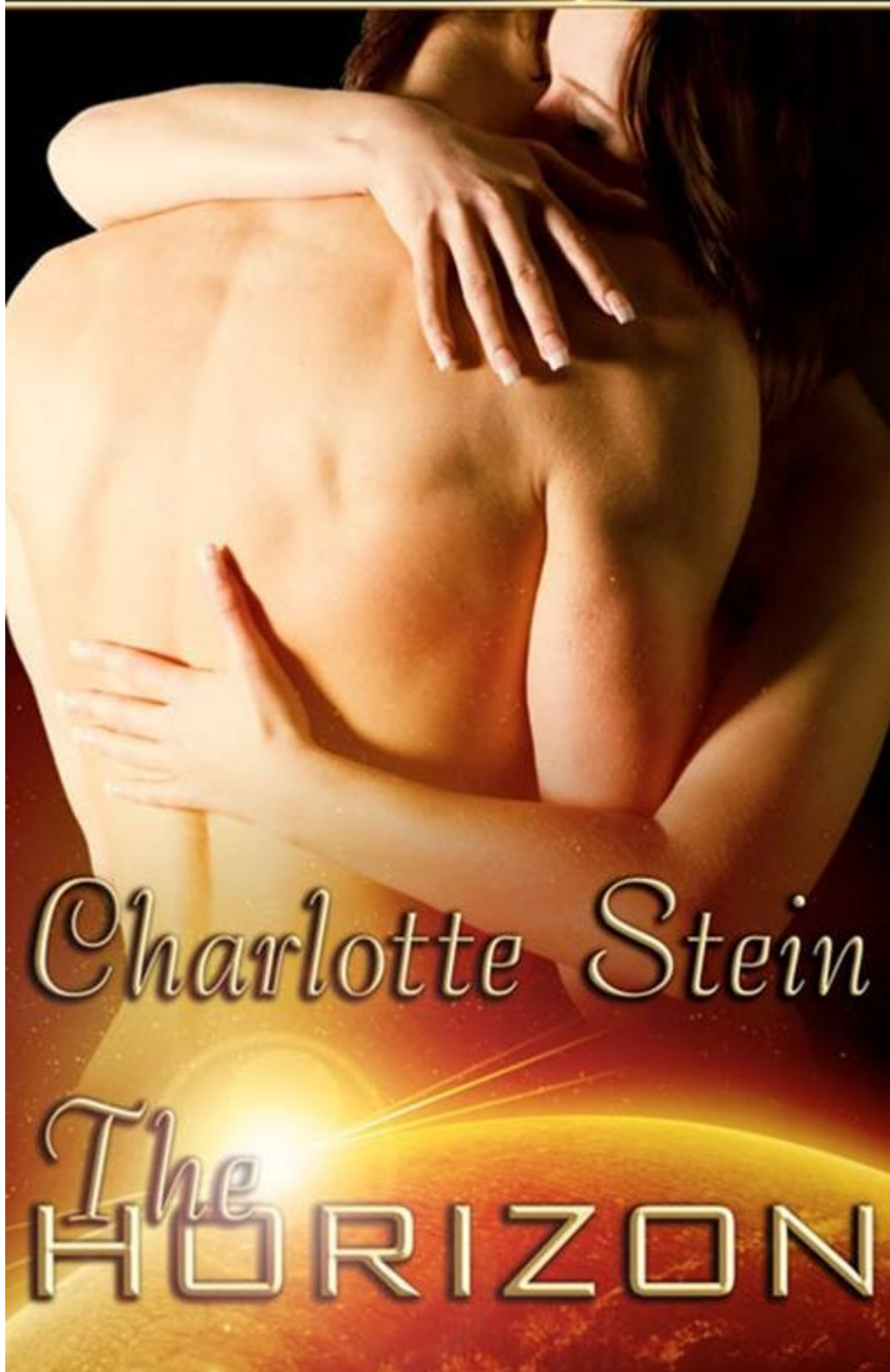


ELLORA'S CAVE AEON



*Charlotte Stein*

*The*  
**HORIZON**

## **The Horizon**

*Charlotte Stein*

When Quade swoops in to save his archenemy, Sol, from bloodthirsty Cybers, he doesn't expect to find himself almost torn apart, terrified beyond imagining and even worse – declaring his love for her.

Now they're trapped on Sol's spaceship, both half-insane due to the Cybers pumping them full of some lust drug. If they can't get a hold of themselves quickly, they're going to be doing some pretty dirty things.

But surprisingly, Sol doesn't seem to mind that newfound feelings are bursting out all over – especially when said feelings pave the way for wild and constant sex with her former enemy.

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The Horizon

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# *THE HORIZON*

**Charlotte Stein**

## *Dedication*

To Kelli Collins, for taking a chance on my work. To La Roux, for my heart's truest song. And finally to Sommer Marsden, for making me calm when I most needed to be calm.

## Chapter One

The proximity alarm goes off right in the middle of his dream—the one with the two girls sliding all over him. It’s a good one too. Both of them had decided he should wear a crown, while they did all manner of things to him. And they had done a ton of stuff he’s not seen in an age out here in the darkness, like actual kissing and touching and wild, weird sandwich sex.

Actually, if he’s honest, that last one’s never happened. But it sure seemed nice, and even if it hadn’t, it’s better than waking up to a proximity alarm.

They’re probably all going to be killed horribly any second. He can hear Marcs bellowing from somewhere toward the engine room, and just as he’s getting his own pants on—two legs in one hole, briefly—the whole ship cants violently to one side.

Suddenly the whole wearing-pants-on-one-leg thing seems minor. Mainly because his head has just taken a beating thanks to the shelf his cabin shouldn’t have, while the boot he’d managed to get on has somehow flung itself into his collection of antique cans. They make an awful racket coming off the wall. Makes the creator of the ship seem almost sane for all the weird shelving and burgundy paint, when considering his own interior design skills.

Marcs’ cabin is better, and all it has in it are walls filled with military hardware and a book entitled *How To Club People To Death, Slowly*. And that kinky picture of the two girls, doing stuff like in his dream.

Only in the picture, there hadn’t been Sol, lounging around with one eyebrow raised, wanting to know if he expected *her* to suck his dick too. Did he want her to tell him *oh baby harder, harder, yes – no one’s as good as you?*

*Because you know, Quade, I’m totally up for that. I want you so bad, baby, that I’ll do anything. Anything. Lord, look at how wet you’re making me –*

He praises that same Lord when the ship suddenly cants again—to the right this time. At least the whole we're-being-attacked thing whacks sex with prickly, annoying, big-boobed Sol out of his mind.

Even if it leaves behind the words “big-boobed”.

Somehow he ends up on the tin-grating floor of the main corridor, staring up at a burgundy ceiling while thoughts of Sol slither through his head. It's probably brain damage, he figures. From all the canting about. Until Marcs takes one giant step over him on the way to the bridge and sane thoughts filter in.

“You sleeping, Quade?”

That lights a fire under his ass. 'Specially since Marcs “forgot” to call him Captain. And today the man seems to be wearing a cap with “Captain” on it. As Quade stumbles up to the bridge and finishes yanking on one desperately trying-to-escape boot, he can't help noticing the patch Marcs has tied around one weirdly bare and insanely muscled upper arm—that of a Company Colonel.

One that he likely killed yesterday. Quade is sure going to have to chat with him about killing people, real soon. If *they're* not killed right now.

“I think we might be about to be horribly killed, Captain,” Thal says from a console he has no idea how to operate. But then, Thal doesn't know how to operate anything on the ship. Largely he just sits at places, looking uncomfortably pretty for a man.

Marcs said he brought him onboard as a paying passenger. As a cook. As a fill-in-the-blank-here. But Quade has his theories about that particular blank—yeah. Marcs is getting lonely.

*Real* lonely.

“Okay, people. Why is my ship sliding back and forth like Marcs' sexuality?”

And all right, he doesn't say that last part. But it's sure occurring to him, hard.

“I don’t know. I can’t get the viewscreen up,” Thal replies, but that’s largely because he’s just pressing random buttons and looking confused when the slanted gray panels *cum* windows *cum* screens that line the bridge don’t turn black and sparkly.

Marcus shoves him out of the way and takes the helm. Or more accurately, the space that’s not quite at the front, because when the hull got cracked everything had to be moved one space to the left.

“Thal, I want you on...communications,” he tells him, and then watches as Thal’s baby blues search for that very thing. It ain’t anywhere near Marcus’ big, hairy, muscular upper body, Quade knows that much for sure.

“Just—get over there,” he says, and points. At which Thal wheels his chair at a clip. Used to be that particular chair wheeled on rails, but now it’s just footloose and fancy-free, and liable to send you out the door and down the stairs if you’re not watching carefully.

Ah, his ship. How he loves it so.

“Got it, Captain,” Marcus says, and Quade has to love him for the use of the title. Makes the whole enterprise seem almost proper.

Until a cold chill gets hold of his gut, thinking of what’s going to be behind that opaque window. Then it just seems like he’s a coward who has no idea what he’s doing half the time. Especially when it turns out they’re not being attacked at all. No, no, no, it’s just backlash from someone *else* being attacked. They’re safe inside a dust cloud—hidden, even.

While Solomon takes a beating on the now-functioning screen in front of them.

He knows it’s her. Of course he does. Who else would be blocking communications like an asshole? And look at that ridiculous hunk-of-junk ship, with the shit painted all over it. “Die, Cybers, die.” Loads of Earth creatures that probably never existed, like tigers and dolphigs and...what had she called that other one?



The elephoto. That supposedly had a nose as big as its entire body. Man, was she ever a crock full of shit! Not to mention the incredible pain she caused monthly...in his ass. Like a period. Only in a man and up his butt.

Marc's hoots. They're buddies, he and Sol. But them being buddies mostly consists of each of them betting when the other will die in some sort of horrific, painful fashion.

"Ah, she's in trouble now! Nail that son of a bitch with your pulse cannon, girl!" Marc's bellows, and pounds the console with one massive hand.

And Sol does. He watches as her little dink of a ship—no bigger than a CT-Hopper—turns on its heel then suddenly flats back, firing as it goes. On a shitting Juggernaut! The thing's bigger than a planet!

He has had many dreams about the size of Solomon's balls over the years. Probably as big as her breasts, he reckons. And he knows without a doubt she'll be yelling right now, telling them to *take it, take it, want some more* and whatever else, prepared to go down in flames and die like an idiot.

Or maybe not an idiot. 'Cause after all, everyone knows what Cybers do to you, if they manage to take you alive.

He turns to Thal, who is very busy pretending he knows how to copilot a cruiser. Marc's, to his credit, actually *does* know how to pilot a cruiser. But he's real engrossed in whooping and telling Sol to cock the shit out of that Juggernaut. Meanwhile they're all just a big heap of cowards, hiding in a gas cloud while Cybers pummel the crap out of Sol's ship.

The knowledge of which decides it. No matter how insane "it" might be.

"Thal," he says, and Thal turns in a seat that's really just a composite of eight other seats. Everything on this bucket is a composite of eight other things, as Sol is often only too happy to point out. Particularly bad was when she claimed *The Horizon* was cobbled together out of old toilets.

It completely isn't. Apart from where it is.

“Prime the pulse cannons and prepare to engage.”

Thal just looks mystified. “Engage...what?”

Marcus swivels in his seat made out of toilets. “Yeah. Engage *what?*”

He’s a little more forceful than Thal. But seeing as how Marcus is usually forceful by killing people with his fists, Quade isn’t about to complain just yet.

“I ain’t ever heard you use that word before. What do you mean by ‘engage’?”

“We’re going to engage the enemy. And save that...little dink out there.”

“You’re pulling my plotz.”

“Just...I don’t want to hear about your parts, Marcus. I’m the Captain. Do as I say.”

“Permission to speak, Captain,” Thal says, but just because he’s a great deal more polite than Marcus doesn’t mean Quade’s going to want to hear the words he’s about to put out there. Something that becomes clear when Thal actually does put the words out there.

“Permission not granted.”

“Permission to tell you that you hate Sol, sir. I’m pretty sure you’ve told me around twenty-thousand times how much you hate her.”

“Permission still not granted. And also, you’re now getting a fifth less of a baked potato for dinner.”

“You’ve already taken away five fifths of my potato for asking for permission to speak on previous occasions. In future, I think I’m just going to say it.”

“Noted. Now let’s...do the thing I said.”

Marcus grumbles a bunch of stuff under his breath about people acting like despots (did he really just use the word *despot?*) and how Sol can take care of herself anyway, but he obeys. He even stomps over to Thal’s console and primes the cannons, because although Thal can make a mean tofu korma, and knows all the words to Shakespeare’s songs, buttons and firing on things continue to elude him.

If his book-reading eyes ever got flicked out of his head—and with the Cybers looming large on the viewscreen, that’s pretty likely to happen—he’d be about as much use as an electric ass scratcher.

“Think we can take this Jugg?” Quade asks, and Marcs barks out that it’s a bit late to be asking that.

It’s a bit late for all the nerves and terror clawing up his throat too. As they break the gas cloud, he fervently wishes he hadn’t thought about eye flicking. It only leads to the recurring imaginings he has about what the Cybers would do if they ever got their hands on him—which is the same as what they’d do to anybody. Pull his intestines out his left nostril. Then cram them back in, before trying it again out his right nostril.

They say that Cybers are excellent physicians. They can get the intestines they just pulled out back in, no problem.

Luckily for them, however, Cybers are also quite single-minded. As the little Hopper dodges a few rounds of hail and fire by ducking under the Jugg’s belly, Marcs skirts *The Horizon* right over its top.

It’s a beautiful move. Truly beautiful. A shame, really, that Thal presses the wrong button and fires the top cannons rather than the belly ones. Though Quade is dead certain space really feels the hit that fires off aimlessly into it. Space is crying now, for its momma.

“Jesus please us—where the shit’re your brains at, boy?” Marcs screams, then launches himself out of his seat the same time Quade does, but Thal slaps the belly cannons just as they’re crashing into each other—and before their ship gets to the end of the Jugg. Up this close, he smells Marcs’ sweat and likely his fear, too, though Marcs is supposed to be afraid of nothing.

Good job they’re nice hits, in the end. Fire plumes off the tail of the Jugg and Thal lets out a breath of relief—one that Quade sorely wants to echo. No man ever wants to meet creatures that even Marcs is afraid of, and that’s the truth.

“Nice shot, bookworm,” Marcs says, and Thal gets that weird happy look on his face, the one that’s kind of naïve and not anything like the look of a man who’s as book smart as the universe is big. Still, Marcs is being serious. So it’s okay for Thal to look like the nerfball who’s just fit in with the popular kids.

“Send out our hooks while they’re clouded,” he tells Marcs, and Marcs shoots him a look like he’s barking.

“We’re gonna hook her? And then what?”

“Then we’re going to jump.”

“You’re shittin’ me. Are you shittin’ me, Quade? That kind of move will wrench our ass clean off and then—”

“I’ve got a good enough idea of what it’ll do, now do it, God shit it!”

Marcs makes some great beastly noises but he sets to it. Not quick enough for Quade’s butt cheeks to unclench, however. By the time their hooks are in Sol’s ship, the Jugg is firing on them.

“Captain, if you don’t mind me saying so, I’d rather our...ass stayed on. I didn’t hire you to remove parts I’d like to keep,” Thal says.

“Since when was the last time you paid me a penny to shift you about from place to place? Since never—now hold on tight.”

“Ah, this is gonna be grim,” Marcs says.

And then he punches it.

\* \* \* \* \*

However much Thal doesn’t seem to know, he’s sometimes good for fixing things. Quade asks him where he learned to deal with engines as he reroutes the power through the secondary couplings, but as usual, he doesn’t respond.

Just fiddles. Makes sure their ass stays on.

“That whine?” he says. “It means there’s a breach coming in the tubes. They need to be sealed up.”

“Sol’s still not responding to us. In a minute I’m going to go over there and see if she’s okay. Maybe she’ll also have some spare sealant or similar we can use.”

Thal glances away from the maze of wires in his deft hands. Like usual, those blue eyes bore holes through him. They always seem to have some sort of weird-ass light, like he’s got neon behind them instead of a brain. Kind of unnerving. Like the Cybers.

“That’s why you wanted to help her. So you could salvage what you need from her ship.”

Quade doesn’t like that penetrating stare anymore, now that he’s said such a thing. Where does he get off saying such a thing?

“Now hang fire a second, I may not like Sol, but—”

“Exactly. You’ve told me many times how much you despise her. How she jumps you on jobs and complains about the size of your posterior. So why help her?”

“Don’t— Why are you mentioning what she thinks of my behind? Just fix that, will you?”

“I hadn’t realized her behind talk had so affected you. I’ll avoid the subject in future.”

“You do that. And Sol—Sol does not *affect* me,” he snorts, but is dismayed by how strange his own finger quoting and efforts at being ironical come out.

Thal just stares at him with those buzzing eyes.

“She’s another human being out there. I’m just...helping another human being. Before there’re none of us left.”

Thal turns back to the bunch of wires in his hand, seemingly indifferent. The subject’s probably going to be changed now, Quade figures.

He figures wrong.

“What does she look like?” Thal asks.

“What does who look like?”

“This Solomon. What does she look like?”

Yeah, he’s real indifferent all right. But oh, Quade knows his game.

“She ain’t pretty, all right. If that’s what you’re thinking – she’s not a looker. She’s not grasped me by my parts, got it?”

“I wasn’t—”

“I know full well what you’re saying, Thal. She’s got nothing on me, okay? Nothing, I tell you. She’s plain as the day is long. Now see to that engine. I’m going to see how dead the plain-plain-plain, mean-assed Solomon may or may not be.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Marcus wants to go with him to her ship, for backup. Thal suggests that he go too, in case she needs medical stuff he learned in some *Big Book of Explosive Injuries*. But Quade shrugs them both off. Marcus only wants first claim on her goods, and Thal...well. He’s not real big on all that what-does-she-look-like talk Thal was doing back in the engine room.

Like he could be interested in Solomon that way! Crazy talk. Crazy crazy crazy. Of course, she’s one of the few women who hang around out here in the spaces between civilizations, but that don’t mean so much.

If he wants a woman he can get one. On Minos or Taprine. There’re still plenty of women to be had, in the Company clinics and in brothels and the like.

