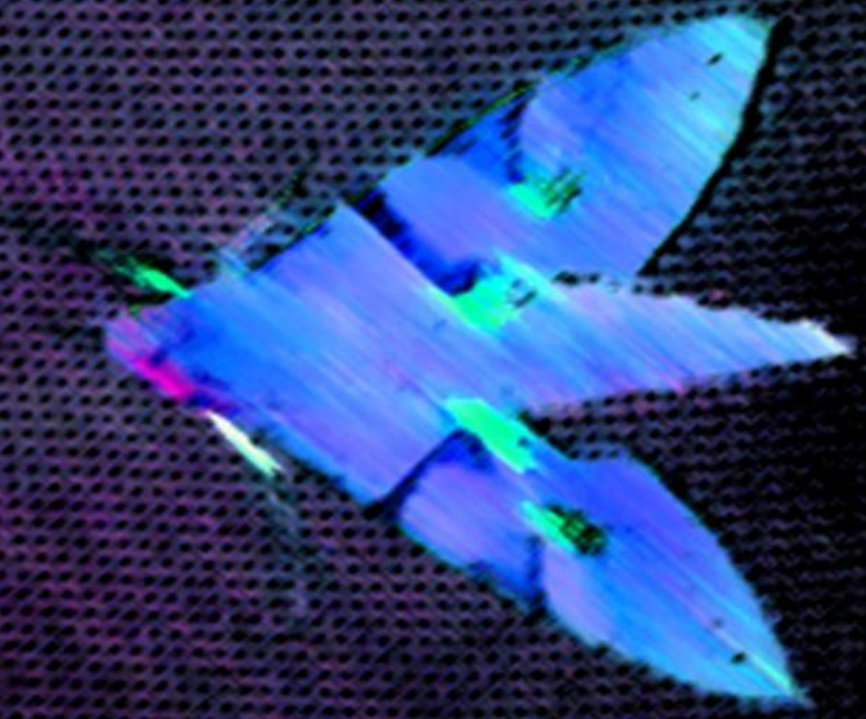


DEIMOS

A StarDoc Novella



S.L. VIEHIL

FOR HOLLY AND MATT

À COEUR VAILLANT RIEN D'IMPOSSIBLE.

PART ONE: ARRIVALS

**0917 HOURS
INTERROGATION RM. 3
LUNAR MARSHALL/LAW ENFORCEMENT
HD-98, SUBSTATION 14
LUNACOLONY**

“You have no right to detain me like this,” the heavy, flat-faced woman told me as she pushed back a handful of her frizzy dark hair.

“Don’t you know who I am?”

I didn’t look up from her arrest records. “Uh-huh.”

Even before I’d run her DNA, I’d known who she was. Everyone on LunaColony knew. Probably anything with tympanic membranes within a hundred light years knew, thanks to the motion-triggered audio blasters she plastered everywhere she went.

Incomparable, Undeniable, Irrefutable – Witness the literary stylings of Lady Constance Di Loma, Performance Poet!

Con Lady was our latest pain in the ass import from Terra. She entertained people with something she called “oral interludes,” which she performed whenever the mood hit her. According to witnesses, she entertained a lot; at least three shows a day since she’d arrived on colony. Always in a high-traffic common area. Always naked.

And there are some people you should just never see that naked.

“Even a mindless bureaucrat like you should see that I am an *artiste*, not a criminal.” She’d kept up the snotty attitude since I’d brought her in

for booking, but she was sweating now. I was pretty sure that I'd arrested her before she could score her post-performance fix, and Connie was starting to feel the chill. "I create poetry with my voice and my body."

That was an interesting way to put it. "Masturbating in public, however, is still illegal, Ms. Di Loma."

"I was expressing an existential physical metaphor for achieving success through the shedding of societal inhibitions and the acquisition of sensual energy and sexual power." She lifted two of her chins. "I was *not* masturbating."

I'd seen just about everything since I'd transferred to the moon to take over as Lunar Marshall, so what I'd found her doing in front of the NASA Crash Memorial hadn't shocked me. Or my partner, who had started out working Vice on planet, in New Angeles. And, hopefully, that group of fifth graders who had witnessed her shedding and acquiring wouldn't need too much therapy.

"Since I'm not an expert on the subject, we'll let the drone judge decide." I tossed the handful of empty 'fusers I'd found in her bag onto the table. The disposable injectors all contained minute traces of a new and utterly illegal narcotic that was popping up all over Luna. A lot like her lousy voice ads. "Where did you get the Glory?"

"Those are prescribed vitamins to enhance my performances—"

I held up one hand. “Spare me the literary stylings. Tell me who sold it to you, and we can wrap this up.”

Con drew herself up like a pudgy hissing cat. “Are you implying that I need *drugs* in order to perform?”

I might need them, to get through this interrogation. “Look, lady, I’m not interested in you. Really, *really* not interested in you. All I want is the name of your dealer.”

But the Queen of Self-Promotion by Mouth was already on a roll. “I am the winner of the Eliot Medal, the Swinburne Wreath, and a two-time recipient of the James Fenton Award. Why, just last week I was selected as one of the finalists for the Ted Hughes Prize for Best Poet of the Year. Which I will win, of course.” She preened by delicately using her pinky to pat away the beads of sweat from her hairy top lip. “That may mean nothing to an uneducated civil servant such as yourself but let me assure you, I am a *very* important woman on Terra.”

“Right. Okay, let me tell you what I *do* know.” I leaned over the console and turned around the vid so she could look at the planetary records I’d pulled. “Your real name is Agatha Bernice Butterworks. Over the last ten years, you’ve been arrested seventeen times for drug possession, public indecency, and innumerable other vice offenses. Leaving Terra was part of the plea bargain you made for the last set of

charges against you.” I met her outraged gaze. “How many real poets filed plagiarism suits against you, Agatha? Was it forty, or fifty?”

Hate glittered in her eyes. “My name is *Constance Di Loma*. I am a *real* poet, and I do *not* have to endure this kind of harassment from an ignorant *bitch* like you.”

I was tempted to drop her dumpy ass in a cell and let her rot, but I needed to get to her connection. Which meant I’d have to string along the little dunce.

I enabled the intercom and signaled my partner. “Sergeant Warren, would you come in here? Our suspect is ready to go to detainment.” I switched off the console and stretched.

“Aren’t you listening? I have performances scheduled! My public is waiting! I demand to see my attorney!”

“Your lawyer has been notified of your arrest, Ms. Di Loma.” Since her credit account was currently hovering in the low three digits, I doubted he was going to show any time soon. “Until he posts a release bond, your public will just have to muddle along without you.”

Sergeant Matthew J. Warren came in. Constance was momentarily distracted by his big, tough body, shaggy dark hair and direct blue eyes – anything female usually was, including me – and I took the opportunity to give him the signal to start the game.

Today we were playing Bad Cop/Concerned Cop.

“Marshall.” He gave me a respectful nod, and then turned to Con. “If you’ll accompany me, ma’am, I’ll—” He stopped and peered at her chin. “What is that thing on your face?”

“What thing?”

“It’s a . . .” he squinted. “Pimple or something.”

“I don’t have pimples.” She prodded the fleshy region under her bottom lip to be sure, and then went still. “Oh, God. What is that?”

“Not sure, ma’am, but it looks a little infected. You’d better go see your doc after you make bail.” Matt’s deep voice held just the right tinge of sympathy. “They say they can do great things with cryolasers these days. Shouldn’t scar. Much.”

“Probably a Glory wart,” I said, letting my lip curl. “She’s a user.”

“I am not!”

“Oh, man. Not Glory.” Matt gave me a shocked look. “That would be terrible.”

“I said, I’m not . . .” she trailed off as she looked around the interrogation room. “Is there a mirror in here?”

“No, sorry.” He studied her face again. “Looks like there’s a hair growing out of it. Is that stage two or three, Marshall?”

“Two.” I examined my fingernails. “Hardly anyone makes it to three.”

Con pawed at her face. “I don’t feel any hair!”

“Nerve damage, already? Oh, man.” Matt took a big step back.

“You sure she’s not a three?”

“Who cares.” I tossed him some skin sealer. “Seal up and put her in the quarantine cell. Make sure you go through biodecon after.”

He quickly coated his hands. “Should I signal the colony chaplain? You know, in case . . .”

“No need; she’s an atheist.” I flipped a hand toward the door. “My skin’s starting to crawl. Get her out of here.”

“Wait.” She knocked over her chair, getting at me to grip my sleeve. “You have to help me, officer.”

“It’s Marshall.” I picked her hand off. “Not mindless bureaucrat, uneducated civil servant, ignorant bitch, or officer. *Marshall!*”

“Please, Marshall. I know I was a bit impetuous before, but—”

I cocked an eyebrow.

“I mean, offensive. I’m so sorry that I offended you.” She dropped to her knees and hugged mine. “Please, please help me.”

I ruined my chances for sainthood by savoring the moment. “All right, Agatha, I’ll get the colony doc here to have a look at your Glory zit, but I want something in exchange.”

“Anything.” And she meant it.

“The name of your vitamin supplier.”

#

A few hours later I stripped out of my uniform and stood under the cleanser, adjusting it to forty degrees Fahrenheit. As the unit clicked on, I bowed my head, closed my eyes and let the cold spray pound into the snarled muscles of my upper back.

I was hot, tired, and frustrated.

As exasperating as the idiot little twit had been, Constance Di Loma was just a minor blip on my mental screen. She'd given me the name of her dealer, a seedy little creep I'd busted for pushing too many times to count. He knew better than to roll over, however, so he'd lawyered up the minute we brought him in. It was his suppliers I wanted anyway. They were the ones responsible for flooding Luna with Glory.

Cheap, highly addictive, and somehow bioscanner-resistant, Glory had become a big hit on colony. Because we hadn't nabbed any in raw form, and the refined form didn't match any chemical or organic on record, the tech heads at the System Drug Enforcement still weren't even sure what was used to make it. A rumor had been going around that there was a cartel ship hiding somewhere in the quadrant, and supply lines were being set up to bring tons of it in from the border territories. So far it had only shown up on Luna, but it was only a matter of time before some enterprising scum found a way to smuggle it on planet.

Whatever Glory was, addicts loved it. Once in the bloodstream, Glory didn't register on any tox screens. The high was fast and lasting, and

was rumored to get better with repeated use. Overdoses had already caused more than two hundred and fifty critical brain injuries and another forty-nine deaths.

Every colony has its problems, but we'd worked our asses off to sever supply lines for Crysrok and Hoser to the colony. It seemed like as soon as we cleaned up one drug, the dealers switched to something else. What seriously bugged the shit out of me was that nine out of ten of the Glory victims had been under majority age. When kids died on my beat, I took it personally.

The door to the unit opened. "Damn, woman." A large, hard body brushed mine as the temperature setting changed. "Why not save water and rub yourself down with a chunk of ice?"

"Too much effort involved." I didn't open my eyes, but the now-warm water induced a pleasant euphoria, and I leaned back against his solid, muscular frame. "Besides, I was counting on you to warm me up later."

"I can do that." Matt's soapy hands landed on my shoulders and started working their way down. "Right now."

Two years ago the Bureau of Planetary Justice had sent Agent Matthew J. Warren to the moon to investigate me in connection with a drug smuggling case. I hadn't liked finding out my best cop was an undercover BPJ agent, but Matt had gone on to help me catch two serial killers. He'd also saved my life and my daughter's more than once, so I had

no problem accepting his permanent transfer. Officially he was assigned to my office; unofficially he still maintained ties to BPJ.

Somewhere in the middle of all that, we'd fallen for each other, hard. I hadn't been looking for the love of my life, but I didn't regret finding it. In every sense of the word, Matt was the best partner I'd ever had.

Okay, and the *only* partner I'd ever lived with, but my grandmother raised me to be selective about men, sex, and pretty much everything that mattered to a woman.

Bless you for that, Grandma. I moved my shoulders against his chest and covered his hands with mine. "You have thirty years to stop doing that." Something itched under the soap, and I recalled the two little bite marks he'd left on my breasts the night before. "Just watch the teeth, pal."

"I can't help it." He nuzzled the side of my neck. What he did to my skin with his mouth and his tongue made my insides curl into a tight, throbbing knot. "I see you naked and I get hungry."

"Next time, we'll have dinner in bed."

"Hello?" A seven and a half foot tall shadow appeared on the other side of the steam-opaqued unit door. "Something illegal going on in there?"

The shadow belonged to the other love of my life.

“I’ll be out in a second, Suz.” To Matt, I murmured, “Isn’t she supposed to be on a field trip to Europa?”

“Next week.” He turned me around and kissed my wet nose, then went for my mouth.

Kissing Matthew while we were wet and naked made me forget my kid. It made me forget that I had legs and lungs.

“Hurry up, Mom, I need to tell you something,” my daughter called as she retreated. “You can jump Matt’s bones later.”

I broke off the kiss and frowned. “Maybe there’s a group leaving this week.”

“What, so you can start pacing the floors sooner?” He pulled me with him under the spray and started sluicing the soap from my skin.

We dried off and dressed before we joined Suz in the living room. My tall, lean daughter had flopped on the big sofa and was re-weaving one of ten thousand tiny, flexible metallic ribbons woven through the green gills sprouting from her scalp. The rest of Suzu was encased in bright pink plas-mesh studded every half inch with tiny white emitters. The emitters flashed in pre-programmed patterns of duration and intensity, which made her look a little like a long, skinny pink alien Christmas tree.

“Good God Almighty.” Automatically I shaded my eyes. “How much did that outfit cost me?”

“Zero. I bought it with the credits Grandma sent for my birthday.” Suz tied off the ribbon and wrinkled her blunt little nose at Matt. “Sad, how fashion terrifies her, isn’t it?”

“Only when it bankrupts my credit account.” I leaned over to kiss her brow ridge. “Want some dinner?”

“No, Arnie is taking me out for pizza with Todd and Marsella. I just wanted to tell you about this before I left.” She handed over a data chip tagged with the code from Armstrong University.

I frowned. Chips from school usually meant Suz was in trouble.

“I’ll make us something to drink.” Matt, who tried never to take sides with me and my kid, disappeared into the kitchen.

“Am I going to like reading this?” I asked as I sat down at my personal terminal to read the message.

“No.” She hopped over to stand next to me. “But this time it’s nothing I did. The dean’s secretary overbooked the visiting students’ dorm again, and they’re begging for bed space.”

The dean had copied the priority message to all parents of the students going on the Europa field trip, requesting we provide personal accommodations for some Terran exchange students who were schedule to arrive on Luna Colony the same week.

I’d been assigned a medical student with a long, complicated name. “Chee-ree-oh Grey Veil?”

“I think that’s pronounced Cherry-Joe.” Suzu peered at the student’s academic rating, which was 5.9 or better straight across the board.

“Wow, look at those numbers. She must be a total datazoid.”

I elbowed her. “Wouldn’t kill you to bring your grade point average up a few more points, you know.” I noted that the Terran female was seventeen, had never been off planet before, and was the only child of research scientist/physician. *Poor kid, she’s in for a shock.* Her last name rang a distant bell, so I punched up the public records on her parent.

My smile faded as I read the display. “She’s Joseph Grey Veil’s daughter.”

“Isn’t he the guy . . .” Suzu thought for a moment, and then straightened, her gills bristling. “Oh, no *way* is she sleeping in my room for a week!”

Joseph Grey Veil was the xenophobic research scientist behind the Genetic Exclusivity Act, which forever denied residency status on Terra to anyone but pure-bred humans. He was the reason I’d become a lunar cop, and why Suz and I could never go back to live on the homeworld.

I checked the message copy list. Every parent had been contacted, and some had been asked to put up two students. “I don’t think there’s anyone else who can take her.” Even if they wanted to; we had a lot of interspecies couples on the moon.

“Then she can stay on Terra with her Dad, the prejudiced jerk.”

I rubbed my forehead to keep from agreeing with her. There were times when acting like a mature, reasonable adult sucked, and this was one of them. “We have to do this, Suz.”

“Come on, Mom, what about when she finds out you have a crossbreed daughter? It’s not like you can hide it.” Suz gestured at all the photoscans of us on the walls. “I don’t want some bigoted brat spitting on my mother.”

“You can’t blame a kid for who her father is,” I reminded her.

Nineteen years ago I’d been sent to NuYork Federal Penitentiary on extradition duty when the prisoners in maximum security had rioted and taken over the prison. I’d survived only to discover I was pregnant with a half-alien child. Under the GEA, I couldn’t stay on Terra unless I had an abortion. I opted to transfer to the moon and keep my baby instead.

It hadn’t been easy, but I’d never regretted my decision. From the moment she’d been born, Suz had been energetic, independent, opinionated, the great joy of my life – and nothing like the monster who had fathered her.

My kid still didn’t look happy. “I could ask Arnie’s parents to take her.”

“Honey, Arnie’s dad is Tingalean. I think she’ll handle pictures of you on my walls a lot better than staying with a man who closely resembles a six-foot-tall walking snake.”

“I guess you’re right.” Suz crouched down and flung all four arms around me as she pressed her face against my chest. “It’s just, you know, I love you, Mom. So much.”

She hardly ever said it.

“I love you too, baby.” I stroked her braided gills and told myself I was not going to cry. “It’ll be okay.”

“All right, but listen. If this snotty little datazoid says one word out of line to you, you signal me.” My daughter gazed up at me, all fierce and protective again. “I’ll come back early and kick her purebred ass out of here.”

“You’ll have to stand in line, Suz.” Matt, who had been listening in, set down two servers down on the console and put a hand on my shoulder.

I looked into his blue eyes, then my daughter’s, as dark as my own. I’d come to Luna alone, wounded and angry and scared. I’d struggled to raise Suz by myself, and she had healed me. Now, with Matt, we had become a family.

No one was going to spit on that, not even the daughter of the racist who had driven me here.

#

A week after I busted Con Lady, I took some personal time and headed over to Transport to pick up my exchange student. Suz had

already left for Europa the day before, and Matt had offered to come with me, but I turned him down. Four users had OD'ed on Glory the previous night, resulting in two dead and two in critical condition.

"I need you at the hospital," I told him, "in case one of them comes out of the coma." Chances were if they did, they'd be Glorified – dome slang for the massive neural damage commonly inflicted by an overdose – but we might get lucky and get one with a bit of brains left intact. "Find out whatever you can."

"Hey." He stopped me on the way out of the station door panel, bent down and gave me a heart-stopping kiss in front of three other cops and two patrol drones.

I blinked and tried very hard not to melt all over him. I mostly succeeded. "That's not very professional, Sergeant."

"You'll have to discipline me, then." His slow smile appeared.
"Later."

I got to Transport a little early. As I waited for Grey Veil's daughter, I watched the new arrivals going through customs. Lots of tourists in white-and-black lunar shirts; some were excited, wide-eyed first-timers; others looked bored and ready to go back to Terra already. They mingled with a stream of anonymous-looking business people in equally bland power suits. Few traders, but since the route tariffs had been increased most sent

their shipments to distributors on Terra or Mars, where they made a better profit.

That was the other problem with tracking the source of the Glory. *If the traders aren't bringing it in, then who is? And how the hell are they getting it here in bulk?*

A momentary shift in the flow of arrivals caught my eye. I wouldn't have noticed it, or the man who caused it by changing direction, if not for the glint of green and silver in his left ear.

Hell.

A minute later the tall Terran male stepped up to the customs desk and placed the plain silver case he carried on the scanner for inspection. When he was cleared, he reached to take it back.

I got it first. "Hello, Michael."

Michael Patrick Killian smiled down at me. "Marshall Noriko." He gave me the once-over with his pretty green eyes. "Long time."

"Not long enough." I nodded toward one of the interview rooms adjacent to the customs station. "In there."

Killian followed me in. "Something the matter?"

I secured the door panel and set the case down on the table inside. "Lock code, please."

He gave me a mild look. "There's only a change of clothes."

The tough, lean body, hardass-handsome face and charming Irish accent regularly dazzled all the women Killian wanted blind, but I'd seen what he could do when he wasn't feeling amiable. "Give me the code, or I call a drone in here to do a cavity search." Which I still might, anyway.

"Seven-nineteen-thirty-eight."

I punched in the date of his father's murder, which released the locks on the case, and sorted through the expensive garments. He watched me calmly, as if he'd expected to get roused like this. I ran my scanner over the contents and the case before I slammed the lid shut.

"What are you doing here?"

He sat on the edge of the table. "I've business."

"Last time I deported your ass, we agreed you'd keep your business off my colony in the future." I walked around to run my scanner over him.

