sixteen, did you fantasize about a woman?"

"One woman? Hell no! If it had tits and ass, I dreamed about fucking it. That's what boys do, Celine, and a lot earlier than sixteen. But," he added, tipping her chin so he could see her tear-shimmered eyes, "I know it's different for girls, Venusian girls especially."

"You do?"

"I didn't but Jynx explained it. How girls need to have a safe first love and how Venusian women—"

"She told you about—" Anger flared in her eyes. She tried to jerk her hand out of his but he held fast.

"*Virtual virgins* and *true* virginity." He rubbed his thumb over the back of her trembling hand until she almost stopped shaking. "So are you going to make an honest man of me or will we live in sin for the rest of our lives?"

"Sin nice," she said, sounding so like Herma-Frodie Keefe had to laugh.

Sobering, he said, "Yes, sin's nice but what will we tell the children?"

"You want children?"

"Sure. Eventually, I even want biological ones."

Frowning, obviously puzzled, she felt Keefe's forehead. "You don't have a fever." She eased her hand down his cheek, brushed it over his heart then stopped. Her fingers

dug into his breast pocket. "You are *not* bringing Herma-Frodie to our reconciliation celebration."

"Aw, Mom," the hermaphrodite whined.

"We'll put them in a safe when we get to your house," Keefe whispered in Celine's ear.

"We hear that."

"Computer off," Celine ordered. Squeaks and squawks whirled then faded into silence. "Now where were we?" She eased onto Keefe's lap and wreathed her arms around his neck. "I have one more question."

Wondering what this might cost him, Keefe tensed, then sighed and forced himself to relax. "Go ahead."

"Why did you come to the Guild? The truth, the whole truth and nothing but. Swear."

He sighed again but raised his right hand.

She tugged on his earlobes until he met her intense gaze.

"We, Garven and I, saw you and Alyson at one of Gran and Gramps' parties. Somebody—"

"Wyatt," Celine corrected.

"Yes, Wyatt." Keefe felt his face heat and his chest swell with renewed anger. "Wyatt made some ugly remarks about Alyson but claimed not to know you."

"And?" She touched his hand and some of his anger eased.

"When Gran refused to introduce us, I decided to go to the Guild and, somehow, wangle an introduction to you for myself and to Alyson for Garven. I think you can imagine—"

"Why your grandmother refused to introduce us. Because of what I did to Wyatt."

Celine struggled to wiggle off his lap but he restrained her, his hands on her hips.

"How pleased I was to have you interview me," he corrected, then kissed the tip of her nose. "Does that clear things up for you?"

"I guess. Now what?"

"I'm going to tell our driver to take us to your house, then I'm going to kiss you breathless and willing."

"Promises, promises. I'd really like that, Keefe, but —"

"But what?"

"I think we're already there."

Keefe blinked and saw that the limousine door stood open. Sliding out with Celine in his arms, he frowned at Joren's clerk.

"Some choice your boss gave us, Fabi."

"Actually, Ms. Jynx decided. The judge merely agreed."

"Man proposed, the Goddess disposes," Celine misquoted merrily.

"You mean *Jynx* disposes," Keefe muttered, trying to sound grumpy.

"Same thing," said Celine.

Chapter Twelve

Seeing Alyson and Garven sitting on the front stoop, Keefe's grin morphed into a scowl.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he bellowed.

The front door opened, revealing Ms. Jynx, Judge Joren and a couple Keefe didn't recognize. The woman looked like a red-gold-haired, petite version of Celine and Ms. Jynx, so Keefe assumed they were related. The man shared Celine's rangy height and lean body, so he must be related as well.

Joren wore his judge's robe, the strange man a dark suit. The women wore dresses in jewel-bright colors and looked like summer flowers blooming in the snow.

"Put me down!" Celine whispered, sounding frantic.

"By Jove, I won't! Who are these people and why are they here?"

"My parents," she hissed. "Now put me down!"

"No." Tightening his hold on Celine, Keefe strode up the steps between Garven and Alyson, then frowned fiercely at the four crowding the doorway.

The judge scowled back at him, as did Celine's father. Her mother sent him a tentative smile then moved out of his way. Ms. Jynx grinned and somehow managed to pat his and Celine's arms simultaneously. Garven and Alyson trailed behind and shut the door.

With eight people in the vestibule, it felt crowded. Keefe bared his teeth and, unimpeded, carried Celine into the parlor. When he put her down, she gave him a weak smile and buried her face in his neck.