Though most of them aren’t anything like Sol.

It’s a jolt to his system to actually find her crumpled on the floor of her bridge, facedown. The right-hand pilot’s seat is tilted at a bit of an angle, and some of her consoles are still smoking and flashing.

She took a beating, all right. Usually she gets hit, she gets right back up again. The sight of her all weak and put down makes his own legs feel watery – what if there are

Cybers on this boat right now? Maybe they injected her with that stuff they do and then just left her here like a trap?

He'll crouch down by her side and then BAM! She'll turn with her eyes all weird and all messed-up thoughts in her brain, and try to claw his eyes out.

His gut tightens down hard on nothing and the spacesuit around him no longer feels safe. Now it's cumbersome and hard to breathe in. The oxygen levels check out okay, so he tugs the helmet off. Glances behind himself, back toward the circular link and the dark and empty corridor of *The Horizon*. As though something's going to be there.

But then that's what they do, Cybers. They creep up on you, as messy and cobbled together out of shit-knows-what as they are. Some say they were people once, army experiments and the like. Dead people made into part machines that went crazy.

Sometimes they look like that. Sometimes.

Mostly they just look like mad, marauding, maniac robots that want to torture you to death.

He reaches out a shaking hand to Sol's back. Her pale and tautly muscled arm. The curling binds she's done her hair in. He's no idea why she keeps her black hair long—seems so impractical. But she does, and if he just reaches out an inch more he could touch it.

When she groans, his heart tries to escape out his mouth.

"Sol," he says. "You still you?"

She turns her head to one side, flopping like a broken doll. He can see she's hit her head—there's a small gash along her right eyebrow.

"You okay?"

"Okay enough to see how fat your ass is getting," she chokes out, and he'd be furious or laughing or whatever if she didn't then follow it with a cough of pain. And this...

“They’re coming.”

They scramble into action as quickly as he can get her to her feet. Fat ass – she’s got a nerve! Maybe she should check out her own ass, it’s as big as a moon!

But now’s really not the time to be thinking of asses. The sensors are going wild and they’ve either got to get off this boat or get it moving before the Cybers jump in. Since Sol doesn’t seem to think the former’s an option, he sets to helping her do what she’s doing – rerouting everything on her ship that’s not working and pushing all power to the jump drive.

“Why they so hot on you?” he yells over frantic switching and dialing and the sound of sirens.

But she just snaps back, “‘Cause I’m human,” and keeps on cobbling her piece-of-shit ship back together, while he attempts to get *The Horizon* on the comm.

When he finally does, all he can hear is Marcs and Thal arguing. Apparently, Marcs wants to flee immediately. Thal, on the other hand, seems to think that’s a bad and cowardly sort of idea.

“They might be hurt,” Thal says. “I can help them.”

“Picked up a stray, apple butt?” Sol asks.

He bites down hard on that “apple butt” comment and goes with what’s currently relevant. “Can’t run on a crew of two. Wind up that coil. We’ve got about thirty seconds.”

“Got tired of only having that manbeast to hump every night, huh?”

“Could you just, for one minute, God shit it?”

Over the comm, Marcs bellows that no one humps him, even as Thal quietly asks if that’s true in this little wondering sort of voice.

“Sounds like a real fancy lady,” Sol says, and he would laugh – because she’s got Thal about right – only now there’s scuffling going on over the comm, and Marcs grunting. He hears Thal say, sharp and bright as a brand new star...



“We can’t just leave, we can’t leave!”

Before the sound comes—the sound of *The Horizon* disengaging hooks from Sol’s ship.

“You’d better get this heap of crap working, Sol, ‘cause they’re leaving!”

But then nothing more needs to be said, because the thrusters kick in and the drive comes on and Marcs hollers that it’s time to jump.

Quade doesn’t disagree. The Jugg appears on the viewscreen as Sol cycles up her drive, punching it at just the right moment. Or at least, it *would* be the right moment, if the drive caught and things followed through and it didn’t turn out to be just a person hitting a useless piece of plastic.

He’s often thought, whilst in a reflective mood—*just bits and bits and bits of plastic, between me and certain death.*

Which is going to be the case now. Marcs and Thal are silent on the comm, *The Horizon’s* gone, and Sol’s jump drive is making a sound like an elephoto dying.

And then everything goes dark.

## Chapter Two

Every schoolboy knows what happens if you're unfortunate enough to be dragged aboard a Cyber ship. But it's a different matter altogether when you're actually on one. Breathing in air that smells like death farts and rotten entrails. Waking up swinging between two man-shaped things with leering, neon eyes and bits of the last person they killed still smeared all over their bodies.

Not that you can call what they have "bodies".

The Cyber on his left has a coolant pump for a leg. The one on his right has no torso, just a maze of wires and skeletal linking parts. The hands that grip him aren't really hands at all, but hooks and tubes and pricking things.

He tries to shake his head clear so he can think about something other than their parts, but clearly they've drugged him. Shots darts full of God-knows-what into them. Sol tried to give 'em bullets back, but they never had a chance. Too much metal. Not enough flesh to aim at.

And now the ship of death is dancing before his blurred eyes.

"Sol," he manages to cough out. "Sol, where are you?"

But she doesn't answer. Neither do they. They just drag him up and bind his hands, and then he's being hauled even higher, higher, wrists crossed above his head. His feet dangle free and the stench of the Cybers lifts a little, but the fact that it does is no comfort. Nor is the sudden feeling of something heavy butting against his back. Or the sound that comes from the heavy thing.

"Quade," it says. *She* says. Sol.

She's strung up just like he is, back to back.

"You okay?"

“Oh I’m great. Look down and you’ll be great too,” Sol says.

He tries to get his dazed, addled mind to focus and understand what she’s saying about greatness and the like, but it refuses. Instead he looks down, and sees exactly what she’s talking about.

A pit of horror, just waiting to swallow them up. Bloody, rusty implements, still with bodies freshly impaled. Whirring blades and chomping blades and amongst them...oh Lord, amongst them...

“There’re people still alive down there,” he says. It comes out slurred and broken.

“Let’s hope we don’t become one of them.”

He cries then. Nothing unmanly about admitting it. He thinks just about anyone would cry, given the circumstances.

Except for Sol, of course.

“Are you *crying*? Oh shit save me. I’m stuck here with a crying man.”

“Why aren’t *you* crying? Jessum crow, Sol, you know what Cybers do to you!”

And then he whacks his body into hers, just to emphasize his point. Gets his shoulder blades good and hard back into hers. All she does is *umph* and then jostle right back.

“Don’t you jostle me, you goddamn pecker! When I get out of this I’m going to dance a party on your grave.”

“Oh, you’re never getting out of this, Sol, I’m gonna see to that!”

“Not before I see to you first!” she spits back, before there’s nothing but unintelligible, furious sounds and her boots banging into the backs of his legs.

“Give it over, you harpy! Let up!”

“Where’s that humongous ass? I’m going to bash the shit out of it!”

He has something all lined up to toss back at that one, something really juicy that’ll make her twice as mad as she already is. Though he doesn’t get a chance to say it. All

words die when, out of the darkness surrounding the pit they're dangling over, something husky and metallic rings out.

"Humans," the husky and metallic thing says. "Humans."

He can still feel the flat of Sol's shoe pressed to the sensitive place behind his knee. It doesn't move, not even when the Cyber speaks to them. Like a hand on his arm, he fancies. Like a hand on his arm saying *it'll be okay, Quade*.

He rests his head back against hers.

"Always fighting," it says, and though it offers nothing more, those few words are easy enough to read. The contempt in them sizzles over his skin like burning threads. He's sure he can feel *Sol's* hair standing up on the nape of her neck.

"Yeah?" he hollers into the darkness. "Yeah, well this ain't exactly a peace-loving activity you're about to partake in!"

When it laughs—though what it does could hardly be called a "laugh"—long and grinding into the silence around them, Sol breaks. He feels it vibrate through her body and then up and out of her mouth. Chills his blood more than that terrible laughter.

"Why do you do this to us? *Why?*"

Feels like a verse from his heart's truest song. But he has to try to sing another one, instead. Their lives depend on it. Their sanity depends on it.

"Yeah—and especially to me! *She* deserves it—she once cannoned a Jugg right out of the sky!"

It has the right effect. She even manages to twist her face around and spit hot, wet fury at the back of his neck.

"You'd sell the last living elephoto for five extra seconds, wouldn't you, Quade? I hope they jam your pecker into a toaster when those five seconds come, you goddamn coward."

"There's no. Such. Thing! Hell yes I'd sell a nonexistent animal for my life! I thought you were going to say something worthwhile, like my grandmother or—"

“Or that plastic vagina you’ve got? Yeah, Marcs told me you had one. Said you called it Deidre.”

“Oh, you –”

“Think she’s going to come and rescue you? I bet she’ll cry when you’re blended into a pulp.”

“Yeah? And who’s going to cry for you? Some member of the imaginary zoo?”

“Marcs will cry for me – he won’t *ever* cry for you! He told me he *hates* you. All this time he’s been humping Deidre behind your back.”

“That goddamn shitter.”

Then...*then*. Then she bursts out with the laughter of the doomed. He’s not sure, but he thinks *that* might be his heart’s truest song. The sound of Solomon laughing, laughing hysterically into the void.

He laughs right back at her, until he’s exhausted with it. God, but they must look a pair to the Cybers. Wherever said creatures are.

“Think they’re going to say *humans, humans, always laughing?*” he manages, and she chokes out some more for him for that.

“That’s a great Cyber impression.”

“Thank you – I’ve been practicing. Got to get it right down in the back of your throat.”

“But that metallic twang – that’s genius.”

She rests her head on his shoulder, just a little. Rests there panting against him. And then after a while, he starts thinking she’s doing more than resting. She seems to be getting awful heavy against him.

“They make you wait, you know. So that you go mad,” she says, in the middle of all this heaviness. Her voice sounds weird too. Faint.

He jostles back at her.

“Hey – hey. Stay with me.”

"I never thought I'd go out like this. With you. I never thought yours would be the last voice I heard."

He chuffs out a bitter laugh. "Yeah? Whose did you think it would be? Marcs? The roar of a lionel?"

He can almost see her eyes closing—those big, dark eyes. Her eyelids are the most perfect, smooth, pale things, like those pictures of seashells she once showed him. She's not pretty, not even a bit, but she has some nice things about her.

Like her mouth. And her voice, coming out of the darkness of space at him. *Hey, Quade—reading you loud and clear, apple butt.*

"I thought it would be David Bowie. David Bowie, before my ship got cannoned into oblivion," she says in some kind of falling-asleep voice. "I rigged the drive plates, you know. So that the ship would go up before they got to me."

He wishes he could put a hand to some place on him. His chest, maybe.

"Why couldn't you just let them get to me, Quade? Now we're both going to die like this."

"I couldn't..." he begins. "I couldn't..."

But he can't fill in the *because* after that.

"Hey—Sol. Sol! Sing some Bowie with me, okay? How does that one thing go—this is ground control to Mayor Crom, I'm sitting on the floor..."

"You're a dink."

"And I'm having the most nuclear day."

"That ain't how it goes."

"Then tell me. *Tell me.* Tell me every bit of everything you've ever known."

Of course he says it because he wants to keep her talking. She seems to be falling asleep, and Lord knows you don't fall asleep in a situation like this unless something's powerful wrong with you. Like concussion, or the drugs they gave her, or maybe even...maybe even something she gave herself.

But he also realizes when he says it, that he says it because it's true. He wants to know every stupid thing she ever thought up or found out.

"Once," she slurs. "There were these things called horses. And they carried men on their backs, and they ran and ran and ran, they ran far away from this place..."

Oh Lord is she ever slurring down to nothing now. Panic gets him by the balls.

"Sol, Sol! Don't leave me on my own out here!"

"They ran to you, I ran to you. I ran to you."

He pulls hard against the binds around his wrists. So hard that he's sure he's about to yank the skin clean off, and even if that doesn't happen, struggling free is only going to land him in the pit.

Though it sure does feel good to do it. He yanks and twists and only regrets a damn thing when there's a sudden loose feeling and the surety that he's about the plummet to his death swamps him. He's about to die. He's about to die because Sol's unconscious and most likely going out like a light, hung here in the ship of death.

Quade is as surprised as the next person to find himself still alive a moment later. His left hand pops free, and the loop tightens around his right. It catches him, as surely as Sol's hand would.

At which point, what he has to do next comes on him with a great and brilliant clarity. He has to reach up with his left hand and grasp the rope, before working his right hand free too. That's what he has to do. Doesn't matter if his limbs are tingling and swelling and feeling weird. Doesn't matter if his vision is blurry—all there is out there is darkness anyhow.

He gets his left hand to the rope and hauls himself up. His body protests. The muscles in his left arm shriek. Sweat stands out on his forehead—the knowledge that he should really bench press a little with Marcs, next time he offers, jabs him in the ribs.

And then his right hand slides free like a baby out of its mamma.

Now what he's left with is the idea that they're watching him do this whole thing. Though he kind of suspects they'd be laughing if they could see him now.

"Go ahead and laugh, fuckers," he says, as he starts the next part of the process. The next part, his brain informs him, is clambering around Sol's body.

It's not as easy as his brain makes him think it is. He panics, briefly, that he's too much weight for her bound wrists to take. She's not as solid as she looks, and there are many things he doesn't want to touch—the warm humps of her immense breasts, which press briefly into his cheek. The curve of her hip against his palm. Her wide-open eyes suddenly staring right at him.

He almost screams.

"What in the shit of shits are you doing?" she asks, and honest to glory, he has no idea how to answer that. His legs are, after all, around her waist.

"You wanna help me out instead of bitching?"

"I ain't bitching, Quade. I'm flabbergasted. I can feel your man parts against my bellybutton."

"Swing, Sol. Just swing, all right? Aim for the edge of this shitting pit."

"That canned-ham butt of yours is playing murder on my shoulder sockets."

A sweaty, frustrated laugh blurts out of him. He makes it last, into the side of her face, her hair.

"This isn't going to work, you know," she says, but by God she swings. He feels her legs kick up close to his ass. And then back. And then up. And then back.

Soon there's something almost like fresh air in his lungs. His belly is lurching. They're flying through the air with the greatest of ease. Though he still can't get a handle on the edge of the pit.

"What now?" she cries.

And he thinks, *Now we go for it, and just hope we land on something that ain't spiky.*



He lets go of her shoulder, briefly, and reaches into his back pocket for the lump that's still there.

"No," she says, when she catches a glimpse of it. "No!"

"Ready?"

"God no, Quade, not yet— not yet!"

"We'll make it. Hold on!"

She's in the middle of screaming something in response when he drags himself up her body to the rope—and slices clean through it with the knife in his hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

Making it to the edge of the pit is a great and wonderful thing. It's a thing that actually makes Sol hug him, tightly, until he can feel her heart hammering against his own rib cage.

But lying there in the middle of all this breathless relief is no damn good when they're surrounded on all sides by the enemy—who *were* apparently standing by this pit, just watching his stupid attempts to escape. And they also seem to be laughing, as he had imagined. Or at least, it's an approximation of laughter.

"Get up, Sol," he hisses, and then she looks about herself and sees what he sees. All of them standing there, like metal sentries.

She scrambles to her feet, whatever daze that was on her clearly gone. Now she's shaking, and he can see even through the neon-sparked darkness that her teeth are clenched. Her hands are still tied but she makes short work of that.

"I'll show you funny, you buckets of crap," she spits.

And even as she's doing so, he's thinking, *She's got nothing to back it up. She's not going to take a step toward them. She's not.*

When she does, he wonders why he spent all that time on the floor, thinking that she wasn't going to. He jumps up just as she launches herself at the nearest tin can, teeth bared, fingers like claws.

He has no idea what she's going to do. Though when she gets a handful of the wires that are curling out of its neck, things become a mite clearer. She yanks hard and sparks go off near his still-muggy head, like on Taprine when they set off those bomb things that aren't dangerous.

Colorful. Pretty.

The Cyber responds by jittering and then jabbing something sharp into her arm. Sol screams so loud he'll hear it tomorrow, but she doesn't stop battering her fist against the side of its face, in the places where it's soft. It's a good plan, and likely would have worked if it weren't for the Cyber right next to the wired one, who simply reaches out one mechanical hand and clamps down on the plaited back of her hair.

She doesn't go down without a fight. As Cyber Two yanks her back, she kicks and punches and clings to Cyber One. He's sure she's gonna let Cyber Two tug that hair clean from her head, but he's not about to allow that. His gears are kicking in. The "action" signal in his head is flicking on.

He jerks forward and stabs the knife that's still in his hand into Cyber Two's wrist. Right into a meaty part, as far as it will go.

Cyber Two does not like that. Cybers Three and Four like it even less. He feels cold zombie hands of evil clamp down on his forearms, his shoulders. And before he can wrestle himself away he feels something thin and needlelike slide into the soft curve of his neck.

It makes him shout out. Maybe it's the stuff. The bad stuff. Maybe this is the end. That Cyber's still got a hold on Sol and though she's twisting against the grip he's got on her hair, he can see what's making that terrible whirring sound. That crazy buzzing, whirring sound.

Cyber Two doesn't have a left hand. It has an industrial sander instead.

"Ha ha ha," it says. "Humans. Die, humans."

They're simple things, really, he considers. Just a few basic needs, not much in the way of expressing themselves. Not able to laugh in a way that's anything but bloodcurdling. About to sand off the side of Sol's face.

He hears himself say, "Please, don't."

But the words come from very far away and seem hardly like him at all. Why, he doesn't beg Cybers! What would be the use? Sol's screaming blue murder and kicking the shit out of the thing, but it ain't listening to *her*. Why would it listen to something as pathetic as "please"?

He wrenches against the insensible hands holding him, but it's too late. It's all too late. Sol's going to be saying goodbye to the side of her face in about ten seconds.

"Ha ha ha," they say. "Ha ha ha."

And then there's just the high whine of the sander and Sol screaming, screaming, screaming.

\* \* \* \* \*

They don't stop when he expects them to. He expects them to wait until she's dead. Until he's thrown up his heart. But when the Cyber drops her to the ground, she's still screaming.