Mike Killian had learned his trade young. As a kid he'd worked with his father, counterfeiting ID chips for the New Irish Front. When the old man had been shot and killed by an unsatisfied client, twelve year old Michael had vanished. So had the shooter, only to turn up a week later, his body nailed to the front door of the local NIF tavern.

Mike still wore his dad's NIF ring, a silver band of emerald chips, pierced through his left ear.

The NIF had brought him into the big leagues, where he became known as Kill. They'd never had a better, or more efficient, executioner.

BPJ had him tagged for at least fifty political hits, but they never found a shred of evidence or a living witness to testify against him. When the NIF had collapsed a few years ago, Killian had gone freelance and had done even better for himself.

If you wanted someone dead, and you had enough credits, you called Kill. If the vic was evil enough, some said he'd do it pro-bono.

I'd arrested Killian on Luna six years ago, after a wealthy mobster vacationing on Luna disappeared. The victim, a real nasty piece of work named Gadurini, had just been acquitted of five counts of child rape charges. I never found a body or a crime scene, so I'd been forced to deport him without charges.

Six weeks after Killian returned to Terra, the parents of the five rape victims received a vid recording, which showed a bound but fully conscious Gadurini being slowly lowered feet-first into a disposal unit with the safeties disabled. It had taken him an hour to die, and Gadurini only stopped screaming when the grinders had reached his lungs.

My scans came up clean, but I expected nothing less. Killian never carried a weapon. He didn't have to. I put away the scanner.

"You're looking well, Holly."

He was looking at me like I was a seven course meal. "Don't bullshit me, Michael. I'm not in the mood."

"It's only the truth." He spread his hands. "Nothing more."

“Why are you here?”

“I told you, I’ve business. Are we done, then?” He stood up. “You and I know that you can’t deport me unless you’ve open charges.”

“I can lock you up while I conduct an investigation.” I took out my cuffs. “Should only take me two, three weeks.”

“Unlawful detainment can result in the arresting officer being suspended. Even dismissed from duty.” He leaned over and traced a finger around the points of the silver star I wore over my heart. “My attorney has an impressive collection of badges; I’d hate to add this to it.”

There was the other problem between us: physical attraction, and still plenty of it. If he hadn’t been a cold-blooded killer, I’d have jumped the man six years ago. Even now, my skin was heating up. Just like his.

But now I had Matt, and nothing Killian could say or do would ever dent my love for him.

“I’ll show the judge a copy of the Gadurini vid,” I said, pushing his fingers away. “Keep your hands to yourself.”

We stood staring at each other for a good minute before Killian smiled. “All right. I’m here to watch over someone, nothing more.” He removed a contract chip from his coat pocket and handed it to me. “Standard personal guard agreement, certified three days ago.”

I popped it in the room terminal and read over the data. Everything was perfectly legal, although the client had been listed under the name of a legal firm. “Nice cover.”

“It’s the job, not a cover.”

I tossed the chip back to him. “Who hires *you* as a bodyguard?”

“Someone who wants his family kept safe.” Killian picked up his case. “Will there be anything else?”

He had me. He also knew I’d have him under surveillance every second he was on colony. “If there is, I’m taking you down for it this time.”

“I expect nothing less.” He inclined his head, and left the room.

My wristcom chimed with a programmed alarm. I checked it, saw that it was five minutes past the arrival time for Cherijo’s shuttle, and swore as I hurried out of the room.

Everyone had already disembarked by the time I got to the gate. I searched through the crowd at baggage claim, looking for a girl by herself.

“Excuse me.”

I looked around, then down. A short, serious-looking kid dressed in an immaculate dark green tunic stood in front of me. She had very direct blue eyes, a little darker than Matt’s, and black hair with a distinctive silvery sheen to it. The hair she wore in a single long, tight braid.

And she might have been all of twelve. *Can’t be her.* “Hi, there. What’s up?”

“Are you Marshall Noriko?”

“That’s me.” I looked around for some other elementary school students. “You get lost from your group, sweetheart?”

“No, ma’am. I’m Cherijo Grey Veil. You were expecting me?”

“Uh, yeah. I was.” I had been prepared to loathe her on sight, but she was just a kid. A skinny little kid at that. “How old are you again?”

Her expression turned wary. “I’m seventeen.”

“I might want to see some ID on that.” God, she was really tiny. And borderline anorexic; when was the last time she’d gotten a decent meal? When she set down her case and started taking out her ID folder, I shook my head. “That was a joke.”

“I misunderstood. I’m sorry.” The guarded look didn’t disappear, but she politely held out her hand. “It’s very nice to meet you, and thank you for providing accommodations for me.” She produced a reassuring smile, like *she* was the grownup. “I’ll try to be as unobtrusive as possible.”

She had a nice, strong hand with neatly trimmed fingernails and a practiced handshake, like the smile. All the signs of an experienced politician’s daughter. I knew because I was one.

“Your flight go okay?” I picked up her case.

“It was quite pleasant.” She glanced back at the shuttle launch, which was boarding the return passengers. A fleeting expression of longing crossed her little face before she squared her shoulders and

turned to me. "If you'll provide me with the location of your dwelling and direct me to the nearest public transport station, I won't take up any more of your time, Marshall."

Apparently Cherijo had been told to keep a polite distance, or trained not to bug grown ups. Either way, she was as stiff and polite as a courtesy drone when she should have been babbling and excited and wanting to see everything, like any other kid.

"I think I can manage to transport you without putting a serious dent in my work schedule. Hang on." On impulse I flagged one of the drones working the dock and took one of the souvenir necklaces they sold to kids from his rack.

"That one is already sold," the drone told me.

"Yeah, I know, I bought it." I pushed a credit chip in his slot and turned to Cherijo. "Here." I held it out to put it over her head. "Welcome to LunaColony."

She regarded the loop of big gaudy pearls as if it were a poisonous snake. "I couldn't possibly accept--"

"Sure you can." I draped it around her neck. "You made the jaunt; you're officially a Moonie now."

"Wouldn't you rather have this one?" the drone extended an bigger, uglier strand. When I swung around to face him, his emitters zeroed in on my badge. "Oh. Sorry, officer." He trundled off.

I shook my head. Transport really needed to check some of these concession drones once in awhile.

Cherijo lifted and examined the pearls with cautious fingertips, like someone who had never worn a piece of junk jewelry before. Then she stunned me again by giving me a real smile. "It's pretty. Thanks, Marshall."

That was more like it. I grinned back. "You're welcome." My wristcom blipped. "Excuse me for a sec." I answered the signal and switch it to display-only.

447 Code 30 HD-7 - LOCATION: JAIKES - OAS: R. MORGAN

An arson, a patrolman in distress, and in the worst place on the moon for either to happen.

Acknowledged/en route, I signaled back. *Relay to EnviroControl and all officers in the immediate vicinity*. Then I turned to the kid. "Cherijo, about the offer you made to find your own way to my place."

#

Jaikes used to be a crummy little watering hole tucked in the back of HD-7, a low traffic storage dome where a few addicts congregated in the shadows to share infusers. About twenty years ago the original owner and a bunch of his patrons died in a shoot-out with some suppliers, and colony management used the bloodbath as an excuse to move long-term storage and abandoned HD-7.

The junkies still needed somewhere to go, though, and after a few years a new transfer took advantage of the vacated, unregulated space and reopened Jaikes. Murphy, the new owner, had done very well since then; the watering hole had tripled in size, and HD-7 had become the moon's primary low-life magnet.

My predecessor, a weary and disgusted old Brooklynier who had come to the moon to get away from five ex-wives, had tried to bust Murphy innumerable times, *sans* success. Before he retired to Europa colony, he frankly advised I plant some evidence and then bring in SDE to do a sweep.

"Murphy's a two-time loser," the old man told me. "Drop a quarter key somewhere and SDE will levy mine time."

I'd gone to see Murphy the day after he left, and had since dealt with the situation in my own way.

By the time I got there, the floor of the dome was three inches deep in water. Envirocontrol techs splashed through it, routing maintenance drones and setting up evacuators to clear out the residual smoke. Junkies huddled near the exits, ready to run but unwilling to leave. The air stank of wet charred plas and something like overdone pork lo mein.

I caught a passing fire fighter. "Where did all this water come from?"

“We had to break into the main supply line and use it to put out the blaze.” He gave the tavern’s gutted structure a disgusted look. “We can’t keep chem tanks in these old domes; the rokheads always steal them.”

In front of Jaikes’s no-nonsense, industrial façade stood a short woman dressed in faded camouflage fatigues. Soot had blackened her bleached, cropped hair and dirtied her face. She had a tech by the arm and was giving him grief in her native language.

“Go dtachta na péisteoga do thóin bheagmhaitheasach!”

I came up behind her. “Is that the curse about worms or the devil?”

“Worms.” Murphy didn’t look at me. “Which should burrow into his oversize, worthless ass if they’re wanting any bit of brain, ‘cause there’s no to be found in his thick empty skull.” She spit on the deck between the technician’s footgear. “Stupid server o’ piss.”

The look of relief the tech gave me over the bar owner’s shoulder was comical. “Marshall. This, ah, Lady is a little disturbed . . .”

Disturbed was the wrong thing to call Falyn Murphy.

“Ah-ah-ah.” I caught her arm before her fist connected with the man’s nose. “Run along now, technician.” I let go once he was out of punching range, then smiled as she pulled her arm back. “Go ahead, take a shot. You’ll scrub floors and toilets in detention for the next six months. With your broken jaw wired shut for the first two.”

Murphy dropped her fist. “You’re a plasteel bitch, Noriko.”

“You’d know.” I scanned the scene. If I hadn’t been with Killian at Transport when this had happened, I’d have made it the reason to haul him in. “Want to tell me where my uniform is?”

“Inside, dead with the rest we couldn’t get out.” The knife scars on her face glowed a livid pink under the soot. “If he survives, you’ll have to be giving me another minute to cut his throat.”

“Simmer down.” I signaled Matt on my wristcom, then keyed it to record her statement. “What happened?”

“Fuck if I know.”

I just looked at her.

“All right, all right.” She let out a disgusted breath. “One minute I’m setting down beers for boys, the next I’m dousing some meltbrain who walks in on fire.”

Her Dublin-speak didn’t translate sometimes. “On fire as in upset?”

“No, on fire as in covered with flames and burning hisself alive. I get the extinguisher and have a go at him, then your boy shows and does he help? No, he tries to lay the ‘strains on me. Like *I’m* the one who lit the bloody brain-wipe up like a birthday candle. While he’s pissing and moaning in my face, the torch stumbles about and then the whole place is going up.”

Ron Morgan had been on the job less than a year, and had racked up three reprimands for negligence and dereliction of duty. He was a

slacker who liked finding a corner to snooze in, and that was when he was *in* uniform. “Who or what set this guy on fire? You see a shooter?”

“No. Not a soul.” Confusion flickered in her eyes. “Something on him, maybe, something triggered. If there was, it was fast; he went like he was standing under a rocket booster.”

“He one of yours?”

“No.” Her gaze strayed to the thin, miserable figures huddled outside the tavern. “A tyro, though. Had to be.”

Tyro was what junkies called new or casual users. “Why’s that?”

“Too goddamn fat.” She nodded toward four techs who were struggling to push out a covered gurney. “Have a look for yourself.”

“Stay put.” I strode over and stopped the techs, and then tugged the decency sheet down. The corpse under it was borderline obese and partially burned, but that wasn’t what made me bend over.

The dead man’s skin was riddled with little half-inch holes. All over, too: face, neck, arms, chest, everything.

A familiar hand touched my back. “Hey.”

“Hey. Got some gloves on you?”

Matt did, and gave them to me. “What are those holes?”

“I don’t know.” I gloved then reached out and brushed away from ash from a hole in one bicep. “Puncture wounds, maybe.” I tugged one

edge out. “Looks like they go down to the bone. Bring Murphy over here, will you?”

Matt went and brought back the tavern owner, who gave the corpse a hard look. “He didn’t have those plugs in his face when he came in,” she told me.

“Too round to be from a blade. There’s tissue missing.” I checked a couple more, then stripped off the gloves. “You program one of your cook drones to do a little tenderizing before broiling?”

Murphy made a rude sound. “When I can’t even get a decent corned beef and cabbage synth out of them?” She met my gaze and lost her sneer. “Noriko, me and mine didn’t do this. I’ll take the polydrone if you want.”

The offer to submit to a lie detector – something an ex-con never made voluntarily – didn’t bother me as much as what I saw in her eyes. Murphy, who had witnessed at least as much during her life as I had in mine, was genuinely rattled.

I’d only seen her this shaken up once before. “What I need are some answers, Falyn. Like who did this to him, and how, and why.”

“I’ll ask.” She strode off toward the nearest group of addicts.

Matt coordinated forensics at the scene while I took a look at Officer Ron Morgan’s body. No holes in his corpse, and he’d asphyxiated from the

smoke versus burning. He'd taken out his pistol, though, and it was still clutched in his left hand.

That really bugged me. Even a jack-off like Morgan wouldn't have drawn his weapon without serious provocation. Popping off shots in an old habitat without proper maintenance was like begging to be sucked out into space.

Something had scared him enough to risk a dome breach.

Ron had no family on colony or planet, so I didn't have to notify next-of-kin, but I put the word out on private relay to the rest of my people. Anytime an law officer was killed, accidentally or otherwise, we closed ranks and watched each other's backs.

Matt brought over an evidence bag and handed it to me. Inside were dozens of pea-sized clear blobs. "They found these in the vic's pockets. There were more, but they melted into the fabric."

"Too small to be infusers." I held up the bag and squinted. "Ceecees."

My partner frowned. "Medical?"

"No, institutional. Convict candy." I opened the bag and sniffed. "Sucrose capsules filled with your drug of choice. Melts in your mouth or any handy orifice, not in your hand. Ideal packaging for people who are always getting searched or scanned. See the red one?" I tapped a corner of the bag. "Neutralizer, in case you have to swallow all of them and don't

want to visit Hell in a hurry." I held it up. "Not enough to deal; this was a personal stash."

He glanced over at Murphy. "You think she was his connection?"

"No." I pocketed the bag.

"She's done time for drugs, Holly."

"Possession, not trafficking. It wasn't Murphy." I'd explain Falyn to him later, and fill him in on Killian. Right now I wanted to know what kind of weapon left a man looking like crispy Swiss cheese. "Let's get over to the morgue and talk to the ME."

#

Finding decent cops willing to transfer to Luna Colony was tough; bringing in good doctors was just about impossible. Aside from the fact that most Terran MDs knew zip about the alien crossbreeds who made up 10% of our population, all our med pros were hired and compensated by colonial admin, whose budget didn't stretch very far. Any qualified physician who wanted to make money stayed on planet.

The docs we got were mostly like our current medical examiner, Dr. David Julienne, who had been barred by the Planetary Medical Association from practicing on Terra for life.

"How does a pathologist get kicked out of the PMA?" Matt asked me as we arrived at the morgue. "It couldn't be because he killed anyone."

"I'd like him better if he had," I said.

Inside, the young, bored receptionist advised us that her boss was too busy to see us.

“Dr. Julianne said that he’ll be tied up for the rest of the day,” she added as she examined her manicure, which she had been working on intently before we’d interrupted. “If you’ll leave your names—”

“Christ, not again.” I bypassed her desk and went through the double doors leading back into the morgue.

The smell of decay and formalin tainted the recycled air inside. Five draped bodies on gurneys were lined up, waiting to be inspected, scanned and dissected. Another, naked elderly male lay stretched out on the center exam pad, his scalp pulled over his face to reveal the skull cap and his brain had been removed. The brain sat in a shallow basin on a scope table, right next to a sandwich, a datapad and a server of lemonade.

The scene didn’t bother me. The closed door and shuttered view panel of one of the isolation rooms did.

Matt joined me. “Problem?”

“I hope not,” I said, in a loud, carrying voice, “because if I caught someone in here doing something illegal with a corpse – again – I’d have to keep that promise I made about yanking his medical license and stomping his sorry ass into the tile.”

The door to the isolation room opened, and a short, blond-haired man emerged.

“Marshall Noriko.” David Julienne was slightly out of breath and reeked of formalin. He pushed his thick-lensed spectacles higher up the bridge of his hooked nose. “I’m in the middle of a delicate scientific procedure, so I’m afraid you’ll have to leave.”

“A *delicate* scientific procedure.” I looked down at the front of his trousers, and the pitiful, fading erection poking up beneath them. “Since when did performing autopsies with your dick become delicate or a science, Dave?”

“Oh, Christ,” Matt muttered under his breath as he followed my gaze and caught on.

“I haven’t done any such thing.” He pulled the edges of his lab coat together and tried to look righteous. “I’ve been going for sessions regularly; you can check with my therapist.”

“Oh, you can count on that.” I was tempted to go in and scan the corpse he probably had in the isolation room for semen, because I wanted to make good on my promise. Just then the back door panel opened and a couple of techs brought in the bodies from Jaikes. “Since you’re such an expert on drilling cadavers, doctor, let’s see what you can tell me about this victim.” I marched him over to the gurney with the largest body.

Julienne put on a mask and gloves before he pulled back the sheet. From the look on his face, it wasn’t love at first sight. “He burned to death.”

“I could have told you that, and I never went to medical school.”

The pathologist sighed as he took a scanner and passed it over the blackened body. “Global charring with extensive mutilation, carbon deposits in the trachibronchial tree, carbon monoxide saturation eighty-six percent.” He frowned. “Actually, he asphyxiated before he burned to death.”

“What made these holes?” I pointed to a bunch on the shoulder.

He leaned over and peered before taking a probe from a nearby tray and poking at one. “I’m not sure.” He frowned. “They don’t look like any wounds I’ve ever seen before. I’ll have to run a full series of scans.”

“You do that. Run a tox on these while you’re at it.” I gave him the evidence bags with the CCs and checked my wristcom. “I expect full reports on both and DNA ID on the John Doe in two hours.”

“Two hours!” Julianne looked outraged. “I can finish one by tomorrow afternoon, maybe, if I have no other cases.”

“You’ll be too busy talking to your therapist tomorrow, Dave,” I told him as Matt and I headed out. “See if she has any suggestions on what bullshit you can serve up to the colony review board this time.”

“How does a perv like him end up as a medical examiner?” Matt asked me as we drove back to the station.

“The same way child molesters end up being scout leaders and sports coaches. Supply and demand. Shit.” I switched lanes and made a U-turn. “I forgot about the child.”

“Huh?”

“Cherijo, my live-in exchange student. I got the call for Jaikes just as I was picking her up at Transport. I had to put her on a glidebus.” I took the most direct route to my residence dome.

“You want me to haul in somebody off duty to babysit?” Matt asked as we pulled into the dome’s common lot.

“No, she seemed pretty self-sufficient.” I parked and cut the engine. “I’ll throw together a quick dinner for us, see that she’s settled in.”

We found Cherijo sitting in the corridor next to the entrance to my quarters. She had her case propped on her lap like a desk and was studying three different datapads while making notes on a fourth.

“I see you found the place,” I said. “Why are you out here?”

“Marshall.” She put the pads in the case, set it aside and scrambled to her feet. “Sorry, but I couldn’t get the door to open.”

“Oh, hell. My fault, kiddo.” I’d forgotten to give her the code to get in, which meant she’d been sitting out here for hours. “It’s four-oh-seven-two-nine.” As I bent to grab her case, the door panel opened. “Why didn’t you signal me?”

“I thought you might be busy.” She flashed a nervous glance at Matt.

“I’m never that busy.” I led her inside. “Lights. By the way, Cherijo, this is my partner, Sergeant Matt Warren. He lives here, too.

“It’s very nice to meet you, Sergeant,” she said, ultra-polite and holding out her hand the same way she had with me.

He shook her hand carefully. “Welcome to Luna.”

Once we were inside, I thought I’d get the worst over with up front. “Cherijo, you’ll be sleeping in my daughter Suzu’s bedroom.” I picked up one of the framed photoscans I had sitting around. “This is a shot of her and me last summer.”

“Oh, she’s . . .” she looked from me to Matt and back again. “Adopted?”

“No, I’m her mother. Her father was an alien.” I waited for a negative reaction, but she just kept on the polite-kid face. “She’s over on Europa for two weeks, so you’ll have the room all to yourself. If this is going to be a problem, tell me now and I’ll find another place for you.”

“No problem.” She handed the photoscan back to me. “I’ll be careful not to disturb any of her things.”

I felt like I should have said more, but the kid looked tired and hungry, and I really didn’t want to get into this on her first day on colony. While I gave her a quick tour of the place and left her to unpack in Suz’s room, Matt checked in with the station.

