

Sink or Swim
Stories from the S.L. Viehl web site
November 2000 -- November 2001

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For my readers
who send so much encouragement and support
I couldn't do this without you.

Introduction

Most of my ideas for novels come from short stories I've written. "StarDoc," for example, began as a fifteen-page story titled "Border FreeClinic," that detailed one day in the life of a human surgeon on an multi-species alien colony. But not all of them can become novels -- I write about twenty to thirty new stories every year, and have written over five hundred to date.

When I turned pro, I wanted to try out ideas on readers, and give something back to the fans. Unfortunately, the few SF short story markets out there seem to prefer homogenized tales by authors who stick to "the rules," so I wasn't able to sell anything. That wasn't a big surprise, but it frustrated me. It wasn't about the money, I just wanted to get my work out there so readers could enjoy it and possibly give me feedback. I came up with the idea of posting stories on my web site as a way to get around this problem.

I had no idea of how successful the project would prove to be. Over the last year I've received literally thousands of e-mails and letters from readers who read the stories on the site. Their comments and enthusiasm are directly responsible for three new novels I'm working on, featuring Holly Noriko from "Selene's Dagger" and "Shadow Zone," Mercy and Cat from "Rule #1" and "Professional Courtesy," and Sarah and Jack from "Mind's Eye." And I assure you, the *only* reason I'm writing these novels is because of reader response.

I've also included two stories in this collection that *didn't* make it to the web site -- "SOFACon," and "Revisions." Both poke a little fun at the genres in which I'm currently published -- science fiction and romance -- and both are strictly for fun.

My heartfelt thanks to all the readers and writers who have made my web site such a success, and especially to those of you who took the time to write to me about the stories you read there. Keep reading, I'll keep writing, and we'll just forget about those stupid rules.

S.L. Viehl
December 2001

Selene's Dagger -- Part One
by S.L. Viehl

"Sea of Tranquility, my ass."

Sergeant Matthew Warren stepped into my office and immediately eliminated half the available space. Not that there was a whole lot to begin with. Regolith grit coated my newest deputy's envirosuit. He'd been out on the surface, and he was furious.

So much for finishing up my monthly arrest summaries. "Am I supposed to make a choice between the two?"

"Don't have to. I found another jerker." Matt tossed a data pad on my console and dropped into the chair in front of me. "That makes five this cycle."

I stopped grinning. "Six." There'd been one before he'd transferred in. "Male or female?"

"Female. Another tempmate." He glanced over my shoulder at the wide-angle view of the eastern domes. "They should've called it the Sea of Dead PaySlits."

I liked that last word about as much as him messing up my office. "Watch your mouth, Sergeant."

Matt's lips thinned. He'd been on Luna Colony less than three clips, but remained as surly and restless as the day he'd stepped off the shuttle from Terra. I gave him another three before he bailed on me. In spite of his attitude, I'd be sorry to see him go. Matt was a great cop. We didn't get much in the way of great up here.

"How'd you find her?"

Moon dust glittered in his shaggy dark hair as he pushed it back from his brow. "Follow-up on an MPR from TempMatrix. Checked detainment, did a surface sweep. The lock picked up her thermals."

If her employer had bothered to file a missing persons report, she must be in high demand. I skimmed through Matt's data. In terse sentences, he'd listed all available facts on Andrea Linnet, twenty-nine year old Caucasian female, licensed prostitute and resident of LHD 27.

Andy. "Damn."

"You knew her." He wasn't asking. "Did she have dome fever?"

I shook my head. Selenophobia, or fear of the moon, was a common problem with new transfers. So was claustrophobia. "She's been here too long. Ten years, at least, with no incidents."

I knew Andy, too. Despite her occupation, she'd been happy and well-adjusted. She liked working for TempMatrix, kept herself clean and always tipped me off on whatever risky trade shuttled in. Andy was the last person I'd expect to go dome-nuts.

The crime scene coordinates caught my eye. "You found her out on The Dagger?"

"A few meters from where the Talupoulos girl jerked last clip." He glanced at the viewer behind me. "What is it about that bloody rock that draws 'em?"

"Hell if I know." I initiated the station desk drone program, then shrugged into my vest. If this kept up, Terra would have to allocate me another deputy. "Go home, Sergeant."

He shuffled to his feet. "After I relay the family."

Tact wasn't Matt's strong point, and I'd been her friend. "I'll do it."

"Sure." He trudged back out the door panel.

That left me to signal Houston, have them route me through to Andy's parents, and tell them the happy news. That less than an hour ago, their daughter had left the safety of the lunar habitat domes and strayed beyond the sensor perimeter.

Then good-natured, vivacious Andrea Linnet had disconnected the oxygen lines in her envirosuit, opened the seals, and died.

#

If someone had told me fifteen years ago I'd be permanently transferring to LunaColony, I'd have laughed myself into a cramp. Terran cops didn't toss their careers in the recycler to take up dome duty. No, back then I'd had it all planned out: five years on the street; steady, solid collars; earn my shield, then apply for instructor duty. I'd sit back and grade papers all the way to my pension.

Only it hadn't worked out that way.

After I'd talked to Andy's folks, who took the news like any devastated parents would, I signaled my reason for leaving Terra. "Suzu? Acknowledge, please."

My house drone answered. "Suzu Noriko is not present."

On a school night. Again. "State time of exit and destination."

"Exit logged at 1723 hours. No destination point was noted. Shall I initiate a dome sweep, Marshall Noriko?"

"No." I knew where she was. LunaTics. I toyed with the idea of heading over to the dance club, but I had work to do, and sixteen-year-old Suz would consider it a deadly insult. So I signaled someone she liked better than me.

"It's about time, Holly." Doug looked grumpy, and I winced. We were supposed to have dinner together tonight. An hour ago. "Where are you? I'm starving."

"Can't make it, Doug. Duty calls." I made an I'm-sorry face. "Listen, could you go by LunaTics and retrieve my main migraine?"

"Sure, I'll go pick her up."

I'd met Doug Lander, an environmental engineer, after someone had tried to mug him at Transport. Never caught the perp, much to my displeasure, but we'd been seeing each other regularly ever since. He was a history buff, so Suz adored him.

"Thanks, I really appreciate it."

Smooth golden eyebrows waggled at me. "You could express your gratitude later."

"If I'm still conscious."

Doug was a great guy. And although we were suffering through the usual rebellious teenager/cop mother stage at the moment, Suzu was the best thing that ever happened to me. Suzu's father had been the worst. I remembered him every time I looked at her face.

NuYork Federal Penitentiary, seventeen years ago. The day I'd pulled extradition duty, and ended up in the middle of an alien prisoner riot.

I'd gotten out battered and brutalized, but alive. As soon as I'd learned I was pregnant, I made my decision to transfer to the moon. Not like I had a lot of choice. I was Terran, the rapist who'd sired Suzu wasn't; abortion was mandatory. But I couldn't kill my baby. Even if I'd gone into hiding until the delivery, the Genetic Exclusivity Act forever denied my half-alien daughter permanent residence status.

But God, I missed Terra so much sometimes. Unrecycled air. Warm soil. And the little things. Grandma's tempura. Real grass. My rock garden --

"Marshall Noriko?" A fat, panting woman skidded to a halt just outside my door panel. She wore a wildly-patterned, skintight jumpsuit. Her tinted hair radiated static.

She'd been running. To or from what?

I recognized her from the photoscans. Behira Modesto, TempMatrix's site manager, had her likeness plastered everywhere around transport. A smiling, bejeweled version of Ms. Modesto beckoned to jaunters, while an audio panel looped the company jingle: *Come to stay, come to play, TempMatrix's got your match today.*

"Someone said . . ." Behira gulped air, then tried again. "Someone said . . . you found . . . one of my girls."

"Sit down." As she did, I switched on a recording drone. "Someone like who?"

"Sergeant Warren." The madam leaned forward, her hands clasped so tightly that the sides of her knotted fingers were white. "Was it . . . Andy? She didn't show . . . for her shift. Is she . . . okay?"

Now why would Matt tell Behira anything? I watched the fat woman's eyes. "We found her, but not alive, Ms. Modesto."

For a nearly-hysterical woman, Behira calmed down fast. "How? How did she die?"

"She went out on the Dagger and jerked her lines."

The eyes, usually a dead giveaway, blanked. Her painted lips mouthed my last words: jerked her lines?

"You know anything about this?"

"No. I don't know anything. Nothing." Without another word, the biggest madam on the moon heaved out of her chair, and fled.

#

I tried to chase Behira down, but she vanished. Sweating, swearing, and feeling like a rookie, I stomped back to the station and put out a firmly-worded request over the public channels for her to signal me immediately. Then I had to go and do the search and lock down on Andrea Linnet's quarters.

Andy had lived in Lunar Habitat Dome 27, an older but comfortable section mainly populated by retirees. Her entrance panel had been left unsecured, so I didn't have to use my judicial override code to get in.

It should have been locked tight. Andy had been good-natured, not an idiot.

The apartment was immaculate. Stark, stannissue furnishings were softened by colorful linens and hordes of small pillows. An antiquated house drone met me in the center of the living area.

"May I help you?"

"Noriko, Holly, Lunar Marshall, ID 845571262," I said.

The drone clicked and buzzed. "What can I do for you, Marshall Noriko?"

"State time of Andrea Linnet's last entry and exit?"

"Ms. Linnet entered at 1609 hours and exited at 1612 hours."

So she'd made a pit stop. "Alone or accompanied?"

The drone's panel flashed wildly for several minutes. It took forever for these old models to process. "Ms. Linnet was alone."

Andy had been here three minutes. Not long enough to do more than grab something.

"List Ms. Linnet's activities during that period."

That took even more time. Older models were slow to retrieve nonessential data. "Ms. Linnet entered at 1609 hours. Laughed from 1609.25 to 1610 hours. Reclined on her sleeping platform from 1610 to 1610.40 hours. Screamed from 1610.40 hours to 1611.35 hours. Exited at 1612 hours."

Screamed? "Replay audio monitor file from 1609 to 1612 hours."

"Audio replay commencing."

I listened to the sounds of Andy's door panel opening and closing. Her audible footfalls thudding on the deck. The sound of a strained laugh. A heavy thump. Silence. Then a high-pitched scream. More footsteps. The panel opening and closing again.

"Copy all data files to my database."

"Confirmed."

The drone trundled over to the main console, then silently downloaded itself. I started searching through Andy's possessions. She hadn't had much, some basic entertainment chips, the gaudy jumpsuits she wore for work, and a staggering amount of footgear. I stopped counting pairs at fifty.

Andy, waving me over as she strolled out of Park Dome. "Holly! Look what I found at the Commissary!" Proudly displaying the brand-new, hot pink plas stilettos she wore. "You should get yourself a pair. They'd jazz up your uniform!"

I laughed. "I'll stick to work boots, thanks, Andy."

"Marshall Noriko?" It was the station desk drone. "Priority relay for you."

"Patch it through."

A face coalesced on the screen. It was small, pretty, and not entirely human. "Mom! Why did you send Doug after me? I was just hov'ing with my friends!"

"Hover with them on the weekend." What was she doing with those idiotic choke-chains around her neck? "You've got school in the morning, Suz."

Her big dark eyes became slits. "I don't need you checking up on me!"

"Then stop giving me reasons to do it." I studied her latest hair style. She was into braids this week. How she got that mane of green gills into order was beyond me. And when had she started wearing all that synleather? "You get your techwork done?"

She sketched a crisp salute. "Yes, ma'am, Marshall, ma'am."

Her tone, and the sight of her four-fingered hand made my throat hurt. I had to defuse this before it dissolved into yet another screaming match. "Good. Then I won't have to beat you."

A smile tugged at her unwilling lips. "You'd never beat me."

"I could start." We'd make it through this, Suz and I. Somehow. "Get to bed at a reasonable hour, okay?"

She made a hideous face, then abruptly terminated the signal. Not sure if I'd won, lost, or placed as The Meanest Mother In The Universe, I stepped outside Andy's quarters to seal the door.

"Marshall?"

I swiveled around to find an elderly man watching from the opposite door panel. "Yes, sir?"

"Is there something wrong with Miss Andy?"

"Not anymore, sir."

#

After interviewing Andy's concerned neighbor and discovering zero, I went to the main air lock and suited up. The drone on duty had no new data, other than Andy's exit logged at 1650 hours. Thirty-eight minutes after she'd left her quarters. Barely enough time to run to the lock, pull on an envirosuit and walk out. She hadn't taken a rover -- that would have set off the perimeter sensors the moment she crossed them.

What had set her off? The job? I'd have to check her work files. Behira would have vid and audio; the local TempMate Union insisted on it. Maybe a trick had gone bad, and she'd gotten roughed up. But why would Andy walk all the way out there when she could have come to me?

I checked the topographic database. Andy was in pretty good shape; five miles wouldn't have been a problem. Since I wasn't that eager for exercise, I took one of the surface units. The rover got me there in less than a minute, and I landed a hundred meters from Matt's coordinates.

You'd think after fifteen years I'd get used to the surface, I thought as I picked my way over the rocky terrain. The gravweights made me feel sluggish, but kept me from floating up and bouncing down every time I took a step. Endless, colorless basalt stretched out in every direction. Small dust billows made a puffy trail behind me. They'd still be floating there when I circled back.

Nope. No matter how often I came out here, it still gave me the creeps.

Selene's Dagger had briefly enjoyed some notoriety back during the last half of the twentieth. The fifteen meter collection of random, straight-edged formations had been catalogued by one of the old flyby space probes. Someone had picked out the shape of a short sword in the lines, hence the name. Back then it had even been suggested that the formation was artificial, some kind of celestial sculpture -- proof that extraterrestrial life had visited the moon.

Dimwits. Who in their right mind would voluntarily stick around on an airless rock long enough to sculpt anything?

I found Matt's tracer beacon right away. There was still some dark smudges on the flat-topped, three-sided rock where Andy had killed herself. I took some soil samples, plas-caste the footprints Matt had tagged, and photoscanned the site.

No signs of foul play, nothing to indicate anyone but Andy and Matt had been out here. I was about to go when I saw an odd, swirled pattern off to one side of the outer southern ridge.

Careful not to disturb the striations, I got as close as I could and knelt down beside them. Too regular to be made by solar winds. My scanner revealed low-grade trace ionization, disrupted hydrogen levels, and fused basalt particles. Readings indicated the marks had been made within twenty-four hours.

Someone, not Andy, had brought a rover out here. But they hadn't landed it.

#

Round Two with my daughter started when I finally got home. I walked in, stripping off my tunic, then skidded to a halt.

Suzu stood waiting for me, and for the first time I realized she was probably going to be as tall as her father -- a good meter taller than me. She already had his dark, lidless eyes, extra limbs, and the hollow green gill filaments that looked like hair but were actually part of her lungs. Which was why she could wind all those metallic links round her slim neck without asphyxiating.

I could still figure out a way to strangle her. "Is this the new look? What's it called? Little Miss Bondage?"

"It's late twentieth biker-style." She planted one of her four hands on a nonexistent hip. "Don't you like it?"

"You really want a beating?"

She sniffed. "I'd like to see you try."

"You might be taller and have more arms, but I'm meaner." I hoped. "Get rid of that neckwear, will you?"

"Why? I like it. It's historically accurate."

"It's pissing me off. Lose it."

Under the cleanser, I rehearsed my usual maternal lecture. I was too tired to be very creative, so I'd try to keep it simple and hope for the best. I came out to a slightly congealed casserole and Suz sitting beside it, minus the neckwear.

Suzu hated cooking. "What's this?"

"Dinner." My daughter gave me a bright, expectant smile.

My maternal understanding instantly evaporated. "If it's about getting that tattoo of the Moon Goddess, forget it."

She pouted. "I haven't even asked you anything yet."

"No tattoos." I tasted the casserole, choked, then grabbed the server of tea she'd put out with it. It took gulping down half the contents before I could wheeze out, "For Christ's sake, Suz, stop recalibrating the damn spice dispenser, will you?"

"I only used four tablespoons of cayenne."

"Only four?" Her hurt expression made me summon up an apologetic smile. Since my lips now had second degree burns, it wasn't easy. "Sorry, honey. You forget, my palate is --"

"Terran, yeah, I know." Her brow ridges crinkled. "Can I help it that mine isn't? I don't know why I even bother."

I did. The meal was a peace offering, and I'd blown it. "Okay. What did you want to ask me about?"

"Some of my friends want to make a surface trek out to the Armstrong Memorial Dome. You know, see the famous footprints, check out the old tin cans they used. Doug said he'd take us."

I thought of six dead women, how much I'd like to punch out my boyfriend for not checking with me first, and shook my head. "Uh-uh."

"Mom!" Her braided gills practically stood on end. "All the other kids can go. I'll be the only one left behind!"

"I'm not taking a chance on you getting a suit-leak, honey, or anything else." Anything else being whatever had compelled Andy and the other women to kill themselves.

"It's not like I'm going to jerk my lines, Mom. I've been out before, you know. Lots of times."

Not with my permission, she hadn't. The door panel chimed.

Understanding her life was in eminent danger, Suz hopped over to the corridor viewer, punched the console, and grimaced. "It's the one who hates me. Sergeant What's-His-Name."

"Sergeant Warren, and he doesn't hate you." I got up, walked over and keyed the panel to open. "Matt."

"Marshall." He didn't look at my daughter. "Sorry to bother you at home, but your console is blocking all relays."

"Is it." I glared at Suz, who hmphed, tossed her head, and bounced off to her room. "Come on in."

Matt declined my offer of a chair or refreshment. "You get out to the site?"

"Yeah." I reviewed what I'd found on the inspection. "Where did you land your rover?" He named a spot close to where I had set down. "I found hover marks on the south ridge."

Matt swore softly. "I should have checked."

"Someone was out there. Maybe watched while Andy killed herself. Or came across the body before you." I rubbed my eyes. "Why are you here?"

"I ran a check on the basecore from Linnet's house drone. Someone tampered with the memory chips." He paused. "Then I checked the main air lock drone. Same time files were altered."

"Sounds like our spectator was directly involved." I remembered my visitor. "Behira Modesto came to see me today. Said she heard about Andy from you."

"I didn't talk to her." He frowned. "I only heard about her a half hour ago."

"Heard what?"

"Signal came in from TempMatrix. Another MPR."

That made me sit down. "You run a surface scan?" He nodded. "Any thermals out on The Dagger?" Another nod. That made me stand. "Come on, let's suit up."

#

It took the rest of the night to locate and recover the remains of Behira Modesto, and make the report. After stopping by Medical for some stimulants, we started canvassing. Doug Lander intercepted me in LHD 41's main corridor. Matt continued on to question Behira's neighbors while I indulged in a warm, if brief hug.

"You look exhausted," Doug said before giving me a discreet kiss on the ear. "Suz?"

"Among other things."

"Poor girl." Doug had one of those classic Caucasian God profiles. Perfect blond hair. Gorgeous brown eyes. He was much better looking than Matt Warren, I thought. Not that I wanted to compare them. "Got time to grab a drink with me?"

"No, I'll be tied up here for awhile."

"Is this about those tempmate jerkers?" He made a clucking sound. "You get at least a half-dozen of those every cycle, Holly. Why make a big deal out of this one?"

"It's standard procedure." I spied Matt watching us from the other side of the corridor. "Listen, next time you want to take Suzu on a surface trip, run it by me first, okay?"

"What can I say." Doug gave me a sheepish grin. "She begged, I caved in."

"Try resisting next time. I'm tired of being the bad guy."

"Yes, Marshall." He gave me a thorough once-over, then rested his hands on my shoulders. "Suz really doesn't need a baby-sitter anymore, you know."

"Not if I get that cage I requisitioned."

He laughed. "I'll spend some time with her today. Soften her up for you."

"No tattoos, no surface trips." He was so good with her, I should take parenting lessons from him. "Thanks, Doug. Talk to you later."

"You'll be too busy," was Doug's prediction as he strode away.

Matt and I finished up the interviews and went back to log our reports at Central. I filed my data entries then looked across my console. Matt was running a comparative on the victims' background profiles. He seemed quiet, even for him.

"Something wrong, Sergeant?"

He didn't look at me. "That guy, Lander. You're serious?"

It wasn't my policy to discuss my private life with anyone, much less a subordinate.

"Why?"

Now he looked. "I don't like him."

Matt Warren's approval wasn't at the top of my wish list. Still, it needed. "You don't like my friends or my daughter, either."

"You're mistaken." He said that in a low, soft way, like "mistaken" meant "beautiful."

"Am I?"

"I don't have anything against tempmates. And for the record, I like your kid. Just never saw a crossbreed Terran before."

"Glad we satisfied your curiosity, I'll be able to sleep nights now." I tossed my data pad down and rose. "I'm going to Behira's Office. You coming?"

There was a new transfer manning TempMatrix's main reception desk, and she squealed with pleasure the moment we walked in.

"Oh, darling, you're *perfect!*"

I watched her hurry around the desk. "Brace yourself, Sergeant, I think she's in love."

Matt only scowled, until the receptionist bypassed him completely and grabbed me by the shoulder. Then he looked away, but I saw the back of his neck redden suspiciously.

"You're Oriental, aren't you?" She made a cooing sound as she tried to turn me this way and that. "The hair definitely needs shaping" -- she nearly pulled a handful out of my scalp examining it -- "but it's so black, and the length is marv, simply *marv*. Plus your skin is gorgeous, stellar material --"

Now I actually heard my deputy chuckling.

"Thanks." I set her at arm's length. My Grandma had been a geisha for thirty years, so I wasn't offended. "But no thanks."

She scrunched up her painted mouth. "Darling, don't you know, you could make thousands? Small as you are, I bet you're as snug as a --"

"U.S. Marshall." I flashed my badge. "Cut it out and signal your boss, okay?"

"You're cops?" The pout turned into an oh. Both hands flew to cover it up. "Oh, God, oh my God, I'm so sorry, please forgive me, I had no idea --"

I rolled my eyes. "Go get your supe, dear." She fled. "You can stop snickering anytime now, Sergeant."

"Yes, ma'am." Matt's cheeks puffed out a bit, and he coughed a few times, but he managed to get his mirth under control by the time the shift supervisor appeared.

"Marshall. Mr. Warren." He was, like most pimps, clean, well-dressed, and aggressively polite. In other words, a jerk. "We've passed all our inspections this cycle."

"Behira Modesto is dead." I didn't give him time to do more than suck in air. "Show me her office."

"R-r-right this w-way, Marshall."

A thorough search turned up nothing, so I confiscated her personal terminal as evidence. Taking Behira's basecore didn't make the supe very happy.

"Ms. Modesto scheduled all our special sessions," he said, wringing his hands as he followed us to the door panel. "How can I work my girls without the appointment data?"

"Give them the week off with pay," was my suggestion.

Matt and I canvassed and interviewed tempmates and tricks until our stimulants wore off, but found nothing to indicate Behira had made any enemies at work or off the job. Analysis on the database indicated she had deleted the work files on all the dead women.

Behira had been hiding something. But what?

I told my deputy to go home.

"We should interview some more of the paysl--prostitutes who worked for her." Matt stretched out his long arms, then went still and squinted at the screen. "That's strange. She's been running a dozen girls in the OD Chamber every week."

Behira had been pushing a line of girls specializing in BDS&M, but since that was the current sex-craze it was only a matter of supply meeting demand. I wasn't interested in the tricks or the trade. "Oxygen-deprivation is popular. Simulating a dome-break puts them on an adrenaline high."

"I don't get it."

"Hope to God you never do. They think sex just before they suffocate is *erotic*." I shook my head. "Men."

"Not all twists are men, Marshall. There are some females listed, too."

I scoffed at that. "Ninety-five percent of the pervs are male." Then it smacked me in the head. "That pimp -- he called you Mr. Warren. Why?"

"I've been there a couple of times." Matt didn't sound embarrassed. "For back massages."

And front massages? I wanted to thump him. "Thanks for telling me." He shrugged. "We'll have to sort you out of the database -- unless *you'd* like to confess to the murders?"

"I just like having my back rubbed."

I punched the console and sorted appointments by client name. I keyed the data to pause when a particularly credit code kept popping up. "Holy Toledo."

He leaned over to have a look. "What is it?"

"Whoever made all these appointments" -- I tapped the screen with my finger -- "didn't enter the chamber. The credit charge is for the tempmate to perform solo."

"Unusual?"

"Up here? You bet it is. One of these guys could have talked Andy and the others into doing the same thing on the surface, then pulled their lines himself."

Matt studied the screen. "Maybe it's all the same guy. He wouldn't make the mistake of using the same pseudonym twice."

"Only one way to find out." I sighed. Grandma would have loved this. "We're going to need more stimulants."

#

TempMatrix clients, for obvious reasons, were allowed to use pseudonyms. After another stop at Medical, it didn't take long for me to terrorize the night manager into setting up the sting.

"You can't seriously believe our clients will be fooled --" the pimp was yelling at Matt when I came out of the dressing chamber. He swung around to start on me. "Marshall, I -- I --"

I planted a hand on my barely-clad hip. "You what?"

He was too busy picking his jaw up from the floor to answer, so I gestured to Matt. "Let's set up." To the receptionist, I said, "Send back the first trick in fifteen minutes."

"Yes, Marshall."

Inside the O.D. chamber, I showed Matt the small storage alcove I'd had maintenance rig to serve as an observation post. "Keep the recording drones activated and watch the monitor."

He inspected my skimpy costume. "You can't hide a weapon in that gear."

"I know. I can barely breathe without something popping out." I checked to make sure nothing had.

He grinned. "Want to rub my back for me later?"

"Don't be cute, Sergeant."

I took my position on the recliner in the O.D. chamber, arranging my limbs into what I figured was a provocative pose, and waited.

The first trick was a business man named Smith in a beautifully tailored suit. He carried a photoscanner and a suitcase. "Hello, darling. You're a sight for sore sensors, I must say. Just transfer in?"

"This morning," I said, and climbed off the recliner to help him with his jacket. "You're my first client."

"Lucky me." He had cold hands, and put them to use. "A little on the thin side, but nice, very nice."

I gritted my teeth and glided out of reach. "Do you like watching?"

Mr. Smith told me what he liked. Judging by the specifics, he was definitely a hands-on kind of guy.

"We're running a surface special. Feel like suiting up?"

He stopped undressing and gave me an incredulous look. "Go outside? God, what for?"

I sighed and flashed my badge. "U.S. Marshall. You can put that back in your trousers now, Mr. Smith."

Using the same routine, I eliminated four more suspects, including one gutter-mouthed female behemoth who didn't appreciate being denied use of my body -- even after I showed her my I.D.

"Space that. I paid good credits for this session, you little bitch." She started coming after me.

Memories of the prison riot made me taste bile. "Back off."

The recliner went flying as she kicked it out of her way. "Who's gonna know?"

Matt stepped out of the maintenance alcove, weapon drawn. "I will."

She hesitated, until he enabled the sight, then she grabbed her clothes and stalked out.

He holstered his gun. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." No, I wasn't. "She only rattled me a little."

"A little?" Matt held me by the arms. "Christ, Holly, you're shaking."

"I'll be fine." I shrugged off his hands. "Give me a minute, will you?"

"No, we're done. We'll find another way to nail this guy."

"You're not in charge of this investigation, Sergeant." *Why was he so angry?* "It's no big deal."

He spun me around. "You think I *like* watching this? Knowing what happened to you in NuYork?"

"What?" I was embarrassed, furious. "How the hell did you find out? The only records are --" Suddenly everything came together, and then I knew. "You son of a bitch. Who sent you up here to dog me?" When he didn't answer, I shoved him back. "*Who?*"

"BPJ."

Bureau of Planetary Justice. The big guns. "Well, well. So it's Agent Matt Warren." I circled around him, looking up and down. "What did I do to stick beans up the Bureau's nose?"

"One of the victims worked for us." He sounded tired. "We've been trying to shut down a smuggling operation out of Houston. The agent who died had gotten a solid lead the day before she was killed."

"Any reason nobody bothered to tell me a damn thing?"

"I couldn't." Matt rubbed the back of his neck. "You were a suspect."

He was a planetary fed, I was a murder suspect, and my g-string was starting to itch. "Great." I went to get my clothes and started stripping off my meager outfit. "You want to search my place, feel free. Let me get my daughter out of there first. I'll give you a statement as soon as I don't feel like kicking your ass out the nearest air lock."

He followed me into the alcove. "You're not a suspect any more."

I whirled. "Why the hell not?"

"Because of this."

Matt had me in his arms before I could blink. Then his mouth was on mine, and I was too stunned to do anything but hang on. His hands pressed my nearly-naked body closer, creating all kinds of disturbing contact points.

I wondered if my sleeping platform would adjust for someone as big as him. Which made me realize it was definitely time to call a halt to this, while we still could. "Matt."