Maybe it's just that it's his turn now. He doubts that the argument "I'm too pretty" is going to hold much weight with them. Not that he's going to make it, considering how much like limp noodles his bones and muscles and vocal cords feel. He sags between his two captors, sure that if he sags enough he'll be able to get to Sol, down there on the floor.

"Quade," she gasps out. "Quade, are you alive?"

While all around them the Cybers buzz and chitter. They seem alarmed, he thinks, though there's no call for it. Did it hurt their feelings when she didn't beg for mercy?

"I'm right here," he says, for which he expects a smack in the mouth with a power tool.

It's less expected when the hands on his arms let go. The sudden freedom makes him lurch forward and nearly fall on top of her.

"Quade, look away from me, okay? Look away!"

It ain't her saying such a thing that makes him suspect something awfully nasty is up. Nastier even than a sander to the face. Nastier than the constant moans of whoever's down there in that pit.

It's the sounds the Cybers are making. The way they're backing up and whirring and clicking like they've spied a bomb.

"Not human," one of them grinds out, and then the others follow like they're all one and the same—*not human not human not human*. Like some sort of shitting feedback loop.

"Sol," he says, and puts his hand on her back. But she just skitters from him with her face turned away—so careful to keep her face turned away. As though a little bone and blood is going to disturb him after this shit storm!

When she stands on shaky feet, she keeps her back to him. She looks only at the weird semicircle of Cybers, as they click their mechanical hands at her and speak the strangest, strangest things.

"Cannot...sense you," one of them says.

And Sol replies, "No. No. You won't ever, you fucks!"

They take another jerky step back.

"Solomon," they say, which somehow seems even weirder.

"You move out of our way," she spits at them. "You move, 'cause we're leaving now. Understand?"

There's a metallic almost-silence. He wants to break it, but there's this terrible fear climbing up inside his throat. Instead, one of them breaks it for him...

"Yes. You can go...Solomon."

Her voice is all kinds of shaky, but she still keeps on. Somehow he kind of wishes she wouldn't.

"And I'm taking my human prisoner with me. Got it?"

They take a while on that one. He takes a while on it too, got to be said.

"Yes," they finally sigh as one.

She takes one shaky step to him, that left side of her face always turned away, and says to him, "Put your arm about my shoulders, Quade, and don't look back. Not even once, don't look back."

When the Cybers part like hair for the shambling, limping walk they get up, he comes near to jumping right out of his skin. He feels as though he's out of his skin already, out of his body and maybe out of this ship and floating somewhere crazy.

He knows this much – Cybers never let you go.

And yet here the pair of them are, trying to restrain themselves from running down the corridor they came from, back to Sol's ship. Or at least, he assumes it's to Sol's ship. He can't imagine how else they're going to get off this Jugg, unless of course the King of the Cybers wants to hold them a leaving party and roll out the red carpet.

Which seems no more or less likely than this.

"Why'd they let us go?" he pants, but he knows no answer's coming. Not yet. Not yet.

Instead she pushes him into the airlock and slams the rolling door shut after her, barking at him to get on the ignition. Power up the drive. Do what has to be done, now, before they change their minds.

She knows how to say all the right things to get him to act. Her Hopper has power and it's enough to do the thing he's itching for most – just get the ship disengaged from the Jugg. Just get the Cybers away from them, off them, just move.

He can't help noticing that she takes the left-hand pilot's seat. The one that keeps the bad side of her face to the wall and away from his prying eyes. Nor can he stop

himself noticing that she doesn't seem to be in the kind of pain that an industrial sander should provoke.

He wishes he could stop himself feeling whatever's bursting up inside him.

"Drive's online," he says.

"Jump," she says.

## Chapter Three

She knows it's coming. She's known it's been coming for too many years to count now. Ever since she woke up with the Doc standing there, already panicking. Ever since she heard him say, *I had to. I had to. You would have died, otherwise.*

*Yeah, Doc?* she thinks. *Well dying might have been preferable to this.*

They're outside the Tyramus cluster, not three jumps from Taprine. Out the viewscreen she can see the faintly glittering dust belt, almost like sunlight on water. It occurs to her that the Cybers did not kill her – that she is one of the few people to live to tell the tale – but that Quade might.

*God, not Quade. I know he might kill me, but please let it be before he finds out. I'll just insult him until he strangles me and everything will be golden. Or maybe I can shoot myself out the airlock next time his back is turned.*

Although it's too late for that, she knows – even before he speaks into the throbbing silence of her little ship, which is still completely intact. The Cybers have barely touched it. Couldn't wait to torture, it seems, so held off on the salvage.

That's the kind of things they are.

"Why did they let us go, Solomon?" he asks.

She thinks a whole string of things – *because they were feeling charitable. Because they liked your apple butt too much to tear it up. Because their mainframe started piping Give Peace A Chance into their metal noggins.*

"I don't know."

She keeps staring straight ahead, but can feel all the weirdness the side of her face has become. Though really it's always been there, just below the skin.

"Like hell you don't. You look at me, Sol."

He sounds spitting mad. Spitting mad but something else underneath. She supposes it's the drugs and the pain and the adrenaline that's causing all that shaking in his voice.

"You look at me now, dammit."

"What am I now, your wife? Bite it, apple butt."

"Why'd they say that, Sol? Why'd they say something about being not human, huh?"

She stares straight ahead at the glittering dust. If only the drive plates had taken her out! If only she hadn't let him rescue her, like some goddamn piece of frill and fluff. If only the drugs she'd given herself had killed her, like they were supposed to.

"I don't know."

"You don't know! You know every shitting thing there is to *be* known! You've told me things I ain't ever suspected in this whole pickiny universe, and you're going to tell me now that you don't know?"

"I— I'm sorry."

"Don't you tell me you're sorry, Solomon. You've never been sorry about a thing in your life."

"I'm sorry about this."

He grabs her arm then. She comes close to punching him in the face, like a reflex. Almost. It just wells right up inside her and whammo! Suddenly he's lost three teeth.

Lucky for him, really, that she resists. He's going to need his teeth, in order to chew the remaining parts of her face off.

"Why?" he demands. "Why? *Why?*"

He hauls her up to her feet, and though she wishes the urge to punch remained fierce, it decides in that moment to take a vacation. Most of her thoughts take a vacation too. To somewhere extremely blank, where tuneless music plays. A voice says, *Please*



*hold. Until Quade stops looking at you with those eyes like insane moons, full power to higher thought processes will not be restored. Please hold. Until Quade –*

His hands drop to his sides. Silence comes over him quick and weird. As though a hand flattened itself over his mouth.

She fills the gap for him.

“Because they were right. I’m not human.”

\* \* \* \* \*

He goes so long without moving or speaking that she begins to fear his mind has gone on the same vacation hers had a moment earlier. She knows full well what he’s seeing, and it ain’t for the faint of heart. The sander took away most of the synthetic skin on the left side of her face. On the cheekbone, up to her eye socket. A lot of stuff close to the temple.

And beneath...well, beneath there’s metal. Just like there is through a lot of her body. The Doc said thirty percent, but there are days when she’s sure it’s more. Days when her toes make whirring sounds. Days when her elbow picks up the latest Murder Ball game on Taprine.

“If you’ve died standing up, give me a sign,” she says, but he just carries on with this open-mouthed silence. His big eyes have reached new huge heights.

Maybe he could go on like this forever. That would be okay by her. That way, he’d never have to say what he does next, and she could just keep him in a glass case in the corner.

But alas.

“You’re a Cyber,” he says. His voice sounds wrong, though it’s just right for the occasion. He sounds like someone who’s recently found out his best friend is dead.

Dead would be easier, she figures. But instead, she has to get into this whole thing.

“You know I’m not,” she tells him, though the words ring hollow in her mouth.

He pauses to take a hitching breath.

“No? *No*? Then explain to me what I’m seeing, Sol. Explain to me!”

This isn’t going how it’s supposed to. He sounds almost like he’s crying—like that awful sound in the Jugg—but there’s only supposed to be a gun in her face. Some kind of violence. Not the terrible, bleak despair that’s got hold of his vocal cords.

“I...I...”

“Answer faster!” he screams, and that’s even worse than the crying and the despair. Quade’s never been the sort of man who felt he had to put on masculine airs, be a tough guy, hold tears or whimpers or feelings inside. He’s a joker, he’s laidback, he doesn’t give a shit what people think.

Without jokes or tears or mockery, his screaming and his hands out and all of this just seems unbearable somehow. Worse than violence. Worse than him finding the joke in every shitting thing.

“There’s nothing I can say, Quade. You know that—”

When he grabs her by the arms, her heart tries to jump out her body. Her human heart. Her still-human heart. He shoves her back against a bulkhead, and that’s good. Violence is good.

“You’d better think of something! Just think...think *now*!”

“I was hurt and he fixed me. He just fixed me, that’s all. I’m still me inside.”

“Who? When?”

“Years ago—a doctor. Before I ever knew you. Our ship crash landed on Syram and he just...he just did this to me.”

She knows that won’t be enough, but even so, it’s disturbing when he bows his head and sobs. His forehead almost touches her chest.

“I’m not a Cyber, Quade. It’s still me inside. It’s still me.”

He looks up then. Those blue eyes as big as moons. As clear as the sky when it tilts over into night.

“How do I know that’s true now, huh? How do I know you’re not just a trick, a trap? How do I know it’s true?”

“What does it matter?” she asks, and though his answer likely should take a thousand years to come, he gets it out quicker than a snap of the fingers.

“Because I love you!” he says. “Because I’m in love with you, God help me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

It’s an odd situation to be in. The ship won’t jump any farther, so they’re dead in the black. And the Cybers ain’t coming for them, so there’s no running or screaming or action to be had. All they’ve got is waiting, to see if *The Horizon* will pick up their signal and come for them.

Until that time, there’s just this. Awful revelations. Love. More awful revelations. Eight hundred memories of him grabbing her arm just before a sniper shot into the place she was about to be. How he’s always around. How sometimes...God, sometimes...she finds herself always around him. Maybe even *looking* for him.

At first he sits down on her bunk and blubbers into his hands. She can’t bring herself to make fun of him for it—the stun of his insane admission and all this crying instead of a gun to her head puts paid to that—but without funning there’s nothing. There’s just the memory of that time he walked in on her while she was dressing, and afterward couldn’t string a sentence together.

And not only that, but she hadn’t even made fun of him for it. She hadn’t! Oh no, why not? Also...had the sight of her boobs possibly sort of made him fall in love with her? It had to be the boobs.

But at the best of times, Quade saying he had somehow fallen in love with her boobs wouldn’t be right. Now it’s just plain crazy.

And then after his bawling there comes quiet. So much quiet between them, like nothing she’s ever experienced. It’s her guess there are no words to be said, and yet they claw at the back of her throat.

Even worse, the love questions claw harder than the questions about what he's going to do with her. It would be okay if he wanted to shoot her. Sometimes she wants to shoot herself for the hybrid thing she has become.

But she kind of suspects he doesn't want to do that at all. Not now, not ever.

He's still got his head in his hands. Seems to be leaning on one of them pretty heavily, all that fine, soft caramel hair sifting through his fingers. Once, she wanted to tell him that his hair is just the same color as those treats she got from the Nova space station, but that had seemed too sweet somehow. Too nice of her.

"Quade..." she says, though she swore not to be the first to speak.

"I need to not talk for a spell, Sol," he replies, and she curses her mouth. Now he has the upper hand!

She rolls her eyes at herself, for thinking in terms of upper hands when she's a shitting Cyber and he's devastated.

Her heart beats a little harder when she thinks of him being devastated. He's devastated in *that* way. All this time, all this time...ragging on her and fighting with her and jumping her on jobs...

"It's just that you're sitting right over my medical kit," she says.

Because that's safe to talk about. For a second, he almost morphs into himself. He kind of takes on a dazed look and tells her "oh, sorry" as he moves to one side. It's a relief. He doesn't even flinch when she crouches down near him, either.

When she sits down on the bunk, the bad side of her face is toward him. It takes a lot to keep her sitting. Even without turning, she knows he's looking.

"How much of you..." he begins, but then he can't seem to carry on. He does better when she manages to meet his gaze. "How much of you is...like that?"

"My left arm. Most of my left leg." Her voice wavers before she can come to the final part, but she gets a hold on it. "The left side of my face—where the bone used to be. My left eye is synthetic too."

“Looks pretty real,” he blurts out. Some of the normal Quade glimmers through when he follows it with, “No wonder you managed to bilk me on that Hawkins job.”

“The eye doesn’t help me with surveillance, Quade.”

“Well, how would I know?” he asks, and it’s almost like they’re back to their old routine. Before he swallows hard on that big Adam’s apple he’s got and she thinks, *He’s trying to eat his words. The ones he didn’t mean.*

A layer of sweat gleams all over his face. There are circles beneath the armpits on his worn-to-threads blue shirt—though maybe that came from being in a Jugg, surrounded by Cybers. Maybe he feels surrounded by a Cyber right now.

“You hurting?” he asks, and she starts a little to hear that.

“In which way?” she asks back, and then his eyes soften some.

“Your face looks like ten trails of shit, so let’s start with that.”

It takes some time before anything but *ten trails of shit* sinks in. But she gets the *let’s start with that* part when he pries the medical kit from her floppy grip and cracks it open.

She winces when she thinks of what’s inside—a grafter, a plasti-bond usually used for girls made out of mostly rubber—but he seems unfazed. Or as unfazed as anyone can be, after discovering the woman he loves is part tin can.

At which point, her brain tries to take back that middle bit. It doesn’t even try to take back the tin-can bit, or the almost-dying bit, or the bit where the Cybers counted her as one of their own. Just the love part. But then, it’s perfectly reasonable that a person could need metal parts put into them. It is not reasonable that a man who once wrestled her for the diamond of Gortex—full-on wrestling, with headlocks and wedgies and everything—actually turns out to have weird love feelings brewing in his insane head.

The urge to ask him if he really said that word or actually meant something different instead, like *glove*, forces its way up inside her. The whole thing made him really messed up and despairing because he gloves her.

Though she knows full well that someone gloving you doesn't make you want to hide when he suddenly touches your face. Of course, he's only doing it because he's trying to fix the mess. But even so, all of its new meanings aren't a comfort. How will she ever be able to get him in a headlock again if she's not allowed to touch him anymore?

"I don't want you feeling sorry for me, Quade," she says, but he barely reacts. He just presses the slanted tip of the grafter to that sore place just below her left eye, and draws it down.

The next words he speaks to her having nothing to do with being sorry.

"Can you feel that?"

To which she thinks about lying. But finally goes with, "It feels the same as if you were touching my real flesh. It feels like a layer of plastic going over a burn."

"Is that why you're shivering?"

Another moment of lying consideration comes.

"Yes."

This time, lying wins.

He strokes the layers into place around the corner of her mouth, the curve of her nose. His touch seems hardly squeamish at all, not even when he has to get the plasti-bond and sear it all into place.

He tells her to close her eyes, and then there's nothing but white-hot pain that comes close to burning her eyelashes off. *It's all right though*, she thinks. *They're not real. I have replacement ones in the glove box.*

*The one that probably has my love in it.*

She tries not to grit her teeth—it will make the layer lie funny. Though the pain's not so bad when he's got his hand high up on her arm. Never thought she'd appreciate Quade doing such a thing, but something about it reminds her of the Doc and his gentle

ways. His patient instructions on how to deal with this brave new world he tossed her into.

The one in which Quade doesn't care, and totally accepts her, and oh Lord, is that poetry she's going to have to start writing now?

*Oh, handsome Quade accepts me for who I am!*

*I think I want to kill myself.*

"Think they feel it too? Every time they have to fix all those bits dropping off them?"

She keeps her eyes closed. Jessum crow, but he asks some useless questions. How can there be any love between two people who ask each other useless questions and then beat each other up?

"Yes."

"Think that's why they hate us so much?"

"They? Is it *they*, now that I look human again?"

She turns to look at him but he doesn't fail to meet her gaze. Because he's now somehow awesome, or some maddening shit like that.

"I know that you're human, Sol," he says. "I know it."

She's not sure when she notices that his hand is still on the right side of her face. Not just on her face, either, but really holding it, the way she's seen people do when they're about to...do something other than plasti-bond skin. His fingers sprawl back behind her ear, cupping just underneath the jut of bone at the base of her skull.

Like he's going to... What *is* he going to do? She imagines, briefly, some new kind of headlock—one which feels really, really nice. Right before the sex-vid *Lust in Space* flashes up behind her eyes. The way the actors moon at each other with their big cow eyes and then grab each other by the face and smash their mouths together, though it doesn't seem to her like Quade's going to smash her mouth.

He's moving in too slowly for that. Far, far too slowly. Almost like he can't believe he's doing it, but it's happening anyway. And though she knows she's the one who should be on hand to beat some sense into him, she can't feel herself moving. Not at all!

His mouth closing in on hers appears to have some sort of paralyzing affect. As does the result of the mouth—kissing. Kissing is happening. Apparently, near-death experiences and telling someone you're part metal makes them kiss you.

Not smooth, either, like it is in the vids. Weird, like he just accidentally fell on her or something. Not that she can be relied on to give him some help in this area, however, because for the first ten seconds of his warm mouth pressing against hers, she's fairly certain her lips just make a little pursed pucker of surprise.

She knows for a fact that kissing's usually done with your mouth wide open. That merc from Lobo almost ate her face clean off. It's just that this time, things are different. It's Quade. She's all stirred up inside over everything. *It's Quade.*

She shoves him away suddenly. He looks hurt, to say the least. Though he also looks confused and appalled at himself, so she's not about to take the hurt too much to heart.

"I...I don't know why I did that," he says, but she happens to have a real good idea.

"Maybe *love* made you," she snorts, but the snort sounds weird and not fully formed, and the eye roll he gives only makes it halfway around.

"Sol, I just—I was hurting—"

She cuts him off before he can become even less convincing.

"Or maybe you thought that now I'm a Cyber, anything you want is up for grabs."

He crumples his face at her, a dismissive, *you're crazy* sort of expression. And this time it reaches some level of credibility.

She can still taste his mouth on hers, salty and sweet from that stupid gum he's always chewing.



“You’re not a Cyber, okay? And either way, that’s got nothing to do with anything.” He pauses, and she can see quite clearly he’s wrestling with something. On his own this time. Finally, the brain of the universe comes up with something like words. “I feel like something’s just...taken hold of me.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. Keep your plotz in your pants, got it?”