"Remember Milk and Water," he whispered and felt the tip of her ear heat. *Down, boy*, he silently told his swelling cock. "And remember I love you."

Along his entire body, he felt her shudder. Lifting her head, she kissed him so passionately his toes curled.

"I love you too," she said then turned to face their guests. "I guess you're here for a wedding, Judge Joren. You too, Mom and Dad."

"Yes," the three said together.

"I hope you're not going to disappoint us, Celine," her mother said.

Her low-pitched voice surprised Keefe. To him, such a tiny woman should sound like Chip 'n' Dale. Celine squeezed his hand and warned him, *sotto voce*, not to make snap judgments.

"Madame Ambassador Clarice, may I present Mr. Keefe? Admiral Andrew, Mr. Keefe."

Flummoxed by their high ranks, Keefe didn't know what he should do, whose hand, if anyone's, he should shake.

Jynx, Jove bless her, came to his rescue. "Clarice outranks Andrew. But under the circumstances and knowing your traditional values as I do, Keefe, I believe you should greet Andrew first."

Celine scowled at all her relations. "My house, my rules. *Maman* —"

She rattled off something in French Keefe couldn't understand then pulled him to stand in front of her diminutive mother. "*À lá française* or *à lá Venus*?" she challenged, both eyebrows raised.

Celine obviously enjoyed razzing her parents, Keefe decided when Clarice blushed. But how did a Venusian greeting differ from the French one?

"Even on Venus, Celine, *à lá française* is still *de rigueur*."

Keefe couldn't tell if Clarice felt insulted or was on the verge of laughter. He risked looking down into her pale green eyes and, relieved, grinned at her.

"You'll have to bend down. If you will?"

"With pleasure, Madame Clarice."

After she kissed both his cheeks she said, "Now you must kiss me. My cheeks, I mean." Another blush accompanied the clarification.

When he'd complied Andrew stepped forward and held out his hand.

"Mr. Keefe," he said in a *basso profundo* voice. His grip nearly broke Keefe's fingers.

"Papa," Celine warned, laying her hand over theirs.

They sprang apart and cried, "Ouch!"

"Such is life with a Venusian healer," Jynx said.

His dark eyes alight with merriment, the admiral again offered his hand. "My friends and family call me Drew. I guess you'll be both."

"I hope so, sir...Drew."

"As to that, we'll not be rushed into marriage, Papa. So don't start lecturing Keefe about taking good care of me. He already knows I can damn well take care of myself."

"Celine," Clarice interrupted, "you need to go upstairs and change into something more appropriate."

"No," Celine and Keefe said together then frowned at each other.

"My house," Celine began.

"My house," Jynx corrected, "*my* rules. Come along, Celine, Alyson. Celine can change in *my* room. And there damn well *will* be a wedding after all this trouble."

"I'm fine as I am," Celine protested, allowing Jynx, Clarice and Alyson to push her toward the stairs. "And nobody's asked Keefe if he wants to marry me."

"Bride not wear black," Herma said, floating down from somewhere overhead.

"Keefe do," said Frodie, materializing at Keefe's elbow and latching on with an unbreakable grip. "Frodie have *Orient* tuxedo for Keefe. Provide for Drew and Garven. Judge okay as is."

"Thank you, Frodie," Joren muttered, looking completely out of his *milieu*.

"Judge welcome. Standby," he ordered. Joren jerked to a stop. "Garven and Drew come with Frodie and Keefe. Herma provide perfect setting for wedding. Frodie provide perfect groom and usher."

"Usher?" Garven squeaked.

"Usher," Frodie repeated. "Only fair Frodie function as best man for Keefe. Unfair Frodie not. Frodie help Keefe and Celine —"

"Spit in one hand," Keefe said then laughed. He followed Frodie through the vestibule and down the stairs to the Guild's kitchens. Garven followed, looking morose and puzzled. Drew looked ticked and determined there would be a wedding today.

A half-dozen people wearing white aprons and chef's hats ranging from berets to Eiffel Tower-size scurried about. They called out to each other, complaining good naturedly about Miss Celine's propensity for impromptu parties. Someone called out that Ms. Jynx was even worse. Or better, another observed and they all laughed.

Frodie led the men through the organized chaos into a room full of lockers and groupings of tables and chairs. It struck Keefe that, except for the lockers, the room resembled the bistro where he and Celine had had their first date.

