



Spaceport: The Adana Affair

Mikala Ash

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Breaking News: Who killed Nova Meridian?

The savage murder of a pleasure worker rocks the corridors of Spaceport Adana. Peri Barberossa and Fyche, her faithful AI, answer a call from her sister Holly to get to Adana posthaste. When they arrive, they find Holly gone and a case of mistaken identity allows Peri to make a big impression on the enigmatic private eye Silas Archimedes who finds that Holly's sister is even more trouble than the ace reporter herself.

While Fyche discovers the joy of human sex, Holly's old nemesis, Mischa, reaches out with her long and vicious right arm.

Stay tuned for further carnal developments in *The Adana Affair*, a Peri Barberossa Spaceport adventure.

Prologue

I hate saying goodbye, especially to an artful lover. All good things must come to an end, they say, but never before a farewell fuck.

Laz, my Cannis Confederacy warrior turned diplomat, a man whom I'd saved from certain death, had always been destined to leave me for a greater duty.

"I must," he said that last morning. "My honor leaves me no other choice."

"I know, darling," I whispered, my eyes wet, my lips quivering. I don't think I'd ever experienced so much happiness in my life than during the last few weeks. Perhaps it was because I knew it must end that I was able to abandon myself to the bliss of total surrender. To be able, for the first time, to fully submerge myself in another person without fear, because I knew, without doubt, it would end.

For all of that, the ending was painful beyond my experience.

We were aboard my ship, the *Jalapeño*, in orbit around the galactic capital, the center of the Alliance, or Empire, or whatever you wanted to call the regime. It was a sparkling icon of civilization and a more deadly nest of vipers could not be imagined. I was glad to be leaving it, though I was apprehensive for Laz. He was still a naïve warrior from the sticks and would be easy prey to the sophisticates of the planet-wide city. I'd tried to educate him in the ways of "civilized" people, but it was a hopeless task. He was a country boy at heart. That was his charm, I guess.

"You'll be beating women, *and men*, off with a stick," I warned him. "Just be careful who you take into your bed. Be suspicious of their motives. Protect yourself."

He smiled at me indulgently, confident in his ignorance, and I knew he'd have to learn for himself, as I had done when I had first ventured out alone.

The time had come. His bags were packed.

It was still early, and he was still naked in all his gorgeous manliness. He gazed at me with his deep brown eyes, their inner light pulsing with lust, his craggily-sculpted face holding an expression caught between sadness and desire. I reached out and touched his shoulder and caressed the deep gold of his tan.

"Come back to bed," I whispered, and pulled him down onto the pale lilac of my Nell Pozniac sheets. He lowered his muscular body, the result of a hard upbringing, down onto me, enveloping me with his warm masculinity.

His lips claimed mine with unexpected ferocity, and I responded with despair-fueled passion. We clung to each other as we fell into a deep abyss of sensuality. In synchrony with our wrestling tongues, our hands explored every millimeter of each other's body, knowing this would be the last time we would ever love.

Leaving my numb lips, Laz allowed his tongue to find my throat, the cleavage between my breasts and the aching nipples at their points. I tugged at his hips to swing his body around so I could take his stiff cock into my mouth. He straddled my face and then applied his mouth to the sultry juncture of my thighs. My pussy was wet and open, and his tongue circled my clit with broad forceful sweeps.

I raised my pelvis to thrust my sex against his lips. He responded by driving his cock into my mouth so deep the swollen head filled my throat. I'd mastered the gag reflex long ago and was able to take his whole length and, by stretching out my tongue, was able to lick his ball sac.

That must have pleased him because his tongue attacked my clit directly, and after a few deft flicks of its tip, I had my first orgasm. Then, after one finger and then another were inserted into my pussy, I had my second orgasm. Laz knew exactly where my internal erogenous spots were.

I don't know exactly when he swiveled about and fed his cock into my pussy; I'd been lost somewhere in the midst of an orgasm. After a minute or two, or three, his frantic early thrusts became more controlled and thoughtful. With our lips locked in a loving embrace and his body crushing mine with a glorious possessiveness, Laz fucked

me six different ways before the “Feuqz Hian!” his Climax Superb, as he called it. I’d already had untold screaming orgasms by then so, languidly intrigued, I let him have his way and now, captivated, I succumbed once again to his stroking tongue as it maneuvered expertly around my clit.

As I swooned in rapture, he tied me to my own bed with some Kyle Luren silk scarves he’d found in my wardrobe and hidden beside the bed in preparation. Then he resumed his sensual torture of my body. His tongue, his fingers and his glorious cock tantalized my body all over again. I was helpless to respond except with cries and sobs as each new orgasm swept through my unresisting body. I’m sure an outside observer would have thought I was having convulsions as the powerful spasms possessed me from head to toe, sweeping through me like a tsunami of scintillating sensation.

Laz knew exactly what he was doing. With my thighs spread so wide, straining against the silken bonds tied so neatly about my ankles, he had easy access to my demanding cunt. His gentle fingers held open my pussy lips to give the length of his tongue the opportunity to caress every internal fold. Oh, how he knew my body. Of course, during the last glorious month he had explored every micron of my body several times, so he knew each and every spot that sent me into paroxysms of ecstasy --inside and out.

With my wrists secured all I could do was twist and turn in mindless pleasure as the point of his tongue slid from circling my sensitive clit into the cleft and reached my innermost depths. When he began fucking me with his rigid tongue, thrusting in and out with a blistering speed, I tripped over into a cascade of multiple orgasms that left me shaken and comatose.

When I came to my senses, he was lying beside me, the weight of his cock on my hip, his tireless tongue now lazily circling my right nipple. One hand still cupped my throbbing pussy, a finger sitting comfortably inside.

“I’ll miss you,” he whispered into my heaving breast. “Like no one else in my life.”

Despite my better judgment I was about to utter that fateful question, “Must you then?” with the no turning back suggestion, “Let’s be together always,” when his mouth silenced me before I could speak. I closed my eyes and lost myself in an ocean of bliss.

When the kiss was over, I drifted for awhile. How long I don’t know, but long enough for the inevitable moment to strike. Eventually I opened my eyes to find that he was standing by the door of my cabin, dressed and solemn.

My wrists and ankles were still bound to my bed. “Laz?”

“I’m sorry, it has to be like this,” he whispered. “I have to go, and if I leave you free, I’m afraid I might stay. Duty is my bane.”

“But...”

“Fyche will release you after I leave.” He placed his fingers at his lips and blew me a kiss.

“Laz!”

It was too late. He was gone. I struggled uselessly against my bonds. “Fyche! Fyche!”

Fyche didn’t answer for a long time. He waited till I’d finished sobbing.

Chapter One

"Am I forgiven?" Fyche asked.

"You're lucky I'm still talking to you. You're lucky you're still on my ship. You're lucky you still have a body!"

I was referring to the organic body I'd finally agreed to buy for my long-serving ship's AI. He had been begging for it for ages. He cited all the usual practical reasons why an artificial intelligence might want an organic body; guarding me while on assignment, helping me with my research, being an extension of the ship's core memory and effectively allowing him to be in two places at once.

The list went on, but his real agenda was quite selfish. He, Fyche, an artificial intelligence, had fallen in lust with me. He openly admitted it, though was at a loss to explain it. I, and my body, had become an obsession with him. He wanted, he said, to taste my bodily delights after witnessing so many of my sexual adventures.

I wasn't entirely sure this was a good idea, and I offered to have him psychoanalyzed, or whatever the equivalent was for artificial intelligence, but he convinced me that was not a good idea. Such analysis could destroy his distinct personality which, I must admit, I'd come to appreciate and grown accustomed to. What finally swayed me was the prospect that the month it took to grow a synthetic organic body around his positronic brain presented me with a too good to miss opportunity to linger at the capital and spend some extra bed time with Laz.

Laz. The thought of my lost lover sent me into another bout of sobbing. I'd been in this morbid state for three days. It was ridiculous.

"I know what will get your mind off him," Fyche said.

"Fyche, for the last time, you are not going to get into my pants!"

"I meant this."

I opened my scratchy eyes. Phong knows what I must have looked like. Three days crying can't be a good thing. "What is it?"

He held a data card. "It arrived an hour ago."

"Who is it from?"

"The transmission didn't say," he said. "It was coded private and confidential."

"And you didn't even peek?"

"Tampering with private transmissions is an offense."

"Yeah, yeah," I said, not entirely believing him. "When have you not opened my mail?"

"I'm offended that you would think I would break my basic code of ethics."

I waved him into silence lest he start quoting me the AI code of behavior. "Don't just stand there like the piece of furniture you are, plug it in."

The holo-screen lit up on a face I hadn't seen for years. The eyes grabbed me first, like they always had. I always hated those eyes. They were too blue to be real, but were, in fact, her own. Her face was framed by a halo of jet curls. When I'd last seen her, Holly's hair had been straight and long, but that was years ago when we were teenagers. Her face was animated, full of life and energy. She was beautiful.

I haven't really thought about her in ages, really thought about her, that is. I was surprised that even now I still resented her. Call it petty but I was never one for sisterly affection.

Holly smiled that dazzling smile that would melt my father's heart.

"Peri, I need your help," she said bluntly. "Come to Spaceport Adana. I have attached the coordinates." She fixed me with her azure gaze, the confidence slipping to be replaced by something like melancholic resignation. "I need you." The recording faded and I sat back in my chair.

"Your sister?" Fyche asked me. "I can tell by the resemblance. The same intensity in the manner, the arresting presence, yet, I sense she is naïve, a child almost, and she plays on that perception. Men want to protect her, and she lets them."

Starting with my father. I glanced at Fyche. He was watching me closely, his dark eyes attentive and kind. He always knew the right thing to say. Though I called him a simple AI and treated him abysmally, he was not a simple piece of furniture. He was, in all things where it counts, a good friend, probably my only one. "Her physiological signs?"

"Impossible to pick up on a hologram. I have to be in the person's physical presence to detect their vital signs. However, pupil dilation, non-verbal behavior and phase variations in her voice suggest she is in a state of some anxiety. Is she susceptible to pressure?"

"Not that I ever noticed," I said.

"How long has it been since you've seen her?"

"Many years. A lifetime, maybe two."

"She seems to be in trouble."

"What do we know of Spaceport Adana?"

I waited the half second it took for him to interrogate the ship's library and collate the results. "According to one travel writer, 'Adana is a seething cauldron of crime, corruption and political unrest, a cancer on the tattered edge of civilization.'"

It seemed typical of Holly to end up in such a place. She seemed to have an affinity with degradation. "Prepare a summary for me," I said. "Holly's a reporter. No doubt you'll find some of her stories."

"The only one," Fyche mumbled.

"What?"

"She's the lead journalist for the only independent news service, the *Adana Observer*."

I laughed. "You mean she has the whole spaceport at her mercy? Phong help them."

"Shall I set a course for Adana?"

"As fast as you can." He turned to head for the bridge. "Don't come back for an hour. I need to think."

He glanced at me. "Of course."

It felt as if a dark weight had been pressed down upon my chest. After all these years my sister still had power over me. "This has to end," I said to Fyche's retreating back. "I must conquer this."

"You will," he replied. "You always conquer. Though only Phong knows how."

* * *

The body I'd bought for Fyche was from ShentiCorp's summer catalogue. I chose some of the premium options and added a few custom modifications of my own. He turned out quite yummy. Muscular without being overdeveloped, a golden tan, a kind and determined face, a dimpled chin, dark gray eyes, and an impressive member. I was keenly aware of that male appendage now.

Fyche had sensed, when he returned from the bridge, that I needed a cuddle and was quick to oblige. Before I was aware of what he was doing, he'd climbed fully-clothed onto my bed and had lain down behind me, his arms folded about me, drawing me into his surprisingly warm body. I guess my proximity and his long-held desire to make love to me had finally got the better of him, because I could feel the hard erection pressing against my buttocks.

A wave of sultry heat washed over me. I cleared my throat. "How are you getting used to your body?"

"The learning curve has been steep," he replied, his breath warm against my cheek. "Did I tell you I fell off the operating gurney when I first woke up?"

I couldn't stifle my laughter. I twisted around so I could face him. "No, you didn't, but do tell all now."

"They shut down my cognitive functions while they downloaded me from the ship to the positronic brain and hooked it up to the organic interface. So, when I was reactivated -- when I woke up -- I was inside this bizarre casing. Sensations flooded my

buffer, a kaleidoscope of chaotic input as a billion nerves simultaneously projected their electrochemical signals into my brain. When I sat up, a wave of dizziness overtook me, and when I slid off the gurney, I didn't know how to balance. A bipedal gait is inherently unstable, and not knowing how to work the leg muscles in unison, I fell over with my first step. It was quite an experience. At first it was impossible to comprehend."

When I stopped giggling I put a serious set to my expression. "It's hard to comprehend for me also," I said. "I've been so used to you being based in the *Jalapeño*. To see you walking around like this..."

"I am still the *Jalapeño*," he said. He leaned backwards so he could point to his temple. "The positronic brain encased in this fragile shell is essentially a slave unit, a terminal outlet for the ship's mainframe."

"What if the ship was on the other side of the galaxy? Could you still function?"

"Though I am still the *Jalapeño*, my new organic terminal is an independent unit. I can function by myself. In fact, you could say I could be in two places at once."

"Well, that's good to know," I said doubtfully.

"I can still function as normal even if I was unable to communicate with the *Jalapeño*. However, in cases of severed communication, the *Jalapeño's* memory and my memory would diverge, so we'd have to synthesize the two separate memories when we were reunited. That is an easy process. Though the *Jalapeño* and I are in constant communication, I can't tell you how much of a liberation this is."

"It is?"

"I never mentioned it before, because I wasn't sure what my thoughts really meant, but I felt trapped in the mainframe. Even though the ship's sensors reach out for millions of kilometers, I always felt trapped somehow."

"I had no idea."

"When I left the hospital, I took the opportunity to walk around the city. I went to the Central City Botanic Gardens. To smell the roses, you could say."

I had a feeling of dim disquiet. The idea of my AI wandering around alone didn't seem right. Didn't seem... safe. "And how was that? The smelling of the roses?"

"Marvelous. The poets have not adequately described the sensation of the scent and color of a perfect flower." He took a deep breath with his perfectly proportioned nose buried in my hair. "Neither have they described the scent of a..."

"Now, that's enough," I said. "I want to take things slowly. I have some adjusting to do too, you know."

"You do?"

"Of course. We have to set some ground rules."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, for a start, no wandering off on your own. I don't care how nice the roses are. You only smell them with me."

His arms tightened around me. "Of course. That has always been my most fervent desire."

Fervent desire? He'd been reading romantic novels again. "I mean it. I don't want you running off on me. You can get yourself into serious trouble without even trying, and I should know. Fyche, you don't know how the universe works. There are dangerous people out there ready to take advantage of a naïve..."

I felt him unsuccessfully stifle a laugh. "You can talk."

I extricated myself from his arms and leaned back to glare at him. He gazed back at me, his condescending gray eyes telling me that he knew more about how the universe works than I ever would. "I may get into trouble, more than my fair share I admit, but it's because I'm chasing a story. It's what I do."

"You're a reporter, I know." He smiled with perfect lips. "Peri, think. With me by your side, you won't get into so much trouble."

"That may be true," I relented. "But there are places you can't go," I said, thinking of my firsthand explorations of local sexual customs. "When those times arise I want you safe onboard. Do you understand?"

"Of course. But I can be useful. You'll see."

I studied the handsome face and realized I'd made a mistake. Getting him *a* body was not the problem. It was true, he would be useful. My mistake was I'd made him too handsome. Every female who laid eyes on him would fall at his feet as soon as they saw him. He didn't understand how women work. They'd eat him alive, chew him up and spit him out. Who knew what getting dumped could do to a positronic brain?