“Give me a break, Sol—I’m shitting exhausted. You think I’m gonna try and roll you? I’m not gonna try and roll you.”

The ensuing laugh looks odd on his face, though. He seems fidgety and uncomfortable in his own skin, and when they both stand up, he can’t put himself in the right places. He tries to walk past her and butts against her body instead, then turns around as though to try for the cockpit. Before changing his mind again.

“You got a sonic shower on this heap? Think I’ll go and...uh...wash up.”

She watches him blunder past to try for the ladder to the lower deck. Then just as he’s almost down, she calls after him.

“I hope that’s not a euphemism, Quade.”

## Chapter Four

She wakes up well into the night, eyes still grainy from exhaustion and body telling tales of what the day brought. The fire in the left side of her face has died down some, but oh, her shoulders, the back of her head. All the muscles previously fired up with adrenaline.

Now there's nothing left inside her but hot air. And the memory of Quade's mouth on hers.

She turns on her bunk and glances across to where he's supposed to be sleeping—on the inflatable roll she gave him for the floor. He's awake, however, and looking right back at her. In the dim light from the console, his eyes are as big and pretty as a girl's. There's that nakedness in them that sometimes comes too. Like when he looked at her onboard the Jugg, right after they grabbed her hair.

*You were terrified you were about to lose me*, she thinks, even though he doesn't actually have her. You can't lose what you don't have. Right?

"You were snoring," he whispers.

Same old Quade. Not like he's going to go romantic or some such nonsense.

"Why aren't you asleep?"

"Just thinking on things," he says.

"Like, say, your deep and abiding love for me?"

He smiles, slow and easy. It's clear to her now that he has the best smile of any man she's ever met.

"Something like that."

Now *that* sounds like a euphemism.

After a long moment of too much eye contact, she glances away and goes with, "How's that t-shirt treating you?"

It's her biggest item of clothing, and has a Tootie-Pop logo on the front. Doesn't fit him hardly at all, but was the best she could do while his own clothes go through the clean cycle.

"Real nice. As tight as a bug's ass and twice as itchy. Plus it makes me look like a girl."

"Ah, quit your complaining. You look like a girl anyhow and the material's softer than anything. I usually wear it to sleep in so it's practically worn down to nothing."

"It's chafing me, I tell you what."

"So take it off," she says, though immediately regrets it. Then he'll be half-naked. He'll be half-naked not a foot away from her, with that big, solid chest of his and more of his smell all over the cabin.

"Think my skin's chafing me, though, to be honest."

It's disturbing that she finds she knows what he's talking about. Her own skin feels too hot and little niggling threads keep wriggling up and down and all over her. Of course, it's obvious what that means. There's only one thing it *could* mean.

Though in such a close-quarters, sudden-declared-love situation as theirs, it seems best not to say what it means out loud. It'll wear off on its own and then they can go about their business, unhindered by whatever seems to be closing in around them.

"Feel as agitated as Marcs in a whorehouse," he says, before quickly glancing back at her. "Though not in that way. Not like that. Just...you know what I'm talking about. Adrenaline and so on."

But it's not adrenaline. She knows it's not. And she also knows that what the Cybers have filled them full of is having a slightly different affect than the one intended. An unexpected and appalling affect. It makes you hyper aware, she knows. Of your body. And maybe of the bodies of those around you.

She turns onto her back and stares up at the ceiling of her ship. *Don't think of him*, she orders her mind. *Don't think of him*.

Her mind disobeys.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the next evening, she suspects he's aware something's wrong. Sweat gleams constantly on his forehead. The t-shirt seems to be actively enraging him. And when he heaves it off right in the middle of her cabin as she sits at the console, she has to turn away.

Every little brush of material against every inch of her body is agony. She can accept that seeing him stripped to the waist makes it worse—just. After all, it's not like he's grotesque or anything. He doesn't have a massive head, like Marcs. And his pants always seem very full at the front. And at the back. And his mouth was very soft, so very soft, like a pillow on his face or something equally—

She bites down hard on her lip. Hard hard hard. But unfortunately that only makes pain burst through her like a supernova, as though she'd clamped her lip with razors rather than her teeth. As though the razors are shredding up the space between her and Quade, and soon he's going to understand that something's wrong. That not only did he stupidly talk about feelings between them, but they're also being supercharged like insane sex toys.

The kind of sex toys Marcs would *definitely* buy. Ones with attachments. Ones with nuclear-powered generators.

He keeps right on saying nothing, however. He just stomps about the place, taking his shirt off and then putting it back on again, giving her teasing glimpses of the thin trickles of perspiration rolling down his perfect, golden back.

She closes her eyes. It's likely an image she'll see forever now. When she's old and gray and trying to pretend none of this ever happened. *It's just the drugs*, she thinks, but then he comes up behind her—she can feel him, a heated presence on the back of her

neck. Even worse, his hands. His hands hover over her shoulders as though only an invisible force field keeps them from dropping.

If he touches her, she's pretty sure she'll die. The overload of sensation will just be too much. Nobody was built to cope with this.

"Sol?" he asks.

And she thinks, *This is it. The moment where he's going to say they've pumped us full of terazine and it's driving us out of our minds. So what are we going to do about it?*

"Yeah?"

"I'm going to go below and see if the engine's turning okay. How about that?"

"That—" Saliva catches in the back of her throat. "That seems like a great idea."

But it isn't. No, she's fairly sure a good idea would be if he were to take her over to that bunk and get her down on all fours. Or maybe she could get *him* down on all fours, or have him wrap his legs about her body like he did on the Jugg, or watch him slowly strip all his clothes off until he's naked and gigantic in her tiny ship.

She wonders if he can tell she's had dreams about him. Dreams in which he mocked her for getting sandwiched by two hot guys. "I'm going to try hailing *The Horizon* on the comm again."

"Sure. Yeah. You do that."

"Or anyone."

"Anyone will do."

The note of desperation in his voice fills the cabin until she's sure a few metal seams are going to split. But alas, the hull remains intact and neither of them are sucked out into space to be spared the awful mess their relationship has become.

*Take it back, she thinks. Just take those love words back and all will be right with the universe.*

Though worse is the suspicion that such a thing may not be true.

\* \* \* \* \*

This time when she turns on her bunk, he's not just staring back. He's looming over her like a goddamn crazy, and she's not too proud to scream about it. She screams so loud that he screams, too, and then once the screaming's through he just carries on sitting there, right by her side, clutching his poor overtaxed heart.

"God shit it, Sol, what the hell do you think you're doing, screaming like that?"

She keeps the actual thought that had occurred to her – that he was about to lay on her whether she liked it or not – to herself, and goes with the next best thing.

"I thought you were about to slit my throat, you dumb hump."

"What?"

"You leaning over me in the dark, me a Cyber..."

She heaves herself up to a sitting position and avoids the look she knows he's giving.

"For cripes' sake, Sol. Now I'll grant you that I've only had a few days to get used to your partially metal status. But I don't think you're a Cyber any more now than I did then. Give over on it, okay?"

At which point, he makes the mistake of putting a friendly hand on her arm.

The feelings it provokes are somewhere south of what she would call friendly. The expression that crosses his features is nothing short of panicked, and the hand goes back to his lap far quicker than it had left.

*Now, she thinks. Now he's going to bring up the fact that his skin feels like it's about to crawl off his body.*

But he doesn't. He just glances away, off into the darkness.

"I guess it hasn't been real easy for you, huh Sol?"

It's not really a question, so she doesn't answer it. It's difficult to speak anyhow, what with the burning imprint of his hand still on her forearm. Her whole body has gone electric, though she suspects the return of the dreams are partly responsible.

Dreams in which bodies tangled together and sweat rolled off them and it wasn't just two random hot guys, all puppyish and enthusiastic. Oh no no no.

Usually her vibe would do the trick after a dream like that, but no luck there. Not with Quade always a foot away. Not while he might be aching, too, and probably he'll hear her running that buzzing thing through all her slick folds until he's as riled as a Cyber at a human convention.

She wonders what Quade riled would be like. Maybe if she just put her own hand on his arm –

“Something's wrong with me.”

Thank God he thought to talk before her mind wandered any further down that path. Though his sagging face and haunted eyes don't offer her quite the comfort she was hoping for.

“There's nothing –”

“They've put something in me, Sol, nothing's plainer. Watch out, 'cause any second now I'm going to start eating your skin.”

“Is that why you're up and scaring the shit out of me? Because you think you're about to eat skin?”

He reaches to grab her and maybe shake some of the sense he's speaking into her, but then seems to grasp that grabbing's not a great idea. His drawing back away from her would be comical if she didn't feel so bad for not talking to him about this issue sooner.

“That's what happens; you know it as well as I do! They put drugs in you that turn you into a lunatic and then –”

His voice is getting way too high. She has to put a stop to this quickly.

“Quade, Quade – believe me, if they'd stuck you with that black goo, you'd be eating skin by now. Happens right away, believe me.”

His expression picks itself back up off the floor – just a tiny bit.

“It does?”

“Yes. See—I thought you knew. They’ve just filled you full of terazine, that’s all.”

His expression drops again.

“Don’t worry, it won’t kill you. It just...”

She can feel her face heating before the words have even formulated. And then the words don’t want to be the ones they should—that terazine seems to have made them incredibly horny. She can’t force that idea out, not at all.

Non-horny is better. Easier. And besides, the simplest explanation is actually the truth. It’s not as though terazine really should be making them feel...whatever it is they’re feeling.

“It just gets you all wired. Makes your skin all sensitive and your nerves all juiced up. So when they torture you and stick things in you and twist them around, it feels twice as bad. Feels so bad you pop your own eyeballs out.”

His eyelids flutter closed and he sags forward, laughing.

“Oh. Oh jessum crow. Goddamn, Sol—why didn’t you tell me that? I’ve been about carking my pants thinking on this craziness! Couldn’t you tell I was going out of my mind?”

*Yes, she thinks. But I didn't want to tell you it was because you're horny.*

And what if he *isn't* horny? What if he’s hardly feeling it at all the way she is? Maybe he can go long stretches without having to masturbate. Maybe he hardly wants for a woman at all. Dose him with terazine and he just feels it like pins and needles or a scratchy annoyance, not every breeze from the ventilation system like a kiss against his skin. A caress.

She licks her lips and then wishes she hadn’t. Her lips seem particularly sensitive, which she supposes is a boon for the Cybers when they’re interested in ripping said parts of the body off.



It's not in any way a boon for her, and even less so when she notices Quade watching. He's watching her lick her lips. He appears unable to look away, and especially so when she touches her tongue to her upper teeth, mouth slightly open.

She tries to think if that's a particular sort of gesture made in the sex-vids, the sort of which gets a man on you immediately. But all she can recall is sticking your tits out and taking all your clothes off or wearing one of those bands around your wrist that say you're up for it.

Quade's never worn one, as far as she can remember. And it's not like he does any of the things that men do to court a woman in the vids, either. He doesn't bend over a lot or flex anywhere or ask her if she's got a pipe that needs filling. It's not his fault he's wearing real tight pants at the moment, which she's heard is another reliable indicator of a man putting it out for you.

Maybe it's like the Company says and you should just get yourself to a whorehouse or a mating clinic, instead of leaving everything up to fate or chance or that thing he said. About gloves.

"What are you thinking on?" he asks. His voice comes out very faint and hoarse.

"You ever been to a mating clinic?"

"What sort of question is that?"

"Just occurred to me."

"Well occur it back out again."

"Can't. It's in my head now. And since you love me, we can be all personal like, right?"

"You're going to kill me with that forever, aren't you?"

"Likely."

"I don't know why I said it, all right? I was under pressure."

"Suuuuure you were. Next you're going to tell me you haven't been thinking of words that rhyme with it. Glove, above, shove."

He passes one despairing hand over his face. Then seems to realize that touching himself is not the best idea in this situation.

“When I think about you, I don’t think about gloves.”

“What *do* you think about, then? Where has all this...stuff come from?”

He shakes his head. His eyes say, *I could sooner tell you what the face of God looks like.* Hairy and pissed, most likely, that the human race fucked up Earth. And fucked up everything else too.

“Maybe we can just...forget about it?” he asks, but even as he’s doing so, he looks as though that’s the most ridiculous notion ever put into words. “Maybe we *should* forget about it. Probably I should just go to clinics and the like—do my business by the human race, and so on.”

“That’s not what I was saying! And besides, I don’t think that’s quite the words to their slogan.”

“Didn’t realize you listened so closely to Company broadcasts.”

“They sell Tootie-Pops. I would let them send brainwashes direct to my frontal lobe if they let me buy in bulk.”

He pulls at the thing that’s encasing him. “Hence the t-shirt.”

“Exactly.”

“Well, aren’t we just learning all kinds of things about each other.”

She was sure it had been getting easier. Now it’s suddenly awkward again. Warmth floods her, but it isn’t in her cheeks. It’s in her gut and in her chest.

“You know plenty about me,” she says, and he gives her that slow, easy smile again. It’s a little more tremulous than before, however. Like it could go over if she only reached out her hand and stroked it down his arm.

“I do now.”

“More than any other person in the whole universe.”

“It’s a wonder I like you at all.”

“I guess it is.”

All this talking, it's not having the effect it usually does. Usually she feels mad enough to spit on him. Usually they're about ready to slap each other. Somehow she's sure no slapping's coming, however.

“And I guess I know everything about you now, too,” she says, but he doesn't smile in answer. His eyes are very dark, suddenly.

“If you know everything about me, maybe you could tell me what I'm thinking right about now.”

She's not entirely certain. Though she's sure it has something to do with his chest heaving up and down the way it is. And maybe there's something in there about the gleaming sweat on his brow and his upper lip.

“I have no idea,” she says, though as the words are coming out she's fully aware that her hand is reaching for him. Casual like. A friendly gesture, that's what a hand on his arm is. He did it to her not a moment since.

Even so, he follows her movement all the way to his own body. Almost in slow motion, it seems to her.

And then her hand is on his bare skin.

It's the empathy, she thinks. She knows exactly what he feels when her fingers graze his over-sensitized flesh. It pulses through you, hot and tingly. It blanks out your reason and even if it didn't, well, maybe it's just like when he blurted out those I-love-you words to her. You don't even know you feel it until you say it.

She doesn't even know she wants to until she's suddenly lurching forward to press her mouth to his parted lips.

At first he doesn't respond. She suspects that's the shock of the sensation that immediately blares through him, just as it blares through her too. Though of course, it could be that she's reading the situation wrong. It could be that he's completely averse to the whole notion, and she's just—

When he shoves her back onto the bunk, it knocks the breath right out of her.

It's not surprising, really. He's the size of a barge. In such close quarters it's been hard not to notice how big Quade actually is, but with him over her like this, legs all tangled together and his mouth on hers, it's impossible.

His huge thigh is between her legs before she's clear on where she's at. It's as solid as a steak and so firm...so firm she'd barely have to move at all to get some of that meat real hard against her already-blooming sex. Before they even got to a single word of embarrassing acknowledgement of this thing, she'd be off and satisfied.

But then his mouth rocks over hers, as wet as anything and soft besides, and she feels his tongue. His tongue flickers against hers. It doesn't jam its way in there and he doesn't slobber all over her. His lips pull and insinuate their way over things. His tongue encourages hers to explore in kind.

She dissolves right through the bunk and through the two floors of her ship and out into the black, to float forever.

For a long while, it's not even possible to concentrate on the thigh between her legs or the possibility of her own completion. All she can think of is this slick, smooth kissing, followed quickly by his hands on her upper arms, pinning her to the bunk. His grip is squeezing and relaxing, almost like he's testing her out, and somehow that's overwhelming, even when he finds that spot where the Cybers stuck her and pain bursts in. She feels all of it—pain included—spark in the tips of her tits and in her clit.

She's damn near wetting herself before they've even got past making out.

Though that's unfair, she figures, seeing as how she's been as slippery as a blackout dealer since that first time he laid his mouth on her. More so since he took off his shirt in front of her. Since he wrestled her that time on Corsinia. Since the first time he grabbed her arm and pulled her back, before any bullets could hit. Since he stuck out his hand and said, *Hey there. Quade – and you are?*

And she had shot her gun at the place his hand was, so he whipped it back right quick.

It's way too much, and he seems to know it. Just as she's thinking of getting her hand down to the snappers on his pants, he wrenches himself away. And then she has to pretend she was about to wrench herself away too. And then both of them push and scabble back on the bunk, as though each is suffering from some god-awful cooties and distance is the most vital thing in the universe.

But Lord, his face is a sight to see. Flushed from chin to cheekbone, eyes glazed over with lust, lips parted. Panting and worked up beyond endurance and surely reflecting exactly how she looks. She sure feels as though she looks that way.

Her nipples are hot electric sparks. Her clit feels as big as a drive bolt and thrums with tingles she definitely wants to be feeling. Even now, when it seems they're about to tell each other how much they never, ever want to do this.

"Sorry," he squeezes out. "Sorry – don't know what got a hold of me."

"Maybe it's all that sweetheart stuff you said you were feeling."

"Well, I guess that whole throw-it-back-in-my-face-forever prediction is sure coming true. I said I loved you...you know, as a fellow human being or what have you. Not as a...sexual...plaything."

He seems to have trouble using the word *sexual*.

"So you think *I* want to use *you* as a sexual plaything?"

"No!" He pauses. For effect, she's sure. "Do you *want* to use me as a sexual plaything?"

Gah, he's unbelievable! If only she really *had* shot his hand off when they first met.

"Don't talk crazy! It's the terazine. It's just the terazine."

"Right! Of course. The terazine."

"We need to drink lots of water and...flush it out of our systems."

"Do we have enough of a supply to accomplish that task?"

"Do you care?"

"Not right now I don't."

“Okay, then let’s drink. We’ll worry about dying of thirst later.”

In truth, the recycle unit will provide them with enough water to last for at least three months. She knows it will. But it’s an interesting thing to see a man so desperate to get away from his own lust, he’ll chug down an entire pint bottle of water that could likely be his last drink.

## Chapter Five

It's only been days, but it might as well have been weeks. It might as well have been forever, for all the good it's doing him. In all his long and lonely days, he's never felt anything half as bad this. Being on the Jugg was almost preferable.