“The last two Glory OD’s didn’t make it,” he told me as he followed me into the kitchen. “Murphy left a message with the desk drone, said she needs to meet but wouldn’t say why.”

“Falyn wouldn’t, she hates talking to machines.” I looked at my prep unit menu, which was a mix of family favorites: my Japanese, Matt’s Mexican and Suzu’s multi-species preferences. For us, perfectly normal; for the daughter of Terra’s biggest xenophobe, not so great. “I wonder if she likes stir-fry.” I loved stir-fry. I mostly lived on stir-fry.

“I can always order something in,” Matt said as he set the table.

“Yeah, maybe.” A signal came in over my work console, and I routed it in to the kitchen. “Noriko.”

It was Dr. Julienne. “I ran the tox on the gel caps, and they’re legal tranqs. He had four times the prescribed limit in his blood, but that’s all. I’ll need more time to finish the autopsy report on this burn victim. I haven’t found his DNA ID and I need to send a consult request to Terra.”

“The guy’s dead, Dave. He doesn’t need a second opinion.”

“Well, I do. I don’t have anything to work with here. There’s no pulse impact or discharge residue, no cavital hemorrhage, no abraded margins.”

“Which means?” Matt asked.

“He wasn’t shot, stabbed or lasered by any conventional means,” he said, managing to sound sulky and superior at the same time. “Look at this.”

An image of the corpse's back appeared on the screen, and it was riddled with so many holes it resembled charred lace.

"There are over six hundred on this area, all the exact same size, all clean as a whistle," Julianne said. "There isn't even any fiber material in them from the clothes he was wearing."

"That would be because they're exit wounds," Cherijo said from the doorway.

I turned, startled. "What?"

"Penetrating contact wounds of the trunk appear externally innocuous with a circular defect approximating the weapon bore," she said as she walked over to the screen. Her voice and body language were completely different; she practically radiated authority and confidence. "Pulse impact imprint is unmistakable, and interposed clothing would have left soot smudging." To Dave, she said, "Doctor, did you find any discoloration of the underlying muscle?"

"Who are you?" Julianne demanded.

"Forgive me for not introducing myself," Cherijo said smoothly. "I'm Dr. Grey Veil, from Terra. Would you enlarge the image you're relaying times ten, please?" She waited until the close-up appeared. "There." She traced her fingertip around the enlarged wound. "When a projectile object or force collides with a human body, kinetic energy transfers and

dissipates, causing characteristic penetrating trauma. The cavitation here indicates the force originated *inside* the victim's body."

My jaw wanted to drop, but I kept it shut.

"That's ridiculous," Julianne snapped. "There is nothing on the inside of the body that could cause this number and distribution of wounds."

"Doctor, surely you will agree that whatever was inside the body," Cherijo said, *"left."*

"Could he have swallowed something or had something implanted?" I asked her. "Some sort of explosive device?"

"It's unlikely; even a small charge would have resulted in severe dismemberment." She studied the image. "The quantity of these exit wounds is exceptional. I would appreciate the opportunity to examine the body myself."

Dave came on and started bitching again, so I reached over and killed the audio. "*Dr. Grey Veil.* I thought you were just a student."

"I'm a first year surgical resident, but I qualified for my MD last fall. I've really only performed a small number of autopsies myself, maybe two or three dozen" –she glanced at the display– "but perhaps I could look over the medical examiner's findings later?"

I was tempted for a second. She sounded smart as hell, like some MedTech professor, but she was still a kid. "As long as it won't disrupt your studies or give you nightmares."

"I never have bad dreams." Cherijo made a wry face. "And I can probably get extra credit for it."

I enabled the audio. "Dr. Julianne, get your consult and have a prelim report to me by oh-eight-hundred in the morning." I terminated the signal before he could reply. "So, kiddo, what do you like, food-wise?" I went to the prep unit. "I've got the usual teen favorites, tacos, pizza, hamburgers."

"I'm sorry, but I'm a vegetarian." She eyed the menu, then me and Matt. "Do either of you like stir-fry?"

#

The next morning Matt drove Cherijo over to the school so I could meet with Murphy. Before I left I had the house drone voice-print the kid so she could run things if we weren't around, and gave her security and medical clearance codes to access our quarters and the colonial database. I also made her memorize Matt's and my private comm codes.

"You get stuck somewhere or you need something, *signal* one of us," I said as I pulled my jacket over my shoulder holster. "We're never too busy to talk."

"I will." She was wearing the moonie pearls I'd bought her, and touched them like a talisman before she went off with Matt.

Murphy didn't like straying too far from her own territory, or anywhere near the clean-living, so we met at one of the stripdrone clubs in

HD-11. The music was retro-pop, loud enough to be annoying, and the employees were all hard-wired. I found her sitting with her back to a corner, ignoring a gaudy breakfast cocktail and a fully accessorized toyboy drone that had been programmed to gyrate up and down the length of the bar while offering his more personal capabilities to interested patrons.

“You bring me to the nicest places,” I said as I slid onto the stool beside hers.

She gave me a sideways look. “You’d have me crashing one of your kid’s PTA meetings?”

“Would liven them up. Coffee, black,” I said as the mini bartender whizzed over to take my order. “Mike Killian’s on colony.”

“I pity the reason why. Mike won’t.”

I nodded. “What have you got for me?”

“One of my boys; he’ll be along shortly. He says the torch’s name was Huey Evans, ex-middle man for the cartel. This is everything I could pull from my database.” She handed me a record chip. “He won’t show up on yours; someone smuggled him in from Europa yesterday.”

I pocketed the chip. “Ex-middle man?”

“His girl had a fondness for the ‘rok, and he nicked a bit off every shipments for her. The things men do for love.” She knocked the fancy paper umbrella out of her drink and took a swallow. “Word is his boss found out, gave the girl to a shifter and made Evans watch.”

That might explain the tranqs. Seeing a shifter work was enough to drive anyone insane. The bartender delivered my coffee, and I took a test sip. There was only one cartel boss who used Odnallaks to work over whoever displeased him. “Kenerak.”

“Aye.” Her expression blanked. “Erak would have busted Evans down to a pony after that; he never liked wasting a body he could still use. Could be a delivery gone bad.”

A well padded animorph drone with a long golden mane chose that moment to sidle up next to me. He sported low nap striped fur, decorative fangs and a multi-function penis the size of my forearm. He used one of his blunt-clawed hands to present it like an oversize éclair. “Want to ride the tiger, baby?”

“Go screw yourself,” was my suggestion.

“I’m not programmed with that function,” the drone informed me as he tried to look down the front of my jacket. “Wouldn’t you rather I screw you?”

“End solicitation.” Murphy dropped some credits into the tip pouch on his left pec. “Go impress someone else, tinman.”

He re-evaluated both of us. “We have female service units available as well,” he told Murphy, dropping the artificial lechery entirely. “Simply request you or your partner’s preferences from the bar unit and it will attend you.” He moved on to the next patron.

“What was that all about?” I stared after the drone.

“He decided we’re butch, darlin’.” Murphy pushed away the rest of her drink. “Whatever Evans brought in didn’t make it to any of the needy. Erak doesn’t like losing product.”

“You think he’ll show?”

“Personally?” She shook her head. “But you’d better expect a pair of his best hitters to come in, and soon.”

“Would Kill take a contract from him?”

“Unlikely. Michael’s not fond of dealers.” She looked over my shoulder. “Here’s my boy Tim.”

Her boy Tim was a skeletal youth with the jerky gait and darting gaze of a rothead. He focused on Murphy, then me, and his pinched mouth puckered. “Didn’t say nothing about no cop, Murph.”

“You want to stay in the shelter, boyo,” Falyn said, and pointed to the stool next to mine, “you’ll talk to her.”

“Yeah, yeah.” He dropped one skinny haunch on the edge.

“Tell me what you know about the man who started the fire at Jaikes,” I said.

“Yeah, well, I’m pulling container duty yesterday morning and I see a couple of suits edge in behind the disposals,” he told me. “Two skyjocs and the pony. Fat man, itchy as hell. I’d seen him before. They come in on the scowl ships.”

I filed a mental note to have Maintenance explain to me why they weren't inspecting their waste haulers. "You said Evans was itchy. What was he using?"

"Nah, not itchy that way," Tim said immediately. "Itchy like he was dome nuts. Tore out of his jacket, sweating, ran his mouth, breathing all wrong. Told the 'jocs they made him late for his meet 'fore he took off."

"How was he carrying, Timmy?" Murphy asked.

"Didn't see nothing. Were up his ass or in his belly, I guess." The boy shrugged. "Skyjocs left, I went back to work."

Murphy leaned forward. "All of it, boy."

"That's it, just . . ." he faltered, and his face flushed. "He went right by me, the fat one. He smelled bad. I mean, I work in the shit all day so I'm used to it, but one whiff of him made my belly twist."

This from a kid who obviously hadn't stepped into a cleansing unit since puberty. "Bad like he hadn't washed in a few days?" I hadn't noticed any particularly vile odor from Evans's corpse.

"Nah, more like . . ." He looked at Murphy. "You know Beezer? Like him, but worse."

Falyn sat back. "You sure, Timmy?"

The boy's head jerked up and down before he checked his wristcom. "I gotta get to work, Murph."

“All right, then. See you tonight at the meeting.” She waited until he trotted out of the bar before she told me, “Beezer liked to hide when he used. Timmy’s salvage crew found his body in the belly of a junked shuttle. He’d fallen into some live wiring, and cooked himself, nice and slow.”

I recalled that smelled I’d picked up when I’d first arrived at the scene: *Overdone pork lo mein*. I’d assumed it had come from the burnt bodies. “If he had ingested his package, and it ruptured—”

“Not likely. Erak uses N-jui plas; stomach acid, pulse fire or alloy can’t penetrate it. The only thing that can cut into it is a focused-beam pharmaceutical laser. They’re real careful when they cut it out; that way the pony can give more rides.”

I finished my coffee. “Maybe somebody got sloppy with the laser. Or was told to.”

“In front of my bar, and risk contaminating the package inside him?” She snorted. “No, they’d take him someplace private and take their time. Erak’s ponies carry a minimum of two kilos condensed pure; depending on the drug the street value would be anywhere from a hundred grand for rok to half a mil for Glory.”

The more I learned, the less I knew. “Falyn, I need his connection.” I knew what I was asking, but she knew why.

“I’ll see.” She paid the tab and slid off the stool, then hesitated behind me. “You still having the nightmares, then?”

I would have said no to anyone else, even Matt, but not to her.

“Sometimes.” I swiveled around so I could look her in the face. “It gets better, Falyn.”

“Does it now.” She smiled a little before she walked out.

#

I called my day shift and gave them the run down on Morgan, Evans and Killian. Matt pulled data files on all of Kenerak’s known associates and distributed them among the officers, along with the black badge bands we all would wear in Morgan’s memory.

“I’ve appraised Transport about the situation, but we can pretty much count on Kenerak’s men getting in here,” I told the uniforms.

“However, we’re not here to provide mop-up service for the cartel. So work with what you’ve got: snitches, listening drones, whatever you can use to find out who blew the deal, and who’s here to kill them. You locate either, you signal me and wait for backup. These guys are pros, and they’ll take you down with them.”

One of my patrolman lifted a hand, and I nodded to him. “What about Kill?”

“I’ve got him under drone and office surveillance. We’ll watch him, see if he makes a mistake.” He wouldn’t, but maybe we could figure out who his target was.

Another asked, “Any idea what Evans was moving?”

“We should know after the autopsy comes in, but twenty credits says it was Glory. Any other questions?”

“Yeah, do we really have to wear these?” one of the younger men asked as he dangled the black band. “I mean, no great loss.”

“Morgan died on the job,” I said, letting my voice frost over. “You respect that, officer, or you hand in your badge and weapon. Right now.”

That shut him up, and no one else had anything to say, so I released them to duty.

“I signaled Julianne earlier, but the receptionist said he worked late and hadn’t come in yet,” Matt told me as we went into my office. “Cherijo said she’d be out of orientation by noon, if you want her to take a look at the body.” He shut the door panel. “I ran her records, by the way, and she really is a fully qualified MD.”

“She’s also seventeen years old, and that body is a mess.” I sat down behind my console. “Dave can earn his comp for once.” I sent a signal to Julianne’s residence, but no one answered. “Or not.” I checked with Pathology and even gave his therapist a buzz, but no one had seen him yet.

Stephany Alden, David’s therapist, claimed she didn’t know where her patient was, but she had plenty more to say to me. “David appeared very agitated when he signaled me last night to make an appointment for this morning. Your insensitivity toward his compulsions brought out

renewed feelings of persecution and rejection.” She sniffed, like that was a *bad* thing. “I believe he may be acting on those feelings by avoiding contact with you.”

“Well, doc, if I don’t hear from him soon, I’m going to renew his feelings of incarceration and deportation,” I advised her. “So you tell Dave to haul his sensitive ass to a terminal and signal me.” An emergency relay came in from my front desk drone, and I switched over. “Noriko.”

“Marshall, multiple incoming RFA, codes eleven-seventy-one AC, twenty-nine, fifty-two, fifty-four, one thousand, location is Main Transport terminal J access gates fourteen, sixteen, nineteen, twenty–” the drone discontinued to answer another call, then added, “Medical and environmental response teams are on scene and request immediate assistance.”

All that translated to a multiple shuttle crash with fire, potential explosives, injuries and dead. Terminal J was one of the main tourist entry gates, through which hundreds of people arrived and departed every ten minutes.

We’d never lost a single ship in all the years I’d been here, and now at least two were down and burning out of control.

“Divert all patrol units in the vicinity to Transport,” I told the drone as Matt unlocked weapons storage and took out two pulse rifles and our rescue packs. “Sergeant Warren and I are en route, ETA four minutes.” To Matt I said, “Grab some breathers.”

Five units came screeching up behind us as we drove into the wall of thick smoke billowing out from the Main Transport docking platform. We jumped out of the unit and directly into chaos. Dock authorities were handling the evacuation of coughing, panicking passengers and terminal personnel, medics were carrying out burn victims on litters, and fire fighters were hauling in hoses and tanks of retardant foam.

Outside the dome terminal, a mid-size passenger shuttle lay in three enormous, chunks all over the landing pad. It looked like a toy some kid having a tantrum had smashed. The cockpit section had crashed into the dome, giving us all a good view of what was left of the pilots. Behind the wreckage, suited rescuers were hooking up a temporary airlock tunnel to a smaller, intact cargo freighter. There were burned body parts still drifting around, along with food, garments, and other cargo from the wrecked freighter.

All the breath left my lungs. "Jesus God Almighty."

One black-faced, grim-eyed patrolman came over to me. "Hijacker." He coughed and cleared his throat. "Stole the freighter and collided with a tour shuttle on lift-off. Flight crew only got half the passengers on breathers before they lost emergency atmosphere. Freighter's decks blew out, but we're reading one thermal. Perp's still on board."

"Hallman, Smith, you're suiting up with us." I turned to my other officers. "Set up a perimeter and shut down all access. Help medevac

move the wounded but scan them for weapons. Anyone suspicious goes to detainment.”

Matt and I went with the two backup officers to the main airlock, where we yanked on pressure suits, O² tanks and weighted boots before heading out onto the surface.

“Keep your comm. lines open and weapons out,” I told them as we made our way around the tour crash to the freighter. “Sergeant Warren and I will go up the front ramp; you two come in from the back. Disable him only if you’ve got cover and a sure shot.”

Matt and I approached the crumpled front end of the hauler. It was silent, so silent that I nearly shrieked when DA signaled via my suit transponder. “Marshall, we’re getting a relay from the hijacker. He’s asking for you.”

I looked up to check the viewports, but they were empty. “Make a patch.”

Heavy breathing filled the channel before a deep, masculine voice I didn’t recognize demanded, “That you, you cop bitch?”

Oh, great, a fan.

“This is Noriko.” I enabled my rifle scope and used it to check the top of the emergency exit ramp before climbing up alongside Matt. “What do you want?”

“Apple pie,” he said, dropping into a toneless croon. More heavy breathing. “You bring me ten apple pies and I won’t kill anyone else.”

Now that had to top the list of all-time bizarre demands. “Release them and I’ll bring you a whole bakery.”

“No.” He sounded sullen, but I still couldn’t place the voice. “Just apple pie. Ten of them. No, twenty. Twenty fresh baked with two crusts.”

“You want cheese on them?” I looked around the edge of the open hull panel before making a circular gesture with my glove. Matt darted in, did a three-sixty area check, and then gave me the all-clear. “Or ice cream? I can get whatever you want, soon as you let the crew out of there.”

No response. The interior of the freighter was trashed, more like a waste container than a vessel. Matt and I waded through floating debris toward the helm entry panel.

“I’m here, waiting outside.” I asked as I checked the panel, which was locked down. I stepped aside so Matt could bypass the security circuits. “Let the crew go, and we’ll talk.”

“They’re all dead,” he said, panting. “They tried to stop me, so I had to. Shoot them.” The voice became a girly whine. “I want apple pie. You said you’d bring me apple pie. *I need apple pie.*”

Bastard. "I've got your pies right here, All twenty of them, fresh baked, two crusts." I said between clenched teeth. Matt held up two fingers. "What's your name?"

"You don't know me?" His voice climbed to a shriek. *"You don't know who I am?"*

"I'm better with faces." I checked my rifle's power cells and flattened myself on the wall opposite Matt. "Give me a hint."

"Your fault!" He was weeping, hysterical. "You did this to me! You kept me from my doctor!" A strange sound hissed over the relay, and he began screaming. "Oh God oh God oh God—"

Matt sprang the door open, and atmosphere blasted out, along with two bodies. I dropped down into a crouch before I rolled around the edge to face what was inside.

Blue-green light filled my eyes.

Something yanked me back as a huge ball of heat and light whooshed out through the open doorway, and a moment later I was face-down on the deck with Matt on top of me.

"Flash fire," he said, rolling over so that I was on top of him. He tightened his arms around me for a moment before hauling us both to our feet. "It's out; air's gone." He enabled his rifle. "My turn to take point."

He went around the door edge and paused just inside. "Holly."

I came in behind him and scanned the helm while he sealed the door and replaced the atmosphere. Then I took off my helmet and nearly gagged on the stench of overdone pork lo mein. The dead crew members sitting still strapped in at their stations, each one shot execution-style in the head. I focused on the source of the smell, a blackened form harnessed behind the flight control console. His envirosuit was riddled with holes, and the face plate on his helmet was black.

I went over to check his air lines, but they were all burned through. Then I took off his helmet, which I dropped as soon as I saw the broad, ruined face.

Constance di Loma had given her last performance.

#

Coordinating rescue and relief efforts after the shuttle crash and questioning the survivors ate up the next twenty-four hours for me. I left a message with the house drone for Cherijo, which I later found out had been completely unnecessary. All the medical students from the school had been sent to the hospital to help with the wounded, and the dean signaled to tell me that Cherijo would be working in surgery for the duration.

“She can’t be *operating* on people,” I muttered to Matt.

He eyed me. “Babe, she’s really a doctor.”

“When I was seventeen, I couldn’t clip a hang nail without fainting.” I tried to imagine that little girl cutting into bodies. “I think I’ll stop by the hospital and check on her. Just in case.”

I ran over to the medical facility thirty minutes later, and after requisitioning some stimulant for myself, I asked where my exchange kid was. A nurse showed me to one of the viewers outside a surgical suite.

“Is she helping with the instruments in there?” I asked as I peered in, trying to figure out which masked figure was Cherijo.

“No, ma’am. She took over the cardio surgeries so our resident surgeon could concentrate on the bone cases.” The nurse pointed to the doctor cutting into the patient’s chest and snapping out orders. It *was* Cherijo, and she was operating while standing on foot-high platform so she could reach the patient. “She’s incredibly talented, you know.”

“No, I didn’t know.” I couldn’t take my eyes off her hands, which moved so fast they seemed to blur. “I thought she was just studying this stuff.”

“Our resident operated alongside her for an hour before he let her take over. He said she’s better than him – the best cutter he’s ever seen.” Someone called to the nurse. “Excuse me, I have to see to a patient.”

When she left, I enabled the audio from the outer access panel and listened for a minute.

“—distension, no bone fragments. Suction.” Cherijo leaned closer to the gaping hole she had cut in the chest. “There’s our problem, an avulsion of the right coronary cusp. I need a twenty millimeter bioprosthesis.”

My polite, shy little houseguest sounded just like a military general in the middle of a battlefield. Which she was, I guessed.

“We don’t generally do those type of bypasses here, doctor,” a female handing her instruments said. “Wouldn’t it be more advisable to stabilize the patient for transport to Terra?”

