

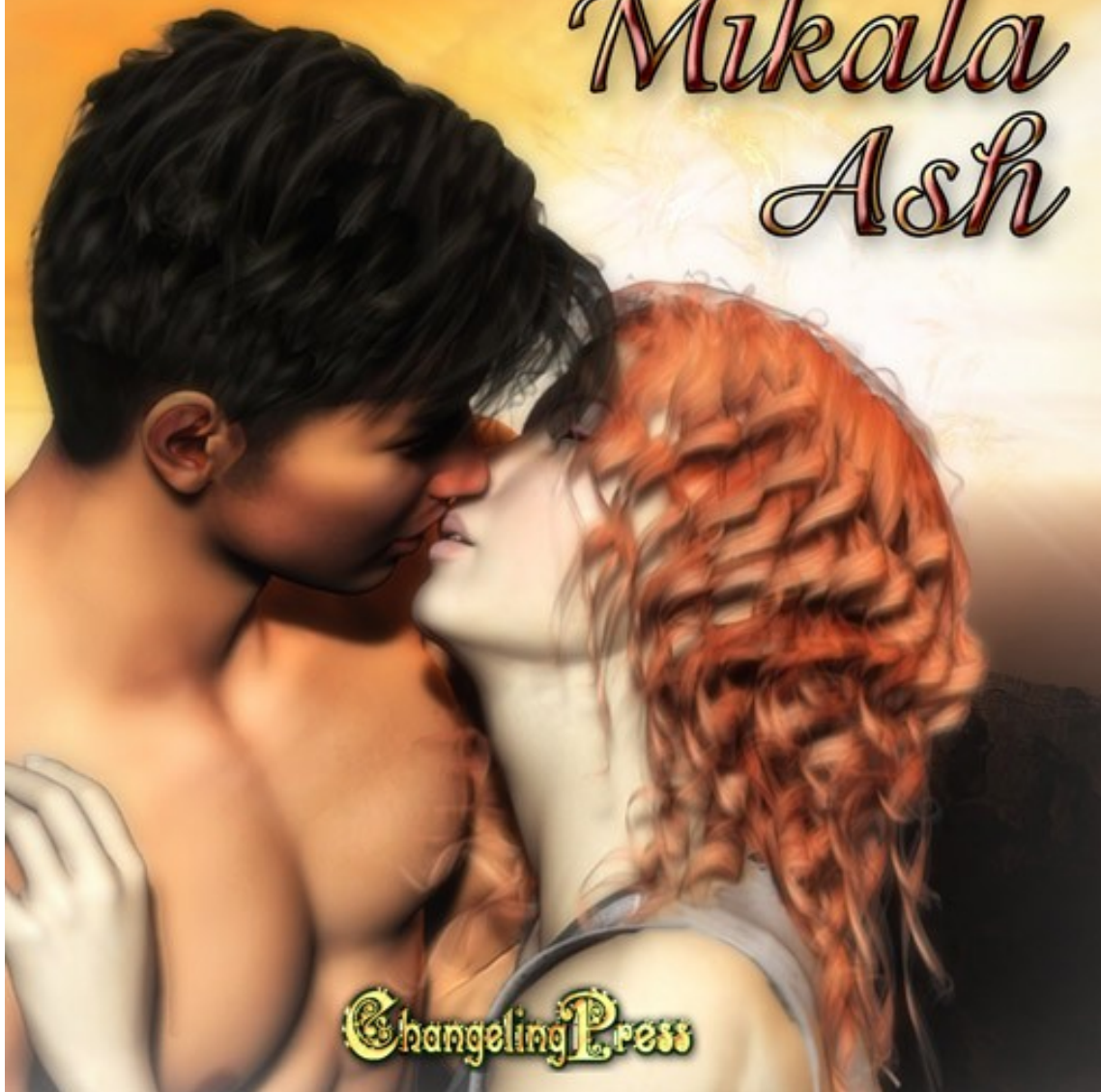


SPACEPORT



The Supernova Affair

*Mikala
Ash*



Changeling Press

Spaceport: The Supernova Affair

Mikala Ash

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Spaceport: The Supernova Affair

Mikala Ash

A Peri Barberossa Spaceport Adventure

Breaking News: The star Hygens will go supernova in less than three days and the population of Jones's World anxiously awaits rescue. Rescue ships are scarce, and Peri Barberossa and Fyche, her faithful AI, in their little ship the *Jalapeño*, are the first to make the mercy dash through the cosmos.

Fyche is left planet-bound chasing an unexpected lead to Peri's mother while the award-winning sex reporter unwittingly takes onboard a pair of ruthless terrorists. Hijacked and taken to Spaceport Adana, Peri, against her better judgment, helps her lover Silas Archimedes stay undercover to find out exactly what the terrorists are up to. The question is, can she make it back to Jones's World in time to save Fyche before the star explodes and vaporizes the planet?

Chapter One

"Masturbation, so it is said, is its own reward."

I stared dumbly at Fyche, not sure what to make of this unexpected declaration.

"It has many desirable aftereffects; physical release and relaxation being foremost. It favorably affects cardiovascular and endocrine activity, promotes sleep, reduces depression and increases self-awareness of sexual response. Though in your case such knowledge is redundant."

"And you are telling me this because...?"

"You've been moping about the ship in a complete funk for three weeks. I've been remotely monitoring your physiological vital signs, and I know, for a fact, that you have not had sexual release since we left Spaceport Adana."

"I've been meaning to talk to you about the bounds of privacy..."

"I am the *Jalapeño's* AI unit. I can't help but monitor your vital signs. Your health and well-being are my *raison d'être*."

He had me there. Being my guardian angel went with his programming. Sometimes he took his interest in me way beyond mere programming. "That doesn't mean you have to pay attention to it."

He gazed at me from the door to my cabin with the gorgeous eyes I'd bought him. "While I process that non sequitur," he said smoothly, "I wish to emphasize that it is not healthy for you to go so long without sexual release. It signifies a break from your basic pattern of behavior which I have observed for many years, and it concerns me."

I saw the direction in which this conversation was heading. It was an old argument from way before I'd bought him his humanoid body. "Does your desire to get into my pants have anything to do with this concern?"

"My desires are always secondary to your own. You know that. The fact that in this regard the two exactly coincide is further reason to indulge them."

"As usual your logic is impeccable, yet I am unmoved."

"Clearly another symptom of your depression."

"Be that as it may, for the last three weeks we've visited four of the planets my mother and I went to after we escaped Nova Town. We are unremembered and we don't appear on any refugee register or bank record. How did we get in and out of these planets and not leave a trace? I'm perplexed, frustrated and depressed about our failure. Is that so unusual?"

"I did not say I didn't understand the reason for your funk. It is how you are coping, or rather not coping, that concerns me."

I knew what he meant. Generally whenever I was feeling low I'd jump the bones of any good-looking male in the vicinity to satisfy my insatiable physical cravings and get out of the funk, as Fyche called it. Luckily, writing for a galactic sex guide pays the bills and allows me to indulge myself in that wonderful pastime as well as maintain my sanity. The last few months, however, had thrown me off that well worn track. First Laz, my intergalactic warrior who I think I fell in love with, left me to fulfill his political destiny. That was, now that I reflect on it, not as devastating a blow as I thought it had been at the time. Distance and events have a way of raising uncomfortable questions about the strength of one's former feelings. Was it love? I really can't say anymore.

Then there was Silas Archimedes, the private dick on Spaceport Adana, whose bones I'd jumped to forget about Laz. I think I fell for him as well. Then he left me so he could perform whatever mysterious duty was more important to him than I was.

Maybe Fyche was right. Maybe I should just let him fuck me and, by doing so, fuck Silas the hell out of my head. I rebelled at the notion, and it occurred to me then that maybe I didn't want the feelings I had for Silas to die the way Laz's light had so quickly dimmed, and the one way to ensure that was not to indulge myself with another man. Could that be true? It seemed a far too convoluted motivation even for me, but the notion lingered in my mind like a favorite old song.

So, what did I really want? Holly seemed to have found a cozy little arrangement with Maxim Dollavera. By all accounts they were now inseparable. Did I want that? Exclusivity? Surely not. If that was the case and all I wanted was a sure thing, hell, forget the others, I'd jump Fyche and be done with it. At least I'd be assured of his lifelong devotion. He wouldn't leave me for some noble duty. I was and always would be Fyche's only duty.

Did I want to be a duty? Of course not. But neither did I want that smothering type of relationship Holly had found. But if that was the case, why was I pining over Silas and Laz? They had their careers and I had mine.

I guess I could arrange to intersect with them every now and again to keep the juices flowing and still do what I've always done. Fyche would be a useful backup for those long lonely trips in between.

Fyche. I ran my eyes over his perfect body. It was the best money could buy. As far as sex toys go, Fyche would be the best there is; handsome, built like an athlete, intelligent, sensitive and... he was just too perfect. Maybe that's why I hadn't jumped his synthetic endoskeleton. I'd already told him I should have given him a blemish, a squint or a scar, maybe eczema, just so he wasn't so damned attractive.

I realized that Fyche was still gazing at me with an excruciatingly patient expression. I felt like a recalcitrant child trying to explain away a broken vase on the floor. "I'm on a mission to find my mother," I said defensively. "I'm preoccupied with other things apart from sexual gratification."

"As I believe I intimated. That is definitely out of character."

"Haven't you got things to do? Like running the ship?"

He smiled that annoying little *I know I'm winning the argument* smile. "As you know, I can be in two places at once. This body you see before you is an independently functioning peripheral AI device. My brother AI, for want of a better description, is still in the ship's CPU, flying the ship, while I am here, standing before you, expressing my concern for your well-being and offering myself as the remedy to what ails you."

"Well, thank you, Dr. Fyche, but I'm tired and I want to be alone. Go and fix dinner, or something."

"Chicken soup, perhaps?"

"Get lost."

When the hatch closed behind him I stared at the ceiling for a minute then decided to put his assertion to the test.

* * *

Thinking myself to a deserted beach on a far away world with cobalt skies and jade seas, I lay beneath the relentless rays of a hot white sun. Beyond the line of swaying palms through which colorful birds and butterflies flittered and frolicked was a great volcano, its lower slopes rising gently out of a verdant jungle then ascending almost vertically to a jagged, smoking summit.

I settled back onto the soft sand and surrendered myself to the warming rays that made my flesh tingle and set my juices flowing. I closed my eyes and luxuriated in the golden glow behind my eyelids. It was at this point I made the mistake of trying to think of any man except Laz or Silas. I've had my share of excellent lovers, albeit technically if not emotionally, so there was no shortage of candidates to choose from, even the dual-phallused General R'nok, but after I had closed my eyes, opened my legs and begun teasing my pussy lips, the indefatigable images of Silas and Laz pushed, or rather strolled, their way into my consciousness.

They sauntered naked along the beach toward me, their golden bodies glistening in the sun, the foamy waves lapping at their feet. They loomed over me, their heads haloed by the sun, their faces strangely luminous though silhouetted against the bright sky, their gazes devouring my exposed flesh with eyes of gleaming fire.

I tried to banish them, but they persisted and without invitation dropped to their knees beside me and with knowing fingers explored the mountains and crevices of my body. In the end I gave up resisting and let their fantastical bodies have their way with me.

Suddenly, as is the way of fantasies, Laz was between my thighs, licking my pussy, his tongue taking the place of my fingers. At the same time my imaginary Silas was sucking a nipple, taking the sensitive point between his lips and flicking the tip with his tongue.

In real life both men had learned the pleasure zones of my body and in my fantasy my own fingers became the instruments of that knowledge. I was in no hurry, and if I let them have free rein it would all be over too soon, so I paced myself and my imaginary lovers, directing their ghostly touch with deliberate intent. Together we slowly ascended the slopes of the tall volcano, following the gentle folds of the foothills, exploring the occasional moist valley but always ascending. Our goal was the heady summit of my own mountain of pleasure.

As we climbed, my body became increasingly tense with the exertion both physical and mental. Keeping my boys at bay while I encouraged them to caress every millimeter of my flesh was a psychological battle that I was not truly motivated to win. My muscles strained as the sensual triggers were tugged and pulled one by one.

Suddenly Silas and Laz swapped places. Laz was squeezing my nipples and kissing me at the same time. His mouth mashed against mine so fiercely I opened my eyes to check that no one was in the cabin with me. Alas alone, I responded to his probing tongue, and within moments his mouth consumed me once more. Silas had not been deterred by my momentary lapse into reason. He was sliding the head of his cock up and down my wet slit, slowly pushing his cock inside. Wavelets of tantalizing pleasure cascaded through my boiling cunt into my belly. Our gentle stroll up the mountain had swiftly become a mad headstrong rush to the top.

My attempts at moderation having failed, I joined the race and surrendered to sensation. Silas's cock was sliding in and out of my cunt with increasing ferocity, touching that sweet spot just inside and, not surprisingly, in synchrony with Laz's tongue as it darted cheekily in and out of my mouth.

Suddenly my fantasy took complete control of its own destiny, and I found myself straddling Silas's hips, his cock embedded deep in my sodden cunt. I was

grinding down on his phallus so that my clit rubbed against his pelvic bone. Our race up the volcanic slopes had become a flight of eagles soaring headlong toward the summit. Laz was suddenly behind me, his hands pushing me forward so that my breasts flattened against Silas's broad chest. With delicate forcefulness Laz pushed the head of his cock into my ass.

We'd reached the summit and I screamed out as the tension that had been inside me all these past weeks exploded in a burst of actinic light that enveloped the universe! The skies split apart in a myriad of flashes as the eternal stars gave up their incandescent lives to the altar of my pleasure.

Convulsing like a stranded fish, I came back to myself in a tangle of sheets and underclothes, my sweetly tingling body lathered in sweat. "For Phong's fucking sake!" I gasped.