"The students practice here," Drew explained. "Jynx and Celine believe chefs need to know their business from cooking to cleanup. Some students act as customers."

"I'd volunteer for that every time," Garven said, sniffing the aromatic air appreciatively.

"Celine might allow you the leftovers," Drew said.

"Gen-tle-men change in there," Frodie said, pointing to a door at the back of the room.

"Where are you going?" Keefe said. To his chagrin he sounded nervous. Judging by their expressions, Drew and Garven shared his opinion. Either that or they were nervous too.

"Frodie get ring Keefe need for ceremony. Then Frodie tend to Judge Joren like proper best man do." He vanished.

"I don't suppose," Garven said, "you'd consider a double wedding?"

"What's your hurry?" Keefe said. He gaped when Garven blushed. "Ahh, Alyson's invoked a no sex clause."

"Yeah."

Keefe and Drew laughed, then Drew excused himself to escort his daughter downstairs.

"You sure you want to do this?" Garven said.

"Remember how badly you wanted Alyson the first time you saw her? Multiply it by a thousand and you'll know how much I want Celine. And if she refuses to marry me, I'll gag her and let Ms. Jynx answer for the bride."

* * * * *

On the fourth floor of the mansion, Jynx eased the emerald and diamond ring off her granddaughter's finger.

"Grandmere," Celine protested.

"Frodie's waiting for this," Clarice explained.

"Keefe give back to Celine during ceremony," Herma added, taking the ring then floating to and through the closed door.

"That's new," Celine murmured.

"What, dear?"

"Nothing, *Maman*. How did you and Papa get here so quickly?"

"We've been on Earth for a couple of weeks," Clarice said, slanting a "help me" look at Jynx. "Ambassadorial and Admiralty demands. You know how it is."

"I know you're a lousy liar, *Maman*." Celine frowned at her grandmother, saying, "I see your hand in all this. And I truly resent the fact that nobody's asked Keefe and me if this is what we want!"

Ignoring her, Jynx grinned and picked up her small beaded evening bag. It perfectly matched her emerald-colored beaded gown. "I just learned that Joren's antecedents are from Jupiter."

"What's that got to do with the price of Saturnian tea?" Celine grumbled, now glaring at her *grandmere*.

"So are Keefe's," Jynx said then winked and closed the door behind her.

Alyson's tugging at the train of Celine's wedding gown diverted Celine's attention. Which she was sure Alyson had meant to do.

"This Edwardian style is perfect for you, Cel. You look so elegant and...well, tall."

Celine laughed. "I *am* tall, Ally. Don't worry. When you marry Garven, we'll find you the perfect gown for someone who's—what's that old-Earth, politically correct phrase, *Maman*?"

"Vertically challenged," Clarice said and Alyson giggled.

Herma floated through the door and said, "Herma design gown for Alyson. Herma very good at designing clothing. Is true, Celine?"

"Is true, Herma."

"Herma design entire wardrobe for Celine and Keefe's trip on *Orient Express*. Even design nightgown, which Celine never—"

A tap at the door made Herma stop. Celine used her hands to fan her blush-heated face. It was one thing for her mother to suspect she'd already made love with Keefe, quite something else for her mother to *know* it.

"Well," Clarice said, chuckling, "thankfully there's neither need nor time for a mother-daughter talk about wedding nights."

"Wedding nights?" Drew repeated, obviously having heard his wife's words when she opened the door.

"You remember our wedding night, don't you, darling?"

Bending down, Drew planted a long, lingering kiss on his wife's lips. "Very well."

Celine cleared her throat.

Straightening, Drew said, "Clarice, you need to go downstairs so Garven can seat you. Alyson, Celine, I've brought your bouquets."

"Oh," Alyson cried. "In all the excitement, I forgot about the bouquets and the boutonnières and the corsages for the mothers and grand —"

"Everything's under control, Alyson," Drew assured her. Gesturing at the apple blossom pinned to his lapel, he added, "As you can see, Keefe thought of everything. Surprising, especially for a Jovian."

Celine kicked her train out of the way and strode to her father's side. "Before tonight is over, somebody's going to explain what makes Jovian men so different."

Clarice laughed and patted Celine's cheek. "Don't worry, sweetheart. Before tonight's over, you'll know."

* * * * *

Hours later, Celine watched Keefe close the front door on the last of their wedding guests.

Coming to her side, he took her hand and placed a tender kiss in her palm. "Alone at last," he murmured, his eyes dark with desire.