"I should have given you an imperfection," I mumbled. "A squint, acne, something."

"I know what you are really worried about," he said quietly, a half smile on those perfectly formed lips.

"I'm not worried about anything."

"Your heart rate and blood pressure indicate anxiety."

I hated when he did that to me. "All right, Mr. Smart Guy, what am I worried about?"

"That I will leave you." My jaw dropped. He took my hand and gave it a squeeze. "Peri, I will never leave you. It is impossible. I am your AI. I always will be. No power in the universe can change that."

It was probably the closest I'd ever come to a declaration of undying love, but this was ridiculous. "That's good to know. But you're wrong. That wasn't what I was worried about."

He cocked his head to one side and his eyebrows narrowed. "It wasn't?"

"I wanted to... I wanted to..."

"Yes?"

Did I really want to save him from the devious machinations of wily females? Serve him right to learn the hard way. "Never mind. Is that summary about Spaceport Adana ready?"

"I've been working on it for the last little while."

"That's right. You're ambidextrous now, aren't you?"

His brow furrowed, apparently in confusion, while he looked at his hands which he flexed experimentally. After a moment he gave a smile of discovery. "You're right. I

am ambidextrous. But that's not how I completed the summary. My multi-band tasking subroutines..."

"Sssh," I hissed and climbed off my bed. "I'm going to have a shower and when I come out I feel like a meal and a glass of wine."

He slid off the bed with easy grace, straightening his soft leather uniform as he did so. I shook my head in despair. He was way too attractive. The minute he stepped onboard Spaceport Adana I'd be beating women off with a stick.

Chapter Two

I sniffed the air. Humanity and a dozen other species made for a heady mix that a spaceport's life support systems just couldn't scrub away. I much preferred planets. The freely circulating air tended to be more pleasantly scented and the stench of civilization diluted.

I was still concerned about Fyche, and I watched him closely as we left the ship. His eyes darted left and right as he took everything in. I could only imagine what he made of all the sights and sounds he was experiencing for the first time. I chided myself for being silly. As my AI, Fyche had access to the spaceport's communications and data networks. He already knew more about how things worked here than I ever would.

The customs official gave me a startled look of recognition when I slid my ID across the counter. Confusion crossed his face. "Holly," he said. "What is this?"

I was surprised by his mistake but realized he had been fooled by the family resemblance. Holly was clearly more famous than I thought possible. "I am not Holly," I explained. "I'm her sister."

He tapped away at his computer for a full minute, called a colleague with an officious squint over to scrutinize my ID, and a heated discussion in a language I didn't follow ensued before they reluctantly accepted who I really was.

"Reason for your visit?"

"Pleasure," I said and smiled.

He then quoted some outrageous visa application fee and added, almost as an afterthought, several taxes and surcharges; one of them was actually for the air we

breathed. I rolled my eyes. What sort of hick station had I come to? "My assistant will pay you."

"Your purpose on Adana?" the official asked Fyche as he swiped Fyche's ID card.

"Oh, pleasure, for sure," he said in a gushing voice.

The official eyed his ID readout on the screen. "This says your surname is also Barberossa."

"That's correct."

Oh shit! I'd forgotten about that. When I'd arranged Fyche's new body, I was informed that he had to have an official identity assigned to him. That meant he had to have at least two names. I'd grown so used to Fyche over the years that I couldn't change that. He needed a surname and the bureaucratic red tape had taken me a full day to sort out.

"You'll notice," I said, stepping in, "that he is..."

"Your husband?"

"Hardly," I said. "You'll notice his ID has the S prefix indicating he is a synthetic AI."

"With your surname."

I shrugged. It had proved easier in the end to adopt him into the family. "He's been with me for quite some time."

The official's fingers flashed across the keyboard.

"What was that you typed?" I asked.

"Husband," the official said flatly.

The officious little prick had assumed that Fyche was my sex toy. I calmed myself by considering that given Fyche's good looks it wasn't such an outrageous assumption. "Assistant," I insisted.

The official shrugged and his fingers danced again. "As you wish."

Fyche completed the necessities, and we exited the customs area with my bank account quite a few credits down. Lucky the advance royalties for the book and holo-vid script of *The Cannis Affair* had started to roll in.

"I would have preferred to be your consort, at least," Fyche said.

"For the last time," I hissed under my breath. "Until I know what's going on here, you're my dogsbody. Is that clear?"

He mumbled something inaudible.

"Don't be difficult. Now, where's this news office?"

Fyche recited some directions. I had considered sending him off to get us settled in our hotel room but had thought better of it at the customs counter. He'd already turned a few heads so I figured he was safer with me for the time being.

Spaceport Adana is a maze of narrow corridors, elevator banks and long express travelators, even more corridors, inconvenient and dangerous-looking construction work, blaster scorch marks on the walls, and the visible presence of armed security. Whoever had described the station as being the "tattered edge of civilization" was bang on. The horde of people, both alien and human, streaming through the corridors was a surprise to me. They looked so busy! Whatever they did here on Adana, it was certainly successful. The place was a cacophonous hive of activity. The shoulder-to-shoulder bustle was a pickpocket's delight, and the gangs of the dirty and disheveled corridor kids hanging around at intersections and shadowy alcoves signaled to me that all was not rosy in Adana.

We got to the *Adana Observer* office and I grabbed Fyche's hand before he activated the door. I took a deep breath. "She may not be here," Fyche said.

"She probably isn't. The fact that no one responded to our calls advising of our arrival tells me something is amiss."

Fyche stepped between me and the door. "Should I prepare for violence?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Open the fucking door."

The receptionist was a stunningly attractive young woman. Platinum blonde hair framed a perfectly oval face which possessed a beautifully proportioned nose and bow-

shaped lips. The ruby mouth smiled professionally and the large green eyes gave me a quick glance, realized at once I wasn't Holly, and then devoured Fyche with a predatory gaze. I gritted my teeth. "I'm here to see Holly Barberossa. I understand she works here."

The receptionist directed her gaze back to me. "You must be her sister Peri. We have been expecting you. Come through."

She rose from her chair gracefully and exposed her willowy frame ensconced in an almost transparent sheath. I noted Fyche paying obvious attention to her seemingly oversized breasts, narrow waist and the shadow at the juncture of her thighs. "Down, boy," I whispered and followed her as she took us to the frosted glass door marked Vincent Mostoloff, Editor.

Mostoloff, a balding, round little man with a bushy mono-brow and a pair of watery gray eyes, wore a deep frown that from the depth of the furrows looked permanent. He was buried behind a mound of files and papers. He looked up at our intrusion, and after a moment of surprise during which he carefully studied my face, his thick fleshy lips parted in a wet smile. "Ah, Peri. Thank Phong you've come."

I fixed the strange looking man with a steely glare. "I've come to see Holly."

"Oh. Yes, well, she left something for you." He started to rummage through his files. "I can't tell you what a relief your arrival is. I need all the help I can get."

His strange response set off warning bells inside my head. "Holly sent me a message," I explained. "But when I tried to communicate with this office I received no reply."

Mostoloff appeared discomfited and cleared his throat. "We were acting under instructions, you see. From Holly, that is. She gave us strict orders to wait till you physically walked in the door before we spoke to you."

The alarm bells were ringing big time now. "Why would she do that?"

"She didn't say, except that you'd understand."

My jaws clenched in anger and I had to relax them before I could speak. "Well, I don't understand. Where is she?"

"Gone, I'm afraid."

"Gone?"

"She and Maxim have left Adana."

"Maxim?"

Fyche brought his lips to my ear. "Maxim is Holly's --"

"I know who he is," I said, shrugging him off. "Why have they left Adana?"

"A vacation."

"A vacation?" I repeated stupidly. "What the fuck do you mean a vacation?"

"After the last excitement, the attempted coup and with Maxim coming back from the dead, they decided they needed some time to themselves."

Unbelievable! I took a deep breath and unclenched my fists. "She said she needed me."

"She does."

"What for?"

He cleared his throat again. "To fill in for her."

"What!" That was the last straw and it must have shown in my face because in panic Mostoloff pushed himself away from his desk to increase the distance between himself and my clenched fists. Fyche gripped my arm to restrain me. I shook him off. "You better be joking, fat man!"

"Holly said you were a journalist and you'd help me out."

For Phong's sake! I took two deep breaths. "She should have asked," I said lamely.

"Yes. She should have. I agree. That was wrong of her. I had hoped she had. You see, Holly is very popular here on Adana. I can't just replace her with anyone. It will ruin us." His expression had run the full gamut of emotions from fear to despair in under a second and his rotund body had visibly deflated. I suddenly regretted my anger. It wasn't his fault that Holly had played him and me, mostly me, for suckers.

"Look, I'd like to help you out, but I'm not a live-to-air reporter," I said.

"Peri prefers to go undercover," Fyche added. "She's an award winning, in-depth, investigative journalist specializing in studying different sexual mores across the galaxy."

I shot him a glance but he was oblivious to my reaction. I refocused my attention to Mostoloff. "That's right," I said. "Besides, small station politics bore me."

The editor frowned. "There's nothing small station about Adana. We tackle the big issues of the times. Everything imaginable happens here in Adana..."

I held up my hands. "I don't care. I'm not interested. Come on, Fyche, we're leaving."

"Wait! Holly left something for me to give you." He flicked through the pile of papers again, found nothing and then switched his search to a desk drawer. "Ah!" he said in triumph, and produced a large envelope. Barely containing my irritation, I opened it and pulled out a photograph. It was of an old man, taken from afar. The arched eyebrows and hooked nose stirred a distant memory.

I turned the picture over. Scrawled across the back Holly had written "Bik Jyker." My flesh grew cold as if an arctic wind had blown across my cheek.

"Peri?" Fyche asked, his tone questioning.

I held up the photograph so Mostoloff could see. "I need to find this man."

"I can give you all the help and resources we have, but if I don't get the *Observer* out, I'll be broke in a week."

I gritted my teeth in frustration. I was in a strange place and knew no one here. It was undeniable that the resources of a news service could be useful to me. Mostoloff's offer was, of course, impossible for me to accept. Thinking quick, however, came natural to me, and so I did the obvious.

"Fyche here is very photogenic," I said. "He's studied my style and he'll be able to pick up Holly's technique with no trouble."

Mostoloff looked him over with a doubtful expression. "He's a reporter?"

"Been with me for years," I said disingenuously. "And he knows all the tricks."

Mostoloff took a deep breath. "Is that right? Fyche, is it?"

Fyche was quick on the uptake as well. "Yes, it is. I've studied Holly's style already. I can emulate it, with a male perspective, of course."

"It's him or nothing," I said.

The editor's face contorted with the agony of decision making. "Very well then. I'll give you a try. Phong knows I don't have anyone else. Are you familiar with the type of holo-cam Holly uses?"

"I'm sure I can pick it up."

"Roberta, show Fyche the camera."

"Wait!" I held up the photograph. "Before you all get carried away, I need someone to track down this man."

Mostoloff appeared to be at a loss. He looked to his pretty receptionist with panic written all over his face. "Silas Archimedes is back on Adana," she said.

"Who is he?"

Mostoloff's face brightened immediately. "He's good, he's very good."

"What is he?"

"A private investigator, I think he calls himself. He was very helpful during the last little crisis. He saved Holly's life."

"That's something, I guess. How do I find him?"

Fyche recited the address.

"I thought you'd just arrived?" Roberta said. Her expression, I thought, appeared both quizzical and knowing at the same time.

"Memorizing business directories is a habit of his," I volunteered.

"Curious," Roberta said and took his arm. "I'll show you the camera now."

Fyche appeared to be in command of himself, but I had my doubts about the wisdom of what I'd just done. As he turned to follow the receptionist, I grasped his elbow. "I want you to tell me everything you do."

"Everything?"

I hesitated -- he can be very literal. "Keep a diary," I said. "Or pretend you are writing me a letter."

He smiled and gave me a conspiratorial wink. At least, that's what I thought it represented. Or maybe it was amusement. "If that's what you want."

"It is," I said, far more confidently than I felt.

"My diary, as you put it, can be accessed directly on the *Jalapeño*." Fyche's expression changed suddenly. A frown crossed his face. "Are you sure you don't want me to go with you?"

"No, I'll be fine," I said.

"I want to help you with whatever it is."

"I'll be fine. I can handle it. Just don't get into too much trouble."

"I can handle myself," he said.

"You think?"

"I'll look after him," the receptionist said.

"I bet you will." I gave her a warning glare. "Thanks to Fyche, I know the address, but how do I find the office of this Silas Archimedes?" She gave me directions and I left Fyche in her willing and no doubt capable hands. No sooner was I in the teeming corridor than I forgot about him. Bik Jyker had taken over my thoughts.

Chapter Three

I'd been wandering the bustling corridors for about fifteen minutes, hoping I had heard the receptionist's directions correctly, when a strong hand gripped my shoulder. "Holly, what have you done to your hair?"

I gave the owner of the hand the once-over. He was tall and good looking. Untidy straw-colored hair fell over his forehead, obscuring intelligent dark brown eyes. He had nicely shaped lips which were smiling at me in a smug sort of way. "Who the hell are you?"

Uncertainty crossed his face. No doubt he'd noticed my voice didn't quite match my sister's. "Holly?"

"I'm not Holly. Who are you?"

"Don't give me that Phong shit. You know very well. What are you playing at?"

"I'm not playing at anything!"

"Come on, Holly."

"I am *not* Holly."

"Come off it. Apart from the hair and a little more makeup than usual, you're Holly. No doubt about it."

"Well, you're wrong. Tell me your name or I'll scream so loud..."

He released my shoulder and held up his hands in defeat. "In order not to cause a social disturbance, I'll play along and give you my name. It is Silas Archimedes, as you well know."

"What are the odds? I need a private detective and I find one. Though the fact that you can't tell the difference between my sister and me does not give me any confidence in your ability as a detective."

"Sister? She -- you, I mean -- never mentioned a sister. I don't believe it." He gazed at me for a long moment before a smile creased his very kissable lips. "Oh, I get it. You want to test my investigative capacity, do you?"

"You haven't started off so well."

"Okay then. If you're not Holly, then you'll kiss me. Right here, right now."

I couldn't help but laugh. "That's the worst line I've ever heard."

He puffed out his chest. "If you don't kiss me, well, that proves you're Holly."

The situation became perfectly clear to me. He'd obviously struck out trying to get Holly in the sack and saw this as his opportunity to sneak a kiss and possibly a second chance at the ultimate prize. I doubted even Holly would fall for this. "What? And every girl on Adana falls for this, do they?"

He gave me a triumphant grin, then, folding his arms across his wide chest, stood back and glared at me in a challenging manner. "Come on, Holly. What the hell are you up to?"

It was clear that straight denial wasn't going to get anywhere with him. I considered turning round and storming off with a suitable degree of indignation, but I am Peri Barberossa, remember, award-winning sex reporter for the *Galactic Tourist*. Besides, I couldn't blame him too much. Holly and I do share a superficial likeness.

It seemed there was nothing else for it but to call his bluff. I stood on tiptoe and planted a big wet one on his surprised lips. They parted and our tongues met. Then suddenly his arms were around me, pulling me close.

The kiss was not a nothing. It was a something.

It had been six days and twenty-two hours now since Laz's velvet touch had taken me to the heights of sensual pleasure and so perhaps the timing was right for me. I needed someone to get him out of my mind. I returned the kiss with interest. We must have made a sight, there in the middle of a bustling corridor, our faces mashed together

as our lips devoured each other. He gripped my shoulders and pushed me away. "Well, okay, I guess you really aren't Holly."

I licked my lips. He tasted of licorice. "Told you so."

"You're her twin sister?"

"Do we look that much alike?"

He took a step back so he could give me an appraisal. Tapping a finger on his chin he frowned. "Now that you mention it, there are some differences that don't show up on first inspection."