He lifted his head, and stared at me. "What?"

"This is a lousy reason to eliminate me as a suspect."

He rested his brow against mine. "I know."

"Come on." I slipped out of his arms. "We need to talk."

#

We talked. I was still steamed about being left in the dark, but after Matt filled me in on the case I understood why he'd done it.

Down on Terra, someone had been using tempmates to smuggle classified hi-tech chips on and off planet. Since prostitutes regularly traveled and were experts at hiding contraband, they'd proven to be highly successful couriers. The few that Matt's team had caught had ended up dead before they could reveal who was using them, thanks to the neurotoxin coating the chips.

"They make their drop, they get the antidote," Matt told me. "They don't, they die. We've tried infusing them as soon as they're arrested, but the smugglers use a different compound with each courier." His expression turned stony. "So far we've lost ten of them."

"I'm sorry to hear that." And I was. "But what has your case have to do with my murdered tempmates? None of them were poisoned."

"Four of the Terran victims held tickets for LunaColony. Someone up here is working the export end. Maybe he's using your girls here to make surface drops."

"Andy wouldn't have done that."

"Tempmates do anything for money."

"Not Andy. And don't look at me like that, you didn't know her. God damn it." I propped my head against my hands. "We're going to have to break into the basecore, pull all the financials on everyone up here."

"That's illegal. And impossible."

"Illegal, yeah. Impossible . . ." I pulled out a little unit that had cost me nearly a year's paycredits and hooked it up to my terminal. "You don't see me doing this, Agent Warren."

He stared at the opposite wall. "Doing what, Marshall?"

Using unlawful tech might cost me my badge, but enough women had died. I broke into the colonial database core memory and retrieved all the resident data files. Then I disconnected the unit and went to work on the confidential credit records. I found what I was looking for almost at once. Matt read the entries, too.

We were quiet for a few minutes.

"Behira must have tried blackmail first," I said. This was beyond a shock. It might just wreck me for good. "Dumb move. It got her murdered."

"Holly, I --"

"Shut up. Just shut the hell up." I punched my console, and signaled Suzu's instructor. "Ms. Jordan, send my daughter over to my office immediately."

"I'm sorry, Marshall Noriko, but Suzu wasn't in class today. Shall I notify the truant drone?"

"No, thank you." I terminated the signal, and pressed my hands against my eyes. "We'd better track her down, fast."

Two hours later, running on nerves and drugs, we still hadn't located Suz. I retraced my path back to LunaTics, while Matt checked in with the desk drone.

Raprock blared without ceasing from enormous speakers into the common area. Overhead spots flickered colored light over the line of teens waiting to get into the dance club.

The short, bored entrance guard frowned when I showed him Suz's photoscan. "Ain't seen her."

"Okay." Suz, Suz, why are you doing this to me? "If she shows up --"

Someone near me tittered, "That'll be like forever."

I pushed surly adolescents out of my way, grabbed the front of the kid's tunic and lifted him off his feet. "What did you say?"

"Nothing. I mean" -- he gulped -- "like, she's going to be hours out there. You know, on the surface."

"Was anyone with her?" I gave him a shake to prompt his memory, and he nodded. "Who?"

"Don't know. Maybe one of her girlfriends."

I signaled my deputy as I headed for the main air lock at a flat run. "She's out on the surface, Matt."

"I'll meet you at the lock in two minutes."

We suited up, walked out and grabbed a rover. Or tried to. They were all disabled.

"Pull your gravweights." I reached down and disengaged the stabilizer units on my boots. "We're going to have to jump it."

Matt did the same. "Selene's Dagger?"

"Where else would she be?"

Without gravweights holding us to the surface, we were able jump and sail through the low gravity much faster than we could run. Still, it took time, and every minute made me sweat that much more. Would we get there in time to stop this killing?

We reached the last outcropping of rock beyond The Dagger when Matt pulled me down and re-engaged our weights. A low hum was emanating close by. Rover, I thought, and motioned to my deputy to circle around to the western side. I edged as close as I could before taking a peek.

There was an envirosuited form stretched out on the blunt angle of The Dagger, another bent over it. The prone body was held down by structural clamps emerging from the rock. A rover on auto-pilot hovered several meters away.

No, Suzu! I switched on my suit receiver to see if I could pick up any conversation. What I heard made me want to vomit.

"-- know you're watching me. I brought the offering." Heavy breathing, then a short, crazed giggle. "Selene will be pleased. As she was with the others."

Another, frantic voice pleaded, "No, no, don't do this!"

"Shhh." Another laugh. "The Goddess wants you, you know. Almost as much as I do." A grunt, then a hissing sound. "There. It won't take long now."

I couldn't run at them, it was that close. I'd have to risk a shot from here. Then I saw Matt charge the standing figure from behind, and the two rolled off into a small shallow depression. I pulled my weapon and held it ready as I ran toward The Dagger.

It took a few seconds to reseal the envirosuit. Terrified eyes stared at me from the other side of the frosted face plate. "Stay put."

I swiveled around, but couldn't tell which of the grappling bodies was Matt. We were running out of air and time. I wasn't about to let a murderer go free. No matter how personally involved I was.

So I lifted my weapon, aimed, and shot both of them.

The bio-electric pulse rendered them both unconscious, but didn't damage their suits. I knelt down beside the prone figure and let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding.

"It's okay," I said, and quickly removed the clamps. Then I put my arms around the shaking victim, and closed my eyes. "Marshall Noriko to Air Lock One. I'm going to need some transport drones out here."

#

"You all right?" Matt asked me while we stood outside the observation viewer two days later. Inside the holding cell, a restless figure paced endlessly.

"No." My voice was raspy; I'd tried to catch up on my sleep. And had failed, miserably. "Why are you still here?"

He folded his arms. "I applied for a transfer."

"Maybe I don't want you working for me, Agent Warren."

"Then I'll get a job working dome maintenance. But I'm not leaving."

I wasn't going to let that ruin my depression. Yet. "Okay."

"Get a confession yet?"

"No."

The evidence, however, had been detailed and condemning. Although the basecore data had been destroyed, I'd found more than enough trophies hidden in the quarters we'd torn apart to prosecute. Along with audio and vids, recording each of the seven murders.

Andy had died quickly, but she'd screamed and fought until the last moment.

"We know it had nothing to do with the smuggling ring," Matt said. "So what was the motive?"

"Sacrifice to Selene, the Greek Goddess of the Moon, in exchange for sexual prowess. The Dagger served as an altar. If you can believe that archaic crap. Auto-erotic asphyxiation, if you don't. I guess the fantasy had to become reality." And a horrible revelation for me. "I should have seen this coming."

"It's not your fault, Holly."

"I didn't say you could call me Holly."

"You shot me." He tapped the bandaged shoulder burn I'd given him. "That puts us on a first-name basis."

I arched a brow. "It does?"

"Among other things." He gave me a slow smile.

"Excuse me?"

We both turned at the sound of that voice. I glowered. "You're supposed to be in bed."

My daughter ignored the viewer and rubbed two of her arms with the other two. "I just woke up, and . . . I didn't want to be alone."

I opened my arms, and Suzu hopped over into them. "Can you hold down the fort for me, Matt?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Holly will do." I took one last look over my daughter's shoulder at the viewer, then turned my back on the pacing image of Doug Lander. "Come on, honey. Let's go home."

The Mandyllion
by S.L. Viehl

Today I was going to hit the unemployment line, and there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it.

"There are three methods I can use," Paul Rosetti said as I got up to hand out the project specs. "Nuclear transfer, synchronization, or telomerac splicing."

I didn't like the executive conference room we occupied -- so large and empty that Paul's voice echoed, and so chilly I had perpetual goose bumps. J.P. O'Neal, the media tycoon who had privately underwritten Paul's research grants for the last ten years, kept all his expensively-furnished offices at blast-freeze temperatures. Part of the perks of being a trillionaire, I guess.

Old Man O'Neal said nothing when I handed him his copy of the specs, but then he never did. I caught myself checking his chest to see if he was breathing. Who could blame me? The guy had to be two hundred years old, minimum.

O'Neal's personal assistant, Richard Colfax, ogled my chest for a second, then flipped through a decade of Paul's research the way he would a copy of Playboy. The discreet, recessed lighting made Colfax's large, bald head gleam.

I didn't like the old man's gopher. Hadn't liked him from the first time he'd hit on me. Colfax hadn't liked me since I'd told him I'd become a lesbian before I'd jump in the sack with him. Over the last decade, we'd spent a great deal of time not liking each other.

"Dr. Rosetti." Colfax tossed the specs on the conference table. "Surely you have determined the most viable technique to utilize for the process."

Paul, who was tall, distinguished, and spent his time winning things like the Nobel prize, remained unruffled. "Nuclear transfer requires an oocyte --"

Dickhead jumped right on that. "Donor egg cells will not be used. Mr. O'Neal was very specific."

I wrote that down on my steno-pad, but knew Paul hadn't forgotten. The "no-egg" rule had been emphasized on practically every page of his appropriation contract. I should know -- he'd made me read it word for word to him while he'd been working on some slimy thing in a petri dish.

"Exactly." My boss sounded amused. "That exclusion also rules out cell synchronization."

Which left telomeric splicing. I made a face. What Paul called "the real bitch" of the trio.

"Explain the splicing procedure," the old man said.

I felt my jaw sag. O'Neal rarely spoke and had never addressed Paul directly. Even Colfax looked surprised.

I saw Paul's expression, and felt sorry for him. Getting a four year old to grasp the intricacies of neurosurgery would have been simpler. Still, he gave it a shot.

"Well, Mr. O'Neal, at the end of each cell's chromosomes are DNA end fragments, or telomeres. They keep the entire DNA strand stable, by --"

"I know what telomeres are, Dr. Rossetti." One of O'Neal's arthritic hands made a jerky, chopping motion. "Explain the telomeric splicing process."

"Be brief," Colfax added. The snort.

My boss did just that, which was pretty amazing, given his subject. Even I didn't understand a quarter of what he said, and I'd been transcribing his notes since project initiation.

What I could follow fascinated me. Since discovering the enzyme telomerase replaced the fragments of DNA lost during cellular replication, geneticists had modified the busy little enzyme to not only repair but recode whole DNA strands. Retrofitting cell chromosomes had become the miracle cure of the twenty-first century. It promised to prevent hereditary diseases, wipe out viral plagues, and extend average life expectancy beyond the 120 year mark.

O'Neal's interest was obvious -- why make fourteen trillion dollars if you can't hang around long enough to spend it?

Once he'd covered the basics, Paul pointed out the pitfalls. "In order to use telomeric splicing, the enzyme must be designed to transform a host cumulus cell into an oocyte. Without ample, workable host cell material, I can't program the enzyme."

"I have the material you need, Dr. Rossetti." O'Neal rose to his feet, using the elegant cane I'd never seen him without. "Colfax will show you to your new lab."

My jaw hit the conference table this time. Here I'd been expecting Paul's grant to be yanked and me handed my walking papers. Now Colfax was going to show us to Paul's "new lab."

O'Neal paused long enough to stare at me. I shut my mouth with a snap. The old man chuckled, shook his head, then shuffled out of the board room.

I looked down. No buttons had popped or anything. What was so damn funny?

O'Neal's assistant handed me Paul's specs file and indicated another door. "After you, Doctor." Colfax glanced back at me. "Ms. Grayson? Are you coming?"

"You'll never know," I muttered as I brushed past him.

#

Paul Rossetti's "new lab" turned out to be just that -- huge, state of the art, stockpiled with everything a genetic engineer dreamed about, and then some. I gave up trying not to gawk like a kid and even played with the electroniscopic scanners for a few minutes. Then I saw something that looked distinctly out of place: a long, extremely dirty, ragged piece of cloth.

"Someone forget a cleaning rag?" I asked Paul, pointing to the filthy thing bundled up on the largest exam table.

My boss smiled at me. "No."

Paul looked a little pale, but then he had this thing about germs. Maybe the rag was making him sick. "I'll get rid of it."

Colfax cleared his throat. "I don't think that will be necessary, Ms. Grayson."

Like I cared what he thought. I walked over to take a look at the table. Yep, it was just a big old dirty rag. If this was the way the sanitation crew was going to handle things, I'd clean the lab myself.

Before I could touch it, Paul gently took my hands in his and squeezed them. "It's okay, Rosie. It's not a rag. It's . . . an artifact."

"An artifact of what?" The bundle of cloth even smelled disgusting. "An ancient Egyptian cleaning service?"

"It is the Mandyion, Ms. Grayson. An *acheiropoietos*." At my uncomprehending glance, he gave me a superior smirk. "Something 'not made by human hands.'"

Human hands may not have made this Mandyion thing, I thought, but they'd certainly wiped up a lot of floors with it. "So maybe could you store your dandelion rag somewhere else?"

"Rosie." Paul sounded strained. "Would you mind running downstairs to get me a sandwich?"

"Of course not." That was weird, too. I usually had to resort to threats of physical violence to get my boss to eat. "Tuna salad okay?"

"Sounds great," Paul stripped off his jacket and went over to the biggest scanner. "Why don't you take your lunch break now, and bring mine back up when you're done?"

Colfax leaned back against one wall and studied my legs like they were his lunch.

"No problem, boss." I wasn't happy about leaving him alone with Dickhead, but I went.

Sixty-seven floors down, I walked in the O'Neal Building cafeteria and ordered sandwiches for both of us. Lunch hour was nearly over, so I found an empty table by the window and sat down to watch Upper Manhattan traffic whiz by.

A couple of men walking by gave me the eye, and I sighed. My blond hair and blue eyes usually snagged plenty of masculine attention, but it was the stuff below my neck they eventually zeroed in on. Like it or not, I was built like a brick laboratory.

One reason I liked working for Paul so much -- he'd never stared at my chest. Or drooled. Or tried to hit on me. Not even once.

At first I'd thought he was gay. Turned out he was utterly devoted to his work. Spent every waking moment researching, experimenting, and recording data. He didn't have hobbies, never took a day off, or gave himself a vacation. The laboratory was his whole world. Not even my chest could compete with that.

I was grateful I wouldn't be hitting the pavement looking for a new job, but this whole business with O'Neal made me feel unsettled. Why the new lab? We'd been working at the O'Neal Institute across town since Paul had hired me.

The sandwich was marginally better than the stuff they served at the Institute, but I had no appetite. Lately Paul had been very secretive, staying at the lab until he fell asleep at his desk, keeping notes instead of having me transcribe them, ordering a bewildering amount of special supplies.

Outside the window, a huge moving truck parked at the curb. A few minutes later, two orderlies I'd seen back at the Institute began unloading large crates out of the back. They were clearly marked "P. Rosetti".

We were really moving in, then.

I didn't want to work in this cold, impersonal tycoon's palace. Being around Colfax was about as appealing as me working on a construction site naked. I knew Paul's research meant a lot, but O'Neal didn't strike me as the benevolent humanitarian type. What exactly was I getting myself into?

Lighten up, Rosie. Paul needs you.

I checked my watch, gathered up the extra sandwich and headed back for the penthouse level.

#

We settled in the new location and over the next few weeks and reestablished our old routine. Paul practically lived in the lab. I brought him coffee, food, and whatever packages came in marked "urgent" or "personal and confidential." I also fielded daily phone calls from Colfax, typed up boxes of Paul's nearly-incomprehensible notes, and kept the filing under control.

It wasn't too bad, but I wore a sweater to work every day.

One afternoon I had to leave early for a doctor's appointment, and went in the lab to remind Paul. He had that dirty roll of cloth spread out on one of the exam tables, and was scrapping something off it.

"Paul."

He didn't stop whatever he was doing. "Not now, Rosie."

"I'm leaving."

That made him stop. He flipped up the magnifier lens from his face and straightened. "You're leaving? Why? Colfax bothering you?"

Ah, he thought I was going to quit. He was so cute. "Just a doctor's appointment." I waved the memo I'd gotten from Personnel. "My routine annual physical."

Paul got that weird look -- the one I'd seen too often since we'd moved into the O'Neal building -- and put a hand on my arm. "Listen, Rosie, I . . ." he paused, and swallowed.

"Relax, I'm not going to quit on you." I spotted the untouched lunch tray I'd brought it and shook my head. "Unless you don't eat. Then I'll definitely walk, and your research will get misfiled by some silly temp, and you'll have to kiss that second Nobel good-bye."

Paul gave me a weak grin. "Okay. I'll eat."

A pungent odor coming from the Mandyllion made my nose wrinkle. The acheiro- whatever it was stank, big time. I frowned when I looked down, and saw the faint pattern of light spots beneath the dirt.

"Paul, what is that thing, anyway?"

"A relic."

I jerked my head around to stare at Colfax. I hadn't heard him come in. Paul dropped his hand from my arm and shuffled around me to the other side of the table.

"Have you been able to harvest the samples?" Colfax asked Paul.

From the rag? I stared down at it. Now I could make out some dark stains smudging the cloth here and there. Soil samples, maybe?

"Yes," Paul said.

"Ick. Make sure you wash your hands before you eat," I said, and rolled my eyes at Paul. "I'd better go, or I'll be late."

I hurried out, but since Dickhead didn't leave I hovered just outside the open lab door. I wanted to know what was going on, and Paul depended on me to run interference.

"Any problems?" Colfax asked.

I jumped when I heard Paul speak in a strained, harsh tone. "A few. Nothing I can't handle."

"Excellent. What have you learned?"

"I've identified seventy-six samples of blood, hair, bone, and saliva. Some iron oxide in a collagen tempera medium where the marks were apparently touched up in antiquity."

"What tests did you use?" Dickhead wanted to know.

"Albumin, bile pigments, cyanmethemoglobin, hemochromogen, porphyrin fluorescence, reflection and micro spectrophotometric transmission." Paul moved something that made a scraping noise. "I confirmed the results with X-ray diffraction, electronisopic scanning, and energy dispersive determination. There's no doubt in my mind. It's human tissue."

"But you doubt the rest."

"No offense, Mr. Colfax," my boss said, "but a similar piece of medieval nonsense was debunked by the best thirty years ago."

"They are quite different, Doctor."

"According to my research, the Mandylyon disappeared when Constantinople was sacked in 1204."

Colfax scoffed. "Your research is in error. A knight named Robert de Clari took it from Constantinople during the Fourth Crusade. He visited Rome before returning to Picardy in 1205. The Mandylyon has been in the Vatican's possession ever since."

So Dickhead could read. Wonders never ceased.

Someone started pacing. I could tell by the rhythm it was Paul. "Mr. O'Neal is deluding himself, Colfax."

"I beg to differ." The guy was begging for a good kick in the crotch, I thought.

"Extensive radiocarbon tests have been performed in Rome and here in the United States, Dr. Rosetti. I assure you it is quite authentic."

"And you believe some . . . celestial process preserved the cellular integrity? After twenty centuries?" Paul laughed. "I think your employer expects me to perform miracles."

"Mr. O'Neal expects you to harvest the genetic material, design the telomerac recoder, and perform the transfer."

"But I --"

"You'll do as you're told, Doctor."

I heard Colfax's footsteps coming toward the door, and took off before he caught me eavesdropping.

What has Paul gotten himself into now?

#

I worried about the conversation all afternoon, until something more troubling came up. According to my doctor, my physical revealed a benign cyst on my cervix that needed to be removed. The gynecologist he referred me to assured me it could be taken care of with one office visit. I made the appointment for the next week and checked with Paul. He didn't act too concerned, but gave me that weird look again.

"Look, if it's a problem, I'll take a vacation day," I said.

"No. As a matter of fact, I'll drive you over and pick you up," my boss said, astounding me.

"That's not necessary, Paul. I know how busy you are, and the doctor said it was a very simple procedure."

He stopped looking at me. "I insist."

My boss was as good as his word. On the day of my appointment, Paul drove me across town in his Mercedes, and even waited in the reception area while I went in.

"Strip to your skin," the nurse said as she handed me one of the large paper towels they pretended was a patient gown.

I took off my clothes and shivered. It was freezing in the procedure room they'd stuck me in. O'Neal probably owned it. The doctor and the nurse returned a few minutes later, and had me stretch out and put my feet in the obligatory stirrups.

"Now, Rose," the doctor said as he prepared a syringe. "I'm going to give you a local, so you won't feel anything. It may make you feel a little sleepy. Just relax, okay?"

A needle. Oh joy. "Sure." I huddled under the paper towel, trying to keep my muscles from tensing as the cold speculum slid into my vagina. I heard the familiar cranking sound, then a hot, sharp pinch deep inside me. "Ouch."

"Almost done." The doctor fiddled with another instrument.

He was right, I did get sleepy. Immediately. My eyelids started to drop, things got fuzzy, then I heard the door open. Someone coming in to watch? I wondered, then thought I saw Paul

Rossetti's silver head over me. No, that wasn't right. My confusion disappeared as I slipped off to dreamland.

The "simple little procedure" wiped me out for a good eighteen hours. I didn't wake up until the next morning, and found I was in my own bed back at my apartment. When I staggered to the phone to call Paul, he told me not to worry, that the doctor said it was a common reaction to the local and I'd be fine.

"How did I get home?" I wanted to know.

Paul told me how he'd been obliged to carry me back down to his car, drive me home, and put me to bed.

Sort of embarrassing to have your boss have to lug your unconscious body around town, I thought, and told Paul that. He didn't comment, so I figured he was as embarrassed as I was.

"Take the rest of the day off," Paul said. "Stay in bed. Watch your soap operas. I'll see you tomorrow."

So I did.

#

Getting the cyst removed was no problem, but I had a bout with the flu a month later. Paul was very understanding when I called in sick. The next week I spent on my knees, hugging the toilet and wishing I was dead. I went back to work as soon as I could, though my stomach never really recovered, and just the smell of coffee could send me running for the Ladies' room.

Paul must have felt sorry for me, because he started hovering. Every time I turned around he was popping out of the lab, wanting to know how I felt. He even got me lunch a few times when I was too busy to make it down the cafeteria.

"You don't have to do this, you know," I said when he brought yet another tray to my desk. It felt nice to be pampered, but having a Nobel-prize winner wait on me was a little ridiculous.

He gave me a fond smile. "I worry about you, Rosie. You still look a little peaked."

"Me?" I snorted. "I'm as healthy as a horse, and you know it. This is just a hangover from that bug I had." It had been awhile, though. "Maybe I should go back to the doctor, see if I need to get a prescription for an antibiotic or something."

Paul's eyes lit up. "I've got an idea, why don't you let me take a blood sample? I can check and see if the virus is still present in your system."

The thought of a needle in my arm made me feel queasy. "Gee, Paul, you don't have to go to all that trouble --"

"No trouble at all, my dear." He went back to the lab, and returned a minute later with a plastic tray filled with empty tubes and needles. Lots of needles.

I swallowed and tried to look brave. "Guess I can't talk you out of this, huh?"

"Only takes a second." He tied a big rubber band around my upper arm. I felt him insert the needle, winced, then watched my blood fill the sample tube.

My face had to be pea-soup green by the time Paul removed the needle. I wondered if puking on a Nobel prize winner would get me fired. Too bad Colfax wasn't around.

He hadn't been around much at all lately, I realized. Guess he'd gotten over his crush on my boobs.

"All done." Paul placed a folded gauze square on inside of my elbow and pressed my fingers to it. "I'll take a look at it right away." Then he disappeared back into his lab.

All this, for a flu bug?

It took a minute for the small puncture to stop bleeding, then I got a Band-Aid from my desk drawer and covered it. "That man is entirely too involved with his microscope."

The telephone on my desk rang. It was Colfax, wanting to speak with Paul. I put him on hold and punched the intercom button. "Boss, the resident anal retentive is on line one for you."

Usually that got me a laugh, but not this time. "Tell him I'll be in his office in a minute, Rosie, will you?"

"Okay." If I wasn't running for the nearest toilet. "Find any ebola viruses floating around in my blood?"

"No." Paul sounded distracted. "No ebola."

He was so preoccupied he rushed out without another word to me. I got up, stretched, and felt my spine protest. Sitting too long, I decided. Might as well straighten up the lab. Paul hadn't let me in there since I'd been sick. I could only imagine what a mess he'd made.

When I walked in, I stood and stared for a minute. It was immaculate. That didn't make sense. My boss was a great scientist, but a complete slob. The ugly mandy-thing he'd been testing had vanished, too.

Was he finished already?

The ache in the small of my back intensified. Maybe Paul had been making notes for me to transcribe. I went over to his desk and started shuffling through the uneven stacks of folders. Paul's handwriting was atrocious, and he refused to learn how to type. His two main reasons, I suspected, for hiring me.

There was an old book laying open next to one of his note pads, and a title caught my eye. The Mandyllion. So he was doing more research. Curious, I picked up the volume and skimmed through the first paragraph.

The Mandyllion was often exhibited to the public, but there are historic accounts that it was folded several times, so that only the head portion was displayed . . . one Roman cardinal's journal detailed the original as a seven-foot length which possessed the impression of the entire naked figure . . .

So that was what had been outlined on that rag. A tall, naked guy. It looked vaguely familiar, but I couldn't quite place where I'd seen it before.

. . . previously unknown evidence of the scourging, the marks of which are consistent with the flagrum taxillatum, the side wound exactly matching the width of known ancient lances. . . the contusion to the left kneecap, shattered nasal cartilage, severe impact damage to the right cheekbone and eye socket . . .

Someone had evidently beaten the crap out of this guy. Maybe he'd run around Constantinople naked.

. . . traces of congealed and fresh blood, as to be expected with the time lapse . . . stain patterns consistent with body movements during the agony of crucifixion . . .

Crucifixion?

Now I knew what the book meant. I saw it every Saturday and Sunday, staring down at me from the altar at St. Joan's. The book fell out of my numb hands and hit Paul's desk with a thump.

The stains weren't just stains. The rag wasn't just a rag. It was a burial shroud. The burial shroud of --

I covered my mouth with one hand. "Jesus."

"Exactly right, Ms. Grayson."

I shrieked, turned around and saw Paul and Dickhead standing just behind me. "Oh, my God! Don't do that!" I pressed a shaky hand to my right breast. "You nearly gave me a heart attack."

"Rosie." Paul looked at the book. "What are you doing in here?"

"Cleaning up, like I used to." I gestured to the book. "Why didn't you tell me about this, Paul?" I shuddered as I thought of how close I'd come to throwing the damn thing away.

Colfax's nose rose an inch or two. "The Mandyllion is priceless, Ms. Grayson."

"Right. Like I'd steal it and take it to my cousin Vinnie to fence." Sweat beaded above my upper lip. Finding a place to sit and calm down became imperative. I stepped away from the desk, but Dickhead blocked my way. "Excuse me."

Colfax didn't move. "Mr. O'Neal would like to speak with you, Ms. Grayson."

I glanced at Paul. "Am I in trouble?"

Paul started to say something, then bent down to pick up the book. He wouldn't look at me.

I couldn't think of what I'd done, but I wasn't going to let Paul suffer because I'd gotten nosy. "All right. Let's go see Mr. O'Neal."

#

O'Neal was waiting, not in the conference room, but in a large office I'd never been in before. His office, I decided, appraising the expensive furniture and exquisite paintings on the wall. He was a Catholic, judging from the number of crucifixes he had displayed. A devotee.

Odd. He must have missed Sunday school the day they had the lesson about the meek inheriting the earth.

"Ms. Grayson." The old man waved me to a chair in front of his desk. Behind him was a breathtaking view of Manhattan. I sat down. "I'm glad you could stop by."

I was glad I was in a chair. My back was killing me, and I felt like I was getting my period. The flu had screwed that up, so it was about time. "You run the place. So what, am I fired?"

O'Neal startled me by chuckling. "No, my dear."

Colfax appeared next to me, and handed the old man a file folder. "Ms. Grayson's personnel record, sir."

"Thank you, Dick." The old man set the folder down, opened it, and peered at the contents. "Let's see, you're thirty-two, Rose Marie, and never been married."

"Rosie, please." I didn't care how much money O'Neal had, *nobody* called me Rose Marie.

O'Neal closed the file and reeled off more facts. "No dependents or living relatives. No marriages. No regular boyfriend. Not much to show for thirty-two years, Ms. Grayson."

That hurt, worse than my back. My smile faded. I didn't need O'Neal's opinion of my life. "What's your point?"

The old man got up slowly and walked around the desk. He stood, half-bent over from his arthritis, and stared at one of the big crucifixes. "Like you, I'm a Catholic, Ms. Grayson. Most of my life has been spent making my fortune. I knew the day would come when I could properly show my devotion to God."

He certainly had enough money now. Maybe he should build a cathedral or something. "That's nice."

"My mother thought I had the calling to become a priest."

"Mine wanted me to be a nun." I glanced down at my chest. "When I hit eleven, I figured I'd never fit into one of those habits."

O'Neal gave me a dry smile. "So we both disappointed our mothers."