“With a plus five aortic regurgitation, he wouldn’t live long enough to make it into orbit. He’d rupture as soon as the g-forces kicked in.” Cherijo’s dark blue eyes narrowed over the edge of her mask. “Is this your way of telling me that you don’t have any replacement valves?”

She could have cut into the nurses’ head with that look, I thought, and grinned.

“No ma’am. We have a full range in inventory, we’ve just . . . never used them.”

“Then dust off a twenty for me, nurse, because today, you start.” She held out her bloodied glove. “Clamp.”

I sent a signal to Matt, letting him know I’d be at the hospital for a few hours.

“Amazing, isn’t she?”

I had my weapon in my hand when I turned to face Mike Killian.
“She’s a kid. Get lost.”

“Afraid I can’t, beautiful.” He smiled down at me. “I’m glad she’s staying with you, though. There’s no safer place on this rock. Lets me get in a few hours shut-eye every day.”

I hauled him away from the viewer and into an empty prep room two doors down. “Grey Veil hired *you*?”

“The man is very attached to his daughter.” Killian let his gaze drift over me. “I like that uniform on you. I’d like it better off.”

I switched the setting on my weapon from stun to burn and changed my aim. “How attached are you to your balls?”

“You’re something.” He had a wonderful laugh, low and deep and almost musical.

Not emasculating him was going to be hard. “You involved with that freighter hijacking?”

“Now, Marshall, you know that’s not my style.” He flashed his pretty teeth at me. “Look at you. All in my face and playing tough cop, and still you’re feeling it, same as me.”

“You feel like throwing me into an isolation cell?”

“That would be a kick, wouldn’t it? Me, interrogating you for a change.” He moved in. “Would you answer voluntarily or would I have to work it out of you?”

Maybe I'd shoot him anyway. "You're a sick son of bitch, Killian."

"That I am. But we've time to have a taste." The green eyes narrowed. "Time we should."

I'd never realized how fast Killian was. I found out.

He had my weapon in his hand and me pinned up against the wall panel two seconds later. His thighs caught my knee on the way up, and then his mouth was on mine. He kissed the way he laughed, and kept kissing me even after I'd bit his tongue, hard enough to draw blood.

Mike lifted his head. "Beautiful." He was panting, aroused, his eyes filled with heat. "Are you this way in bed?"

"You'll never know." I dragged in air. "Get off me."

He didn't. "I know, Noriko. I know about you, and I know about him. You think having Matthew makes you safe." He shifted, lifting me until my crotch rested against his. "You'll never be safe." He rocked me, slowly. "Not from me."

I stopped struggling and leaned in, relaxing against him. "You're right." As soon as he loosened his hold, I was going to break it and beat him unconscious.

"Faking a fancy for me now won't work either." He glided his mouth over my cheek and rubbed his face slowly against my hair. "I don't force women, you know. I've killed them, but I've never raped them."

“What a shocker.” My back-up piece was in my forearm sheath. All I needed was an inch of movement and I could pop it into my hand. “What do you call this? Flirting?”

“It’s my purgatory, love.” He leaned back and looked all over my face. “Six years ago, I thought about drugging you and taking you back to Terra with me. They have things that can keep a woman docile and cooperative. For years.” He kissed the tip of my nose. “You’ll never know how close I came.”

My blood ran cold. He was serious. “What stopped you?”

“If I wanted a doll, I’d buy one. I wanted you.” He closed his eyes for a moment, took a deep breath. “I’ll never see you again after this job, you know. I promised myself. When I leave here, I’ll never touch you again.”

“You’re damn right you won’t.” I twisted against him, still pinned. “You’re under arrest for assaulting a law officer.”

“No, dearest, that’s not going to happen. Tell you what, I’ll leave you be while I’m on colony, on one condition.” He grabbed my hair in his fist. “You kiss me now. Kiss me as if I were the one who holds your heart, and sleeps in your bed, and fills your dreams.”

Kiss him as if he were Matthew. “Hardly.”

“Well then, after this job, maybe I’ll come back. Maybe I’ll take you and keep you.” His voice changed, went cold. “Or maybe I’ll kill everyone you love, so can you suffer, same as me.”

I had no doubt that he was serious. "I wouldn't live long enough to suffer much." I didn't have to say *Neither will you*.

"Let's make it simple, then." Incredibly, he released me and put my weapon back into my hand. "Shoot me, or kiss me. It's the only way you'll keep me from coming back for you."

I lifted my weapon and rested the emitter against his chest. He had threatened me and my family. He was a mass murderer, no different from Strosca, and he deserved to die a thousand times over for his crimes. There were no monitors in here, and if I killed him I could make up any story I wanted. Hell, I'd probably get a damn medal for it.

And, somehow, he knew I wouldn't shoot him.

I lowered my weapon and put it back in my holster. "Come here." When he was close enough, I went up on tiptoe so I could reach his mouth. I closed my eyes, and kissed him.

I kissed Killian as if he were Matthew, the man I loved, after he came home from a brutal day on the job, when he looked at me as if I was the only sanity in the world. I kissed him as if he were Matthew, the man I trusted, standing with me in our bedroom, warm and naked and stroking me with hands that trembled a little. I kissed him as if he were Matthew, the man who stirred my passion, grabbing me in the shower and pressing me against the tiles, too hard and hungry to wait until we were dry. I kissed him as if he were Matthew, my only love, in bed with me, holding me

as I wept after one of my nightmares, stroking my hair and murmuring that he would never let anyone or anything hurt me that way again.

Then for a moment, just before I took my mouth from his, I kissed him as if there had never been Matthew, and Michael wasn't a killer, and I wasn't a cop.

I let go, stepped back and looked up at him. His eyes and his expression were blank, but his eyelashes were wet.

"I love Matthew. Do you understand?" He nodded. "If you ever come back here, or threaten me, or touch me again, I will kill you."

"You'll have to." Out he went.

#

I made the rounds of the wards, taking statements from the survivors. When I went to find Cherijo, they told me she'd finished in surgery and sent me to a staff lounge, where she sat slouched in a corner staring down into a server of steaming tea. She was running her fingers along the moon-pearl necklace I'd bought her.

I dialed up a cup for myself before I came over to her table. The front of her scrubs were stained in three places with blood, and her small face seemed paler than ever. "Mind if I join you?"

"Yes, I mean, no. Please, sit down." She sat up and rolled a hand over the back of her neck. "Sorry, I'm a little zoned out."

“Eleven straight hours of surgery will do that to you, I imagine.” The stimulant I’d taken was starting to wear off, but only my body felt tired. After my tussle with Killian, however, my heart felt bruised. *What am I going to tell Matt?* I focused on the gaudy necklace she wore. “You really don’t have to wear that all the time, you know.”

“I like it.” She patted the strand. “It’s my good luck charm.”

It hadn’t been working too well. “I’m sorry that this trip hasn’t been much fun for you.”

“People were hurt; I had to help. I’ve never pulled a marathon like that, but it wasn’t so bad.” She looked out through the view panel toward Transport. “I just wish we could have saved more of them.”

Rescue was still recovering the remains, but we had a hundred and three confirmed dead and eighty-nine injured, many seriously. Every doctor on colony was at the hospital, attending to the wounded and prepping the stable cases for evacuation to Terra, and David Julianne was still missing, or I wouldn’t have asked my next question. “How tired are you, kiddo?”

“Not much. I’m kind of hyper, actually.” She rubbed her hands against her upper arms. “I think it’s the adrenalin rush.”

I nodded and finished my tea. “Before it burns off, feel like cutting into one more body?”

Cherijo agreed, and I took her over to Pathology. Remains from the crash site were still being brought in, but I’d had the rescue workers tag Di

Loma's body for immediate exam. The receptionist was busy preparing DNA ID reports, but still had not heard from Julienne.

"It's not like Dr. J to miss a shift," the girl told me. "He's so dedicated to his work."

"Yeah, I know how much he loves it." I signaled the station and put an APB out on Dave, then went in with Cherijo to see about Con.

Constance was already laid out on the exam pad. Since the orderlies were busy sorting bodies, Cherijo prepared the instrument trays she needed herself before she put on a gown and gloves.

"This woman was an actress?" she asked me as she came to the table.

"Sort of. She performed poetry naked."

"Oh. I think I've heard one of her ads."

"Everyone has." As she drew the sheet away from the thick, flabby corpse, I let out a slow breath. "She looks just like Evans did."

"While I'm here, I'd like to see his body, too, if I may." Cherijo switched on the recording drone. "Initiating post-mortem examination of Butterworks, Agatha. Examining physican, Dr. Cherijo Grey Veil; attending witness, Marshall Holly Noriko."

There was that change in her voice again. It was a little spooky to see her transform from polite kid to doctor in charge.

“Visual assessment of victim: obese Caucasian female, approximately forty years of age, evidence of severe decompression exposure and global second- and third-degree burns. Several hundred randomly spaced circular perforating wounds present” – she rolled Constance onto her side for a moment to have a look at her back– “on all dermal surfaces.” Her brow furrowed. “Severe pooled lividity on shoulder blades, buttocks and calves. No rigor.” She lowered the body. “Beginning upper torso central incision.”

Cherijo flicked on the lasscalpel, then made a Y-shaped cut from the body’s armpits down to the top of the pubis. “Exposing thorax for visual assessment.” Once she had cut through the thick layer of yellow fat and sawed open the breast plate, she set aside the laser and picked up a probe. “The perforations’ linear track extend down through subcutaneous tissue, and show characteristics of exit wounds.” She drew in a sharp breath and probed in several places. “No hemorrhaging.”

“Is that bad?”

“It’s just not possible. Wounds like this, in this quantity, cause massive internal bleeding, and yet . . .” she pulled a magnifier over and peered through it. “The disrupted vessels have all been sealed off, as if they were cauterized, but the burns don’t extend down into the cavitation.” She took a scanner and ran it over the open cavity. “She has five pints of blood left in her vessels, but no trace of chemical sealant or coagulant.”

She glanced up at me. "You said that she spoke to you just before she died? You're absolutely sure of that?"

"Yeah, she was screaming at me." The kid was starting to look scared. "Why?"

"Let me finish the autopsy before I jump to conclusions." Cherijo discarded the probe in a shallow alloy pan and used the laser rig to excise the reddish-purple organ, then took it to another, separate table to dissect and scan it. "Heart appears normal, no signs of congenital, hypertrophic or valvular defects. Arteries are intact with signs of moderate arteriosclerosis, consistent with mild obesity. Three separate penetrating wounds grazing the pericardium, but no indications of infarction."

She continued examining the internal organs, removing and weighing each before she moved to the head. "Cranial case appears somewhat small but otherwise normal." She cut and peeled back the scalp and removed the top portion of the skull, then took a sharp breath. "Surface cerebral tissue appears necrotic." She used the scanner again. "Deep cellular damage and deterioration is uniform throughout the brain, brain stem and spine. Time of death estimated at . . ." Shaking her head, she performed the scan again, and then a third and fourth time. Then she switched scanners and performed a fifth.

"What's wrong?"

“This isn’t possible.” She stripped off her gloves and backed away from the table, dragging in deep breaths.

I knew panic when I saw it. “What is it, Cherijo?”

“Marshall, this can’t be the same woman you spoke to yesterday.” She gestured toward the body. “The wounds prove it. She didn’t bleed because she was already dead when she received them.”

“Then something killed her just before she was wounded.”

“You don’t understand. There are some instances where people can live for short periods of time with necrotic organs, but not when it’s the brain. Something destroyed her brain.” Cherijo scrubbed a hand over her face. “According to my scans, she died forty-eight hours ago.”

#

“So the kid made a mistake on the time of death.”

“Could be.” I pulled up the next of the DA security vids Matt and I were reviewing on my display. It showed the hijacked freighter being loaded with cargo. “Only it doesn’t play. Di Loma didn’t have the motive or the intelligence to hijack a freighter. You heard the voice, it sounded like a man. What if someone planted the body and used a remote to set off the charge as soon as the doors were opened?”

“Why go to all that trouble if you’re just planning to steal a ship?” he countered, queuing up the next vid.

He was right; it didn't make sense. "If only someone from the freighter had survived."

"Have Julienne perform a second autopsy, Holly. Cherijo has to be wrong." His attention moved to the display, and he leaned forward. "Who is that?"

A short, heavysset figure approached the dock workers loading the cargo bay and gestured toward the ship.

"Magnifying." I stopped the vid and zoomed in, then let the recording advance a few frames. The face was somewhat blurred, but the big mouth and tiny little eyes were unmistakable. "There she is, walking and talking." I sat back and blew out a breath. "I guess you're right."

Matt reached over and switched off the vid. "This isn't the only thing bothering you."

I thought of Killian and how I had kissed him. "I did something extremely stupid yesterday."

"Am I going to like hearing about it?"

"No."

He smiled. "Then don't tell me until Kill's gone."

"Excuse me, Marshall." The desk drone hovered in the doorway. "There's a Terran female here to see you."

"Tell her to have a seat." I stared at Matt. "How did you know?"

“You signaled me just before he showed, remember?” He tapped my wristcom. “You left the relay open.” His eyes cooled. “If he puts his hands on you again, however, he’ll leave here in a mortuary container.”

“Matthew.” What could I say to him when I felt just as pissed?

“I can’t wait,” Stephany Alden said as she elbowed the drone out of her way. The petite, pretty woman didn’t look as well-groomed as the last time I’d spoken with her; in fact she looked like someone had just hauled her out of bed. “Marshall Noriko, we have a serious situation.”

“Do we.”

“Dr. Julianne signaled me last night, and he was extremely agitated. David believes that he has manifested a separate identity, and that that second identity is trying to kill him, the original persona.”

I saw Matt roll his eyes. “And?”

“I tried to talk him into coming to see me – David has always been very responsive to verbal cues – but he insisted that it was too dangerous. He warned me that his second persona might try to kill me, too, and then terminated the relay. Then my security drone signaled me a few minutes ago. David made an illegal entry into my building and has evidently barricaded himself in my office.”

So Dave had come up with a unique story for the staff review board. *Oh, I didn’t screw those dead people, my invisible evil twin brother did.* “I’ll send a couple of officers over to remove him.”

“Before you do, you should take a look at my office monitor,” she said, and gave me the pass code to her security system.

I pulled up the vid on Dr. Alden’s office. David Julienne was sitting at her desk, working on a terminal. He looked sweaty and dirty, and his hands were shaking. There was a pulse pistol sitting on the desk.

Maybe he wanted to make a few new dates for himself. “How did he get hold of the weapon?”

“I don’t know. What I can tell you is that in the condition he is in, he may use it on anyone whom he perceives as a threat.” Dr. Alden folded her arms. “I am filing a report with your superiors and holding you responsible for this breakdown.”

“Make sure you spell my name right.” I pulled up the schematic on her office structure and the dome where it was located. “Matt, send a unit over to evacuate the building.” A signal came in from the front desk, and I switched to it. “Hold my calls.”

“Marshall, we’re receiving RFAs from sixteen different locations,” the drone informed me, and started feeding me a list of codes.

Matt leaned over. “Arson, armed robbery, arson, arson, assault and battery, attempted homicide, multiple hostages taken . . . the hell?”

“Has to be a prank.” I halted the screen as it scrolled past twenty serious felony reports. “Desk, did you verify via monitor?”

“Affirmative, Marshall. Security monitors confirm that RFAs are genuine and now exceed the response capacity of units presently on duty,” the drone added.

“Recall all shifts and reserves,” I told the drone. “Assign calls in order of severity/threat to life – and find Falyn Murphy for me.” As I got up to grab my gear, I glanced at Alden. “Doctor, please return to your residence and monitor your relay channel; I may need you again.”

She was staring in horror at my console, so Matt had to gently urge her out the door. He closed it, then turned to me. “What is it?”

“Kenerak. Has to be.” My console blipped, and Murphy’s image popped up on my display. One of her eyes was swelled shut and dried blood darkened her bottom lip. “Falyn?”

“I went to check on Timmy this morning. He jumped me.” She touched her face. “I thought I had him clean, but he’s like all the others.”

“What others?”

“Everyone using Glory,” she said. “Noriko, they’ve all gone bloody fry-brain. Started tearing places apart, setting fires and attacking people. Paranoid, they are, thinking everyone wants them dead.” She looked over her shoulder as someone called to her, then back at the screen. “Junkies don’t act this way; not together, not all at once. Erak must have tainted the last shipment that came in before Evans.”

“With what?”

“I don’t know, but whatever it is, it’s driven them mad. Timmy thought I’d come to kill him.” The sound of pulse fire whined over the audio. “The boys and I’ll be leaving now. Watch your six, Noriko.” The signal terminated.

#

Matt and I took the RFA call to the hospital, where a patient had armed himself with two portable laser rigs and was using them to hold an entire ward hostage. Hospital security had evacuated the wing, and had set up emitters to form a bioelectrical defense screen through which they were trying to negotiate.

The armed patient, a teenager named Jonas Barrett, only wanted two things, according to the security guard at the scene.

“A shuttle off colony and some kind of candy,” he told me, giving the barrier an exasperated glance. “He’s got a couple of laser rigs and says he’ll start using them on the hostages if we don’t land the ship right outside the dome.”

“Who is he and why was he admitted?” I asked as I surveyed the empty corridor.

“He’s a tourist, Marshall.” A nurse brought a chart to me. “He arrived on colony about a week ago.” She enabled the chart display. “His parents admitted him three days ago for testing; we thought he might be using Glory.”

The guard pointed toward the corridor. “He’s got eleven kids and four nurses in the therapy room at the end, and he says he’s going to kill them.”

“Contact maintenance and tell them to get ready to cut the power to this section, at my signal.” As the guard went to a terminal, I turned to the nurse. “How powerful are these laser rigs?”

“At the highest setting, they’ll instantaneously cut through flesh, bone, and most inorganic materials,” Cherijo said as she joined us. She removed an instrument from her coat pocket. “Marshall, I’ve calibrated to deliver a tranquilizer appropriate for his height and weight. You have to inject him in the jugular vein, here” –she showed me the place on her own neck– “for it to take immediate effect.”

As I tucked the infuser into my pocket, a frantic-looking woman rushed up to us. “Please, don’t shoot Jonie. He’s never done anything like this before in his life.”

The nurse took the mother by the arm. “Let’s wait over here, Mrs. Barrett.” She guided the terrified woman out to the nurses’ station.

Cherijo checked her wristcom as if she needed to be somewhere. “Marshall, it’s imperative that I examine this boy as soon as possible.”

“Let me disarm him first, okay?” I had the guard clear everyone else out of the immediate area before I walked up to the barrier. “Jonas

Barrett, this is Marshall Noriko. I've made arrangements for your shuttle to be delivered."

"I want my chocolate zing puffs too!" a young voice called out. "Six full bags, unopened."

"No problem, but first I need to see that the hostages are okay." I reached down and shut off the emitter, then took off my harness and handed it to Matt. "I'm coming down to have a look. I'm not armed."

"Don't come near me!" he shouted, his voice turning shrill.

"I won't come anywhere near you, I promise. I'm just going to look inside the room and see that everyone is all right." I kept talking as I walked into the corridor. "You'll need a crew to fly the shuttle for you, right? How many should we have on board?"

"No people! I want drones! And my candy! I need my candy!"

"I got your candy on the way." I was halfway to the therapy room, with Matt right behind me. "Can I ask where you're going?"

"Far away from here. Maybe that auto station on Pluto." He made a sound like a sob. "I'll be safe there."

I used my wristcom to send a signal to hospital maintenance, text-only, and told them to shut down power in three minutes. As we drew close to the door, I moved close to the wall. "Do you want to send a signal to your Mom and Dad? They're really worried about you, you know."

“They hate me.” He was definitely sobbing now. “They brought me to Luna to kill me. They’re going to say I got lost and dump my body in one of the craters. But I won’t let them, I’m smarter than them!”

Paranoid, they are, Murphy had said. Thinking everyone wants them dead.

No way was he going to let me stick him with the tranquilizer. “I’m right outside the room now, Mr. Barrett. I’m going to move in front of the door. My hands will be up so that you can see I’m not carrying any weapons or trying to hurt you. All I want is to look inside, then I’ll let you take the shuttle and leave.”

“Do it fast!”

I glanced back at Matt, who had stunners in both hands. With a deep breath, I held my empty hands up and stepped into the doorway.

Patients were huddled on the floor in a close, silent circle around their captor and the two portable laser rigs, the beam emitters of which he had strapped to his forearms and was holding like weapons. One of the nurses had a thin, bleeding burn across her face, and two of the patients’ gowns were similarly scorched.