"Not quite alone. Alyson and Garven are downstairs in the kitchens beginning Herma-Frodie's cooking lessons. And the last time I looked, *Grandmere* and Joren were somewhere."

"They were among the first to leave," Keefe told her as he headed for the door to the kitchens below.

"Without saying goodbye? Without letting us thank them? And what are you doing?"

"Locking up our remaining guests. I don't know about Alyson but Garven's been known to start a *shivaree*. I'm not about to let him spoil our wedding night with pot pounding and caterwauling."

"That door doesn't lock. Besides, I know for a fact no mere door can stop Herma if she wants out."

"Which probably means Frodie can get out too. Damn!"

"Frodie would follow Garven's lead, thinking a *shivaree* the proper thing for the best man to do."

"Jonathan Jacob Jones!" Keefe caught Celine's elbow, halting her exit. "Where are you going?"

Celine grinned. "Come along, oh husband mine, and I'll show you a trick with a hole in it. A hole even Herma-Frodie can't get through."

"I can but hope, wife of mine," Keefe said, following Celine to the second floor and looking around.

"These are private suites. Our surrogates prefer to meet new clients in a safe environment." She sighed. "A rule Alyson broke first time out of the gate."

"The surro-gate?" Keefe suggested, his voice droll.

Celine groaned and continued up to the third floor. She stopped at the entrance to a long, dark hallway. The only light came from a slit under a door at the far end.

"My quarters are here, in the north tower." When Keefe merely quirked his eyebrows, she took his hand and pulled him a few steps inside the arch.

"Now for the trick." She opened a panel discreetly installed in the wall, then pushed a button. What looked like a steel door slid down silently and locked. "Not afraid of the dark, are you, darling?"

"Not as long as you're here to protect me," he said, sweeping her into his arms.

Celine laughed. She laughed even harder when Keefe carried her across the threshold of her suite. Kissing her, he kept her close when he let her feet touch the thick carpet. Goddess, it felt like a millennium or two had passed since they'd stood like this, breast to chest, pelvis to pelvis, thigh to thigh. Lips to lips, tongue to tongue.

She tugged at his tie but he caught her hand and broke the kiss.

"What's wrong?" Her voice shook and her stomach muscles quivered. Her womb was seeping juices, eager for his penetration.

"This time we're going to do this right. Nice and slowly."

"Well, hell." She kissed him, tongued the corners of his mouth, the seam of his lips, until he opened to her and sucked her tongue into his mouth. "I'm ready now. Can't we—"

"Nope."

She absolutely, without equivocation, hated it when he sounded implacable. She hated it even more when he looked and acted that way too.

"Do you have a kitchen up here?" he said, looking around. Like what he'd seen of the rest of the house, her living room was huge. And, like his own apartment, it felt spartan. A sofa, a few chairs and tables, paintings by well-known artists were all the contents. A meditation pillow sat in the bay window. The room was uncluttered, like his bride, sleek yet soft.

"Don't tell me you're hungry."

He looked into her eyes and let her know without words just what he was hungry for. She sank to the sofa and fanned her flushed face with her hands.

"I asked Jynx to have some champagne sent up. I want to share a private toast with my wife."

She pointed and said in a breathless voice, "Kitchen."

A panel slid open, revealing a small space that seemed impossible to cook in. An ice bucket, champagne and two glasses sat on a tray. He carried it to the table and opened the bottle.

"Dom Perignon," she said, smiling up at him and taking a glass from his hand. "Like we had on the *Orient*."

Sitting beside her, he raised his glass and clinked it with hers. "To my friend, to my lover, to my wife." He drained the glass. "Leaving you in Paris was the most difficult thing I've ever had to do."

Her smile wobbled. "You didn't look back. Which is exactly how it should have ended. At least, that's what I told myself."

"If I'd looked back, we'd still be in Paris."

"What and miss today? Miss being railroaded into marriage, surrounded by people, half of whom neither of us knew?" She sipped her champagne.

"Seeking Dutch courage?"

"Yes," she admitted, raising her gaze to his face. Looking like she'd rather face a firing squad, she said, "I owe you an apology. When Jynx told me you and Wyatt and Garven are cousins, I thought—"

Keefe brushed his fingers over her lips, silencing her. "I can imagine what you thought. In fact, I told you at lunch the other day what I thought you thought. Cut from the same cloth, et cetera. And it hurt, Celine. A lot.