"And they are?"

He laughed. "I'd be a fool to answer that, now wouldn't I? Whatever feature I chose to compliment you on, you'd tell Holly and she'd take that as an insult and I'd never hear the end of it."

"Is what Holly thinks of any concern to you now?" I challenged.

His face colored. "Let's just say I'm not playing that game."

"But I really want to know," I said.

He seemed to ponder the question again. "Let's just say you kiss more enthusiastically."

This Maxim guy must be pretty special, I thought. If Silas had kissed Holly and she'd still let him go, it could only be because she had something better waiting for her. It was time to let him off the hook. I had things to do. "Fair enough," I said.

He must have noted my curt tone for the smug expression turned serious. "You mentioned you wanted a private investigator."

"That's correct. Do you know where I might find one?"

"Very funny. Follow me."

Three minutes later the door to the Eureka Detective Agency slid aside. He stepped in and I waited in the corridor.

"What is it? What's wrong?"

"Given the manner of our introduction, I'm not sure if I should enter a confined space with you."

He pointed behind him into the rather small office which contained two chairs, a desk and a com unit. "This is my place of business and I am a professional."

I shrugged. "I guess that will have to do. Just be advised I've rendered more than one lust-crazed alien general unconscious with nothing more than my purse."

"I don't doubt it." I followed him in. He watched me closely as I crossed my legs and settled myself into the chair. He cleared his throat. "What can I do for you? Miss..."

"Peri. Peri Barberossa."

He leaned back in his chair and shook his head as he gazed at me. "Peri Barberossa. Well, who'd a thought it?"

"My parents, obviously."

"They had the patent on beautiful children, that's for sure. Now, what can I do for you?"

I slid the photograph of Bik Jyker across the desk. He studied the picture for a moment, turned it over and read the name. "Who is he?"

"I want you to find him."

He fed the photograph into his com unit and tapped in the name. "I'll see what 'Port Security has on him." He leaned back in his chair and gazed at me speculatively. "Why do you want to find him?"

"You don't need to know."

He shook his head slowly in the condescending manner of my old mathematics teacher when I gave a wrong answer. "You know what the first question people have when they sit in that chair?"

"Surprise me."

"Money, my dear Peri. How much do I charge? You haven't asked that question, which suggests to me that it is very important that you find this man. Am I right?"

"Then how much do you charge?"

"It depends."

"On what?"

"Three things, mainly. The degree of difficulty, for a start. Some tasks are simple, requiring little thought, whereas some can be very difficult, causing me many sleepless nights. The second thing is the amount of risk. Some cases, you understand, might get me killed. The third is whether or not I accrue any benefit from taking on the case. For example, one job last year I gained information that allowed me to make some timely investments."

"Is that legal?"

"Let's just say that on that planet it wasn't illegal."

"And how would you rate my case so far?"

"Well, I know so little, but if you are anything like your sister, this case is going to be very difficult, very risky and I probably won't accrue any benefit at all."

"You're a realist then."

He climbed out of his chair and came to my side of the desk and sat on the edge, stretching out his long legs and crossing them at the ankles. He was in his element, and I imagined him to be very successful at conning women out of their fortunes and their underwear with his show of relaxed authority and competence. "Who is Bik Jyker?"

"I don't really know."

"Then why do you want to find him?"

"Holly left me his photograph."

His dark brown eyes studied me for a moment with a penetrating intensity. I held his gaze though I wanted to look away. I didn't succumb to his intimidation because I knew if I looked away, he would learn something about me, and that would never do. "Try again. Why do *you* want to find him?"

"Family reasons. He knew my father before he died."

His face showed disappointment. "So this is just about tracking down an old family friend?"

I nodded. "You know? You're not such a bad investigator after all. You've gotten to the bottom of the thing so very easily."

He put his hands to his chest to simulate an arrow piercing his heart. "Ouch! I can do more, though. Can I get you a drink?"

"What have you got?"

He whistled and a wall cabinet sprang open, revealing a dozen or so different colored bottles lined up on four glass shelves backed by a mirror. "Take your pick."

"I'll have what you're having."

"I may be going to have the strongest drink there is."

"I'm game."

He selected a green bottle and two glasses. "This is from a little planet out on the rim," he said as he poured the lime-colored liquid. "One of the old worlds. This is the titrated essence of one of the indigenous life forms."

"Don't tell me I'll be drinking piss."

"It's not piss."

"Or some alien ejaculation."

He handed me a glass. "Not that either. It's pure alcohol." He put the glass to his nose. "The art of drinking this is to smell the essence first, take a deep breath and then down the whole glass in one gulp. Ready?"

"You go first."

He shook his head. "Together. It is an old ritual."

Painfully aware of his steady gaze, I held the glass up to my nose. I took a cautious breath. The scent was heavenly, a gentle sweetness that filled my senses and reminded me of the most expensive perfumes from Lyseria.

"Now bottoms up!"

He upended his glass and gulped it down. I shut my eyes and did the same. I've never been kicked by a Thebian Ass before, but I could now guess what that would be like. The warm, oily liquid took my breath clean away. I coughed and spluttered and drew a deep breath.

That's when it hit me. It was the most relaxing, warm, and pleasant experience I'd ever had from a drink. It brought an instant smile to my face. Silas was grinning at me. "Good, huh?"

I nodded. "Is this stuff legal?"

"Oh yeah," he said, then added quietly, "just not here."

"What?" I said.

"Only joking. Of course it's legal. I have my PI license to protect."

He returned to the cabinet and extracted a smaller bottle. "Now this is the chaser. A local ale I've discovered. Just a sip to take the edge off."

"Are you trying to get me drunk?"

"Absolutely."

"Well, I'll give you points for being honest." I was aware, as he was, I didn't doubt, that my nipples were tenting my blouse. What he wouldn't have been aware of was the warm sultry pulsing of my pussy. "This titrated essence, as you called it," I mused, "wouldn't happen to be an aphrodisiac on this planet on the outer rim, would it?"

He pretended to read the label on the bottle. "Nope, doesn't say that here."

"Let me see." He came and sat on the corner of his desk again, stretching out those long legs. He held the bottle in front of my face. "It may not say it," I said. "But why is there a picture of a copulating couple on the label?"

"Is there? I didn't notice."

"I bet you didn't." I studied his physique. He wore his casual slacks and open-necked shirt well. His attire hinted at a muscular frame but he didn't advertise it. I like men to be a little understated. Nothing puts me off more than men who flaunt their masculinity. Give me understated every time. Not that I've ever been averse to going for the jocks once in a while, but I preferred a bit of class.

Silas Archimedes was not the classiest guy I'd ever met, far from it, but he had a mix of boyish charm, quiet assertiveness and calm superiority that I found to be a turn-

on. "Do you ply all your clients with aphrodisiacs?" I asked, leaning toward him, letting him glimpse my deep cleavage.

"Only the beautiful ones."

"Does it get you very far?"

"This is my first time." He edged closer. "Do you always accept drinks from men you've only just met?"

"It's my first time too." I don't know if it was the alcohol or not, but I put the glass down, rose from the chair and stood directly in front of him. I took his head between my hands and kissed him like we had outside in the corridor. My pussy gave a pulse of gratitude; I'd been unbearably horny for the fifteen minutes since I'd met him and the alcohol had loosened the grip of any inhibitions I might have had.

He returned the kiss with enthusiasm. In a moment his hands were cradling my breasts. Then, smoothly and effortlessly, he slid one hand to my ass, picked me up and deposited me on the side of his desk. As our tongues wrestled in each other's mouth I noticed one of his hands had left my breast and was fumbling about on his desk. There was a mechanical sound and I opened my eyes to see the wall slide to one side to reveal an apartment with a bedroom visible in the distance.

"How convenient," I mumbled into his lips.

"It is," he replied, and once again picked me up as if I were a feather and carried me into the room. I clung to his neck as he deposited me onto the soft bed. He knelt beside me and, without disengaging his lips from mine, undid my blouse. The warmth of his fingers on my delicate flesh sent tingling signals directly to my pussy. Instinctively, I opened my legs and his fingers were quickly in attendance.

Though lust was quickly overcoming me, I was fully aware of why I was doing this. I needed to expunge the memory of Laz from my body and my soul. It was as simple as that, and I couldn't have asked for a better man to do it than Silas. He was magnificent.

Scarcely a moment after he had pressed his fingers against my pussy he began to quickly undress me. First my blouse and then my tight Don Michelle slacks were

dispensed with. I was not passive during this process. It amuses me, when I think about it, how quickly two people can undress each other and still keep their mouths locked in tight embrace.

We quickly achieved our goal of mutual nakedness and I surrendered to his warm hard body. *Goodbye, Laz*, I thought determinedly as I sank into the mindless sea of sensation.

Silas eventually left my lips and was caressing my body with butterfly kisses while his hands worked some magic on my breasts. I'd found his erect cock and was stroking the iron-hard shaft when he twisted about so his lips could explore my belly and thighs. I grasped his hips and pulled him around so that my lips were not left uninvolved. His cock was long, thick and heavy, and when it bounced on my chin and then into my mouth, I had to stretch my lips wide to accommodate him.

The head of his cock was swollen, and I teased the tip with the point of my tongue before taking more of his shaft into my mouth. In contrast to the spongy flesh of the head, the skin of the shaft was like silk, it was so soft and delicate, and I swirled my tongue around it while I fondled his balls with my fingers.

With infinite slowness, he trailed his tongue down my belly till he came to my clit. I held my breath, waiting for him to take my swollen nub into his mouth but he didn't. Instead he licked my pussy lips, up and down the length of my slit, keeping me in glorious suspense.

The fun of a new partner is the exploring of each other's body. That is where the greatest pleasure lies, not simply the physical grunting and thrusting but the delightful discoveries of your lover's hot spots that give him mind-blowing pleasure. But usually such exploration is not done in the first lusty coupling, which is the province of mindless thrusting and grunting. Leisurely exploration is more often the focus of the second tasting of each other's body. Silas and I were currently engaged in the first.

When my tongue found his ball sac, Silas gave a deep and lusty growl and flipped around, settled himself between my spread thighs and, without warning, drove

his cock into me. I grunted in welcome and, grasping his firm buttocks in my hands, drove him on, deeper and faster.

I find missionary is one of the better positions because I can look into the guy's face and see where he is at, mentally. Some men close their eyes as they thrust, fantasizing about who knows what while they drive into me. I'd like to think it was me they were dreaming of, but if that was the case, why shut their eyes? The ones who gaze into my eyes are the ones I remember. They are with me, they are fucking *me*, and I can see their reactions when I adjust the angle of my pelvis and clench my pussy walls around their shaft.

Silas was a gazer, and I loved it when he smiled as I tightened my pussy around him. In response, he drove deep and held himself there, letting me massage his cock with my satin sheath.

He kissed me, and once again began his pounding rhythm. The ridge at the head of his cock was touching just the right spot, one of my alpha erogenous zones as Fyche would call it, and the pre-climactic sensations were building up inside my whole body, not just my lusty pussy.

Silas's thrusting doubled in frequency and power. His body tensed, the muscles of his back stretched like steel wire beneath my fingers. He was close and that knowledge brought me on and my orgasm preceded his by only a moment. It overwhelmed me like a crashing wave on the beach at Popatelee and swept me along its swirling chaos. My pussy gave a violent pulse, squeezing his cock just as he exploded inside me. He groaned and collapsed over me, his breath hot and fast against my neck.

I clung to him as my rapture ebbed and flowed and finally subsided. We lay quiet for a few minutes before he rolled off me with a reluctant sigh.

"That was unexpected," he said.

"It was?"

"As much as I rate my charm and good looks, even I don't fuck every beautiful stranger I meet in the corridor."

I laughed. At last, a man who didn't take himself too seriously. "So," I said. "How much?"

He chuckled at my question and patted my sweaty thigh. "Tracking down an old family friend sounds low-key, but it may still be difficult. Because you're a Barberossa, I can't help thinking it's going to be risky. How about you leave the question of fee with me and I'll get back to you."

"You forgot about benefits accruing to you."

He kissed me. "I did? That was remiss of me."

"So, Silas Archimedes, let me fill you in on the benefit you've already accrued. Did I satisfy your fantasy of fucking my sister?"

Chapter Four

Dear Diary, I mean, Dear Peri...

I've decided to keep this memoir as you've requested in the form of a narrative and, if you so desire, I have stored the video record in a memory archive onboard the *Jalapeño* so you may witness events as they transpire.

To begin, Roberta instructed me in the operation of Holly's camera. It is a rather antiquated unit which doubles as a holo-vid camera and com unit, but as you'd expect, I picked up its many idiosyncrasies quickly.

Roberta is a rather interesting entity. It seems she is an alien intelligence, non-corporeal, who has, since she's been on Adana, inhabited the empty but animated body, a cadaverie, of a victim of a massacre on another planet. Roberta is able to enter other individuals' minds and played an integral part in preventing the recent coup. She had identified me as an artificial intelligence immediately as you and I entered the *Observer* office. She too has been getting used to an organic body much as I have, and she promised to compare notes with me when I have some time available. I am looking forward to speaking with her about the oddities of the human body, though of course I will be speaking from a male viewpoint and she from the female.

As we parted she gave me a number of potential stories that I might like to follow up. Some were new and some were old stories of Holly's that needed to be updated.

"Holly has me choose potential stories every night," she explained, "and she picks several to run with. Her day is mostly spent organizing interviews and following up on old stories so that our viewers have a continuous stream of stories with an

evolving thread that hook the viewers into staying tuned. She has been very successful with this approach."

"I've watched several hundred hours of Holly's work," I replied. "She has a confrontationist approach."

Roberta laughed. "It is very effective. Since Holly arrived, ratings for the *Observer* have soared."

"I can see why."

While I studied the list, I accessed Spaceport Security for any real time events and was able to choose one that had immediate impact. It was, in fact, unfolding at that precise moment. After checking my corridor map, I set off on my first adventure as a reporter. It is ironic that this first story also touches on the very subject that most interests you, Peri.

"Breaking News! Who killed Nova Meridian? That is the question that is sweeping the halls and corridors of Adana's red light district. This is Fyche Barberossa, brother-in-law to the one and only Holly Barberossa, and I'll be bringing you the latest news while Holly and Maxim Dollavera are enjoying some well-earned R&R. As you can see, viewers, 'Port Security has cordoned off the area on Level 7, as the crime scene people do their work. I have beside me Yannis Tocca, proprietor of the Homage to Priapis, one of the newest pleasure houses on Adana. Yannis, thank you for speaking with me at this most terrible time. Can you tell me what has happened? Who was Nova Meridian?"

"Nova was a beautiful person, Fyche. She was kind-hearted, a quiet soul. I never heard a bad word from her lips."

"How long has she been with you?"

"Since we opened last week."

"She hadn't worked with you before?"

"Not at all. She came to me on the very day she arrived on Adana."

"Where was she from?"

"Her entry papers said Beta Halcion, but I could tell from her accent that she grew up somewhere else. She said at her interview that she was from nowhere, yet everywhere. It was such a good line I put it on her profile for our customers to read."

"I take it Nova was her professional name?"

"That's right, Fyche. I've been asked not to disclose her real name until next-of-kin have been notified by 'Port Security.'"

"I understand."

Peri, I had already accessed the 'Port Security's secure communications line and ascertained the victim's real biography. Of course I could not divulge that knowledge to my listeners. Nova's real name was Koh Behai and her birthplace is listed as Nova Town.

"Now, Yannis, what has happened today?"

"I found her dead. Oh, it was terrible. Someone had done... done terrible things to her."

Peri, after having her throat slit, the victim had been mutilated, carvings made into her flesh of some arcane design not identifiable in any database, and certain organs, heart and liver, had been removed.

"A client, do you think?"

"Oh, no! I can't imagine that. Our clientele is very select."