I met the crazed eyes of the terrorist, who was heavyset, shivering, and couldn’t have been more than ten years old. “Hi, I’m Holly. You’re Jonie, right?”

“Don’t call me that. Don’t talk to me.” He pointed one of the emitters directly at my face. “You’ve seen them, now get out.”

“I know about the poison, Jonas. I want to help you. Together we can send your parents to prison for the rest of their lives.” As I lied to him, I kept my voice soothing and my movements minimal. “If you leave then they’ll just hurt someone else.”

“I don’t care. I have to go. I have to go now.” He clawed at his neck, digging his fingernails in so deep that he drew blood. “Where’s my candy? Where’s the shuttle? Take me to it.”

“It’s right this way.” I gestured toward the door. “The drone pilot is waiting for your orders.”

“You’re not lying to me, are you?” He grabbed one of the littlest girls sitting at his feet and jerked her up. “I’ll shoot a hole through her head if you are.” He pressed the end of the emitter against her temple.

“I’m not lying, I promise. I had the bags of candy put in your private quarters on board.” I backed slowly toward the door. “Come and see for yourself, it’s right outside. You can walk to it, Jonas. Twenty feet and you’ll be free.” I checked the time; the lights would be going out in sixty seconds.

He couldn’t haul both of the heavy lasers along with him, so he left one behind and wrapped his free arm around his hostage’s neck. “Go away now,” he told me as he used the girl as a body shield.

“Okay.” I backed out into the corridor, then made as if I was walking away. When I was out of his line of sight, I darted over to Matt and handed him the infuser. With my hand I showed him the relative heights of the two children, then signed what I was going to do. He nodded and we both put on our thermal goggles.

“I’m coming out,” the boy shouted. “Stay away from me or I’ll burn her!”

My timing couldn’t have been better. As soon as the boy dragged the girl into the corridor, the lights went out. The two kids were blinded, but our goggles picked up the heat from their bodies. Matt lunged forward, grabbing the child and wrenching her out of Barrett’s grip. As he dropped to the floor and rolled away with her, I used my body to pin the boy to the wall. Laser light flashed around us as I jammed the infuser against his neck and injected him with the tranquilizer.

“You lied to me,” he wailed, his eyes drooping. “You . . . liar . . .”

I grabbed him as he sagged and stripped the laser off his forearms. Pin points of red and orange bloomed in front of my thermal lenses. “Ah, Christ.” I tugged down my goggles, flicked on my flashlight and saw that his gown was smoldering. “He’s set himself on fire!”

Cherijo was there with a gurney a heartbeat later, and together we lifted the boy’s limp body onto the pad. “Tear the gown off.”

We stripped him in a few seconds, but the smell of burning flesh became more intense. More like the overdone pork lo mein smell I'd caught from Evans and Di Loma.

"What is it?" I shone the light on Jonas's face, where the skin seemed to be bubbling. "Is it from the laser?"

"No. It's internal. Like Evans and Di Loma. Whatever is in him is burning its way out." Cherijo changed positions and shoved the gurney into a room across the corridor. "Marshall, help me."

I followed her in as she pushed the stretcher to a large therapy tank. "In the water?"

"Yes. Quickly."

Together we lifted Jonas Barrett from the gurney and lowered him into the tank. Something hot streaked past my face as the water sizzled and the boy screamed.

I dropped my flashlight as Cherijo shoved his head under the water.

"What are you doing?" I grabbed her arm. "You'll drown him!"

"I have to, they're in his face, all over him." She elbowed me away and held him beneath the surface. "Look in the tank. Look!"

Without the light it should have been impossible to see anything, but then the water began to glow. I moved closer and peered over the edge. Things were erupting out of Jonas Barrett's face, chest and limbs. Things that resembled triangular-shaped blue and green fireflies. As soon as the

water hit them, their glowing wings turned black and curled up, and they fell to the bottom of the tank.

“Are those *bugs* coming out of him?”

“Parasites of some kind.” Cherijo pulled Jonas out of the water, and the boy immediately started coughing and gasping for air. “Do those goggles of yours have a UV setting?”

“Yeah, they do.”

“Put them on and look up at the ceiling.”

I did what she wanted and scanned the panels overhead, until I saw the glow in one corner and adjusted the magnification. When I took off my goggles, they disappeared. “I see them.”

“What do they look like?”

I pulled the lenses down. “Three gigantic blue and green butterflies.” I hurried over to the door to shut it, then skidded to a stop. “Oh, God.”

“Are there more outside?”

“Yeah.” I swallowed as I tried to estimate the number of butterflies clinging to the ceiling of the corridor outside the room. “A couple thousand.”

#

After Matt and I took a brief walk through the surrounding domes, we met Cherijo back at the morgue.

“They’re everywhere,” I told her as we came in and secured the door. “In every one of the habitats. Hundreds of thousands of them.”

“They’re in here, too.” Matt said, peering through his goggles. “All over the ceiling, coming down the walls, too.”

Bugs sometimes migrated to the moon via passenger shuttles, but they never lived very long. All of the domes were equipped with extermination drones which hunted down and eradicated any unregistered non-sentient life form. They’d never detected any of these butterfly things, though, maybe because of the UV.

“I don’t think we should try to disturb them,” Cherijo said, “until we know what they are, and what they can do.”

Matt got on a terminal and began looking through the database while Cherijo and I brought out Constance di Loma’s body for a third examination.

“It’s reasonable to assume that the parasites are using human bodies as hosts for their larval stage development,” she said as she probed some of the exit wounds. “You and I saw how they burn their way out of the body in order to erupt in this mature, invisible winged form.”

“Why can’t we see them without the goggles on?” I asked.

“Their bodies are emitting electromagnetic radiation, the wavelengths of which are shorter than the violet end of the light spectrum,” Matt said. “That would make them invisible to the naked eye.”

“Okay, but how did they get into these people?”

Cherijo took a tissue sample from one of the wounds. “Parasitic infection generally occurs through water, food, insect bites, body fluid exchange or contact with a contaminated substance like feces.” She carried the specimen over to a table mounted with a huge complicated-looking scope. “Since the mature form is visible only in UV light, and the larval form undetectable in the body, it’s logical to assume the egg form is also camouflaged in some manner.”

I still felt disgusted from making that tour. “Our biodecon wouldn’t detect UV saturated life forms. But if these things kill the host getting out of the body, why aren’t more people dead?”

“The three victims were all fat,” Matt said. “That and using Glory has to be a factor.”

“Jonas wasn’t using Glory,” Cherijo said. “I checked his lab work. He was in insulin shock when he was admitted. He must not have checked his blood sugar before taking his daily infusion. His brain scans are reading normal. Evans, however, had the same neural tissue necrosis as Di Loma.”

I rubbed my aching temple. “We have to find a way to test for these things, and we have to get rid of the adult versions before they start laying eggs somewhere. Maybe I should just round up all the fat people on colony.”

“I’m reading trace amounts of UV radiation in the fat tissue from a wound on Di Loma’s body.” Cherijo moved away from the scope and glanced at Matt. “Sergeant, do you have any blemishes on your skin?”

He shot me an amused look. “Not since I was fourteen.”

She nodded absently. “Would you remove your jacket and shirt, please?”

After he stripped down to the waist, Cherijo walked around him, studying his torso.

I knew she wasn’t admiring his physique. “What are you looking for?”

“I’m not sure yet.” She touched a small scab on his right side, then another above his left hip. “How did you get these two wounds, Sergeant?”

He craned his head to look. “Those? I don’t remember. I think they’re just a couple of itchy places I scratched too hard.”

She retrieved a scanner. “You don’t have a great deal of body fat, but these wounds are all in places of the highest concentration. They’re also perfectly round.” As she scanned them, she asked, “Marshall, do you have scabs on your skin?”

I started to shake my head, then remembered being with Matt in the cleaner. “Wait. Two, one on the underside of each breast.” I came over to look. “Why?”

“You and the Sergeant are extremely fit, while the two dead victims and Jonas were severely overweight,” she said. “If the extent of infestation is determined in part by the amount of body fat, you would both would serve as very poor hosts.”

“You mean we have these thing are growing inside of us?” My skin crawled.

“I believe they’ve already exited your bodies.” Cherijo studied her scanner’s display. “There is a very faint trace of UV radiation in both locations which matches that of the parasite. Sergeant, you were definitely infected.”

He frowned. “I don’t use Glory. Neither does Holly.”

“But we’ve handled it.” I pulled off my jacket. “Cherijo, scan me.”

She found the same tiny traces of UV in me, and then asked me to scan her. Matt was a gentleman and turned his back, which made her blush.

As she shrugged out of her tunic, I frowned. The kid was too damn skinny for my liking. “None.” I handed her the scanner so she could see for herself. “But you just got here. Maybe you haven’t been exposed to whatever is infecting us.”

“That could be.” She grew thoughtful as she pulled on her physician’s tunic and fastened it. “I’m going back to the hospital; they have

a better lab there. I also need to report this outbreak. Would it be possible to obtain a sample of the Glory drug for me to analyze?"

I nodded. "Hold off on reporting this, though. Announcing that the entire colony is probably infected with these things will only cause widespread panic and jam up hospital services." We'd already had another dozen incidents involving Glory users who had gone crazy, and the psych ward and my holding cells were full.

"I do have to notify the Planetary Center for Disease Control," she said. "I'm sorry, Holly, but under the circumstances I have no choice. These parasites may have already been carried down to the planet."

"Okay. Just keep it quiet for as long as possible." I checked my wristcom. "Matt, take her back to the hospital and shut down Transport. No flights in or out until further notice. Cherijo, get one of the orderlies to bring you a meal, and eat all of it." I pulled on my harness. "I'm going to go and find some Glory."

#

I had an idea where Falyndra Murphy and her boys had gone, and made the stripclub in HD-11 my first stop.

Two of her flock were standing guard just inside the entrance, and the biggest and meanest-looking stepped into my path. "No trouble here, officer."

“Yeah, but there will be if you don’t get out of my face.” I looked around him. “Where is she?”

“It’s all right, Jude.” Murphy came out of the shadows. “Back here.”

I followed her through a door panel draped with gaudy beads into a storage area, where a couple of the club’s drones were playing poker with some rail-thin, worried-looking addicts, and past them into the manager’s office.

I closed the door. “I need some drugs.”

“So do I, but I gave up the bloody stuff,” Falya said. “Would you like to come to a meeting instead?”

My mouth hitched. No one except her recovering addicts and I knew that Murphy held nightly prayer meetings in her private shelter for junkies. “I could use a sample of Glory for analysis.”

“That I can get you, though it’ll be costly. Glory’s in high demand and low supply.” She went to the storage unit and unlocked it. “I was right, it’s the Glory doing this, then?”

“It may be a factor.” I watched her shrug into a field jacket. “Any word on Kenerak?”

“No, and that’s not making me feel too safe.” She took out a pistol, checked the charge, and then pocketed it. “All the pushers have dug in, like they’re expecting a war.”

“It isn’t only about drugs. We’ve got alien parasites crawling up and down the walls.” I told her about our bizarre infestation. “Do you have any sores or scabs that you don’t remembering getting?”

“One on my right butt cheek. I thought I’d sat on something. You’re telling me one of those things . . .” She shuddered. “Makes me want to hurl.”

“You’re not using, are you?”

“No, but there’s only one way to believe a former junkie.” She rolled up her sleeve and bared a forearm pocked with thousands of tiny infuser scars, “Have a check.” When I hesitated, she pulled a scanner from her hip pocket and handed it to me. “Don’t be bloody dense. I’m doing you before we go anywhere.”

We tested each other’s blood, and we both came up tox-free.

I still didn’t like it. “I would have taken your word for it, you know.”

“Last time I believed what someone told me, I ended up with this.”

She flicked her fingers at her scarred face. “Trust is a beautiful thing, Noriko, until someone destroys it. Stick with scanners.”

As we walked out of the club, her two bodyguards followed. For about ten seconds, until four other hulks stepped out of the shadows and jumped them. Falyn produced a blade a split second after I pulled my weapon, but we never had a chance to use them. A huge pulse blast enveloped us, knocking us to the deck.

I stayed conscious long enough to see David Julienne walk up to stand over us. He smiled, and then his eyes turned orange and his face started to melt.

David believes that he has manifested a separate identity, and that that second identity is trying to kill him, the original persona.

I should have paid more attention to Alden's psychobabble. David Julienne hadn't had a nervous breakdown. He'd been copied by an Odnallak.

A boot filled up my vision, and my head exploded with pain. Then it was lights out.

#

Cold water hit me in the face. "Wake up, Marshall. You can't sleep on the job anymore."

Light blinded me. I sputtered and coughed as I rolled over on something soft and plush and tried to get up. Something heavy rested against the back of my neck, pressing me down.

"Hands behind your back."

When I didn't comply, someone grabbed my arms and jerked them back. Smooth cuffs snapped over my wrists, binding them together. Only then was I yanked to my feet.

They'd brought me to a beautiful hotel room. Judging by the velvet drapes and excellent 23rd century reproduction furniture, an expensive

one. A discreetly monogrammed H on one of the throw pillows confirmed I was in one of the best suites at the Lunar Hilton. Falyn still lay on the floor unconscious, and besides the goon holding me upright, there were only two other people in the room.

One was a tall, ghostly-looking thing with green gills and orange eyes: the shifter. The other was a short, bald man wearing an Armani tunic suit.

I'd only seen a blurry photoscan of second man, but the eyes were the same dead, flat black. "Kenerak."

"Marshall Noriko." He gestured to his thug, who dragged me closer. "I understand you're in the market for some Glory. As it happens, so am I."

"I don't have your shipment."

"I didn't think you would. You have a number of other things I'm interested in, however. My ex-girlfriend here, for one." He nodded to the Odnallak, who went over and pulled Falyn Murphy to her feet. She wasn't unconscious; she was wide awake and staring at the shifter with unblinking eyes. "I thought Fal had better sense than to steal from me, after I was so generous to let her live and all. I'm so disappointed."

Blood trickled from Murphy's mouth. "I wouldn't touch your filth, Erak."

"You liked it well enough before. Did you kill Evans so you could break into the business? Or was it some idiot female revenge thing?"

When she didn't answer, he adjusted his sleeve. "Shouldn't take but a few sessions with La Mangle for you to tell me whatever I want."

Falyn and I had gotten drunk once, soon after we'd met. She'd told me her secrets, and I'd told her mine. As she looked at me, I knew what she was going to do.

"Not yet, Murphy," I said. "The dirt bag here doesn't know about the Glory."

"And you do?" Kenerak chuckled. "I set up my lab in your morgue, right under your nose." He walked over to me and took out a packet of infusers. "David does nice work, doesn't he? Looks just like vitamins."

"Julienne was refining it for you?"

"David already had the knowledge and the equipment. My ponies brought him the raw product. In exchange we provided him with a pretty dead girl every now and then." His voice sounded pleasant, as if he were talking about sending the ME a gift basket. "Not difficult when you're as particular as I am about women."

"What is Glory?"

"I'm not sure, exactly. It grows on the leaves of some plants on a distant world. Traders first brought it back with them as an exotic." He yawned. "I traced it back to the source – a little swamp planet populated by the most incredibly stupid aquatics – and started harvesting it. They let me have all I wanted for free."

"It's killing people."

"Illegal substances do that. Happily there are always new customers to make up the difference." He turned to Falyn. "I'll give you one chance to tell me what happened to my shipment, and then the entertainment will begin."

Murphy began to shake. "I don't have it. Torture me all you want, but I still won't have it."

"Torture you?" He frowned. "You know how I hate repeating myself." He snapped his fingers, and another thug came in carrying Cherijo, unconscious, in his arms. He dropped her on the sofa.

I nearly broke free as I lunged, then bit back a shriek as the one holding me nearly dislocated my shoulder hauling me back.

"She's about the age you were, Falyn, when I took you out of the slums in Dublin." Kenerak sat down beside Cherijo and trailed his fingers over her face. "Much more refined and educated, of course, but just as green. La Mangle likes them that way. The innocent have such inventive imaginations."

"She's just a fucking kid." Falyn twisted out of the Odnallak's grip and went on her knees. "Do me instead. Come on, Erak. You liked it the last time. You even helped."

"Not that much, Fal. Tell me where my shipment is and I'll do the three of you quickly. Otherwise . . ." he glanced over at La Mangle, who

shifted into a cinematic wolf-monster with sharklike teeth and jagged, ten-inch claws. "You get to watch the little one grow up, real fast."

"God damn you, I haven't got it!" she shrieked.

Cherijo stirred, blinking and trying to focus. "Holly?"

I twisted against the grip and felt my right shoulder tear. A moment later, four pulse rounds exploded from the ceiling and hit each of Kenerak's thugs in the head. Another came from a gap in the door panel, wounding the Odnallak. Kenerak grabbed the shifter and disappeared into the next room a heartbeat before Matt and a squad of patrolmen burst in.

I looked up, and glimpsed Killian's face as he slid the ceiling panel back into place.

PART TWO: DEPARTURES

**1817 HOURS
LUNAR MARSHALL'S PERSONAL QUARTERS
HD-77, WEST WING
LUNACOLONY**

I sat down on the edge of the sleeping platform and waited for Marshall Noriko, who was talking to some of her officers in the living room of her quarters. She had let one of the medics at the hotel put her left arm in a sling, but her face was pale and drawn with pain.

In comparison, I was fine. Physically. Mentally I was kicking myself all over the place. *When Dad hears about this, he'll go into orbit. Minus the transport shuttle.*

I was glad Marshall Noriko hadn't yelled at me in front of everyone back at the Hilton. After the shooting stopped, I'd gotten up to check on the men who had been shot, and had promptly fallen on my face. On the way I'd nearly knocked Holly over with me. At the time, she had been kind and made me sit and said the medics could handle things, but her voice and eyes had been like ice.

She must have felt like strangling me. I looked at the photoscan by the bed. It showed a really tall alien girl hugging the marshall with three arms, and shots of different parties that looked like they'd been a lot of fun. I already hated Suzu Noriko for being so tall. *I bet she could have taken out half those guys with one good kick.*

“Hey, Cherry.” Sergeant Warren looked in on me. “How are you feeling?”

Nobody had ever called me *Cherry*, and every time he did, I turned the color of one. “Like an idiot.”

He came in and sat down beside me. “Why’s that?”

Holly’s partner really made me a little nervous – him being so big and quiet and . . . well, so totally drop-dead gorgeous and all – but I also liked how he never talked down to me. “The whole hotel kidnapping thing. I should never have them grab me at the morgue.”

He frowned. “Honey, you were jumped, drugged and taken hostage. Unless you invited them in, gave them the infuser and let them tie you up, none of that could possibly be your fault.”

He was just being nice again. I’d already caused enough trouble for him and the marshall, just coming here, and now? When Dad found out about this, he’d lose it.

You behave while you’re up there, Joey, Maggie, my companion and surrogate mother had told me. Your Dad’s already got steam coming out of his ears over this offplanet trip requirement. Any trouble, and more heads than just yours will roll.

I knew exactly what he’d do: send Maggie on the next lunar shuttle to personally haul me back home. It wouldn’t stop there. He’d have Holly investigated, and when he found out that she had a crossbreed daughter –

something I hadn't actually *mentioned* during any of the dozen times that I'd signaled him from Luna – then he'd really detonate.

I'd seen what my father had done to ruin the professional standing of the few pro-alien colleagues who had dared to stand up to him. I couldn't let him destroy the marshall's life.

"I think I should go and stay at the hospital," I told Sergeant Warren. "I can work from one of the labs there."

"I'm not letting you out of my sight," Holly said from the doorway. "If you're not feeling well, we'll go over to the ER together."

"No, that's okay." I checked her eyes, but they were still frosty. I swallowed. "I mean, if you want to for your shoulder, we can, but I'm, uh, fine."

"Matt, would you give us a minute?" She waited until Sergeant Warren left before she closed the door panel. "Tell me everything that happened." She sounded like a cop now. "Start when they grabbed you from the morgue."

"I don't remember much," I said, and absently rubbed the sore spot at the base of my skull. "I was running a tissue analysis, and then I felt something jab me in the back of the neck. I blacked out and I didn't wake up until I was in the hotel with you." Maybe I should apologize again. "I'm really sorry about – "

“What about the hotel?” She came over and had a look at the back of my neck. “What do you remember from there?”

“Not much there, either. I only saw that funny-looking man with the orange sunglasses and green hair.” I thought for a minute. “And that officer you had up in the ceiling.” That guy had winked at me, although I had no idea why.