"Maybe you did. Mom was relieved I didn't become a stripper." From the way my belly was cramping, I needed to make this fast. Very fast. "May I be excused for a moment?"

"Shortly, Ms. Grayson. I need to explain something to you. I founded this corporation, and many, many others like it. They provided the means to achieving my ultimate goal."

I squirmed in my chair, positive I was going to leave a nasty stain on the brocaded upholstery. "Um, Mr. O'Neal, I really need to --"

He went on like he hadn't heard me. "I've finally attained my goal, Ms. Grayson. I must admit, it was done without your consent, but when you understand the incredible opportunity I've give you, I feel certain you will see this through."

Without my consent? What exactly had he given me? "I beg your pardon?"

He beamed at me. "Young lady, you will make history."

The old guy must be getting senile, I thought. "I'm sorry, sir, but I haven't the slightest idea of what you're talking about. And now I have to go. This flu bug is --"

"You don't have the flu, Rose Marie. You're pregnant."

Pregnant?

I must have said it, because O'Neal grinned like a kid in a toy store. "Your son will change the world."

Pregnant. Me. I hadn't had sex in years. The few times I had were a vague memory at best. Then it all come crashing down on me, and I struggled to my feet.

Harvesting material. Transferring material. From the Mandylion -- into me.

"Paul wouldn't --" The back pain flared to a white-hot burst of agony. I grabbed the back of the chair. I couldn't breathe.

"Dr. Rosetti created the clone cell from DNA harvested from the Mandylion Shroud. You carry it in your body, Ms. Grayson."

The doctor's appointments. That stinging, pinching sensation. Paul leaning over me. Waking up eighteen hours later. They'd duped me. Drugged me. Implanted a baby in my body.

Not a baby. A clone.

O'Neal's Jesus clone.

I tottered toward the door, gasping, my arms cradling my burning abdomen. Colfax caught me by the arms, and supported me as I doubled over. Something wet and warm ran down my thighs. My sluggish brain processed this without the slightest bit of embarrassment.

I'd either wet myself, or I was hemorrhaging.

At a distance I vaguely heard O'Neal screaming at Dickhead. "She's bleeding! Get Rosetti!"

I was hemorrhaging.

Pain kept me dazed and immobile for a time. Staying conscious required every ounce of my concentration. I was picked up, carried out, placed on a gurney.

Someone had called 911. I drifted in and out as they loaded me into the ambulance. In the emergency room, I watched as my clothes were stripped off. My heels placed in stirrups. Cold, trembling hands performed a pelvic examination.

Paul leaned over me. "Rosie? Can you hear me?"

That woke me up. "You bastard." I stared up at my boss's masked face. "How could you?"

"Hold on, Rosie, I --" He closed his eyes for a second. "I am so sorry."

#

Two months later, I was standing in the unemployment line when Paul Rosetti walked up to me. He wore a creased suit and needed a shave and a haircut. His color looked terrible, like he hadn't eaten or slept for days.

Good, I thought. Maybe the heartless son of a bitch will drop dead.

O'Neal had fired me, of course. As soon as I'd been discharged from the hospital, I'd gone to the police -- fat lot of good that did. No one believed my story. O'Neal's money took care of the rest. The general consensus of opinion was I needed to get a life. Or extensive therapy.

"Hello, Rosie."

I was tempted to start screaming, accusing him of groping me, anything to get him arrested. See what the Nobel committee thought of that. "Paul. O'Neal give you a pink slip, too? Or are you still impregnating helpless, oblivious women?"

That got the attention of everyone standing within earshot.

"I've been fired. O'Neal didn't like the conclusions of my forensic report."

He referred to the autopsy he'd performed on the child. My child. "What a pity. Get the hell away from me."

"There's a reason you miscarried, Rosie. The fetus wasn't viable."

I didn't need unemployment this badly, so I turned and walked out of the building.

"Rosie. Rosie!" He caught up with me, paced me for a minute, then pulled me to a halt. "Rosie, listen to me."

My temper exploded. "How could you do it, Paul? How could you treat me like one of your damn lab rats?"

He paled, but he didn't back off. "It was wrong to implant the cells in your body. I know that now. But would you have agreed if I'd ask?"

"No. That's why you go and get test volunteers, Paul. Because they're willing."

"O'Neal wanted a specific type of woman." Paul sighed. "You fit the bill perfectly. And I thought, being Catholic, you'd --"

I slapped him, hard. Then I walked away.

"Rosie, please. Just listen." He followed me. I ignored him. "Rosie, there's more you need to know."

More what? Had they done something else to me? I whirled around. "What?"

"I discovered why the clone wouldn't properly develop in your body. I didn't check the original cumulus cell's telomeres. They were too short. The enzyme I developed couldn't recode the second cell's DNA properly."

"Congratulations. Get away from me."

"Rosie, don't you understand what that means?"

"Sure. You're incompetent as well as an asshole."

"The original cells I harvested were already damaged, Rosie." Paul's gaze went from my face to a distant point on the horizon. "The cumulus telomeres could only be shortened by one process. They'd already been cloned."

"I get it." I let out a bitter laugh. "Someone beat you to it. What's wrong? O'Neal hire him to replace you?"

"He'd have a tough time doing that." My former boss gave me a haunted smile. "Seeing as the cells were originally cloned over two thousand years ago."

Scratch Fever
by S.L. Viehl

"Excuse me?"

Leandra Jodan glanced up at the thin form standing on the other side of the quarantine barrier. The woman looked timid, but there were sweat patches under her arms, and a familiar ring of pea-sized blisters circled her lips.

Far from harmless.

"Good morning." Leandra closed the file on her desk and smiled politely. Would this one try to punch a hole in the plas wall between them? Security was getting tired of repairing the cracks. "May I help you?"

"I can get stuff here, they told me," the dying woman said. "Something that'll keep me from going crazy."

They'd lied to her. "Have a seat, please. This will only take a minute."

Leandra's job was to scan the patient's vitals, locate her chart on the national database, and record the pertinent data. Not that there was any question as to the diagnosis. The woman had a well-established case of felidae lymphatic toxoplasmosis.

Because the plas barrier prevented any contact with the patient, Leandra programmed the lobby drone's extensor attachment to administer an appropriate amount of Valumine. The tranquilizer wouldn't slow the infection, but would keep the woman from becoming too violent until she descended into the third stage, when the virus began destroying her brain.

Then nothing would help.

"Those people outside." The woman nodded toward the viewer. "They say you got cats in here."

"Yes, we do."

The patient looked under her seat, cautiously, as if expecting a feline to jump out at her. "Why are you people fiddling with them?"

"We're studying them."

"The crazies say they're gonna get them away from you." A blister popped as the corners of her mouth bent. Opaque fluid dribbled from it down her chin. "I don't know why they'd bother. Everyone's got it now, don't they?"

Nearly everyone in North America had been infected, but the National Center for Disease Regulation hadn't made that information public yet. So the KIAs were now planning to storm the facility. Wouldn't that make the assistant director happy.

All she could offer the woman was a paraphrased version of Alec's mandate. "We need the cats to help us create an inoculant, and find a cure."

Tears spilled over the woman's ruined cheeks. "There's no cure."

Leandra resisted the urge to agree. The drone pressed the infuser against the patient's forearm, making the woman jump. "This will only take a minute to start working, and I promise you'll feel better."

"No, I won't," the woman said. More pustules broke as she pressed a hand to her face. "I've got scratch fever. I know I'm gonna die."

Leandra quickly signaled an orderly, who appeared moments later in full envirosuit to escort the weeping patient from the Immunization Clinic. She waited until she was alone before she notified the Security Supervisor on duty and related the woman's comment.

"Sorry, Ms. Jodan." The broad face on her display didn't appear sorry at all. He looked tired, and pissed-off. "Can't help you. Keeping the grid operational and securing the outpatient entrance takes every man and drone I've got."

Not enough men, too many security issues, forget about the crazies. Same old song. "Perhaps you could request assistance from the local authorities?"

"What local authorities?" Before she could respond, he terminated her signal from his end.

Gee, thanks for reassurance.

Leandra stared at the blank screen, then ground the heels of her hands against her eyes. She was tired, too. It had been over two months since she'd left the facility. No one went home anymore; conditions outside were too dangerous. Not like she had much reason to go back to her empty apartment. What relatives she had were already dead. Crook was long gone.

Would the KIAs break in? Or would FLT beat them to it? Either way, the staff's lives were at risk.

Will I die here?

She sedated a dozen more infected outpatients that morning before AD Elias Shore stopped by her desk.

"Good morning, Dr. Shore."

He went to the exterior viewer and opened the observation panel. "Looks like the KIAs are out in full force today."

Leandra glanced at the demonstrators outside the viewer. FLT hadn't made much of a dent in their numbers yet. Lately the original picketers had been whipping the angry mob into constant hysteria -- when they weren't busy attacking each other, ripping off their clothes, or screeching obscenities at trees. "One of the patients said they might try to get in here."

"That's why Security carries pulse rifles."

"But it isn't their fault," Leandra reminded him.

"It isn't ours, either." The Assistant Director left the window and came to stand over her desk. He was good at that, but then one of his favorite hobbies was intimidating lesser mortals. The scent of his after shave, a pungent synthetic musk, enveloped her. "Any word from the NCDR yet?"

The same thing he asked her every morning. "No, I'm sorry, sir."

"This is ridiculous." Yesterday he said it was becoming *ludicrous*. The day before that it was *getting ridiculous*. The AD needed a thesaurus. "Have you seen Dr. Galen?"

"No, I haven't, sir." That was the truth.

"When he checks in, have him signal me."

Leandra hadn't seen Alec Galen since he'd received that last transmission from the National Center for Disease Regulation, more than a week ago. "Yes, sir."

He glared through the viewer one last time. "Idiots. Don't they realize how important the test specimens are?"

"They're not rational." Leandra could sympathize with them. Considering the hefty chunk of humanity wiped out by FLT in the past six months, it was a miracle there was anyone sane left on the continent.

"Morons. They'd rather get the cats than have us find a cure." Shore swiveled around to enter the main corridor, and on the way knocked her grav-supports askew. "Signal me when you see Galen." Out he went, the hem of his white jacket flapping behind him.

Leandra's eyes felt as heavy and dry as old marbles. She hadn't slept much since Alec Galen had disappeared, and knew she couldn't keep covering for him. Shore and the others were getting suspicious. Half the staff was gone. The epidemic had advanced around the globe.

Everyone was out of time.

She punched in Alec's home number on her console and listened to the drone response. Dr. Alec Galen was not at his residence. Would the caller care to leave a signal? She bit her lip, then enabled the audio record.

"Dr. Galen, this is Leandra Jodan from the facility." *God, Alec, where are you? Are you dead? How much longer can I keep this up?* "Please signal me as soon as you receive this."

Something smashed into the outer viewer panel; the sound made her jerk in her seat. She disconnected the call, planted her hands on her desk, and pushed her half-dead body upright. Shore's carelessness forced her to grope for her only means of mobility.

"I swear." She finally reached one support, and used it to limp over and retrieve its twin. "He probably does it on purpose."

#

Access to every point in the facility had finally been established. They traveled in absolute silence, using the maintenance corridors, the air conditioning ducts, undetected, unimpeded. They were to watch and do nothing. Occasionally they communicated through nonverbal means to share information.

How many in Research lab?

Twenty.

Do they suspect we are here?

They shall discover us.

No. Their leader was calm, emphatic. *We're almost ready, and then it won't matter if they do.*

Shall we kill them?

We shall try to save them first.

#

Leandra Jodan had been one of the last victims of retropolio before the cure had been discovered back in '12. Millions of other children had been saved, just as they had a half century before the original virus had mutated.

Unfortunately the cure had come several months too late for Leandra. Nothing could be done to repair the damage to her spinal cord. The grav-supports she used to walk would never replace her paralyzed legs, but kept her from the strength-sapping confines of a glide-chair.

She liked the pretense of still being able to walk. Sometimes she could even forget for a few moments that she was nerve-dead from the waist down.

Losing her mobility to disease had led Leandra to study epidemiology. She'd applied to the Enders Institute as soon as she achieved her SciTech nursing degree. The chance of working with Alec Galen, the doctor who had created the RP inoculant, had been a dream come true.

"I should have found it faster, Leandra," the big Irishman had said the first time they'd met. "Feel free to bash me with one of those supports of yours whenever you like."

Leandra figured that was the exact moment she'd fallen in love in Alec.

"Butchers! Cold-blooded murderers!" a young man outside the viewer shouted at her. He appeared to have the classic second-stage symptoms: swollen lymph nodes, the inevitable blisters. Some moderate hair loss where he'd pulled hanks of it out with his own hands. She knew his brain had already begun to swell; that he'd descend into full-blown psychosis in twelve hours, and die screaming in thirty-six.

An older woman beside him had the less severe, first-stage signs. She had a week, perhaps two before she'd begin the encephalitic plunge into madness. She launched another rock at the plas defense screen, and bared her teeth in frustration as it bounced off without making a dent. A trembling, blistered hand raised and pointed at Leandra. "Bitch! Give us the cats!"

Alec used to joke about the protests. "No taking bribes from the KIAs, Lea. Unless you give me half, of course."

"Give me a break." She turned her back on the window and hobbled across the office to the lab entrance.

Entering the sterile environment only took a few moments for a mobile person. Leandra's awkward gait and inability to stand without her supports made the process more time-consuming. It took at least ten minutes for her to bioscan, decon and suit up. By the time the green light lit on the interior console, frustration had her grinding down her molars.

If I could just walk. Not run, not dance, not jump -- just move my legs in one direction. That would be enough.

The automated unit gave her a final retinal scan, then the Main Research drone asked for voice identification. An additional safeguard, in the event someone had pulled an eyeball out of her skull to gain access to the facility. Not quite as far-fetched a thought as it had been six months ago.

"Jodan, Leandra, nurse intern," she said. The door panel slid open, and she shuffled over the threshold into the central access corridor.

The Enders Institute had been founded at the turn of the century, when the AIDS virus had mutated into an airborne pathogen and world panic poured billions into research coffers. In the twenty-five years since AIDS-A had been wiped out, Enders and other research facilities had become indispensable in the ongoing war against new viral plagues.

Infectious felidae anemia had erupted at the same time as AIDS-A. No one had paid much attention. Pet owners had been appalled by the baffling ferocity brought on by the disease. None of the cats died, but became so feral they were no longer pets. Many owners had actually set their animals free, which eventually spread the IFA virus among all felines, domestic and wild.

Leandra remembered when Crook had shown the first signs. They'd been sitting on the couch, watching the latest Ricky Martin retrospective. The half-crippled old silver tabby she'd found raiding her garbage cans the year before had started to shake. When Lea had stroked his pelt, he'd hissed and jumped off her lap to limp off and hide.

That had been the last time he'd let her touch him. Lucky for Leandra.

She'd managed to lure Crook into his carrier and took him to the vet. He'd made the diagnosis with a simple blood test, and recommended Lea turn her pet over to a research facility.

"There's only been a half-dozen cases of this IFA so far," the vet said. "Your cat could save thousands of others."

Lea knew exactly what the doctors would do to poor Crook, and she couldn't bear the thought of it. She'd shaken her head and taken Crook home. He'd howled and spat when she'd placed his carrier on the ground outside the back door, and opened the latch.

"Stay or go, pal. Your choice."

Crook had staggered out, snarled at her, then hobbled off. She hadn't seen him since, and it had broken her heart. Later, after the transmission of FLT had been linked back to the IFA-infected cats, she'd suffered from terrible guilt.

How many cats had Crook infected? How many people?

"Jodan?"

Startled, Leandra looked up to see another envirosuited figure at the end of the corridor change direction to intercept her path. She didn't wait to see the face behind the dark shield -- she'd have known that pretty, petulant voice anywhere.

"Yes, Dr. Kent?"

The young scientist planted herself in front of Leandra. "Where in God's name is Alec?" Not again. "Have you tried his office?"

"Yes, and he isn't there, as usual." Dr. Kent's voice rose an octave. "Damn it, I've got a live monitor to do in three minutes. You find Galen and tell him he's needed in Specimen Storage. Something's bunged up with the test animals. We haven't gotten any of our allotment yet."

Alec had never liked Vicki Kent. She was too fond of using a taz-stick to maim and kill the cats she worked with. He'd tried, several times, to convince the other scientists to use noninvasive research techniques, to no avail.

"Will do." Leandra already knew her clearance would get her back into Storage. Unlike the other staff members, she hadn't avoided all unnecessary contact with the test animals. Sometimes she wondered if she wasn't deliberately courting infection, to make up for what she'd done. "Can I tell him what the problem is?"

"I don't know." The other woman frowned. "I sent four requests for specimens yesterday, and none of them were delivered this morning. Tell him to deal with it, will you?"

#

A small skirmish involving two of the abusers who'd inadvertently encountered the raiders was quickly resolved. The bodies were dragged from where they had fallen and were hidden. That had caused a small commotion among the group.

We should kill them all. Now.

No.

Several were distressed by this. One approached the leader. *It should be done before these two are missed.*

Under the circumstances, any insubordination had to be dealt with harshly, or there would be instant chaos. *Do you challenge me?*

The bold follower immediately backed down. *No.*

With a single blow, the leader killed him anyway. *Any other challengers? No one blinked. Excellent. We shall continue as planned.*

#

Leandra walked slowly down the corridor, eyeing each vacant room as she passed the open plas doors. Half the team had already come down with the fever, which barred them from working in the facility. All it took was one scratch, and the virus entered the bloodstream. The test cats did a lot of scratching, too. No matter how often the scientists used drones to protect themselves, at least one person per week was infected.

She already knew she wasn't going to find Alec in any of them. Could she possibly fix whatever problem had cropped up with the allocation unit?

She knew she was virtually invisible to the research staff; one reason she was able to gain access to most areas without being questioned. Still, she had never done more than look in on the cats. They had always reacted to the sight of her, or anyone else, with the same savage ferocity.

It's that or tell them Alec's missing.

At last she reached the door panel, and placed her glove on the ID screen. It wasn't secured, and a moment later the door panel slid open.

Instead of the usual cacophony, there was utter silence. It unnerved Leandra -- could they all be dead? -- then an image of Alec's handsome, smiling face coalesced behind her eyes. Dr. Kent would definitely cause trouble for him if she didn't get her specimens. She forced herself to cross the threshold. Her eyes widened as she saw row after row of containers.

"Oh, God!"

Leandra shuffled forward, nearly losing her grip on the supports as she worked her way further into the storage unit. She prodded several containers aside with one support to check behind them, yet found nothing.

They were all empty.

#

Eyes watched as another abuser moved through the storage section. This one was different from the others. Unable to move without the supports, awkward and clumsy.

Easy to kill.

Shall we take her?

The clustered watchers shuffled restlessly. Scratch fever had released a primal, predatory conscience among them; they wanted to launch themselves, tear at her flesh, lap at her blood.

Not her.

The silent command was obeyed. Still they watched her move with hungry eyes.

Come. It's time to see to the others.

#

The small hairs on the back of her neck rose, and Leandra jerked around, certain she'd been discovered, or worse, was about to be attacked by a pack of feral cats.

Nothing was there.

"KIAs." She released the seals on her helmet and pulled it off. "Damn it." The protesters must have somehow gotten into the compound. They'd be the only ones crazy enough to take the cats. She put her helmet on top of one of the empty containers before accessing the section control panel.

"Specimen Storage," the drone audio said. "Please input identification and allocation requirement."

"No allocation required." Rapidly she keyed in Alec's personal access code. "Identify quantity and current allocation of all test specimens."

"Working." The console hummed. "Current test specimen inventory count is five hundred fourteen, Dr. Galen. No present allocations."

"Bullshit." She rapped her fingers over the keypad and manually input the inquiry. The display screen silently displayed the same information. Five hundred and fourteen cats, all unaccounted for. Sweat beaded on her brow as she imagined them all prowling some part of the facility.

"The collars!" All the specimens had been collared with identification chips that doubled as locators. "Track ID chip frequencies for unallocated test specimens and identify current location."

"Working." The console's panel fell silent, then the drone came back on line. "Five hundred fourteen specimens are located in food storage, Dr. Galen."

Leandra wished the damn thing would stop calling her that, but she had used Alec's code. "Where is that?"

The console displayed a floor plan and highlighted a large vault at the back of the storage area. Leandra paused long enough to pull her helmet back on and grab a taz-stick before she worked her way back through the labyrinth of containers to the appropriate door panel.

If I open it and they attack, I'll be torn to shreds, she thought. The envirosuit was designed to withstand contamination, not claws and teeth. *On the other hand, if I don't look in there and the cats are loose, we're all kitty food. Or crazies in the making.*

She switched on the taz-stick. If anything came at her, she could knock it away. Momentary contact with the electrically-charged shaft would stun even the largest feline.

But it wasn't just one cat. It was five hundred and fourteen of them . . .

"Engage main door panel emergency bolster," she called back to the console, and waited until she heard the tempered titanium shield slide in place. "Send a signal apprising Main Research Console of this inquiry session in two minutes, unless canceled by my voice command."

"Acknowledged."

She opened the access port to the door panel controls, and set it to manually open an inch at a time. Holding her breath, she began to slide the panel to one side, peering around the edge and holding the crackling taz-stick in front of her.

No sound. No movement. No cats.

Now the door panel was nearly half-open, and she managed to squeeze her body into the gap. The interior section was dark, and she groped for the light panel. A sudden flood of dazzling white blinded her for a few moments. Then her vision cleared, and the taz-stick fell from her nerveless fingers.

Five hundred and fourteen empty collars lay in a heap in the center of the floor.

That was when all the lights went out.

#

"Oh, God, oh God," she said, and pulled herself out of the door panel. Now they were after the staff. She had to get help, find some kind of weapon --

"Leandra?"

That sounded like Alec, she thought wildly, then shook her head. No, she was hysterical. Alec was gone, dead or soon to be. She had to get a grip, or --

"Lea, where are you?"

It was Alec. "Dr. Galen?" She limped toward the sound of his voice. Something small brushed against her leg, and she shrieked. "The cats! Alec, they're loose! Get out of here!"

"It's okay, Lea. Hold on."

Strong hands latched on to her arms. She smelled Alec's familiar scent, and nearly collapsed against him in relief. Almost at once she stiffened as she realized he wasn't wearing an envirosuit.

"Alec -- Dr. Galen -- you're not protected. You have to suit up, the cats, the KIAs must have gotten in here --" she was babbling, and Alec gave her a small shake.

"Settle down, Leandra."

Somehow she had to make him understand. "They're called Kill Infectious Animals for a reason, Alec. The specimens must be dead. Or maybe they got loose when the KIAs tried to kill them. Until we know for sure --"

"Trust me, the situation is under control." Alec put his arm around her waist. "Come with me now."

Numb from the shock, she let him lead her to the door panel. There he stopped.

"Disengage emergency door panel bolsters," Alec said.

The door panel slid open. The outer corridor was shrouded in darkness, too.

"How did they get to the compound generators?" Leandra knew that section was only accessible by coded entry -- and only a handful of people had the code.

"An inside job?" Alec said.

"Do you think so?" Leandra stumbled, and he kept her from falling. The sound of her supports scraping along the floor and the drag of her legs only added to her frustration. "Alec, leave me here, I'm only slowing you down. You have to go and help the others --"

"I'm not leaving you alone, Leandra." His hands released the seals on her helmet, and she was too shocked to protest. "Don't worry. I'll keep you safe."

"From five hundred plus infectious cats?" She knew she sounded incredulous. Was he infected? Out of his mind? "How?"

He chuckled. "I've found a cure for the virus, Lea."

"You did? You found the cure?" Her eyes rounded, and she laughed with weak relief. "Oh, Alec, I knew you'd do it!"

His arm tightened briefly, then he gave her a gentle nudge. "We have a lot to do. Let's go."

The faint sound of someone screaming made her jerk, and she nearly lost her balance. The shriek abruptly faded. "God, what are they doing?"

"It's all right, Leandra. We'll deal with them."

Alec guided her down the corridor to the main research access door. Along the way Leandra was almost positive she felt three more cats brush past her legs, and shuddered each time. Yet nothing leapt at her or made a sound.

"Here we are." She heard Alec key in the access code, then he helped her over the threshold.

"You'd better secure that door," she said. "This may be the only uncontaminated section in the compound now."

He guided her around something. "I want you to sit here" -- he carefully eased her down onto a work stool -- "and wait for me. Okay?"

"Where are you going?"

From the sound of his voice, he was already walking away. "I'll be right back. Stay put."

Unable to see a hand in front of her face, Leandra waited. Alec had a cure; everything would be okay. That young KIA protester she'd seen wouldn't be dead in three days, he'd live, they'd all live --

Something jumped on her back, and bit her neck.

Leandra screamed, flung herself forward, and hit the floor. No, not the floor. Something big. Motionless. Bony.

The scent of pungent musk and blood filled her nose.

"Dr. Shore?" Leandra yanked off her gloves and groped along the inert form. Her fingers sank into a mass of shredded flesh, and she snatched them back.

Something long and heavy pressed down on Leandra's shoulders, holding her on top of Shore. She shrieked as sharp teeth sank into the other side of her neck. Was it one of the panthers? The teeth were like needles, digging deep into her flesh. She froze, terrified that any movement might provoke it to tear out what it was biting.

Warmth flowed down into the collar of her envirosuit. At last the teeth eased out of her flesh, and the weight left her shoulders. Still she didn't dare move.

"Stay away from me!"

It was Dr. Kent, and she ran past Leandra, shouting the same words over and over. There was a thud. A final, horrendous wail. A thick, liquid tearing sound. Silence.

We're all dead, Lea thought dully. The cats will tear us and the KIAs to pieces before Alec can stop them.

"Leandra."

Hands pulled her from Shore's body, and she clutched at the familiar form. "Alec? Wait, no." She tried to push away. "Don't -- I'm bleeding."

"The lights are coming on now." He moved around her, supporting her from behind as the overhead optics blinked back on.

One glance and she immediately wished they'd stayed off.

There were bodies all around her. Dr. Shore had no face left. She swallowed hard against rising bile as she spotted Dr. Kent's body. The cats had decapitated her, among other

things. Leaning back against Alec for support, she raised a shaking hand to her neck. Her own blood painted her fingers. She stared at it, then felt her eyes round as a small lynx casually padded up to her.

"Alec." Her voice became a tight, panicked whisper. "There's a cat in front of me."

"Don't be afraid."

Incredibly, the lynx sat a few inches away from them and began calmly licking the blood from its paws.

Don't be afraid? He wasn't making sense. "Where are the KIAs? Did the cats kill them, too?"

"No, the humans are still outside."

The humans?

Alec's hands held her firmly as she tried to turn around and look at him. "Watch now."

Another cat joined the lynx. A bobcat, Leandra thought. Two calicos came from the opposite direction. She trembled as more felines streamed toward her. None of them tried to attack. They all simply sat or reclined on the floor, as tame as any house cat had ever been before the virus.

A familiar, ragged-eared form padded around the group, and Lea flinched at the sight.

"Crook?"

He looked up at her with his haughty green eyes, and presented himself at her feet.

Leandra slowly bent, her blood-streaked hand trembling as she reached down.

Crook rubbed his head against her palm.

Alec urged her back up. She couldn't stop staring at the cats, they were all there now, all five hundred and fourteen. Persians. Calicoes. Bobtails. The smaller, former domesticates sat in the front. Behind them were the wild felines taken from zoos. Panthers. Ocelots. Jaguars. Tigers. At the very back, a pair of lions.

None of them appeared to be in a bad mood. Which simply wasn't possible.

"Alec." Her entire body shook. "How . . . ?"

"Do you remember the last transmission from the NCDR?" She nodded. "My research worked. The recombined DNA, once transferred from feline to human cells, eliminated the final two stages of the disease. But there was a side effect."

"Side effect?"

"The NCDR told me to destroy the serum."

"Destroy it?" She knew she sounded like a parrot, but the sight of all the cats kept her mesmerized. "Why?"

"It caused the human DNA to mutate, Lea. That's the tradeoff for the cure."

"But the only way to know human DNA would mutate is --"

"Yes. You see, I was scratched the day before I got the signal. So I had no choice but to inject myself."

"Alec, I don't understand."

"Neither did I, until I saw the full effect of the mutation process." He turned her slowly around. His pupils were vertical slits. A shimmering pelt of dark hair covered his skin.

All of his skin.

"You turned into . . . a cat."

"Half-cat." He grinned, and the fangs sprouting from his gums glittered. He gently touched her neck. "I'm sorry if I hurt you." His hand slid down. "I had to mark you as mine."

Leandra felt her mouth sag. Alec was touching her breast. His scent changed, became more intense. Her teeth clicked together when he bent and ran his tongue along her jaw line. It felt rough and rasped over her skin.