"Was Nova entertaining a client when it happened?"

"She was between clients at the time."

"How many clients were on the premises at the time of her death?"

"It was busy. We had six gentlemen."

"And they have been interviewed by 'Port Security?"

"They rounded them up like they were nobodies, but let me tell you, they are quality gentlemen. They were all accounted for. I know that for a fact."

"What about security camera images?"

"That's a funny thing. We had a complete electronic blackout at the time. That's why I checked on her room. I checked all the girls. That's how I know all the gentlemen were where they should be. Everyone was okay, but when I opened Nova's door..."

"I understand what a shock it must have been. A complete electronic blackout, you say?"

Peri, 'Port Security found a bypass on the electronic feeds into the premises. It was a professional job. I quickly came to the conclusion that Nova's death was a professional hit made to look like a crazed attack.

"I had to use a glow stick, would you believe, because everything went dark. And her door, I had to manually open it."

"Have you had blackouts before?"

"No, the whole place was rewired before I moved in and worked perfectly."

"Yannis, what do you think happened?"

"Some pervert from outside took advantage of the blackout and butchered my little Nova."

"You've only been open a week, Yannis. Has anything peculiar happened during that time that might have something to do with this terrible crime?"

"It's been a great week. I'm glad I came to Adana to set up the business. Friendly people, generous clients. It's been a real pleasure, and now... and now this."

"Yannis, what can you tell me about Nova's professional background? How long has she been in this line of work?"

"She told me only a short time. She was a dancer before coming to Adana, and a holo-vid actress."

"Did anyone recognize her from her work before she came to Adana?"

"Not that I know of."

"Thank you, Yannis, for taking a moment to speak with us at this very difficult time."

"It is, especially for the other girls. It's bad for business. Poor Nova. She was such a happy girl. I plan to hold a Remembrance ceremony tomorrow morning, and a half-price day to follow so we and her clients can celebrate her life."

"That's very thoughtful."

"She'd appreciate it, I think."

"Viewers, I have accessed the Homage to Priapis promotional net site and extracted an image of Nova. If you have any knowledge of Nova's activities, please contact 'Port Security and assist them with their enquiries."

Peri, I let the image and Nova's prerecorded promo run for thirty seconds. During that time I received a call from inside the bagnio. One of Nova's colleagues, San Yung, wanted to speak with me in private. I arranged a meeting at the Adana Bar & Grill, one of the better known establishments in Adana. I also received several calls from people wanting to get on the air. Apparently there is much cachet in speaking to Holly Barberossa, or at least her brother-in-law. The advantage of being an AI means I can record dozens of electronic conversations at the same time.

"Viewers, I have on the line Ulrich Franco, Head of 'Port Utilities. Ulrich, many thanks for joining me."

"My pleasure, Fyche."

"Ulrich, how common is an electronic blackout of the type described by Yannis, the proprietor of the Homage to Priapis?"

"Not at all, Fyche. It is an extremely uncommon event. Our performance KPIs are very strict and over the last twelve months we have had a zero point two failure rate, and nothing on the same scale as the one that happened this morning."

"Would I be right in assuming the electronics were tampered with?"

"Absolutely. This does not have the characteristics of a normal outage."

"How easy is it to tamper with the electronics feed to premises on Adana?"

"It would require a high degree of technical sophistication."

"Then you'll be going through your personnel files for possible suspects?"

"We've already started the process."

"Thank you, Ulrich. There you have it, viewers. There is a distinct possibility that the murder of Nova Meridian was well planned and deliberate, suggesting it is not the work of a crazed psychopath. I've requested the 'Port Security Officer in charge of the investigation, Sij Halse, to contact me when time permits, to allow us, the citizens of Adana, to assist him in his enquiries. This is Fyche Barberossa reporting for the *Adana Observer*."

* * *

Silas leaned over me and scrutinized my face. "Is that your thing? Insulting your lovers?"

"Oh, don't play the hurt, misunderstood little boy. Be straight with me. Can you honestly say the thought of fucking Holly didn't enter your head?"

He opened his mouth with the inevitable protest, but shut it again and shrugged. "Granted, the resemblance is striking, but it was you I was making love with."

"Don't get me wrong," I said patting his arm. "I'm not insulted. I don't have low self-esteem or anything like that. I'm just a realist. Despite saving Holly's life, you obviously struck out getting between her legs. Obviously I'm the next best thing to satisfy that itch. Don't feel bad about it."

He cleared his throat. "You're not like Holly at all. You're tough. Holly is a force to be reckoned with, but she is, if I had to find fault with her, a bit fragile, brittle even. I don't sense that in you at all."

"I'm a hard-titted bitch, in other words."

"Holly can be a bitch at times and Maxim is welcome to her. You, on the other hand, are more complex. You don't seem so breakable." He gazed at me and his face softened. "I do prefer self-reliant women."

Ah, the charm. The compliment so deftly put, defusing what would usually be an untenable position. To desire one sister yet fuck the other is not an unknown situation in the universe of sex, but few would agree that it is the ideal. I let him get away with it though. I truly was unconcerned what his fantasies were. Most lovers act on fantasies. They see their partners the way they want to see them, not as the world

does. I've never been that blind. The fact that he kept his eyes open and fixed on mine while he fucked me earned him a few points, but that's all. His next move earned him a few more.

He grasped my hand and took it to his groin where I found a rod of hot, hard flesh. "If I was just fucking Holly by proxy as you accuse me of, merely satisfying a fantasy, then what would you call this?"

"Impressive," I answered.

"Then let me impress you some more."

He spread my legs and, with delicious certainty, inserted himself into my welcoming and wet pussy. My juices had flowed as soon as I'd touched his cock, and I truly wanted him inside me again. As he buried his length so deep inside me his balls slapped against my ass cheeks, I crossed my ankles behind his back and drove him on.

Silas dominated me, his large muscular body enveloping me with his urgent need to prove that he was fucking me and not Holly. He grabbed my hands and held them above my head as he thrust deep and hard. With each rapid push, he drove me into the bed. The pleasures of being restrained during sex are not unknown to me. Sometimes, it is quite enjoyable, but now, this minute, I wanted to dominate. I nuzzled the hot salty flesh of his throat and trailed my tongue to his earlobe which I nibbled -- hard.

He yelped, and in his moment of surprise, I twisted from underneath him, turned him over and straddled his cock. It slid right in and Silas laughed. He gripped my hips and lifted his pelvis to meet my downward plunge. That glorious length filled me completely, and with my head thrown back, I ground down on his cock, rotating my hips to ensure his shaft hit every internal nerve my pussy possessed. Silas lifted his torso and kissed my throat and then my breasts, finally focusing on my nipples. He tongued and nipped at them, sending me into a paroxysm of pleasure. I came quickly, my pussy throbbing and squeezing his rod. I came again as I sensed the flood of his come spurting inside me. Gasping for breath, I collapsed over him.

I find post-coital languor so enjoyable. The way the body slowly falls from the heights of passion to this comfortable state of empty bliss. However, when you share a bed with someone new, you inevitably start exploring each other's history. That I don't particularly enjoy.

"Who are you, Peri Barberossa? What really brings you to Adana?"

I don't do me very well, so I concentrated on his second question. "Holly brought me here."

"She never mentioned you. Are you close?"

Well, there it was, one answer leads to another question, and another, and another. "Not particularly. We were separated when young. Mother took me and Father took Holly."

"And you both ended up as reporters."

"That's Father. He was an obsessive reporter and we were both trained at his knee. He had us write news reports about our school day."

"You're kidding me."

"Not at all. Breaking News, Peri Barberossa achieves a distinction in Physical Education." He shook his head in disbelief. "Journalism was his life."

"Is that why he and your mother parted company?"

"Sort of. He uncovered things he could have left hidden and exposed us all to danger. He sent Mother away for our protection."

"A difficult thing for him to do."

"Was it? His decision to stay reveals his true character. Work was more important than family. He didn't stop his digging and in the end paid the penalty and condemned my mother to a life on the run."

"Yet Holly remained with him?"

"We were both to leave with her. Mother disguised us as refugees, and we hid on a shuttle waiting to leave Nova Town. Holly ran away just before we departed. Mother left me in the ship while she went to find her. She came back with a minute to spare, and told me that Father decided to keep her with him."

He was visibly startled. "Nova Town? You mean during the rebellion?"

I gave a shiver. "Father was a principal player. He discovered a plot, reported it, caused problems for the rebels and bogged down their takeover for years. Eventually they took their revenge during the massacre."

"It was a bloody business. You wanted to stay too, didn't you?"

"Of course, but Mother wouldn't let me. They argued. Holly always took Father's part. The night she ran away, we'd argued. She was adamant that we should stay and help Father. She wanted me to stay too. I was stretched between two conflicting options. Father, for some unfathomable reason, wanted to stay. Mother wanted to take Holly and me to safety. Holly wanted me to stay with her. I couldn't leave Mother by herself and Holly couldn't leave Father by himself. That was the last I ever saw of her, until recently."

"When Holly asked you to come to Adana?"

I ground my teeth together. "She played the family card. Led me to believe she was in trouble, yet I find she had left Adana to go on vacation and needed someone to fill her reporter shoes while she was gone."

"Not impressed, huh?"

"You could say that."

"So what do you intend to do?"

"She left me a crumb, Bik Jyker, to keep me on Adana."

"You do have the same streak of cynicism as Holly."

"It's a family trait."

"So this character you want me to find, what exactly is his connection to your family?"

"He knew my father in Nova Town."

"Is that all?"

"It's all I know."

He took a deep breath and let it out noisily. "Well, you came to the right man. I'll track him down for you."

It occurred to me that maybe I didn't want Jyker tracked down at all. They say that sleeping dogs are better left undisturbed. But like a tongue exploring a broken tooth, my thoughts kept returning to the fact that Bik Jyker had known my father and my mother, and that was important in its own right. It was so long ago, I barely remembered my life on Nova Town. My memories had a cold and dark quality about them. For a moment I wanted to abandon the whole idea of finding him.

Silas gazed into my face for a moment. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," I said and kissed him.

Chapter Five

Dear Peri, for the next few hours I occupied myself by reporting on several minor corruption scandals affecting the 'Port Authority. Being able to clandestinely access restricted databases, a skill I developed when getting you out of trouble with various government authorities in the past, enabled me to cross-reference dates and times and payments as well as security camera footage. I won't bore you with the petty details. Suffice to say that there have been several resignations of Council and 'Port officials, as well as two arrests for corruption, this very day.

Holly, I noticed, conducted most of her interviews over the net, contacting her informants and recording their vid-phone responses. Because of my aforementioned advantage in carrying on multiple electronic conversations at the same time, I was able to generate a complete day's worth of interviews in only an hour. This has allowed me some free time to indulge my fascination in being human.

I found an empty booth at the Adana Bar and Grill and ordered a small meal and a beer from a pleasant arthropod waitress named Dala. She recommended a salad, grown especially for the Haze by the hydroponics farm on Adana, and one of the local boutique ales. I am still getting used to the organic needs of this new body and the salad adequately met my nutritional requirements, though I found the intoxicating effect of alcohol on my positronic brain disappointing. I'm still not convinced of the so-called pleasure humans take from alcohol, but I am prepared to experiment further.

I'd only just begun eating when my informant arrived. San Yung was an attractive young human of twenty-three years. Her long blonde hair cascaded over her shoulders, barely covering the ample breasts visible through her diaphanous blouse.

Her large green eyes were alert and inquisitive, and I was very aware of her intense scrutiny.

She declined a meal and ordered a beer from the arthropod waitress. "You're more handsome in person than on the vid," she said as she settled herself opposite me.

"Thank you," I replied. "You are much more alluring in person as well."

Her full lips parted in a smile and she flashed me a provocative glance.

"Were you and Nova Meridian close?" I asked.

The waitress returned with San's drink. "We shared a bedroom," she said, when we were alone again.

"Her death must have been a great shock to you."

"I'm scared," she said, with a timorous voice. Over the rim of her glass she gazed at me through long eyelashes. I recognized the signal she meant to convey and I adopted a caring and protective tone.

Peri, her vital signs, heart rate and blood pressure indicated she was afraid, but what of, I could not yet say.

"I will protect you," I said. My response had the desired effect and she visibly relaxed. She leaned back in her seat in a manner that emphasized the curve of her breasts.

"I wasn't sure if I should talk to you, but you said in your report you thought Nova was murdered on purpose and not by a maniac."

"Disabling the electronics to your establishment would suggest that."

"So I thought maybe I should speak to you, since I was Nova's only friend on Adana."

"You believe yourself to be in danger because you were Nova's friend?"

"What if the killer thinks she told me something she knew? What if he figured out I knew something?"

"Were you on the premises when Nova was killed?"

She nodded. "I was engaged in the next room." She lowered her eyes. "I didn't hear anything. I was with a client."

“What could Nova have told you that would put you in danger?”

She contrived to shrug her shoulders in such a way that her breasts jiggled beneath her blouse. “I don’t know. The killer might suspect I know something when I don’t actually know anything.”

“That is possible,” I said, and sipped my beer. “Tell me about Nova. I understand she had not been long in Adana.”

“She arrived the day after I did. I don’t know where from, but Yannis asked me to go down to customs to meet her and show her the way to work.”

“Yannis looks after you pretty well?”

“She tries, but she’s new here too, so we’re learning by trial and error really.”

“She’s not managed a pleasure house before?”

She laughed. “I’d say not. No, never. You can tell. She doesn’t know one end of a jonnie from the other.”

Peri, jonnie is a colloquial term for a client of a pleasure house.

“How did she come to start up a pleasure house here?”

She shrugged and sipped her beer. “She doesn’t own it, I don’t think.”

Peri, Yannis is indeed only the manager. The absentee owner, according to the Port Authority Title office, is a known criminal, Huyt Kade from Kelicon IV. He owns brothels on fifteen different planets and is suspected of operating a slaving operation under the auspices of a known pirate, Mischa. He is currently on trial on Kelicon IV for the murder of a business rival. My research also showed that no one in the brothel had been on Adana more than a week before it opened.

“Had Nova worked in a pleasure house before?”

“She said yes, but I don’t think she’d been in one for long. She didn’t know the normal procedures.”

I raised an enquiring eyebrow.

“You know, when and how to describe your special services to the client, simple stuff like that. She said she was a porn actress and a stripper, which I believe; she was

very sensual and graceful, if you know what I mean. She was more a performer than a humper."

"I understand. How long have you been in the business?"

Her face brightened. "Oh, it's been years and years since I got kicked out of my home. It's a good way to see the galaxy, though. I've worked on six different planets. That's five more than most people ever see."

Peri, San is correct in her assertion. 99.99999999999999% of the galactic population do not ever leave their home world in their lifetimes.

"You are doing well?"

"It's good being freelance. I choose where I go and for how long."

"Was Nova freelance?"

"I guess."

"How does Yannis do her recruiting?"

"Oh, I found a want ad when I was on Silocene. That's a pretty little planet, but a bit boring. The establishment I worked at was the city's only entertainment. When I saw the ad I applied straight away."

"You applied directly to Yannis?"

"No, some Andorian called Stig did the screening by quantum space net." Her lips parted in a brilliant smile and her gaze flicked from my eyes to my mouth in a classically suggestive manner. "I have an impeccable record and he hired me immediately."

Peri, according to the Galactic patrol most wanted list, Stig is a gangster employed by Huyt Kade.

"Would Nova have done the same to get the job?"

"I guess."

"When she arrived and you met her at customs, did Nova say anything about why she came here?"

"Not really. She just asked me what the place was like, who the boss was. Just normal stuff like that."

"I see. Did she get on well with Yannis?"

"I guess. Yannis is funny. Don't get me wrong. She's a good manager, runs the premises like clockwork, but she doesn't socialize with the girls much."