The marshall crouched in front of me, and her eyes were different now. They weren’t cold, they were . . . *scared*? “You’re sure that’s everything? They didn’t do anything else? The guy with the orange . . . shades, was he at the morgue? Did he scare you or hurt you in any way?”

Wow, she *was* scared. More of him than I was of her.

“I don’t know who was at the morgue, but all they did was infuse me.” Far as I knew, anyway. “Why? Who was that man?”

“He wasn’t – never mind.” She stood and walked over to Suzu’s view panel. “I should never have dragged you into this mess.”

“I volunteered.” I took a deep breath. “Marshall, are you going to tell my Dad about this?” *Please say no, of course not, it’ll just be our little secret.*

She propped her arm against the plas over her head. “That’s not a signal I’m looking forward to sending, but, yeah. I think I have to.”

Rats. “If you do, he’ll send someone to come and get me.”

“He can’t.” She glanced back at me. “We’re under quarantine.”

“Not officially yet; I didn’t want to send an incomplete report. Even if we were, it wouldn’t matter. You don’t know my Dad. He’ll find a way.” I glanced up at the ceiling. I could imagine invisible bug eyes watching me, and the thought made my stomach churn even more. “If he takes me back, I might transport something; maybe infect people down on Terra with these things.”

The marshall stood there staring out at the lunar horizon for a long time. Then she said, “The colony transponder’s been down since the shuttle accident. I don’t have time right now to nag maintenance about fixing it. Could be three, four days before I get a chance.”

Yes! “Okay.” After squelching the urge to do a little victory dance, I hopped off the sleeping platform. “I need to go back to the hospital and get the specimens from the tank we put Jonas in. One of the nurses bagged them for me after they drained it. I’ll stay there, too.”

“Whoa.” She got between me and the door. “You’re staying here. In the morning, with a proper escort, you can go. Right now you need some sleep.”

Adults were such a pain about rest intervals. “I’m not tired, honest. If I can find out what these things are, I can formulate a treatment. Maybe even an inoculant. Then no one else has to die.” And she wouldn’t have to babysit me any longer, and I wouldn’t have to worry about my Dad going orbital.

She really wanted to yell at me. I could see it in her eyes. But all she said was, "It's not your job to do this."

"I heard one of the officers say that Dr. Julianne went crazy and had to be taken to the psych ward. You couldn't trust him anymore." I gave her my best *let's be rational adults about this* look; the one that always made my maternal influencer laugh until she got the hiccups. "Are there any other pathologists on Luna? Or anyone else who can fill in?"

"No." She sighed. "We have zero backup for Julianne."

"Then let me do it, Holly. I can help, and this way I'll be out of your hair." I kept the mature tone in my voice – Maggie would be rolling on the floor by now – and crossed my fingers behind my back.

She rubbed her fingertips against her eyelids. "You're not in my hair, Cherijo. But you're right, I do need the help." She called Matt back in and asked him if he would take me over to the hospital and stand guard over me while I worked.

"No arguments," she told me when I started to protest. "And you're to be back here in four hours, max."

#

Despite the sealed, sterile bag they'd been placed in, the forty-odd specimens from the tank hadn't held up very well. The first one I extracted was little more than a blob of black goo.

“Yuck, gross.” I turned the forceps around to view it from all sides.
“What’s your cellular decay rate measured in? Nanoseconds?”

I put it under the scope to examine it, and had probe at it and adjust the magnifier to 50X before I could make out the rudimentary structure of the bug’s body.

“Recorder on,” I said, to activate the hover drone. “Examination of unknown insect life form, one of approximately forty which emerged from the body of Jonas Barrett. Specimen apparently died upon contact with water. This appears to be some sort of flying insect, judging by the two pairs of smooth wings. Body consists of three symmetrical exoskeletal segments, assumed to be head, thorax and abdomen. Four large spiracle openings and two pair of multi-jointed legs present on abdomen. Head contains two antennae, two compound eyes and the remains of what might have been a thin proboscis.”

I scanned the abdomen for the presence of eggs, but found none. The contents of the tiny body had turned to bioorganic sludge. The UV readings from the insect were also, surprisingly, nil. As if the water had put it out like a candle.

I examined the remaining specimens, which were in as bad or worse shape than the first, and learned nothing more about the creature except that it seemed to be like a crude version of a Terran butterfly.

I was no insect expert, so I went from the dissection table to a console and patched into the university's entomology database. Once I had accessed the archives, I input a query to retrieve the data on the life cycle of a butterfly.

Reading through the subsequent flood of information would have taken hours, so I refined my query by listing a string of the odd characteristics displayed by the UV insect: *Lepidopteron. Parasitic. Gestation within living host. Chemical excretions.* That narrowed it down to a handful of species, and I began to read.

Larvae are very limited in their diet; many species will only eat the leaves of a single type of plant . . . the cells that comprise the caterpillar are different from the cells of the adult . . . some species drink tears and blood . . . swallowtail butterflies possess two protruding processes on their heads that release an extraordinarily malodorous substance when provoked . . . up to a hundred or more sloth moths live on the fur of their mammalian host, in whose dung gravid moth females lay their eggs . . .

I soaked up as much data as I could, and then ran comparisons between that and what I knew. Our bugs didn't have clubbed tips on the end of their needle-fine antennae, so they were actually more like Terran moths than butterflies.

Scary moths. Idly I punched in query on fear, and the computer offered a dozen synonyms, including *Deimos*, the Greek god of fear.

“Deimos,” I said, trying out the name, and strummed my fingers along my necklace. “Sounds better than moonie moths.”

A male voice behind me said, “Not on this rock, love.”

I knocked over my stool whirling around, a sharp plas slide in my hand. The officer who had been in the ceiling at the Hilton stood a few feet away. “Could you not sneak up on me like that, ever again?”

“Can’t promise to, Doc. I’m the sneaky type.” He tilted his head. “You’re shorter, up close.”

“Thank you for pointing that out, Officer . . .” I didn’t see a name badge and frowned. He wasn’t even wearing a uniform. “You do work with Marshall Noriko, right?”

“On occasion.” He set aside a disposable server of BovaCola and offered his hand. “Michael Killian.”

I had to put down the slide to shake it. “Cherijo Grey Veil. Call me Cherijo. Thanks for what you did back at the hotel.” I looked around him, expecting to see Matt. “Something I can help you with?”

“I thought I’d check on you and see if there’s you need.” His clear green eyes studied my face, and then he took a sip from his drink. “If you’re wanting to get off this rock and fly back to Terra, I can arrange it. In fact, I think it would be good for you to go home now.”

“Not just yet.” Michael Killian was making me very uneasy, so I casually wandered over to the table beside the laser rig and retrieved the sharpest instrument from the tray. “But when I’m ready, I’ll get in touch with you. If you’ll give me your –” I turned around to find the man had vanished. “Okay. That was weird.”

I thought about calling Matt or signaling Holly, but if he was one of her officers – undercover or whatever – I’d just look dumb again. But a quick check of the colonial database revealed there was no law officer or permanent resident named Michael Killian.

Matt came in while I was trying to pull up info on Killian from Terra.

“Quitting time,” he said, tapping his wristcom. “I’m under orders to bring you home. You hungry? I can stop on the way.”

Should I ask him about Killian, or not? Do I want to look stupid again, or not? Not. “No, that’s okay.” I gathered up my data pads, and on our way out asked, “I’ve got a working theory on these bugs, but I need to check something. Do you have those thermal goggles with you?”

“Right here.” He pulled them from his uniform pocket and handed them to me.

“Great.” I flagged down an exhausted nurse. “I need to see a patient who is suffering from obesity. Any patient, it doesn’t matter who.” While she went to the nurses’ station, I said to Matt, “The UV is like protective coloration. Similar insects on Terra use a number of different methods to

deceive predators, and I think the UV emissions are just this species' evolutionary adaptation."

"Whatever you say." He took out a candy bar from his pocket and unwrapped one end while he glanced up at the ceiling. "I still feel like taking a blow torch to the damn things."

The nurse came back. "Room 179. We had to use a grav-lift to move her in. Wear gloves; she's got a nasty skin condition."

Matt and I went to the room, but I didn't go inside. Instead, I checked through the viewer and saw that the enormous Terran female was sleeping. Her roommate was a thin, elderly woman, also asleep. I shut off the interior room lights from the doorway access panel, then secured the entry and went back to the viewer.

"What are you looking for?" He said, pacing a little behind me.

"The fourth link in the chain," I said as I put on the goggles and switched them to UV. "Terran lepidoptera – that's moths and butterflies – generally go through four stages of development: egg, larva, pupa and adult. Each stage demonstrates different feeding habits, and different survival behaviors." I caught my breath as I saw the first, blue-green glimmer spiral down from the ceiling. "Larvae mostly eat. The pupa stage is for metamorphosis." I watched as a dozen more gently flew down to land on the patient's body. The first one stuck its hair-thin proboscis into

the patient's pudgy cheek, and I shuddered. "Adults lay eggs, and the whole process starts all over again."

"These aren't Terran, though." He had been eating the candy bar, and now popped the last piece into his mouth and talked around it.

"They're frigging alien."

The vehemence of his tone surprised me. After all, he was living with a woman who had an alien kid. "That they are." When the obese patient was covered with Deimos, I took off the goggles and handed them to him. "Have a look."

He looked through them and stopped chewing. "What are they doing?"

"I think they're laying eggs in our bodies every time we go to sleep," I said. "That's why we weren't able to find any. I think we're carrying them around inside us."

His color faded a little. "Why aren't we all full of holes? And why aren't they all over the other woman? I only see one on her."

"This is theory part: I think the larvae live on body fat, and the adults swarm on hosts who are obese to lay their eggs, while maybe only one or two might implant a thinner person. Keep watching them for me." I turned on the room light and went in to examine and scan the patient, who along with her roommate woke up and complained about me disturbing her. I noted the rash, which was prevalent on the fattiest portions of her

body, and then went to her roommate, who only showed the tiniest pin prick wound on her breast. I apologized to both women and picked up their charts before I left the room.

“The obese patient has been steadily losing weight since she was admitted. Almost thirty pounds over the last week. Her roommate’s weight remains basically unchanged. They have to be feeding on body fat.” I looked at Matt. “Did they fly off them and go back up on the ceiling panels?”

“The minute you turned on the light,” he told me.

“I bet they’re nocturnal.” I frowned. “The only problem is, the exit wounds are different. Both women’s wounds are only the size of needle marks and the obese patient’s resemble a bad case of dermatitis. The wounds on Evans, Di Loma and Barrett were a hundred times larger, and there was tissue loss.”

“Maybe they only want to kill us a few at a time.”

“I doubt that. A species like these has a very regimented life cycle, and they have no reason to deviate from it.” *Or did they?* I thought for a minute. “Sergeant, I really have to analyze a sample of that Glory drug tonight.”

“It’ll wait until tomorrow, Cherry,” he told me. “I’ve got to get you back before Holly puts out an all-points on the both of us.”

“Okay.” I didn’t want to wait, but I could do a little more research on the console in Suzu’s room before I went to sleep. “By the way, do you know someone named Michael Killian?”

He came to a dead stop and stared at me. “Where did you hear that name?” He grabbed my arm. “Did he come near you?”

I gulped. *So much for not looking stupid again.* “Uh, yeah, just a little while ago. He looked in on me at the lab. He said he was checking on me.”

Matt swore and hauled me to his glidecar. “Mike Killian is a contract killer. If he comes near you again, you run. While you’re running, you signal me or Holly. Immediately.”

“I will.” As we drove away from the hospital, I noticed Matt was sweating. “Are you feeling all right, Sergeant?”

“Yeah. Fine.” He reached into his pocket and took out another candy bar. He noticed me staring and shrugged. “Hungry. I should have grabbed dinner earlier.” He ripped the wrapper open with his teeth.

The way he was tearing into the candy startled me. “I’ll make you something when we get back.”

Abruptly he stopped at one corner and stared at something on his control panel. “That son of a bitch.” He turned a corner onto a path I didn’t recognize.

“I’m sorry?”

“Killian.” He wiped some sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. “He’s following us. Don’t turn around!” he snapped when I went to look. “He’ll know I’m on to him.”

He increased speed and took another corner faster than he should have, which made one side of the glidecar lift off the path.

“Does he work for that drug dealer?”

“He works for himself.” A grim smile curved his mouth. “Thinks he’s going to take my Holly away from me. Got another thing coming.” He took the pulse pistol he carried out of the holster and enabled it. “You just sit tight, honey.” He came skidding to an abrupt halt and jumped out of the car.

Then he started shooting at the man driving the glidecar behind ours.

#

Evidently not worried about getting shot, Killian drove his vehicle straight at Sergeant Warren. I shrieked his name, but he never stopped shooting. Then Killian’s glidecar hit him and he went flying through the air. I was out of the car a second after that, running toward Matt, who now lay unconscious and bleeding on the path.

“I didn’t kill him,” Killian said as he walked up to us. He looked down at Matt and took a sip from his soft drink. “Did I?”

I ignored him and ripped open Matt's uniform shirt before punching in the signal code for medevac on my wristcom. "Trauma, this is Dr. Grey Veil. I have an injured male requiring emergency transport." I gave them our location and then sent a copy of the signal to Holly Noriko. Only then did I look up at Killian. "Are you out of your mind, running him over like that? Why didn't you stop or turn around?"

"I only clipped him." He crouched down. "Leave him."

"Go to hell." I pulled a pressure dressing from my case and applied it to the deep laceration on Matt's temple.

"Come on." He tugged at my arm. "The medics can do this stuff."

"I know who you are. He told me." I whipped out a handheld suture laser and pointed it at his right eye. "Keep your hands off me or I'll seal your eyelids together." I was lying, of course, but he didn't know that.

"All right, love. Steady on now." He held up his hand, palm-out, and backed up a step.

I kept the laser trained on him as I took Matt's vitals, which were elevated but steady. "Sergeant Warren told me you're a killer."

"Wasn't he chatty." He chugged down some of his soft drink. "Your father hired me as your bodyguard."

I stopped working on Matt for a second. "You've got to be joking." No, he wasn't, I could see that. "Why?"

"Your father wanted you protected by the best."

“And my father thinks a contract killer is the best.” I felt like slamming my head into the nearest flat surface. “Perfect. Wonderful. When I go back to Terra, can I hire you to kill him?”

“Maybe.” Killian rocked back on his heels. “How many credits have you got?”

“Oh, shut up.”

The sound of an approaching siren grew louder. “Looks like the medics are here.” He finished the last of the drink and threw the empty server carelessly onto the path. “You’re done now. Time for you to get home to Daddy.”

I tightened my grip on the laser. “I’m not leaving.”

“Yeah, you are.” Killian knocked the instrument out of my hand before I could enable it, and jerked me away from Matt. Up close, I saw that he was sweating. The same way Matt had been. “We’re going back to Terra. Where it’s safe. Away from her.” A pulse shot hit the path a foot away from Killian’s left foot. “Ah, the bleeding witch herself.”

“Turn her loose, Mike,” Holly called out.

“Can’t do that, love.” Killian shoved me behind him. “You’ve nearly gotten her killed once already.”

She took what looked like a combat stance. “I *will* shoot you.”

“No you won’t. Not when you might hit her.” He picked me up like I was a doll and started to run, only he was moving very unsteadily and the arms holding me were shaking. “Bollocks,” he said under his breath.

Killian only covered fifty feet before a blast hit him from behind, and he stumbled to the ground and on top of me.

His breath smelled sweet from the BovaCola as he panted out, “She shoots like she kisses.” His eyes rolled back in his head and he slumped into unconsciousness.

Holly appeared and kicked him off me. “Cherijo?”

“I’m okay.” My backside was bruised, but I managed to get to my feet without a groan. Then I saw how she was aiming her weapon at Killian’s head, and the sweat running down her face.

All three of them?

“Holly, don’t shoot him again.” At this range, she’d split his head in half.

“Why not? Bastard threatened me. Now he tries to kill Matt and grab you.” She dragged in an uneven breath and shifted her grip on the pistol. “He’s not doing anyone else on my turf.”

“He can’t now, he’s unconscious.” I knelt down, putting myself between her pistol and Mike Killian. “Put down the weapon.”

She gave me the full glacier glare. “He’s a killer.”

“So you lock him up.”

She didn't twitch. "I don't have any cells left."

I tried to think of what Dad would do in a situation like this. In my coldest voice, I said, "Marshall, you're not thinking clearly. Back off." As her aim shifted, my heart nearly stopped. "*Right now.*"

"Jesus." An odd expression came over her face, and she slowly lowered the pistol, and then shoved it into her side holster. Then she hugged herself with her arms. "Cherijo, for a minute . . ."

She didn't have to say it. She had nearly shot me.

"I know. It's okay." I noticed a smear of white on her upper lip. "Holly, what was the last thing you ate?"

"Six donuts. The powdered sugar kind. I emptied out the prep unit at the station." She seemed dazed. "And I fucking *hate* donuts."

Things began to clicking into place in my head. Holly's donuts. Matt's candy bars, Killian's soft drink, Jonas demanding bags of candy. Di Loma shrieking for apple pies.

Sugary foods. Sugary drinks. The only kind of sugar used in prep units and processed foods these days was synthetic glucose. It tasted identical to natural sugar and had approximately the same caloric content, but like most foodstuffs it was made from a chemical compound.

It couldn't be a coincidence. "You have to come back to the hospital with me."

She seemed to be swaying a little now. “What is making me do this?”

“I don’t know.” I waved down the medevac team before I put an arm around her for support. “But I’m going to find out.”

#

Convincing the hospital administration to set up a quarantine ward was difficult, until I mentioned how disappointed my father was going to be when he heard how my concerns had been addressed. Then people started jumping like the dome’s artificial gravity had been disabled.

Good old Dad’s name came in handy sometimes.

Killian had only been heavily stunned, so I put a guard on him and let him sleep it off. There was no brain injury from Matt’s head wound, and I parked a nurse beside him before I went to examine my third patient. Holly refused to get on an exam table at first, but the threat of sedation proved to be an effective method of persuasion. Also, I was in a bad mood. I figured being guarded by a killer and nearly shot by a cop entitled me.

“Get on that or I’ll tranq you,” I told her as I pointed to the table.

“I liked you better when we first met,” she grumbled.

“Everyone does.” I scanned her and drew a blood sample. “How much sugar do you normally have in your diet?”

“Not much. I’ll have a slice of cheesecake or some chocolate now and then, but mostly I eat fruit.” She tried to look at my scanner’s display. “Why?”

“How many processed foods containing a large amount of sugar have you eaten in the last two weeks?”

“Not that many, I mean, I’ve had some Danish at breakfast, and I’ve had some ice cream at night, when Matt and I watch a movie, but . . .” she frowned. “A lot, actually, now that I think about it. More than I’ve eaten all year. Why?”

“An adult’s normal blood sugar level is 80-120 mg before meals, and 100-140 mg in the evening.” I set aside the scanner and calibrated a syringpress for administering centrophenoxyline. “Yours is registering just over 300 mg.”

“That’s impossible. I’m not a diabetic.” She watched as I infused her. “Am I?”

“No.” I’d already checked her for that. “But something is making you crave and consume a lot of sugar. Your pancreas is releasing an inordinate amount of insulin. Insulin moves sugar from the blood into the cells, and under normal conditions, this is natural – there are certain cells in your body that do need glucose to survive – but something is changing the way the insulin delivers it in your body. The majority of your nervous system cells are flooded with glucose. That has to create increased

metabolism in the brain cells' mitochondria and is over-stimulating the adrenal gland. There are also chemicals present that are affecting your reasoning, but I don't know where they're coming from. Basically, whatever is doing this is causing you and Matt and Killian feel paranoid and a little crazy."

"Like Di Loma and Jonas were." She rubbed the back of her neck. "I don't know what was in that shot you just gave me, but I feel a hundred percent better."

Good, maybe she wouldn't try to shoot me again. "It's a anti-ageing drug we usually use on elderly patients with brain dysfunction. It'll redistribute the glucose and help your nervous system return to a more natural balance. Sit and relax for a minute." I gave orders to one of the nurses to administer the same to Matt and Killian before I signaled the nurses' stations and ordered the hospital staff to take blood sugar levels on every patient in the facility.

Holly was dressed by the time I returned. "This has to be tied in with the Glory," she said, her voice much steadier and calmer.

"I have to get a sample of it and analyze it, as soon as possible."

She nodded. "I'll find some."

"We'll find some together." I nearly jumped when she handed me Matt's weapon. "What's this for?"

“If you’re coming with me, I want you prepared.” She pushed the weapon into my fingers. “*This* is prepared.”

“Then I’ll be unprepared. I couldn’t pull the trigger anyway.” I handed it back to her. “I took an oath to that effect.”