"Alec." She placed a hand on his chest. Took a step back. Tried to remember how to inhale. "There's more, isn't there?"

"I can communicate with the cats."

"By meowing?"

He grinned. "Let me demonstrate." He concentrated for a moment, and the entire group of cats quickly lined up in several perfect rows. Like soldiers, Lea thought.

Alec's own personal army.

"Is this your doing, then?" Lea gestured at the dead bodies around them.

"They wouldn't take the serum." Alec looked sadly at his dead colleagues. "I offered it to all of them. They refused. Then they attacked us."

Us. Leandra closed her eyes. "You didn't offer it to me."

"I wasn't going to tell you until after I'd injected you."

"What changed your mind?"

"You deserve a choice." He touched the wound on her neck, his cat-eyes narrowing.

"Not that you have much to choose from."

"I guess I don't." She'd either take the serum, or go crazy and die. Not a real complicated decision.

"It's not as bad as you think, Lea. Look at Crook's hind leg."

As if ordered to, Crook broke formation to parade back and forth in front of her. The twisted back left leg that once caused him to limp was now straight, and appeared to work perfectly.

Lea looked down at her own powerless limbs. "You don't owe me a pair of legs, Alec."

"As it happens, I do."

Leandra looked into his inhuman eyes, and suddenly everything seemed very simple.

"Will I look like you?" She touched his cheek. The hair was silky and soft.

"Yes." He pulled open his shirt to show her the dense, black fur covering his chest.

Wicked-looking talons sprouted from the ends of his fingers. "We'll keep evolving, you know. Until we become the dominant felines on the planet."

That was better than dead. "And the KIAs? What about them?"

His smile disappeared. "They want to kill us all."

"Enough people have died, Alec." She thought for a moment. "How long does it take until the first signs of the mutation appear?"

"Two weeks. Why?"

Now she smiled.

#

The dying man crept into the half-open door panel, and was startled to see the young blond woman sitting behind the desk. She looked up with a calm expression.

"Good afternoon. Won't you have a seat, please?" She shuffled some files to one side and took out a vial of amber serum from her desk drawer.

"I'm here to kill all the cats," he said, giving her a menacing snarl.

"I'm afraid they've gotten loose and escaped. You'll need to have the new scratch fever inoculant if you want to chase go after them." She filled a syrinpress. Now that the plas wall had been removed, it was much simpler to do her job. "Sit down, please. This will only take a minute."

Rule Number One
by S.L. Viehl

There are three rules in my business. **Rule Number One: Always Keep the Customers Happy.**

First thing the Terrans who come through here want to know is how I got started. Starvation, I say, and they laugh and think I'm joking. Too bad they weren't around on Trellus-6 twenty years ago, when the Hsktskt stopped by for a visit. Bet they wouldn't have been chuckling then.

My parents, along with most of the other colonists, were killed. Survivor kids like me had a hard time for a while. We bartered what tech we had with passing traders, but it wasn't much. Other species moved in, put the squeeze on us. Then a couple of missionaries landed, set up the Shelter, and offered training in another form of trade.

Some of the new transfers look down their noses at me. Like I care. Mercy House provides a service to the colony on Trellus, as well as passing travellers. A very valuable one, I might add. I may be the most infamous Terran in the quadrant, but I'm also the richest.

Does that make me lazy? On the contrary. I earn every credit. You sure can't do that sitting on your ass. Not in this business. Take the last time we got raided, for example . . .

That morning I'd just staggered over to my prep unit to dial up a cup of coffee when my business manager Cataced stomped in. Didn't even bother to use the panel chime. He was that pissed.

"Cat." I yawned and scratched the back of my scalp. He looked ready to quit on me. "What's got your membranes in a knot?"

"I quit. I fucking quit, Mercy."

Did I know him, or what? "You can't, Cat. I've got five ore-hauler crews coming in tonight."

"That's your problem." Cataced's an Omorr, with meter-long prehensile gildrells bearding his mouth. They spoiled the full effect of the ferocious scowl he gave me. "Not mine."

He might be big, mean, and muscular, but I wasn't impressed. Remember, I survived the Hsktskt. "So tell me my problem."

He let it out in a rush. "Kohbi's started cocooning again, Heesel and Yadara got sloshed last night and impregnated each other, and the new girl tried to eat the sanitation crew." He regained control, and got all dignified and Omorr on me. "I have had enough."

Poor Cat. He always took this stuff so personally. Omorr have an extremely acute sense of responsibility. Makes them great business managers. When they weren't being a satellite-sized pain in the ass, that is.

I needed more coffee. Some analgesics. A couple of ear plugs.

Rule Number Two: Business comes first.

"Okay, okay." I stripped, pulled out my day tunic and yanked it over my head. "I'll handle it."

"You'll handle it?" His gildrells turned into straight spokes of outrage. "Weren't you listening to me? I said --"

"Come on." I shoved my toes into my footgear and grabbed his arm. "And stop yelling, I'm getting a migraine." I hauled him out of my quarters and down the central corridor.

Walking through the House always gave me a sense of smug satisfaction. After I'd completed my training at the Shelter, I'd won the place from the previous owner, a Rilken hustler who'd tried to cheat me in a game of whump-ball. Big mistake. I'd been sharking whump-tables with traders long before the little bastard had even hatched.

Once I'd had the House thoroughly deconned -- Rilkens might be small, but Christ, they are slob -- I remodelled, set up the rooms, hired a group of Shelter graduates, and opened for business. The credits had never stopped coming since.

Kohbi's quarters were the closest, so we stopped there first. Her species passed through innumerable changes before gaining their final adult form, but Kohbi had promised she'd give me plenty of notice before she hit metamorphosis again. I didn't have a problem with the cocoon -- hey, everybody has to evolve, right? -- but her timing sucked.

"See?" Cat pointed to a large, opaque green pod webbed into one of the corners. I could just make out the outline of Kohbi's body inside. Apparently she was busily manufacturing more silk to line the interior.

"Kohbi?" I walked over and tapped on the cocoon. "Got a minute?"

"Hi, Mercy." She sounded breathless. Guess spitting out all that green stuff was hard work. "What's up?"

"You going to cut a hole in that thing for the customers?" I asked. Behind me, Cat snorted.

She tried the airhead routine on me. "Oh, sorry, am I working tonight?"

Cat fell for it. "You're scheduled for four sessions, you twit!"

I'd grown up with some Munitalps. In the synaptic storage department, they made Terrans look retarded. "Kohbi."

"Hmmm." I could hear Kohbi's antennae rubbing together. "Tell you what, I'll hurry up and take the last two. Okay, Mercy?"

Two was better than zero. "Sounds good. And next time, Kohbi, just let Cat know before you start spitting silk."

"No problem. Thanks, Mercy."

I turned to my seething manager. "Problem solved."

"Not quite. Who's going to take the other two sessions?"

I thought about that for a minute. "If I remember correctly, the Zadakans were complaining about the lack of overtime. Schedule them."

"Fine." Cat marched out.

"Who put the hair up his proboscis?" Kohbi called from the cocoon.

"Search me." He had been pretty short-tempered lately, I thought. "Happy transformation, Kohbi."

I caught up with Cataced just as he started pounding on Yadara's secured door. I grabbed him before he could bruise his fist membranes on the panel. "Hey. You'll dent the alloy."

"Right." He hopped back and folded his upper appendages. "Be my guest, boss."

Someone had stuck something up his nose. "Just relax, Cat, okay?" I signalled the interior door panel. "Yadara? It's Mercy, honey. Open the panel."

"Is Cataced out there?"

"Open the panel, you silly bitch!" Cat bellowed.

I heard Yadara sobbing over the audio, and smacked my manager's left appendage. "Will you shut up?" To the door panel, I said, "It's okay, Yadara, let me in."

"He has to stay out there," Yadara said after she regained control. "He called me names, Mercy. Heesel wants to gut him."

"He's staying out here. Now open the door."

The panel opened and I walked in. Yadara stood in the center of the room. Behind it stood its silent identical twin sibling/lover, Heesel, looking ready to gut some Omorr.

Yadara and Heesel worked only as a team, which delighted the customers but sometimes led to minor headaches, especially when Heesel, the dominant sib, got possessive.

"That filthy u'flargot called Yadara a mindless orifice," Heesel said. Yellow streaks flared along its bright orange hide, which meant it was pretty upset. As did the long, ritual castration blade it had clutched in one tendril-cluster. "Who does he think he is?"

"Hold it right there." I could understand Heesel wanting to defend its sib, but they had broken one of the major rules. "Cat didn't have an insemination party last night -- you two did."

Two of Heesel's four arms encircled Yadara's torso. "We've been wanting to breed for awhile, haven't we, sweetie?"

"Well, sweetie, you both agreed under contract not to propagate while you worked for me," I said. "Remember? Paragraph two, section seven, right after the part about refraining from intoxicants during working hours." I tapped a finger against my chin. "Come to think of it, you violated that one, too."

Yadara saw how mad I was, and hurried to make peace. "Couple of spacejocs made us drink with them, Mercy. Said it would enhance the session. Gods know I wasn't thinking with a clear head, and then Heesel started rubbing my siring glands, and . . . well . . ."

"Spare me the details, please." I pressed a palm to my throbbing forehead. "How long until you gestate?"

Heesel looked uncomfortable. "A cycle."

"A *cycle!*" I kept my temper from exploding. Barely. "Great." Couldn't they have found a little self-control? Even now they could hardly keep their hands off each other.

Which, naturally, gave me an idea.

"All right, here's what we're going to do. You're both off regular duty until after the kiddies are born. Until then, you're assigned to exhibition."

Yadara, being the more reticent of the pair, wrinkled one of its noses. "Exhibition? But Mercy --"

I held up my hand. "Save it. Exhibition, or find another occupation."

"It's better than unemployment, darling." Evidently pleased by the idea, Heesel tickled Yadara with a lazy tendril. "You're so beautiful when you acquire, too."

"See the staff physician for pre-natal exams before your next session," I said as I walked out.

Cat was still waiting outside.

"You put them on exhibition, didn't you?" I nodded. "Fuck this." He turned on his foot and stomped down the hall.

"Cat. Cataced." He stopped. Probably because I'd never used that tone with him before. I caught up and looked into his dark eyes. "What's the deal?"

"The deal, Mercy, is I'm tired." His pinkish derma turned a ruddy hue. "I haven't had a decent vacation in two revolutions."

He didn't act tired. I didn't like the way he was staring at me, either. What the hell was wrong with him? "Then take a couple of rotations for yourself."

"You are as blind as a Larian flatworm." Off he went toward the training corridor.

Maybe he was constipated, I thought, and trailed after him.

The new employees all start out in the training corridor. It's the best way to gauge their particular talents, and to keep them from upsetting the regular customers with a lot of novice crap until they get used to the demands of the profession. I'd learned that from my first week at the Shelter.

I didn't have a big turn-over, but the customers liked variety, so we usually had at least four or five new hires in training at any given time. Cat led me down to the last door in the hall. It was Lilia's room, and Cat had secured it from the outside. When I would have released the door panel, he grabbed my arm.

"You don't want to do that." He punched the external viewer, activating the interior vid screen. "Look."

Lilia, who'd been hired on the strength of her looks by one of the shift supervisors, had changed. Her pretty, delicate humanoid form now lay on the floor. At least, the outer casing. In her place stood a much larger, much nastier-looking being. Or hung, I should say. The monster was clinging to the ceiling with a dozen long, multi-jointed legs.

"What the hell is that?" I said, my eyes wide.

"One of the other girls recognized her species. She's a Sovant, Mercy."

My eyes closed. "*Shit.*"

Sovants, AKA body-snatchers, ate the insides of other living organisms, then used their outer flesh as disguises. They regularly infiltrated colonies and were as hard to get rid of as Terran cockroaches. Normal weapons didn't harm them -- in fact, they were nearly impossible to kill. The only good thing about them was their inability to proliferate off their homeworld, or they would have eventually over-run the quadrant and made us all into garments.

"Yeah." Cat gave me a snotty look. "So how are you going to handle *this*, Madam?"

I didn't appreciate that, and showed him some teeth. "Keep her locked up, and let me think."

I was still pacing the corridor and thinking about it when the House alarm grid started to wail. "God, now what?"

Cat and I ran down to the main level, and found our security had already been breached. A large group of raiders had the staff on the floor, and trained their pulse rifles on us as we stumbled into the reception area.

"Hello, Miss Mercy." The leader, a large, filthy specimen of Gnilltak, gave me a sharp-toothed grin. "Heard this was a good place to stop before launching."

"Pus-breath," I said, and didn't flinch when he fired directly over my head.

Rule Number Three: Never show your true emotions.

"My name is Posbret!" He shrieked.

I studied my fingernails. "What do you want, Pus-breath?"

"Bitch." He tried another tactic by leering at Cat. "Still playing with one-legged pretty boys, Mercy?"

I automatically put a hand on Cat's nearest appendage to hold him back. His muscles were tensed to plasteel-density. "Easy." To the raider I said, "*What do you want?*"

"What you sell, Mercy. Only the best, high-volume playthings for us, huh boys?"

The boys made a agreeable sound.

That wouldn't do. At all. Posbret's bunch liked to get rough. They'd killed five of my employees last time, and had gotten off-planet before I could return the favor. Raiders like Pus-breath make me sick.

"Mercy," Cat said. "How about Lilia?"

He was faking the nervous voice, of course. No wonder I paid him so many damn credits, I thought, and played along. "Not Lilia. She can't take more than twenty men at a time." Which was true. Her mouth wasn't *that* big.

"Twenty at once?" Posbret whistled, spitting drool on me at the same time. "What is she, a P'Kotman? They're too fucking noisy, and they squish."

Like he was a prize. "Not at all." I walked over to the console and punched up Lilia's employee photoscan and room assignment. "She's so insatiable, I have to keep her locked up."

Cat coughed to cover a different sound.

I shook my head sadly. "No, this one's not for you, Pus-breath."

"Yeah?" Posbret eyed Lilia's image with interested greed, then swung the rifle toward my abdomen. "Ydi, Og, stay here. We'll let you have seconds." He smiled at me. "Take us to her."

I left Cat with the two mercenaries and led the rest to the training corridor. Thank God I'd remembered to turn off the external viewer, I thought. Quickly I released Lilia's door panel and opened it.

"Customers, Lilia," I called out, then gestured for the men to go in.

"I'll see you when I'm through," Posbret said, then swaggered into the room. The last man was inside before the first scream started. I shut and secured the panel before leaning back against it and letting a sigh of relief out.

Then I laughed, and broke Rule Number Three.

Cat had the other two disarmed and tied up by the time I returned to reception. He was handy that way.

"Call Colonial Security," I said, then eyed my manager. "What?"

"You can't keep feeding customers to the Sovant," Cat said.

Given the amount of raids we'd been subjected to lately, I might have argued that point. But he was right. "We'll work something out with her."

His dark eyes rolled. "You always do."

Hungry as she was, it took awhile for Lilia to ingest all the raiders. Once she was gorged, I negotiated with her. She wasn't averse to the idea of taking the raider's ship and leaving the planet. Especially when I detailed the type of cellular dismemberment weapon I'd use on her if she didn't. We had a few tense moments as she came out in Posbret's skin (mainly because I'd made up the part about the weapon), then she lumbered off to Transport.

I signalled colonial security after she left the building. They were only too happy to blow Lilia's stolen ship, and Lilia, into molecular space dust as soon as she launched.

"I thought discretion was our middle name," Cat said as we watched the star shuttle explode on the monitor.

I arched a brow. "She wasn't a customer. She was only *wearing* one."

Cleaning the room required raises in compensation for the entire sanitation crew, but at least I didn't have to do it.

The evening went on from there. Five deep-space ore-haulers landed at Transport, and soon Mercy House was chock full of miners who'd spent the last revolution in cryogenic suspension. They wanted to drill everything in sight.

A few of them were content to watch Yadara and Hessel perform on stage. The twins got very inventive when they played with each other. Most of the miners, however, wanted full orifice contact, which kept the staff prone for hours. Kohbi finally crawled out of her room, sporting a new pair of wings and some additional genitalia, which she cheerfully put to good use. By the end of the night, not even the Zadakans complained.

I signalled Cataced after the rockhounds came and went, and asked him to meet me in my quarters. I was tired, but still puzzled over my manager's behavior. True, it had been a challenging day, but there was something bothering him. He was visibly perspiring as he hopped in.

I decided to get right to the point. "Are you going to tell me what the fuck is wrong with you, or not?"

"Mercy, I've got to get off this world. Now." He started bouncing around me. The Omorr form of pacing. "You don't understand, and it's really none of your business."

"Explain it to me."

He just gave me this embarrassed shrug.

I mentally reviewed what I knew about Cat, and suddenly it made sense to me. The temper, the looks he'd given me. It was my business.

"You're in season, aren't you?" Absolutely the worst state for an Omorr to be in when trying to manage, of all things, a very busy colonial brothel.

"Yeah, I am."

I'd been trained by the finest courtesans at the Shelter. Trained so many species on how to give pleasure I could do it in my sleep. I hadn't personally taken a lover since . . . I'd hired Cat, I realized. Funny how you never appreciate someone until they threaten to go back home and breed on you.

"We'll handle it," I said, and grinned.

He gave me a speculative look. "You're a Terran."

"That never bothered you before. It won't now." I sat down on my sleeping platform and patted the biomalleable mattress. "Come here."

So we worked that out, too, although I broke Rule Number Three again. Several times.

#

Kohbi eventually metamorphosized into a non-sexual form and had to retire from the business. She was nice enough to refer several of her cousins to Mercy House, who more than made up for the loss.

Heesel and Yadara each gave birth to miniature versions of themselves, which they promptly named after each other. That made things really confusing, until we gave the babies nicknames. Ultimately I set up a daycare room so the sibs wouldn't have to find another line of work. That's now part of the benefits package I offer to all my employees.

Word got out about Posbret's fate and the raiders left Trelus-6 alone from there on out. Good riddance.

Happily, the entire Sovant species was wiped out by a genetic retro-virus created and released by some highly pissed-off scientists, who also happened to be related to several of their victims.

Cat moved into my quarters permanently. He was as efficient in bed as he was out of it. He made some noise about quitting at first, but I handled that.

"I still pay you, Cat." I snuggled up to his gildrells, which were like a couple of hundred very long fingers. Very long, very clever fingers, as I'd personally discovered, to my great pleasure.

"So?" His membranes stroked my back.

"So remember Rule Number One."

SOFACon
by S.L. Viehl

"Abbey Aaron?" The pale young man in the Mars Crossing t-shirt checked his list. "That's with two bees and two ays?"

"Yes." Abbey glanced down at the bulging pocket folder the registrar shoved into her hands. "What is this?"

"Your SOFAConPak." The gaunt face scowled down at his paperwork. "Don't tell me -- this is your very first writer's conference."

Abbey took a peak inside the folder. "Yes, it is." She squinted at his plastic-covered name tag. "Sweeney Prufrock?"

"That's me." Prufrock heaved a sigh, still not looking at her. "And you're not a published author, right?"

"Not -- I mean, no."

"Okay, Abbey Aaron, here's the deal: the SOFACon time grid shows all the different writer's tracks, cross-referenced by time, subject, and experience level. You can go to all of the workshops, including the advanced ones, but no bugging the published authors before or after, okay?"

"Okay."

"Don't try to swipe any of the gaming equipment, and stay out of the SOFAPoop meetings."

Abbey scratched an itchy spot under her chin. "Um, SOFAPoop?"

"Speculative Original Fiction Author's Professional Organization of Peers," Prufrock said. "And for God's sake buy some of the books at the author signings instead of bringing every out-of-print you own. Okay?"

"Um, sure."

The registrar looked up from his attendee log for the first time and groaned. "The seventies look? C'mon, honey, that is so last year."

Abbey gazed down at her hip-hugger jeans and baby doll smock. "You think so?"

"Do yourself a favor," Prufrock said. "Change."

"Hey, can you get a move on?" The Klingon standing behind Abbey bared ferocious plastic fangs. "My cranial ridges are starting to peel off."

"Put your engines on impulse, pal." The registrar eyed Abbey. "Any questions?"

"A million," Abbey said, and grinned. "But I won't be a pest."

"That'll be a first." Prufrock waved the Klingon forward. "Last name? No, man, your human name."

#

Abbey wandered away from the table, following a couple carrying bulging tote bags of Babylon 5 action figures. Above the entrance to the conference reception area was a sagging banner: **SOFACON Y2K -- SPECULATIVE ORIGINAL FICTION AUTHOR'S CONFERENCE WELCOMES ALL LIFE FORMS!**

"That's pretty friendly," Abbey murmured.

"Hey, babe." A man wearing clown white and what appeared to be the contents of a body repair shop painted monochromatic black leered at her. "Wanna be assimilated?"

"Maybe later." Abbey had spotted the first writer's workshop, and check her SOFACon time grid. A basic seminar listed as "The Do's and Don'ts of Speculative Fiction" was about to begin. "Excuse me."

Abbey filed into the same, over-crowded room, and after seeing all the chairs were occupied took a position against the back wall. Ten minutes later, a middle-aged man in a beautiful tweed jacket walked in, and the attendees began to applaud. Abbey followed their example and clapped her hands, too.

"Good morning, wannabes," the man said into the microphone. Everyone except Abbey chuckled. "If you don't know who I am, to hell with you. This workshop is entitled 'The Do's and Don'ts of Speculative Fiction', and is being recorded. If you have a question, save it until the end, and talk into the microphone, or I don't answer. Got it?"

From the nods, everybody appeared to get it.

Abbey leaned back and ignored several stares at her bare midriff as she listened to the speaker. She was one of the few who wasn't scribbling down every word the man said, so occasionally he gave her a hard glare.

"Never call it sci-fi. We refer to morons who do that as "skiffies". Call it SF, science fiction, or the universally-preferred term speculative fiction. All 'skiffies' do is make themselves look like jackasses."

A few of the room's occupants made donkey noises.

"If you want to write Star Trek novels" --the man made an obscene finger gesture toward the audience-- "get *out* of this room immediately and never, *never* return."

Everyone but Abbey roared with laughter. The speaker gave her a glare and a frown before he continued.

"Having a space ship and an alien in your story does not make you a writer of speculative fiction. Having a space ship, and alien, and a manic-depressive serial killer intent on destroying Earth does not cut it, either. Birds with the reincarnated souls of past presidents, quaint little villages with gateways to other dimensions, and remote island civilizations where dinosaurs have never died out are not speculative fiction."

Abbey idly scratched her belly, and wondered if the man knew the long, thinning strands of hair he'd combed over the top of his head did absolutely nothing to camouflage the fact he was balding.

The speaker held up a massive volume. The book jacket portrayed a cartoon figure of a laughing, tumor-ridden clown prancing across a war-torn battlefield as he chased a terrified woman with scaly green skin. The title read, "Happy the Leper's Revenge". "Now this," the man said, "*this* is speculative fiction."

The group got to their feet and applauded wildly. Abbey gathered the book had been written by the speaker himself.

"I'm going to give away a signed Advanced Reader Copy of this to one of you lucky wannabes," the man said. "As soon as we get the Q&A portion over with. Remember, use the mike." A line swiftly formed behind the microphone. "Okay, go ahead, wannabe numero uno."

An earnest young man with a terrible case of acne asked, "Uh -- I was just wondering, were you in the war?"

"Yes, son, I was in the Storm." The speaker's expression grew stern, and he removed a pipe from his jacket pocket. Abbey noted he didn't smoke it, but kept it in his hands and fingered the stem lovingly. "I don't talk about that time. Suffice to say, it was hell on Earth."

Abbey's eyes widened, then she coughed into her hand, which earned her a frown from the recording engineer.

The next young woman simpered for five minutes about how much she loved the speaker's last novel, how much she felt she personally resembled the heroine, and her uncontrollable desire to write a novel herself. The man smiled, made a rolling gesture with his hand, and twice licked his thin lips. When she was finished, the speaker gave her breasts a transparent leer.

"I think I'm in love." This comment made the flustered girl squeal with delight. "Forget about writing that novel, sweetheart. My room number is 1128."

That was enough for Abbey. She made her way to the door, halting only when it became apparent the speaker was addressing her directly.

"Hey. You there. Laurie Partridge. What's the matter, are we boring you?"

Abbey looked over her shoulder and smiled. "Yes," she said in a voice loud enough to be picked up by the microphone. "You are."

#

The following five days were a harrowing ordeal for Abbey. She navigated her way through four luncheons and a brunch, twenty-four more workshops, software and hardware demos, seven games rooms where teenaged conference goers sat mesmerized in front of rent-by-the-hour computer monitors while working hand controls and joysticks furiously, two multiple author book signings, and a SOFAPoop meeting she walked into by accident.

"I refuse to sign this contract!" an emaciated woman with thick glasses and no make-up thumped a folder down on the podium. "It is an insult to my intelligence, not to mention my work. SOFA will be hearing from my personal attorney."

Incredibly, the membership applauded the woman as she stalked out of the room. As she brushed past Abbey, the skinny woman sneered at the white tube top, hot pink mini-skirt and white knee-high boots Abbey had donned for the day's events. "Oh, look, it's Barbie on Acid. How sweet."

Now used to the hostile reaction to her clothes from the female conference attendees, Abbey merely stepped out of her way.

Sweeney Prufrock noticed her standing by the door, and hurried over to urge her out of the meeting. "Didn't you understand me when you signed in?" he whispered angrily. "You can't attend SOFAPoop meetings. You're not a Class A member."

"Sorry." Abbey left the room, checked her SOFACon grid, and decided she'd seen enough. Before Prufrock could stalk back inside, she put a hand on his arm. "May I ask you a question?"

He stared down at her hand, then gulped and nodded.

Abbey showed him her list. "Are any of these writers at this conference?" She took her hand away to scratch the back of her neck. "I don't see their names on the grid."

Prufrock made a strangled sound that could have been a laugh. "I don't think so. We're not big enough to attract him . . . and he's dead . . . and she writes fantasy." He raised his watery eyes to Abbey's clear gaze. "You're not a -- I mean, you have --"

"Oh." Abbey stop scratching and looked at her hand. "I have polydactyly. You know, like that character in Thomas Harris' novels. What's his name -- Horrible?"

"Hannibal."

"Right." She beamed. "Like him. Just a birth defect."

Prufrock didn't look convinced. "S-s-sure, whatever you say, I-I-lady. See you." He dashed back into the meeting.

Abbey stopped by the last author book signing, where she avoided the man in the tweed jacket and bought enough novels to fill a large cardboard box. She had the porter take that, and her cases, to the front while she checked out of the hotel.

"We hope you enjoyed the conference," the desk manager said. "You didn't swipe any of the gaming equipment, did you?"

"No." Abbey kept a straight face, and remembered not to scratch her eyeball in front of him. "I didn't."

The cabbie was a bit curious when he left her off at the edge of the swamp, but she explained it as a pre-arranged meeting spot. Which in all honesty was exactly what it was.

Night crept over the horizon, and Abbey checked her watch before walking into the swamp. The Earth Shoes she wore and the cases and box she carried made slogging through the mud a challenge, but she enjoyed the scents and sounds of the marsh environment. The sounds abruptly went quiet as a solid beam of light focused on her from directly overhead. She looked up, waved, and vanished.

#

"Well, Cami?" Busy at the flight controls, Dru found a moment to give his companion a fond look. "What was it like?"

"Weird. Bizarre. Kind of revolting. You would have loved it." Cami shuddered with relief as the last of the itching sensations faded away. It felt so much better to be out of that damned skinsuit she'd endured as Abbey Aaron for the past five days.

"Any problems?"

"I made a time-allowance error, and downloaded the wrong period garments. Luckily they thought I was being nostalgic." She smacked Dru lightly on the rump. "You also forgot to tell me they have *five* digits on each upper appendage. I was walking around with seven and scared the warplights out of one of them."

"Sorry." Dru grinned, unrepentant. "What were they like?"

"Noisy. Eccentric. And they smell awful." Cami's cranial nodules turned pink as she recalled the overwhelming odors of sweat, perfume, and alcohol-laden breath. "Did you know they talk and eat with the same orifice? Want to know what they eat?"

"Don't tell me." Now Dru shuddered. "Probably something that will give me nightmares. Like botanicals with the dirt washed off."

"They call it salad." Cami laughed at Dru's reaction. "Plus they're obsessed with stimulating their genitals." She rolled four of her eyes. "At least twenty of them invited me to impregnate them."

Now Dru's nodules flushed. "But you didn't, did you?"

"Of course not." Cami looked indignant. "As if I'd sully our gene pool with their DNA. Besides, mating alone would probably kill them. They're awfully fragile, especially around the outer extremities."

"What about the writers?"