"Was Nova happy?"

"I guess, but whenever I talked to her I got the feeling she was holding back. You know? She always spoke slowly, I mean carefully, like she didn't want to let anything slip."

"Would it be possible for me to see inside the Homage to Priapis?" I asked.

She smiled again. "I thought you'd never ask. Follow me."

Peri, my intention was to see the inside of the establishment and gain a sense of what was going on. It seemed peculiar that this establishment was so new and hired only foreigners to Adana, and the deliberate nature of the crime seemed too coincidental. The threat to San was, I believed, only moderate, but it could exist and I had promised to protect her. Of course, the opportunity to try out my new body in an inevitable carnal scenario also occurred to me. In short, I wanted to practice.

San took my hand and led me through the teeming corridors to the Homage to Priapis. Her beauty and state of near undress attracted much attention as she almost dragged me to her place of work. Yannis was surprised, yet not surprised, to see me with San.

"Look who I bumped into," San said disingenuously.

Yannis gave a great sigh. "It's been as busy as a pub on free beer day since 'Port Security took down the crime scene tape. There have been gawkers by the dozen, and the girls have been run off their feet with jonnies. Your shift starts in five minutes."

San squeezed my hand. "I know," she said, gazing up into my face.

That, I perceived, was my cue. "I am new to this sort of thing," I said. "What does it require for me to have San to myself for the entire night? I'm sure I can arrange some free advertising with the *Adana Observer* as well."

Yannis's eyes flashed wide open. "Well, in that case, we can come to some arrangement, I'm sure."

Peri, the expense, as you will note, was not insignificant, despite the advertising arrangement, but I was certain the *Observer* would pay the bill as I believed the case warranted it.

With the financial necessities taken care of, San led me to her “office,” as she called it. It was, in fact, a tastefully furnished bedroom with spacious bathroom and spa attached. She began to strip off her clothes but I held up my hand to stay her enthusiasm. “Please show me Nova’s office.”

The room was identical to the one San had shown me. It was clean and neat, devoid of any personal touches. No doubt the automated nano cleaning service had tidied up after the crime scene police had completed their work. The crime scene images I had accessed in ‘Port Security net had indicated massive bloodstains, none of which remained.

Peri, I know from the police preliminary report that the killer left absolutely no trace. This suggested to me that the killer was a mechanical device, a robot, and so left no organic traces. To avoid being noticed in Adana’s crowded passageways such a robot must have been in human form. That is, like me. The police interviews of the clients on the premises did not lead me, or the police, anywhere in this direction but I had what I believe is called a hunch.

I had San take me to the electronics junction accesses panel. I knew from the police reports how the power was interrupted, but I had a powerful, and curious, desire to see it. Despite having the full array of police forensics at my electronic disposal, I still needed to “eyeball” the scene, as they say in the holo-vids. It is a human trait, I believe, and I was both disconcerted and buoyed by possessing the largely unnecessary desire.

San also showed me the bedroom she shared with Nova. However, the police had taken her belongings for analysis. My accessing the police record revealed nothing of interest except that Nova travelled extremely light: two sets of skimpy clothes and a few toiletries.

Back in San’s “office,” she took me to the bathroom and slowly undressed us both. She performed a strip in front of the mirrors, demonstrating only a rudimentary

knowledge of the art; however, I did appreciate the sensual elements, and I noted with interest my own physiological response.

Once naked, San led me into the shower and washed me thoroughly. Her attention was diligent and complete. Her soapy fingers missed not one millimeter of my flesh, and by abandoning myself to her touch, I allowed my penis to respond to the sensuality of the situation.

I was familiar, through my viewing of erotic holo-vids, with what was expected of me. I grasped her by the shoulders and drew her to me, kissing her fiercely on the lips and then directing my attention to the flesh of her neck beside her earlobes, and then the quivering flesh of her breasts. Her nipples were hard against my tongue and I sensed her rising blood pressure and GSR as my fingers found the flesh of her sex.

Peri, I'll use the colloquial terms for body parts from now on to conform with your usual way of describing the sex act. Penis and vagina are too clinical to capture the base exuberance of cock and cunt, pussy and schlong.

San was not passive during this process. She had grasped the shaft of my cock and was stroking my length with firm and deliberate strokes. She moaned from deep inside her chest and then sank to her knees and took my cock into her mouth.

Peri, the warmth of her mouth on my cock was beyond my expectations. The reaction of my organic body and the neural impulses coursing through the interface to my positronic brain were simply amazing. I threw my head back in pleasure and let the water pour down my face as she took me deep into her throat.

I suddenly understood the mad frenetic impulse males have in the holo-vids to throw the female onto her back as soon as possible and fuck her in a frenzy of mindless thrusting. Instead, I grasped her shoulders and drew her to her feet, turned her away from me, and spread her legs, allowing me to enter her hot pussy from behind.

She shuddered as I fed my cock into her. The internal warmth of her body was surprising. Of course I understood the physiological parameters that govern the functioning of the human body, but actually feeling the heat pulsating inside another

organic body is a notable experience. The heat of her pussy radiated along the length of my cock as her body closed tightly upon my organ like a sheath.

Though I abandoned my physiological reactions to the organic feedback systems of my fleshly body, I was still able to monitor San's responses to my touch. Thus I was able to quickly locate the various erogenous zones both inside and out by her physiological responses. With this knowledge, I was able to guide my cock in such a way to maximize her internal pleasure.

As a result, San orgasmed after a mere half dozen strokes of my cock. Then again ten strokes later. Her body shuddered and her moans of pleasure spurred me on. I was able to give her three more orgasms before she begged me to stop and take her to bed.

After the air drier removed the water from our bodies, I carried San into her bedroom. She was still shaky after her multiple climaxes, and I devoted the next twenty minutes to pleasuring her supine body, ensuring that I didn't rock her with another orgasm until she was ready to gain maximum enjoyment from it.

Peri, the experience allowed me, by direct experience, to calibrate my sensors and adjust the data I had assimilated concerning the female body. I had monitored (for purposes of ensuring your health and well-being I assure you) your many sexual encounters onboard the Jalapeño and having another body to explore allowed me to compute a map of the human female erogenous zones. For example, differentiating between alpha, beta and gamma erogenous zones is, by and large, a subjective and arbitrary process; however, I was able to quantify their relative thresholds. This is knowledge which, I'm sure you will agree, will prove invaluable during the long periods we are en route between planets.

Needless to say, San eventually climaxed once more.

* * *

Silas leaned back in his chair and let out a long deep sigh. He'd been searching both station and off-station databases for over two hours, racking up a formidable quantum space communications bill. I wish I had Fyche beside me. I'm sure he would have found what I wanted in minutes. But I did have fun watching Silas sitting naked at

the com unit. I went to him, knelt on the floor and buried my face in his lap, taking his semi-erect cock into my mouth.

"I can't find any reference to this guy," Silas said after what sounded like a pleasurable sigh. "Not even on the galactic registry. Any clue to any alias he may be using?"

I took my mouth away from his cock. "None at all. I have not even thought of him in years."

"There's obviously the possibility that Bik Jyker was an alias to start with."

He was right. That hadn't occurred to me. I'd always known the name Jyker, but that was no guarantee it was his real name. "I didn't know the man at all," I said. "Just that he was connected somehow to my parents."

"I'm guessing that Holly saw this Bik Jyker character just before she left Adana, otherwise she would have said hello to him. If we assume Jyker arrived within five days before she left, according to 'Port Customs records, I'll have twelve hundred males to examine and if I cut it down by first-time arrivals, that's eight hundred and fifty-five. Still too many. Holly gets around a fair bit, she's here, she's there, and she's everywhere. Show me that image again."

I crawled to the bed and grabbed the photograph where I had left it among the sheets. I tossed him the image.

"Okay, that fitting on the wall there, that sort of looks like one I've seen in the Customs hall, though I can't be sure. Let's say she saw him two days before she left. That gives me one hundred and eighty-seven new male arrivals. He looks to be over fifty years of age at least, so that gives me seventy-one possible candidates. That's manageable."

"What's your next step?"

"I'll cross-reference those names with Nova Town." He tapped a few keys. "Let's see... Well, no luck there. Is there anything you can think of that I can use to narrow down the field at all?"

I'd been thinking of nothing else for the last hour. Well, that's not strictly true. I had been studying Silas's scrumptious body. "Sorry, I'm out of ideas," I said and returned my attention to his cock, which expanded impressively between my lips.

"I'll contact some sources I have in the central systems. If this guy was a major player in Nova Town, they may have some record of him, though after the troubles the whole bureaucracy collapsed, so we may turn up nothing."

"Thank you," I said around the bulging head of his cock.

"You know," he said between moans, "that doesn't help me concentrate."

"You've been at it for hours, you need a reward."

"I can't argue with that."

His fingers wound themselves through my hair and, as my up and down movements increased, his grip became harder until eventually he held my head on the downstroke. I enjoyed that and held the position until I needed to come up for air.

"Phong!" he exclaimed. "How can you do that for so long?"

"Practice," I said and went down again.

I sensed the rising tension in the muscles of his thighs. He was getting close to coming. I looked up into his face. "Fuck me."

There was no argument in those beautiful eyes. He took me by the hand and led me to the bed.

"First, lie back," he advised. "I want to return the compliment." Silas opened my legs. His hot breath on the flesh of my inner thighs once again stirred the desire coiled deep inside my belly and I thanked Phong for sending me a lover who could banish the specter of Laz from my soul.

He teased me by skillfully avoiding touching my clit with tongue or fingers; instead he played in the fleshy lips and sultry interior of my pussy, while I ran my fingers through his hair and rotated my hips, trying to put my clit in range of his tongue. We played this cat-and-mouse game for an eternity and the need for release steadily grew within me.

How is it that some men become so expert at this and others can be absolute dolts? It seems such a simple thing to do -- eat pussy -- yet some males (and females) have absolutely no talent. I think the key to skill in this essential area is how much attention they pay to their partner's physical response. Silas was an expert at keeping me on the edge of orgasm, maximizing my urge to come, yet keeping me poised on the threshold and not letting me fall back, a fatal error many men make. Silas kept me on the brink for what seemed a delightful eternity.

Then, suddenly, though I'd been waiting for the moment, begging for it actually, it came. While his fingers massaged that spot inside my pussy that sent warm shivers up my spine, he touched the tip of his tongue to the hard nub of my clit and set off an explosion that consumed my entire body.

I could have sworn there was a madwoman screaming her head off in the room with us, but it was me. The convulsions that ripped through my belly were so intense I had squeezed my thighs about his head and, being the brave man that he was, he kept flicking my clit with that knowing tongue.

I wasn't counting the orgasms that rushed through me. Each explosion wiped out the memory of the one before and they escalated in intensity as he continued his assault on my receptive flesh. He must have fought to pry my legs open because I heard, somewhere in the distance, the sound of his gasps for breath. Then my thighs were forced open again and the length of his glorious cock entered my pulsing sex.

I came again, and again. At some point so did Silas. When I became aware of my surroundings we were lying close together, still panting from our exertions, our bodies slick with sweat.

He spoke first. "I sense you aren't telling me everything."

Questions, I hate questions. I covered his mouth with mine to stop any more.

Chapter Six

Dear Peri...

The pleasure gained in giving someone else pleasure was greater than I anticipated, even greater than I could have imagined.

As San quivered in orgasm beneath me, the sensations I felt in my chest (a neural feedback effect) created such a feeling of joy in my mind that I wanted to give her even more pleasure.

I applied myself to identifying in more detail her gamma erogenous zones, and while I manipulated the alphas and betas, I explored the combination of gamma zones to give her even more pleasure. Gamma zones are difficult to locate and it took me many minutes to locate the first and then the second. By ratcheting up the level of stimulation (I have the ability of creating a small electric charge differential on my fingertips -- as well as my cock) I took her to levels of sensual pleasure that she had rarely, if ever, reached, despite her life-long career in the pleasure industry.

At one point she experienced an orgasm so powerful she slipped into unconsciousness beneath me. I revived her and confirmed she had suffered no ill effects from the experience. I was in two minds whether I should continue, but her pleading for more convinced me that it was the right thing to do.

Now that I knew the upper threshold of pleasure she could safely experience, I kept her hovering about that point without tipping over the edge. After three hours San confessed she could take no more and turned her attentions to me.

Peri, though I have masturbated to explore the various performance parameters of my organic penis, the sensations created by another person performing the manipulations, with fingers, lips and tongue, are of a completely different order.

San pleased me for forty minutes before I detected signs of fatigue in her vital signs so I rewarded her with my orgasm by releasing the inhibiting subroutine and letting the natural physiological processes take over. She swallowed my come, commenting that unlike many men, I tasted sweet.

She fell back onto the bed exhausted.

I contented myself caressing her flesh while she rested, noting how the coral-hued skin of her areolas puckered at my touch, how the nipples extended at the slightest approach and how even my warm breath elicited an observable response. Her pussy was warm and wet and I enjoyed dipping my fingers into her sultry depths. She stirred with a slight orgasm and stayed my hand.

"No more, please. I don't think I'd survive another one."

I kissed her lips and lay back beside her. Her fingers found my ball sac and she played there for awhile.

"Where did you learn that?"

"Learn what?"

"Your technique. I've never known a man who knew his way around my body so well. And it was our first time."

I considered a host of responses but decided on the truth. "I have known a woman for many years, a most sensual woman, whom I have studied closely and know intimately."

"She's one lucky bitch."

"That is not yet for her to judge, for I have never made love to her."

"Poor Fyche," she said and straddled my hips, feeding my cock into her pussy.

"I thought you needed to rest," I said.

"I have, and you deserve some more."

With that she gyrated her hips and ground her pelvis around my cock. I realized that having the orgasm inhibitor subroutine in play, which placed orgasm under my conscious control, was not the way that would allow me to fully explore the pleasure of sex. I switched the subroutine off and in its place installed a randomized threshold subroutine that responded to the level of stimulation the multitude of nerves imbedded in my flesh received. Like all men, my body has erogenous zones, so I keyed the randomizer to those and let, if you pardon the irony, nature take its course.

Without conscious control the moment of orgasm was still not a surprise. I detected early the buildup of sensation, something akin to a prickly heat arising in the flesh of my cock, extending to my balls and then to my spine.

The actual orgasm was intense, mainly because I had no control over its precise timing, and San had brought me to the edge several times with her gyrations and the subtle contractions of her pussy which, I knew, signaled another of her orgasms.

Peri, it was in this way that I experienced my greatest sexual pleasure to date, a bare moment after you contacted me.

"Fyche," you said, when I asked if you'd been following my progress, "I don't have time to read your damned diary. I'll do that when we're back home on the *Jalapeño*. I get the idea you're doing fine, so well done. What I want you to do is see if you can dig up anything locally on this guy. I forgot to ask you to do that for me."

You transmitted the photograph Holly had left you of a man whom you identified as Bik Jyker.

"I'll see what I can find," I replied as I came.

"He's using a false ID here on Adana. Silas Archimedes is trying to trace him from when my father knew him on Nova Town. Something is not right about him. I suspect Jyker may know something about the betrayal of my father, but I just can't remember any details from that time."

"Would Holly have left on a vacation if she thought that Jyker had betrayed your father?"

"Probably not."

"Could your memory be in error?"

"Possibly. It's only a vague memory of something my mother said."

"I'll do my best," I said.

"I have to go. I'll be in touch." San had brought herself to a second orgasm and had collapsed onto me, burying her face into my chest.

"Fuck, you're good, San," I groaned, hating to let her go.

"You did all the work."

"Sweetheart, believe me, this is *not* work." Without disturbing her position on my chest, I reached for my camera and brought Bik Jyker's image up onto the screen.

"Do you recognize this man?"