"I intended to tell you we were finished, that I didn't want to see you again. But," he gently tapped her lips, forestalling tears and interruptions, "giving you up would let Wyatt win. *And* I could see how you might construe our involvement as yet another Wyatt prank."

"I should have trusted you," she whispered against his fingertips.

"Yes, you should have," he agreed. "But since I'm not just another handsome face but *am* a brilliant attorney trained to see at least two sides to every argument I decided to marry you. Today. Before you decided you deserved to live without me.

"Besides, I liked today. I liked having our family and friends with us. And if anyone was railroaded into marriage, you were."

"Wasn't."

"Was. You missed all the fun of planning it. The bridal showers, the —"

"Endless hours of selecting the food and worrying that our reception would fall short of the smallest gathering hosted by Mrs. Major." She laughed. "I never knew your grandmother had a first name all her own."

"Marjorie." Keefe chuckled. "When we were kids, Garven, Wyatt and I couldn't pronounce her name. So we just called her Mrs. Major."

"And your parents, yours and Garven's, don't seem to be strangers. They were friendly with everyone."

"Ms. Jynx knows who to invite to a party. Besides, your parents and mine already knew each other. All those years they were friends and we never met."

Celine touched his hand. "We met when we were supposed to meet. I wouldn't change a thing."

"Even if it feels like some cosmic joke?"

She bristled then laughed. "Even then."

Putting their glasses aside, Keefe eased her feet across his lap and slid off her shoes. Massaging her toes, he said, "Have I told you how beautiful you are? How proud I felt just to stand by your side and hold your hand?"

"Hmmm." Her eyes drifted closed then fluttered open. "Keefe! How did you unbutton my gown when you're —"

He kissed her quiet.

“And have I told you that I’ve been wondering for hours what you have on underneath this lovely gown? Or that these little corkscrew curls are driving me crazy? Again?”

He stood then drew her to her feet. The gown pooled around her ankles. There she stood, magnificent in only a white satin thong and thigh-high stockings.

Grasping her shoulders, he turned her around and patted her butt. It felt more like a caress. She looked back over her shoulder and saw him staring at her ass.

Payback, she thought and sashayed across her living room.

His jaw dropped. Closing his mouth, he licked his lips then wagged his tongue like he was sipping her juices. She felt the spasms begin, like little tongues on her clit, in her core.

Jonathan Jacobs Jones! she thought, feeling a blush flood her chest and face. If he could do that with just a look, tonight promised hours of fulfillment.

She drifted her gaze from his face to his wide shoulders, down to his crotch. At least she had company in arousal.

She winked and opened the double doors to the bedroom.

Rose petals, dozens of them, hundreds perhaps, in every color of the rainbow, dotted every surface in the room—the dresser, the nightstands, the carpet, the wall-to-wall bed. The scent was glorious, unlike anything she’d ever smelled, with a hint of apple and cinnamon underneath. So this was why he hadn’t wanted her up here to change for their wedding.

Tears of joy stung her eyes but she didn’t hide them. She ran to Keefe and rushed into his open arms. Arms that closed around her as if they’d never let her go. Arms that made her feel safe, welcomed, loved.

“Jynx didn’t—?”

“I thought of it all on my own.”

“I love you.”

"Because of the roses?"

"Because you thought of them all on your own. And because of the s-scent of apples and c-cin—"

"Sin is very nice." He kissed her, picked her up and carried her into the bathroom. Placing her like a fragile parcel on the closed commode, he started to fill the humongous tub.

"Herma-Frodie haven't been in here, have they? Because if my tub acts like the one at Jaap's, I'd rather share a shower."

"We aren't sharing anything. Yet. You relax in the tub and think about all the things we'll do to each other for a few hours. I'll—"

"Hours?" she squeaked.

"I'll change and slip into something comfortable. Like you."

"Not fair," she yelled at his back and fanned her heated face with her hands.

"Spit," he hollered back and shut the door behind him.

Intending to throw the antique cut-glass crystal vase at the door, she snatched it off the vanity but sniffed the flowers before she made the toss. Apple blossoms. Where in the galaxy had Keefe gotten apple blossoms in January?

Humming, she put the vase down, finished undressing, then stepped into the tub. Inhaling the scents of roses and apple blossoms wafting off the warm water, she lay back and thought of Keefe.

As if her thoughts had summoned him, he appeared, carrying the champagne bucket and a single white rose.