"That was the biggest disappointment." Cami sat back in her flight cradle and brooded. "Some of them were okay. Most evidently need extensive therapy. A few were outright farkling snobs. Most of them make the Ichthori look humble."

Dru's tendril snaked out to rub her upper dorsal fin. "Guess you didn't give anyone a copy of your latest novel."

Cami snorted through all six nostrils. "I wouldn't waste the data chips." She whipped a tendril back toward the hold. "I did get a new supply of books."

Dru perked up at that. "Really? How many?"

"Only fifty-three. Hardly an hour's worth of reading. Sorry. They're so damned bulky, you know how it is." Cami yawned. "Though they have invented something called e-books that looks promising."

"Did you meet any of the names on our list?"

"Not a one." She recalled what Prufrock had said. "The nice young human who checked me in told me Silverberg was too big to come to their conference."

"He doesn't appear that large on the book jacket photos." Dru looked puzzled. "I thought they were all basically the same size."

"Search me. Apparently Herbert is dead." Cami made a soft, musical sound saluting the man's passing. "And Lisle writes fantasy, so they'd probably try to stone her if she appeared."

"Oh, sweetling, that's a shame." Dru put the controls on auto-pilot and pulled her onto his lap for a cuddle. "I know how much you love their work. Did you meet any others worthy of direct contact?"

"One I'd like to see again." Cami grimly described the patronizing man in the tweed jacket. "What a lying u'flargot he was, Dru. He pretended to be a veteran of one of their global conflicts. I did a mind-pick, and found out he actually spent the entire time period working in a garment-cleaning establishment. You would have ingested him on the spot."

"Not to worry, hearts' beat. There's always SOFACon 2002."

The flightshield initiation system sounded a warning blip, and Dru pulled the nose of the star shuttle up until it was even with the rising moon. "We'll be home in five cliqeqs, sweetling. Care to show me some of your souvenirs?"

Cami giggled and drew her mate back to their sleeping chamber. "Wait until you see these self-adhesive cranial ridges I bought. They're hilarious."

Revisions
by S.L. Viehl

Already eleven o'clock? Have to get the kids in two hours. Ugh, coffee's cold, too. Figures. Well, just have to do ten more and I can call it a day. Where am I? Oh, yeah, they made it to the motel, blizzard's snowed them in, yada yada yada . . . damn, not the phone again

--

#

Wrapped in Ethan's arms, Heather listened intently for a moment. "Telephone." Ethan cocked his head. "Sounds like Gena's Mom."

They grinned at each other.

"Dibs on the toilet!" Heather wrenched out of her former-childhood-friend-and-current-defense-attorney's embrace and ran for the closet-sized bathroom.

Ethan grabbed the phone and dialed '0'. "Operator? Connect me to the nearest pizza place. Fine." He covered the mouthpiece with one large, strong hand and shouted toward the bathroom, "Hey, babe, what do you want on the pizza?"

"Everything!" Heather yelled over the flushing sounds.

"Hello? Rinaldi's? Yeah, this is room 777 at the Pink Pagoda. Send over three large pizzas with everything. Throw in a case of beer, too. Whatever's cold. Thanks."

Heather strolled out, smirking as Ethan dashed past her. "All yours." She flopped down on the full-sized bed and stared at the ceiling tiles. "How long have we been stuck here? Couple of days?"

Now Ethan walked out and dropped on the bed beside her. "Man, I thought my bladder was going to explode."

Heather lifted her head long enough to glare at Ethan. "You got beer, I hope."

"Got beer."

A few minutes later the delivery arrived, and Ethan shoved a hundred dollar bill in the startled teenager's hand before slamming the door shut. "Dinner has arrived."

"Food!" Heather leapt from the bed and tore one of the large, flat boxes open. "Oh God, it smells so good." A moment she groaned in ecstasy. "And tastes wonderful."

Ethan handed her a beer and guzzled half a can before he cocked his head again. "Uh-oh. Gena's back."

"No!" Heather chewed furiously. "She can't. I won't!"

"Too late."

#

Now, where was I?

Ethan took Heather into his arms and turned her slowly to face the mirror. "Tell me what you see, small flower."

Heather's eyes grew heavy. "I see a desperate woman, and a very, very gentle man."

Ethan chuckled as he stroked her soft blonde curls. "No, my darling heart. You see a desperate man, and the woman he loves."

No, that's not right. It sounds stupid. Why can't I imagine them doing this? Maybe if I change a few things . . .

#

"Small flower?" Heather repeated, incredulous. "If you call me that again, I'm going to throw up."

"Here we go again," Ethan muttered.

"What?" Heather shrieked as her hair suddenly turned a vivid shade of red. "Ethan!"

"Nathan," Ethan said. "It's Nathan now." His hair instantly fell to his shoulders. Crept up his neck two inches. Grew out another foot. "Nathan Running Bird, illegitimate son of the Chief Shaman of the Apache Indians, and attorney at law."

They both watched the mirror as Nathan's now-naked chest swiftly broadened, became paved with more muscle, and his skin acquired a distinct coppery hue.

Heather rolled her eyes. "You get much bigger, you'll make Arnold Schwarzenegger look anorexic."

"Speaking of bigger." Nathan peered down at her chest.

She looked down, too. "*Christ.*" Her breasts had abruptly doubled in size, while her blouse changed into a tight, clinging sweater. "She can't do this! I'll tip over when I walk!" Heather glanced up at Nathan, and her irises changed from a soft butterscotch brown to a deep, shimmering emerald. "Different color, right?"

Nathan sighed. "Green."

#

There. That's better.

Nathan's work-roughened hand gently caressed Heather's auburn tresses. "Will you let me love you, Morning Cloud?"

"Always," Heather whispered, trembling against his chest. "But what about the murder charges I've been framed for?"

"I won't let them put their filthy hands on you, my precious treasure." Nathan's jaw hardened. "I'll call on my blood brothers, and we will fight for your freedom."

Better and better. Wait, I'd better find that book about the Apache.

#

Heather collapsed into the chair in front of the mirror, laughing until tears rolled down her satiny cheeks. "M-M-Morning Cloud?"

One of Nathan's now-winged ebony brows rose. "It's the special name I gave you when we were children playing together in the secret flower-covered meadow on the reservation where your father owned the general store and cheated my relatives for every dime he could get and beat you regularly but I still loved you and swore one day we'd be married which is why I'm defending you against the murder charges you were framed for."

Heather covered her face with her slim hands as her shoulders shook. When she could speak again, she said, "Hand me a beer, Running Bear."

"Bird. Running Bird."

"Whatever." She caught the can he tossed to her and drained it in five swallows. "I can't keep doing this, pal."

Nathan's other brow rose. "Oh, like I'm having the time of my life?" He stared at the pizza. "We haven't eaten since Gena made us stop at the diner back in Nevada, and you threw your food at me --"

"That was to get you back for kidnapping me from the school for the retarded children where I was a much-beloved teacher and forcing me into your pickup truck and driving me out of the state before I could be arrested for the murder of my ex-husband who was never able to

consummate our marriage due to an unspecified health problem and consequently treated me like dirt," she reminded him.

"I still need to eat once in awhile," Nathan said, grabbed a handful of pizza, and tore off a chunk with his strong, white teeth. "Be nice if we could get some vacation time." He ogled her improved profile. "Been awhile since I've done a lot of things."

"Is that all you can think about?" Heather tossed the can aside and started pacing. "There's got to be something we can do."

Nathan snorted and wiped tomato sauce from his mouth with the back of his hand. "Like what?"

Heather stopped suddenly, looked at the phone, and smiled. "I've got a plan."

#

So the Apache don't actually have a reservation there -- I can probably get away with it. Make a note here to check with my editor, then I can -- blasted phone!

#

"Hello?"

"Hi, Gena?"

"Yes?"

Heather smiled at Nathan, and gestured for another beer. "This is Heather Morning-Cloud St. Simone. Unless you've changed my name again. You know those revisions of "Love's Primitive Fury" you've been working on? We need to talk."

Box
by S.L. Viehl

She was still on the toilet when the doorbell rang.

Now Barb knows I can't run to that frigging door. Emma reached for her walker, stood, and waited for her nightie to slip back down over her trembling thighs. *But she'll keep on ringing the bell until I get there.*

Getting out of bed had taken a good hour. Took longer every morning. Her stringy muscles had stiffened up from the hours of immobility, and still she was tired. Sick and tired.

Yesterday she'd shuffled over to the closet, hoping Robbie hadn't put the box up too high. But he had.

Have to get Barb to take it down.

"Mother Watley?" a muffled voice yelled.

Emma hated it when Barb called her that. Mother Watley indeed. As if she'd ever give birth to a fat, nasty thing like Barbara Tuttle and not smother it on the spot.

Don't argue with Barb, Momma. Rob would give her a careful half-hug and press his mouth to the threads of silver hair covering her pink crown. *She always wins anyway.*

Not with me, she doesn't, Emma thought.

Every chime was a taunt. *Emma. Emma. Hurry. Get the door. Get the door. Barb's here. Barb's waiting.*

Barb was the same age Emma had been when she'd come to Florida. Even after forty years, the old woman still missed the ranch. That wonderful, dry desert air that came down from the mountains. Miami Beach was hot, but the humidity about strangled her. Too many people. None of whom ever spoke proper English, not even the mailman.

I'll get her to get the box, and as soon as she --

Her bad hip unexpectedly gave out, and Emma fell forward. Her fingers clutched at the hollow aluminum bars as the world tilted. The terror of collapsing made her jerk back. Her fragile spine popped in protest.

No Lord can't fall Lord my bones --

The walker righted itself, all four legs planted on the faded carpet. She was standing. She was all right. No trip to the emergency room. No greasy-haired HMO doctor making noise about her blood pressure. No crowing from Barb about how helpless old women shouldn't live alone.

The doorbell kept ringing. *Emma! Open the door! Barb's waiting! Barb's angry!*

After she caught her breath back, Emma worked her way to the door. She'd taken to using the walker back in '95, after her last knee replacement. Now she couldn't walk without it.

Lift the walker. Set it down a few inches away. Drag herself forward. Emma knew better than to hurry. Even when the urine dribbled down her legs in the morning, she went nice and slow. Her hip was more important than the old carpeting. Besides, it gave Emma a perverse pleasure to watch Barb kneel and scrub at the damp spots.

At last Emma unlocked the dead bolt and pulled the door open. Her daughter-in-law looked all business today, in her best church dress with the prim white collar and pearl buttons. The wide, bright-red mouth formed an inverted-U as tiny dark eyes gave Emma the once-over.

"Mother Watley." She said it the way she would *Monica Lewinsky*, with little bits of spit coming from her mouth. "I was worried you'd fallen."

"Barb." Emma remembered to smile. "Wasn't expecting you so early."

"It's noon, Mother Watley. Did you sleep all morning? Again?" Barb didn't wait for an answer. She hooked her purse over one thick wrist, and stepped over the threshold. "I don't have time to stay. I'm speaking at the Ladies Auxiliary Luncheon at one."

"That's nice." She tried to shuffle out of the way, but her daughter-in-law pushed by. The walker teetered for a moment, then Emma regained her balance. "I'll make us some coffee --"

"I'll do it." Barb was already in the kitchen. "Sit yourself down and rest, Mother Watley."

Emma didn't being told to rest. She didn't like Barb in her kitchen, either -- she never put things back where they went. She didn't say anything. From the sound of her voice, Barb was in the mood for a fight. She must have argued with Robbie before coming over. Slowly Emma lift-set-dragged herself over to the dining room table.

Fool woman, doesn't she know what a good man she has in my Rob?

Barb came back out, her pretty dress now covered with one of Emma's big aprons. "You didn't eat my casserole."

Emma wasn't so feeble that she'd missed the mold spots. Barb probably hoped she'd get food poisoning, and that would finish her off. "Wasn't very hungry at all last night."

"Is that right." Barb wiped her hands with the edge of the apron, then sat down at the head of the table. "Mother Watley, we need to talk."

While she spoke, she shuffled through Emma's pile of mail, dividing it into two piles. One she'd throw away, the other she'd take home for Rob to pay. Emma had argued about that, until her hands had become too twisted to hold a pen for long.

"You know Robbie and I love you more than life itself."

This was an old speech; Emma knew the rest: *You're eighty-seven years old, Emma.*

Her daughter-in-law folded her hands together. "Emma, you're eighty-seven years old."

It's time to enjoy your golden years.

The double chins dropped a notch, so that the little eyes peered out from under plucked-too-thin brows. "It's time you made your golden years the best they can be."

Rob worries about you.

Tiny fissures of lipstick crept outside Barb's lip lines as she pursed her mouth. "We're worried about you."

Emma personally thought the golden years were nothing but a big pile of steaming horse pucky. Knew Barb didn't worry about anything except getting her hands on Emma's good pearls and her collection of cameos.

As far as being eighty-seven, well, that was all she was getting to. From the blood she'd passed over the last month, Emma knew her time was nearly up. A gun would have been better, but she'd left all of John's back at the ranch.

She'd set fire to the barn, then taken Robbie out of his warm bed and tossed him in the truck, along with whatever clothes she could put her hands on. She'd only stopped long enough to leave the horse at Hank's. Driven from New Mexico to Florida in four days, scared to death, looking over her shoulder at the box --

"Coral Quay Home is the best full-time care facility in South Florida." Barb put one of the hundreds of brochures she carried around down in front of Emma. "Rob and I checked them out thoroughly. You'll be able to be around other people your own age. You'll be safe. And the nurses are there for you, twenty-four hours a day."

"No, Barb." Emma pushed the pamphlet aside. "I'm not going into a Home."

Under the smooth layer of beige pancake, Barb got pink. "Mother Watley, what if something happened while you were alone? What could you do to protect yourself?"

"Nothing will happen, Barbara." The scent of brewing coffee distracted her for a moment, but new pain rolled over the old. Emma's hands shook as she folded them in her lap. "Would you get my pills, please?"

Barb slapped a plump hand on the crocheted tablecloth. "Where are they?"

Emma thought for a moment. "In the bedroom, on the phone table."

Her daughter-in-law got up and disappeared. A faint mutter of disgust drifted from the bedroom. Then the sound of sheets being yanked from the bed. Emma rested her brow against her twisted palm and waited.

Robbie had never understood why they'd had to run. Emma had never been able to explain. It was her fault he'd grown up scared. Her fault her son had latched on to the first girl who'd batted her false eyelashes at him --

"That does it," Barb said as she came out, her arms full of bundled linens. "You'll have to wear those Reliables I bought you."

"No," Emma said without looking at her.

"Stop being a stubborn, foolish old woman." Barb thrust the sheets by the front door and turned on her. "Or do you like sleeping in your own piss?"

The vulgar word sounded peculiar, coming from Barb, who never said worse than damn. "I'm not wearing a diaper, Barbara."

"Fine. Get another infection. I'll have the doctor take care of you, like the last time."

The last time Emma had spent a month in the hospital. Barb's doctor had changed her catheter every day. Probably on Barb's request.

Emma made a point of nodding at the clock. "It's getting late. You'd better go now."

Barb didn't go. She waddled over until she loomed directly above Emma. "Mother Watley, you're going to the Home. Next week."

Emma shook her head, then hissed in a breath as Barb's strong hands grabbed her shoulders. Scarlet-polished nails dug into her soft flesh, hard enough to draw blood.

"Listen to me, you smelly old bitch." Barb bent down, and her wintergreen-scented breath blasted in Emma's face. "You're going, or so help me God, I'll have you declared incompetent. Do you understand me?"

Emma felt her head wobbling, but kept her eyes on Barb's. If he'd been there, John would have killed Rob's wife with his bare hands. But John had died at Hank's, a year after she and Rob had run. "Get out of my house."

Barb slapped her. Hard. Tears of pain and humiliation blinded Emma. But she wouldn't let them fall. Not in front of this pig-faced shrew who'd made her boy's life miserable from the honeymoon on.

"Fine. Be it on your head." Barb stomped out, kicking the sheets aside as she did.

Emma waited until the door slammed, then rested her hot face against her folded arms and wept.

#

After she'd cried a good bit, Emma went in the kitchen and drank the weak coffee Barb had made. She made herself choke down a slice of toast, too. She needed a shower. Her pain medication. A bus ticket to Albuquerque. And wouldn't that infuriate Barb, she thought, if I up and went to the Greyhound station.

She should have gotten Barb to get the box down. Now she'd have to wait until tomorrow morning. The pain from standing so long made her grind her plates together. She'd spend the afternoon in bed, and get ready for tomorrow.

But who will I use for the change?

Maybe if she didn't use anyone else, she'd simply die. Emma had no regrets about her life. She'd lived longer than anyone in her family. Robbie would miss her, but he was going on fifty now, and he had Barb. Too bad they'd never had kids.

If you use the box while Barb's still here --

No, that was wicked. She couldn't do that. No matter how much she hated Barbara.

She rested. Her bad shoulder screamed too loudly to let her sleep. Damned arthritis, never let her have a minute's peace. The sour smell rising from the stripped mattress made her nose wrinkle. She must have wet through to the box springs last night.

Best clean myself up, one more time.

Emma curled over and worked herself up into a sitting position, then reached for her walker. It was too far away; she'd forgotten to leave it close to the bed. At the same time, her bladder made itself known.

If only I could reach it.

She stretched. Joints seared, muscles knotted. Her good hand swiped at the walker's aluminum frame, caught it, dragged it forward. Lift-set-drag. Lift-set-drag.

At the sink, Emma took out a pair of Percoset® and dry-swallowed them before she shrugged out of her over-large nightie and got in the shower, walker and all.

It felt good to wash the dried urine from her body. She'd wished she could have cleaned John's body up before she'd left the ranch. Of course, there hadn't been that much left of him. Just a vague, muddled shape.

What was in the box?

Horrible thought. She didn't want to know. She'd seen what it could do. That was enough. That was more than enough.

She was drying herself off when she heard the front door slam. Barb again? No, she'd never turn down a chance to gab in front of a crowd. Robbie would still be at work, far as Emma knew. So who could have come in?

What if something happened to you --

She dragged her robe on and lift-set-dragged herself out into the hall. There Emma went saw something that made her go very still. Her heart thundered beneath one sagging breast.

At the other end, a strange young man stood as though waiting for her.

"Hey, lady." He was dark, muscular, and had a Spanish accent. A crowbar in one hand, a splinter of wood still wedged in the notched end. The head of a snake was tattooed on the back of his hand. Its body twined up around his strong, brown arm. His mouth curled as he made a show of looking around. "Nice place you got here."

Emma lifted a hand to grab the edges of her robe and pull them together under her chin. Her voice shook, but she got the words out. "What are you doing in my house?"

The young man sauntered over and yanked the walker out of her hands. Before Emma collapsed, he seized her and held her suspended between his hands. "Shit, you're one old broad, aren't you? Got some good drugs, I bet."

Emma was too terrified to blink. With a laugh the man let go of her, and she collapsed on the floor, her hip taking the full brunt of the fall. Something snapped, and agonizing pain radiated through her lower abdomen.

Hip oh Lord my hip --

"Bitch said there'd be plenty." Calmly the burglar stepped over Emma and went down the hall to the bedroom. She heard his shout through a haze of torment. "Holy shit, here we go."

The man reemerged, carrying a handful of Emma's prescriptions. "Ok, where's the good stuff?" Emma only stared up at him, confused. "The jewelry, lady, where is it?" When she didn't answer, he jerked her back up by her hair. "The cameos, the pearls, where?"

Emma heard the brittle strands snapping, felt her scalp separating from her skull. Her mouth worked as her hands scrabbled against his chest. "Packed -- away --"

He dragged her back into the bedroom. "Show me." When he saw she couldn't stand by herself, he tossed her on the bed. "Where?"

Emma pointed to her closet door.

He dragged the sliding panel aside and started making a mess, opening shoe boxes and cartons. One by one he dumped their contents out on the rug beside him. "All I see is a bunch of old pictures and junk."

Get rid of it, Johnnie. Please!

Later, John's beloved voice, coming from that huge mouth. *You'll want it, Em. Someday you'll need it.*

"There's a box. At the top of the closet, in the back." Emma shut her eyes very tightly. She heard him move, heard the photo albums thump as he pulled them out and let them fall to the floor. Then a soft, breathy exclamation of "Madre mia."

His finger tapped against her cheek a moment later. Emma opened her eyes but wouldn't look at him or what he carried.

"Looks like pure silver. What's in here?"

She had no idea. "Open it and see."

He tried, just as John had. He even thumped the box on the rug, trying to pop a seam. "What is this bullshit?" He shoved the box on Emma's lap. "You open it."

Emma looked down. It was as shiny and mysterious and weightless as the day John had brought it home. They'd hidden it at first, burying it deep in the soil. The men had come from the government, asking questions. John never said a word, and had sworn Emma to secrecy.

Maybe if he had told them, they'd have taken the hateful thing and her husband would still be alive.

Emma ran her twisted fingers over the intricately carved panels. John had been obsessed with it. Tried opening it every way there was. Used drills. Hammers. Every tool he could think of. He'd even gotten drunk one night and run over it with the truck. Couldn't make a dent or scratch on it. For a few months he'd left it alone, half-buried in the hay at the back of the barn.

Then that last night, when he'd noticed the little slots, then calling Emma up at the house, telling her to come and see --

On her way to the barn, Emma heard a shout. Saw light streaming from the cracks between every board. A blue light, cold and concentrated. Her skin crawled at the touch of the light. Emma had run. She'd never seen what John had released from the box. When she'd flung open the big door, whatever it was had gone back inside.

Emma remembered cradling her husband's mangled body in her arms. John's remaining eye staring up at her. The horrible noise that had come out of his mouth.

Emma.

She'd turned to see John's old gelding staring at her.

Yes. Here.

He'd told her what had come out. What it had done. Emma had immediately tried to open the box.

No. I'll die if you do. Then he'd made her promise. To take him to their neighbor Hank's ranch. To set fire to the barn. To take Robbie and leave Roswell forever.

Don't give it to them. He'd never flinched, not even when she'd raised the rifle to shoot the wordlessly screaming body. *You'll want it, Em. Someday you'll need it --*

Lord have mercy on my soul. "You have to press your fingers to the top, like this." She placed her hands over the small slots.

"So open it." He watched, and smirked when a small hum emanated from the interior. "A music box, huh?"

As the box opened, Emma closed her eyes. She felt the wave of cold-heat. Heard his startled yelp. Then the tearing, liquid sound. The crack of bones.

And in the end, his screaming.

#

Frantic hands woke Emma from her semi-stupor. "What are you doing? Wake-up!" "Barbara." She blinked rapidly, then focused on the dancing pearl buttons before her eyes.

"What happened? You're covered in blood!" Barb's busy hands poked and prodded Emma until she pushed them away. "Did you cut yourself?"

It had taken time to get up the courage to use the knife. Then Emma had stumbled through the widening pool of blood to the bathroom, hoping she wouldn't vomit on herself. Had vomited anyway, as soon as she'd looked in the mirror. "I'm all right."

Barb hunched down and peered into Emma's eyes. "Did you have to make such a mess?"

The cameos, the pearls, where?

Emma stared at her daughter-in-law. "Sorry."

"Shit. I'm not cleaning this up." Barb rose to her feet. "Where's the body?"

"Back in the bedroom."

Barb's tiny eyes rounded. "You mean, it's still here?" She whirled around and hurried back to see for herself.

Emma waited. Heard Barb's mewl of distress, her dash to the bathroom. The sounds of retching. Then, oddly, the hushed footsteps back to the bedroom.

Barb came back. Her round face was white. The gore-splattered box in her hands. "I found this next to . . . it."

Emma nodded, and slowly pushed herself up. This was going to take some getting used to. There was no time to dither now. She glanced at the box.

You'll want it, Emma. Someday you'll need it --

"It's beautiful." Her daughter-in-law's voice became soft, cunning. Greed gleamed in her smile. "I wonder why I've never seen it before?"

"I never showed it to you." Emma clenched the knife in her strong, brown hand, and wondered how hard it would be to get rid of the tattoo.

HODS

by S.L. Viehl

"If it's about the money, James, we'll triple your usual fee."

It wasn't about the money. Jim Eliot imagined slamming the phone down to emphasize that. "Screw my fee, Barbara. Tell me why I should drive two hundred miles in the middle of the night to make what amounts to a house call."

"I can't. Not over the phone."

"Project security, right?" That bullshit was really getting old, too. "All right, Barbara." He jerked the sheets back and swung his legs over the side. "I'll be there in a couple of hours."

"Thank you, James. GenSync appreciates your cooperation."

"GenSync better have some coffee ready when I get there. Make a lot."

#

Not much had changed since his last house call to the remote lab site. An old dirt road had been repaved for the benefit of tourists who'd gone astray looking for Yosemite. High-voltage fencing and private security guards waited for anyone stupid enough to ignore the No Trespassing signs.

At the main entrance, Jim was asked to exit his vehicle, and submit to a detection scan. One of the gate guards used a golf cart to take him on to the facility.

A pretty brunette in a lab coat stood waiting for him just inside the double glass doors. As usual, he wondered what she'd look like doing the same thing, only naked.

"James, right on time." Barbara Duffman held out a styrofoam cup of coffee. "Good to see you again."

Her tone made him think of flight attendants on a rocky trip. "Barbara." He took a sip. "Thanks."

"Before I take you to see the patients, the Director would like a word with you."

Two surprises. He'd never actually treated anyone here, nor had he met Thea Rogers-Cohan. All they'd given him before were charts and abstracts to work on. "Someone get hurt?"

"No." Her smile wattage dropped for a second. "This way."

Dr. Rogers-Cohan turned out to be a short, silver-haired candidate for anorexia. She met him halfway as he walked into her office. "Jim Eliot. Welcome to GenSync. I've been looking forward to this."

He shook her bony hand. "I can say the same, Doctor. Barbara tells me I've got real patients this time. What's wrong with them?"

"Call me Thea. You get right down to business. I like that." She pointed to a chair in front of her desk. "We'll discuss everything before we go down to the stock rooms."

He sat. She handed him a slim folder with dire warnings typed on a discreet label.

"These are the project specs. You'll want to take a moment to familiarize yourself with them."

The front page was blank except for one word. HODS.

Jim read the project summary, closed the folder and handed it back to Thea.

She placed it in a drawer. "Well? What do you think?"

He wasn't going to tell her that. "You've done this. You've gone through with it."

"Yes, of course."

"I'd like to see them." No, he wouldn't.

Pleased, Thea got to her feet. "I'll take you down to the stock rooms now."

#

In the elevator, Thea briefed him further.

"Back in '97, a professor of developmental biology in the UK was the first to successfully suppress neuroanatomical development. At the time I was working on the Human Genome Project, and quit as soon as I heard the news." She chuckled. "A bit premature on my part. It wasn't until Simmons invented the uterosphere that I could feasibly do the same with my subjects."

"I see." He gripped the handrail, and watched his knuckles turn white.

"We had obstacles to overcome -- the prototype stock had to be kept on continual life support, fed intravenously, and even they didn't live more than a few months. Very costly. Programming a thoracic intramuscular stoma, feeding into both the lungs and the digestive system, eliminated that."

Jim wondered if anyone had ever told a Nobel Prize winner to shut the fuck up. "Very clever."

"Then there were time considerations. Synthetic growth hormone reduced the gestational period from nine months to eight weeks."

"Efficient." Like Hitler's ovens.

"I like to think so." The elevator stopped, and Thea inserted a key to open the door. "We maintain high security on the lower levels, for obvious reasons."

Outside a short corridor led to a yet another double set of doors -- but these were reinforced steel. As they approached, a camera mounted above them swivelled, zoomed, then the doors swung outward.

"Their appearance takes some getting used to," Thea said as she led him into the large laboratory. "However, they're quite harmless."

Harmless, Jim thought as he saw the central enclosure, and what was inside its transparent walls. Some getting used to.

"Right through here." Thea opened an access panel and guided him into the enclosure. "We have twenty-seven of these stock rooms -- or crawlrooms, as the staff refers to them. Exercise promotes proper circulation and increases the average functional range to about thirty years."

A dozen bodies were creeping around the stainless steel mesh floor. None reacted to their entrance.

As if they'd been decapitated, Jim thought, but no neck wounds. No necks. Just headless bodies.

"Why are they naked?"

Thea gave him an amused look. "Easier to keep them sanitary. Waste products fall through the grid, and we just hose them down at the end of the shift."

Like zookeepers would. He crouched down beside one and placed a hand on its shoulder. It stopped crawling and flipped over onto its back. A large oval stoma on the sternum opened, and blasted him with an exhalation. As he lost his balance and fell on his buttocks, the aperture began to rhythmically open and close.

Smacking its lips. If it *had* lips. "What does it want?"