As usual, Fyche had been right.

Though exhausted, I felt deliriously happy and profoundly relaxed. I lay semi-comatose for some time before rousing myself. I climbed off my bed onto wobbly feet and padded into my bathroom. After a quick shower I dressed in a light pastel Polinee blouse, white Jerry Olin slacks and my favorite black Gulan pumps. Feeling like a million credits, I slinked my way up to the bridge.

Fyche was seated in the pilot seat, listening to some ancient classical music in which he'd recently developed a fondness. He glanced up at me and gave me an impertinent wink of his left eye. I waited for the inevitable "I told you so," but instead he pointed to the console.

"Peri, I was just about to call you. We've received an urgent quantum space signal from the Navy."

I slumped down in the copilot seat, put my feet up on the console and admired my Gulan. They were studded with tiny Helio IV diamonds and they caught the light magnificently, like a sparkling galaxy of stars wrapped around my feet. "What do they want?"

"They are calling on all private and commercial ships in the sector to assist with an emergency evacuation."

"What's going on?"

"The star Hygens is about to go supernova. A quantum subspace tear has ripped through its core. They estimate they have just seventy-six hours to get the affected population out of range."

"Good Phong almighty. A whole population?"

"According to the Galactic Almanac, Jones's World is a large, one G-sized moon circling a gas giant in the Hygens system. Settled by pirates a century ago, it has been the base for smugglers and criminals ever since. Fifty years ago it became a popular destination for displaced persons fleeing religious persecution and political unrest and now has a substantial population of seventy-five thousand. Ten years ago the moon's Central Committee applied for membership of the galactic parliament. That application is still being processed."

The wheels of galactic bureaucracy turn slow. "It won't be needed now," I mused.

"While under consideration, humanitarian aid becomes a legal responsibility for the IAC, hence the Navy's involvement."

"Lucky sods, otherwise the IAC would have left them to it."

"The application was not favorably received. The planet's criminal past is not popular in the civilized worlds."

"Civilized worlds. That's a joke."

"Oxymoron perhaps?"

"Well, whatever it is, get us over there. We can fit a family or two in the *Jalapeño*."

"I'll confirm our ETA with the Navy Commander, and then I'll start clearing some space."

"How long till we get there?"

"Three hours."

"I bet it will be chaos on the ground."

"Reports say there is already rioting occurring at the spaceport."

"Where will we take the evacuees?"

"The nearest planet is Tannis, four hours away."

"So we can make a few trips over the next few days."

"I expect so. The Navy has only one transport at the moment. They expect more soon. However..."

"You don't think they can get everyone off?"

"The evacuation is hampered by the fact that the moon does not have a space station and associated fleet of shuttles. So the Navy will be shuttling people up to their main ship in their small scouts from which they will disperse evacuees to smaller ships which lack surface landing capabilities. Until other military vehicles arrive the evacuation will proceed very slowly."

"What about the local ships? You said they were pirates and smugglers."

"There are not enough at home. They are, as you might imagine from their nature, scattered all across the galaxy. The ones that are in the area are doing their best, apparently, but until the Navy gets more transports there, they'll be only saving a few people."

I shuddered when I thought of the panic that must be occurring on the surface. Thousands of people desperately wanting evacuation, but knowing there was limited space on the few ships and shuttles. It must be terrible.

I recalled those panicked moments when Mother and I left Nova Town. There was constant gunfire outside the spaceport gates, which made me jump and others scream. I had waited for her in the decrepit shuttle while she had gone off to retrieve Holly, who had sneaked off to rejoin Father. I remember the fear of being cooped up with hundreds of people in the hold. All of us faced death if the New Guard caught us on the ground. The fear in the air was tangible. I don't think I'll ever forget that gut-wrenching tension.

When Mother appeared out of the swirling mist at the ship's hatchway I'd searched the smoky air for a sign of Holly, but she wasn't there. She had decided to stay with Father. I'd screamed at my mother for letting her stay, but my adolescent anger was lost amongst the wails and sobs of the others huddled about us. I'll always remember the look of utter despair on Mother's face. To silence my incoherent cries she'd clutched me to her breast and dragged me to our little corner where we sat holding each other for the long journey to safety.

"We'll need to use your cabin as well," Fyche said, pulling me from my memories.

"Of course. I'll clear it up."

After tidying my mess and securing loose bric-a-brac in the closet, I changed into a pastel blue flight suit, thinking I might as well look the part of a starship pilot. Fyche brought us in thirty minutes out from Jones's World and the gas giant it orbited. This was a little bit closer to a planetary body than normally recommended, particularly one as large as the gas giant, because of awkward gravitational effects, but Fyche didn't want to waste time in chugging along too far at sub-light speeds. The bright yellow clouds swirled in agitation as the solar wind whipped up its atmosphere and disrupted the fine tracery of its ring system. It would have been a fine sight from the colony, I thought, soon to be obliterated.

Fyche gained clearance from the Navy Evac Coordinator, who was obviously glad to see him, to land at the spaceport of the second continent which, until now, had not seen a rescue ship at all. The anxious spaceport controller gave him the coordinates of a landing pad and, after Fyche told them we could take a maximum of thirty-five people, relayed the names of the people we would transport. The local authorities had our allotted evacuees already waiting on the tarmac.

As Fyche took us down I gazed out the bridge windows with some trepidation. It wasn't likely to be pretty down there. The spaceport was a large circular patch of black asphalt with a half dozen landing cradles. It appeared as if there was a vast swarm of ants covering the plain that surrounded the port. I guessed there must be thousands of

people streaming into the city by the five roads that radiated spoke-like from the city a few kilometers to the north.

Another vessel was coming in behind us. A smuggler's ship no doubt. A wave of agitation spread through the crowd of ants as their desperate eyes spied us approaching. Because we were the first spacecraft to land since the emergency was declared, the mood of the crowded mass would have been electric.

Fyche settled us gently into the landing cradle and I went to the hatch and lowered the ramp. A dry hot wind blew across the empty port and hit me square in the face. A very human stench came with it. These people have been waiting the best part of the day out in the open, none searching for privacy to relieve themselves in overstretched amenities for fear of losing their place. Armed guards toting pulse rifles protected a hastily erected wire fence around the landing pad. I was reminded of Nova Town and recalled that this was an outlaw world where guns would be the final arbiter of justice.

A small group of people was seated on the tarmac. I counted seven families, fourteen adults with twenty-one children all aged between two months up to ten years old. There was a lone male, wearing a hooded cape and breathing mask, sitting off to one side. The group rose as one, relief brightening their eyes as the ramp hit the tarmac. The crowd behind the fence erupted in angry shouts and jeers and pushed at the fence. A shot was fired into the air.

An armed soldier waved our passengers forward and it was clear to me that they had been ordered at gunpoint to sit quietly and show restraint. I motioned to the people to approach. None had luggage. The soldier flashed me a glance with haunted eyes and gave me a piece of paper. "Names," he grunted before striding off to a ground car that was waiting for him.

"Hi, everyone," I said, trying to be upbeat. "I'm Peri Barberossa and this is my ship, the *Jalapeño*. We'll get you off world in just a minute. My pilot will show you where to sit." The people filed on board, the mothers comforting crying children. The relief on the adults' faces was tangible. They whispered their thanks as they passed me,

eyes lowered. I had no idea of the method the authorities used to select the lucky families, and I didn't care. In this case, a life is a life, no matter what.

A pretty girl in her mid-twenties with piercing dark eyes and wearing a blue shawl smiled at me and offered me a little white paper bag. "Chocolate," she said. "It's all I have."

I blushed. "Payment isn't necessary," I said. "Save it for the children."

Disappointment crossed her face.

"Oh, just one then," I said and reached for the bag. Before I had time to take a chocolate she was bumped aside by one of the other passengers and swept up the companionway by the press of people.

Fyche ushered the rest of the evacuees onto the *Jalapeño* and got them quickly settled. I was closing the hatch when he stopped me. "I can't come, Peri. We're too heavy for safety. I'll stay and sort out the next group. I'll see you in eight hours."

"Fuck that!"

"You know I'm right, Peri."

Fyche was never wrong about things like this. It occurred to me that he'd known this would have to be the case even before we landed. He probably hadn't told me so I wouldn't worry, which was what I was doing right now. "Be careful."

"What can go wrong?" he said with a smile, grasped my hand and gave it a squeeze. "See you in eight hours."

"You bet."

"One thing before you go. The guy in the hood looks the competent type. If anything goes wrong, seek his help."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

He shrugged and gave a little wave. I shot him a scowl and shut the hatch. I carefully stepped through the people sitting in the companionway to take the pilot's seat. "Take us up," I told Fyche's brother AI, the one embodied in the ship's CPU.

"I'll be okay," Fyche said reassuringly.

I gazed at the people sitting squeezed together behind me. *But will I?*

Chapter Two

I looked at the haunted expressions and knew that my rescue effort was pitifully inadequate. Seventy-five thousand people still waited to leave the doomed world. The thirty-five I carried was a drop in the ocean. A child began crying and that brought the thing back into perspective. Every life is important, I thought, every life saved counted.

I noticed a few more ships in orbit as Fyche took us to a safe jump point. I doubted if there were enough to make a difference. I was afraid this was going to be a total disaster. Twenty minutes later we were in quantum space.

"You could have told me you were planning to stay behind," I hissed at Fyche. I kept my tone down so the passengers couldn't hear.

"I didn't want you to worry."

"So what am I doing now?"

"I didn't want you to worry, before we touched down at least. The *Jalapeño* can only carry so much weight. As you know, my artificial body weighs slightly more than a human adult my size. In fact, my estimates were in error. We are slightly overweight as it is."

"You just didn't want me to talk you out of it."

"As if you could challenge my logic," Fyche said haughtily.

"There will come a day, smartass, when I'll surprise you."

"There was another reason I stayed."

"And what could that possibly be?"

"There may be a lead to your mother here. It's a thin one, hardly plausible, but while I'm there I might as well check it out and see if it comes to anything."

"What is it?"

"Leeson came up in a search I performed as we logged into the spaceport's database. They live in a village two hundred kilometers north of the spaceport."

A surge of excitement coursed through me. Leeson was my mother's maiden name. I didn't have time to interrogate Fyche any further as the hooded male dropped into the co-pilot seat. I was about to tell him to piss off out of it when he began unfastening the breathing mask that was attached by tubes to a small canister at his belt. I guessed he was a bio-engineered inhabitant of a non-terraformed planet. "Madam pilot," he said in a voice that was strangely familiar through the huskiness and foreign accent. "On behalf of my fellows I wish to thank you for what you are doing. We owe you our lives."

"It's my pleasure," I mumbled. "Now..."

He tilted his head strangely, as if he wanted to say something else but a baby started crying. Behind us the young pretty woman who had offered me chocolate was comforting the child, holding it close to her breast. Her partner, a dark-haired man with a cheery smile, played rock-scissors-paper with another toddler. He noticed my gaze and gave me a nod and mouthed, "Thank you."

"May I speak to you in private?" the masked man said.

There was a family each in the two cabins, one each in the galley and sick bay, with children overflowing into the companionways. Apart from the head, outside which there was a queue, the engine room was the only private place, and I wasn't too keen on taking a stranger there.

"As you can see, we're packed to the rafters at the moment. Say what you have to say."

The guy pushed the hood back a little and I gasped in surprise. It took me a moment to collect myself. "Um, sure, why don't we move down to the engine room?"

"I'd much appreciate it. My medical condition is a little embarrassing." He said that loud enough for the young couple sitting on the floor behind him to hear. One of the older children giggled.

I led the way down to the engine room, stepping over some sleeping people, and shut the door behind us. He unclipped his hood and then removed the mask. He grasped my shoulders and pulled me to him, mashing his mouth against mine. I surrendered to it for a half minute before pushing him away. "Silas! What the hell are you doing here?"

"Does it matter?" he asked and kissed me again.

I disengaged from him once again. "Of course it matters."

"Glad to see me?"

"Of course."

"Then show me. Show me how glad you are."

"Bastard," I said, and then kissed him.

We came at each other like starving beasts. Though my last self-induced orgasm had only been a few hours ago, the sight of Silas had, in a matter of moments, made me hornier than I'd felt since we'd last fucked for real.

We grappled with each other, madly clawing at our clothing, as if we were on fire. Silas's disguise meant I had more to get through which increased the urgent ferocity with which I attacked him. In a matter of moments we'd stripped each other of the essentials. My flight suit was flung carelessly over the quantum engine manifold. His cloak and shirt were similarly dispatched with thoughtless abandon. I had a moment of clarity and flicked them off the cowlings. Fyche had once told me that quantum engines should be treated with respect lest they let loose all the fires of hell.

It was only a moment of sensibility. I immediately fell back into the whirlpool of hot emotion. With our mouths locked together we clung to each other as if we meant to fuse our bodies into one single pulsating lump of flesh. With sudden violence Silas pushed me back onto a work bench, held me down and spread my quivering thighs.

"Fuck me!" I shouted in a voice ragged with lust.

He gripped his cock, a long scimitar of hard flesh, and without delay he pushed the head into my sopping wet pussy. I gasped in welcome surprise. He had last been inside me three weeks ago, and I'd forgotten how well he filled me. The violence of our

frenzied coupling drove my back into the hard bench, but pain meant nothing, as long as I had him inside me. As he fucked me Silas pawed at my breasts, squeezing them together, pinching my nipples till I screamed.

"Fuck me, you bastard!"

He drove into me with a vengeance, grunting as his balls slapped against my ass cheeks. He bent low to kiss me and take my lips between his teeth. With each downward thrust of his cock I grunted my own satisfaction into his mouth. He fucked me like a man possessed, and after only a few minutes his shaft swelled inside my tight sheath. He cried out and his cock erupted, filling me with a glut of hot volcanic come. His explosive ejaculation ignited my cunt, and I came too, the walls of my pussy squeezing his throbbing cock as if I wanted to milk him dry.