*This is torture, pure and simple.*

His body aches. Not just the ache of being a little turned-on by some sexy pictures or even a lot turned-on by some naked woman lying right next to him. This is horniness for the insane. It's so bad he's certain he's about to go blind, without even laying a hand on himself.

And the worst of it is, he *can't* lay a hand on himself. There's no relief to be had, no end in sight. He's trapped on a ship the size of a ham can with a woman he inappropriately declared love to who's now driving him wild with all-consuming lust.

That she happens to be half robot almost seems beside the point. Though the fact he finds himself more often staring at her boobs than her still-healing face is a cause for concern, he feels. He should be thinking about her inner workings.

And certainly not in *that* way.

Though really, what does it matter? He knows in his blood and his bones that she ain't tricking him. This isn't some con. He's never seen her look so raw, and he doubts it's because she's feeling as wound up as he is. She keeps touching that nearly not-there scar on her face when she thinks he isn't looking. She keeps turning the "bad" cheek away from him, so he doesn't have to be reminded.

He knows that's what it is. Sol may be as unfathomable as the deep-dark black, but in this she is clear. Clear and raw and tender, so tender. He has run his hand along the wrong nerve, and now she's shivering.

It makes something inside his chest swell. Before he curses himself for being a fool and letting his mouth run away from him in the first place. What was he thinking? *Sol*. Jessum crow. He doesn't *love* her! Love – bah!

And then she delicately touches her fingers to the scar and the thing inside his chest swells and other stuff swells with it and oh, Lord have mercy. This is a nightmare. It's like she's got the screws on him, even though she's the most vulnerable he's ever seen her!

Though she's not exactly some knock-kneed puss when she steps over him as he lies still, pretending to be sleeping, and gives him a kick to the shin. Maybe to rouse him. Maybe just to be her usually salty self.

He doesn't open his eyes. Instead he lies there nice and quietly with a stiff one the size of someone's arm, and listens to her go about her business. She sits down up front, he thinks. Turns on the vid and scrolls through until something catches her interest – some Company junk about miners on Syram falling down a hole through the center of the planet. Clickers on how to get hold of Tootie-pops and Biskicks, now in bacon flavor.

She seems to like that. He wants to tell her the bacon probably won't taste like real bacon's suppose to, but then he knows she thinks bacon once came from creatures with curly tails, so it's likely she already understands that.

She does *not* understand that now is not the time to be listening to Company broadcasts on mating clinics. Especially when they put that whole cheery “come to us, and enjoy as much sex as you'd like!” thing in there.

He jumps up off the floor just as it gets into the graphic-descriptions-and-enticing-images portion of the show, and strides toward her manfully. It's hard to be manful when there's an arm down his pants, but he manages with the aid of a blanket held in front of him and lots of leaning forward.

Why is it that she now looks so utterly, sensuously edible? He'd go for her over one of those bacon Biskicks. She's sitting in the left-hand pilot's chair, one leg up to her



chest, one trailing down to the floor. Boots on, no pants. Just a t-shirt and some man shorts, and somehow more enticing for it.

She's got her hair down too. As black as that hole through Syram likely is, made curly from all the times she's plaited it, no doubt. Her skin looks real pale against it, and though that should be unappealing, it isn't. Ship skin, he should call it, but he can't.

She's thrumming with energy and as vital as that feeling in his chest, and though her dark eyes are on something other than him—they're fixed, fascinated, on her tiny little bucket-of-crap vid-screen—they still seem to bore deep into him.

There's a strange light in them he's never fully noticed before. The kind of light he used to figure as mocking, but now seems different somehow.

He can't bring himself to approach her all the way. Instead, he says from around halfway there, "Come on, turn that thing off. You think we oughta be listening to that now? No."

"Making you uncomfortable, huh?"

The curving turn of her mouth is making him uncomfortable. Those freckles over her nose. The arch of one thick, dark eyebrow. Yeah, those things are making him uncomfortable, all right. Even her slightly too-heavy jaw and her definitely too-long nose are adding to the party in his pants.

She's not beautiful in the way the women at the clinics are. He knows that. But he realizes with that same disturbing swell in his chest that she *is* lovely.

He makes it to the right-hand pilot's seat and sits down. She doesn't turn around to face him, but that's okay. Maybe this way she won't notice that he looks like he's sitting on a pile of flaming fuel.

"I wonder what it's like," she says, which sure as shit shakes him out of his reverie. She wonders what it's like? As in what? As in—surely not?

"Say what now?"

He can't hide the incredulity in his voice. Does she really mean...didn't she have at it with that merc who operated out of Lobo City? Cammy told him she'd been around his place for the better part of a month, and at real unsociable hours.

"I just mean..." she starts, then shrugs. "You know."

He's not sure he wants to hear this. Not ever. And yet his mouth keeps on moving.

"Sol, you've been with a man before, right? Tell me you have."

Her laughter makes him jump nearly out of his skin.

"I meant that I wondered what it's like to be with one of those clinic pretty boys! Not that I wondered what it's like to be with a man, you dumb pecker."

"Yeah? And what's so great about those clinic pretty boys, then? Whoever you humped treat you real bad, did he?"

She turns away from the flickering vid-screen, rests her arm on the back of her chair. Rests her chin on that.

"No."

"But he wasn't good enough for you, I gather. Too old, maybe, and with a big fat... head."

She gives him a little quizzical frown, but in truth he doesn't know what he's saying any better than she does.

"No, his head was fine."

"So what was wrong with him?"

"Nothing—I don't know. It was all fine."

"Well, what did he do?"

Alarms are blaring. *Don't go down this route*, they say. But he's in the slipstream now, and it's oh so hard to pull back. Likely the slipstream started way before this—when he said he loved her. Back even further, when he told Marcs and Thal that he was going to go in and save her.

Back before that, when she almost shot his hand off.

“What?” she snaps, but he keeps on plowing at it.

“Where do you think he went wrong?”

“He— I don’t think I should answer that, Quade. Want some breakfast? I’ve got ham chunks and boxes of Tasty Treats.”

“Was he too rough? Or maybe he was a little too gentle— maybe you’re not into the tender type.”

“You really going to get into this?”

“I’d get a hold on myself, but likely that would cause problems of a similar kind.”

“Similar to what?”

“Similar to all my thoughts of you, getting it in a variety of positions from someone who ain’t me.”

“Oh jessum crow, Quade, it wasn’t like that—”

“Really? ‘Cause I been up nights thinking on it, and I’ve come up with some real nice scenarios that I’m sure you’d have appreciated, had they happened.”

“Quade, for shit’s sake— drink some more water.”

She turns her face away sharpish, but something different is in her expression now. There’s color in her cheeks and he sees her stroking that scar, soft like. Her other hand goes beneath her hair and rubs at her neck.

He can hardly imagine what that must feel like. Like fire lighting up on her skin, maybe. He couldn’t hardly take the shower at all, what with those little sonic fingers stroking all over his aching flesh. Even just the brush of the material of these glued-to-him pants is enough to send him mad.

And then she speaks again, and he’s sure he’s about to go madder yet.

“He got me down over his bed. Bent over, not on it. I was crazy for it, real ready— so he just pulled my pants down and mounted me like that.”

She doesn’t seem to realize that he’s frozen in position, unable to call for help. She only carries right on with her little tale, oblivious.

"I was wet. I was so wet and wanting it, but it was all over in seconds. Sort of rough I guess, though good just the same. Kind of disappointing."

She looks back at him before she says her next words, but she doesn't look as though she's trying to tease. She looks as the words suggest—kind of disappointed. A little weary. Before finally landing on wistful.

"I wish he could have worked on me forever."

He can feel sweat standing out on his face, the stiff thing in his pants aching and tense enough to make him sure it's about to bust out and leap across at her.

Not that she looks like she'd mind, currently. She turns the chair slightly and he can see her sweet little nipples standing out through the material of her t-shirt. The flush on her cheeks has spread to her neck, and she makes no move to hide all the clenching together her thighs are doing.

It wouldn't take much to cross the space between them and claim her mouth. And he doubts she'd turn him down, in this state. Though Lord, it would be that much sweeter if she made the move first, as she did the night before. If he could just find the right words...

"Didn't he run his hands all over you?" he asks, and watches as she shakes her head real slow. Runs a little greedy tongue over her plump lips.

"Didn't he play with you a little, tease you, lick your body in its every secret crevice?"

"I'm not sure he'd have even known what a crevice is. I'm surprised *you* do."

"Lord yes, I know all about crevices. Especially those on a woman."

"You had many women, Quade?"

She sounds almost sarcastic. Almost.

"Hardly any at all, but that don't stop me being a diligent studier of the subject at hand."

"And what have you learned in your many diligent studies?"

“That a woman likes a mouth on her cunt more than any other thing.”

Her eyes had gone as hazy as anything, and now they go hazier still. It’s a gamble, tossing words like that out there, but then his brain isn’t functioning on the level of gambles and gambits and ploys or whatever else he might usually employ to get a woman into bed. His groin has the direct connection to his mouth, and it apparently wants him to talk as dirty as he can.

Not that Sol seems to mind.

“Really?” she asks, and his brain tries to tell his groin before it gets to his mouth that she’s drugged. That *he’s* drugged. That this is wrong and drug-addled.

Unfortunately, his brain gets gagged before it hits the word “this”.

“I could give you a demonstration, right now.”

“I think it would probably kill me.”

“Best way to die I know of.”

She stands up suddenly, and he can’t stand up suddenly enough in kind. There’s no touching, not a hand on each other, yet he’s sure he can feel her heat against him. The air between them is heavy and prickling, just waiting for them to come together.

“Quade?” she asks.

“Yeah?” he asks back.

“This doesn’t mean I love you.”

Strange, but it doesn’t cut him at all. Maybe because his groin’s doing the piloting now. Maybe because it seems like somehow she’s saying the opposite. He puts a hand into her hair and her eyes practically roll back in her head.

They shouldn’t have stopped last night. Now it’s just going to be ten times as strong. Could be she’s right, and it’s going to kill them both.

And then she touches him back, and he’s not sure he cares.

“Wait and see a while. I’m sure you’ll be singing more praises than that to me by the time I’m done.”

\* \* \* \* \*

He tries to go slow. It's important to go slow. Didn't she say that shitting merc got it all over too fast?

Of course, he knows that he isn't likely to do any better, given the circumstances. But he'll be damned if he's just going to leave her at one. The merc might not have had the sense to work on her until forever, but he does. Now that he has her, he does.

That she seems to have no sense at all is more of a concern. In truth, she appears to have so little sense that she's talking a blue streak and wrestling with his pants before they've hit the bunk, her hands unbearable over his clothes. Never mind under.

And then she *licks* his *neck*, and everything goes white, briefly. A jerking pulse tingles right down the length of his cock, and for a moment he's certain he's about to go off right there, before his pecker's managed to hit air.

It's a relief to come back to reality, still aching and trembling in a way he's sure would be embarrassing if she weren't doing the same.

"You taste amazing," she says, and that feels good too. In fact, all her words go straight to the root of his cock, though when they're words like *I can't wait to feel you in me* and *I just got to have your mouth on my clit*, he can't be surprised by that.

She asks, "Do you taste like this everywhere?"

And his entire body goes supernova. Why, they could just plug him into the jump drive and get it going by sheer force of his lustful will.

"How do you get these things off?" she grinds out, as she tugs at the snappers and zips on the front of his pants.

"I don't know – they're yours, aren't they?"

She laughs in this giddy way he's never heard before – real sweet to his ears. Could be she doesn't know what she's doing. Could be *he* doesn't. But that laugh sure seems like a sound someone makes when they're as happy as they've ever been.

When she finally gets the snaps undone, she gives out a little yelp of victory – which makes him laugh in the same way she did a moment earlier – and then next thing he knows his pants are on the floor. Not just the pants, either. The underwear she gave him that weirdly fit fine.

Feels good to have everything out in the open. Nice and freeing. A relief.

The pressure comes back real quick, however, when she makes this breathy moaning sort of sound and presses herself right up against him. Something soft brushes the length of his cock, which seems keen on kissing his belly. That's where she traps it, too – right between their bellies, straight up like an aerial and getting some serious rubbing from all her softest places.

Right now, he could do with hard. Hard roughness, to take the edge off. Shame that now's the time she chooses to be as sinuous as a length of rubber piping in his arms, all melting and coiling and wriggling like she was made to be doing this.

Like *they* were made for doing it.

She doesn't go directly for the hotspots, and instead slides her hands all the way up his back, ruffling the material as she goes. Might as well be running the same hands all over his cock, however, 'cause he experiences it just the same. Warm trickles of pleasure rush up and down his spine, and he sighs to feel them doing so.

Dimly, he's aware that he should be doing things to her. Isn't that what he promised? But if he removes her t-shirt, what's his prick going to go through then? He can already feel how slippery the tip is, how much it's straining for the release she doesn't seem reluctant to give him.

Anything more and he's *definitely* going to embarrass himself.

He's grateful when she chooses that moment to step back. His cock bobs, the sudden lack of heated contact like a slap in the face, but good for relieving the strain all the same. Unfortunately, she then decides that *this* is the moment to remove her t-shirt. Just arms up, pull, oops – there it goes. Now she's naked, boots and shorts aside.

She's not exactly the way he pictured her. Not that he'd ever done anything like picturing, of course. But either way the shoulders aren't as square, and the arms are more ropey with muscle than he would have expected, and she doesn't have the booze gut Marcs claimed she had.

She looks thinner without her clothes on. And her tits are the stuff of wet dreams. Big – not that he's averse to small, but it seems quite clear now he's got a hankering for more than a handful, considering how Sol makes him feel – with the tiniest pearly pink nipples, turned right up and pointing at the ceiling. They look almost sugary, like if he took them into his mouth, all sorts of sweetness would burst on his tongue. Like those stupid Tootie-pop things she likes; like those fruits you can get on Taprine.

"Pretty nice, right?" she asks, which seems very un-Solomon-like. But then so does her hands on her own tits, rubbing and pinching those Tootie-Pop nipples in a way he'd sure like to, if given half the chance.

Her head goes back. She tells him more things that go straight to his swollen prick, such as, *Damn, that feels good and give it to me quick, first. I don't think I can wait.*

Good intentions fly completely out the airlock when she turns her back on him and slides those little boy shorts down her legs. Her ass is the juiciest thing he's over looked on, and juicier yet when she suddenly bends right over and puts her hands down on her bunk. Just like that. Like he's that merc, about to take her.

With all the slippery coils of sensation in his belly and his thighs and in his balls that have drawn up so tight he's sure he won't be able to find them tomorrow, he's amazed he manages to cross the cabin and get a hold of her hips. Even more so when he gets to see the glistening state of her pretty, pink slit.

And then when he reaches down and *feels* the glistening state of her pretty, pink slit...

She's as wet as high tide. So wet, in fact, that it's coating her inner thighs and his fingers can't even get a bead on anything. They just slide and slip right through and



over her folds, all the lessons about women he's ever learned boiling away to nothing in the face of this cream-drenched pussy and her twisting and squirming and begging.

"No," she tells him. "No, God don't, don't, please. I can't take it."

"*You* can't take it?" he asks, and almost laughs at the sound of his own voice going up and down like a schoolboy's. Like some kid about to get some slippery seconds with his first woman.

She hasn't got a bit of hair down there, either. Nothing, just bare ass to the world. Feels about as strange as he could imagine, only in a way that makes him shake harder and throb right down low in his gut. The outer lips of her sex are as smooth and plump as pillows, and sensitive enough to make her beg and demand to know why he's trying to kill her with pleasure.

She tries to get away from him when he kicks her legs wider and circles his middle finger right in on her clit. But how can he let her escape? She needs a head start, or else she's going to get as shortchanged as she was her last time. And her swollen little bud is just jumping up against his pressing fingers, so slippery it barely lets him get at it the way he wants to.

It doesn't matter much, though. When he gives the underside of it a few rough strokes, she comes as though he's pulled a trigger. Hard, too, and still fighting against the restraining grasp he's got on her hip. Her back arches and her hand whips up to slap against the wall, the noise out of her like nothing he's ever heard a woman make. It's loud and harsh and it draws out right across the tip of his cock.

She doesn't go limp the way he expects her to, either. Instead, when he tries to pull away a little, her hand suddenly snaps back and gets him right around the upper thigh, drags him close enough to get a whole lot of wetness all over his cock.

He slides right between her thighs, feels them close around his tense flesh as warm and neat as a pussy. The sensation is startling—eye-opening so—but he survives it. He lives to fight another day.

The grip she's got on the meat of his thigh isn't helping, however. Her fingernails biting in, the soft slipperiness between her thighs, the way she's talking again... God, he never thought she'd be this eager. Not even with an eagerness drug in her system.

"Fuck me, Quade," she says, and he thrills at the sound of that word coming from her. It's almost as filthy as having her legs spread again and his cock between her slick thighs. "Come on and fuck me."

He can hardly stand to put a hand to himself, until he does it. Thoughts of Marcs in a dress on his mind. Thoughts of plumbing manuals and Thal's descriptions of said manuals close behind. It makes the pleasure recede some, only then there's finding her wet and willing cunt with the head of his cock, and that's a process which takes some gritting of his teeth.

She parts for him soft and slow, first the clinging folds of her pussy when he draws his prick back, and then the heavenly heated hollow he's barely known he's been wanting so badly until right...now.

Sinking into her is much like sinking into a vat of warm oil. From head to foot. His entire body tenses at that first slippery clenching feeling, as her sex swallows him down like a mouth. And then comes a spreading relaxation, an easing into things that sets him on an ocean of tingling, fizzing sensation.

She tightens around him before he's halfway in and he can't stop the gasp that breaks out of him. His thighs are trembling. Her hand is *really* digging in now, and all he can hear is her making a chain of little tremulous noises – *ah ah ah*.

"Holy – goddamn it, Sol."

"Keep going, don't stop, keep going!"

"You want me to keep going? Lord, I don't think I can. You're cunt's as tight as a fist."

He looks to the ceiling for inspiration but none's coming.

"You feel so good, Quade, come on – please just fuck me, I'm dying."

“I thought you had that vibe as big as a piston, for God’s sake...”

“It’s not as though you’re built tiny, you dumb hump—oh Lord, I need to come again.”