"She doesn't want anything, Jim." Thea helped him to his feet. "She has no head, and therefore no brain, so she has no feelings. No desires. She can't interact with you or me or the other HODS. What you see is a conditioned physical reaction. The HODS are trained to respond to the same touch for feeding intervals. Here" -- she took a small brown tube from her jacket pocket -- "let's give her a treat."

Thea bent over the headless female and squeezed the thick liquid contents of the tube into the stoma, which closed and contracted for a moment.

Jim looked at the small breasts and hairless mons, then checked the remainder of the stock. "Why so many males?"

"Our ratio of Ichabods to Maries is three to one. Bigger demand to harvest males these days."

"Ichabods?" The female latched on to his jacket with her hand. "Maries?"

"Staff joke. The males are Ichabods, the females are Maries." She made a tsking sound. "She won't hurt you, Jim. We suppressed fingernail and muscle growth to prevent involuntary self-injury."

He pried the hand off anyway. "Is there a lavatory nearby?"

The Director pointed. "Right around the corner, next to the caretaker's station."

He found it in time, and spent the next half-hour emptying out the contents of his stomach.

#

"Does the government know about your project?" Jim asked the Thea later.

"Who do you think funded it?"

He eyed the crawlroom. "Jesus Christ."

Thea turned to one of the caretakers, a heavily-muscled man with a bland expression, and asked for several specific chart. Then she said, "You're a neurologist; you've seen mutations in your line of work."

"Mutations, yes." Jim had seen infants born with terrible deformities, gaping cleft palates, distorted cranial cases, and even one tiny boy born with an exposed brain. "Nothing like these people."

"Stock. We call them stock. That's what they are. Headless Organ Donor Stock. Nothing more." Thea patted his arm the way a mother would. "Come on, Jim. Time to see your patients."

She led him down another hallway to an isolation room, where six of her "stock" lay strapped to hospital beds.

"The abscesses began showing up about two months ago. I've ruled out the usual causes -- no sign of injury or viral infection. We tried aspirating them, but it killed the three we tried it on."

"Killed them? Just by draining an abscess?"

"That's what doesn't make sense. Post-mortem shows they're only pockets of spinal fluid. They shouldn't have died, but they did."

Jim bent over the hospital bed and examined the line of bulges bisecting the median plane of the back. "Toxicology?"

"Also negative."

"If it's not viral, why have you isolated them?"

"These six have been observed demonstrating cluster behavior."

"What's that?"

Thea's lips thinned. "They congregate and indulge in non-productive physical activity with each other. Mutual masturbation, usually."

"Sounds like fun." Jim palpated the abscesses. "You said they weren't capable of interaction."

"All the HODS indulge in occasional masturbatory behavior."

Which pissed her off to no end, he could see that.

"However, these six have managed actual intercourse." The Director made an irritable gesture toward the female HODS in bed three. "Marie 978 is pregnant."

Marie 978 was very pregnant. "How far along is she?"

"About four weeks."

"What? She looks like she'll deliver in four weeks."

"A side effect of the growth hormone -- their natural gestational cycle has accelerated."

"Right along with their procreative drives."

"That would require more than hormonal stimulation, James. No, Marie's pregnancy is the result of random accident, I assure you."

There were all kinds of accidents. Jim thought of the male caretakers. "You're certain your staff haven't abused their privileges?"

The skin around her nose drew up. "We keep the crawlrooms on constant monitor. You can watch the vids later, if you like."

"I'll pass for now. I need to do a full MRI and ultrasound series on all of them." The HODS's limbs stiffened as he applied gentle pressure to the abscess. "I also want to review the post-mortems on the three you lost."

#

Hours later, in a borrowed office, Jim closed the last of the charts and rubbed his fingers against his eyes. A hand landed on his shoulder, making him yelp.

"Barbara." He slumped back in the chair. "Christ, don't do that."

"Sorry, James." She offered a tray with a covered plate. "I thought you might be hungry."

"Thanks." He had no appetite. "Tell me something. Why am I here?"

"To diagnose the cause of the HODS's spinal abscesses."

"Barbara, you didn't need to drag me out of bed at one a.m. to do this. What's the rush?"

She looked at the door, then at him. "The Surgeon General will be here to tour the facility in four days. We must have his full endorsement before we can begin harvesting the organs. You understand."

He understood. "You've been with this project since initiation, haven't you?"

"The Director recruited me straight out of BioTech. I know what you're thinking. In the beginning, I was shocked, too." She made a small, charming gesture. "I was such a kid."

His fantasies about getting her naked vanished. "Now that you're all grown up, you have no problem growing headless human beings and hacking them up for their organs?"

"No, James, I don't." Instead of getting mad, she sat down beside him and put a hand on his arm. "You can't imagine how important this project is. Thousands of people needing transplants die every year. Now that we have the HODS, no one needing a replacement organ will ever have to suffer again. Since we use the patients' own DNA to clone the HODS, there's no further need for anti-rejection drug therapy, either."

"The one that's pregnant. Marie" --he checked his notes--"Marie 978. Are you going to allow her to go full-term?"

"No. The fetus will be aborted. We're not monsters, Jim." Barbara's manicured fingernails tapped on the desk surface. "You don't approve."

"My approval isn't pertinent." Getting the hell out of here was. Something occurred to him. "How many of the HODS have gotten pregnant?"

"Six."

"When?"

"All in the last three months."

"Versus none in the previous two years since project initiation." He didn't wait for her to confirm that. "I'd like to take a look at those crawlroom vids now."

#

"Sit down," Thea said. "I'm delighted you've come to a conclusion so quickly."

"With the Surgeon General coming here? I imagine you are." He didn't sit down. "I don't think you'll like my diagnosis, though." He threw his diagnosis summary on her desk. "They're evolving."

"I beg your pardon."

"Evolution. A natural process in any species. Your hormone and genetic therapies have simply accelerated the process. The HODS are developing cerebral spinal meninges."

"That's utter nonsense. The primary goal of this project is to stop that from happening."

"Well, you failed."

"I'm not interested in creative speculation, Dr. Eliot."

"Let me tell you a story. I had a young kid come in to see me about six years ago. College student, complaining of migraines. No apparent cause. When I did the cranial MRI, I found nothing."

"Very fascinating, I'm sure, but--"

"I mean I found nothing inside her head. She had no brain tissue."

Thea's mouth opened and closed a few times.

"Yeah, that was my reaction. All she had was a two-centimeter clump of tissue where her brain stem should have been. Her skull was filled with spinal fluid."

Thea looked skeptical. "I never read about this case."

"I never published anything about it. How do you think the patient would have reacted if I told her she had no brain? I gave her a script for some painkillers, told her to take it easy on the all-night cram sessions, and sent her home."

"That's absurd."

He smiled. "She's on the dean list this year."

"You think fluid can replace brain tissue?"

"In her case, maybe it does. In the cases I've got here, I'd say the fluid is the precursor to actual neural tissue formation. Given the rate of cellular mutation, I'd say they'll be capable of higher brain functions within the next six months to a year."

Thea shook her head. "You're wrong. We suppressed development of the heads --"

-- and the HODS have simply adapted to the suppression. Life, Dr. Rogers-Cohan, goes on." Jim placed both hands on the desk edge and leaned over her. "Your stock has developed into a mutant sapient species. They're not mindless banks of replacement organs any longer. Tell that to the Surgeon General."

She groped for her glasses. "We'll suppress the spinal development."

"They'll adapt, and continue to mutate. Without four of the five senses to distract them, they'll develop other methods of communication and interaction. If they haven't already." Now for the part he was going to thoroughly enjoy. "It's over, Doctor. Shut down this fucking ghoulish factory."

She pressed a button on her phone. "Barbara, Dr. Eliot is ready to leave now." To Jim, she said, "Get out."

#

Jim Eliot got out. He went back to LA, called the Surgeon General, and even filed a grievance against Thea Rogers-Cohan with the American Medical Association for good measure.

The Surgeon General cancelled his visit to the GenSync facility. The corporation's attorneys went through the motions by threatening to sue Jim, but the project was shut down before anyone got to court.

Barbara Duffman paid a visit to Jim's office after the facility had been closed for good. Actually, she shoved an exam room door open, stomped in, and started yelling.

"You've ruined everything! Thea's career has been destroyed, they pulled all her licenses. They're even talking about taking the Nobel away from her!"

"Hello, Barbara." He helped his young patient off the table. "Tim, would you mind waiting out by the front desk for me? Thanks."

She ignored the child as he edged past her. "Do you know what you've done? Do you know how many people are going to die because you couldn't handle what you saw?"

"It's a little more complicated than that."

"You've murdered thousands by doing this. I hope you're happy."

"I'm thrilled." He stripped off his gloves and started washing his hands. "What happened to the HODS?"

"Most of them were put down. Why do you care?"

Like stray dogs and cats. "I care. Where are the ones you didn't kill?"

"I have no idea. Crawling around Yosemite, probably." She snorted. "Fifteen of them got loose somehow, including Marie 978. The park rangers are still looking for them."

"So I was wrong." Jim stopped washing his hands.

"About what?"

He smiled. "How long it would take them to develop higher brain functions."

"You're smirking about that?"

"No. Just thinking." He turned off the sink. "Those rangers would do better to pass out some of those brown feeding tubes to the tourists."

"Why?"

"Because by next summer, they're going to be knee-deep in wild Ichabods and Maries."

Dark Side Part One
by S.L. Viehl

Twelve hours to go before Dark Side went online, and if Will Dalton didn't strangle Martin E. Januso, Jr. before then, it would be a miracle.

"You manned Ohio State back in '77, right, Will?" the younger man asked. The audio in Dalton's suit amplified Januso's pitch to nerve-shredding octaves.

An ice pick in the ear would have been more fun.

"Yeah." Dalton aligned the feed platform translator's lateral couplings. Fantasized about Junior's helmet getting caught between the paraboloid panels before they closed. Imagined the satisfying pop what brains he had would make. "Set observation window default plus sixty degrees Sol."

The kid pulled up the subsystem on the remote terminal. "Why plus sixty?"

Will reigned in a sigh. "Solar winds disrupt the signals."

"You said JODI uses star coronas to amplify the signals."

"Only when we're boosting along the spectral jetstream." He had no intention of explaining that. Or condensing four decades of research into words of two syllables or less. "Otherwise, we stay the hell away from the sun."

"Oh. Right." Januso keyed in the parameters. "Default set. What was Phoenix like? Dad said you hung on until Congress pulled the funding in '96."

"'93." That was when his wife had died of pneumonia, and left him their four year old daughter to raise. AKA the worst year of his life. "It was a job."

Not like this one.

Two hundred fifty-seven tons of hardware had gone into making Dark Side the largest, most expensive radio telescope ever constructed. Transported in pieces from Terra, it had taken a hundred men nearly a year to clear the bottom of Mare Ingenii and reassemble the enormous paraboloid. Dalton himself had spent six months installing and fine-tuning the JanuSystems's Operational Digitizer/Identifier.

"Double check the polar display mode parameters, will you?"

"I did," Junior said. "Did you starjoc at Harvard?"

Too bad the construction crew had cleared out a week ago, Dalton thought. He could have framed someone else for the homicide. "Yeah, I worked for Horowitz."

Dalton checked the azimuth drive array. Tons of regolith had already been removed from the site. Despite this, moon dust still regularly worked its way into the equipment.

"How about Werthimer?"

"Yeah. Him and Sagan."

"You worked for Sagan?" Januso gaped from behind his face plate. "Geez, you have to be the oldest starjoc on Terra."

"We're on the moon, Januso." Dalton lifted his hand to run it through what was left of his silvery hair, and smacked himself in the helmet instead. *Christ*. "Now check those parameters, will you?"

They finished the last of inspections and took the 300 km trip back up to the crater's rim. There wasn't much to see along the way. Mare Ingenii was a near-perfect bowl of featureless basalt.

"Why'd they call it Dark Side, anyway?" The kid stared out the viewer. "The far side gets just as much sun as the side facing Terra."

"Ever hear of Pink Floyd?"

"Huh?"

"Never mind." Dalton concluded he'd soon qualify for sainthood. Or a life sentence on Mars' penal colony. Januso couldn't help the fact he was young, eager, and knew zero about radio astronomy. But why couldn't Bates have sent someone a little quieter to be Dalton's gopher?

Because Motor Mouth also happened to be the son of Dark Side's number one investor, M.E. Januso, Sr. Offplanet regulations required a minimum complement of two. Junior wanted the moon. Daddy's two hundred and forty-four billion dollar investment insured he got it.

Dalton, on the other hand, should have never bagged this slot. After forty years of jockeying SETI antenna, Bates had informed him he was too inexperienced to serve as project foreman. The slot required a thousand hours offplanet, minimum. Dalton had exactly zero. Nor did he have a rich Daddy to buy the ticket for him. At least they'd agreed to use his software design for the project.

All that changed when Januso Sr. had relayed Dalton personally.

"I want you up there," the kid's father had told Dalton. When Dalton brought up his lack of time-in-space, Januso waved a manicured hand. "No one knows that software better than you, Will. I'll handle Bates. You watch out for Marty."

Januso didn't want a competent man -- he wanted a babysitter. Dalton had opened his mouth to tell the man where to go. It came out "All right, I'll do it."

"Can't you give it up, Will?" his wife had once demanded after learning they'd be moving for the third time in a year. "There's nothing out there but stars. What about me and the baby? When are you going to start listening to us?"

"This will be last time," Will had promised. And, like always, she'd pretended to believe him.

"Will? You feeling okay?"

Dalton saw the envirodome's lights had gone green. Januso had already removed his suit. Disgusted, he released his seals and yanked off his helmet.

"Just peachy." Dalton rapidly stripped out of the bulky suit and tossed it on a maintenance rack. "Go to bed, kid. I'll finish up."

"Sure." Junior didn't argue, for once. "Mind if I borrow your synthesizer? Mine's busted."

The kid couldn't even repair his own stereo.

"Be my guest."

Dalton strode out into the narrow corridor before he was tempted to close and depressurize the lock. Once inside central control, he grabbed a stool and started the last diagnostic run.

"Hello, William."

"Hey, JODI." Dalton swivelled around to consult the latest relays from the Cape. There were the usual last-minute checks to be done, and a long list of relays to plow through. "Delete all non-essential transmissions."

"Including the one from Frances?"

The other bane of his existence. Wonderful. "No, save that one."

"Deletion complete." JODI's feminine audio sounded a little sulky. "They merely wanted to wish us good luck."

"They wanted to hear themselves talk. What did Frances have to say?"

"Do you really want me to repeat that sort of language?"

"No." He rubbed his hand over his face. He needed a shave. A week in Bermuda watching the bikinis. Someone to adopt Frances. "Patch me through."

Dalton watched his daughter's face coalesce on the display. She had her mother's hair, and his direct blue eyes. Her expression made him wince.

"Dad, what the hell are you doing?"

"Hi, sweetheart." Dalton braced himself. "Miss me?"

"Miss you?" She was snarling. "I could kill you! Do you know how long it took me to track you down?"

"Six months," he said. "Six amazingly quiet months."

"Well they're over." She thrust her fingers through her red hair, unconsciously imitating him. "You just couldn't tell me, could you? No, you had to wait until I went on remote assignment, then sneak offplanet."

"Franny." Will noticed the equipment behind her and frowned. "Aren't you topside?"

"No, Dad, I'm still on the bottom of the Pacific! I thought you might be worried about me." She half-turned away from the screen. "Shit, why do I even bother?"

"Baby, if I'd told you, you would have headed back to the States."

"Damn right I would have. You've never been offplanet before." Her expression softened a degree. "Dad, you're scaring me."

"I'm okay, Frances. How's the dig going?"

"Great. We've sifted through an acre of silt, and found zip." She sighed. "Unless we hit something soon, they're going to shut us down."

Her work in marine archeology had earned Frances Dalton a one-year stint in the Pacific's Ramapo Trench. Though he could never fathom why his daughter disdained the stars

in favor of the ocean floor, Dalton was proud of her determination. She'd gotten that from him, too.

"Hang in there, baby. You'll find the -- uh -- "

"Thule, Dad. We're looking for Thule."

"Right. Thule."

"Don't hold your breath." She rubbed her fingers against her temples. "When are you coming back?"

"As soon as the drones are up and running. Don't worry, sweetheart. I'll signal you once a week, okay?" She nodded. "Still love me?"

"I still want to kill you, but" -- she smiled -- "yeah, I love you. Be careful, Dad."

The signal terminated.

"Why didn't you tell Frances about your assignment?" JODI asked. "Were you afraid she would persuade you to refuse it?"

"You're here to analyze galactic radio transmissions, JODI, not me. Display sky feed one."

Dalton watched as the system pulled up blank scopes for the first of some ten thousand feed horns, the "ears" Dark Side used to search for artificial signals. Filtering out signal interference from Terra -- one of radio astronomers' major headaches -- was no longer a problem. Dark Side occupied the only place in the solar system that never had Terra cluttering up its sky.

"How are you doing on the pulse and wave digitizers?"

"All fully operational, William. Do you think we'll get lucky tomorrow?"

"Not unless you grow a body overnight and I lock Junior in his quarters." Dalton activated the auto-target. "That's it. All you have to do is wake me up on time. Can you handle that?"

"As the most advanced JanuSystems Operational Digitizer/Identifier array in existence," JODI said, "I should think so."

Dalton trudged down the corridor to his cramped quarters. Across the hall, he could hear music playing, and Junior softly snoring.

Thank God he didn't have to tuck him in. Then he would get life on Mars.

After a shower and shave, Dalton sat down in front of the view port and drank a beer he'd smuggled with him offplanet. He couldn't see the dish from here, not that it mattered. It was out there. Ready to give him what he wanted. What he'd been listening for all these years.

Sagittarius A.

Commonly known as the galactic hub, Sgr A occupied the very center of the Milky Way. It was shrouded by exotic gases and dozens of enigmatic blank spots. Some physicists thought the voids were immense black holes, whose combined force put the spin on the galactic wheel.

Dalton was betting they weren't.

Forty years ago, he'd been monitoring when the signal came in. A signal so powerful the subsequent overload had fried half a million old dollars in hardware. By the time they'd jury-rigged enough boards to get the back-up system on line, the signal had terminated.

Dalton had known what he'd heard it over the headset. Clear. Strong. Absolutely artificial in origin. Unfortunately, he'd been the only one to hear it. The receiver recorders triggered by the signal had been wiped clean.

Dalton's word hadn't amounted to much in those days. The project's supervisors had made some uneasy jokes about tinnitus. Wisely he'd had kept his mouth shut after that.

"I know you're out there." He lifted his beer and toasted the darkness. "This time, you're mine."

#

It was 0445 when Dalton left his quarters. To his surprise, the kid was already at the central console, gearing up to throw the switch.

"Putting in overtime, Januso?"

Junior's jaw sprang open. "What are you doing here?"

If he'd screwed up the panel, Dalton would kill him. "That's my question, Marty."

The kid flushed. "I guess I couldn't wait any longer."

"Yeah?" Dalton nudged him aside and inspected the panel. "You've initiated the coordinate scanners. Who told you how to do that?"

"I did, William," JODI said. "We wanted to surprise you."

"Run a maintenance check on yourself, JODI. You're getting too damn female." Dalton checked each setting. "Looks good."

Januso audibly exhaled his relief. "Thanks."

"But if I catch you fooling with it again, I'll kick your ass."

They spent the next hour gearing up for system initiation. Dalton ignored JODI's pointed reminders about taking a meal interval, and sent the kid to the galley for coffee instead.

Finally they were at ten minutes to first switch.

Dalton switched on all the monitors. "Give me the numbers, JODI." While the computer repeated the start sequence, he ran a final diagnostic. All green, except --

"I'm reading some proximity output interference." Dalton tapped the display with a finger. "JODI, track and identify the source."

"Tracking." The audio was silent for a few seconds. "Source is grid nine, section four. Identified. Active construction terminal running routine stress test."

"The crew should have deactivated all those," Dalton said. "Idiots. Do a remote shut down for me, JODI."

The interference disappeared. "Shut down completed."

"Good girl." Dalton punched an intercom key. "Januso, if you want to make history, get your butt in here."

A few moments later, the kid appeared carrying, of all things, a bottle of champagne and two flutes.

Dalton's brows rose. "You plan on getting me drunk?"

"Dad sent it." The kid set the booze and goblets out of the way. "He thought we'd want to celebrate."

"Next time, tell him I'm a beer man." Dalton swung back to the panel. "Okay, JODI. Initiate first switch."

"Activating antenna array."

Junior sat down beside him as Dalton opened the outer dome panels and switched on the exterior lighting. White beams pierced the darkness, bounced off the dish, and disappeared into space. The gleaming center tower rotated 360 degrees as it targeted the initial coordinates. A solid hum vibrated beneath the dome as huge underground generators fed power to the transformers.

"System fully activated, William."

"Good." Dalton watched the monitors and pretended he wasn't sweating. "Initiate Dark Side Program One. Full scan."

He didn't expect to see a single flicker on the display at first. The signal might come in at any time -- today, tomorrow, a thousand years from now.

"Nothing." Junior sounded disappointed.

"Keep your trousers on, kid."

The younger man shook his head. "Even if we do pick up a signal, how long did it take to get here? A hundred thousand years? A million? Double that by the time we transmit back to them. Why bother?"

"Wrong." Dalton pulled up JODI's main schematics. "Dark Side's software transmits along quasar jetstreams -- spectral pathways between every star in the galaxy. The Eos have to use the same system, otherwise, like you said, why bother?"

"So it doesn't take a million years?"

"Kid, didn't your old man explain any of this to you?"

"No," Januso said. "He said I'd learn everything I'd ever want to know about being a starjoc from you."

"Well he was right." Mollified, Dalton clapped a hand on the boy's shoulder. "Now, how about we crack open that pricey bottle of bubbles?"

#

Will decided he'd waited long enough.

Over the last twenty-one days, they'd received some organic signals here and there. Pulsars, the screaming maw of a nearby black hole, and one epic supernova.

Space static.

A solid signal would be found. The problem was time. The last of the drone units would arrive on next week's shuttle. Will had only to set them up, test them out, then Bates would recall them both to Terra.

On one hand, Dalton knew JODI would run virtually on her own. The drones would keep the envirodome operational. On the other hand . . .

This was his last shot.

"That's it." Dalton accessed the system's manual override, pulled up an open transmission screen, and input the formula.

"Will? What are you doing?" JODI asked.

"Taking a shortcut." Dalton sat back to monitor the feed horns' realignment. "I'm getting callouses on my ass."

"Override commands acknowledged. You have targeted the galactic hub, William."

"Bingo." The target sweep abruptly shifted the scanners' range from a neighboring region to the center of the Milky Way. "Any transmissions come in from Terra overnight?"

"One brief data-only signal from Frances."

"Display."

His daughter's message contained a single line of text: YOU OWE ME THREE SIGNALS, YOU OLD FART.

"Mouthy little witch," Dalton said fondly. "Scanner status?"

"Processing."

Will's grin widened when the receiver display went to full lock within seconds.

"Signal acquired," JODI said. "Source emanating from preset target coordinates. Processing."

"C'mon," Dalton said under his breath. Sweat trickled down his brow. "Talk to me."

"Processing completed. Signal identified." The computer paused for several dramatic moments. "Artificial in origin."

"Gotcha!" Dalton jumped to his feet, knocked over the chair, and whooped. "Give me audio, JODI."

"Audio feed initiated."

Faint, rhythmic pulses filled the dome. Dalton went still as he listened to the signal he hadn't heard in four decades. A simple, repeated pattern. One pulse. Three pulses. Five pulses. One. Three. Five.

"Copy that to the Cape, JODI." Dalton used his sleeve to wipe his face, then input his transmission sequence. "Transmit Dalton-1, continuous loop."

"Why transmit a pulse sequence of seven-eleven-thirteen, William?"

"Those are the next three prime numbers, darling." Dalton righted the stool and sat. "The one-three-five is the same code they transmitted back in '77. Mathematically they're saying Hello, have you got any brains. I'm saying yeah, we do."

Over the next four hours, Dalton's elation quickly evaporated. Sgr A kept transmitting the same pulse loop: one, three, five. Dalton had tried sending alternate prime number sequences, but the EO's signal didn't alter.

"JODI, any change in the pulse-width at all?"

"No, William. Signal band-width and pattern remains constant."

If they wouldn't respond to mathematics, maybe they'd answer a personal call. "Hook me up to an audio output and record."

"Output enabled. Recording initiated. Proceed."

"I am William Dalton of the planet Terra. If someone can hear the sound of my voice, please respond. End recording." Dalton stretched out his cramped legs. "Okay, JODI, transmit."

"Transmission complete," the computer said. "William, it is unlikely that extraterrestrial life forms will comprehend our language."

"So I'll teach them all the good words." He began the daily routine of checks and diagnostics.

An hour later, JODI's mother rack boards surged into red-range. Dalton snapped his head up. "JODI? What the hell --"

"Incoming signal," the computer said. "Processing."

Was someone talking back?

"Signal processing complete. Artificial in origin."

"I know that, you silly twit." He grabbed the headset and jammed it over his ears. "Play it for me!"

"Commencing playback."

It wasn't a pulse. It was a voice. Unlike any voice Dalton had ever heard. Three sounds, stretched out in an eerie wail. "D-a-a-a-l-t-o-o-o-n. T-e-e-e-r-r-a-a-a-n. H-e-e-e-a-a-a-r."

"Shit." He tore the headset off and flung it away from him. "It has to be an echo."

But the equipment said it wasn't.

"Incoming transmission from Terra."

JODI relayed the message to the main console. George Bates, the planet-side project manager, appeared on the display.

Bates looked very pleased. "Will, we copied your relay. How are you doing up there?"

He was sweating. Terrified. Ready to throw up. "Fine, George."

"Any break in that EO trans?"

"Same three pulses," Dalton lied. "We'll signal if there's any change."

"Excellent. Nice work, Will. You're coming home a hero. Cape out."

"William, why did you lie to Project Manager Bates?" JODI asked.

Dalton sagged back into his chair. Suddenly he was furious. "If this is your idea of a joke, JODI, I'll take you apart with a screwdriver, board by board!"

"Humor is not part of my programming."

"Right." He slipped the headset back on. It felt like he was wrapping a snake around his skull. "Repeat the last signal, JODI."

The same alien voice wailed in his ears. "D-a-a-a-l-t-o-o-o-n. T-e-e-e-r-r-a-a-a-n. H-e-e-e-a-a-a-r."

"Enable audio, JODI." Dalton took a deep breath. "This is Dalton. Who are you? What's your name?"

Three minutes later JODI processed a response.

"D-a-a-l-t-o-o-n. I-I. E-e-s-r-a-a."

"Open the loop, JODI, and boost to interchange." Dalton cleared his throat. "Your name is Esra?"

"E-s-r-a. I. E-s-r-a."

"Do you have translation technology?" He saw the kid enter the command center and waved him toward the panel. Once Januso got there, Dalton handed him a headset. "Marty, you're not going to believe this."

"Dalton." Something about Esra's voice made the hair on the back of Dalton's neck rise. "Technology. Translate. Language."

Dalton's blood thundered in his head. Were his people capable of interstellar flight? "Are you located in the center of this galaxy, Esra?"

"Yes."

"We are two million light years apart."

"Yes."

Junior pressed his hands over the earpieces and frowned. Dalton made a don't-worry gesture. "Esra. What is the name of your world?"

"No. World. Dalton."

"Your planet," Dalton said, thinking the alien didn't understand him. "Where your people live."

"No. Planet. No. People. Dalton."

Januso was shaking his head. "Will --"

"Shut up." Dalton spoke into the transmitter. "Esra. are you on a ship? Are you alone?"

"No. Ship. Alone. Space."

"Esra. Why did you respond?"

"Dalton. I. Create."

"What do you create?"

"You. Dalton. Terra. All."

"Oh, my God."

"Yes. I. God."

That was when JODI's main processors blew, and Esra's signal abruptly terminated.

#

"I'm sorry, Will, but I didn't hear it," Januso said an hour later as he handed him the board scanner.

Dalton's forehead bounced off a support strut as he tried to sit upright. "What do you mean, you didn't hear it? He was talking to me in English, for Christ's sake!"

"I didn't hear anything." The kid gave him a hand up. His young face appeared worried. "There was nothing but static."

"Bullshit." Dalton walked over to the console and punched in an access command. "JODI, replay last three minutes of the latest transmission."

"All transmissions have been deleted."

"Replay the god damned signal!"

"All transmissions have been deleted."

"I'm sure you heard something," Januso said, grabbing Dalton's arm. "Once we get the processors back on line, JODI can access her core memory."

Dalton knocked the clammy hand away. "You were hooked in on the headset. You heard it, the same way I did."

Januso took a discreet step backward. "Let's get JODI back on line, then we'll check it out."

Three hours later JODI's systems were fully operational, and Dalton was ready to explode again.