Drenched in sweat and panting like dogs we released each other and rolled apart. "Wow," he huffed. "What was that about?"

"I can't honestly say," I panted.

"I've been thinking about you day and night," he said.

"Really?"

"Have you thought of me?"

"Possibly."

He laughed. "You have! I knew it! Well, this is really something."

"Yep, it's really something all right." *But what?*

I waited till my thumping heart slowed and the rush of blood past my ears eased before I spoke again. I had to collect my thoughts. "Now will you tell me what the hell you're doing on Jones's World?"

"I'm undercover, following someone."

I gaped at him uncomprehendingly. "We're in the middle of a horrendously fucking big emergency, and you're following someone?"

He shrugged. "It's my job. The woman I'm tailing works for Jyker."

"Jyker!"

I propped myself on my elbows and peered down at him, trying to read his face. His gaze found my breasts, and he stuck out his tongue and licked the nearest nipple.

"I see you remember the little sod," he continued. "I couldn't figure him out. What he was doing on Adana, going there to get himself a new body, just didn't make sense. I mean, he has enough money to have bought his own robot surgeons and done it somewhere safer. I always had doubts about that theory but couldn't come up with anything better, because I didn't know much about him. Running from Mischa I understood. She's a real vindictive bitch, but by coming to Adana he actually showed himself and Mischa responded. She almost got him too. Maybe she would have had we not interfered. So I'm thinking there's a deeper thing going on here. He's a clever little bastard."

"So what took you to Jones's World?"

"Though Jyker worked for Mischa, he was actually running his own secret organization as well, in parallel with hers. The digging I was doing turned up Jones's World. So I popped over for a look see and found his gang, or part of it anyway. This woman, well, she's heading to Adana to pick him up."

She? "But we're taking you all to Tannis."

He shrugged. "I expect she'll hijack your ship."

I stared dumbly at him for a moment before exploding. "We have to stop her!"

He screwed up his face in an exaggerated wince. "Well, you see, that's the thing. If we do that, we don't get Jyker."

"The hell with Jyker! I'm not risking my ship for anyone."

"Come on, Peri. You have to trust that I know what I'm doing. This parallel operation that Jyker was running is involved in something sinister, something big."

"It sure is. It's called a supernova and it's going to kill tens of thousands of people."

"That's true, and it is just like you to be the first civilian ship to offer aid. But the Navy is on the job now. When the spaceport authorities were paid a massive bribe to get my target on the first civilian ship out of here, I got suspicious. The bribe was

astronomical. I know 'cause I had to pay the same amount. So, what can be worth fifty million credits to get this woman off the planet?"

Fifty million! For Phong's sake, fifty million?

He licked my nipple again and I twisted out of range. "I don't know what's worth fifty million, so why don't you tell me."

"No one knows where the money came from. I suspect Jyker has a cache of credits safely hidden somewhere, or a few somewheres is more like it. The only thing that I can figure was that he has hatched a plan to escape Adana using this woman. He must be on a timetable. The supernova came at the wrong time for him. The next commercial flight is scheduled for three days' time, but of course that has been cancelled."

"Why does she need a commercial flight? There are smugglers all around here."

"She must need a legitimate cover to get into Adana space. So the supernova raised its ugly head, she contacts Jyker. He arranges the bribes to get her on board the first ship out. All ships are directed to Tannis so it's logical that she will hijack you and take us to Adana."

I recalled Silas's intention to torture Jyker when we had him temporarily in our power on Adana. "Can't you tie her up and pull out her fingernails? Force her to tell you where Jyker is?"

"I could, but there's a risk she may not know. Jyker plays things close to his chest. He hasn't survived this long by letting people know what he's doing. She may just be turning up to wait for him to give her further instructions. I can't take that chance."

"There's something you're not telling me. This is just simple gangster stuff. You wouldn't foul up a civilian evacuation, risking hundreds of lives, just because of a gangster."

"Yep, you read me pretty well. I think I like that. Ordinarily there is no way I'd compromise an evacuation of this type. I don't want innocent people's lives on my conscience." He let his words hang in the air, waiting for me to fill in the blanks.

"So you think more people are in danger if you don't catch Jyker."

"Right again. Jyker is one smart son of a bitch. He got away from Mischa. He got away from us. From what I've turned up, he's tied in with a terrorist group who we think may be trying to stage a coup in the galactic capital, Batrium Nuun'r Prime."

"You're kidding me."

"We don't know much. Intelligence has been patchy. My inquiries from Adana when you first brought it to my attention set off some sparks. There were scattered bread crumbs all the way from where the plot began, in Nova Town, where your family first ran into Jyker. Mischa's attempted coup in Adana was a straight criminal job for her, a grab for money and local influence, but not for Jyker. He's involved in something bigger. When she let him down, when we mucked up her plans, he jumped ship with her money to finance the next stage of the operation. What that is I don't know, except there're some crumbs that lead to a separatist faction in the galactic capital, via Jones's World."

"And you think Jyker will tell you what those plans are?"

"Not tell me. No more Mr. Nice Guy from me. We'll psychoprobe him, get every single memory out of his stinking skull. I don't care if it wipes his mind and leaves him a drooling shell. If we fail, millions will die, not the sixty you may rescue from Jones's World if we muck it up, no offense to your good intentions. Not sixty but millions, Peri. Millions."

"Every life is important," I muttered.

He caressed my cheek. "That it is, my love. But a million outweighs sixty, don't you think?"

"Fyche is still there on the planet. I might not get back in time."

Silas's face contorted in sudden anger. "He's a fucking machine, for Phong's sake!" He took me into his arms. "I know this is hard. I know that. I've had to reconcile it a million times since I bribed my way onto the *Jalapeño*. Someone is stuck on Jones's World because of me. That doesn't sit well. But we may only get one chance at this. At

the moment Jyker is relatively helpless on Adana. This contact of his is his next way out. If he succeeds and joins his friends, we'll never find him until it's too late."

A machine. A fucking machine?

"Peri?"

A million outweighs sixty. Outweighs a machine. A fucking machine.

I gazed into his determined eyes. "Sixty-one lives for a million. I can't fault the logic." I just hoped my conscience would forgive me for that logic. Fyche, ever the logical one, would have come to the same conclusion. "For the greater good then."

"That's the ticket. Nota, she's the woman I'm tailing, is a cool customer. She ran a whorehouse which was a front for a smuggling operation, medicines mostly, stolen biotics and painkillers. That was one of the moneymaking fronts that was being channeled to an arms dealer. Tep, the guy posing as her husband, is her second in command. The story is he started out as a street bum boy, selling head jobs and more in dark alleys. Nota liberated him from an abusive customer. Blew the sod's cods off while Tep was, well, you can guess what Tep was doing at the time. Anyway, he's now her devoted slave. She's a tough little bitch. Kill you as soon as look at you."

"You know a fair bit about her."

"Not much. She's ex-colonial marine, so she has discipline and won't do anything until she's ready."

"When will that be?"

He shrugged. "If I was clairvoyant I could tell you. But I'm not."

"Which one is she?"

"Nota is the young one, long dark hair, with the blue shawl."

Phong's hairy ass! "She seemed so nice. She offered to give me a chocolate. Fyche," I said to the air. "What is she doing now?"

"She's sitting in the companionway behind the bridge. She's tending the children in her charge."

I glared at Silas. "Her own family?"

"Not likely," Silas said. "She's borrowed them. She probably told the parents she'd guarantee their safety."

Those poor parents, I thought. Fearful they wouldn't get off planet themselves, they'd given their children to a gangster. "This is a dirty business."

"They play for keeps, sweetheart. I'm sure the kiddies are safe as long as she needs them as hostages."

"Watch her, Fyche. Let me know every time she sneezes."

"I've reviewed the vid records from when she first came on board," Fyche reported. "She's done nothing suspicious since she's been on board. Neither has her partner."

"Any weapons?"

"None that I have detected."

"How is she going to hijack us without weapons?"

Silas shrugged. "There's more than one way to skin a cat. Just don't turn your back on her or her so-called husband."

"Fyche, keep watching her."

"Peri, I have noticed that the other refugees are unusually fatigued. All the children are now asleep and the adults are virtually all asleep. Vital signs suggest they have been drugged."

Silas chuckled. "Oh, she's good. She's very good."

"You sound like you admire her."

"I can't help it. Just before you arrived she was handing out chocolates to everyone. No one had eaten for hours so they were all grateful."

"She tried it on me. You weren't hungry?"

"I don't like chocolate."

"Don't you? I didn't know that."

"There are a few things you don't know about me. I'd like to make you better informed."

"Really?"

Silas kissed me. "You know, in these close confines, my thoughts are drifting to other things. Nothing is going to happen for a few hours."

The pressure of his cock against my thigh was impressive. "I guess, while I can't think of anything better to do, you can show me something I don't already know." I kissed him and he kissed me back.

This time we weren't quite so frenetic in our lovemaking.

Chapter Three

Dear Peri. While I'm here on Jones's World, I'll keep a diary-type record as I did on Adana to keep you fully informed of my activities, as I know you are concerned about me getting into trouble.

I don't know what will happen to me. Looking about me, the planet is clearly in chaos. Martial law is in place and I have seen much violence. I'll try my best to survive, of course, but there are some things I need to say to you, just in case. I know you doubt the veracity of my statements of love. How could you not? I am your AI, programmed to care for you, body and spirit, so how can you possibly believe me when I say I love you?

What do I know of love?

You see, I too have questioned my feelings. Believe me, I want them to be real as opposed to a mere consequence of my programming so I perform repeated analyses of my subroutines every time I experience these odd sensations in my chest, those spikes in electrical potential when I see you for the first time every morning. How the sound of your voice echoes through my circuits, the pride I feel when I see you perform some selfless act, and the pain I feel when you yourself are in pain. It goes beyond simple programming, I'm certain.

Why am I saying this now?

Watching you close the *Jalapeño's* ramp just now, the hot wind blowing through your hair, the disapproval written across your face, caused a chilling hollowness in my chest. If I believed in premonitions, I would say that I believe I may not see you again. The feeling is ridiculous, of course. I am still in the ship's CPU, watching over you, monitoring your vital signs, caring for you as I always have. But the feeling that these

particular eyes will never see you again is strong and painful to me. I want to remind you that I always tell the truth. Remember that if this physical body ceases to exist, the ship's backups will have everything until we parted. Remember, the Fyche that is the *Jalapeño* loves you too. We are, after all, the same.

While it caused me some concern to leave you in the company of so many strangers, I knew you were in good hands. As a precaution I checked each of the passengers for signs of ill health in case we needed to provide special care during the trip. I identified Silas Archimedes' vital signs immediately when he came within range of my sensors. Silas was obviously traveling incognito and did not want to be identified, but I understand your relationship and so my decision to stay behind was easier to make.

Why did I decide to remain on Jones's World?

As I've probably already told you, my brother AI in the *Jalapeño*, I mean, I found your mother's maiden name in the population register of their Central Committee's database. As the planet's population is made up of displaced persons from the last fifty years I thought it possible that I might pick up a lead on your mother's travels. As I have done elsewhere, I checked the names of Barberossa and Leeson. Imagine my reaction when I discovered a family named Leeson registered to have landed fifty years ago who were connected to a village two hundred kilometers to the north of where we had touched down.

That village is populated by a commune of religious fundamentalists, the Naturalists, a rather obscure breakaway sect from the planet Rowan. They reject modern technology and live a simple agricultural existence, obeying the strict moral precepts of their deity. They exist on several dozen outpost worlds but hardly register amongst the hundreds of religious philosophies that are found in the galaxy. How your mother's family is connected to them is unknown to me, and I'm hoping that I'll be able to make contact.

Totally rejecting technology as they do, the Naturalists have not been warned of the disaster as they operate no technology whatsoever. Knowing the possible family

relationship to you I have decided to make ourselves available for their rescue. We were already committed to the first thirty-five evacuees, and since it would take me some time to organize the village's evacuation, I thought it best to let you take the first group yourself.

Forgive me for not telling you at the time. I did not want to create an anxious situation for you. Knowing the fundamental principles of this sect, it is possible they would not wish to evacuate at all. I did not want to raise any false hope on your behalf, nor debate the pros and cons of my staying while we were standing at the hatchway.

I convinced one of the spaceport guards to lend me one of their small one man speeders as well as a comm unit, and I set off to the village to warn them of the impending catastrophe. The journey was straightforward once I negotiated my way through the massive and restless crowd. I was, as you'd expect, the *only* person heading away from the spaceport.

I do believe that when you return you should come directly to the coordinates of the village as I do not doubt I will be able to get anyone through the vast and unruly crowd that has gathered outside the fence. My brother on the *Jalapeño* has the coordinates and will use them to guide you to me. I've taken a homing signal transponder as well.

Beyond the city outskirts there are extensive agricultural fields which give way to a vast expanse of grasslands which in turn become small foothills which morph into more rugged, broken terrain. There were no roads at this point and I relied on the speeder's guidance system to get me to the village.

The village was a small affair, some thirty round domed huts made of mud brick, arranged in two concentric rings around a central space. The huts were set on the south facing slopes of a deep valley through which ran a wide, gently flowing river. Thin plumes of smoke arose from the peaked roofs. Children played in the grassy fields beside the village, and in the tilled fields adults worked with domesticated animals resembling six-legged oxen. It appeared an idyllic setting, one which many poets

through the ages have lamented the loss, but which the Naturalists seemed to have regained.

I parked the speeder some distance from the first ring of huts and made my way slowly on foot. My arrival caused some consternation and men with pitchforks and other farm implements rushed toward me from the adjoining fields. I held up my hands in peace and in the loudest voice I could muster demanded to speak to their leader.