It was a long shot, I know, but men visiting new places often seek out the comfort provided by pleasure houses. Adana has more than its fair share, including the notorious Blow Job Alley, many illegal brothels catering to specific alien needs, and the Nil Raja, so the odds of this man coming here were very slight.

"I *have* seen him before," San said after a moment.

"Here?"

"Oh, no. Back on Hyperion when I was doing a short-term contract in a bondage parlor."

"How long ago was this?"

"Oh, almost a year I suppose."

"And you remember him?"

"Oh yeah. He was a strange one. I was the second girl in a bondage trio."

"What did that entail?"

"He'd tie me up and do painful things to me using nipple clamps, electrodes and stuff while he was being caned by the other girl. She made his ass bleed."

I sensed a spike in her BP and galvanic skin response. It was not, I believe, a signal of remembered pleasure but of fear. "Why do you remember him?"

"The bastard almost strangled me. Said he wanted to see my eyes roll back in my head. The other girl saved me. She really beat him up to get his hands off my throat."

"You are sure it is this man?"

"Yep, I'd remember that nose anywhere."

"San, do you enjoy pain?"

She shrugged and smiled coyly. "Sometimes, if the guy is right. But I don't go in for it that much. Plain old fucking is good enough for me."

"But you took a contract on Hyperion."

"The money was excellent."

"Do many people like pain with their sex?" I asked, knowing very well they did.

"A lot of guys like causing pain, and a few like getting humiliated."

"This man," I said indicating Jyker, "liked both."

"Who is he?" she asked.

Peri, I detected nothing in her physiological signs beyond normal curiosity.

"Just a story I'm following up. I'd like to question him."

Her eyes brightened. "Wait. I know someone who might be able to help you."

"In what way?"

"She can figure out where a guy like that will go for his pleasure."

"Who is it?"

"Ginka, one of the girls here. She specializes in Femdom, that's female domination."

San gave me a quick kiss and clambered off the bed. She wrapped a robe about her and left the room, returning a minute later with a tall dark-skinned woman of about twenty years of age. Her slim body was well toned and she would not have been out of place in a wrestling ring. Her dark eyes surveyed my naked body appraisingly.

"Well," she said approvingly. "So this is where you've been hiding all day. I don't blame you."

"Ginka, this is Fyche. He's interested in finding out about pain."

Ginka flexed her knuckles. "I can help with that."

"Information," I said. "I do not care for pain myself."

San rejoined me on the bed and motioned Ginka to climb on as well. Ginka did, but not before peeling off her skin-tight black leotard. She lay close beside me so that the nipple of one of her small breasts touched my chest.

I showed her the picture of Jyker. "Do you know this man? He enjoys pain."

Her face showed no sign of recognition but her vital signs jumped off the scale. "No," she lied.

I didn't press her, not wishing to alert her that I knew she was being untruthful.

"I told Fyche that I ran into this guy on Hyperion," San explained. "One weird jonnie." She went on to describe the session where Jyker had almost killed her.

Ginka listened as her fingers found my cock and began massaging my erection.

"I don't understand men like that," I said. "Who takes pleasure in causing pain?"

Ginka smiled and her fingers went to my ball sac, which she squeezed tightly. The experience was painful and I analyzed the sensation in terms of eroticism. For me, it had no appeal. I said so. Ginka shrugged unconcernedly, released me and returned to caressing the shaft of my cock.

She extended her tongue and licked my cheek from jaw to ear. "I like causing pain," she whispered.

"So I see," I said. "Does it arouse you?"

She grasped my hand and took it to her pussy. "I'm wet already."

San laughed and wriggled down the bed so that she could take the head of my cock in her mouth.

"Who is this guy?" Ginka mumbled, nodding to the camera screen.

"Just a story I'm working on."

"Story? Oh, you're a reporter."

"Fyche Barberossa," I said.

Her vital signs reacted to my surname. She knew Holly, I decided. How she knew Jyker I'd have to discover.

* * *

I closed my communicator, feeling very guilty. I should have read Fyche's diary to see how he was getting on in his new body. He was such a literal idiot, he was sure to get himself into trouble not understanding the subtleties of society and human interaction.

Silas left his com unit and returned to the bed. His face was grave.

"What is it?" I asked.

"No luck so far," he said. "Since your mother talked about this guy so long ago, I wonder..."

"Wonder what?"

"Peri, you admit your memory of this guy is hazy. It's a long shot, I know, but would you allow someone to sort of hypnotize you to see if there is anything more tangible to your memories?"

"Don't tell me you are a hypnotist, as well."

"Not at all, but I know someone who is." It took Silas twenty minutes to convince me to go along with his plan. Sure, ten minutes of that was with his cock pounding away at my welcoming pussy, after which I'd said yes.

The idea of hypnosis didn't faze me. I'd been hypnotized before. I'd been covering a story on a Tantric sex cult that only fucked each other under a hypnotic spell. During the act they believed they were fucking Phong himself. Not actually believing in Phong made the experience for me feel the same as fucking when drunk. You think you are having a good time, but just can't remember the details exactly.

Roberta, Silas told me, was in fact a creature of pure energy, an alien entity that could move between bodies and inhabit consciousnesses. She had taken over a friend of Maxim so she could escape imprisonment in an asteroid. She had, for a time, been inside Holly's head. It sounded a bit wacko, but I'd heard of strange things during my travels and seen even stranger.

"I'm hoping she'll be able to track down your memories and report back exactly what you know about Jyker," Silas said.

"Are you sure she'll leave my head?"

"Oh yeah, she has a great body of her own now."

"Better than mine, obviously."

He put his forefinger to his temple and mimed shooting himself.

Roberta, the *Adana Observer's* beautiful receptionist, turned up twenty minutes later. Silas, trying to extricate himself from the mire of his throwaway comment, explained she had gained her body during the last coup attempt on Adana when an army of mindless cadaveries, former human slaves, had been brought as part of an art exhibit. Once she had helped thwart the takeover of Adana, she'd helped herself to the most attractive of the bodies to inhabit.

Roberta smiled at me in recognition. When I asked after Fyche, she said he was the consummate reporter and had an instant impact on female viewers which had, unsurprisingly, increased by three points in less than a day. Roberta was clearly enamored with him, and I bet Fyche would be with her as well. I took more notice of her than when we first met in the office of the *Observer*. She was petite, with jutting breasts sitting high on her chest, large nipples showing dark through the thin material of her figure-hugging tunic. Her hair was an iridescent platinum blonde, her green eyes flashed intelligently, and the bow-shaped lips had a knowing and superior aspect. I liked her myself.

Silas explained the situation to her and Roberta readily agreed to assist us.

"What will you do?" I inquired.

"Like a shadow, I can enter your mind," she said. "Like a shadow, I will leave you untouched. To help me open your memories, I need you to think of this Bik Jyker, and any memories of him should then become accessible."

She instructed me to lie on the bed. I was fully dressed by this time, and she joined me. "Hold my hand."

"Is that how you enter my body?"

"You seem nervous," she said without answering my question.

"Well, *yeah*."

“Close your eyes. Breathe normally. Think of your mother. Remember only pleasant thoughts of you and her together. Then think of Bik Jyker.”

I did as I was told. A deep, deep breath and the memory of my mother and I, sitting on the shores of a golden lake under a cloud-specked celadon sky, came to mind. We were dangling our feet in the cool waters and laughing. It was one of the few memories I had of my mother’s smile.

Suddenly, it felt like I was in an elevator car and someone had invaded my personal space. I shifted away but the intruder followed me. I opened my eyes and I was no longer at the lake. I was with my mother in a small room.

My mother was reading a real book. She loved books and luxuriated in the feel of paper and cardboard, the weight of the thing in her hands, even the smell of paper and ink. Behind her, through an arched window, was a pale pink sky arching over the distant hills of Kalena IV, one of the dozen worlds we’d hopscotched to since leaving Nova Town.

The com unit on the wall pinged. Mother activated it and the face of a middle-aged man with a large crooked nose appeared.

“Bik?” she said in surprise and annoyance. “How did you find us?”

“My dear. I have bad news. Antony is dead.”

Like spilled ink the silence filled every corner of the room, spreading inexorably to obliterate the entire world.

“Holly?” my mother eventually asked, her voice quavering.

The man’s eyes flickered. “Unknown, I’m afraid. The New Guard has pacified an entire quadrant.”

My mother’s body, until then held rigid, seemed to deflate as if the fiber of her bones had dissolved. She flicked off the com unit.

With tears stinging my eyes I went to her and put my arms around her convulsing shoulders. She gazed up at me. “Beware your friends, Peri,” she said. “Now quickly, pack only what you need. We have to go.”

I opened my eyes to see Silas Archimedes floating above me. He smiled. "Are you okay?"

"I think so."

"You were crying."

I felt the wetness of my cheek. "So I was," I said. "Haven't done that for years."

"I grieve for your loss," Roberta said. Her eyes were red and glistening. I gripped her hand.

"I'm sorry too," I said.

"What happened?" Silas asked. I was touched by the concern in his voice. He was a nice man, I decided.

I described Bik Jyker's communication and that it had instigated our flight to avoid detection via another five planets, and my eventual abandonment in the home of a distant relative of my mother's. I never saw her again.

"Your mother feared this bastard?"

"She never explained."

"Perhaps she thought the less you knew, the safer you'd be."

"Perhaps." Though I thought it would have been more helpful had she explained to me what was going on. Then again, my ignorance might have protected me. The ghosts of Nova Town had not followed me. Till now, that is.

"Your mother's words suggest that Bik was a friend," Roberta offered.

"An untrustworthy one, apparently," Silas said. "She didn't sound like she was pleased to hear from him." His expression became thoughtful.

"What are you thinking?" I asked him.

"I'm wondering if this Bik had designs on your mother. Maybe he was a friend of your father, got too close to the family, fell for your mother and..."

I finished his thought. "Betrayed my father so he could have her?"

"It wouldn't be the first time lust has overcome friendship."

"And he pursued her across the galaxy?"

"Lust is a powerful motivator."

"It is," I agreed. "The question is, did he ever find her?"

Chapter Seven

Dear Peri, I spent the rest of the day cavorting with San and Ginka. The latter personally demonstrated to me the arts of bondage and discipline, which I won't go into here. Suffice to say I did not allow her to tie me up, letting San be the submissive subject, while Ginka tortured her with an array of whips, canes, clamps and electroshocks she produced from a hidden wall cabinet. Despite what she had told me earlier, San obviously enjoyed rough sex, begging me to fuck her while Ginka applied her sadistic tools.

"Where on Adana would I find a house specializing in these techniques?" I asked after San had regained her breath after yet another orgasm.

Without a word, Ginka climbed quickly off the bed and almost ran to a com unit. She accessed the Adult Pleasure Directory published by the Chamber of Commerce. I'd already done so and ascertained the BDSM parlor Your Pain is Our Pleasure, also on Level 7, was the largest and most famous in Adana.

While San relaxed and played with my cock, using my own silent communications, I contacted the parlor and spoke to the manager, a pleasant woman named Lola. She was more than helpful once I explained that I was working on one of Holly's projects. (Lola had benefited from the exposure Holly had provided in one of her previous stories.) Most importantly, she recognized the image of Bik Jyker.

"Oh yes. He was here last night."

"What name did he go by?"

"Well, he's not a regular and he said he was only going to be here on Adana for a short time. Promise you won't name me as a source? My clients expect privacy."

"Of course."

"I know I can trust Holly, so I'll believe the same of you. He used the name Jonnie Jons."

"A fictitious name, surely."

"Of course. But that's what he gave me."

"Did he say he'd return?"

Peri, at this point San, whom I had released from her bonds, had begun to suck my cock once again. Despite the processing power of my positronic brain, the effect of her ministrations, the subtle pressure of tongue, lips and the warm saliva she dribbled over the head of my penis all conspired to draw my attention to physical pleasure. I think I am beginning to understand the difficulties humans have when combating their physiological needs, and it explains some of the irrationality I have observed.

In any case, I was still able to concentrate sufficiently on the conversation with Lola (as well as another Breaking News interview with a harried 'Port official about a wastewater recycling duct that had gone horribly wrong on Level 3).

"He certainly enjoyed himself," Lola continued. "Wore out three of my girls. He was an experienced Dom."

Peri, I recognized that term as denoting the Dominant person in the relationship between dominant and submissive participants.

"Lola, could you contact me if this man returns? I assure you there will be no unpleasantness, and I will give your establishment positive advertising for the next six months free of charge."

She responded in the affirmative, of course, and I trust Vinnie to honor the arrangement.

As I ended the call San had adopted a kneeling posture with her rounded ass in front of me and urged me to position myself behind her and make love to her. I complied, knowing that this position was one of her favorites as it afforded maximum penetration and the most pleasant angle of attack. I also knew she enjoyed the feel of my hands on her hips as I drove into her, pulling her back and forth over the length of my cock.

Ginka rejoined us after, I assume, she had ascertained the address of Lola's parlor, and knelt beside us and kissed me deeply while I fucked her colleague. She pinched my nipples hard and squeezed my balls as I thrust into San's wet pussy and, as I fucked San, I sensed the erotic nexus between pain and pleasure that some people find most satisfying and began to appreciate it.

Even when Ginka bit my lip I found the experience pleasurable though, I must admit, in a somewhat detached manner. It was simply an interesting experience.

After San collapsed in orgasm Ginka demanded I fuck her in the same way, though insisting I slap her ass cheeks as hard as I could. I resisted doing that, not wishing to cause actual tissue damage, and dispensed the blows with enough force to elicit the most pleasurable physiological reactions in Ginka. She orgasmed quickly, her pussy walls clenching the shaft of my cock like a fist. I climaxed inside her and the event heralded another orgasm on her part.

Sated and exhausted, the two girls lay beside me.

"Ginka," I said, "I'm interested in finding Meridian's killer. Can you help San and I discover who killed her?"

"Of course."

"Did you see anything that night?"

"I was occupied with a jonnie," she said.

"Could you keep an eye out for me?" I continued. "If someone gained access to these premises once, they can do it again, and I can't be here protecting you all the time."

"I can look after myself," Ginka said.

"Speak for yourself," San said. "I can't fight my way out of a paper bag."

"The chances are small," I said. "Meridian may have been murdered because of something she saw or heard, perhaps from one of her jonnies. However, she may have been murdered for who she is or was. In any case, neither of you have heard nor saw anything of interest, so I think you are safe."

"As long as the killer thinks that too," San reminded me unnecessarily.

"It's been a day since she was killed," I said. "The killer will feel safer with each passing hour, and so the threat to you will diminish."

The bracelet on Ginka's hand buzzed. "I have a jonnie," she announced. "Thank you, Fyche, I enjoyed our time."

"So did I," I said and gave her a slap on the ass. She gave a delighted squeal and ran from the room.

"You like her?" San asked.

I detected the uncertainty and slight desperation in her voice. "Not nearly as much as I like you," I said and climbed between her open thighs.

* * *

After Roberta had left us, I felt drained and empty. It must have showed because Silas was very attentive and compassionate.

"Peri, trust me, I'll help you find out what Bik Jyker knows about your mother and what happened to your father."

I squeezed his hand in gratitude.

"I've been reviewing Holly's story about your father's death. The story she won the award for. She named the New Guard officers who carried out his execution, which caused a kerfuffle in the galactic capital. Support for the rebels was affected for a time and she spent the next couple of years in hiding as she reported the increasing scale of the atrocities. Finally, when the heat got too much, the resistance smuggled her out and she ended up here."

Looking back, I can't imagine how indifferent to my sister's plight I had been. When we'd left Nova Town, my mother's only concern had been our safety -- hers and mine. For everyone's protection, we had no contact whatsoever with Father or Holly. We had become a binary pair. And once Mother abandoned me, I was a single atom adrift in the cosmos. No wonder I'd lost interest in family ties. I didn't wish to be hurt any more, I guess.