She gave me the Arctic look again. “You’re pissing me off again, kid.”

No doubt I was, but this was one battle I was going to win. I gave her my father’s famous upper lip-curl/down-the-nose glare combo. “What are you doing to do, Marshall? Send me to Suzu’s room?”

Holly blinked, and then burst out laughing. “Damn, that’s pretty good. Your Dad?”

I nodded. “I can do him being extremely disappointed, too, if you want to see that one.”

“Another time.” She strapped the extra pistol to her belt. “Let’s get some answers first.”

#

On the way to find someone named Murphy, I filled Holly in on my theory about the Deimos and what Matt and I had observed at the hospital with the two patients. She returned the favor by telling me about Mike Killian, although I could tell she was editing out some parts. I didn’t tell her one of my MedTech instructors had told my class all about the Gadurini murder when it had happened. Sometimes you had to let adults feel like they were protecting you from stuff.

“What made you decide to become a doctor so young?” she asked me out of the blue. “I know you’re bright, but you must have started studying medicine before you got your first bra.”

I didn’t need to wear bras yet, but I’d rather amputate my tongue than admit it. “I’ve always studied medicine.” I’d never really thought about it, either. “I knew I was going to be a cutter the first time I held a lascalpel in my hand.”

“Which was when you were, what? Twelve?”

“Ten.” I grinned at her shocked look. “My father started me off with dissecting training torsos – simulated ones. After my first operation on a live patient, I didn’t even have to think about what I was doing. Dad said he always knew he was meant to be a surgeon, so maybe it’s genetic.”

She parked by a passage into one of the older domes, which looked dark and deserted.

“Power grid doesn’t extend this far. Grab a jacket from the case in the back; it’s going to be cold in there.” She climbed out and scanned the area. “You stay right beside me, understand?”

“I will.” I pulled on the insulated jacket. “Should I bring some breathers?”

“No, Falyn has the tunnels rigged with solar envirounits. She’s probably got thirty or forty of her ex-junkies down here.” She led me from the glidecar to what appeared to be a maintenance hatch. “You’re not

claustrophobic, are you?" she asked as she switched on a light emitter and had a look inside.

"No," I lied, I wasn't waiting out here by myself. "Not a bit."

"Good. Don't change your mind." She dropped down and went in.

I followed after her. The tunnel was only two and a half feet in diameter, so there was room to crawl, but not comfortably. It probably wouldn't collapse on us. The air was different inside – cold but fresher – and made my nose tingle to breathe it. We went on our knees and elbows for about four hundred yards before the tunnel opened up into a large, oblong space lined with deactivated or inoperable control panels. I gratefully crawled out of the tunnel and Holly helped me to my feet.

"I'm here to see Murphy," Holly said out loud, although the room was empty.

I was wondering if she'd had snuck some sugar. "There's no one here, Marshall."

"Wrong, midget," a reedy voice said.

Four males stepped out of the shadows, all of them carrying huge rifles. They looked normal, or as normal as four men who evidently had a history of long-term substance abuse could look.

"We don't want anyone trouble," Holly told them. "I'm Marshall Noriko."

“Maybe you are.” the one who had insulted me said, and flashed his teeth. He’d had them capped with something metallic and sharp. “Maybe you ain’t.”

Holly didn’t draw her weapon, but did something very strange. She rolled up her sleeve and showed the men her bare arm. “Make it quick.”

“Wait a second.” What was she doing? “I’m a doctor.”

“I’m a Scorpio, myself.” A thin woman with spiky short hair and a terribly scarred face appeared. “Guns down, boys.”

“It could be him, Murph,” one of the men said, sounding scared. “Get back and let us deal with them.”

“It’s not, Harry.” The woman I assumed was Murphy showed him a thermal body scanner. “See? Neither of them are running hot enough.”

Who was “him” and why would our body temperatures make a difference? I opened my mouth to ask, but closed it when the marshall glanced at me and shook her head slightly.

“How are you, Falyn?” Holly asked, her voice oddly gentle.

“Jittery, but I’m not one to cry. You?”

“About the same. We’re collar-deep in shit.” Holly gave her an abbreviated version of everything that had happened since the shootout at the hotel, and then asked, “You find what you were looking for?”

Murphy nodded. “This way.”

We followed Falyn and her men through a series of interconnecting passages, until we entered an old cargo storage space that was set up as a crude living area. Murphy sent the men out and secured the hatch before she pulled a credit holder out from under a pallet.

“Infusers, CCs and a bit of cut,” she said as she handed it to Holly. “Dealer’s stash, as pure as you can get. I nabbed it on the way here. You owe me a pint.”

“I’ll buy you a vat.” The marshall passed the holder to me. “Any temptation?”

Murphy went still for a moment, and then she laughed. The sound was awful – like it was being forced through a throat lined with broken plas. “No one could say I haven’t earned it.”

“No one could.”

“Except you.” She turned away from us and her voice went hoarse. “I found a mirror first.”

Their conversation mystified me, but it was obviously something they weren’t going to explain, so I simply observed and waited. Holly went over and murmured to the other woman, too low for me to hear. Murphy nodded once and sat down on the pallet and rested her face in her hands.

Holly came back to me. “Let’s get out of here.”

As we left the room, I heard another sound behind me. It wasn't the terrible laugh. It was the sound of a woman who said she didn't cry, weeping.

#

Holly signaled ahead, and there were four uniformed officers and a small army of hospital security guards waiting for us when we arrived at the hospital.

"Secure the hallways and exits. I want every possible access point covered," Holly ordered her officers. "Run DNA scans on everyone who comes in or out. If they resist, don't hesitate. Stun them."

Holly paced around the lab as I removed three samples from the compounds contained in the credit holder and carefully analyzed each one. Two were organics that didn't register as any known substance on the database; the third was synthetic glucose.

"What do you know about this Glory drug?" I asked her as I waited for the results of the last scan.

"It's alien in origin. The cartel boss importing it told me that it grows on plant leaves on some swamp planet. Evidently the natives let the cartel harvest it for nothing. We've never seen it in raw form, though."

I frowned. "What sort of natives?"

Holly thought for a moment. "Kenerak said they were aquatics."

Water dwellers. Water killed the Deimos. Absently I fingered my pearl necklace as I checked the analyzer display. “The drug was rendered from raw form into a liquid by heat exposure, but it contains no water. This powder form” –I indicated the faintly luminous blue-white dust–“appears to be a crystalline version. If it grew on a botanical, it might be a form of fungus.” I read over the display, which was unable to identify the chemical composition of the sample. “You said this drug makes the user feel energetic and powerful, right?”

“Yeah. People who take it feel ‘glorious,’ hence the name.” Someone signaled her, and she slipped out of the lab. She came back to tell me she had to leave.

“We’ve got calls popping up all over the colony. I probably won’t be back for while.” She nodded toward the console. “You going to be okay with this?”

“Go ahead, I’ll be fine.”

#

Days and night blurred together as I stayed in the lab and continued running tests on the two specimens.

Both the liquid and powder forms of the Glory didn’t register on the database. I put them through scan after scan, with no results. There was no way to analyze either specimen because I had no baseline of comparison.

I mapped out what I knew about the drug's effects on users, and compared that to the behavior of the three confirmed victims, but there was no correlation. The Glory drug made people feel wonderful. The Deimos egg infestation made people paranoid and crazy.

"Maybe Di Loma and Evans were going through withdrawal," I muttered as I sat at the console and absently tugged at my necklace. "The Glory might have shielded them from the effects of the Deimos eggs. Or extended the gestation period, so that the moths that emerged were larger." The only way to know that would be to test it on a living host, however, and I couldn't experiment like that.

You must overcome these feelings of compassion, Dad said the first and only time he'd tried to make me experiment on living animals. These creatures are created in this lab to serve a scientific purpose.

It's still torture. It was one of the few things I'd flatly refused to do for him. *We can run the same tests with sims, and nothing has to suffer or die.*

Someday, Cherijo, you may have to choose between your sensibilities and a cure. Will you save the lives of monkeys and rats so that you can watch your species die?

No, I'll probably be busy dying with them. He had given me the oddest smile when I'd said that, but then he'd let me run the sims and had never brought up the subject again.

I couldn't run a human simulation this time, however, because I still had no baseline. The computer could only sim from identifiable substances and related physical reactions; I had sharply contrasting reactions and zero identification. I was so aggravated I snapped the souvenir necklace Marshall Noriko had given me and spent the next thirty minutes picking up moonie pearls from the floor.

"At least they're not real," I grumbled as I scooted under the lab desk to get the last stray bead. A thought blazed out of the recesses of my memory, and I jerked my head up only to slam it into the underside of the desk.

Beads made to look like pearls. Glory might cause the same effects as another, recognizable drug.

I dropped the pearl, crawled out from under the desk and ran for the console. "Audio entry on."

"Audio input enabled," the computer replied.

"List all controlled and illegal substances which instill the following physical and mental reactions in users: euphoria, increased vigor, food/other cravings, increased glandular activity, paranoia, psychosis, neural tissue damage."

"List displayed."

I checked the screen. "Commonality among substances listed?"

“All substances contain or are refined from $C_9H_{13}N_2SO_4$.”

I blinked. “It’s acting like an amphetamine?”

“Unable to provide response. Please restate input to define ‘it.’”

“Never mind. Pause audio.” At least I had a baseline now. I paced around the lab. “Okay, so it duplicates the effects of an amphetamine drug. That means it has to share some of the same physical properties.” I eyed the two specimens. The only way to confirm that was compare Glory to different amphetamines at the atomic level while running a test sim.

I ran a series of comparisons in a brain saturation simulation. It took eleven tries, but finally I found the right combination. Although the alien organic was chemically different, its effects on the neural tissue were almost identical to a compound of amphetamine sulfate, adrenochrome and adrenalutin. The only difference was that both forms of the Glory drug were absorbed much more quickly; three times as fast as the comparative Terran compound.

Something was helping it, but what? Could it be the glucose? I retrieved the sample holder and looked through it.

Marshall Noriko came in. Her eyes were bloodshot and she looked as if she were running on what I was testing. “You haven’t had a break in four days. Shut down the scope and come home.”

“Murphy called this ‘cut.’” I picked up the packet of glucose. “What does that mean?”

“Dealers add it to the pure product. It dilutes it and makes up more bulk for them to sell.” Holly came over to the console. “Are you stalling me?”

“No. I need to check something.” I carefully mixed the Glory with a small portion of the glucose before I ran the tissue simulation again. This time the saturation rate doubled. I repeated the experiment, doubling the ratio of sucrose to Glory with each consecutive sim. The highest saturation rate was achieved with a thirty percent Glory-seventy percent glucose mix, and jumped to one hundred times faster than the Terran comparatives, making the high almost instantaneous. “The dealers were wrong.”

“What do you mean?”

“Glucose enhances the effect of the drug. In liquid or powder form.” I showed her the simulations. “The more it was cut, the more potent it became. The combination would probably distort consciousness, induce obsessive-compulsive behavior and invoke severe paranoia.”

“There would have been a disruption in the supply when the shipment Evans brought in disappeared. The pushers would have added more cut, thinking to stretch out what they had on hand.” Holly stared at the console display. “And that’s when all the Glory junkies started going

crazy. But why would Matt and I crave sugar? Could we have been contaminated somehow?”

“I don’t think so. The only thing contaminating non-users has been . . .” As everything came together in my mind, I jumped up from my chair. “Oh, God, why didn’t I see it before? That’s it.” I grabbed my scanner. “We have to catch some of the Deimos.”

“Why?” Holly followed me out of the lab.

“Because the eggs are the answer.”

Catching an invisible alien moth turned out to be about as easy as it sounded. Despite the fact that there were hundreds of thousands of them all over the hospital, they didn’t want to be caught. After standing on a ladder while wearing the thermal goggles in one of the wards and trying to scoop one into a specimen container, Holly was ready to give up.

“Hang on, I have an idea.” I found an orderly and requested a maintenance drone, then programmed the housekeeping unit to vacuum one ceiling panel. When I removed its dirt trap, which was transparent, I slapped a chart over the open end and held it up to show Holly. “Are there any in this?”

She peered through her goggles into the clear cylinder. “Yeah, about ten of them.”

“Now we need is a host.” I suspected the moths wouldn’t be fooled by a simulation unless I spiked it, so I requisitioned a large chunk of deep,

fatty graft tissue from the burn unit's regenerators and incorporated them in a simple surgical training torso. Holly met me in the lab, where we sealed the moths with the fake patient in a surgical suite, and shut down the lights.

"They're flying out of the trap," Holly said as she watched through her goggles. "And they're taking the bait."

Once the Deimos had finished implanting their eggs, I went in, shut down the sim and put the real tissue under a scope adjusted to screen UV emanations. At the base of each tiny, pin-prick wound were clusters of tiny eggs, each no bigger than a grain of pale sand.

"Got them." I removed the eggs with a neural probe and sealed each in a sterile specimen dish before I rushed the first over to the analyzer. The egg registered as an unknown organic on the database, but I had anticipated that. I ran a second test. "Cross your fingers."

"Want to tell me why?" Holly peered over my shoulder.

"I'm comparing the atomic composition of the Deimos eggs to Glory." I held my breath as the analyzer finished scanning and the results were displayed. "I was right. They're identical. Glory must be made from the eggs." I put the sample of the drug over to the scope to examine it. What I saw made my stomach clench. "Oh, no." I retrieved the egg sample and viewed them side by side. "Marshall, look at this." I stepped back so she could use the scope.

“What am I seeing here?”

“The sample on the left is the Deimos eggs. The sample on the right is the drug made from them.”

“That can’t be. They’re identical.”

“The Glory is magnified ten times more. Julienne didn’t destroy the eggs by refining them.” I swallowed a surge of bile. “He compacted them.” I went to the desk and stopped as I felt something crush under my heel. “Oh, rats.” I lifted my footgear, and stared.

The moonie pearl I’d stepped on was shattered, like an egg. The inside of it was filled with a blue-white luminous sand. I bent down and collected some of it on a slide, and put it under the scope. “That’s how they’ve been moving it around the colony, hiding them in the souvenir pearls. No wonder that drone didn’t want you to buy it for me. You probably paid fifteen credits for drugs worth ten thousand times that.”

“What about Evans?” Holly asked.

“Poor Evans.” I winced. “He never had a chance to steal the shipment he was carrying.”

“Then what happened to it?”

“It gestated inside him.” I added a dropper of water to the dish and watched the eggs turn black. “Pure water still kills them, even in concentrated form.”

The marshall put a heavy hand on the back of my neck. “We don’t want to do that, kid.”

“Yeah, we do, and really soon, or every person on this colony is going up in flames.” I looked up at her and thought I saw her eyes turn orange. Then something crashed into the back of my head, and all the lights went out.

#

I don’t know how long I was unconscious, but I woke up with a splitting headache.

Not again. I rolled to my side and winced as every muscle I owned gave me grief for it. *What is it with people knocking me out?*

I was on a cold floor in a dimly-lit room. Next to me lay Holly, who was unconscious. A rivulet of dried blood ran from the corner of her mouth and she had an enormous bruise on her right temple.

I tried to reach to her but my hands had been bound behind my back. A rumbling sound and the faint sensation of movement made me go still and listen. The sound was the same as the one the passenger shuttle had made right before we had launched from Terra.

We were on a ship, and it was getting ready to take off.

“Holly.” My legs were free, so I nudged her with one foot. “Marshall, wake up.” She stirred and groaned. “Please, wake up. We’re in trouble.”

Her eyes fluttered open, and she squinted at me for a fraction of a second before jerking upright. "What the hell? What happened?"

"I got knocked out. Looks like you did, too." I saw her arms were also bound and bit my lower lip. "We're on a ship of some kind."

She struggled to her feet. "Can you stand up?" When I did, she turned her back to me. "What have they got around my wrists?"

"Plasfibre cord, knotted pretty tight."

"Come over here." She walked to a wall panel and braced one of her feet against it. "There's a blade in the side of my boot. See if you can get it."

It took some fumbling, but I was able to extract the short alloy blade and curl my fingers around it. After that we stood back to back as I used it to cut through the cords around her wrists. When her hands were free, she shook off the cords and used the knife to slice through mine.

Holly went to check the door panel, which was evidently secured from the outside. "What happened?"

"Didn't you see them when they came in the lab?"

She leaned against the wall for a moment before turning to me. "Cherijo, I never made it to the lab. Somebody jumped me on my way there."

"It's the head injury," I told her. "Sometimes they cause memory gaps."

“Not this time. When I was there, at the lab with you, did my eyes turn orange?”

I had to think for a minute. “Just a flash.”

“Bastard.” At my blank look, she said, “It wasn’t me.”

“You have a twin sister I don’t know about?”

“There’s a species of aliens called the Odnallak. They’re very dangerous and no one knows much about them, except that they’re shape shifters. They like to mess with people’s minds. They can change their bodies and coloring to look like anything and anyone. The only giveaway is their eyes. When an Odnallak is in shift, sometimes they flash orange for a minute. If you’re ever near one of them, you do whatever it takes to get away. *Anything.*”

Her tone was frightening me. “How do you know about them?”

“My daughter’s father was one.” She used her blade to pry open a seam in the access panel. “I’m going to try to override the lockout. Step back; I don’t want you catching any sparks in the face.”

She’d barely started working when the door panel opened. The marshall pivoted and lunged at Mike Killian, who disarmed her before I could blink.

“Is that any way to thank me for saving you, love?” he asked as he pocketed the knife.

Holly backed away, putting herself between me and Killian. "I'm the one you want, not her. Why take her?"

He seemed puzzled. "She's my job. You're my fringe benefit."

I didn't see his eyes changing colors. "Holly, I think it's really him," I murmured.

"I want DNA."

Killian held out a scanner and rolled up his sleeve. "Be my guest."

Holly went up and scanned him. Then she tried to punch him in the face, but he blocked her fist. "You working for Erak now, that it? He outbid Grey Veil?"

"I took you and the kid from him." He pulled her up against him, the way a lover would. "No one touches what's mine."

Oh, boy. Were they involved? Did Sergeant Warren know? Was she nuts, fooling around with a guy like this?

When Holly said "I'm not yours. We're going back." I released a sigh of relief. At least she wasn't insane. Killian evidently had a crush on her or something.

"You're never going back. You'll like my place on Terra. It's right on the edge of the Irish coast." He tried to touch her hair, but she jerked her head away. "I've only loved two people in my life, you know. One started me out on this. Be the one who stops me, Holly."

Not a crush. He was in love with her. That explained a lot.

Since the marshall looked like she wanted to rip his face off with her teeth, I decided to speak up. “Mr. Killian, if you take us back to Terra, you’ll kill everyone on the planet.”

He looked over Holly’s head at me. “I’m not *that* dedicated to my job, child.”

“The three of us are infected with a parasitic alien life form. If the crew was on Luna, so are they. We’re carriers. The Deimos lay their eggs inside us. Millions of them. All they need is the dark and sleeping bodies.”

He gave me a sweet smile. “Bullshit.”

“Listen to me. We’re walking incubators for these organisms. Most of the eggs the Deimos implant go dormant, but a few become larvae, feed on our excess body fat, stimulate brain activity, and then pupate. After they mature into adult form, they burn their way out of our bodies to go in search of new hosts for more eggs. The other, dormant eggs don’t hatch until there is enough body fat to sustain them. Normally it’s a harmless process, and even offers some benefits to the host by reducing body fat and increasing neural cell metabolism. The only real threat was to obese hosts.”

“So they kill a few fat people on planet.” He shrugged, like it didn’t matter.

“It’s not just the obese who are at risk anymore. Someone refined the Deimos eggs into this Glory drug. That refining process didn’t destroy

the eggs, it concentrated them. I think it also altered them and their lifecycle. The new Deimos eggs hatch sooner and grow faster. They don't require body fat to survive, either. They've adapted to feeding on an alternate food source. One that was part of the refinement process."

"Sugar," Holly muttered.

"Yes." I met Mike Killian's amused gaze. "The new Deimos are secreting other chemicals, too. I think it allows them to partially control the minds of their hosts; maybe even keep them alive after their brains die. These are the moths that emerged from the Glory users, and by now they may have infected everyone on Luna. Their eggs are lethal, because there is nothing to keep them dormant now that they can live on sugar. They'll all hatch at the same time."

"How do I know you're not just making this up, Doc?"

I wished I could punch him in the face now. "You don't. The only way to find out is to take us to Terra, wait, and see if there is anyone left alive in a month or two."

Killian's smile faded. "You're not a very good liar."