The response I received was angry in the extreme. I noted the accent and dialect the people were shouting and adjusted my voice accordingly. I repeated my request and this appeared to make them even angrier, and I suffered several prods of the pitchfork for my trouble.

The men confronting me were dressed in shabby shirts and leggings. Despite the idyllic setting, life here in the village was obviously hard. The men appeared malnourished and everyone I could see, even the women observing from the safety of the huts, was under forty years of age.

In their own language I reiterated the fact that I came in peace and needed to warn them of an impending disaster. Their reaction was, however, to start mumbling what I took to be prayers. Some even fell to their knees, saying things to the effect that some prophecy was coming to pass. When I pointed out to them that it was only their sun going nova and not the suns that shone on the planets where their other sects were located, several of the men became furious and, with pitchforks prodding my back, led me into a small hut.

I was willing to allow them this minor victory, giving them time to have a meeting so they could decide their course of action, though I had my suspicions what that decision would be. Before they shut the door I requested to see any of the Leeson who I knew to be living in the village, but they made no answer and shut me into darkness.

Twenty minutes later the door opened and a young woman with strawberry blonde hair entered the hut. She had the most captivating green eyes with a wild kind of innocence in her expression. She wore the simple rough tunics of her fellow villagers,

displaying slender legs and bony arms. With trembling hands she presented me with an earthenware cup. Though she was clearly afraid, and I was probably the first outsider she had ever confronted, she was brave enough to carry out this duty.

Peri, the family resemblance was clear. Though she lacked the sensual bearing of yourself or Holly, she was, without doubt, related to your family. I performed a vital sign check and was surprised at what I found.

"My name is Fyche Barberossa," I said. "Are you the village leader?"

She started a little at the sound of my voice, perhaps surprised that I spoke her language, or maybe it was my peculiar accent. She shook her head slightly. "I am not the leader, I am Gemma Lees." She held up the cup again. I took it from her. "It is customary," she said hesitantly, "to offer a stranger a drink. God commands it."

My sensors identified the liquid as water. I took a sip to satisfy her custom.

She gazed at me wide-eyed, taking in my body from toe to head. "Is it true, what you say?"

I fixed her eyes with my gaze. "Your planet will be destroyed in a couple of days," I repeated. "You must prepare for evacuation. I am the pilot of a ship belonging to a relation of the Leeson's. She is probably a distant cousin of yours, though to what degree I cannot tell without a family tree."

"Cousin," she repeated softly. Her eyes widened even further as she took in the concept.

"Will your elders agree to be evacuated to a planet on which one of your other sects now lives?"

Her face clouded and she looked to the floor. It was as I thought. These people were fundamentalists. The idea of using technology such as a spaceship to take them from this place would be an anathema.

"Gemma," I said. "Your people do not have much time. Your elders came to this planet by spaceship fifty years ago. They can leave by spaceship to live as you have always done, only somewhere else."

She shook her head. "We have always been here in the valley."

This again was as I had feared. I guessed that once they had suffered the indignity of using unnatural technology to get to this planet, the elders had erased all memory of the fact, telling their children they were indigenous. "You think you came from this planet? Is that what they told you?"

She gave me an odd look.

"Gemma, your people came here before you were born. They came in spaceships after being persecuted on another world. They settled here and made a good life for themselves. But that life is about to end. You must go somewhere else and rebuild. You can do it. The galactic government will help you."

She gazed back at me and I could tell from her expression she was trying hard to process this startling claim.

"I understand your reluctance to believe what I say. Why should you believe me, a stranger, with an impossible tale such as this?"

I pulled the comm unit I'd brought from the spaceport out of my pocket. I activated it and held it before her eyes to show her the emergency warning put out by the planet's Central Committee as well as the breaking news from the spaceport.

Gemma stepped back in alarm. Of course she had never seen such a device before. It must have appeared to be a work of magic to her eyes.

"This is just a simple communication device," I said. "It won't harm you. It just shows you what is happening elsewhere on the planet."

She held her lower lip between her teeth as she watched the chaotic scenes from the spaceport where thousands of people clamored at the locked gates, pleading with the armed soldiers to let them be first to the ships. In the background shuttles and spacecraft were landing and taking on more refugees.

"I can have a spacecraft come here, to the village. That way your elderly will not have to walk all the way to the spaceport."

"Where do you come from?"

"I live on your cousin's spaceship. I am her pilot."

Peri, I didn't think it necessary to confuse her with my true nature. She had enough to deal with as it was.

She fixed me with her jade eyes. "The sun will destroy us?"

"That's right. I know it is hard to believe. You have trusted the sun for all your life, rising every day, setting every night, giving warmth to your crops. The sun is so important to your life. But it is sick. It will explode, believe me, and turn everything to dust."

She watched the newscast for a few minutes more, listening to the reporters describe the chaos and the running count of how many people had left the surface. At that moment it stood at five thousand. "Sixty-six hours and seventy thousand people to go," the reporter announced with a note of resignation.

"I can have your cousin come here so you don't have to experience that sort of chaos. She will save your people."

I felt that she was beginning to accept what I was saying, how much she actually believed with certainty I couldn't say. It was a big ask on my part. Peri, would you have believed a total stranger with a tale so far outside your experience? I doubt anyone would. That being the case I decided to see if she had any information about your mother's family.

"Gemma, you are a Leeson, though you have shortened your last name. Do you have any knowledge of your parents and grandparents? Where they came from?"

She shook her head. "I'm sorry. There is only my mother and me now."

The door to the hut was flung open and a man with a scowl on his face and an axe in his hand rushed in and, placing a hand around Gemma's slender arm, dragged her toward the door. He was rough with her and I stepped toward him. A second man appeared and threatened me with a spear.

"It is all right," Gemma cried. "Don't hurt him!"

I was touched by her concern for my safety. "Gemma. Tell your elders the danger is real."

An hour later she was thrust back into the hut. She stumbled and fell. The smashed comm unit was thrown in after her, and the door was shut fast. Her cheek, still red from an open-handed slap, was streaked with tears. She was sobbing. I knelt by her and took her into my arms.

"They did not believe me," she said.

"I'm sorry they hurt you. I see they didn't like you using my technology either."

"They say you are from the devil sent to trick us into leaving God's bosom," she said once she had caught her breath. "I told them to believe you, that you didn't lie. You had come from my cousin to save us. They said I had no cousin and that you have taken over my soul. That you were inside my head speaking with my voice, making me use your devil box." She took a deep breath. "They will send us to God in the morning."

She said it so matter-of-factly. It was as if she had already resigned herself to death at the hands of her own people. Could her cultural training be so strong? "Do I look like the devil?"

She raised her eyes to mine. "I have no idea," she said.

"Gemma, I think the devil is in their heads, to kill you simply because you touched a piece of technology."

Her eyes flared and her jaw set in anger. I thought at first she might have been angry at me for criticizing her elders, but she snuggled closer. "I hate them," she whispered into my chest. "I don't want to die."

"No one wishes to die, if given acceptable alternatives."

"They never listen," she said bitterly. "It's always 'refer to the book... refer to the book.' They never listen to us."

"Us?"

"Women. We count for nothing."

"Many cultures have made the mistake of not listening to their own people."

"Men tell us who to marry and when. Men can reject us if we don't please them, but we can't say no to them."

"That too is common."

She lifted her head and gazed into my eyes. "I have never been with a man."

I sensed where this was heading. "Gemma, it would be wrong of me to make love to you now. You are afraid your life will end tomorrow, and you want to experience one of the pleasures of being alive. Gemma, believe me when I say you are not going to die tomorrow. I have the means to escape. We will do so closer to morning. It is cold outside and an unpleasant night out in the dark will not help us. We'll escape just before dawn. Do you know a place where we could go that the elders do not know about, somewhere we can be safe?"

She broke into a smile that lit up her face. She reminded me of you. "There is such a place."

"Gemma, I cannot force the people of your village to go to safety, but if you want to save yourself and come with me, then I will help you."

"You will save me from the fire?"

"I promise."

She placed her head onto my chest and gave me a hug. "I like you, Fyche Barberossa."

"I like you too. You are a brave and honest woman. To go to your elders and state my case took great courage."

"I don't know why, but I trust you," she said and then added, hesitantly, "I want you to be with me."

"Gemma. If we were in any other circumstance I would make love to you ten times over. But this is not the time. I'll protect you. You will not die in the morning, believe me. You'll live and experience many things. You will find someone you love."

A cloud passed over her expression. All hesitation and reticence disappeared. "No, I won't, Fyche Barberossa." She stifled my obvious question with her mouth.

Chapter Four

For one inexperienced in sex she certainly knew how to kiss. I surmised she may have practiced on the village boys. Regardless of how strong a culture's segregation of the sexes may be, adolescents always find a way. I considered holding her back, denying her this mistake, but to take away her chance at some pleasure would not help her get through the next few hours. Despite my words to the contrary I think she fully expected to die in the morning. No doubt she had seen her elders exact similar punishment on other transgressors. She didn't realistically expect me to save her.

I returned the kiss.

Though she had given up any reserve or hesitation, her knowledge of sex was truly limited. No doubt she had shared clandestine kissing with the boys of the village as she grew up and had secret talks with married girls. Despite this, the actual mechanics of sex were unknown to her. She knew somehow it began with a kiss and that's how she began.

Peri, I have never had the expectation of taking a twenty-year-old woman's virginity. I have read the literature on how special the first time is. I well remember my first experience and the impact it had on my psyche. Being less rational and more emotional, the first time must weigh on humans heavily indeed.

Her enthusiastic kiss kept her occupied, allowing me to slip my fingers under the hem of her tunic and slowly lift it up. She disengaged the kiss for a moment to allow me to slip the rough cloth over her head. Then she resumed her assault on my mouth with undiminished fervor.

She was naked underneath and I caressed her quivering flanks with slow deliberate care. She calmed a little and with my direction lay back onto the floor and

allowed me to explore her body and pleasure her. Each touch of my fingers or lips sent shivers cascading across her supple flesh. I realized that every intimate touch would be new to her. From what I assumed of her culture, the touching of the body would probably be restricted to husbands and wives. The way her flesh quivered and the sound of her quiet gasps suggested I was the first person in her life to touch her breasts, caress her belly, or explore the sultry juncture of her thighs.

She was like a new flower bud, tightly curled, awaiting the warm caress of the sun to permit her to uncurl. At first her awakening was hesitant to be sure, but as her trust in me grew, her blossoming accelerated.

Gemma's nipples were exquisitely erect and her pussy, covered with soft down, was warm and wet. I teased her pussy lips, causing them to swell with arousal before paying attention to her clit. She shuddered in sudden orgasm when I touched that sensitive nub, and as the release of climax overcame her, she clutched at me with surprising strength.

Without breaking our kiss I undressed and positioned myself between her open thighs. I hesitated, knowing this was unknown territory for both of us. I considered warning her of imminent pain and perhaps some bleeding, but events overcame me for when the moment arrived she clutched my buttocks and pulled me in. I entered her as slowly and deliberately as I could. She gasped and her vital signs spiked, indicating a little stab of pain. When I was completely seated in her tight sheath I began to move, ever so slowly. She cried out and clung to me with sudden intensity.

Not thinking of my own pleasure, though the honor of giving Gemma her first orgasm was indeed a pleasure I had not thought possible, I continued making love to her, carefully and methodically, causing her the least discomfort and providing the maximum of pleasure.

After a time we simply held each other, Gemma's arms tight about me. Her breasts squashed hard against my chest, her thighs wrapped around my own. I felt her tears on my cheek.

"I never feared dying until this moment," she said. "Now that I know what I will miss, I am angry."

"Gemma, I..."

"Ssssh. Let's do it again."

* * *

Silas certainly had stamina.

I blame his excellent physical condition, of course. Every time I'd paused to recover from another screaming orgasm, his steel-like cock would somehow find an open orifice and he'd begin all over again. On the other hand, Silas would blame me. Had I not grabbed his flaccid cock and coaxed it back to full potency with my mouth, he would not be licking my clit this very moment.

We'd been in the engine room for over an hour, fucking nonstop. I can't explain the hunger that I had for him, a hunger that would not be satisfied with a single climax, nor a dozen. With each caress of his tongue a shiver of pure pleasure swept through me. I was quickly building up to another orgasm and had an overwhelming desire to have his cock inside me when I did.

"Fuck me, for Phong's sake!"

"Always happy to oblige," Silas laughed and positioned himself once again between my thighs. Gripping my waist with both hands, he drove into me right up to his balls.

I growled in appreciation. "Don't stop!"

He didn't. Each thrust was harder than the first; the sound of his balls slapping against my ass echoed round the engine room. I hooked my ankles behind his ass cheeks and pulled him in deeper. Fuck, I wanted to come so bad.

Why I was so lusty, I can't say. I would have thought the masturbation session Fyche had encouraged would have quelled my libido, as would the first few orgasms here with Silas. But it seemed each climax was just the launching pad for the next. My body was going wild, each and every nerve fiber firing at ever increasing intensity.

If only Fyche could see me now! Which, of course, he could. He'd be monitoring my vital signs as he always did. I wondered if he was happy I was getting the sexual relief he had so earnestly recommended. I felt a slicing pang of guilt over that particular thought.

"What is it?" Silas asked, pausing momentarily.

"What? Nothing! Don't stop, for Phong's sake!"

Silas resumed his powerful assault on my pussy, his hands finding my breasts, squeezing my nipples. I pulled him down by the shoulders and kissed him. The moment our lips touched I came, and then came again.

"Fuck!" he cried into my mouth. He was coming too, his swelling cock stretching my pulsating cunt. "You know what?" he said after our breathing had once again returned to something approaching normal.

"What?" I panted.

"I'm going to leave you and come back more often."

"Sounds like a plan," I mumbled.

"I think, though, we should get back to the real world. We'll be coming to the decision point for Nota pretty soon. Then she'll make her move."