“And those other toys...that one with the sucking thing on top...honey, you don’t know how many times I’ve pictured you using all that junk on yourself.”

“How do you even know I have stuff like that? Just stop trying to hold off and get to it, Lord, please get to it... Feels like you’re burning me up from the inside out. Feels like *you’re* about as big as a piston.”

“You think I’m talking about seeing you fuck yourself on something until you go off nice and hard as a holding-off technique? Also, just so’s you know, talking about how big and hard I am won’t keep me at a grinding halt, either.”

“What if I talk about how much I want to suck your cock?” she asks, right before her already too-tight cunt flutters around him. His balls jerk up. His stomach clenches.

“Or just shove back on you hard and fuck you myself?”

Another wave of pleasure—oh, good and full, this time. The urge to slam into her comes close to overwhelming him.

“That would be...I don’t even know what that would be.”

“I want to feel you come inside me, Quade. I’ve never felt that before—he wasn’t set, like you. I don’t care how quick it is, just go to it.”

“He wasn’t set and you humped him?”

“Do I seem pregnant to you? We used one of those wrappers—jessum crow, you think I don’t know you’re trying to distract me? If you don’t hurry up and fuck me I’m gonna throw you down on the bunk and fuck *you*, I swear it.”

Sometimes it’s clear to him why he loves Sol. Even clearer when he manages to sink into her shimmying cunt to the hilt. She sighs like it’s the nearest to bliss she’s ever been, and urges back against him in a sweet roll that leaves him boneless.

He can feel her creaming around him before he's even completed the first shaky slide back out, while his cock screams at him not to leave this slick, delicious heat. She cries out brokenly when he can't stop himself from shoving back in nice and deep, all the way. And then again, shaking even harder than before. His control is slipping but Lord, it's leaving trails of fire as it goes, pushing him into things he doesn't want to do and other things he definitely does.

Like grabbing her by the hollows where hips meet thighs and yanking her back on him until she calls out his name. Or lifting her, just a little, so that when he fucks into her the swollen head of his cock rubs and thrusts and ruts against that sweet spot inside her.

He knows he's hitting it before she tells him so. It's easy to figure when she's got her cheek resting against her hand on the bunk, and he can see her mouth is open and her eyes are closed. Thoughts of filling that mouth swamp him, as does the sound of her calling out his name—right when he thinks she might be dreaming on someone else, with her eyes closed like that.

But no—the harder he fucks her, the higher her voice gets, and it talks of nothing but him. As she climaxes for the second time, she gasps out, “Ah, Quade, yes—now.” And he's fair certain there's nothing sweeter than that. So much so that it gets him right by the balls, right down low, too hard to let him think this is going to be a bearable sort of orgasm.

He's sweating and shaking and drilling her right down into the bunk, desperately trying to get at his orgasm and yet fearing it just the same, and when it comes, when it wrenches through him and sends him rigid, he has to lean over her and get one hand up to the wall to hold him in the land of the living.

He can't even make a sound the way she did. Something thin and high comes out of him and he can feel his suddenly molten cock spurting like a goddamn geyser, but he can't speak with it. He can't say what he wants to, though maybe that's a mercy. The words sound like something a girl would say to him, even as they're spinning round his

head and his body's pulsing and shivering and this orgasm's going on forever and ever and ever.

He thinks, *Oh, Sol. It ain't ever been like this.*

He takes a long time to come back around. When he finally does he's not sure how he got here, with Sol pushed right up against the wall and his own cheek resting on his hand. Somehow his knees are on the bunk.

And his cock isn't softening, not even a bit. The release of tension is good, but it's clear there's another wave coming. Even as he twists inside his soaked t-shirt and wonders how they got to this tangled mess, he knows it's coming.

"Hey Quade?" she asks, voice as wavery as he still feels. "You okay?"

Yeah. One *definitely* isn't going to be enough.

## Chapter Six

The cabin feels like it's full of moisture. Everything is sticky and hot, and they're not excluded from that assessment. Sweat is running down the backs of her thighs, from where he briefly sealed himself against her. The hand that's still on her hip is slippery.

His thick, solid cock—as thick and solid as ever it was—is still buried in her pussy. Or to use his word, *cunt*. She shivers just thinking about his laidback, humor-filled mouth saying things like that, and then worse when she considers where she's heard that word before—in sex-vids, with rough, burly men taking slinky women hard.

Up against things, bent over things, twisted into all kinds of shapes.

The knowledge that she wants Quade to twist *her* into all kinds of shapes is not unsettling in the slightest. How could it be, after a show like that? The way he teased and then fucked hard, the way he grasped her hips and yanked her back on his almost-too-thick cock. Those shaky groans of his, and the things he had muttered.

Things about coming in her pretty mouth and about how good her slippery little pussy felt and oh, oh... Oh, she can't move. If she moves, likely she'll press back against him for more. He's still hard, after all.

She's not surprised, though. Two goes and her sex feels as swollen and ready as ever—and they were good goes too. Better than good. Her clit pulses with the echo of his finger rubbing over her, pushing her up before she even knew she was ready.

She's pretty sure neither of them were ready for that. He still hasn't answered her, after all. Takes him a good few minutes, and even then it's just, "Yeah. Yeah. I'm okay. You?"

And it's not as though she can manage more.

"Yeah."

It's not until he's eased his way out of her protesting body – making a sound all the while like a strangled dog – that he tries for more.

“Well. That sure was something.”

But it seems his body can't go for anything that requires effort. Just as she's managed to gather herself, he caves in on top of her as though his bones are made out of rubber. Feels like having a sack of something melted poured over her body. She makes a sound of protest, but after that it's kind of nice. Real warm and moist. Squeezes out all the shivering tension.

“Quade? I think you're turning me into soup.”

He chuckles, so she knows he hasn't fallen immediately asleep – as the merc did. Though he makes no further move to get off her or stop being a rather solid blanket. Ain't nothing to do but give in to it.

She breathes shallow. Relishes the feel of his still-stiff cock pressing into the soft curve just above her ass, and then tries thinking on how old he is. Thirty-five? Maybe a little younger. Even so, isn't the truth of it that the older you get, the longer it takes to spring back into action?

Not for him, it seems. Either that, or terazine is actually some sort of miracle sex drug. It certainly feels like it right now, with her head full of lust clouds and her body still wanting it and wanting it. And not just wanting it, either, but wanting it from *Quade*. The pressure to reach a hand back and touch some portion of his skin, some curve on his body, is immense.

And it seems that he feels something like the same way, because it doesn't take him long to stroke his hand over the length of her arm. The left arm, too, where the metal thrums beneath. Even worse, the left side of her face, along the line of the scar that's now barely there. Heals fast, real fast – more so than ordinary skin.

Seems, though, that he doesn't mind touching it. She almost flinches but then his hand flits away and finds other places, and it's easy to forget what he was doing not a

moment before. It's easy to forget anything when his hand is on her breast, her hip, her thigh.

She arches and rubs her head back into the curve of his throat. He's curled around her now, and it's simple enough to do. To just push back into him and let him come around her and stroke and envelope, soft and slow now, and hardly urgent at all.

Their legs tangle together real easy. His hand goes over hers, fingers interlacing. So natural, too, as though they'd never said a harsh word to one another in their lives. She supposes it's an uncomplicated thing to be tender with someone when half-naked and tangled together.

Certainly seems it when she half-turns in his arms and he just leans right down into her and kisses and kisses. Oh, how syrupy-slow his kisses are. She could live in those warm, wet pulls.

It takes a lot of effort to demand he remove the t-shirt in the middle of all the kissing. It's worth it, though, she feels. Now they're skin to skin, nothing between them but her boots and his boots and the occasional whisper of air. He gets her on her back, not rough exactly but as firm as she could wish him to be, and then the kissing gets to more than slow and easy.

It's like freefalling through the atmosphere of some planet, only hitting the thrusters at the last second and even then, the sudden boom of power only takes you faster, higher, more. His tongue thrusts into her mouth, wet and warm and provoking every pleasurable ache in her. His hands ghost over the line of her jaw, the slant of her shoulders, before he takes her hands in his and tugs them up until they're above her head.

It takes a whole lot of effort to tell him no, in between harsh breaths and beguiling kisses and oh, is that the feel of his plotz pressing urgently between her legs? Or at least, almost between her legs. In truth, it seems to push and rut against anywhere but where she needs it most, kissing the swelling bud of her clit.

Soon fixed, though.



“No,” she says, and he gets that agitated, you’ve-just-bilked-me-on-a-job look for a second all over his sweetly open face. She quickly puts his mind at rest – after a fashion. “No, it’s my turn now. My turn.”

A trembling smile comes to his lips – kind of like he wants to smile but figures she shouldn’t get the advantage of such an expression.

“Your turn for what? Would have thought you’d trust me to bring it out right. Didn’t I give it to you good?”

“You sure did, honey. But now *I’m* going to give it to *you*. How about that?”

He begins to say something probably contrary but she gets to him before he can. One foot hooked in beneath his thigh, her strong hand on his arm. Then it’s just a matter of a lifting and flipping, like cooking flat cakes.

He seems somewhat breathless to find himself so easily turned and with her suddenly on top of him. Not quite straddling – not yet at least – though with lots of nice things pressing against other nice things. He has a faint smattering of hair on his chest, and it grates pleasingly over her still-taut nipples. Between her legs, her sex is tender and juicily wet, his come mixing with hers to make a sticky mess of her in a way that isn’t at all unpleasant. Their bellies kiss in a sweet sort of way and his mouth opens beneath hers, as quickly acquiescent as she could wish.

It’s easy to give in when there’s so much pleasure to be had.

In between kisses, he tells her in a laughing sort of voice, “I don’t mind taking turns.”

Really, she should have known he’d be that way. It had seemed as though he might like to be the one always in control in the sack, getting a little something from her here that he never gets anywhere else – her submission. And though she thinks she could really go for that, he’s never been that guy. Never treated her like she should be a certain way, and never acted as though he could only operate on one level.

He's much more of a roll-with-the-punches sort of man, she knows. Even if the punches are coming out of the ceiling on spinning tops in multicolors, with aliens doing the operating. Small wonder that he took her partially metallic status so well.

Being a creature from the back of beyond likely wouldn't have thrown him.

It's at this point she knows. Tries to shake it off, but knows all the same. Tells herself she's wrong, and yet still it comes on her. When she kisses him and he moans low and deep into her mouth, she knows it right down through her bones—or at least what bones she has left.

She had thought, once upon a time, that she felt something for the Doc. He was the one man who had made her feel warmth inside toward him; real warmth, even though he made her this thing. Now she understands that she was wrong.

It's easy to know you were wrong when the real deal presents itself to you.

She shivers and his hands come up to clasp her arms, a flicker of concern making a groove between his brows.

"You cold?" he asks, because he knows her well, it seems. It ain't the kind of shiver you get from feeling pleasure. "Maybe we're coming down from this terazine high."

Doesn't seem like it to her, but even so, it's on its way. And when it arrives, then things will just go back to normal. No more troublesome knowledge of feelings she doesn't want. No more of any of this.

Though in the meantime...

"Maybe. I don't know — you tell me. How does this feel?"

On the last word, she lifts her body and reaches between them, for the thing that's still poking at her with some urgency. His expression automatically goes slack. More than that—in truth, she's never seen a man look so much like he wants to fuck. Never seen it written so plainly on someone's face, in hooded lids and smoky gazes, lips parting like they're just waiting to take something in or give something out.

“Feels like I should be well satisfied by now. Rather than like my brains are trying to leak out the end of my cock.”

“Well, you never did have much in the way of thinking parts, Quade. It’s no great loss.”

“I’ll give you no great loss in a— Oh for the love of...don’t squeeze, okay, don’t squeeze like that.”

“Really? ‘Cause I thought you’d be much in favor of a little tug like this.”

“I’ll be honest—there ain’t nothing unpleasant about it. Doesn’t mean I can take it without embarrassing myself.”

“I think you’re a good fuck’s length away from embarrassing yourself, Quade. This is just for you, so might as well enjoy it. What do you say?”

She rubs her thumb nice and firm over the place she knows is most sensitive, right on the underside. He jerks as though struck.

“I’ve had better.”

“Yeah? Girls who knew some sweet tricks, huh?”

His eyes roll upward while his hips bump in the same direction.

“Like...say...some of the tricks I’ve learned from extensive exposure to every sex-vid going?”

This time she rubs her thumb over the slick tip, right where the little slit is. His prick is still well oiled all over from her body and his, but there’s a special sort of slipperiness just there. Feels good and arousing to work beneath her fingers, and apparently it’s even better for him. She can see his tongue curling up to touch his teeth, as though he’s concentrating real hard on something. His eyes close and then open, close and then open.

Ah, but this is something delicious. Even better when she pushes down his body a little way and straddles his meaty thighs. Keeps her hand on his cock and watches him watching her, with something like nervousness in his still-smoky gaze.

“Tell me when I hit the right spot,” she says, before getting her other hand right between his legs, right down underneath the tightly drawn-up pouch of his balls, to that little strip of skin between one thing and the other.

Feels as soft as plush. Apparently he objects to her stroking it as she circles the tip of his cock with the fingers on her other hand, however. He almost gets to a sitting position, so fast it’s like a reflex. The word *no* jumps out of him, though as quick as it does he arches back onto the bed, mouth full of nothing but the kind of breathy groans she’s rarely heard outside women in the vids.

“I’ve forgotten why I wanted to tell you to stop doing that,” he says, in between those sounds that ring through her sweeter than any other thing she’s ever heard. “Oh, keep right on it.”

“Keep right on jerking you off like this?”

“Yeah, yeah—just like that. Good Lord—my own hand hardly does me as good as that.”

“So you don’t want me to try anything else?”

“No. God, no. Think I’m about to burst.”

“So you’d rather I didn’t take you in my mouth right now?”

His eyes snap open, almost comical like. He’s a great subject for teasing.

“No, no—you can do that. You can do that. If you want to, I mean. Only if you’ve got a mind to. I’m really not overly fussed.”

He sounds about as fussed as a person can get. His cock swells against her grip, leaking more of the same sort of fluid that’s still trickling from her greedy pussy.

“So you’re not going to beg me to do it, then?”

He raises an eyebrow, though it’s his smile that makes her want to reward him. His teasing smile that tells her he wouldn’t be averse to playing those sorts of games. Why, they could play those sorts of games for the rest of their lives!

She bends down and licks at the little bead of liquid welling in that sweet slit at the tip of his prick, instead of thinking too hard on that notion. He responds with a mind-blanking moan, and then a deeper one still when she parts her lips and takes him all in, almost to the root. Almost, but not quite. Though she thinks she does a good job, his immensity considered.

It should have been clear, really, that Quade had something more than satisfactory in his pants. All the sardonic laidback-ness, his lack of need to be the toughest and the baddest in any situation. Once, she saw him run away from a pack of armed mining gals who'd tried to steal his payload. Just straight up ran away, leaving Marcs to fend for himself.

Marcs, on the other hand, fired seventeen huge guns into the crowd while standing on a box. She's betting Marcs has a pecker the size of a peanut.

"Did I mention," he asks, as he quite obviously restrains himself from shoving his cock down her throat, "that I love you?"

"Do you want me to answer or do you want me to suck you off?"

In between each word, she gives him a little teasing lick. Ah, the taste of him, salty with his juices, sweet with hers. Full and warm and tangy on her tongue.

"Here," he says. "This is what I want."

At first it's not really clear what he's trying to do. He kind of half sits up and grabs her arm. Then reaches farther down, tugging at her insistently. Only when he tells her to turn around does she get it.

"Getting it" thrills and tingles through her, near enough to the feel of an orgasm that she's sure it counts. He wants her spread over his face, and her with her mouth on his prick—just like in the masterpiece, *I'll Do You While You Do Me*.

It's a good deal better in reality, however. Sex-vids can't tell you what balancing on a bunk with a man's mouth between your thighs and his cock against your tongue is like. She spreads her hands out just to feel the weighty meat of his thighs, just to press her nails in and let the sense of him keep her steady while he works his tongue between

the spread lips of her sex—the whole length of her slit, from the tip of her clit to the shocking and sensitive pucker of her asshole.

She almost forgets him entirely in the rush of pleasure that follows. Her cunt clenches around nothing and creams for him at the same time, waiting for what she's sure must be coming. She lets his straining prick simply rest against her cheek as he obeys her every imagining, his tongue wriggling and working its way into her juicy hole, tasting what he had earlier on the fleshy length of his prick. The remains of his orgasm, the remains of hers.

Her cheeks are too hot. Her entire body is too hot. The entrance to her pussy has always been sensitive, she knows that. But nothing compares to how it feels now, with his tongue fucking into her eagerly and his hands holding her thighs apart and the musky delicious scent of him right up against her face.

It's all she can do to bring her hand up and grasp his taut, gleaming cock. But he doesn't seem to mind. He bucks when she squeezes the swollen head, and squirms on the bed when she turns and her hot breath gusts over him.

It makes her eager to give him as much pleasure as he's giving her. In fact, the pleasure that's saturating her body is the thing that persuades better than any words, any gestures. Her body melts into doing whatever he might want—anything, anything at all.

When he rubs the flat of his tongue over and over her clit, she sucks him deeply into her mouth.

He seems to appreciate that. The licking gets messier, more frantic, and the sounds he makes vibrate through every inch of her pussy. She almost goes over right then and there, but manages to keep a hold on it long enough to return the favor—she moans and lets the sound buzz through the length of his cock.

Now they're a tight circle of pleasure, feeding off one another.

When his fingers slide into her, fumbling and eager, she gives it back to him. Sucks hard and waits for an answer, which duly comes—he curls his fingers in her and finds

that sweet spot he got to so easily as he took her. A near-constrictive bloom of pleasure bursts outward from that place, quickly followed by several more that make her desperate to taste him.

She wants to tell him she's close, so close, but her mouth is full of his swelling flesh and he's flicking his tongue just ever so lightly over her fat little bud...oh, it's impossible. She gives him one last pull—from near root to tip—and then her body tightens. Her clit leaps against his working tongue and her cunt clenches around his thrusting fingers and she gasps, long and loud.

Long enough to coax a protracted climax from him, in kind. He bucks hard and comes in her mouth just as the sweet tingles billow through her, swelling from her clit and outward until she's sure she's cutting into his thigh with her nails. Until she's sure that all she can taste is his jism, hot and thick and like the sea, salty and sweet as anything.