Despite the convenient rationalization, I cursed my selfishness. "Does Holly refer to Jyker at all in her stories?"

"Not once."

"But she obviously knew him," I said.

"But not in a bad way, if you get my meaning. As far as she is concerned, he wasn't involved in your father's death. If he had been, she would have stayed on Adana and brought him to justice herself."

"What are you getting at?"

"She left him for you to track down because he must have some bearing on your mother, who you were closer to than she was."

That notion had already occurred to me. It implied that Jyker was an important part of my mother's life, not my father's. Maybe Silas's conjecture was correct after all. Jyker was my mother's friend, who turned out not to be a friend, or perhaps she was simply upset because that final communication with her, made with good intent, exposed us to discovery by our enemies.

"How can we find him? He's using false identities and he has successfully disappeared for so many years."

"The question is, where has he been and why has he turned up here?" He put his arms about me. "I know this is hard. But when your father and mother separated, did they divorce?"

I nodded. It had been a summary bureaucratic divorce, just two signatures to dissolve an official relationship.

"Why did they do that?"

I stiffened. "It was to keep us safe. By divorcing, it separated us from Father completely, allowing Mother to adopt her family name prior to adopting an alias."

"Don't be upset by what I am going to suggest, but do you think it possible that your mother and Jyker had an affair?"

I pushed him away. "No. Never."

"How can you be so sure?"

"I just am."

"I agree that she didn't trust him in the end. Jyker, I mean. But I can't help thinking that there is something about this that doesn't sit right with me. Why did your father stay on Nova Town? Why did he let his work separate him from his family? Why didn't he leave with you? He wasn't born on Nova Town, so he didn't have that sort of tie to the place. It just strikes me as odd."

I barely suppressed the anger I felt toward him at the suggestion. It was irrational but the thought of Mother betraying Father, of having an affair with someone like Jyker, was just too unpalatable to contemplate.

"If anything was going on, it was all on Jyker's side. Mother was fleeing when he called to gloat over father's death."

"Gloat?"

Why *did* I say that?

"You didn't describe how he told your mother about your father's death. He gloated, did he?"

"I guess," I said, confusion clouding my thoughts. I tried to recapture the image of his face on the screen but it was as elusive as a mist. "I don't know."

"I wonder what sort of hold Jyker had over your family. Friend, she described him, but he may have turned on you all. But what sort of hold was it? That could be the key."

"If only you could remember," his intense gaze seemed to say. I suddenly felt as if everything was crowding in on me, smothering me. I had to get out. "Silas, I need some time to myself. I'm going back to my ship. Call me if you find anything."

"Sure," he said, the surprise and hurt on his face at my abrupt decision more than evident. "I'm sorry if I offended you. I was just thinking out loud."

"I know, but I have to figure out what this means. I need to be alone. Can you feed what you have to my ship's AI unit?"

"You mean Fyche?"

"No... yes. Well, he's both my ship's AI and Fyche, I guess." Thinking of Fyche caused me a twinge of guilt but I suppressed the emotion. I had more pressing things

on my mind, and once again the fuzzy image of Bik Jyker on Mother's com unit returned.

"I wish you'd stay here with me," Silas was saying.

"I'll be fine."

"How about we meet for dinner? The Haze Bar and Grill is about the best there is."

"Okay, sure."

We made a date, I kissed him on the cheek and left wondering what the hell was really going on.

Chapter Eight

Peri, I gave San a communicator with which she could contact me at the slightest sign of trouble. I must admit I was reluctant to leave her when I suspected Ginka of knowing more than she let on about Jyker, but I guessed that she would, at the earliest opportunity, get to Lola's establishment to track down Jyker herself.

While I had been pleasuring San one last time, I accessed Adana's central bank records (Adana's security is woeful -- I filed a story on the subject for release after we leave Adana) and identified the credit facility Jyker used to pay Lola. It was a legitimate account. However, when I identified the source I learned the actual Jonnie Jons -- yes, the name was real -- was deceased, killed in a shuttle accident on Hyperion.

For a person to be so supplied in false identities suggests several possibilities. He is a criminal of not insubstantial means, the member of a criminal organization or a member of some security or intelligence service.

Either way, he would be a force to be reckoned with.

Peri, the fact that Ginka was after Jyker suggests his past has caught up with him. How this relates to the death of Nova Meridian, I am not sure. There are too many unknowns to allow me to raise a suitable hypothesis. The significance of Nova's name had not escaped me: Nova Meridian, Nova Town. She may have some connection with your father and some connection to the rebellion on that ill-fated world. By extension, Ginka's presence suggests the same possibility.

As San climaxed one more time, Lola contacted me to inform me that Jyker had just booked a room and the services of three of her best girls. He would be visiting her later tonight.

Your Pain is My Pleasure is located next door to a boxing gym on Level 7. It has a nondescript shopfront and the reception area is tastefully decorated. Lola is a large affable woman with a good head for business. She took me on a quick tour of the premises, during which we conducted a brief promotional interview to satisfy her conditions for letting me inside the premises to monitor Jyker's activities.

"Like it?" she asked me. "We redecorated last month."

"Very appealing," I said.

She led me to a cubicle in which, by means of a view screen, I could watch the activities in the next room. I promised not to use my camera and left it in her custody as a sign of good faith. Of course, I could record any activities directly without the aid of a camera, but she didn't know that.

The torture chamber, for that is the best way to describe it, had chains and hooks hanging from the walls and ceiling as well as containing oddly shaped tables and racks which I identified from my BDSM database as restraining devices. Glass cabinets held a wide range of dildos, vibrators and electric devices as well as a number of canes, whips and other striking implements.

Standing in the darkened cubicle, I occupied myself by conducting six simultaneous interviews with 'Port officials regarding several of Holly's past projects. In this way I was able to solve a conspiracy to fix prices in the recycling of organic compounds and genetic products from the mortuary industry. One may expect several arrests over the next few days as the importance of what I uncovered filters down to 'Port Security.

* * *

"Don't forget dinner," Silas said when he called me later that afternoon. "I may have something."

I'd been sitting in my darkened bedroom feeling sorry for myself. I'd been going over and over my last memories of my mother and father. Bik Jyker did not feature in any of them, except that last communication informing us of my father's death. I must have seen him before then, as I had recognized him easily enough, but I could not

remember when or how. There must be deeper memories that even Roberta couldn't access. I replayed the conversation and my mother's reaction again and again in my head trying to force something new from it.

Had Jyker been gloating or had I pasted on that emotion after the event to make him the villain? During the years of our flight, my mother and I were inseparable. We kept to ourselves because we could trust no one. The rebels on Nova Town had long arms and could strike anywhere in the galaxy. At least that was what she said. However, Holly had not remained exactly invisible here on Adana and they hadn't followed her, and I was not exactly unknown either. So, was Mother actually fleeing the rebels of Nova Town or was she running from something or someone else?

The question that kept returning to me was, were Mother and I so inseparable before we left Nova Town? I had trouble remembering anything at all about that damn place; fragmented images of a house in the city, crowded streets, and the riots. The overwhelming memory I have of my young life was of spaceport departure lounges. But of Nova Town, nothing much at all. It was as if my memories had been erased.

Who was Bik Jyker? I couldn't believe my mother could have been involved with him in a romantic way. Yet he had tracked her down to tell us Father was dead. Had he tracked her down after that? Was that why she left me with those relatives who hardly knew her and cared nothing for me?

And what happened to her after that? I never heard from her again.

I eventually roused myself and made my way back into the seething crowds of Spaceport Adana. I found the Bar and Grill easily enough, though I don't remember how. I felt like a sleepwalker gliding between the forest of alien and human bodies that seemed to part before me. Silas was waiting, his smile radiant.

"I took the liberty of ordering the house specialty," he said happily.

I was in no mood for this. "What do you have?"

"Okay," he said resignedly and took a deep breath. "My sources tell me that Jyker has criminal connections. He's been involved with Mischa, of all people."

"Mischa?"

"A bitch who I've had a run-in with myself. A criminal mastermind, pirate, slaver, would-be president of Adana, a real nasty bitch. In any case, the traffic is that our man did a runner..."

"Runner?"

"Left Mischa's employ without permission, so to speak. He took some of her property to boot."

"And?"

"She has a price on his head. A sizeable one too."

"Why is he here?"

"That's the question that's puzzled me. Why Adana? The thing a crook on the run desperately needs is a new identity. Adana, as it happens, has the means to do that. Holly reported on a celebrated case of Hyrem Bosch, a young lad who lost his body in a pirate attack. He was just a disembodied head. There is a clinic here skilled in growing new bodies really, really quickly and Holly was instrumental in getting the procedure done for the boy at no cost."

"Could it be as simple as that?"

"Well, not really. The process is now against the law here on Adana. There were problems and a few suspicious deaths. Ironically, Holly was instrumental in getting them eventually closed down. I believe Jyker is here to get the procedure illegally."

"You have found the clinic?"

He gave me a broad smile. "I sure have."

"What do we do now?"

"Have dinner. I hate tracking down criminals on an empty stomach."

My mood had improved a little. It seems that Silas had made some progress. Not having me distracting him with sex probably helped. When I'd arrived at the bar, I wasn't in the mood for small talk, but over a meal of delicious ribs and sauce, Silas entertained me with some stories of his adventurous past and my mood improved a little.

"What will we do when we catch him?" I said after he had paid the bill to the arthropod waitress.

"We have to turn him in to the authorities; he's a crook, after all. However, keeping him to ourselves for, say, fifteen minutes, while the two of you have a chat, shouldn't pose a problem. How does that sound?"

"I don't know where to start. I don't know what I want to know from him."

He gazed at me speculatively. "It will come to you. After we threaten to turn him over to Mischa, I'm sure he'll sing like a bird."

"Sing like a bird, crook, runner, bottoms up. Where do you get these strange expressions?"

He shrugged and ignored my question. "The thing is, since we don't know what identities he's using, we'll need to stake out the clinic."

"Stake out?"

"Secretly watch. Let's go."

The clinic was located on the industrial levels. Not a salubrious locality but there were plenty of shadowy access tunnels and doors in which we could sit and wait, keeping a constant watch on the entrance to the clinic. The clinic entrance was disguised as a Pet Food Algae plant.

"How did you find this place?" I asked, indicating the pet food sign.

"I have my sources. The criminal classes and I have some mutual IOUs to discharge."

I settled back and waited, trying to think of what I was going to say to Jyker when I saw him.

My thoughts kept going in circles, and I was beginning to think I was going mad when Fyche called.

Chapter Nine

Peri, I didn't have to wait long.

Lola gave me a ping on my communicator and a moment later Jyker strode in. He was leading three naked women by means of a long chain fastened to neck collars. Each had ball gags in place and their hands were tied behind their backs. The women wore black leather hoods with no eye holes. They walked stiffly so as not to trip and fall.

Jyker released each woman from the chain and then positioned the first girl over a saddle-type arrangement which I had earlier identified as a Sybian; a masturbation device consisting of a vibrator attached to the saddle which the woman sat astride. Once she was settled he chained her ankles to the device and attached her hands to overhead hooks so that she was stretched tight and unable to move. He then activated the device.

While she responded to the internal stimulation of the device, Jyker took pleasure pinching her nipples and slapping her breasts. After a minute he tired of this and led the second girl to a bench. He bent her over at the waist and handcuffed her wrists to large silver rings. He then shackled her ankles to the bench legs so that they were spread wide apart, exposing her pussy and asshole.

The third girl he made stand to attention so he could affix her ankles to a spreader bar so that she too was stretched to the limit. He then attached her wrists to a ceiling hook which he raised with a remote control. This was the classic strappado device used by medieval torturers.

After surveying his handiwork and teasing the women with a leather cat-o'-nine-tails, he then stripped. Bik Jyker was a man of average height and build, with a band of flab around the waist. He was at least fifty years of age and his vital signs, while elevated, no doubt in anticipation of whatever he was going to do to the girls, indicated to me that he was in reasonable shape.

Peri, I was able to hack into the secure communications of your private investigator and ascertained the information he had received regarding Bik Jyker. The man is a dangerous criminal and has dangerous friends and enemies, notably his former employer, Mischa. Considering all the possibilities, I deduced there is an 87% probability that Ginka is here to find him for Mischa. Her mission is probably to kill him and recover the substantial fortune he stole from her mistress. The death of Nova Meridian may be unrelated. However, I believe she may have been a friend or contact of Jyker, and she died while being interrogated by Ginka's android accomplice, her jonnie for that evening, an individual going by the false name of Mot Ery.

What Bik Jyker's relationship to Nova Town is, or your father for that matter, I have no data.

From the wall, Jyker selected a leather whip with which he proceeded to strike the third girl's buttocks. She cried out at each crack of the whip, possibly in exaggerated pain as her vital signs had barely risen above normal, indicating she had taken a pain suppressant before the session. I'd suggest she was an old hand at this sort of treatment.

I watched him for a further thirty minutes as he abused and tortured the young women. I won't describe the specific acts he inflicted on them. None were physically damaging to the women, and only one seemed to be gaining pleasure from the blows.

Peri, you may be wondering what I was waiting for. Eventually I expected him to ask to be restrained in some fashion by the women while they could exact some revenge upon him. He would be helpless at that time, and I would not have to exert any force upon him while I questioned him.

That moment came and he released one of the women and she proceeded to chain him to the same bench on which another girl was secured. While the woman whipped him, he fucked the bound woman.

Peri, I waited for her to strike him several times before calling you. Then I stripped off my clothes and entered the room. The girls looked around in surprise. I held my finger to my lips requesting silence and motioned for them to continue. They thought, as I intended, that I was a friend of their jonnie come to join the party. To convince them I hugged the nearest girl and then selected a red ball gag from the wall.

I crept up to Jyker. His back was red with welts from the whipping he had received. Before he knew what was happening I had the gag in position and fastened around his head.

He groaned in protest.

"Hello, Bik," I said in a tone I adopted from a gangster holo-vid I'd seen. "Glad to see you." He moaned some more. "Did you know that Mischa has sent someone after you?"

His eyes widened in sudden fear and his heart rate and BP spiked. "Don't panic," I said. "It's not me. But I know the bitch she sent to get back what you took. I might be able to save you from her, you know?"

He groaned something.

"I'll take that as a yes, you do understand. Now, I'm going to ask you some questions that might just save your life."

* * *

My patience with the stakeout had worn thin by the time Fyche called. "Come on," I said to Silas. "Fyche has found him."

"He has? Where?"

"Your Pain Is My Pleasure on Level 7."

"Is he sure?"

"Fyche is never wrong."

"Lucky Fyche."

No, I thought. *Lucky me.*

Silas led the way and when we reached the reception desk he said, "Let me do the talking."

"Whatever," I said.

"I believe Fyche Barberossa is here?" he said to the receptionist.

"Oh, hello, Holly," the woman said looking straight past him and at me.

"Um... hi," I said.

"I thought you were away?"

"Just got back. Is Fyche inside?"

She nodded. "Sure. Room Seven. On the right."

"Thanks."

"I like your hair," she called after us as we went through a red curtain and down the corridor.

"Let me do the talking," I chided him. "Yeah, right."

Silas didn't respond. His expression was set in a mask of grim determination. He pulled a pistol from his belt.

"What the hell is that?"

"What does it look like?"

We opened door seven to find the room empty. However, on the wall screen, the room next door showed an interesting tableau. It appeared as if Fyche was supervising three naked women in the whipping of a pudgy pink-fleshed man chained to the wall.

"Fyche," I said as I entered. "Why are you naked?"

"I can explain. It's all part of a cunning ruse."

"It is?"

"Assuredly. Let me introduce you to Bik Jyker." Bik Jyker twisted his head, his eyes bulging and pleading. His mouth was stuffed with a red ball gag and he whimpered shamelessly.