"Take us back and help us kill these things," Holly said. She reached up and curled a hand around his neck, the way she did Matt sometimes.

"Do it and I'm yours. For the rest of my life."

Oh, God, she is crazy. "Holly, don't."

“Shut up, kid.” He looked as if she had punched him in the face now. To her, he said, “Just like that.”

“Just like that. You have my word.”

“If I don’t?”

“I’ll kill myself,” she told him, startling me again. “I had a self-term nodule implanted after Suz was born. You’ll never find it in time to stop me.”

He regarded her for a long time, long enough to make me nervous, before reaching for his wristcom. “Captain,” he said, “Would you turn the shuttle around, please?”

#

“It’s been a week since Evans died. He must have been the original carrier,” Holly said as Killian drove us back to the hospital. “How much time do the rest of us have left before these things start hatching?”

“I don’t know, forty-eight hours, maybe less. I don’t if the acceleration process has stopped.” I used my scanner to check Holly, looking for UV traces. “CentrophenoXinaline nullifies the effect the larvae have on the brain, and water kills the bug.” Combining the two into a vaccine was the only hope of a cure, but how could I saturate the body tissues enough to kill the eggs?

“How many are inside me?” she asked as I finished the scan.

I checked the display and saw more than a thousand individual trace points. “Enough to kill you as soon as they emerge.” I thought for a moment. *Flood the tissues with water.* “Would you let try something?” She nodded, and I took out a syrinpress. “This won’t hurt you, but you may start to feel a little bloated.”

Since I had already administered centrophenoxinaline, I infused her with a compound used to on patients with deep burns or severe dehydration. I put her on continuous scanner. One by one the eggs’ UV signatures winked out, until there was no longer any trace of them in her body.

Holly stared at her fingers, which had grown slightly puffy. “I feel a little like a cartoon character.”

“A very clean cartoon character. Your scans show that you’re parasite-free.” I vaccinated myself and Killian, and by then we had arrived at the hospital. “I can synthesize the vaccine, but we’ll need help with the distribution. Then there’s the small problem of the mass paranoia everyone is experiencing. People are going to resist taking the vaccine.”

“We’ll use tranq darts.” Holly glanced at Killian, who had been very quiet since we’d left the shuttle. “I’ll need everyone who knows how to handle a weapon.”

He smiled a little. “I believe I still remember how to point and shoot.”

Sergeant Warren was waiting at the entrance to the hospital, and for a moment I thought he might go after Killian. He had the look of a man pushed to the edge of his self-control. “You all right?” he asked Holly.

“I will be, as soon as we shoot everyone on colony. Killian, go with Cherijo.” She took Matt’s arm and led him off to a console, where she spoke quietly to him as she began sending out signals.

For a second I thought Killian might go after them, but then he turned to me. “Time to make some bug killer.”

I let Killian escort me to the lab, and had him help me set up the synthesizers to begin mass-producing the vaccine and filling tranq darts with it. All we had to do after that was to wait and let the machines do the work. While I was waiting, I dictated an epidemiology report to a recording drone. I’d have to wait and see the results before I transmit the report with the PCDC. If I did at all.

If Dad finds out I was involved, he’ll go after Holly. I can’t even sign my name to this.

Killian came over while I was working and held out his hands, which like Holly’s were slightly bloated. “Did you give yourself enough of the stuff?” At my blank look, he nodded toward my hands. “You’re not puffy.”

That was a little odd. “My father says I have an unusually fast metabolic rate.” Which reminded me. “Did you signal my father and tell him I was coming home?”

“Not yet.” He paced a little in front of the door panel. “After this is done, though, you’re going.”

I saw Matt standing outside the lab. Killian couldn’t see him, but he was listening on the audio panel. “And Holly?”

He stopped and gave me that mild look that I suspected meant he’d like to make me his next contract. “She said she’d come back to Terra with me of her own free will. Hell, girl, you were a witness.”

“That wasn’t free will, Mr. Killian. That was sheer desperation.” I arched my eyebrows. “Is that the only way you can get women?”

“I suppose you think I should do the noble thing and leave her here, on this waste dump.” He folded his arms. “I’m not that noble.”

I tried not to look at Matt. “Yeah, I got that part.”

“She deserves better, Cherijo. Do you know how wealthy I am? I could give her anything she wants.”

“Except her daughter, and the man she loves.”

“The kid is of majority age. She can get a temporary visa to visit her mother now and then. And Warren,” –his mouth hitched– “will just have to find himself another woman.”

“Will he?” I tilted my head. “You haven’t.”

He didn’t like hearing that. “She’s mine. She’s been mine since the first time we touched.”

“That would have been just after you murdered Mr. Gadurini, wasn’t it?” I made a tsking sound. “Did you remember to wash his blood off your hands first?”

He laughed once. “You’ve some ice in your veins.”

I’d take that as a twisted compliment. “She doesn’t. You take her away with you and she’ll die, Michael. Not right away. Not fast and clean. She’ll stay with you because she gave you her word, but losing them will eat her up inside. She’ll start dying by degrees, every day, right in front of your eyes. As if you were feeding *her* to a disposal unit.”

Matt reached over, turned off the audio, and disappeared.

Killian went white around the lips. “You’re a mouthy brat.”

The look in his eyes scared me – *he* scared me – but I pushed on. “I’m not telling you anything you don’t already know.” The console beeped, indicating the vaccine was ready. I opened the unit and began removing the filled darts, stacking them in a basin. “Signal Marshall Noriko, if you would, and let her know we’re ready here.”

#

As Holly, Matt and her officers loaded up the vaccine darts, I inoculated the hospital personnel and distributed vials of the vaccine to them for the inpatients.

“We’ll also need to eradicate the adult moths, so have maintenance evacuate one room at a time, seal it and apply water mist to the ceiling

and walls.” I turned to Holly. “After people are vaccinated, they’ll need to do the same to their homes and businesses. If your envirotechs can temporarily replace the chemfoam in their fire retardant systems with water, and then activate the systems in all the domes and shuttles in dock, that should clean up the rest of them.” I picked up one of the tranq guns and examined it. It wasn’t much different from an infuser. “If someone will show me how this works, I’ll help.”

“That’s okay.” Holly took the weapon from my hand. She looked terrible, and it wasn’t because her facial tissues were puffy. “I need you to stay here, just in case something goes wrong,”

I saw Sergeant Warren walk out to meet some newly-arriving officers. “Did you tell Matt?”

“No.” She gave me a sharp look. “You’re not to say anything, either. This is my personal business.”

“Marshall—” I thought of Matt listening in on my little talk, but then let it go. “You told Killian you had a self-term nodule implanted. I know from your scans that that’s not true.”

“He believed it, that’s all that matters.”

“You’re not going to have one implanted, are you?” Self-termination implants were illegal, but she was a cop; she could probably get anything she wanted.

“No.” She looked out through the viewer at Killian, who was loading his darts into an expensive-looking rifle.. “You want to know why I lied to him.”

“I want to know why he believed you.”

“I was captured by an Odnallak serial killer named Strosca during a prison riot in NuYork. He tortured me by shaping himself into my worst nightmares and raping me, over and over. He nearly drove me insane.” She recited the horrifying words in an utterly flat monotone. “La Mangle – the Odnallak who grabbed you from the lab – did the same thing to Murphy.”

I thought of Murphy’s scarred face, and the photoscan of Suzu. “Strosca was your daughter’s father.”

She nodded.

“You had to leave Terra to keep her, didn’t you?” My eyes stung and I felt about two inches tall. “It was my father’s fault, Holly. He was the doctor who proposed the GEA. He pushed the government into making it a law.”

“Honey, I knew who your father was before you got here,” she said, her voice warmer now. “It doesn’t make any difference.”

I still felt awful. “You must hate me.”

She turned around. "Do you think I should hate Suz because her father was a monster?" I shook my head. "Then why should I blame you for what Joseph Grey Veil did?"

"Thanks." I came to stand beside her and looked out through the viewer. "You're not going to commit suicide, are you?"

"Not while I've got bug eggs to kill." She put a hand on my shoulder. "You look exhausted, kiddo." She pointed toward the folding cot in one corner. "Try to get some sleep."

I was tired, but sleep was the furthest thing from my mind. Something was bothering me; something that I knew was serious but that lay just out of reach, like a shadow at the edge of a pool of light. I gave myself a headache, trying to figure out what it was, and after pacing for a good hour I stretched out on the cot and closed my eyes.

Something serious. Something to do with the Deimos. Something I'd forgotten.

What Holly had told me about the Odnallak was the problem. I couldn't help thinking about it. The one who had taken me from the lab – La Mangle, what a disgusting name – he must have been the man with the green hair and orange eyes (not shades) at the hotel. That was why she had been so afraid, why she had asked me all those questions. She had thought he might have done something horrible to me, like he had done to Murphy . . .

Falyn has the tunnels rigged with solar envirounits. She's probably got thirty or forty of her ex-junkies down here.

I sat straight up. *Murphy.*

#

I tried to signal Holly and then Matt, but their wristcoms only recorded my voice message, which meant they were too busy shooting people with the vaccine to respond. I couldn't afford to wait until they returned; we didn't know what the gestation rate of the altered moths were and, until they were vaccinated, Murphy and her men were vulnerable. I packed up a case with everything I needed to treat forty-one patients and slipped out of the lab.

The two guards Holly had posted in the corridor were talking with a nurse in front of a prep unit. They all had their backs turned to me, and since I didn't want to waste time explaining, I simply walked around the corner and went down to the trauma unit. One of the medics on standby came up to me, and after I explained things agreed to drive me out to the abandoned dome and help me administer the vaccine to Murphy and her men. I scanned his DNA before we left, just to be sure, but the medic tested positive as a human male.

On the way there, I tried to signal Holly and Matt again, and then recorded a second message about where I was. I knew the marshall

wasn't going to be happy about me leaving the facility, but no one knew where Falyn Murphy was, and the medic made sure no one followed us.

"You're a surgeon?" he asked as he pulled up to the abandoned dome. "You look really young."

I was getting tired of doing an adult's job and still being viewed as a kid. "I started studying medicine pretty young." I walked up to the maintenance hatch and opened it. "We have to go in through here."

He bent over to have a look. "How many people did you say are down in these tunnels?"

"Thirty or forty. I don't have an exact number." I climbed in and pushed my case ahead of me as I crawled toward Murphy's hideaway. "Stay close to me," I called back to the medic. "They're already a little paranoid." And hopefully not in the last stages of Deimos emergence.

"Sure thing."

I made the medic wait in the tunnel as I got out and stood in the light. "Hi, remember me? I was here with Marshall Noriko. I need to see Ms. Murphy."

The men who surrounded me looked just as surly and unhappy as before. "She's sick," one told me. "She can't see nobody."

"I'm a doctor." I held up my case. "I can help her."

The eyes of the one talking to me bulged, and he snapped out something to the others in a language I didn't understand. Then the shooting started, but not from Murphy's men. It came from behind me. I swiveled around to see the medic holding a weapon, which he used to stun the four men.

"What are you doing?" I shouted.

A second man came out of the tunnel and came to stand beside the medic. He was short but well-built and had short black hair with a faint gray sheen to it. "Hello, Cherijo."

I took a step back. "Dad?"

"You lied to me. You know how I feel about deception." He started walking toward me. "Your behavior has been completely unacceptable."

"I'm sorry, Dad, but I didn't think—"

My father drew back his arm and slapped me across the face, hard. "I didn't give you permission to speak."

"You're not my father. You're that shifter asshole." I spit in his face.

The medic came over and grabbed me by the front of the tunic and used it to lift me up on my toes. "Nasty words from such a pretty little mouth." He glanced at the man pretending to be my father. "Go and get Fal. We'll wait."

I watched the shifter walk to the corridor leading to Murphy's chamber. "Why are you doing this?"

“You didn’t ask for permission again.” He put me at arm’s length and clipped his fist across my mouth, splitting my lower lip. “How did you know he wasn’t dear old Dad?”

“My father doesn’t resort to physical violence.” He didn’t need to.

“He’s missing out.” He shoved me to the floor and pinned me there with a foot against my throat. “Where is my shipment, doctor?”

“It turned into butterflies.”

He drew back his foot and drove it into my side. Bone snapped. “Try again.”

“Your drug is made of alien insect eggs.” I curled over, panting against the pain. “They hatched inside him.”

He nudged up my chin with the toe of his footgear and studied my face. “Your worst nightmare isn’t your father, you know. It’s me.” He smiled. “But I’d like to see what Daddy can do to you anyway.” He kicked me in the side again.

Over the roaring in my ears I heard a faint, whistling sound, then saw the man stiffen. He staggered off to one side before dark blood gushed from his mouth and he fell over. The hilt of a blade protruded from the back of his neck.

Killian climbed out of the tunnel, a pistol in one of his hands and a bigger knife in the other. “Cherijo.” He came over and helped me to my feet.

I couldn't stand up straight. *Two broken ribs, no internal bleeding.*
The sound of a scream made me stumble toward the corridor. "Murphy."

Killian swore and followed me, putting an arm around me for support. When we reached Murphy's chamber, he backed me against a wall. "Stay here." He opened the hatch and strode in.

"Michael?"

I came around the corner and saw Killian standing very still. Murphy was huddled in a fetal position on the floor, her eyes too wide.

Holly stepped out of the shadows. "Don't shoot, it's me."

"It's not her, Killian," I warned him. "It's the shifter."

She gave me an impatient look. "You're wrong, honey. It's really me. I remembered Murphy and her boys and brought the vaccine."

"It's a trick," I insisted. "Don't let her come near you."

"It's okay." She held out her hands. "I'm not armed."

He lowered the pistol. "Where's the shifter?"

"I don't know. I came in and all I found was him." She pointed to an unconscious man lying by the pallet. "Falyn's too shaken up to tell me anything."

I could see how she was moving closer to us. "Murphy, tell him it's not her." But Falyn Murphy was evidently too terrified to make a sound.

"Come on, kid, it's me." Holly went over and helped Murphy to her feet. "We need to get her out of here and find the shifter."

Killian turned and shot Murphy squarely in the chest. She staggered backward, her face contorted, and then dropped. The knife that she had been about to stick in Holly's side clattered to the floor. Her body shifted back into the tall, ghostly form of the Odnallak.

My jaw sagged. "She was the shifter?"

"I knew it had to be one of the three of you." Holly showed me a small pistol she had concealed in her hand. "I was just waiting for someone to make a move." She knelt to check the Odnallak, then eyed Killian. "Dead. I'm glad you didn't try to shoot me."

He looked dreadfully pale. "I almost did."

"What changed your mind?"

"Hearing your backup piece pop into your hand before you reached for Murphy." He put away the pistol. "No one knows about that but a man who's held you in his arms."

Falyn Murphy strode in, carrying a huge knife and a pulse rifle.

"Where is he?" She looked down at the dead shifter. "Ah, damn. I was hoping to have the pleasure." She scanned our faces. "What did I miss?"

"You don't want to know," I told her.

#

Matt arrived soon after that, and helped Holly with the bodies while Murphy and I administered the vaccine to the rest of her men. We returned in time to see the marshall closing the body bag over Kenerak's

remains and Sergeant Warren programming a mini-hauler unit to drag it out through the access tunnel.

Killian tugged me back into the corridor, out of sight. “Can you stay out of trouble for the rest of the time you’re here?”

“I think so.” I gave him a troubled look. “What are you going to do?”

“I’m leaving.” He brushed some loose hair back from my eyes before he rested his hands on my shoulders. His eyes looked so lonely. “How old are you again?”

“Sevent—” my eyes went wide as he bent down and brushed his lips over mine. Then I forgot the question.

“Bloody shame.” He kissed me again, this time on the forehead. “I’ll have to go back solo.”

I frowned. “But I thought . . .”

“Tell her something for me, will you? After I’m gone. Tell her she’ll never know what she missed.” He walked down the corridor, away from Holly and Matt.

That was the last time I saw Michael Killian.

I spent the next two days in the hospital, being checked over and monitored by what seemed like every medical professional on Luna. I wouldn’t have stayed two hours, except that the marshall made me promise that I would.

“We have everything under control now,” she assured me. “And if you don’t want me to start immediate repairs on the colony transponder, you’d better stay horizontal and heal.”

It turned out that my ribs weren’t broken, only badly bruised. I thought it was a little odd – I was positive that I had heard the bones fracture when Kenerak had kicked me – but I wasn’t going to make a fuss. The fewer entries made on my chart, the less I’d have to erase before I went home.

The vaccine was one hundred percent successful, and after basically hosing down every living space on Luna, the last of the Deimos were destroyed. The hospital administrator stopped by to tell me that some ship had been jamming our transmissions to Terra, so no one on the planet knew what had happened. When I asked him what was going to be reported, he advised me to talk to Marshall Noriko.

While we were cleaning up our mini-epidemic, the Bureau of Planetary Justice located Kenerak’s cartel ship, but it blew up before anyone could board it, destroying the only supply of Glory in the Quadrant. The final transmission from the ship came from a crazed crew member demanding someone ship half a ton of marshmallows to him or he’d initiate a core meltdown. Evidently he’d gotten tired of waiting.

I received a recorded relay from my father, who was busy attending one of his medical conferences. “I received a favorable report on your

academic performance from the dean,” he said. “Remember to thank him and your exchange hosts before you leave the colony. I expect a concise report on your activities when you return.”

Of course he did. Dad expected a concise report on everything. Mine would be the first work of fiction I’d ever written, but it was better than being grounded until I was thirty.

The marshall was really busy coordinating the clean-up around the domes, so Sergeant Warren came to pick me up from the hospital when I was discharged. He looked tired but happy.

“I owe you, Cherry,” he said as he drove me back. “I think you were the one who convinced Killian to go without her.”

“Me?” I shook my head. “All I told him was the truth.”

“Just the same.” He parked and helped me out of the glidecar. “Are you sure you’re only seventeen?”

I thought of Michael’s sad eyes, and that brief, startling kiss. “Yeah, I am, but hopefully not forever.”

He laughed. “God help us all when you grow up.”

We walked to Holly’s living quarters, and a second after Matt and I entered someone yelled out, “Lights! Surprise!” and I found myself in the middle of a surprise party. Holly’s living room was crammed with medics, nurses, exchange students and cops, and they were all grinning at me.

“Um, my birthday isn’t until July,” I said, looking around.

“This isn’t a birthday party.” Holly came up and nodded to Matt, who put a long narrow gift box in my hands. “This is a ‘You Saved Our Asses’ party.”

Everyone cheered their agreement.

“Oh. Okay.” I opened the box and took out a new strand of moonie pearls. “Can I have a really big glass of water, please?”

Everyone erupted into laughter.

There was cake and punch and lots of silly presents, and everyone had stories to tell. I laughed so much I thought I’d really break a rib. I’d had parties at home – civilized, dreary affairs arranged by Dad that were about as much fun as dental checkups – but this was real, like the photoscans of the parties she’d thrown for her daughter.

I looked around and felt my heart twist. *I hope Suz knows how lucky she is.*

Holly brought me over by her wall of photoscans to open my last present, which was hers.

“One is for you to take home,” she said as I unwrapped the two framed photoscans. The first was of Holly and Matt, standing by one of the observation viewers. They were smiling, and behind them you could see the Earth rising over the lunar horizon. The second was of me, taken when I was working by myself in the lab. “I’d like you to hang the one of you

right here.” She pointed to a hook in an empty space in the middle of the wall.

“This is your family wall.”

She nodded. “You’re family now.”

I fumbled getting it on the hook, because my vision was all blurry. “I don’t know what to say. When I go home – my father – “

How could I explain that I couldn’t risk sending her too many relays or keeping up any sort of correspondence without arousing Dad’s suspicions?

“I know, honey, and it’s okay. As far as anyone else is concerned, this was just a vacation.” She touched my cheek. “Just remember us. We’re never going to forget you.”

#

Maggie was waiting for me at New Angeles transport. Her silvery red hair and barely-decent jade green dress were pretty hard to miss. I waved to her as I got off the shuttle, and she met me just outside the gate. Dad wasn’t with her, but for once I was glad.

“You look tired,” she said, studying me after a big welcome-home hug. “Everything go okay up there?”

“Fine.”

“You spend a week and a half on the moon, and it was just *fine*? Didn’t you go anywhere, or meet any cute guys, or have even a single adventure?”

“Maggie, everything is under a dome. The cute guys were all taken.” I moved my shoulders. “And I was kind of too busy working to look for adventure.”

“Really.” She gave me a sharp look, and curled a finger around the necklace wore. “So what’s this?”

I glanced up at the darkening sky, where Luna glowed like the mother of all pearls. “Oh, just a little souvenir.”