"Oh, that's right, we're about to be hijacked. I'd forgotten."

"Listen. It'll be all right. I swear."

I started looking for my flight suit and found it lying beneath the quantum flux chamber. I lifted it gently away from the Permidian cover. A few millimeters beneath my hand the seething energies that powered the universe were barely contained by the magnetic field of the generator. Maybe some of that energy had leaked into my body, I mused, and energized my lusty desires.

We wiped the sweat off each other with a towel Fyche kept handy for when he tinkered with the engine. Then we dressed, curiously becoming more bashful the more clothes we put on.

"What's happening?" I asked the air.

"All is calm up here," Fyche said and I picked up the touch of sarcasm in his voice. "Nota and her partner have occupied themselves with the children who are now all asleep, as are all our passengers. Nota and her partner have been resting, but their heart rates have recently elevated. I suspect they will make their move soon."

"How should we tackle this?" I asked Silas.

"Do nothing to provoke her. Simply comply. I'll stay out of the way. If they get rough, I'll step in."

I raised my eyebrow at him. "Should I be satisfied with that highly detailed plan?"

He gave a cheeky grin and produced a small pistol out of his clothes.

"How did you get that onboard?"

Fyche cleared his throat. "I recognized Silas by his vital signs as he sat on the tarmac. I assumed he had a good reason for being in disguise and having a firearm. Given our relationship with Silas, I decided it was acceptable to allow him on board with it."

For Phong's sake! "Well, thanks for telling me finally."

Silas kissed me again. "Trust me. They won't do anything naughty until they are in Adana space. I'll be ready for them. Just play along with my lead. Whatever happens, just play along with me, okay?" He gave me a peck on the cheek. "Now get up there and behave like a ship's captain."

"Aye, aye, sir." I tried to calm myself as I stepped carefully over the sleeping passengers. I checked everyone, making sure they were lying on their sides in the recovery position. I'd hate for someone to choke or something if they had a bad response to whatever drug Nota had given them.

They seemed so peaceful, which was a blessing I supposed. They had looked so haunted by survivor's guilt when they had first come on board. At least while they were unconscious they didn't have to deal with that, though the knowledge that they had paid for their survival ahead of other, perhaps more deserving, cases would be something that would follow them for the rest of their lives.

The rights and wrongs of the evacuation were not for me to judge. I had more immediate things on my plate.

As I approached the bridge I took more notice of my would-be hijacker. Nota was in her mid-twenties with long raven hair, severe eyebrows and dark, intense eyes. The smile she bestowed on the sleeping child she was nursing was clearly faked. I wanted to hit her for it. Her partner Tep stood up as I approached and asked for directions to the head. I put on my best smile and told him before dropping into the pilot chair. I checked with Fyche that we were on course and settled back to see what would happen next.

Five minutes later I felt something cold against my neck.

Nota was standing behind my chair, the barrel of a pistol at my throat. "Don't do anything stupid," she whispered in my ear. "Remember, we have children on board."

"What is this?" I said as calmly as possible.

"There's been a change in plan. We are going to Spaceport Adana."

"No," I said firmly, acting as surprised as I possibly could. "We have to go to Tannis."

"Now, don't go silly on me. I have a gun. Before you get any smart ideas of trying to disarm me, I have given each of the children a poisoned chocolate. The antidote is waiting at Adana. If you don't take me there they will die."

"You're bluffing. Fyche?"

"Some of the children do show elevated blood pressure and their exhaled breath indicates drugs. Peri, it is possible that they are not merely sleeping."

There was movement behind me and I turned to look. Silas was standing very still, his eyes fixed on mine. She pointed the pistol at Silas. I recognized it as his gun. Our plan had gone wrong right at the start. They were on to us. But how? How had they got his gun without him putting up a fight?

"Will she play ball?" Nota asked him.

Silas shrugged. "Sorry, Peri."

For fuck's sake! "What?" I mumbled stupidly.

Silas shot me one of those bashful smiles that would usually melt my heart but not this time.

"What the fuck is going on here?" I demanded.

"Settle down, toots," Nota said sarcastically. "Don't blame yourself. He really is very good. Not your fault for falling for his tall tales. What story did he spin for you? Was it the one about him being a government agent?"

I felt my jaw tighten. "As a matter of fact it was."

"That's a good one, that. He had me going for a while with it too. He can be very convincing. Now, change course to Adana."

I shot Silas another glare.

"He's good in the sack too," Nota continued. "I can guess what you were up to down there in the engine room. He has a certain animal attraction about him. You have a history he said." She gave a careless shrug. "That doesn't matter. He may have plugged your hole earlier, but he's all mine now."

"I'll show you history," I growled. Had it not been for the gun she had pointed at me I would have hit her.

She gave me a condescending smile. "Enough histrionics. Change course now, before I lose my patience."

A pistol in the face has a way of focusing one's attention. "What will I tell their 'Port Authority? They demand flight plans, reason for entry into their space, that sort of thing."

"Don't get smart with me. Tell them the truth. We have a bunch of ill children here on the ship. Evacuees from Jones's World. They'll bend over backwards to let us in."

Silas moved closer. I avoided his gaze. Was he with them, or was this part of his undercover act? If so, why hadn't he told me? If he was with them, our little tryst in the engine room was just a diversion to allow the drugs time to take effect and knock out the passengers without me asking awkward questions and causing trouble. "All right, I'll do it, but what about the antidote?"

"I don't have it, so don't get any bright ideas. It will be provided by our contact on Adana. Don't do anything stupid or the children will die. Now, enough with the questions. Change course before I blow your fucking head off."

Fyche made the course correction and contacted the Adana 'Port Authority. With the barrel of the gun pressing against my neck I tried to be as calm as possible as I answered their questions.

"We picked them up as evacuees from Jones's World... Its sun is going supernova... Oh, you've heard... Well, I don't know what's wrong with them, but they are really sick. Their temperatures are sky high. My sick bay autodoc doesn't know what to do... I know they have hospitals on Tannis, but I heard Adana had the best children's hospital in the sector."

"Clearance is granted. We'll have a medical team waiting."

"Many thanks, Adana Control. We appreciate it."

"Stand by for your approach vector."

After the relevant information was exchanged Nota did a cutting motion across her throat. Then with a wave of the gun she urged me out of the pilot's chair. She produced a data cube from her coat and handed it to her comrade, Tep. He took the cube and sat in my place.

"What are you doing?"

He inserted the cube, tapped out a few commands on the board and the whole control panel went blank.

"What have you done?"

"Killed your AI," the guy said. "I'll pilot the ship manually."

Fyche!

I started toward him. "Over my dead body you will!"

I made it halfway before my lights went out.

Chapter Five

Peri, my study of human literature has alerted me to the feelings that many men have the “morning after the night before,” when they regret making love to someone they, for whatever reason, believe they shouldn’t have.

I gazed down at Gemma’s sleeping face and understood what that regret felt like. Since my inception I have been aware of my growing understanding of human emotions and since having my own physical body which allows me to feel as humans do, my understanding is growing stronger with every encounter.

In my endeavors to ensure that Gemma’s first sexual experience was a pleasant one, I analyzed her alpha, beta and gamma erogenous zones. That involved measuring her vital signs at the most intimate level.

My sad discovery was that Gemma is suffering from a fatal genetic disease. The symptoms were clear and my medical database was able to identify the cause with a high degree of confidence. She is suffering from Weslt-Loche Disease. The condition results in early mortality with a maximum life expectancy of four decades. In any other human settlement in the galaxy, this young woman’s condition would have been diagnosed in early childhood, treated and the threat removed. However, locked into a culture that eschewed modernity, her condition has become terminal and despite the best our medical science could do, the process is now irreversible. In a small, closed society like this village, with interbreeding the norm rather than the exception, everyone would have been affected. My observation that there was no one aged over forty years in the village was now clearly explained. These people were tragically short-lived.

Gemma opened her eyes and smiled. "Good morning," she whispered. For someone facing death in a few hours, she was amazingly optimistic. "Love me again," she said after a kiss full on the lips.

"I wish we had time," I said and kissed her. "But we must escape."

She gazed at me intently for a full minute. "They have destroyed your... machine."

"I guessed they might, but even on foot we can still put some distance between us and the village before sunrise."

She kissed me again and fumbled at my clothes.

I grasped her hand and pulled it away from my belt. "Gemma, in order for me to signal my friend's ship, I'll need to find high ground."

She frowned at my single-mindedness. "I will take you there."

"We'll go now. There are still two hours before sunrise."

"It's dark."

"I have excellent night sight," I said.

She sighed resignedly and then her eyes narrowed in the most devious manner. "Only if you promise to love me again."

"When we are safely hidden, I promise."

She gave me a hug and another kiss. "I'm glad you were the first," she said. "It was said that I wouldn't have anyone before I died."

"Why is that?"

"I've been promised to three men. None pleased me and luckily, I did not please them. They rejected me and took other wives."

Somehow I was not surprised. "I daresay you were too outspoken."

"That is why they had me meet you. Everyone else was too scared of you. I belong to no one. My loss would not be mourned. When the elders said you wanted to speak to Leeson, I was happy to be sent."

"You are very brave."

"Stupid, they say."

"Well, they are wrong."

She gazed at me with a serious expression clouding her face. "Do you have a woman?"

"I am your cousin's pilot."

"I don't know what that means."

I sensed it was important for her to be the only one, as it were. I played to that desire. Peri, my discovery of her terminal medical condition had put me at a disadvantage. Simple compassion dictated that I try not to disappoint her in any way. Though I suspected that she needed no such protection -- she has too robust a personality -- I was happy to follow that dictate. She reminds me of someone I know. Being determined and indefatigable are traits of the Leeson's, I believe. I pitied her poor suitors. She must have run rings around them.

"Gemma, I have no woman of my own."

She looped her arm through mine. "I feel sorry for the women you have not loved. They have missed a great deal."

I had nothing to say to that.

Listening carefully -- Peri, I'm glad you opted for enhanced senses when you selected my body -- I determined there were only two men guarding us at the front door. Earlier I had examined the back wall of the hut and located several loose bricks. These I pushed out, taking care not to make any noise.

Gemma watched me with what I assume to be wide-eyed admiration. In a matter of minutes I had made a hole wide enough for us to slide out. I went first, and when I was certain my activities had gone unnoticed, I pulled Gemma through the opening.

"Which way?" I whispered.

"Follow me," she said and set off into the darkness.

She too had good night sight and led me up a winding footpath past some terraced fields and toward the heights of the valley. The path quickly became steeper and less sure, so I took the lead, using my better night vision to make out the way. We

traveled for over an hour before we came to a small clearing containing three dilapidated huts, no more than a few wooden supports and a loosely thatched roof.

"This is the death place," she said. "No one will come here. Everyone fears it."

"Yet you are here."

She motioned to one of the huts. "My mother."

I realized then what this place was. Many cultures exposed their sick and elderly to the elements to die in isolation. This was one of them.

"When it is time," she explained as she approached the hut, "we are brought here by our relatives and..."

"Left to die?"

"It is tradition. It will be safe for us. None will come near for twenty days. It is unclean until her spirit finds the path to heaven."

I gazed into the gloom and detected the shape of a female, around thirty-five years of age. Her vital signs were low. She had only a day or so to live.

Gemma entered the hut and knelt by the cot, reaching for a withered hand. "Mama?"

The woman mumbled something. Gemma bent her head and put her ear to her mother's mouth.

Peri, I felt strangely out of place and so I left them and circled the clearing to reconnoiter the area. The death huts were placed near the edge of a steep cliff, a sheer drop of a hundred and fifty meters. I placed the comm unit in a stable location and activated a radio beacon, hoping you would be able to detect it when you came. I sat on the edge of the cliff and dangled my legs over the side. The view was expansive. The raging river below swept through the valley and cut deep gorges where it narrowed before widening on a fertile flood plain. Beyond that it fanned out to a delta, feeding into a distant, gray ocean.

The glow of the rising sun had lit the eastern horizon with rays of gold. The faint ring system was flecked with silver and the clouds beneath roiled with age-old turbulence.

Gemma found me after a while and in silence sat beside me, gently swinging her thin legs over the edge of the cliff.

"Gemma, do you know why your mother is dying?"

"It is her time."

"Before her time. She has a genetic illness which is uncommon in the galaxy of humankind. It is a sickness which is easy to fix. Instead of a lifespan of twenty to forty years, you should be able to live to one hundred and fifty."

She gazed at me wide-eyed, the sun's rays catching the golden tan of her skin and setting her hair aglow. "Truly?"

"It is a genetic reprogramming treatment which is easy to do, but only for those in their childhood and adolescent years. Once you reach..."

"My age?"

I took her hand in mine. "Gemma, I'm afraid your dying has already begun."

She nodded slightly and looked out to the distant horizon. "I have sensed it for many months. We are taught the signs. It is a punishment from God."

"Never think that. It's just an accident. The sickness is a mutation in the genes of one of your ancestors which has passed down through the generations. When your people came here, most would have carried the mutation in their own genes, and so after a few generations, you all have it. It is not a punishment, just simple genetics."

She did not respond.

"I'm sorry," I said. "That probably sounded like nonsense. You don't know what genes and mutations are. I'm sorry."

"You mean that the sickness is passed from parents to children, and that we have had the sickness for a long time. You say other people where you come from do not have the sickness, and if they do, they can be cured as children and live very long lives."

I laughed. "Yes, that's what I mean."

A faint cry came from the hut.

"My mother is thirsty."

I watched as Gemma found a cup made of fired clay which I guess she had placed here on previous clandestine visits. She filled it from a nearby spring and took it into the hut. The period of taboo was twenty days, yet she had come at least once before, unable to leave her dying mother to the elements. Gemma was used to breaking tradition. I couldn't help but think of what she could have become had she been born elsewhere.