It's nothing like she had imagined. None of this is. She collapses over him, uncaring of where her legs go or what they're crushing, cheek pressed to the crisp thatch of hair around his cock and not caring about that, either.

She only knows she isn't suffocating him because she can hear his panting breaths. And his sighs that are almost laughs—of satisfaction, she thinks. They sing right through her, as do the echoes of her orgasm. She shivers with it, and he rubs a hand over her thigh.

Like before, when he was so tender and concerned.

"Sol? As much as I appreciate you making me this lovely womanly blanket...you think we could try lying like normal people who don't want to merge into one being?"

"Can't have that. We'd make one gross merged being. Your ass and my ass together? The universe would run in terror."

He laughs as she slip-and-slides off him. She's halfway to getting free when he grabs a hold of this and that and turns her right around, until they're squashed side by

side on her tiny bunk. Her rough patchwork blanket bunched up beneath them. His arm around her shoulders, firm underneath her neck.

She glances at him and sees that soft smile on his face. The way his eyes are already drifting closed, kind of the way hers want to. She doesn't think the beasts in them both are quite satiated, but even so. They need to rest.

"Ah," he says. "This is the stuff."

She doesn't think he means the sex, either. He means this, right now. This sudden soft warmth with someone beside you, as sleep comes in like falling night.



## Chapter Seven

She wakes with nothing warm beside her, somewhat sore, somewhat sticky, somewhat addled. Odd, she considers, how a person can come to miss something after only a few moments with it. She can't even remember ever having had a person to lie next to. It makes her sit up straight, to think of how much she might be getting used to it. It makes her throw off the covers and tug on a t-shirt and shorts.

While in the middle of this operation, she hears banging coming from below. Clanging and cursing. Quade, no doubt, at her shitting engine. Doing Lord knows what. Why, it's almost like he think he runs her place now. Next thing you know he'll be moving things around and putting pictures up on the walls and then it'll be like they live together. *Actual living together might occur.*

Oh, the horror.

She goes to the ladder and climbs down in an awful hurry, anger building all the while. Only to find him looking as mad as she, as though all that relaxed sleepiness never existed. Instead he's awkward and ornery, as pissed as she's ever seen him. Though maybe that's just due to his attacking of the left piston. Which may or may not have attacked him first.

Either way, she doesn't appreciate them fighting.

"Goddamn drive's busted all to hell, Sol. When was the last time you replaced this cuff? And were you just going to leave these plates all set to blow us to shit and back?"

"You think I'm a dummy? They'll only blow if the sensor clicks with a *Cyber* ident, while connected to one of their Juggs. Don't tell me you didn't know that—if you hadn't, you would have been down here sorting it days ago."

“Well, okay. All right then! But what about the rest of this junk heap? You know your drive feed is connected to main life support? It’s not even working but it’s siphoning off power from your rust bucket of an engine!”

“And you’re only just noticing? I thought you checked it out earlier, big shot.”

“I didn’t check the shitting drive feed, Sol—how can you live like this?”

She pauses before answering. Her temper is rising, like usual, and the urge to fall right back into how they once were is strong. Too strong, in fact.

“Last time I was on your ship, the ass fell off and nearly sucked us all out into space.”

“That is— That’s beside the point, goddamn it,” he says, and then he whacks the piston with what looks like a fusion drill. She understands why he does it, though. The fusion drill doesn’t exactly work.

“The point is—if you bash my girl again, you’re going to get a face full of something unpleasant. What are you even doing down here, Quade?”

“I was— I just— I don’t know! For some reason I keep thinking we’re about to die any minute, and it looks like I was right!”

“We’re not going to die any second, you dumb hump. Now leave my engine alone and come back up top.”

“No!”

“No?”

“You realize how close you are to death, constantly? On this piece-of-shit ship with this cobbled-together engine and this explosive jump drive? Jessum crow, Sol—I never realized, I never—”

“Just stow it, would you? What’s the matter with you? Huh? I think you’ve gone around the bend, I tell you what—the Jugg and the near death and the terazine, it’s addled you’re damn mind—”

She doesn't get chance to finish her little speech. He finishes it for her by striding right up and pulling her in for a kiss so fierce she's sure she should hang on to her face. He's about to suck it clean off.

It's the strangest thing, however. Any will there was to keep the shouting match going immediately drains away. Or at least, she thinks it's drained away until it suddenly reappears in the form of boiling, bone-shaking lust of the kind she was sure was purged from her system not a few hours before.

But it isn't purged. Her hands are on his face before she can deal with the paradigm shift. Her hands are everywhere. She grabs his ass—great handfuls of it, that make him stumble. She kisses so hard and frantic all over his barely keeping-up mouth that she comes away with third-degree razor burn.

It takes him a moment to come back at her just as strong. Too long, in fact. Though when he does, she's thankful for it. As his tongue finds previously unexplored territory inside her mouth, his hands slide up to her still so very, very sensitive breasts. Everything is still sensitive, in fact. Her skin buzzes wherever he puts a hand to it. When he pushes her back against her probably still-wounded engine, she doesn't protest.

In fact, she's pretty sure she's begging. Not that such a thing matters, when he's begging her right back. Lots of *take this off* and *harder* and *more*.

"I knew one go around would never be enough," he says, as he wrestles with the elastic on her shorts. For a moment she's certain he's going to rip them—the material presses tight and near painful into the flesh of her thigh as he yanks on them—until they're off. They're on the floor and her pussy is bared once again to his gaze and his touch and dear God, he does a lot of both. Lots of gazing. Lots of touching.

She wants to tell him that he doesn't need to rub her clit the way he is to get her worked up. That she is already beyond aroused and ready for whatever's coming. But the little pulses and shivers of pleasure are so good that all she can do is let her legs flop open, and lean on the engine for support. Her head goes back and words come out of

her that she doesn't intend, terrible words that are going to get her in a whole heap of trouble.

"I'll do anything you want," she says, though doesn't regret it once it's out there. Feels good to have it out there.

Or at least, it feels good until he takes one pointed step back. And says, "Anything?"

His hands go behind his back in a very ominous sort of fashion. It makes her want to pull her t-shirt down a little way, to cover her bare sex. Or at least close her legs so he can't lay those amused eyes on her flushed wetness.

"Well...maybe not *anything*. I mean...I mean what I meant to say was—"

"You said anything."

"Yeah, and now I'm kinda worried what you're taking that to mean."

"Let's see if you're horny enough to find out."

She snorts. "You'll break first," she says, but the expression on his face doesn't make her so sure. He looks like he's been waiting a long time for whatever this is going to be.

Minutes go by. Maybe hours. They kind of feel like hours. She squeezes her legs together around that niggling ache, but that turns out to be a step in the wrong direction. As does flicking her gaze to the solid ridge in his pants.

"Okay, what? What do you want from me? *What?* Just say before I kill you."

"It's nothing major."

"Good. Okay."

"It's not like I want to blindfold you or gag you or have you blindfold or gag me."

"Well, that's—"

"Or maybe have your ass or let you have *my* ass or use various items around this ship on each other or—"

“If you don’t shut up, I *will* have your ass. And I’ll spank it while I’m shafting you.” She pauses when his eyebrow lifts. “You’re not going to ask me to do that, are you?”

“Maybe later. For now, I just want to see you do what I’ve often imagined in the lonely, dark hours of my lonely, dark quarters, aboard a ship with two other men.”

Most of his words fly right overhead. Largely because she’s stuck on the first two.

“Did you say *maybe later*?”

“After you’ve stood right there, in front of your piece-of-shit engine, and put your hand between your legs. Then we can get into whatever other perversions you have in mind.”

She can’t even put names to all the perversions she has in mind. There’s an entire universe of things she hasn’t done, and all of them would look damn fine on him. Including the terrifying ones.

Unfortunately, this seems to be one of the terrifying ones—in a way she hadn’t imagined. It looks real easy when some woman in a sex-vid is doing it while in a space station corridor, but it’s harder when you’ve lived your life alone, with only an audience of yourself.

She tries to close her eyes but he puts a stop to that. It seems he has the power to put a stop to all kinds of things, like her resistance and her embarrassment. Before this moment, she wasn’t even sure if she had any of those sorts of feelings. Everyone’s free and easy about this kind of stuff, and she was sure she was too.

Now things aren’t as clear.

She’s acutely aware of how she’s standing, what she looks like. Girls in the clinic clickers usually lean over something or put their shoulders right back so their tits jut out. Now she realizes just how artificial that whole pile of nonsense is.

Feels best to let the engine support her. To not stare him right in the eye or even consider that he’s here, watching her obey.

She doesn't even want to think about the fact that she *is* obeying. That seems insane. And like she's gunning the engine just before hitting the ground again.

"Go on," he says. So she does. One hand between her legs and some sweet thoughts on her mind, like usual. The Doc, operating on her in a very specific sort of way. Quade, alone in his quarters...yeah, it's okay to admit that now. Quade alone, maybe without any clothes on, running his hands all over his body – which happens to be faintly oiled and gleaming in some sort of golden light.

Ah, yeah. That's the stuff. Even if she wasn't already wet from earlier exertions and all the heated arguing and now this ton of fun, she'd be getting there from such thoughts.

Could be he's...tied up. Yeah, like he said. Maybe Marcs tied him up, and tried to take over the ship. And then...oh God, then, could be Marcs decides that taking over the ship is not as much as fun as toying with a stripped, oiled and naked man. Like in that vid *Dudes Get it On*.

He rubs his big, rough hands all over Quade's slippery body, until he reacts in that great way he seems to have about him – that unable-to-resist, urgent sort of thing. Lots of moaning and groaning, until eventually he gets himself free of his bonds and rolls Marcs something good.

Because somehow, she's betting Quade would top him. Even though Marcs looks like he'd call the shots, usually that's not the case, is it? Big men in control like to be bossed around and told what to do. Big men like sudden orders, like the one that comes out of her mouth upon realizing such a thing.

"If I'm doing it, you gotta do it too."

It blurts out of her in a rush, urged on by the stiff, slippery feel of her clit and all her swollen, sticky flesh and the heat in here. Lord, the heat is unbearable.

*Marcs, she thinks. Marcs telling Quade to do him hard.*

Sweeping tingles burst outward from her clit in answer to *that* particular thought.

"I gotta do what?" he asks, but he looks like he knows all right. His cheeks are flushed and there's a firm ridge in his pants and one of his hands is almost on himself at any rate.

She puts him out of his misery, however.

"Touch yourself."

Just saying it makes her not have to rub her clit anymore. She presses down hard on the tender knot of flesh to hold it off, only that makes matters worse. Feels as jumpy and primed as though it hadn't already had a couple of go-rounds.

"You want me to pull my plotz in front of you?"

"Ain't I doing the same?"

"Well...yeah...but—it sounded fun when I asked *you*. You asking me just sounds..."

"Embarrassing?"

He shrugs. "Sorta."

For some reason, this sparks her arousal even higher. He's embarrassed to do the thing she's already having a go at!

"You want me to carry on? Get your pecker out. Give me something to look at while I'm working myself up."

He rolls his eyes and chuffs and starts unsnapping his pants as though it's an immense and uncomfortable chore, though his expression does seem to say otherwise. In fact he seems tense all over, a bit like before when she bent over and then looked back, and saw him all tremulous and disbelieving.

Turns her on like she can hardly believe. Turns her on more to see him with his pants shoved to mid-thigh, that thick, red-tipped cock of his jutting out straight and strong. And then he takes a deep breath, and gets a grip on himself.

"Go on then," he grits out, eyes wide and insistent like she's holding him up in a queue.

She spreads her legs wider for him. Circles her clit once, twice, then has to stop before she goes over. He chuckles.

“Too much, huh?”

That’s a goddamn understatement. Just looking at him as he rubs slow and steady over his prick is too much. She can tell he’s on the edge too, by how deliberately he goes at himself—and that’s too much on top of too much. When he drops his head back briefly and makes a sound up to the ceiling, she’s sure her orgasm dances close enough for touching.

“Oh jeez, Sol,” he says. “You look a sight, I tell you what.”

“Feeling’s mutual.”

“Take off your t-shirt so’s I can get a look at your tits.”

“Isn’t that just going to make you boil over faster?”

He bites his lip in answer. Strokes harder over himself, almost like a punishment. Of course, she’s seen guys jerk off before, in vids and what have you. But she’s never seen any man go at it the way he does. Fierce, like he’s in trouble for doing it.

“I’ll take off mine if you take off yours,” she tells him, as her finger circles faster on her clit without her permission. He groans when she dips down into the well of her pussy.

“Like to look, do you?”

“Course I do,” she replies, only it comes out all high and shaky. Pleasure hits on the word *I*.

“Bet you look all the time—at all those pretty boys from the clinics and in the vids. Bet you get yourself all stirred up feasting your eyes on them.”

She’s not sure if his words are meant to have this effect on her. But they’re having it just the same—her sex clenches around her probing finger and wetness covers her hand. She’s close now, real close.

“And what do you look at when you’re fucking yourself?”



“I don’t,” he says, in the middle of a whole mess of gasping. “I think about you.”

She comes then, just like that. So hard and shaking with it that she barely feels him press his body against hers. He knocks her hand away right in the middle and she twists and moans in complaint, but it’s okay. It’s all right because his mouth is over hers and she can feel his slippery tongue and his fingers sliding through all her slickness.

And then he has her shoved up hard against the engine, one leg hooked around his waist and his eager prick poised at her entrance. Her hands scrabble at his back, his ass, trying to get him closer, trying to get him into her before the melting, heated feeling swirls away.

When he finally slides home, he makes a sound into her mouth that she can’t help echoing back. A long, drawn-out cry of pleasure that goes on and on and on.

She grabs fistfuls of his hair and batters his mouth with hers. Tells him *fuck me, fuck me*.

So he does. Hard and relentless and up against the hot metal of her engine, his hand on her ass when she starts to slide down to the floor into a puddle of bliss.

It’s impossible to get enough of him. When he slides out unsteadily, she sobs to have him back in her again. It would be humiliating if he wasn’t actually saying almost the same thing into the hollow of her throat. He tells her that her wet pussy feels so good around him, that he needs more, desperately, that she’s so hot and sweet and tight. Her sex clenches around him and he demands she do it again and again, until he’s gasping.

“Hurry,” he says. “Hurry up, sweetheart – I’m gonna burst.”

And as usual, it’s his words that send her over. In truth, though, she’s not sure she ever stopped going through this endless orgasm. By the time it’s done, her entire body feels wrung out and watery.

Even more so after he’s fucked hard into her and spilled copiously. She feels his thick seed running down the inside of her thigh as he jerks and groans to his completion, and then they’re both just about as limp as rags.

She holds him up, while he holds her up.

“Think we can make it up the ladder?” he asks, after a long moment of shaking and panting and sweating on each other.

“I don’t think I can make it across this room,” she replies, and he laughs into the fall of her hair.

\* \* \* \* \*

Her bunk won’t fit two – that much has been clear for some time. Though it’s really the fact that this notion has had time to become clear that’s cause for concern. Or not a concern, really. More like...an interesting thing that keeps her up nights. He feels very solid beside her, something new and alien and yet not. Not anymore.

She thinks but does not say, *You’re very big in my little world*. Then wonders what thoughts *he’s* thinking but not saying. He’s quieter now than she has ever heard him. If she strains, she can make out the whir of the air-cycling unit.

Finally, after forever in this sonic-shower-cleaned-but-still-somehow-sticky-warm silence, he goes with, “Do you do this often?”

There’s a brief flare of outrage, but unlike the usual run of things, he’s quick to dispel it.

“Just hang out in the black, drifting, with an engine barely kicking over and everything about ready to fall apart?”

“I wouldn’t call it *hanging out*. Stranded, more like it.”

“Okay, hair splitter. How often are you stranded?”

There’s something underneath his words, of course there is. She can hear it. She heard it in the engine room. It sounds brittle and fluttery, like he hardly wants to get hold of it his own self.

“No more than you, I’m betting. What kind of life do you think we live out here?”

He says nothing to that. Though she's guessing he's got a parcel full of things he'd like to say. Things that would probably give too much of him away. Not that he's pushing for Most Closed-Down Man of The Year award, what with all that love talk.

"You realize Marcs has probably run off with your ship, right? I mean, that's why he's not answering the signal," she says after a moment, though hates herself for saying it. But hey, he's needling her. How about a little bit of needling back? Might be no good to exist out here on your own in the black, but it's no better to have a crew full of idiots.

He deflates her somewhat with his reply, however.

"Yeah, I realize that. Shitting trunk head, he is. About as much use to me as a second ass."

"What, attached right there next to your first one? 'Cause I gotta tell you, that thing would have its own gravitational field."

He barks out a laugh, so loud and long and suddenly hysterical that she has to follow suit. Soon they're going at it like lunatics – something she never thought would happen after ragging him about his finest feature.

When it goes, it leaves behind a comfortable sort of silence.

"You still mad at me for having a crappy engine?" she asks, right in the middle of all that comfort. He chuffs out another laugh for her, shifts around on the shared pillow.

"Crappiest piece of rust and fluff I've ever seen in all my days." This time when he shifts around, he turns his gaze on her at the end of it. "No, I'm not mad. Wasn't ever mad. Were you?"

"Don't think I've ever been."

It's the sappiest thing she's ever said in her entire life and it makes her cringe to think on it too hard. It makes her cringe even as he's leaning in to her, nice and slow, lips parted, but as sappy as all of this might be, oh Lord, it's good to get his kisses.

His mouth is almost on hers – *almost* – when a sound rumbles through the ship. The bad kind of sound, she knows. That dying sound, like when all the wind has been punched out of someone’s belly.

Doesn’t seem fair that Quade’s comments are now allowed to be right and prescient, but there it is just the same. Another moment goes by of hoping and hoping he’s wrong, shortly before all the lights go out.

Through the darkness, Quade’s voice comes loud and sardonic.

“I might be madder at you now.”

## Chapter Eight

A world of pain is coming, he knows. And not just because they're going to run out of oxygen—maybe in thirty seconds. Maybe in four hours.

Either way, she's going to kill him when she realizes that in disconnecting the drive feed from life support, he appears to have dumped the whole lot in the shitter.