"Damn it, JODI, the core memory can't be breached."

"Internal diagnostic complete. No records on file."

The kid hovered. "Will, maybe the Cape can upload a recovery program --"

"No." Dalton tossed his tools back in the storage unit and slammed the lid. "You heard her. She's wiped."

Back in his quarters, Dalton thought about drinking himself into oblivion. Taking apart some of his furnishings with his bare hands. Wiping up the control room with Junior's face.

He took a cold shower, dressed, and sat looking at the dish until Januso signalled him.

"What?"

"I need you up here."

When Dalton got to central control, Januso had his hands thrust in his pockets and a hang-dog look on his face.

"You told them."

"Sort of." The kid looked up, cringed, and went back to inspecting the deck. "They relayed about the cut-off. Mr. Bates wanted to know what happened, and I just . . ."

"Told him everything."

Junior nodded miserably.

Will sighed. "JODI, patch me through to the Cape."

His subsequent report to Bates didn't help.

"You heard God transmitting from the galactic hub?"

Dalton's molars ground together. "Yes, sir."

"And God's name is Esra?"

"Sir," Januso said, leaning toward the display, "as soon as we recover the transmissions, we'll relay them to you."

"How? If the core's wiped --"

Januso Sr. interrupted the relay with an override signal. "Marty? What the hell's going on? I got some crazy message about Dalton talking to God."

"I didn't talk to God," Dalton said. "I received a signal from an EO claiming to be God."

"Marty? Are you listening?"

"Right here, Dad."

"Is that man drunk?"

Dalton pushed himself away from the console and began pacing around JODI's processor rack.

"No, Dad. Listen --"

"Marty, shut up. Dalton, get your ass back on line."

Dalton stalked over to the display. "Sir?"

"Pack your bags. You're fired."

Bates decided to jump in. "Mr. Januso, you don't have the authority to --"

"The hell I don't." The billionaire's temper exploded. "You've got my son stuck on the moon with a lunatic!"

"Sir, we simply can't --"

"You get him back on planet in twenty-four hours or I'm shutting this project down!"

Now Bates looked miserable. "Dalton --"

"Yeah. I know. I'm packing."

Dalton stalked back to his quarters. Januso shadowed him, putting up a hand to stop the door panel from sliding shut.

"Will, I'm sorry."

"Save it." Dalton pulled out a case from his storage unit and opened it. "Get back to the console. Run a full system analysis on JODI." He yanked open a drawer and grabbed a handful of shirts. "And if Esra calls again, tell him I'm busy."

The door panel slid shut.

Why the hell had he ever wanted this lousy job in the first place? It was '77, all over again. Worse. He'd made a complete ass out of himself. Talking with God. Right. Next he'd

be chatting with Napoleon. He needed to stop thinking for awhile. Put on a Mozart disc. Get plastered.

He grabbed a beer. When he couldn't find his synthesizer, Dalton remembered the kid had borrowed it weeks ago. Never bothered to return the damn thing, either. Dalton hit the door panel with his fist.

He'd stayed out of Januso's quarters, mostly because Junior was a pig. Now he picked his way around piles of dirty garments and stacks of entertainment discs. The synthesizer sat hooked up next to the kid's berth.

"Probably listens to spinal rap." Dalton snatched the unit from the table. Something sitting next to it caught his eye. Junior had left a datapad on. Dalton reached down to switch it off, then frowned. It wasn't a datapad. It was a terminal remote. One Dalton often used to monitor JODI's systems when they left the dome.

What was the kid doing with this?

He picked it up and shoved it in his pocket, just before the door panel behind him slid open.

"Will? What are you doing in here?"

He swung around and lifted the synthesizer. "Just getting this."

"Oh, sorry."

"No problem." Dalton walked past him and across the corridor into his own quarters. "I'm getting some sleep before the shuttle arrives."

He left the door panel open, but went through the motions of packing until he heard the kid's footsteps retreat. Then he took the remote out and keyed it to recall.

What appeared on the display made him chug the rest of his beer.

#

"Kid."

Januso's nodding head jerked up. "Hey, Will. Why are you suited up?"

"I had to take care of a little problem."

"You went out alone?" Junior glanced at the console chronometer and yawned. "You should have woken me up."

"I couldn't wait." Dalton grabbed a headset and threw it at Januso. "Put it on."

"What's wrong?"

"Put it on, or I'll staple it to your ears." Januso jammed the unit over the his head.

"Good. JODI?"

"Yes, William?"

"Initiate Program Dalton-2. Give me an open audio on Martin's headset." Dalton downloaded the data he'd pulled from the remote terminal.

An eerie alien voice filled the room. "D-a-a-l-t-o-o-n. I-I. E-e-s-r-a-a."

"Hear that?" he asked the kid. Januso shook his head slowly. "Maybe we need to wash it through the analyzer a few times. JODI, remove all frequency filters."

The voice went from eerie to monotonal. "Dalton. I. Esra."

"Good girl, JODI. Now resequence the signal as it was originally transmitted, and replace the missing segments."

Dalton's own voice came over the audio. "Dalton of the planet Terra. I'm okay, Frances."

Januso slowly removed the headset.

"Nice try, Junior. You're not as dumb as you act, are you? Where did you graduate? Berkeley? Harvard Tech?"

"MIT," Januso said in a sullen voice. "Class of '04."

"That's what I figured. You're not a kid. You just look like one." Dalton moved in.

"Majored in radio astronomy, too, didn't you?"

Januso's lips curled. "I have a PhD."

"Well, kiss my ass. It's Dr. Motor Mouth." Dalton leaned against the mother rack's frame. "How did you do it? Without me picking up the transmitter from the surface?"

"I programmed JODI to accept direct feed and hooked her up to the remote terminal."

"So no transmission to screw up the monitors. Nice work. Used my synthesizer to create the echo distortion. Then all you had to do was bounce it back to Dark Side." Dalton thought for a moment. "I'll bet you used a deep space probe. Which one? Voyager? Sagan III?"

"The Hawking," Januso said.

"Beautiful. Then all you needed was a worn-out old starjoc to take the blame for the whole deal. No one would believe I'd heard an alien voice talking back. Especially one who claimed he was God. What I can't figure out is why. Your old man funded the project. Why sabotage it? He'd loose all that lovely money." Dalton stroked his stubbly chin. "Or would he?"

"Your program doesn't work, Dalton." Januso sneered. "I ran it from Arecibo. It's worthless."

"Sure it was. Because it doesn't work anywhere but here. Did you disable the original program altogether, or just mask it?"

Januso didn't try to put up a pretense. "I dumped it before first switch."

"Well, put it back," Dalton said. "Then we're going to call Daddy and tell him whatever scam he's pulled on the Project Board is busted."

Dalton should have remembered Januso wasn't stupid, or slow. The kid's right fist filled up his vision. The world exploded. Pain, then darkness.

". . . the only way, you know."

Dalton winced as he drifted back into consciousness. Damn kid's voice drilled into his aching skull. Someone needed to adjusted the suit audio units --

Dalton opened his eyes. Above him was black, star-studded space. He couldn't move his legs or arms. The glitter of silvery metal caught his eye, and he turned his head.

He was on the paraboloid. Or, more precisely, wedged between two panels of it. Januso's face appeared above him.

"So you're awake." The kid's breath fogged the interior surface of his face plate. "Too bad."

Dalton realized what Januso had done. The dish panels could be manually uncoupled for maintenance purposes. The kid had wedged him in and planned to key the couplings to close. The same thing he'd fantasized about doing to Junior only a couple of weeks ago. "Adding murder one to your resume, Dr. Januso?"

Januso laughed, straightened and turned away.

"Martin." The kid's helmet swivelled back toward him. "Your old man is using you. They'll know it wasn't an accident. Mars is cold as hell."

"It was my idea, Dalton." Januso began climbing back up to the paraboloid's rim. "See you, starjoc."

"Asshole." Dalton struggled, but his limbs remained pinned between the rhodium alloy panels. "Dalton to command center."

"Command Center."

"JODI, release panel couplings in southern grid section twelve and thirteen."

"Unable to execute. Command override activated."

"Won't work, Dalton," Januso said over the suit audio. "I've locked you out."

The kid had a lot to learn. Januso may have screwed with the primary software, but Will bet he'd forgotten about the routine maintenance check system. "JODI, initiate program Dalton C-5. My voice command only. Enable."

"Initiating Program Dalton C-5," JODI said.

Januso swore. "Disregard all Dalton voice command codes!"

"Unable to execute. Command override activated. Maintenance program initiated."

"Good," Dalton said. "Enter formula $z(n+1) = zn^2 + c$. Calculate. Use all resources."

"Processing."

"What are you doing?" Januso shouted.

"Locking you out. JODI is going to calculate infinity. Should take a while."

Dalton didn't have to wait long. Januso reappeared and grabbed the front of his suit.

"Tell her to discontinue, or I'll rip it open."

"You'd just be committing suicide. JODI's been instructed to use all resources. By now she's shut down the whole envirodome. Not even your old man could get a shuttle here in time to keep you from asphyxiating, kid."

"And if I let you live? Like you said, Mars is cold."

"Cut me in," Dalton said. "I'll help you."

A speculative gleam entered the boy's eyes. "Yeah?"

"Hey, I'm an old man." Sweat trickled down the back of Dalton's suit. "I'd like to spend my golden years on a remote, tropical island."

Januso's grip relaxed. "You'll still have to take the fall for the project."

"Ask me if I care."

#

On the way back to the envirodome, Junior filled in the details of the plan.

M.E. Januso had invested his own money in the Dark Side Project, primarily to insure he'd get the manufacturing contract for the paraboloid. However, he had no intentions of losing his \$244 billion dollar investment. The entire project had to fail in order to recoup project costs from the underwriting insurance companies. That, and sitting on top of all the profits he'd made as the primary project contractor, would double the family fortune.

"That's why we approved your software design," Junior said. "I did the research on you myself. Turned up all the data on the stunt you pulled back in '77. Everyone knows what a fanatic you are about Sgr A. You were the best insurance of all."

"Was I?" Will looked out at the walls of the crater.

"Let's go over the story again," the kid said.

When they arrived back at the dome, Januso insisted on placing the signal right away. "Remember, say exactly what I told you to. Nothing more, nothing less."

JODI quickly patched the direct relay through to the Cape, and the monitors filled with the faces of unhappy men.

"Dalton, this had better be good," Bates said.

M.E. Januso Sr. wasn't quite as diplomatic. "What the hell do you want, you maniac?"

"Gentlemen. I wanted to let you know that I'm responsible for the bogus transmission," Dalton said. "JODI, replay signal Esra-1, original signal, frequency wash, then resequences, if you would, please."

"D-a-a-l-t-o-o-n. I-I. E-e-s-r-a-a. Dalton. I. Esra. Dalton of the planet Terra. I'm okay, Frances."

"For God's sake, Dalton." Bates scowled. "Shut it off."

"There's more." Dalton smiled at the kid. "JODI, access Program Dalton-2. Replay envirosuit audio transmissions, please." He grabbed Junior's arm before Januso could shut down the main console.

"So you're awake. Too bad."

"Adding murder one to your resume, Dr. Januso?"

There was the sound of Januso's laughter.

"Martin. Your old man is using you. They'll know it wasn't an accident. Mars is cold as hell."

"It was my idea, Dalton."

"JODI, forward to the last ten seconds recorded," Dalton said.

"You'll still have to take the fall for the project."

"Ask me if I care."

Dalton leaned close to the kid's pale, perspiring face. "You really should have asked me if I cared, Junior."

#

It took another month to replace JODI's original software. While Dalton and his new assistant worked on that, they monitored the Januso hearings.

"Looks like they'll both do Mars time," Dalton said, then realized his server was empty. "Hey, where's my coffee?"

"Get it yourself, you lazy slug." Frances leaned over and switched on the tracking controls. His daughter had taken over as Will's assistant once Januso had been hauled back to Terra. The Cape was more than happy to oblige, in light of the lawsuit she'd threatened to file if they didn't. Will suspected she had years of nagging to make up for. "Okay, sky feed systems are back online. That's the last item on my list. How about you?"

Dalton didn't have to look. "We're done. Ready to start her up?"

Frances sat down next to him, folded her arms, and grinned. "I think you should do the honors, Dad."

"My pleasure. JODI, initiate second switch operations."

"Activating antenna array."

He put an arm around his daughter as they watched the paraboloid sparkle in the darkness. "Initiate Dark Side program Dalton-3."

Franny propped her head on his shoulder. "Think we'll hear something?"

"You never know, sweetheart." Dalton checked the antenna. "JODI, scanner status?"

"Processing." A few minutes later, JODI's audio made a sound that might have been a laugh. "Signal acquired."

Author's note: For various reasons, sometimes an editor has to cut scenes from a novel or have the writer revise them, and this is what happened to the original beginning of "Beyond Varallan," StarDoc book Two. Although I agreed with my editor that the majority of the original opener scene could be sacrificed and the rest worked in with another scene with Cherijo's adopted brother, Xonea, I've always missed it. This month I thought I'd post it in lieu of a short story, though it almost passes for one on its own.

Engaging the Enemy

from the original manuscript for StarDoc II: Beyond Varallan
by S.L. Viehl

With purity and holiness I will pass my life and practice my art.
Hippocrates (460?-377? B.C.)

With sweat dripping down my face and a curse on my lips, I dropped to my knees. I was hot, bruised, and filthy. We'd been forced to stay on the move, and I'd been clobbered twice since the battle had started. If I took a third hit, I decided, someone was going down with me.

I dug both hands into the thick layer of muck beneath me. Brown rivulets oozed between my fingers and down my forearms as I raised my only weapon.

"Healer . . ." a shrill voice called.

I peered through the tight, glittering tangle of yiborra grass. They were close. Beside me, a grimy blue face emerged from the ground cover.

"They're advancing," he murmured, close to my ear.

A drop of sweat stung my right eye, and I blinked it away. I should have drafted one of the surgical nurses. You never appreciated a good sponger until you needed one.

I turned my head, and whispered, "Get ready."

I finished my preparations as the signal passed soundlessly down the line. Ammunition was primed, targets acquired. Tension rose to peak levels as my team shifted into counter-attack position. Without warning, the other side launched a battery of projectiles overhead. Everyone hit the mud, including me.

At least half their reserves, I estimated. Trying to flush us out. Nice move. Too bad they'd missed us completely. When the others would have pushed forward, I held up my fist.

"Wait." Couldn't tell my team to wait until they saw the whites of their eyes, I thought. Their eyes were nothing but white. "Let them move in."

Moments flew by without further sign the enemy was advancing. I knew better than to feel safe; when they wanted to, they could be absolutely soundless. Especially their leader.

Instead, I calculated elapsed time and the distance to be covered between us. Just a few more seconds, I thought. Shadows deepened, shifted. I drew in a deep breath. Smelled

the damp mud. My own sweat. And something else . . . the faintest trace of something sweet . .

It was him.

I turned my fist. The signal to get ready. My team went on full alert. I nodded toward the right. Starboard. A slight rustle of grass from that direction decided it.

"Now!"

Trumpeting howls echoed me as a dozen bodies vaulted from their hiding places. The enemy, startled by the unexpected offensive, reacted blindly. Crossfire immediately filled the air. Bodies darted and dodged. Grappling forms went down, hard. Mud exploded all around me.

"Over here!"

"Xonea! I see -- "

"No! There! *There!*"

I spotted him, and flattened down as low as I could. His scent grew stronger, until I saw his bulky form pass only inches away. I waited until his back was toward me. Never would have tried this three weeks ago. Back then I'd been too green to resort to anything but evasive action.

Whap!

Direct hit. I jumped over the tangle of grass to throw my arms around the staggering form. He twisted and got me half under him before we landed in the foot-deep muck. The heavy impact of his body on mine jolted through my limbs.

Damn, I always forgot how big they were.

I used the momentum, rolling with it, wrestling for possession of the prize. Mud splattered my face, filling my mouth and nose as he shoved me down.

Not even trying to be a gentleman today.

I spat out the gunk and slipped under his raised arm. He had the advantage of size and strength; I had speed and flexibility.

Strength got flexibility pinned under him in about three seconds flat.

He was big and heavy. My heaving body sank into the mud. Several of my ribs creaked a warning as his arms clamped around me. I scowled up into the face above mine.

"You have lost," he said.

I bared some teeth, and got one arm free. "Uh-uh."

He pinned my wrist back down. "What say you now?" His breath was fragrant with the sweet jasperry tea he liked to drink. "Concede."

There was only one way to handle this. I relaxed beneath him. Opened my mouth as if to agree to the surrender he demanded. He grinned. I felt his arms loosen, and filled both my hands with mud.

He was so gullible.

I drove the top of my head into his chin, hard. That painful little surprise broke his slippery grasp. Two handfuls of mud in his face did the rest. I squirmed out from under him, and snatched the prize from his hand. A tuck of my arms, a full body roll, and I was back on my feet.

I dodged the sweeping snatch of his big hands, and ran from there to the center of the fray. Everyone went still at the sight of the flag I was carrying above my head. I planted the pole in the mud and grinned at the young, gaping blue faces. "Healer's Team prevails."

My troops surrounded me and cheered. Beyond us, the losers grumbled as they gathered around their leader.

"It is not fair, Xonea," a six-foot tall teenager said as he helped my temporarily-blinded ClanBrother to his feet. "The Healer's team has prevailed over us four times now."

"Our newest HouseClan member brings honor to our name," the big pilot said as he wiped the mud from his eyes and face. From the looks of it he'd have a nice purplish bruise on

his chin by tomorrow. Courtesy of the newest HouseClan member. "However unscrupulous she proves to be in our games."

"Hah!" I laughed. "You're just sick of losing, Xonea."

Xonea slogged through the yiborra grass toward me. One of the largest men on the ship, the sapphire-skinned Jorenian could have snapped me in half with one twitch of his big blue hand. He halted in front of me. All seven and a half feet of him.

I stood my ground. Tried to look tough as I began sinking in it to my ankles. Stern white eyes stared down at me. I held on to the pole, while HouseClan Torin's stained banner fluttered over my head.

"We prevailed." *Never say Uncle*, Maggie had taught me. *Even if the other guy was four times your size.* "Concede, Xonea."

The two teams got very quiet. Xonea didn't blink. Neither did I. He leaned close. Black eyebrows lowered. For a moment, I wondered if Maggie's advice had been all that great.

"We concede." Xonea smiled. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." I grinned back at him. We clasped our palms together and shook them, Terran-style. That was when I heard the environome door panel slide open behind me.

"What in the name of the Mother . . . ?"

I swung around to see the startled face of a Jorenian woman in a physician's tunic. None other than the Senior Healer, Tonetka Torin. I let the pole go slack, and the banner drooped down against my shoulder. The never-say-Uncle leader of the winning team was about to get chewed out by her teacher and boss.

"Cherijo?" She walked over and inspected me as if I had sprouted another head. Well over six feet tall herself, Tonetka had plenty of looming space over me. "Is that you?"

Competent thoracic surgeons didn't go around with mud dripping from their chins, as a rule.

"It's me, boss." I wiped my face with the back of my hand.

One of the Jorenian children sidled up to me and put a dirty arm around my waist. At ten years old, she stood only a half-foot taller than me.

"Senior Healer!" The little girl gave me an affectionate squeeze that bruised my already-tender ribs. "You should have seen our final assault! Xonea's team never had a clue!"

Tonetka pursed her lips at the Terran idiom. "I'm sure they didn't, child." Her sharp gaze settled on me again. Skillful, beautiful hands spread to indicate both groups. "What call you this, Healer? Surely not personal hygienic training."

I cleared my throat. "A mudball fight, boss." Water began to cascade down on us from the ports overhead. The Senior Healer stepped hastily back into the entrance alcove. The kids giggled and danced beneath the pre-programmed rain shower. "Personal hygiene included."

#

Tonetka and I arrived at my quarters a short time after the clean-up. Jenner greeted us at the door panel. My Tibetan temple cat's silver fur rippled as he looked from my boss to me. It wasn't hard to guess what His Majesty thought of my soggy, mud-stained appearance.

Well, well. Look what the Jorenian dragged in.

"May we come in?" I asked, heavy on the sarcasm.

You may. He turned and stalked off, tail held high. When I would have playfully ruffled his fur, he darted out of reach. Utter disdain radiated from his regal glare. *Don't even think about it.* Jenner tolerated very little. Getting his pelt damp topped his Absolutely Not list.

"What an eloquent expression," Tonetka said. "He must worry about you during your absence, Cherijo."

"Not me. Getting his dinner on time, maybe."

After a brief but necessary interval in my cleansing unit, I shrugged into a light robe and rejoined the Jorenian physician. Tonetka had prepared a stimulating drink for both of us and held out a server. I fell on it like a desert-stranded exile.

My cat perched on my favorite chair and dug his claws in. *Was your favorite chair. It's mine now.* He began kneading the cushion with his paws, preparing for yet another nap.

"Keep it up, lazy," I said with a smile. "I can always program a feline exercise program. You're getting pretty fat, you know."

Jenner drew himself up, thoroughly insulted. It's not fat, it's muscle.

"I see you . . . running laps around a track," I said. My grin widened. "Being chased by Terran wolfspaniels."

I got my chair back.

"*N'ettka devaol n'und dworka,*" my boss said.

I was startled, then realized I didn't have my vocollar on. I rolled my eyes at Tonetka, gulped down the rest of my tea, then retrieved it. I'd gotten so used to wearing the device that I always forgot I had it on -- or off.

The vocollar was a flat, square-linked translator worn like a necklace. It enabled me to communicate with the non-Terrans on board the Sunlace. That constituted pretty much everyone on the ship, with one rather aggravating exception.

I fastened it around my neck. "Sorry, what did you say?"

"Do not gulp it so, you will give yourself dyspepsia."

Oops, forgot to breathe in the aroma again. Like Terran Orientals, Jorenians got rather fussy about how you drank their tea. "Sorry."

"I can see you enjoyed your leisure interval; your skin is glowing," my boss said, then she gave me a puzzled look. "From where does this mudball fighting come from? We have no such activity on Joren."

"It was something the kids and I invented one day when we planned to do some sand sculpting." I rubbed a towel over my wet hair as I sat down. "I accessed the main imager array and . . . well, you know how I am with most tech."

Now she rolled her eyes. "Ah, yes. How you are able to feed yourself remains a mystery to me."

"The prep units like me. Dimensional simulators don't," I said. "Anyway, instead of producing a simulation of New Angeles Beach, my program generated a sea of saturated topsoil." I lifted a shoulder. "Couldn't let all that beautiful mud go to waste, now, could we?"

"I thought you far too fastidious for such an activity."

"This is simulated mud," I replied. "The most sanitary kind in the universe."

Tonetka chuckled. "Well, Xonea will not soon forget his -- fourth, was it? -- defeat in a row. The children will remind him if he does. Unmercifully." She gave me this shrewd, direct glance.

"What?" I put a hand to my nose. "Did I miss some gunk?"

From the way she smiled, I knew I was in for one of her 'talks'. Time for diversionary tactics. I went to my console and slipped in a music disc. Charlie Parker's alto sax spun dazzling notes into the air. Jorenians were always fascinated when they heard bebop for the first time.

"How are you adjusting to life aboard the Sunlace, Cherijo?"

So much for ancient Terran jazz bailing me out. My hands gripped the sides of the unit for a moment. "Fine, thanks."

That didn't fool her. "You spend a great deal of your off-duty time with the children."

I sat back down and sipped my tea. "I like kids." The truth, mostly because they never lectured me.

"Xonea reminds you of my ClanNephew, does he not?"

"Not really," I lied.

Tonetka rose and smoothed out her tunic. "You honor your Chosen, yet it is past the time to release him to his journey."

Easier said. "We did that, Tonetka. Remember? I gave part of the eulogy." I nearly cracked into a heap of small pieces doing it, too.

My boss walked over and put her hand on my shoulder. "We sent his body to the embrace of the stars. His memory remains with you."

"I'll never forget him." What was wrong with his memory? It was all I had left. The stars weren't getting it.

"No." Her hand tightened, then drew away. "I do not believe you will." She made a graceful gesture that was the Jorenian equivalent to shaking her finger in my face. "Only know, Cherijo, your journey will endure many more changes. You cannot walk two paths."

Jorenian journey philosophy was full of little gems like that. "*You cannot walk two paths*" (make up your mind); "*select the journey to complement your destination*" (make up your mind and decide where you want to go); and the always popular "*a wise traveller knows his direction*" (do you even know where you're going, stupid?).

What else could be expected from a species whose idea of a good time was to travel a thousand light years? For no particular reason, either. The mood hit them and *wham!* They were firing up a stardrive.

The Senior Healer was well-acquainted with my view of journey philosophy, too. I'd aired my opinion often enough.

Tonetka cleaned and put away her server before she added, "I say this to you as your friend."

Instant remorse descended. I didn't have to be so touchy. Tonetka was only trying to help.

"Thanks for the advice," I said. I even manufactured a believable smile.

"Anytime," she said. My Terran flippancy had become highly contagious. "What say you to making evening rounds with me? I have a case of lymphedema I would hear your opinion on."

Work. Now there was something I could get enthusiastic about. "Great." I headed for a clean tunic. "I'll meet you in Medical Bay."

"Cherijo?"

I skidded to a halt.

"Grant me one request?"

Here it comes, I thought, and turned. No matter what, be polite. She is your boss.

"The next time you have a fight, please include me on your team," Tonetka said, her smile mischievous. "I should like to throw some mud at Xonea and capture that banner myself."

She made a farewell gesture, and departed.

by S.L. Viehl

Quorum: the number (as a majority) of officers or members of a body that when duly assembled is legally competent to transact business. -- Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary

Quorum Sensing: the term used to describe the phenomenon whereby the accumulation of signalling molecules enable a single cell to sense the number of bacteria (cell density.) -- University of Nottingham Quorum Sensing Research Group, June 2001

The signal came in an hour after I'd fallen to sleep. Not surprising or unusual. QSOPs has no respect for the living dead.

I reached out, groped for the bedside console switch, and opened one eye. Maybe I wouldn't have to wake up all the way. "Mmmmph?"

My assistant's image blipped up on the screen. "Bonnie, we've established a protein lock on Hastings. Chem traces all over the grid. It's definitely a multifactorial, maybe a VF1."

Now I was awake. "What's the stain show, Adam? Gram-negative? You nail down the exotoxins?"

"Blue, yes, a shitload, and when will you be here?"

"Ten minutes." I closed my eye. "Signal transport for me, will you?"

"Already on the way."

I dragged myself out of bed. Got dressed. Kissed my sleeping husband on the brow. Listened to him mutter something in his sleep. I never woke him up these days, knowing he'd pace the floor until I signaled.

If I signaled.

We'd selected Troy Hastings from the Detroit survivor pool; he'd already been fighting the bug for two weeks on his own. One of the CDC search team had noticed the infection that had killed Hastings's immediate family and about three hundred thousand of his neighbors had shown quorum potential, which was why QSOPs got called in, and why Troy got shipped on a glidejet to Miami.

I walked out of the bedroom and snagged a cup of instant coffee from my prep unit. My front door panel chimed after I gulped the first scalding mouthful. I threw the rest out and put on my breather.

Time to go to work.

#

I wouldn't have my cushy job, if Dr. Rebecca Stanislawski hadn't foreseen what would happen after the millennium, when the various extremist factions around the globe had decided the ban on biotech weapons was too inconvenient for their group purposes. They'd started lobbing salvos of genetically-engineered bacteria at each other. The wind blew the fallout around. It got into the water tables. Infected soldiers and refugees did the rest.

By that time, nearly all of the antibiotics developed during the twentieth century had been rendered useless. Hundreds of thousands of people died -- daily. We needed a new approach to treatment, to give the researchers time to develop new vaccines.

Dr. Stanislawski had developed the first multiphase quorum VRML vocabulary, and spent the next ten years teaching me and a handful of her other graduate students how to "speak" bug.

After a mutated form of *Klebsiella influenzae* hit North America, the government for once had the good sense to provide unlimited funding. Becca had promptly founded QSOPs. She'd brought all of us on board as her preliminary research staff.

"Survival of the species," Dr. Stanislawski had said, "is now your job description."

And suddenly the bugs had a fight on their hands again.

As I rode to the lab in the glidecab Adam had sent, I thought about the footsteps I was trying to fill. Since Becca hadn't kept her promise to me to live forever, I was now running the facility. I wasn't afraid of messing up my name, but mine wasn't spelled out in nice silver lettering across the front of the building.

At the entrance to the Stanislawski Quorum Sensing Operations Laboratory, the receptionist keyed me in. I immediately stripped and stepped onto the fry plate. The decon took a few seconds, then I was stepping out and into my envirosuit.