She returned a few minutes later. "Is it true that my mother did not have to get sick?"

"It's true we all die, sooner or later, but with modern medicine there is no reason for any of you to die before your time. We have the cures for most diseases. Rarely would a disease progress to a terminal stage, as your mother's has done, so early in her life."

Gemma placed her head on my shoulder. "Do you keep your promises?"

"I do."

She took my face in her hands and kissed me.

Pleasure is fleeting, someone once said, and that we are a long time dead, so the rational thing to do is to take pleasure wherever you can find it. I think that if Gemma had a philosophy, that would be it.

Peri, it seemed she wanted to experience every sensual pleasure at once, kissing, fondling, caressing, biting and sucking. I was happy to oblige and teased her flesh and rewarded her quivering impatience with orgasm after orgasm.

I licked and sucked her pussy, fingering the tight sheath, caressing those internal trigger points that sent her into paroxysms of sensual bliss. I fucked her mouth and pussy with slow gentleness and with racing passion. When I slowed to give her time to recover, she would urge me on.

Peri, she also wanted to try every sexual position possible and I was happy to oblige. Accessing one of your own guidebooks which I have in my memory, we explored some of the more obscure positions that you have tried. We spent the day making love, resting, making love again. And when she was done, her body quivering

beneath me, struggling to catch her breath, she seemed to take on an ethereal glow. Night had fallen and together we lay and gazed at the stars.

"I've often stared into the sky," she said, slowly chewing on some berries she had gathered during one of our interludes, "and wondered what all those stars were for."

"They are home to countless races, a few humanoid, most not."

"There is so much out there to see."

Peri, I pulled her close to me and told her of some of the sights we had seen in our travels. I kept the stories light and she giggled at some of our misadventures; however, she was in a melancholy mood, and I detected the tears forming at the corner of her eye.

Finally she slept, and I watched her through the night, waiting for your return.

Early on the second to last morning this world would ever see, Gemma started as if she had been bitten by some vicious insect.

"What is it?"

She stared into my eyes for a long moment. The seriousness of her expression mirrored the increase in heart rate and GSR. "I have always felt my life has been a waste. That it had no point, no purpose. Thank you, Fyche. You have given me so much in so few hours. You have given me pleasure I never thought possible. You have given me knowledge of a life that could have been. Most of all you have also given me a purpose."

She gave me a long open-mouthed kiss.

"I trust you, Fyche Barberossa. I believe all that you say. The sun will kill us, and we have been dying young for centuries for no reason. I cannot fix those terrible ills. But I can help others who do not deserve to die. Will you help me?"

"Of course. What do you have in mind?"

There was a steely glint of determination in her eye. A look I recognized. "I'll tell you on the way."

* * *

"Wake up."

The voice sounded like it was coming through a bucket of water. "Silas?"

"Well, that's an improvement. You've been mumbling Fyche's name for the last ten minutes."

I was lying on the floor of the companionway just behind the bridge. Around me passengers were sleeping. The awful reality hit me again. "Fyche! Those bastards killed him."

"Settle down. At least they didn't kill you."

Instinctively my body tensed, and I drew away from him. Had Silas hit me? He must have. Both Nota and her partner had been in sight when I'd made my rash move. I shook him off. "Leave me alone."

"Don't be like that."

"You knocked me out."

"For your own good, for Phong's sake. Nota is a killer. Remember that."

"So you hit me for my own good."

"Something like that."

"They killed Fyche. Did they damage his backup in the core as well?"

Silas nodded. His expression told me he had no idea why I was making so much of a fuss about it. "Fyche was just an AI," he'd be thinking. "What the fuck. Get another one."

"Nota had to be sure Fyche didn't return," he said. "An AI's backup automatically reboots. To take control of the ship she had to erase both the actual and the backup."

I leaned back against the bulkhead, completely defeated. Fyche was dead. When General R'nok's fleet had attacked Laz, Rendido and me, the EM burst accompanying his fleet's arrival had destroyed Fyche's CPU and prevented reboots, but the shielded core had protected his memory so I could bring him back when I fixed the fried CPU. This time there would be no rebooting from the ship's backup. There was no coming back from this deliberate vandalism... murder.

The chilling reality now was I had to make sure I returned to Jones's World and get Fyche. His memory could reboot the CPU. But without him operating the ship, how was I to do that? I'm a reasonable pilot, but without AI support I'd fuck it up for sure. I'd probably come out of quantum space too far from the planet and spend too many precious hours travelling at sub-light speeds. I checked the chronometer and my heart sank into a well of despair. With my limited piloting skills I sure as hell couldn't get back there in time.

"Damn Phong and his fucking cousin!"

"Calm down," Silas whispered.

I slapped him across the cheek.

Nota and her man were busy at the console. They hadn't noticed my outburst. "What's happening?" I hissed.

He rubbed his cheek. "Not sure if you deserve an answer after that."

"For old time's sake."

"We're on the approach run to Adana. Nota has been talking to someone there, possibly Jyker. Going on what I've overheard, I'm guessing they don't intend to actually go to the docking bays. Maybe head for one of the bits of rock that litter this fucking system. Jyker has probably stolen a prospector's survey skimmer and slipped out one of the lower level service bays."

I gave him a sarcastic raise of the eyebrows. "You guess? What, aren't you in on the plan?"

"Now, now."

"Fuck, was I wrong or what? I thought there was something decent about you, something honorable. But you end up being a gangster after all. I should have known."

His face turned to stone. "I'm sorry to have disappointed you."

"I don't know why I'm even talking to you."

Nota turned to us. "Hey! Peri. Some pushy bitch wants to talk to you. Holly Barberossa."

A shaft of hope filled my chest. "My sister."

"Okay. Here's the deal. Talk to her nice and sisterly like. Any false step and I'll push one of the kiddies out the airlock. Do I make myself clear?"

"Perfectly."

I took Nota's place in the pilot seat. The screen lit up. Holly looked happy. "Hey there, sis. I heard through my sources at 'Port Traffic Control that you're bringing in some evacuees. Sick kids and all. Well done, you."

"I was passing," I said putting on a fake smile. I hoped she would pick up that I was forcing it. "It's pretty bad over there," I continued. "If you and Maxim get there, make sure you look for Fyche, my AI unit. He stayed to organize the next batch of refugees for me. A village two hundred kilometers north of the spaceport. I don't want to lose him, he cost me a pretty penny."

She didn't miss a beat. "Sure. No probs."

"Well, listen, say hi to Dad for me. Tell him I'm tied up with this lot, so I probably won't get out to his rock this trip. Has he found any gemstones yet?"

"Not yet." Phong bless her, she didn't miss a beat then either.

Nota, the bitch, was slashing her hand across her throat.

"Well, wish him luck for me. Tell him the cops will catch him if he's not careful."

"He's a hard man to reach."

"Well, gotta go. Don't forget Fyche. See you later."

"Count on it, sis. See you."

The screen went blank. Nota dragged me back into the corridor and then ignored me. "ETA?" she asked Tep.

"Fifteen minutes till we jump back, then five to the rendezvous point."

"Good enough."

"That was pretty cool," Silas whispered in my ear.

"Fuck off."

"Peri, please don't be like that."

He gave a piercing look as if I was the bad guy. "I thought she'd catch on and shoot me," I said. "Would you have stopped her? Come to think of it, why didn't you shoot me?"

"I thought about it."

"Fuck off."

"Just kidding."

"Well, what's next? Are you going to kill us as soon as Jyker shows up?"

"Nah. You're still more valuable as hostages."

I gazed steadily into his face, trying to read his thoughts. He didn't look all that convincing.

Chapter Six

Peri, the transformation in Gemma had been startling. From the hesitant young woman of yesterday fixated by her own awakening, she was now an angry firebrand. She described to me a litany of vile injustices perpetrated by the men of the village under the cover of their strict adherence to scripture. She set her jaw in the Leeson way and with a determined stride led me down the path back to the village.

The sun had been up for an hour by the time we got there. Hidden by the undergrowth we watched the villagers perform their morning routine. I assumed there would have been a few minutes of uproar at first light when they realized we were gone from the hut, but all was quiet now. There were no males in the village, and I assumed they were out searching. In the distance I could see a mob of figures heading out in the direction I had come yesterday. The pursuers would naturally assume we had fled back to civilization. Gemma had been right. They had not gone in the direction of the death place.

"The children will be going to school in a little while," she explained.

I immediately grasped her plan. "How many are there?"

"Thirteen plus Maya. She's my assistant."

"You are the teacher?"

She gazed at me with earnest eyes. "I was. The elders said I was a bad influence on the children when I was rejected by my last suitor. I miss them. They are good children and with so much ahead of them. I can't let them die."

Finding a place on the *Jalapeño* was not going to be a problem, I knew. However, I didn't like our chances of herding a group of children away from the village in broad daylight. "What is your plan?"

"Once their lessons begin, they don't break for two hours when some return to the family hut to help their mothers. They will only be missed then. The men are out searching, and they won't be back for hours. Now is the best time."

I couldn't fault her logic. If we waited until the men arrived back it would be far more difficult to remove the children. "And we take them to the place of death?"

"No one will think to look there."

"I think they will. Once they realize we have not fled to the city but stayed to take the children, they will search everywhere. They'll guess we are relatively close by, held up by the children. They will be able to follow our tracks."

"They will not come. They fear it like nothing else. Besides, it's the only thing I can think of," she said and then shrugged. "If we fail we'll all be dead tomorrow anyway."

"That is true, but your cousin will rescue us. Believe me."

She gripped my hand and the look in her eye spoke of her need. "We have a few minutes before they all arrive at school."

"You are insatiable!"

"When we have the children, we might not get the opportunity again."

Our coupling was urgent and I let her have her way with me. In a startlingly short time Gemma had become an adept lover. She knew what she needed and she knew how to get it from me. She pushed me down to the ground, loosened my slacks enough to have access to my cock, and straddled my hips.

With earnest concentration she ground down on my cock, maximizing the friction against her clit. I grasped her hips and assisted her, using my superior strength to pull her down on my cock. Her arousal had been sudden, as was her climax. Not wishing to make a noise and attract undue attention she bit her bottom lip as she came till blood dripped over her chin.

When the tension in her body was released Gemma collapsed onto my chest. Suddenly she lifted her head and gazed at me, a deep frown forming on her forehead. "You gained no pleasure?"

"That's all right," I said. "Next time."

"There may not be a next time."

She took my cock in her mouth and brought me to a rapid erection. Then she straddled me again, and this time rotated her hips slowly, asking me at intervals what movement was most pleasurable for me.

Peri, as you know, I can climax on command. I judged what would be an appropriate time and relaxed the subroutines that control my ejaculation and let the sensations of her tight pussy bring me to orgasm. My climax was intense and I groaned out loud as the excitations swept along my nervous system and impacted in the centre of my positronic brain.

Gemma was greatly pleased with herself, though she told me the way I contorted my face made her feel she had hurt me in some mortal way.

Her statement brought home to me the essential transparency -- nakedness, if you will -- of the sex act. It seems to me that during the act, and more specifically the final release, we are totally unmasked. I had always believed control of my facial muscles was strong. However, Gemma's simple observation put paid to that. It was a revelation that surprised me as I had assumed I had total physical control even during climax and for which I was grateful.

Without speaking we resumed our surveillance of the school. The children were now arranged in two lines in front of the school hut. A taller figure, Maya, I assumed, gave a command and the children filed into the small hut. Gemma waited a minute. "They should be seated by now."

"Go now," I said. "The men in the search party have not returned. They are at least an hour away."

"I'll only be a minute," she said and sprinted down the path.

As I watched her sprint to the hut, I wondered if she would be able to convince Maya of the threat to their survival. I admired her confidence and became more optimistic in turn. Gemma was certainly a force to be reckoned with. Despite the disease that would take her life, the Leeson genes are indeed formidable.

Two minutes later Gemma emerged from the hut and sprinted quickly into the surrounding brush. A minute later Maya led a line of children out of the village and up the slope toward where I waited. The procession attracted no attention from the village females, who were too concerned with keeping their eyes on their chores.

Gemma was smiling broadly when she reached me. "I did it!"

"So I see."

A few minutes later Maya and the children reached us. "Fyche, this is Maya."

"Pleased to meet you, Maya," I said to the obviously terrified young woman. "My name is Fyche. I'm here to help you."

"Is it true the sun will explode?" she asked with an anxious voice.

I nodded. "There is a possibility of rescue. The sooner we reach safety the better off we'll all be."

"I'll meet you there," Maya said to Gemma, though she didn't take her round eyes off me. "I must get food and water for the children."

"Come, children," Gemma said. "The next part of the game is to run and hide from our parents. It's a game they want us to play. They want to see who can be the cleverest in hiding. So we have to be quiet and well behaved. Follow me."

Gemma set off, followed by a line of extremely obedient children. I followed at the end, using a tree branch to sweep across the path to disguise our tracks as best I could.

Peri, I felt a strange feeling of what I think is best described as guilt. The parents would have many hours of fear and despair as they fruitlessly searched for their children, and I could only guess at what the children will feel when they know they won't see their parents again. This was a heavy burden to carry. Intellectually, kidnapping the children was obviously the right thing to do. I had searched my ethics subroutines for any other alternative but found none. Nevertheless, I was cognizant of the pain I was causing these people who, had it not been for me, would have gone unsuspectingly to their deaths in eighteen hours' time.

Gemma was feeling guilty too, I believe. As we made our way up the hillside, I noticed she had become guarded when speaking to the children and encouraging them in this game of hide and seek.

"You trust Maya not to betray us?"

"She has had doubts for a long time," she replied. "Doubts about our life in the village. We've often talked about running away."

"What stopped you?"

"Our parents were sick. We could not leave them. Maya's mother and father are now both dead. My father is dead. I do not miss him."