She sat up and drew her knees to her chest, suddenly feeling shy. Why, she hadn't a clue. After everything they'd done to each other, would do to each other tonight, modesty seemed silly. Besides, after what he'd done to her only minutes ago with just a look, she owed him. She stretched out again and smiled up at him.

"Aren't you overdressed?"

He looked down at his skimpy briefs then sat on the wide edge of the tub, smiling.
“No.”

“What’s up?”

“Besides me, you mean? I’ve come to wash my wife’s back. Here.” He handed her a glass of champagne then slid into the tub behind her. Nuzzling her neck, he cupped her breasts and thumbed her peaking nipples.

She could feel his erection against her back and moaned, pressing against him and wiggling.

He hummed and eased her thighs open. He combed her nether curls, teased her clit until she moaned and arched her hips, silently asking for more.

She felt him fumbling with his briefs, heard them plop on the floor.

“By the Goddess!” She tried to sit up but couldn’t.

Two sets of hands, one set holding her thighs apart, the other on her breasts caressing her nipples, held her in place. One pair of legs circled her waist, the other slid along her own legs, his silky hair rubbing sensuously.

“Keefe? Is there something you’d like to tell me?”

His erections pulsed between her buttocks and at the entrance to her womb. He slid one cock into her. Now resting near her mouth, the other seemed content to wait its turn.

“Oh Goddess, you feel good! You will have to tell me how you do that,” she mumbled around his second cock.

He blew in her ear. “Oh yeah. I forgot to tell you. I’m from Jupiter, where the men have two of everything important.”

“By Jupiter!” she said.

“On Jupiter we say ‘By Jove’.”

Epilogue

Mars' roar made Jupiter cringe but Venus only laughed. Mars roared again, this time a roar of laughter. Jupiter chuckled, soft enough that if Mars decided to rail at him, Jupiter could pretend he had a frog in his throat.

"I should have recognized your hand in this, Venus."

"It was a battle, Mars, getting those two together."

"A battle of the sexes. How appropriate," Jupiter drawled, disliking the barely felt tremors Mars and Venus exchanged. Too late, he recognized the danger to himself when Mars turned a fierce gaze toward him.

"Now, boys," Venus said, putting her hands on their chests.

Mars deflated his puffed-out chest and Jupiter followed suit. Jupiter sighed with relief. Mars chuckled.

"You never told me, Venus, that Jovians have two cocks."

"I never knew for sure," she said, casting a reproachful glance at Jupiter. "I thought only Jupiter himself had them."

"What if..." Mars whispered in her ear.

Giggling, she faced Jupiter with a speculative look in her eyes. Those mesmerizing eyes could change color, depending on her lover's mood or her own.

"While I consider your suggestion, Mars, you have to promise not to start any wars."

"Or skirmishes," Jupiter added while wondering what Mars had suggested.

"That could take—" Mars objected.

"Several millennia," Venus agreed. "Longer if Jupiter and I have to keep you from making war. So what's it to be? Promise or..."

"Promise," Mars growled. "Well? Get on with it."

"Not until you leave." Noticing his truculent expression, Venus added, "I'll tell you all about it. Once we've succeeded."

"Oh all right!" Mars snapped and withdrew from their consciousness.

"What does he want?" Jupiter asked, scowling.

"Nothing much." Venus batted her eyelashes and smiled at him across the light-years.

"None of your flirting, Venus. I want to know what Mars wants and I want to know it right —"

"Now. Another typical male reaction. Always thinking with your cocks." She laughed. "Both of them. Or should I include Mars and make that all three of them?"

"Ah. So my misfortune has something to do with Mars' plans?"

"Fortunately, Mars doesn't view having two cocks as misfortune."

"So what does he want?"

"He wants us to create a woman who can accommodate both."

"Simultaneously?" His look of incredulity morphed into speculation. "Not in her mouth and —?"

"No, one of two cocks in each of her two wombs."

"By Jupiter, I like that!"

"By Jove, so do I!"

About the Author

Dee believes she was born with a pen in one hand and a writing tablet in the other. Determined not to work in an office, this wannabe actress never learned to type well; she still composes with pen and pad, then transcribes her manuscripts onto her PC. Sometimes Dee and her dictation program are best friends; more often they are mortal enemies.

Dee lives in northern California with her inspiration, best friend, and husband. She loves to read and, of course, write. *Passion's Four Towers* is her first published novel.

Dee welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

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