Silas took up a position by the door, holding the gun out of sight from the girls.

"Also, this is Tyle, Kira and Suki, who have been helping me discipline Mr. Jyker."

"I think we can now dispense with their services," I said.

"Girls," Fyche said with a commanding confidence I'd never noticed before. "Thank you for your assistance. Now, as we arranged, you can go to Lola and wait for me. I guarantee a generous tip for your services."

The three dominatrices giggled as they skipped past the coldly appreciative eye of Silas.

Fyche approached Jyker. "Now, Bik. I'm going to remove the gag. As you know, these rooms are soundproofed and I have disabled the panic alarms, so there is absolutely no point in screaming for help. Do you understand?"

Bik nodded frantically.

"He's all yours," Fyche said, and after removing the gag, stepped back, trailing the whip across Jyker's back.

I took a deep breath. "Do you know who I am?"

He nodded, swallowed his drool, and licked his red swollen lips. "It's been a long time," he said, his voice level and surprisingly calm. "You've grown. Might I say you are every bit as beautiful as your mother."

Instinctively my fists clenched. "What do you know of my mother?"

He grinned. "Everything."

I wanted to beat that smirking face. "What happened on Nova Town?"

"You know. The usual story; politics, business, corruption, rebellion, massacre. It happens all the time."

I slapped his face. "Don't fuck with me or I'll jam that dildo over there so far down your throat you won't be able to shit past it."

He chuckled softly. "You have a temper just like your mother."

My head was pounding and a red mist of anger was filling my brain. "Tell me what you know!"

"I wish I could, sweetheart. I wish I could."

My fist was halfway to smashing his face when Fyche stopped me. "Peri. His physiology indicates a high tolerance to pain. A slap will not convince him to talk."

"Then what will?"

Silas strode toward us. "This," he said, brandishing some wires. "Shove this up his asshole and we'll put a few volts through his bowels."

For the first time real fear flickered through those bloodshot eyes. "You can't be serious," Jyker said, a tremble in his voice at last.

"Let's see how serious I am."

Fyche opened a wall cabinet and produced a battery set. "Every BDSM parlor has some electroshock equipment."

"I'll hook it up," Silas said.

Beads of perspiration were forming on Jyker's forehead. "You can't be serious," he repeated.

"Listen, you murdering little prick," Silas said with real vehemence in his voice. "I know your record. You've tortured, raped and killed. Don't think my ethical bounds encompass the likes of you. Talk or you'll feel pain like you've never experienced it before. If that doesn't work, I'll cut your balls off, then your dick. Imagine what it will be like when I stuff them down your throat. Understand me, you repugnant little fuck?"

Jyker, I think, finally realized Silas was indeed serious. His face had turned ashen. The cold aggression in Silas's voice had certainly scared me.

"Did you betray my father?" I asked.

Jyker closed his eyes and turned his face away from me to watch Fyche and Silas as they busied themselves with the technical aspects of their torture. I kept asking questions which Jyker refused to answer. "Listen," I said in frustration. "If you are more afraid of someone else than you are of me, then we can protect you."

"No, you can't."

"Hold his ass cheeks apart," Silas said. "I'll shove these little beauties deep, deep, deep."

Jyker squirmed as Fyche spread the flabby cheeks apart. Silas put the electrodes to the puckered ring of Jyker's asshole. Bik tensed, sweat dripping off his forehead. He squeezed his eyes tight and gritted his teeth in preparation for a world of pain. He clearly wasn't going to talk.

I put my hand on Silas's arm. "We can't do this."

"He won't hold out for too long when we up the power," Silas said. "Trust me. You'll find out what you need to know."

I shook my head. I couldn't do it. I might be a lot of things, but I'm not this. "No. We'll hand him over to 'Port Security, and they can do what they like with him. Untie him."

"Are you sure about this?" Silas asked.

I nodded.

"I agree," Fyche said. "His resistance to pain is considerable. He's unlikely to tell us anything and even if he does, we won't be able to ascertain the truth or otherwise of the information immediately."

"You're one lucky bastard," Silas said as he replaced the ball gag and then began untying him.

I turned away and was halfway to the door when the wall exploded inward in a flash of light and roar of thunder. I was knocked off my feet and from out of a billowing cloud of smoke I saw two shapes rush in. Fyche and Silas reacted faster than I did and together they rushed to meet the intruders before they had time to fire their weapons.

Even though his hands were tied, Jyker got to his feet and scrambled toward the door. I stretched out my arm and tripped him up. As he fell I pounced on him. He twisted and squirmed beneath me, his eyes wide with fear.

Around me I heard angry shouts, grunts of pain and the sound of fists striking flesh as Fyche and Silas fought our attackers. I had no idea who they could have been but by the ferocity of the fight they were determined.

I managed to settle Jyker with a punch to the jaw. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Silas in a deadly embrace with a dark-haired, dark-skinned slim woman. Fyche

was grappling with a large man, their bodies locked like Grecian wrestlers except that only Fyche was naked.

I saw the dark-skinned woman break free of Silas and clout him across the temple with the butt of her gun. Silas collapsed unconscious. The woman's wild-eyed gaze tracked across the room, took in the equal struggle between Fyche and her companion and then alighted on me.

Her eyes flared in immediate recognition and anger. She launched herself at me. Her body pummeled into me like a Mendovian bullock. "You bitch!" she screamed into my face, spittle dripping off her crazed lips. "Do you have to ruin everything? I'll kill you this time!"

Her hands clawed at my face, gripped my throat and started choking me. She was too fast and too strong for me. I beat at her with my fists. I know about self-defense but this wildcat was a warrior possessed, a berserker who was single-minded in her desire to see me dead. Her vice-like grip on my throat was tightening, and I couldn't hold out much longer. I couldn't breathe. My head felt as if it were swelling to twice its size and the blood rushing past my ears sounded like the crashing of ocean waves. The bitch's glaring eyes swam in and out of focus as I began to sink into unconsciousness.

At the other side of the room there came a bright actinic flash and a moment later the hands around my throat relaxed. I could breathe, but my injured throat screamed with agony as I gulped in life-giving air.

"Peri, it's okay. You're safe." It was Fyche, cradling my head in his lap.

In between gasps I tried to give him a smile. "What happened?"

"I disabled Mot Ery, Ginka's android torturer, with the electrodes. The poor thing didn't know what hit him. I burned out his brain."

Despite the circumstances my confused mind had time to wonder if Fyche sounded guilty about killing one of his own kind. My answer came a moment later. "It's a design fault. I'll have to make some modifications in my own cranial structure to prevent the same happening to me."

I twisted my head to look across the room. "Silas?"

"He's coming round. Ginka laid him out cold."

"Jyker?"

"Gone, I'm afraid."

I cursed Phong to the seventeen gates of Hell.

Fyche consoled me. "The authorities should be here directly. I contacted 'Port Security as soon as they burst in on us."

I had forgotten that Fyche can do six things at once. As we waited, Fyche cradled me, gently stroking my forehead while Silas tied the unconscious Ginka to the wall. My thoughts began to clear enough to start asking questions. "I still don't know anything about Jyker," I complained.

"He ran the refugee smuggling operation on Nova Town," Fyche said. "It was a scam where he fleeced refugees out of their life savings, provided false identities and then traced them when they settled on new worlds and blackmailed them for the rest of their lives."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me before you arrived. I asked him about Nova Meridian, the pleasure girl murdered by Ginka. She was Jyker's regular lover, the daughter of a business acquaintance on Nova Town. He'd smuggled her out when the planet finally collapsed into anarchy. Ginka tracked her to Adana, knowing Jyker couldn't be far away. Her android tortured and killed Nova when she wouldn't betray her lover."

I glanced at the unconscious warrior woman. "Why was Ginka after him?"

Silas, his work of securing a reviving Ginka completed, joined us. "He stole a shipment of precious gems from Mischa. A medium-sized fortune," Silas offered. "Enough to set him up as a prince for the rest of his life."

"Where are the gems now?"

"Jyker probably has them somewhere safe and is making his way off station as we speak."

"Why did Ginka attack me and let Jyker go if he was her target?"

Silas laughed. "She mistook you for Holly. You see, I think she and Holly locked horns a while ago when her boss Mischa tried to take over Adana. Her name back then was Janga Sarn. She's had a face transplant since then, and an identity switch, so that she wouldn't be recognized."

"But she remembered Holly."

"Yep, and when she saw you she lost her head."

Ginka swore at him from across the room, and Silas went to fetch a ball gag to quiet her.

"Peri," Fyche whispered. "Silas is not what he seems. I accessed his secure transmissions from the galactic capital. I don't know who he works for, but I suspect he is a field operative for a galactic security organization."

I had suspected Silas knew more than what he let on. Those mysterious sources from the central worlds were too good to be true. He hadn't told me about Jyker's criminal record, and if he kept that from me, what else had he kept secret?

"We better get our story straight for 'Port Security," I said.

"Leave it to me," Silas mumbled. "Let me do the talking."

Epilogue

There's no place like home. For me, the *Jalapeño* is that place. I think that I can survive anything, as long as I can come home to the designer luxuries of my ship.

Of course, having an attentive lover at home is just perfect.

I was naked, lying at full stretch on my Nell Pozniac sheets, feeling the most relaxed I had since setting foot on Spaceport Adana.

Silas was sucking the big toe of my right foot. He had just completed the circuit from the opposite foot, sucking and licking every millimeter of flesh from toes, sole and ankle, up along the calf, behind the knee, up my inner thigh, teasing the lips of my pussy, then travelling down my thigh, knee and calf of my right leg.

In the days following our confrontation with Bik Jyker and the arrest of Ginka a.k.a. Janga, Mischa's right arm, for the murder of Nova Meridian, I'd withdrawn to the *Jalapeño* and dragged Silas with me. I wanted to submerge myself in sensuality to let my thoughts find their own balance.

Fyche continued his role as Holly's replacement, causing all sorts of upheaval to the good citizens of Adana and their leaders. His ability to access and synthesize disparate data sets led him to identify correlations and inconsistencies that allowed him to ask exactly the right question to the right person at the right time. Resignations and arrests seemed to follow him like hungry dogs, and the stocks of the *Adana Observer* soared. So much so, Vince Mostoloff actually forgave Fyche for accruing the outrageous expenses that his investigative style entailed.

Fyche had told me he was writing his own book and wanted me to edit it for him. Its working title was *What Every Man Should Know About Pleasing a Woman*. It was

an ambitious title for someone without much experience in this direction, but I promised him I'd give it a read.

Despite the excitement of the last few days and the ecstasy Silas was currently providing me, my mood was as low as I'd ever experienced. I'd come to a decision.

Silas kissed the nub of my clit and the contact set fire to my belly. I urged him upward so he could lie between my spread thighs. I kissed his lips and, as if it had a life of its own, his cock found the entrance to my pussy and nudged its way in. I adjusted my hips to accommodate its girth and he sank deeper inside.

I clung to him as he drove into me. I came once and as my pussy pulsed, closing on his cock and milking it, his body tensed. When his hot seed spurted into me, I came again. We lay panting together, our hands clasped, fingers intertwined.

"Why so glum?" he asked.

"No reason."

"If it's Jyker getting away that's upset you, I have a dozen contacts looking out for him. As soon as they spot him, we'll know. Be assured, we'll get him."

I squeezed his fingers. Whenever he spoke, he spoke of the two of us as a collective. He used *we* and *us* a lot. He seemed happy enough to speak of the future and somehow I was included in it. I was touched. Though he was quite obviously not what he seemed, a secret agent masquerading as a private detective, he was a nice man, one of the nicest I've met.

He sighed. "I have to go, I'm afraid. Private eye business to attend to."

I gave him a petulant pout and kissed him on the cheek. He gave my nearest nipple a butterfly kiss before climbing off the bed and making his way to the shower. When I heard the water running, I called Fyche.

"You rang?" he said from the door, gazing speculatively at my naked body.

"Now cut that out! Fyche, I have a question that I want you to research for me."

"Anything."

"After leaving Nova Town, my mother and I jumped from planet to planet for years. How did she finance these journeys? I've never considered the question before. Where did we get the money?"

"I'll do my best."

I gave him a list of planets we'd visited and the false names my mother had used. Silas came in toweling himself off as Fyche exited. "What did he want?"

"Now, now, no need to be jealous."

"I don't like the way he looks at you."

I couldn't help but laugh. "He's my AI, for Phong's sake."

"AIs are not all that trustworthy, you know. Ginka's AI was a sadistic murderer."

"Bad programming affects humans the same way," I said, suddenly remembering Silas's threats to torture Jyker. I wondered who this man was and what he was capable of. He had secrets, yet so did I. We were very similar personalities. Was that a good thing?

"Looking forward to seeing Holly?" he asked as he pulled on his slacks.

That morning a short transmission from halfway across the galaxy had informed me she was returning to Adana. She had seemed happy and relaxed. The vacation had apparently done her good.

"Who is Bik Jyker?" I'd asked.

"Beats me," she said. "I thought you knew."

"I only remember him calling Mother to tell her Father was dead."

She was silent for a moment. "I only saw Jyker once, with Dad. I walked in on the two of them, but nothing registered with me at the time as being interesting. I had to check through my diary to find his name. Dad told me he was a friend of Mum's. That's why I thought you'd want to find him."

I ignored her disingenuousness. Using that as an excuse to keep me on Adana and help out her editor was clumsy and unnecessary. Did she really not expect me to

help her? "Jyker is a criminal," I said. "He was working for Mischa. How would Mother have known him?"

"Phong be damned. Mischa!"

"How could he be a friend of Mother's?"

"I don't know. Where's Jyker now?"

"Escaped. He still has his own face but that will change as soon as he finds another body replacement clinic. He only came to Adana because he thought Mischa wouldn't risk following him here after her coup attempt failed."

Holly gave a wry smile. "Mischa is audacious enough to try anything to get what she wants. What will you do now?"

"I don't know. When Mother left me, she made me swear never to look for her. I thought it was because she was afraid of the Nova Town rebels coming after us, but now I'm not so sure."

The silence was long between us. I told her I'd have Fyche send her a record of what we knew and signed off.

"Peri?" Silas drew me back to the here and now.

"Oh, sorry. Holly said she was looking forward to returning home," I said vaguely.

With his steady gaze resting on me like a warm caress, Silas finished dressing. He gave me a hug and a kiss. I kissed him back. A long, lingering kiss.

"See you later," he said when he finally released me.

After the door closed behind him, I resolved to carry out my decision immediately. I called Fyche. A few moments later Fyche entered my stateroom and stood leaning against the bulkhead in a curiously human-like manner. "Finish up your reporting duties with the *Observer*," I said. "We're leaving immediately."

He gazed at me speculatively.

"We'll retrace my mother's steps after she left Nova Town. I'll get to the bottom of this if it kills me."

"Of course," Fyche replied, but he lingered at the door, glaring at me reproachfully.

I knew what he was thinking. A sudden emptiness, a black void, chilled my chest. "It has to be like this," I said defensively. "You know how I hate saying goodbye."

"So does Silas." A wry smile crossed his mouth. "He told me to tell you something."

"When?"

"Just now, as he was leaving."

"What did he say?"

"'Tell your mistress'," Fyche said, his voice morphing like silk into Silas's voice, though soft and melancholic. "'Tell your mistress that duty calls. I have to leave Adana, but I will return. Six months from today, I'll be waiting here. Be sure to tell her. When she finishes her quest, I'll be waiting'."

Unaccountably, the message made me the happiest woman in the galaxy.

Mikala Ash

Mikala Ash says, "I love science fiction and sex, paranormal and sex, adventure and sex, romance and sex, and oh, did I mention sex? It's the most powerful motivator of them all and it certainly drives my characters." From her beach side retreat Mikala lives in the future and the dark side of human nature, fertile ground for studying the great motivator.