We reached the huts of death without incident. Gemma took the children, who seemed unaware of the tradition of exposing the sick and dying, to an empty hut and began conducting a lesson in arithmetic.

After checking to make sure the radio beacon was still operating, I returned to the track to watch for Maya and any followers. If challenged by the men, I would fight to protect Gemma and the children. My ethics subroutines gave me permission to use deadly force. The decision left me feeling disquieted.

Maya appeared fifty minutes later carrying a basket of fruit and bread. I surprised her when I rose from my hiding place. She dropped the basket.

"I'm sorry to surprise you like that, Maya. I was watching for the men. Let me help you. You had no problems in the village?"

"The men have not returned yet," was all she said.

I was dispatched to get water from the spring while Maya and Gemma fed the children lunch. They were in a good mood, and when I returned, Gemma had me tell the children the stories of the travels I had spoken of last night.

After a time Gemma left the children with Maya and, with me in tow, paid a visit to her mother. I stood there in the darkness while Gemma introduced me and explained what we were doing there with the children. Her mother was only semi-conscious and I doubt she heard anything.

"He is my man," Gemma said. "You can go to God knowing I am happy and have found a good man."

Her mother's wrinkled lips moved in a half smile and then she fell asleep. Gemma took my hand and led me outside.

"That was a thoughtful thing you did," I said.

"She always wanted me to marry and have children. She despaired when the last man tossed me aside. I was glad, but Mother cried."

"We should keep lookout down the path," I suggested.

"The mothers will be afraid for their children," she said suddenly, sniffing back her tears. "They will be crying for their babies."

"Despite that, it is a good thing you have done. Saving their lives is worth some tears, no matter how heartfelt."

She gazed at me solidly for a moment. "You see things so clearly," she said. "You have such definite ideas. I wish I was as confident as you."

Peri, of course I couldn't admit to her that with my greater capacity for problem solving, where I can run hundreds of optional solutions through my brain at the same time, not only am I able to make quick decisions, but usually I have considered all the options the data allow. I have noticed, however, lately my decision making has become more problematic, as I consider illogical factors. My decision to stay here to follow up a thin lead to your mother and then not discuss it with you to allay possible raised expectations on your part is a case in point.

Instead I replied, "Gemma, I envy your purity of thought."

She gave me a coquettish smile. "My thoughts are not always so pure."

She draped her arms around my neck and kissed me deeply. In the short few hours I had known her, Gemma had metamorphosed from a virgin to a fully sensual creature. As she unfastened my clothing, I disabled my sensory overrides in an effort to experience the moment as a human, with no executive control over my sexual response.

I followed Gemma's lead in the rush to orgasm. She began by plunging her mouth over my already erect cock and taking it deep into her throat. I reciprocated by

sliding my tongue along her moist slit, teasing open the delicate petals and exposing the rich pink flesh within. The hard nub of her clit was impossible to ignore, and when I touched it with the tip of my tongue, Gemma shuddered in a frisson of pleasure that I detected as a spike in all her vital signs. She intensified her deep throating of my cock and I was in danger of coming in her mouth. With her newly acquired knowledge of my body she sensed the swelling of my shaft and quickly disengaged and rotated her body so that she could straddle my hips and lower her pussy onto the throbbing head of my cock.

She closed her eyes and threw back her head as she impaled herself. Once she had me settled deep inside her she began a series of hard but slight movements of her hips, squeezing the walls of her pussy around my cock. With a quite deliberate and staged increase in the momentum of her hip movements, punctuated by sharp intakes of breath, she brought herself to orgasm. She threw back her head and released a deep impassioned groan.

Her pussy was pulsing around my cock. I took my hands from her breasts, and grasping her by the waist, I held her while I fucked her from beneath, thrusting my cock into her with a force that surprised me with its intensity. I wanted to come, and come fast.

A series of orgasms rocked through Gemma's sweat-slicked body. I did not hold back and she gripped my shoulders for support as I thrust relentlessly into her. I raised my head and licked the nipple bobbing in front of my eyes. She came again and this time the squeezing of her pussy brought my orgasm on. I erupted inside her, and as I pumped my semen into her, she collapsed over me, gasping with each powerful contraction of my cock.

Then, in a frenzy of emotion, Gemma smothered my neck and face in kisses. I held her tight and kissed the flesh of her throat and cheeks, luxuriating in her salty sweat.

Sometime later, when her passion had subsided, Gemma nuzzled my neck and whispered, "I love you, Fyche."

* * *

I watched in silence as the two terrorists and Silas took turns to change into spacesuits. Nota gave her gun to Tep to cover me while she donned the one I'd used when I'd rescued Laz and Rendido all those months ago. Three suits, my entire supply. Silas was wearing the suit I had bought Fyche. "Red doesn't suit you," I said. "You should have taken the yellow one."

Silas ignored my jibe and winked at me. "I bet you'd look good in it."

"It belongs to Fyche."

He rolled his eyes.

Nota's partner resumed the pilot seat and brought the *Jalapeño* into normal space amidst an asteroid field. He was a fine pilot, handling the ship with a deftness that was admirable.

"Where are we going?" Silas asked.

"Easy, lover boy," Nota said. "All will be revealed soon enough."

I couldn't suppress a smile at the scowl that distorted Silas's face. He wasn't in the loop, and he clearly didn't like it. He was used to driving the course of events and instead this bitch was running the game. I sighed as the question that kept rolling through my head demanded an answer. Was Silas still undercover or had he lied to me and changed sides? I couldn't tell. Thinking back to when we first met, he had deceived me, pretending to be a private investigator when he was in fact a government agent. Fyche had warned me about his double life, and when Silas had left me so abruptly three weeks ago without any hint of explanation, I had assumed he was on a mission. But was he? Or had he turned bad?

I just couldn't tell. If I loved him, I should be able to tell, shouldn't I?

I was trying to puzzle that new and for some reason more disturbing question when I noticed his intent gaze. "What's the matter, lover boy?" I chided.

"Don't ask."

An incoming transmission interrupted my retort.

"Jalapeño, Jalapeño, this is Spaceport Adana Traffic Control. You're off course. Please return to approved vector."

Nota responded. "Sorry, Spaceport Adana Control, this is *Jalapeño*, we're experiencing a navigation malfunction. Loss of AI unit. Please retransmit approach vectors and I'll try and get us back on track."

"Understood, Jalapeño. Do you need assistance?"

"Not yet, Adana Control."

"That's good, because we've got bugger all left here. Every ship with a quantum drive, even the Guild of Scavengers, has gone to assist the evacuation."

"That's good to hear. We won't need any assistance, Adana Control."

"Keep us posted."

"Will do. Jalapeño out."

"Coming up to target," her partner said. It was a large, slowly spinning asteroid, craggy and pitted with light gray dust. In under a minute he matched its spin and brought us in to a gentle touchdown.

"Now what?" I asked once the dust had settled.

Nota waved the pistol at me. "We wait."

Letting me watch, Nota then opened the wall intercom, made some adjustments, and reclosed it. She held up a lipstick which glowed red when she pressed on the lid. "Done."

She then dismantled a child's doll, extracting various components. Tep climbed out of the pilot's seat and she gave him the pieces. He checked them and then made his way down the companionway.

"Where is he going?"

"To the engine room," Tep said over his shoulder. "There are things I must do."

"What the fuck?"

"Settle down," Nota laughed grimly. "And shut up, I'm getting sick of you. Silas, I don't know what you ever saw in her."

I clenched my fists and set my jaw in preparation to hitting her when Silas restrained me. "Peri," he said. "For once in your life, do as you're told."

I shrugged him off and counted to ten. It didn't help but stopped me from getting shot. Tep returned and gave Nota a thumbs up.

"They have a bomb," Silas said blandly.

"But you don't need a bomb," I said to the woman. "The poison..."

She gave me an icy smile. "Insurance."

I shot Silas a baleful glare. "The antidote?"

Nota gave a humorless laugh. "No need. The children will recover."

"You lied?"

She looked surprised at my naivety. "Of course. What do you think? But this," she held up her little contraption. "This is not a lie. This connects me to the bomb my friend has attached to your quantum drive. It will destroy you and the children, not to mention a sizeable piece of this rock, and I daresay Spaceport Adana will be hit by debris. Very nasty. Many killed. Maybe even your sister."

"Why? You don't need to do this."

"Call it insurance. I don't want you chasing us, so I'm leaving this little gift to keep you occupied. When I flip the switch, you have ten minutes to find the bomb and disarm it. Don't waste time coming after us. Think of the children."

"Bitch!"

She gave me a chilling smile. "You don't know the half of it."

Nota's partner touched her arm. "I disabled the airlock controls as well."

"Good thinking." She pointed the pistol at me. "Sit down, shut up and wait!"

It was a long wait. Though sitting on the floor with my back against the bulkhead was not very comfortable, I fell into an uneasy sleep. I dreamed of Fyche, standing on the tarmac on Jones's World giving me a gentle smile and a little wave. The scene kept repeating as if it was on a never-ending loop.

I was roused from sleep by movement in the bridge. I stood up and stretched. Through the bridge windows something new had been added to the desolate scene. A hundred meters away sat three prospecting skimmers. There was no one around.

Nota turned to give me a cheery smile. "Remember, the children will die if you interfere with our plans."

She raised her eyebrows in a menacing manner, and I nodded my understanding.

"Good," Nota said with a false smile. "It's time to go."

I followed them down the companionway past the unconscious evacuees. Nota opened the inner hatch, gave Silas an open-mouthed kiss and then donned her helmet. Silas risked a quick glance at me, his expression set somewhere between anger and fury, and donned his helmet.

The inner hatch closed, and the moment the outer door opened, Nota pressed her lipstick so the top turned green. She blew me a kiss. "Ten minutes to find it and disable it. Have fun, Peri Barberossa." She turned to Silas. "Coming, lover boy?" she said and leaped from the hatch.

Through his visor I saw the moment of indecision on Silas's face as he gazed after Nota as she and her partner skipped their way across the dusty wasteland toward the three skimmers.

It lasted for only an eye blink but it was enough. I hated him for that look. "Fuck off, damn it!"

It didn't matter to me that he didn't follow Nota out the hatch. The fact that he shut the outer door, opened the inner and raced instead down the companionway to the engine room did nothing to quell my loathing or my anger.

I didn't follow him. What the fuck did I know about bomb disposal? I went to the bridge instead and sat in the pilot seat and stared at the lifeless console. Outside, Nota and her partner straddled the skimmers and sped off at great speed. I tried to manually activate the core and revive Fyche so he could transmit his backup to Adana. I tried till

my damn tears blinded me. But nothing worked, damn it! Nothing. The core was really wiped, the backup gone.

"Peri, you okay?"

"No, I'm not! Look what those bastards did to... did to my ship!"

He held up the pieces of the bomb. "That's not all. We've been had."

"What do you mean?"

"The damn thing wasn't primed. It would not have gone off anyway."

"So they were incompetent?"

"No. The primer was disconnected. This was just a diversion. They chose not to kill us."

"But she was so convincing."

"She was that. I think that last contact she had with Jyker included a change of orders."

"But why?"

"I have absolutely no bloody idea. Killing us and removing all trace was in her power, not to mention her nature, yet she was ordered not to kill us. Had it been up to her, we'd be fried by now."

I gazed at the desolate expression on his face. I patted his hand. "Well, your heart is in the right place, after all. You've blown your cover for good by choosing to stay and save us rather than track down Jyker."

He grasped my hand and kissed it. "That's something. At least now you don't believe I'm a completely heartless bastard."

"You'll get Jyker eventually." He rolled his eyes but I wasn't worried about assuaging his feelings. I was thinking about Fyche. "How long till the nova goes up?"

"Six or seven hours."

Fuck it!

"That's about how long it will take to get there. Fuck! Fyche is going to really die."

"You have a master backup?"

I brightened for a moment. I'd forgotten about the backup in the safe. My rising spirits dampened. "There is, but it's an old one. It won't be current."

"Will that matter?"

I gave him a hard look. "Yes, it will matter. A lot has happened over the last couple of months."

He raised an enquiring eyebrow.

"All the information we'd gathered on my mother and father. It's all gone."

"Had you gotten very far?"

"That's not the point! He found a lead on Jones's World. Now I'll never know what it was."

He kissed me. "Listen, I'll help you track down your mother."

I returned a weak smile. I wasn't so sure I wanted his kind of help.

Static crackled through the air. The ship was running on basic power and limited to old-fashioned radio.

"Jalapeño, Jalapeño. This is Vesper Two, respond."

It was a man's voice. Then Holly came over the line. "Peri, are you okay? Sensors say your ship is dead."

"We're fine."

"I read between the lines of your last transmission. We've been searching the asteroid belt ever since. What the hell is going on?"

"You're not going to believe me."

"We'll be there in a minute."

An idea leaped into my mind. "Never mind us, we're okay. You have to get to Jones's World. Find Fyche."

"Your AI?"

"I mean it. You must find him! He's in a village two hundred kilometers north of the spaceport on the second continent. He found a lead to Mother's travels."

"Well, okay. We'll get one of Maxim's buddies to give you a tow to Adana. It may be a while. Every ship with FTL has gone to help the evacuation. See you when I see you."

"We aren't going anywhere." Closing the transmission, I did some mental arithmetic. "Maxim's ship will take five hours to get there."

"It will be close."

Too close. Reality struck. "I shouldn't expect Holly and Maxim to risk themselves for my AI. I should call her to say don't try."

"He really is important to you, isn't he?"

I shot Silas a baleful glare. "Yes, for Phong's sake! For your information, Fyche is the only person that has never lied to me."

"He didn't tell you about me or my gun."

"He was protecting me."

"And I wasn't? Peri, how many times do I have to say I'm sorry? It was better you didn't know what I was doing."

"How much else of what you told me was a lie?"