Of course, he tries to make the wires and connections and little non-flashing lights say otherwise, as he goes over them with a fine-tooth comb and a little pencil torch. But it reads the same whether he pokes it and begs it to be different or not.

All that talk about her living on the edge, and he's gone and broke her shitting ship.

"Let me have a look at her," she says, not even mad that his hands are all over the engine, like before. Now she's just tense and probably thinking *she's* the one who's killed them both. He can't bring himself to play that card and rub it in and then hustle her back up top for some doomsday sex.

Though where they've got to go from topsy-turvying and mutual masturbation, he ain't exactly sure.

Before she can get past him, he turns in the flickering, creepy light from her collection of neon strips and tiny torches. She looks ghostly. Still sexy, but ghostly. Any second now, she's going to melt right through his fingers.

"Sol, there's something I should tell you..." he starts, and even in the low light he can tell her expression changes.

"You've busted it, haven't you?"

"Might be I have."

"You are just made up of ass, Quade, I tell you what."

“You shouldn’t have had the damn drive feed connected to life support in the first place!”

“Don’t you think I know that? Oh you shitting meddler—jessum crow, this is just like you. You just couldn’t help yourself, could you—now look where we are!”

“Hey, I’m not the one living like a crazy, falling-apart Cyber on the edge of—”

He’s glad he stops himself. Though not so glad that he didn’t stop himself right before the word “Cyber” came out. Kind of feels like an ethnic slur of some type. Doesn’t sit well in his stomach, not at all, and even more so when he sees the flash of hurt on her face.

“You know what I meant,” is the best he can do to fix it. Lucky for him, she seems to take it.

“It’s fine. Just forget it. Just...it’s no one’s fault, okay? It’s the way things are out here and you know it.”

“I do know it.”

“Then why we riding each other?”

“Because we’re going to die.”

It’s hard to see her not even deny it. She goes to the drive feed and checks over the burnt-out life support system, but he’s guessing she knows what she’ll find. Still, he asks her. Just to make conversation.

“How long we got?”

She answers quickly but there’s a little shake in the middle. That’s Sol, all right. Quick and no-nonsense and tough. But maybe with a little shake in the middle.

“Four hours, tops,” she says.

\* \* \* \* \*

They spend around two of the hours left sweating and bashing on things in the darkness, trying to get anything at all to work again. But even rerouting the signal’s

power to main life support does nothing, because main life support is deader than an elephoto. The system's fried, there's nothing for it.

And then the cold comes in, and there's really nothing for it.

They huddle under blankets he's not sure why she has, her fingers freezing on his skin—from fiddling with the signal to try giving it a boost. *Not much luck on that score, either*, she says, just as she's giving in to a real hug. Not arm to arm like before, like she didn't want to come in too close.

Now she gets right into the nook he makes for her, with his arm around her shoulders and her cheek against his. It's everything he could have hoped it to be.

"I'm gonna kill Marcs when I see him," she says, finally.

"Can I kill him first?"

"Nah. You're a big man. You need way too much oxygen. You'll be dead long before me and then I'll just have to strike out on my own, avenge your name and what have you."

"Make sure you avenge me good against that Company division who made your crappy jump drive."

"If I'm going after Company divisions that make crappy stuff, I'm gonna be going after a whole mess of people."

"Remember when they put out those energy bars?"

"Ener-Go, for the space dweller on the move?"

"And all those people grew extra legs."

He can feel her laughing against his body. It's good. It's calming. Hell, he's laughing too.

"And when they tried to sue, when they tried to sue—"

Talking's apparently real hard when you're hysterical. Luckily, she gets a hold on herself. "Yeah, I remember. They claimed it was just meant to be that way all along. That's where you get the extra movement from, the extra get up and go! A third leg!"

“Ah, the shitting Company.”

“Real solid gold operation, ain’t they.”

“Oh yeah.”

Silence comes then. Probably for the best, considering how talk uses up oxygen. And yet—jessum crow, if there aren’t a million things he wants to say to her now. All those things she never told him, all those words they never said.

And then she says some of them, and he’s calm again.

“You know, things used to be real different. There used to be operations like the Company, operations that everyone knew about and which kind of connected people and so on...but they were called other names. And they used to look after people, I think. Yeah, kind of like they used to look after people or make decisions or some such.”

“You don’t really have idea about any of that olden-days stuff, do you?”

He’s sure he can feel her smiling against his shoulder.

“Busted,” she says.

“Ah, it’s some nice talk, though, Sol. You make it all sound real nice.”

“That’s the beauty of it. Just dreaming thoughts on once-was things. Animals and helping people and one place you could always call home.”

“*The Horizon* is my home,” he says, and it strikes him for the first time how much that is true. A sudden keen longing for its shapes and spaces goes through him, and he hugs Sol to him tighter.

“You are my home,” she says, real sudden. So sudden he’s sure she’s about to take it back any second—or at least wants to.

But no taking back comes. He clings to the words so tightly he doesn’t think she could take them back even if she tried. *Oh Sol*, he thinks. *God, please don’t let us die now. Not now.*

Not now that he realizes *The Horizon* isn’t his home at all. That he thinks like her.



That she is his home, too.

\* \* \* \* \*

There's only a little light in the cabin. Not enough to see her face by – not clearly, at least. But he can still make out all the things that make her Sol, like her witch-black hair. The long, thin slope of her nose. Her hand clutching his.

"You afraid to die?" she asks.

All he can think is, *It's nice to actually get the time to contemplate such an idea.* Instead of thirty seconds before a sander to the face and a torturous death in some pit aboard a Jugg. Or getting beaten into oblivion by a bunch of mining gals.

"Not like this I'm not."

"Because freezing to death and being unable to breathe is a great way to go out?"

"We'll probably just fall asleep."

She seems satisfied by that. Or at least, as satisfied as anyone could be when they're around an hour from death. He can feel, when he shifts about, that her face is wet. She hides it well on the three t-shirts and coat he's wearing, but he knows it's there.

"Remember the first time we ever met, Quade?"

"You're making me choke up, seriously. Can we talk about dying children next?"

"It was on that space station – the Copperneck."

It takes him a second to get the words out – and not just because breathing is now a little like breathing through a straw.

"I remember."

"Why *did* that guy smash a chair over your head? You never told me."

"Why would I tell you? My first sight of you was you yucking up a storm at my expense!"

She laughs, but it's like on the Jugg. Every sound she makes sounds suddenly sleepy. Her body feels heavy against his.

"It's always funny when a guy gets carked on the back of the head with a chair. People always seem to want to beat you up."

"Including you, I might add."

"Including...including me..."

He shakes her. His own eyelids feel kind of heavy, but he shakes her.

"Hey—hey, Sol! What happened next, huh? What happened after I got hit by that hump's chair?"

Panic tries to crush the insides of his chest. Her next words are barely words at all, they're slurred and weird and like she's being poisoned by carbon dioxide.

"You...knocked him out...with a serving tray."

"And then what?"

"I ran over to you. I ran...to you."

"Cause you wanted to get in on the action, huh? Said my face was born to punch."

"No...no. I ran to you 'cause...the Jugg was chasing me. Got close...couldn't bring myself to call you on the comm." She laughs in this wheezing sort of way. He can feel his stomach dropping, dropping. "Isn't that a riot? Couldn't...call you."

He remembers her saying on the Jugg. Clear as day her saying, *I ran to you*. Now it's pretty clear what she meant, in between all her mixed-up answers to the wrong events and her slurring and oh, he doesn't know what to think.

All the time they were in that cloud, she knew. And she waited for him to come and save her. Sol, who actively punches people to stop them saving her. She wanted him to save her all this time.

"Don't go to sleep, Sol," he says, and his voice sounds thin and high. "Stay awake, okay, stay awake."

"I'm sorry," she replies. "I'm sorry I brought them on you. But...but I would have come for you. I would have come...if you called."

"Why didn't you ever tell me, Sol? Why? It's too goddamn late!"

Her voice when she next speaks is so faint, he could pretend she hadn't said a word if he were so inclined.

"You're holding me now. It's not too late."

Though he has to say, it's better than he could ever have imagined, feeling his heart ache like this. At least, yeah at least – at least he got to feel something like this once.

"Don't go to sleep, Sol, please," he says, but this time she doesn't reply.

Seems she was wrong about that whole him-dying-first thing. Though he can feel himself going, sure as anything. His entire body is as heavy as a sack of wet sand, and it just seems easiest now. To let it all go. Why, it's as sweet as sinking into that said same wet sand. Only it's warm down there, it's real warm and –

When the proximity alarm goes off, he almost turns right over and puts it on snooze. In truth, he comes so close to telling it that he wants another five minutes, that it's only when something connects to their airlock that he gets to something like a terrified, bleary sitting position.

His brain shrieks, *Cybers!* His body shrieks, *Oxygen!*

As he attempts to stand and only manages to fall off the bunk in a maze of blankets, his body and mind fail to connect on one vital thing – that even if it is Cybers, magical, half-tin-can Solomon is at his side.

And so the terror continues as he stumbles around the cabin, trying to remember where Sol keeps her guns. When they open that airlock, he's going to face them, by God. He's going to blow their shitting peckers off this time! Fuck yeah! And then he's going to steal their life support system and fly off with his girlfriend on this heap of crap!

"Sol!" he shouts. "Sol, where's that 1020 pulse rifle of yours?"

It's some comfort that she groans at him from the bunk. It's even some comfort when the airlock rolls open like the stone from the front of the genie's cave and fresh, fresh, delicious oxygen gusts all over him.

It's not so much a comfort when the light bellows over his face, and he has to come to terms with the fact that what he fumblingly found in the dark is not actually a gun, but a vacuum cleaner with a detachable hose.

Man alive, the Cybers sure are going to quake over that.

"You show 'em!" Sol shouts from the bunk drunkenly.

And then, yeah, maybe then he *will* show them. Because his chest is filling up with the knowledge that Sol is still alive and will continue to be so, if they can just survive this next shit storm. If they can just kill any Cyber that moves. If they can just –

"Quade, what in the blue blazers are you doing with a goddamn cleaning apparatus? She got you washing her dishes and trimming her toenails for her too?"

There have been times, many times, when Quade was unhappy to see Marcs. When he tried to sell Thal to a clinic in Pango city. When he blocked up the waste pipes with something so terrible, so monstrous, that he actually had nightmares about it.

It goes without saying, he feels, that this is not one of those times. As far as he is concerned, Marcs can now block up the pipes with anything he damn well pleases.

"Sorry it took so long. Didn't realize you'd gone and run out of air! Was getting me a piece of ass on that new hooker station off Syram. Can you believe that place? Well, I couldn't at any rate. They bought Thal off me for seven hundred –"

"Marcs," he says. It's about the only word he can manage.

"Yeah, Quade?"

Well, and this one too.

"Thanks."

## Chapter Nine

The skies above Taprine are pouring water down on the Mech-Port, but for once she doesn't mind. Weather seems like an annoying thing when you're used to the ever-temperate insides of a ship, but after a few hours inside one without any oxygen, it's not such a bad thing to be out of it.

For a few days, at least. Yeah, she's liked these last few days all right. Getting her girl back together. Working hard on it. Not thinking too much about Quade, even when he's right next to her.

*No drive feed connections*, he said, as they pieced her life support system back together.

Smart ass. As though *The Horizon* is any better! It's a great big green eyesore the likes of which the universe should never see. A wart on the face of the beautiful black.

A beautiful relief, getting to them in the nick of time.

She stands in the open airlock, looking out over the wavering blue valley beyond, waiting for her all clear. Taprine has some nice features—not least of which is its whispering fingerlike vegetation. She can hear the wind singing through it all from here, on this platform.

But Taprine is not her home.

She looks back to the dark, cavernous hollow of the Mech-Port, near-deserted but showing signs of something much worked in. A part of some ship here. An old discarded pulse cannon there.

Quade, walking toward her.

Now that the work's all done, him doing so makes her want to run into her ship and shut the airlock. Take off now without the head mechanic's all clear. Crash into a sea of wavering fronds and die like that. Death by vegetation.

Oh, the things they said to each other while under duress.

He looks almost as awkward as she feels.

"Hey now," he says.

She tries to smile. And not think about whether she really told him that it was his signal she'd homed in on. Him she'd run to when times got tough.

Though she knows that it has always been that way. And maybe it has for him too.

"Hey," she says.

He glances out over the valley. Maybe just to have something to look at. Something to do.

"You heading out then, huh?"

Weird that he should ask. All they've done for the last few days is work like machines to make sure she could do just that. As soon as possible.

"Guess so."

When he looks at her, she can't help her face heating. All the kissing, the love talk, the home talk—everything. People will say anything when they're dying, she figures.

"Guess we've no need of seeing each other for a while," he says. Then, after an obviously uncomfortable second, "I mean, it's not like we *have* to jump each other's bones anymore, right?"

"Right. It was just the terazine."

He nods. His eyes are hard to look right into, however. Still so naked, God! Probably always will be, she's sure.

"Just the terazine," he says.

"And the dying."

“Lord, there was a lot of dying,” he laughs. He does it almost easily, and she follows suit. She thinks about the first time she ever saw him, when that hump had cracked his head with a chair. And how he had burst out with all this comical indignation to see her laughing at him.

And he had laughed then too. Because that’s who Quade is. He knows he looks comically indignant, he knows all the stupid things he does and how foolish everything can be. He knows, and laughs.

It’s why she loves him.

“Well...” he says.

And then he turns to walk away, just like that.

Of course he’ll know that she can’t call after him. How could she ever call after him? And then he’ll fly off in *The Horizon* and she’ll fly off aboard her boat, and they’ll probably only meet up again right before they’re about to be killed horri—

When he turns back around—so fast she actually jumps—she comes within a hairsbreadth of just barreling at him. Fortunately, he saves her the trouble.

“I can’t rightly *believe* you were just going to let me walk off like that! What in hell’s name is the matter with you?” He leans in as though right up close to her, voice low and conspiratorial and giddily funny all at the same time. “You know, I think you just might be a robot through and through.”

She tries to very casually put her hands in her pockets. It’s a good move, because it stops her from running to him immediately.

“Really? ‘Cause I don’t recall you asking me to join you on *The Horizon*. Maybe *you’re* the robot.”

His eyebrows lift into his hair. It’s not a hard task, considering how much of it he’s got hanging over his forehead. But even so.

“You’d...are you saying you *want* me to ask you to come aboard my ship? You’d actually come and live on *The Horizon*? Seriously? *Live?*”

"I don't know 'cause you haven't asked me."

"Okay then, I'm asking now! I'm asking it right out there—come aboard immediately, yesterday, last week. At least you wouldn't die of oxygen deprivation!"

"Fine. But if I get sucked out into space..."

Now his eyebrows are all the way around his head and back to the beginning again.

"You're—are you—you're seriously going to come aboard my ship? I was thinking you'd just want to cruise together, you know, sometimes you'd come to my ship, sometimes I'd come to yours..."

"Is that what you're looking for?"

"Hell no! Get onboard my ship you goddamn tease! Were you planning on keeping me hanging like this all along? Waiting 'til just the last second? 'Cause I gotta tell you, my heart's beating in my mouth. That's some awesome, *awesome* work there, ice queen."

She hops down from the airlock and strolls up as casual as you please. While *her* heart hammers a hard metal tune in her chest.

"I aim to please. Now come on, apple butt. If I'm going to live on your piece-of-crap, floating-wart thing, we're going to need a connector that won't pull off your ass when I hook my girl up."

He grins lopsidedly at her. Eyebrows on standby.

"You're going to live onboard *The Horizon*? With your most prized possession trailing off the ass end? I am deeply, deeply moved."

"I'll deeply move you, you jackass."

But it's he who grabs her. He actually grabs hold of her and kinda spins her round and for a second, she's sure they're dancing. *Dancing*. Oh, this is going to be a disaster.

The kind of disaster in which he very suddenly and inescapably sweeps her off her feet. She can't help the little noise that comes out of her mouth—another human being has actually picked her up! Dancing and being picked up, all in the space of thirty seconds!



Now her heart isn't hammering. It's trying to escape out of her mouth. It forces her to put her arms around his shoulders and press him to her hard. One brief, hard squeeze, before she can get back to her real self.

"I swear to God, if you don't put me down I'm gonna redecorate the inside of *The Horizon* with elephotos and lionels."

"I'll put you down if you say you love me."

"Of course I love you. Why else would I be coming onboard a ship so packed with ass it could win Mr. Big Butt 2427?"

He doesn't even seem to register the butt talk. After he's done swinging her around until she's sure she's about to vomit, he sets her down on the ground real slow. His gaze makes her shiver, so soft and dark and warm all at the same time. Doesn't feel like quite the right moment to take her hands off him, so she keeps them on his arms. He keeps his on her waist.

They're keeping on with all sorts of things, it seems.

"Any time you want to say that to me, you just go ahead," he says. "Maybe next time cry a little, and blurt it out after a hideous revelation."

She stands up on tiptoe to kiss his sweet mouth. Just once, gentle like. And he reaches down to take it, no problems.

"I love you, Quade," she says, once the kiss is done and with his warmth still in her. "Always have."

"See, I knew —"

She cracks him one on the arm before he can finish. It can't always be kisses and dancing, after all. Sometimes you've got to keep things zesty. Sharp. Tough, like love is. She's pretty sure her love for him is tough all right.

It let her run to him, after all.

"Okay, maybe I didn't *know*. But I knew this much—I've loved you since the first day you punched me in the face. And I'll love you 'til the last."

At which, she lets go of his arms. Slides out of his grasp. Starts to walk away.

Then turns and glances at him, sharp and cheeky over her shoulder.

“Sap.”

## About the Author

Charlotte Stein has been writing for over ten years, and perving on hot dudes for even longer than that. However, it's only recently that she's had the courage to pair the two together and pen some critically acclaimed, steamy-hot erotic romances. She lives in Brit-land with her very own hunk of manbeef, and their imaginary dog.

You can find her at [www.themightycharlottestein.blogspot.com](http://www.themightycharlottestein.blogspot.com), usually in the middle of rambling about nonsense, squee-ing over her totally unexpected life as a writer, and generally lusting after seriously sexy men.

Charlotte welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her [author bio page](#) at [www.ellorascafe.com](http://www.ellorascafe.com).

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