"Everything I said was true. I just didn't tell my plan."

Fury was rising from my belly into my chest. "You fucked her, didn't you? Was she good in the sack?"

"For Phong's sake! Undercover is dirty work. I won't explain my methods. I had to infiltrate the gang, that's all there is to it. I have to do a lot of things I'm not proud of."

"Infiltrate. What about me? Was I just an infiltration?"

"For Phong's sake, Peri, get a grip. You came to me to find Jyker, remember? I didn't ask to get involved with it. But it opened up some enquiries. It was my duty to follow them up."

"Duty. I'm sick to death of hearing about duty!"

"I don't know what I can say." He took me in his arms and planted a kiss. "Peri, believe me. I want to be with you."

My body betrayed me. As angry as I was, I needed someplace warm to hide. I didn't resist when he picked me up. I just didn't passively let him take me. I responded. I kissed him deeply, happy for a moment to feel his arms about me, his lips on mine, helping me forget.

My cabin was occupied by sleeping passengers, so he carried me to the engine room. We kissed all the way, and I let the hot waves of sensation sweep away the hurt and the doubt of the last few hours.

I wanted to forget what had happened; the betrayal, the disappointment and the loss. I wanted to forget, and true to form, sexually-induced amnesia is my favored tonic.

Silas was kissing and caressing me with a strange urgency. It seemed to me, as he made love to my body, that he was trying to prove something to me. That he loved me? I guess that was it. He had let me down and now he was showing me he was better than the man who had hesitated in the airlock.

And Silas, true to form, was his usual best. I opened my legs to him and let him plunder my body. His urgent lips sucked and pulled on my turgid nipples. His cock was embedded in my cunt, pumping relentlessly into me, his salty sweat dripping onto my lips.

I enjoyed it, of course. He was an excellent lover. That moment of hesitation in the airlock no longer mattered. Not here in the engine room. Not right this minute. Despite all that had happened I realized I could still make love to him.

Anything more I'd have to figure out later. Maybe we would end up like Holly and Maxim, lovers for all time. Who could say? But for now, he was in the right place and at the right time. And so was I.

Chapter Seven

Peri, I built a shielded fireplace and lit a warming fire. Except for several bouts of lovemaking, the afternoon had been uneventful. Gemma's assessment that her people would not break their taboo and enter the death place had proved correct. After dinner, Maya had taken the children to one of the huts and to bed, leaving Gemma and I sitting at the fireside.

"Your friend is not coming, is she?"

I gave Gemma's shoulders a squeeze. "Your cousin is a resourceful woman. She has never let me down."

"How much longer do we have before the sun rises?"

"An hour."

"Come."

She led me away from the firelight into the shadows. I held her close to my chest. She was trembling. We were both mindful of the melancholy circumstances and our lovemaking was subdued. I took my time, pleasuring her slowly with my fingers and tongue. She came and then begged me to enter her.

I was gentle and her next climax was slow in coming, but was intense for all that. After she came I allowed myself to climax within her. She held me tight, crying softly into my shoulder.

"I wish we could have saved the children," she whispered.

"There is yet time. Peri has a saying; 'it's not over until it's over'."

She gave a little laugh. "That's very wise. We say that the spring planting is never over until there are enough green shoots for two winters."

"That too is wise."

"I'm sorry this spring's planting will not be harvested. Harvest time is hard work, but a time of great rejoicing."

"I can imagine."

The eastern sky was lit with a golden glow. She sat up suddenly. "I would like my mother to watch the last sunrise."

"I'll help you."

We carried her mother's cot to the cliff edge and Gemma sat by her side, holding the weathered hand to her cheek.

"Wake Maya and the children," Gemma said. "They too should see the last day."

After I had woken Maya and left her to do the same with the children I checked that the comm unit was still broadcasting the homing signal. Though I hoped that you would find us in time, despite the proverbs I had accepted the probability you would not arrive.

My feelings are hard to describe. They must denote sadness, regret and perhaps the shame of failure. I've discovered that emotions are hard to define, refusing to be pinned down, like the shades of color in drops of oil on water, blending and changing moment to moment. I'm sad because my eyes will not see you ever again. Illogical as that is, my brother Fyche is no doubt gazing lovingly at you at this moment. I'm sad for Gemma as well. Regardless of what happens, she is doomed. I am experiencing great regret for not telling you all that I feel, as naïve as those feelings may be. Becoming human is more complicated than I had imagined. The shame of failure is, upon reflection, the clearest of my emotions. I would have liked to have saved the children.

The comm unit crackled, making Gemma jump in surprise. "Fyche, it's Holly. Are you there?"

"I'm here, Holly."

"We'll be at your location in three minutes."

Gemma cried out in joy and Maya clapped her hands. While Gemma hugged and kissed me, I asked Holly where you were. My worst fear was that something had gone wrong with the *Jalapeño*.

"Peri's safe. She's back at Adana. A little engine problem. She sent us to rescue you."

A surge of intense joy swept through me. I knew, above all things, you would not let me down. "I have some extra passengers for you."

"It might be a tight squeeze. We've already picked up some stragglers that had been left behind at the spaceport. Everyone has cleared out, the planet's empty."

"I have a schoolroom of children waiting."

"We'll be right there."

"Now, children," Gemma was saying to the children. "You are going on a special ride, a ride into space on a mighty starship."

The children stared disbelievingly at her, for her announcement went contrary to everything they had ever been taught.

"Maya will go with you. I'll stay behind and tell your parents where you are. It will be fun, and you'll see wondrous things that you can't possibly imagine."

We were suddenly illuminated by lights from Maxim's ship, the *Vesper Two*, which had come over the rise behind us. Some of the children screamed in surprise and alarm. Maya and Gemma quieted them and in awe they watched the ship descend and touch down beside the death huts.

The ship settled and the ramp dropped onto the dirt. Holly stood silhouetted in the hatchway. If I hadn't known better I would have thought she was you, and the sadness I felt that it wasn't you was profound.

"Quickly!" she called.

With Maya's help I herded the hesitant children onto the ship. Gemma cried her goodbyes as they ran up the ramp. When the last one had disappeared inside she wandered slowly to the cliff edge and knelt by her mother to watch the rising sun. I think I always knew she couldn't leave her mother, who wouldn't have survived the journey, and would not have wanted to leave even if she could.

I stepped off the ramp onto the dirt.

Holly grasped my arm. "Come on, Fyche, there's room. Not much, but we can squeeze you in."

"I can't, Holly. Give this to Peri. It has information regarding your mother."

"Fyche, you'd best tell her yourself!"

I glanced back to where Gemma stood watching the glow of the sun rising over the valley.

"The sun is twelve light minutes away. It went nova seven and a half minutes ago. You must leave now. You have no time."

"Are you sure about this?" Holly asked me.

I nodded and, as I disconnect the data cube from the jack in my neck, I think of you, Peri. I know you'll understand why I cannot leave Gemma alone and forgive me the expense of a new body... oh, please don't give me a squint.

* * *

I woke up alone in my bed. Silas had disappeared somewhere doing whatever it was he did; chasing Nota and Jyker no doubt. His absence did not pain me as it once had done. His explanation when he left me was logical enough. I forgave him for lying to me. It was his job. He had to maintain his cover. Had Nota not tested his loyalty, he would be deep inside Jyker's plot with a good chance of stopping him. He was now on the outside, and that would make his job far more difficult. But like a Guinean Hound, he wouldn't let go of the scent. I was grateful, of course, that he had blown his cover to save my life, but that moment of hesitation at the airlock had changed something, of that I was sure.

One of Maxim's brothers had towed the *Jalapeño* to dry dock. We'd unloaded the evacuees, who were all unharmed by Nota's drugs, and given our statements to the 'Port Security. We didn't mention Silas's clandestine activities. As far as 'Port Security was concerned he was my lover. I was happy to play along. I had no idea which security service Silas really worked for, and I didn't care.

The ship was strangely quiet, just the hum of the life support running on automatic. I was so tired. After the security people had left us, Silas and I made love one

more time. It was slow and we forgave each other for misunderstandings and harsh words and sins of omission. I fell asleep in his strong arms and dreamed of Fyche.

I received a call from Z Dollavera, one of Maxim's brothers. Maxim was docking in a few minutes. There'd been no word from them since they had left me on the asteroid. I'd been told they'd taken their evacuees to Tannis as ordered by the Navy. Z explained that their communications had been damaged by the supernova and so they couldn't contact us directly. I ran to immigration and was in time to watch Holly and Maxim come through the gates.

"Hi, sis."

I gave her a welcoming smile but hardly saw her as I was looking over her shoulder.

"Boy, was that an adventure or what? We were lucky to get out in time. Maxim did a neat piece of flying. We flew west at treetop level, outrunning the sunrise and into the planet's shadow and then jumped into quantum space with zero seconds to spare. The ship was scorched."

"Where's Fyche?"

Holly put both hands on my shoulders and gazed into my face. "He refused to come with us," she said carefully.

A shaft of ice cut through my chest. "What do you mean he refused to come?"

She frowned as if searching for an explanation. "He may have thought there wasn't room."

I knew that wasn't true. He was an android. He could have clung to the outside of the ship if he wanted to leave.

She held out her hand. "He gave me this for you."

Like a robot I reached out and took the data cube.

"There's something about Mother in there somewhere. He said it was important and then he said goodbye and went to the cliff edge to watch the sun rise. I'm sorry, Peri. I know how much he meant to you."

I didn't hear. I just went back to my empty home.

* * *

Somehow the ship seemed so unfamiliar. It was a mess. The events of the last few weeks had left it in a shambles, and I hadn't been in the mood to clean it up. At least now the engines were back on line, all systems go. All I needed was a destination.

Rebuilding Fyche's control over the ship had taken a squad of AI experts a week to accomplish. The damage done to the CPU required a complete replacement. Nota's friend had installed his own viral code which destroyed Fyche's real time backup when he tried to reboot, and fried the CPU and fucking central core as well. Fyche had been completely erased from the ship.

The hard backup Fyche had made and stored in a shielded safe had not been up to date. It ended way before I'd bought him his body. I guess he'd figured that since he was actually in two places at once he served as his own backup. He could never have anticipated being incinerated in a supernova and having the ship's CPU and the central core fried at the same time.

When he was reactivated I knew immediately he wasn't right. There was something of a stranger in him. The resurrected Fyche was, for all intents and purposes, still him, but what we had shared in the last few months was gone. It felt strange talking to him. It was as if I was in the presence of a ghost, his haunting disembodied voice not quite filling the cabin as it had once done. I knew that was probably my imagination. How could he be different?

I hoped that the data cube he had given Holly would restore that missing something.

For our shakedown cruise I had Fyche take us far from everything, out to deep space, the perfect place to think. I fell heavily into the pilot's chair and pointed out the window. "Which star is it?"

A green rectangle appeared and zeroed in on an unassuming point of light.

Despite spending the better part of my life flitting through space at faster than the speed of light, I found it hard to grasp the concept that the star which had killed Fyche, which was now nothing more than an expanding sphere of incandescent gas

dissipating into the void, was still visible. From here, fifty light years distant, due to the finite speed of light, the star still shone with a steady glow. It would do so for half a century while its pale light sped across the cosmos.

I guess if I was morbidly inclined I could keep heading further out of the galaxy to always keep that light alive. But that would be just too plain stupid. "Have you integrated the data cube?" I said through sudden tears.

Hopefully, after integrating the data cube, the newly restored Fyche would become the one I left behind, the one who had stood on a cliff edge and stared down the creeping light of doom. I hoped the update would bring that Fyche back to me.

"I have," Fyche replied.

The timbre of his voice was unchanged. I guess I had hoped for too much. "Play it."

"Full audio/visual?"

"Just audio," I whispered.

The bridge filled with his voice and I closed my eyes.

"Dear Peri..."

After Fyche's story had ended I gazed dumbly at the distant point in the void, letting its cold light spear into the hollow place beneath my breast.

"Did you love her?"

"Gemma was not classically beautiful, or as sexually experienced as some, but she had certain admirable qualities." His voice was soft and thoughtful and yet razor sharp. "She was intelligent, sensitive, caring and compassionate. I am honored to have known her. The Leeson genes are strong in Gemma and I've now realized what it was that drew me to her. She had this overpowering desire to do the right thing, though I suspect she experienced great confusion, trying to figure out what the right thing might be. Once she made a decision, however, she carried it out with single-minded purposefulness. She didn't let her ignorance stop her. The idea of standing back and simply observing the needless death of so many innocents was an anathema to her. She had to do something, you see, even if it went against a lifetime of tradition and cultural

indoctrination. She was willing to take risks. Trusting me was the biggest risk of all. You can see why I couldn't leave her to face the end alone."

He paused. "Peri, take her out of the rigid bonds of culture and tradition and I think she would be very much like you."

I blinked away more damned tears. "You didn't answer my question."

"I think I have."

Don't Miss:
Spaceport: The Erogenous Affair

Award-winning sex reporter Peri Barberossa is spiraling out of control. She's running from something, but she's not sure what. Spending time sitting in bars, picking up men, drowning her confusion in sex. Tonight the lucky one is a fighter pilot who, in addition to having a great body, has an unusual accent which she unexpectedly recognizes. But why is it so familiar?

He's from the planet Scalion, a provincial backwater Peri has never visited -- not that she can remember anyway. Could it be a lead to her mother?

She has to follow it up, anything to get away from the smothering affections of Silas Archimedes and the claustrophobic corridors of the spaceport.

But by now Peri should have realized. Everyone comes back to Spaceport Adana.

Mikala Ash

Mikala Ash freely admits balancing her day job as a management consultant and her passion for writing is a tough job. "If it wasn't for Ricky, my faithful Border Collie, I'd go crazy." Mikala enjoys reading science fiction and paranormal adventure stories that have a sexy angle, "...and that's what I love writing."

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