"Good morning, Dr. Jones." The receptionist moved gracefully toward me. She was used to spending eight hours at a stretch wearing the bulky suit.

Not me. I hated the damn things, myself, but we couldn't use dermal seal outside the Containment unit. Too much residual biofallout still polluted the air.

"Gracie." I signed in on her clipboard and submitted to the obligatory retinal scan. "How are the boys doing?"

"Fine. Zack keeps whining about wearing his breather and O-2 rig to school; says it messes up his hair. He's at that age, I guess."

"Be nice if we could figure out a way to permanently ditch them." I felt sorry for kids. Because of their weaker immune systems, they couldn't step a foot outside without full upper torso protection. "Tell Zack I'm working on it."

"Will do, Dr. Jones."

My first stop was at the Diagnostic Lab for Hastings's profile. The senior tech there, a graduate microbiology student named Shan, had the chart in his hands and switched to display before I closed the door panel.

"Hey, Bonnie. Sorry to get you out of bed."

"That's what they all say." I slipped on my reading glasses and skimmed the preliminary data. "Mary Mother of God."

"We're starting a pool, if you're interested." His black eyes gleamed. "Tate says it's got to be Queenie. I say it's one of her ladies."

Queenie was the nickname we'd given to the mutant pneumonia that had wiped out most of eastern Uganda. Her "ladies" were lesser outbreaks of mutated strains in the surrounding countries.

"You guys are ghouls." I frowned as I saw the amount of activity on the tracer. This bug wasn't just active, it was moved in and setting up house. "Put me down for twenty on the King."

Shan laughed. "You can't be serious. Elvis? Really?"

Elvis was a very sophisticated bug. Not everyone believed it had been biogenetically engineered, but rather that it had developed from the old *Yersinia Pestis* bacteria still found in some remote areas of the world. Judging by the symptoms, my own personal theory was that some disturbed biochemist had taken a nasty strain of *Streptococcus* and crossed it with a form of *Yersinia Pestis*.

Nothing like marrying flesh-eating bacteria with septicemic plague.

The problem was, Elvis mutated almost as soon as it entered its host -- into what, we didn't know. By the time we found a victim, he or she was already dead and the virus itself vanished into the leftover hematological sludge. To date, we hadn't been able to determine what the hell it camouflaged itself as when attacking a host.

"Twenty." I handed the chart back to him. "Copy in full to Adam, stat. I want a download on everything else you've got, too. Specs, recs, and precs."

"So much for my day off."

I patted his shoulder. "You're welcome."

From Diagnostics I took the long walk down to Containment. This was the nerve-center of QSOPs, where we really earned our paychecks. Besides a full microbiology lab and

inpatient ward, we had a half-acre of pathogenetic research equipment and a quorum tracking array that made the National Observatory's hardware look like an erector set.

I put my eye to the door panel aperture for another scan, then strode in. Dr. Tate, my resident boy genius, was waiting just inside.

"Adam." I grabbed the cup of coffee he held out and kept going until I reached my personal console. "Give me patient status first."

"Troy Hastings, thirty-seven, Caucasian male, six-three, one hundred ninety two pounds prior to infection. Med files indicate excellent health."

"What's he do for a living?"

"Factory worker. He made glidecars until sixteen days ago, when he and his entire household contracted the pathogen. Along with the rest of Detroit." Adam reached for the terminal beside mine and pulled up his chart. "Shan hit you for the pool?"

"I'm in for twenty." I keyed up the latest blood and systemic scans. Troy Hastings was not in good shape. "Interview?"

"Not possible. Patient arrived comatose and, unless you believe in divine intervention or pulling the plug, is staying that way."

"Damn." I was betting this latest outbreak was waterborne, but I hadn't found a survivor who could corroborate that. "Okay, give me the encodes."

"I've never seen anything all over the grid like this." Adam shook his head as he switched screens and retrieved the data for me. "At least three dozen active proteins, and God knows how many exotoxins. My last count was forty-eight. Weird thing is, the expressions keep phasing in and out of the samples. One minute I've got a trace, the next, poof, gone."

I glanced at him. For a guy who had gotten his doctorate before he'd started shaving, Adam still got as jumpy as a kid with his first hoverboard. "Is that your professional diagnosis, doctor?"

"Okay. I hypothesize that the bug is encoding a legion of extracellular protease genes, which are communicating to other cells, which in turn is causing the trigger. Massive tissue damage to the host, and complex bacterial dissemination. These encodes are so minute and rapid that our system is unable to track them for longer than it takes them to travel from gene-strand to cell-wall."

"Uh-huh. Just what I thought." I sat back. "It's Elvis."

Adam straightened. "You put twenty on Elvis?"

"Yep." I looked around. "Who's on?"

"You, me, Shan, and three other techs I just called in. Hastings is stable." He gave me a hopeful grin. "Are we going to try the re-sequencer?"

It was my baby, my research, my call. "I promised, best case scenario, we would. It isn't going to get any better than this. Let's go."

#

By the time the three additional techs arrived at Containment, I'd finished my examination of the patient and was stripping out of my dermal seal. Everyone gathered in the decon room as I dressed. We'd all gotten used to being occasionally naked around each other, but the men still politely averted their eyes. It was little things like that which kept the team running smoothly.

"Pre-run checks?" I asked, as soon as I had my jumpsuit back on.

"All green. Re-sequencer is at optimum levels," Janice said. "How about this guy Hastings?"

"As stable as we're going to get him." I glanced through the viewer at the comatose man. The bug was literally eating him alive; he barely weighed a hundred pounds now. "Let's do this by the numbers, people, okay?"

We all knew Hastings wouldn't survive the night. Once the CDC team had explained the situation, he'd still been required to voluntarily sign the release. Which he had. Troy had known he was a dead man already.

But thanks to his willing sacrifice, there was a solid chance we'd nail this bug through him. He'd get an AntiB named in his honor, I decided. Hastings cepacia had a nice ring to it.

"I'll need Janice to monitor me on the EEG while I'm in. Adam, I want you on console. The rest of you can divvy up the rest of the chores -- just make sure you watch Hastings's vitals."

Adam headed back to the pathogenetic array while we filed into the Re-sequencer room. It had taken us two years and a lot of trial and error to put it together from Becca's original schematics, and still it looked like someone had ripped the guts out of a thousand consoles and dropped them in a pile around a nice, comfortable chair.

I climbed up and strapped myself in. "Cerebral imaging?"

"Up with Adam."

"Hook me in and run a base line."

The monitor leads automatically clamped against my skull as I sat back in the chair. The messages they transmitted from my neural activity traveled up to Adam's console, where he would be watching every cerebral move I made.

Now I had to make the speech.

"Okay, guys and gals. We've done the drill a dozen times. I'm going under and in, and I'll use the synencodes we've put together to try and disassemble this bug. I want everyone to relax, but stay alert. If you see something that isn't right, don't panic, don't think about it. Shut it down."

I closed my eyes as the cranial shroud lowered and blocked out four of my five senses. The faint sting of an injection in my arm, administered by Janice, made my body go numb. A minute later I was in full sensory deprivation, the state I had to be in before the re-sequencer could access my higher brain functions.

The journey began in absolute, pitch black darkness.

At first, the sense of being dead is almost overwhelming. We're not used to being deprived of even one of our senses, so losing all five is quite stressful. Meditation and simulator runs had helped me adjust to the shock of being thrust, literally and wholly, into the abyss.

Four out of five researchers usually fell asleep at this point in the experiment, but I resisted the natural urge and tried to mentally reach the place I needed to be. The monitor leads encasing my skull began biofeedback, and suddenly, the abyss went away.

Dr. Stanislawski had come upon the solution to teaching her students the chemical vocabularies of bacteria by sequencing them into a computer and having them translated into three-dimensional virtual representations. I had taken the research a step further by developing the re-sequencer, which not only translated the bacteria, its environment, and the patient's personal physiology into VRML code, but allowed a second person to access and manipulate the code.

That was why I stood in front of a huge mansion, reaching for the front door.

Troy's body was the mansion, of course. As I entered the virtual threshold, in reality my brain waves were crossing the artificial synaptic link the re-sequencer had created between my brain and his.

I felt like Armstrong on the moon, only I took a giant step *into* mankind.

A very sick human being, from the looks of the interior. Lights -- VRML representations of Troy's synaptic functions -- flickered on and off. Cracks webbed his virtual brain tissue walls. It was a scary-looking place. There were no sounds or odors, but I could see everything. I couldn't verbally communicate with my team, but they could track my brain waves, and tell if I was in trouble.

Some of the imagery generated by the program came from Hastings's residual memory patterns as well as my own, which probably explained all the spare car parts I saw cluttering up the place. I smiled. *Men. They always bring their work home.*

Who are you?

I turned, stunned, to see Troy Hastings standing by the VRML representation of his heart -- a dying fireplace.

Hi. I'm Bonnie. A formal introduction seemed sort of silly, considering I was inside the man's brain. *Do you remember what happened to you in Detroit?*

He shrugged, then stared back into the fireplace.

I'm sort of surprised to see you. You're supposed to be in a coma.

I'm not dead yet. He pointed to the ceiling. **If you're looking for him, he's up there.**

I noticed some thuds and thumps coming from up there. *Him?*

The guy who's going to kill me.

I tried to process this, then realized the re-sequencer must have coded the bacterial infection as what Hastings interpreted as a bad guy, waiting upstairs. And it was the bad guy I needed to talk to.

I'm going to go and see him, okay?

He tossed another log on the fire. **Be my guest.**

The sounds got louder as I mounted the staircase and stepped over an engine block to get to the second floor. Then I saw the bodies lining either side of the hallway.

Neighbors and friends, I told myself. *The ones he'd watched die. They hadn't died easily, or painlessly, from the looks of the corpses.*

Suddenly another Troy Hastings burst out of a doorway directly to my right. This Troy was covered with blood, panting, and holding a huge butcher knife.

This was it. The very first communication directly between a human being and a bacterial pathogen. I couldn't think of a single thing to say except, *Hi.*

I don't know you. He lifted the butcher knife over his head. *One of his defenders, are you?*

I stepped back, alarmed. I hadn't counted on the bug getting violent. *No. No, I'm not defending him. I came here to see you, to talk to you.*

For what? So you can watch me die? Ask how it feels? He waved the knife at the corpses. *Weren't they enough?*

I forgot I was talking to a single-celled organism. *Hey, pal, you killed them.*

He dropped the knife and covered his hands with his face. He started sobbing. Then he pushed past me and went into another room, slammed the door, and locked it.

I went over, lifted a hand to knock, then decided against it. Maybe I'd just go back downstairs and talk to the patient. Let the bug calm down for a minute.

The first Troy Hastings was standing in front of the fireplace, still staring into the flames. He only glanced at me when I called to him.

Just me again. Maybe you can help me out with some information. How did you and your family contract this illness?

It was the water. We thought it was safe.

I see. I walked over and put a hand on his shoulder. I'm very sorry for your loss.

Are you? Then why don't you just end it? That's what you're here for, isn't it?

I need you to hang on a little longer. The more information I can get from that guy upstairs, the more lives I can save.

That idiot? He snorted. **All he knows how to do is breed and butcher.**

The nature of the beast, I'm afraid. I heard a man scream upstairs and grimaced. *If you can think of anything that will help me, let me know, okay?*

Here's an idea. Get out of here. He came over and grabbed me by the arms. **Better yet, take me with you.**

In spite of my training, and everything I'd seen over the last decade, his desperation shook me. *I can't. I'm sorry, Mr. Hastings.*

He gave me a strange look, then released me. **I'll go with you. It's time to finish this.**

Troy walked back up the stairs with me. He ignored the dead bodies and surveyed the hall of doors. **He's afraid of me. He'll hide unless you call him out.**

Hello? What was I supposed to call this bug? We still weren't sure it was Elvis. Uh, sir? Can you come out and talk to me?

The second Troy Hastings opened the door, looked out, and screamed with rage before slamming the door shut again. *You brought him up here? To me?*

My companion gave me a sympathetic smile. **They're always like this.** Then he went over and kicked in the locked door. **Come on out, face me. You can do it now or you can die in a hole, alone.**

We walked into the room. The second Troy Hastings was sitting beside an empty crib. He was holding a stuffed dog and pressing it against his face.

My son. My baby.

Suddenly I wasn't sure who was who. *Wait a minute.* I turned to the calm Troy Hastings beside me. *Who are you?*

He shrugged again.

Why did they look alike? I glanced from one Troy to the other. The VRML codes should be completely different.

Unless . . . Elvis disappeared as soon as it infiltrated the body. By mimicking its host's own cells, maybe?

I took a step back from the calm Troy. *Who are you?*

I have many names.

Without warning he launched himself at the sobbing man beside the crib, and the two fell to the floor, grappling.

I hadn't scripted this. I had expected floating symbols and dimensional enzyme creatures, not two twin Troy Hastings, each trying to kill the other.

But wasn't that what they were? Troy Hastings, and the bacteria that was trying to take over his body?

I could communicate with them. Troy understood me. The bug understood me. They both wanted to survive. Then I knew what I had to do.

Stop. I went over and wrenched the two men apart. Then I sat down on the floor between them. *Do you want to live? Do both of you want to live?*

The calm Troy Hastings stared. The filthy one sobbed.

I'd take that as a yes. All right, boys. Here's what we're going to do.

#

I came out of the re-sequencer a few minutes later, and yanked the monitor leads from my chest and face. Janice was standing over me, looking worried.

"Jesus, Bonnie, you scared the hell out of us."

I got out of the chair and went around her. "I need a basin and a large specimen storage container. Yesterday."

Janice got them for me, and I left the chamber. I went past Adam and everyone else who got in my way and pulled open the door to the patient ward. Alarms went off everywhere.

"Seal that door!" someone shouted. People started running around behind me. The door panel slammed shut and was secured from the outside.

Adam's voice came over the intercom. "Have you lost your mind?"

"No." I went over to Hastings and pulled him up into a sitting position.

"Bonnie, he's practically dead."

I removed the endotracheal tube and yanked off the nasal canula. "Not yet, he isn't."

As he went into respiratory arrest, I slapped the patient as hard as I could. His eyelids fluttered. "Troy. You have to do it *now*."

Slowly his eyes opened, then Troy doubled over. I positioned the basin against his chest and held on as he vomited bile. When he was reduced to dry heaves, I pressed him back on the pillows and emptied the basin into the storage container. Then I sealed it, and sat down on the edge of the bed. He was conscious, looking at me through fever-glazed eyes.

"Will it work?" he asked, his voice a hoarse whisper.

I smiled. "If he wants to live as badly as you do -- yes." I turned toward the intercom. "Ladies and gentlemen: Elvis has left the building."

#

Our very first quorum host not only survived Elvis, he made medical history and opened a whole new field of study in disease treatment and prevention. It was Adam who coined the new term for it when we discussed how we would proceed.

"Just what do we call this treatment, Bonnie? Cellular conferencing? Bacterial negotiation?" He smirked. "*Biodiplomacy?*"

Much to Adam's chagrin, the Stanislawski-Hastings BioDiplomatic Treatment Center opened for business a month later.

Our first order of business was to help me keep my word and create a safe environment for Elvis to occupy. We tested water samples from all over the world, and found the Arctic ocean provided the most stable medium to sustain and perpetuate the bacterium. Once we temporarily transferred the colony purged from Troy Hastings into specialized tanks, we began testing volunteers to serve as permanent human-quorum hosts.

It was important to stay in touch with Elvis, for many reasons. Aside from the staggering benefits derived from direct communication with a disease, over a hundred other types of genetically-engineered bacteria remained rampant around the globe. If we could make contact with one bacterial life form, we might be able to do the same with others.

As soon as we infected the first host, I went back on the re-sequencer.

Elvis met me inside the volunteer's mind/mansion. This time he hadn't mimicked his host's form, either.

That's a very familiar face, I said to the man waiting for me. *Mind telling me where you got it from?*

It was in your thoughts when we met the last time. My husband tilted his head to one side. **Does it surprise you that we wish to understand you, too?**

Yeah, it does. Until a month ago, we were your food.

There is other food, and there is more to you than we thought.

I smiled. If he could change his diet, then working together we might just be able to change the future of the world we shared. *Same goes for you, Elvis.*

Professional Courtesy

by S.L. Viehl

You won't find Trellus-6 on any of the regular tourist jaunt routes. It isn't famous for its atmosphere, natural wonders, or intriguing aboriginals. Trellus has no atmosphere. Two zillion years ago, Nature uttered its final volcanic belch and vaporized the nitrogen/methane envelope. It majorly flattened the topography, too. Evidently nothing was stupid enough to evolve before or after that.

So basically, if you land here, you want to get drunk, laid, or killed. Two of those urges can be satisfied at my place.

Okay, sometimes all three.

I'm Mercy, a displaced Terran and yeah, I've already heard all the twelve-step program jokes. As it happens, I'm only Terran by blood; Mom gave birth to me on the jaunt here to found the colony. My parents and their radical Terran friends came intending to terra form this big, cold, dead gray rock into a something with a viable ecosphere. Sometimes that takes centuries.

My folks didn't even get ten years.

When I was nine, the Hsktskt raided Trelus, and reduced every adult on the planet to wet smears. They left as quickly as they arrived, and took everything but the bodies and the envirodomes. Because the lizards don't like wasting ammunition, me and a few other kids survived. Other species moved in, but they weren't interested in becoming humanitarians -- they were too busy evicting us from the best of the domes.

We wouldn't have stayed, if not for the Shelter. Missionaries came to set it up, and taught us to barter the only thing the Hsktskt hadn't touched. I worked for the Shelter until I paid off my apprenticeship costs, then went into business for myself.

Mercy House has made me the richest being in the Quadrant. With the way the Hsktskt/League war has been going lately, I've been getting even richer. Soldiers on leave are always in a hurry and very generous with their credits. After all, they can't spend anything when they're dead, and a lot of them end up that way.

I'd gotten a little bored over the past cycle -- I sort of like it when all hell breaks loose. Lets me use my brain cells for more than calculating capital percentage rates. Remember that ancient Terran saying that went something like, "*Be cautious what you long for?*"

Uh-huh . . . you guessed it . . .

It started when my Omorr manager came back from a trip over to Transport. At the time, I was considering whether to invest my quarterly earnings into backing some Aksellan mining expeditions, or leave it in League blue chip stock. The League was losing the war, big time, so I was already leaning toward the subsidizing the spiders.

Without warning my door panel slid open and Cat stomped into my office. We'd been lovers for over a year, so I was sensitive to the Omorr's moods. Watching his breather fly across the room and smack into the opposite wall panel told me he was upset.

"Hi, handsome," I said, and sat back in my chair. "Couldn't find any footgear in your size?"

My boyfriend's round, dark eyes zeroed in on me. "We've got problems."

I thought of my current roster of employees, and the problems they could cause. "One of the girls get pregnant? Injured? Hungry?"

"No." Cat hopped back and forth in front of my desk on his one leg. Omorr have four limbs, but use three as arms. As a species, they're also tall, tough, and incredibly strong. Lots of nice, sweaty muscles bulged all over him. I didn't know whether to offer him a drink, a towel, or rip my clothes off and throw myself in his path.

I sighed. My lust for his alien bod never seemed to diminish. If I wasn't careful, before long I'd be falling in *love* with him or something. "You want me to guess again, or can I give up?"

He stopped hopping. "You're really not going to like this."

There wasn't much that rattled me. "The Hsktskt are in orbit?"

"Rasheena's come back."

Blood rushed to my head, and I switched off my console. The Hsktskt are one thing. Lying swindling bitches who should have known better than to set an appendage on my planet are quite another. "Rasheena? Rasheena *Tybee?*"

He nodded.

I pictured a beautiful, angular maroon face full of guileless appeal. A long, gorgeous N-jui body that wouldn't quit. Scythe-shaped hands filled with my credit chips. "The Rasheena Tybee who ripped me off?"

The white, prehensile gildrells bearding my Omorr lover's dark pink face flared.

"Mercy --"

"The Rasheena Tybee who also drugged and hijacked most of my staff?" I yanked open a drawer and started searching through it. "The Rasheena Tybee I said I'd dismember with a rusty amalgam blade if I ever, ever saw her skinny red N-jui ass anywhere inside this quadrant again? *That* Rasheena Tybee?"

Cat reached out, thought better of it when he saw me pull out my pulse pistol, and hopped one step back. "Yeah. She's setting up a house."

"Not for long." Plasboard screeched over the tiled floor as I shoved the desk out of my way. "Where did you park?"

"You can't kill her, Mercy." Cat jumped directly in front of me. He's a good head taller and twice my weight, but I'm faster. I dodged him and went for the door. "The trade commission has been looking for an excuse to shut you down for years."

I grabbed my breather and the stunner I kept on the wall for misbehaving clients. Just in case I completely drained the pulse pistol. "Where. Did you park. My car."

"Woman, will you listen to me --" Before he could finish, I gave him a look. The want-a-fracture? one. He sighed. "It's out front. I'm going with you."

"Long as you don't testify, fine." I headed for the lobby. A couple of the girls coming our way saw my expression and swiftly changed direction. Only one of the new trainees had the stupidity to swoop down and get in my face.

"Mercy, you gotta let me off Virgin Row, I'm dying here!" Danali was a Ylyfa avian being, and feathers started flying everywhere as she fluttered in circles around me. "How can I make any serious creds, I mean honestly --"

"You're fired." I brushed past her.

She dove at my head again. "But --"

I grabbed her by a wing, and yanked her to my face. "You're *fired*. Get *out*." Then I threw her over my shoulder.

Cat must have caught her, because he lagged behind for a few seconds, then barely jumped in my glidecar before I took off. "Gods, Mercy, calm down."

"I'm calm." I punched the accelerator and nearly mowed down a couple of customers on their way to my place. "Where is she?"

"You wouldn't be reckless enough to barge in there without a plan, without backup, without thinking this through."

I eyed him.

"West side of Main Transport."

Rasheena had purchased one of the abandoned Tingalean taverns for her latest scam. They were still unloading her ship, judging by the number of cargo haulers at the service entrance. A huge, armor-plated Gutellaj bouncer stood at the lobby entrance, and folded his four arms as I came to a screeching halt, leapt out and demanded access.

"We open after suns down," he said through a wristcom.

"Really." I reached down and shoved my hand through a gap in his thorny exoskeleton. What I found inside I grabbed, and twisted. The Gutellaj sank slowly to his knees. "I say you're open now. Any problem with that, Spike?"

"No," he said in a very tiny voice.

"Good. Cat, get the door panel." I held on to his three testicles while the Omorr punched the access keypad. I bent over to regain the Gutellaj's attention. "You be a good porcupine now and stay out here, or I'll turn you into a female. Got that?"

He nodded frantically. I let go, and he toppled over. Cat watched from the door, his gildrells snarling in nervous knots. "Mercy --"

"Shut up." I walked past him and into Rasheena's lobby, passing through a bug detector first. She'd had the interior designed to match her worthless hide, and seeing all that red didn't soothe me much. A little humanoid receptionist behind an equally diminutive desk stared at me in horror as I pointed to her. "You. Get that lying container of waste that passes as your boss out here. Pronto."

"Mercy! Darling!"

Down the stairs came the most beautiful female in the Quadrant. She was tall, elegantly skeletal, with a gleaming maroon hide and a man of artificial pink hair streaming down her back. Her negligee was almost, but not quite, transparent, and changed colors as she moved (thermalsilk, tuned to her personal body heat, naturally.) She smiled widely, displaying rows of gem-enhanced orthodontia she'd gotten after personally servicing an entire crew of ore-haulers.

Too bad they hadn't drilled a few more holes in her head. Would have saved me some trouble.

"The prodigal thief returns." I planted myself at the bottom of the stairs. "I thought I told you to stay off my turf."

"Now, Mercy, is that any way to greet an old friend?" Pink curls slithered over her shoulders as she tilted her head. "What's the matter, precious? Menopause finally set in?"

I lunged. Cat grabbed my arms and held me back.

"Oh, dear." She pressed an appendage across her thorax, faking distress. "I'd forgotten what violent, ill-tempered little mammals you Terrans are."

Rasheena was two meters taller than me, and at least three times my weight, so grabbing me was probably a prudent move. That didn't mean I had to like my boyfriend doing it.

"Let me go, Cat. I won't mess her up. Much."

"Now, dearest." She gracefully descended a few more steps. "There's enough to go around, isn't there? Or have you chased off all the regular trade since I left?"

"I lied," I told Cat, straining against his hold. "Ichthori will look pretty next to her when I'm done."

"Mercy, Mercy! Exercise a little self-restraint. Mustn't be threatening to mutilate a legitimate free enterpriser -- as you can see, I have all my papers in order," Rasheena waved business, licensing and registration chips under my nose. "Duly approved by the colonial trade commission, I might add."

My jaw sagged, but only for a second. "Approved my ass."

"Tsk-tsk. You know, I've never thought much of that portion of your anatomy, myself. So shapeless, and only a few piddly orifices to offer. No wonder you went into administration." Rasheena's mouth stretched open, all the way back to her diamond-studded molars. "Resign yourself, darling. I'm here to stay."

"What about the credits you stole from me?"

"Credits?" One of her multi-jointed limbs swing up so she could rub the tip against her wide nose. "You mean, the profits which you turned over to me when I moved on?"

"You never did anything for my business but bore my customers and embezzle my money."

"They never looked bored." Rasheena produced another superior smirk. "Still, according to some very legal documents, you gave me those credits voluntarily. As a bonus for all my hard work."

I had no doubt her forgeries would pass inspection -- Rasheena was greedy and vain, but not stupid. "And the girls? What did you do with my girls?"

The smile disappeared. "Such a pathetic bunch of whiners. I barely recouped my own losses through a deal with the Garnotans."

Cat was so shocked by that he let go of me. "You sold them to slavers?"

"One does what one must in this business. It's not always pleasant, but if it were, everyone would be running colonial brothels, wouldn't they?" Rasheena beamed. "Luckily, it'll just be you and me. For now."

"Any further objections to me frying her?" I asked my boyfriend through my clenched teeth as I activated my weapon.

The Omorr produced his favorite fighting knife. "I get to gut her first."

"Children." Rasheena made a high-pitched, clicking sound, and suddenly we were surrounded by more Gutellaj than I could count. "I've so enjoyed our little reunion, but I am opening for business tonight. My assistants will see you out. Taa."

The Gutellaj guards disarmed both of us, then hustled us out the front entrance. Cat and I went flying, and landed on our faces next to the glidecar.

"Either of you show up here again, and you're dead meat!" one of the guards shouted. The entire group made the buzzing sound that passed as Gutellaj laughter, then went back into Rasheena's house.

Cat helped me to my feet and looked back at the former tavern. "She dies. Tomorrow."

"Oh, no." I dusted off my jacket. "Killing her is too easy."

The tips of his gildrells brushed over my face as he checked my abrasions. "Let me handle it."

He really had no idea what I was capable of. "Not in this lifetime, pal."

#

Revenge, really decent revenge, takes a considerable amount of time and careful planning. Unless you're dealing with a former whore who's also a thief and a slaver. By the time we returned to my place, I'd already decided what to do. Now it was time to call in some favors.

Unfortunately, the colonial trade commission had other ideas. Their number one pain in the posterior, an asexual lulolon auditor/inspector named Brrakk-li, was waiting for me when I walked into my place of business.

"Terran Mercy," The lulolon crimped up his photosensitive body folds and assembled his many layers into a vertical position. "We must speak."

"Hiya, Broccoli," I said as I tossed my jacket on the nearest chair. "What's the matter, get bored with budding yourself?"

lulolon didn't quite comprehend the need for sex with another being, and by extension, my making money off fulfilling that need. "A grievance has been filed with the commission, naming Terran Mercy, Omorr Cataced, and all beings presently employed by Terran Mercy in violation of colonial charter, portion nine of the trade regulations, referencing fair practice in enterprise."

I was proud of my business. Sure, we had trouble now and then, but Mercy House always did far more good than harm to the colony. The trade commission didn't like me -- politicians are universally uptight, moralistic hypocrites -- but they'd never before accused me of cheating my clients.

I *never* cheat my clients.

Which meant someone had gone to a great deal of trouble to make the commission think I did. Three guesses as to who would directly profit from the colony shutting down Mercy House. "Rasheena stop by to tell you boys some bed time stories?"

Brrakk-li's wristcom took a few minutes to translate the idiom into his rather terse, non-descriptive native tongue. While he was trying to grasp my meaning, I sent Cat to chase out the customers.

The bulky plant being at last unfurled a crimp and handed me a data pad. "You will surrender your financial files to me for immediate inspection. I will also require interviews with all your employees, Omorr Cataced, and yourself."

I kept my expression bland, but visions of Rasheena scrubbing out lavatories in a Rilken communal home danced in my head. "You got it."

Cat showed the auditor/inspector to the conference room while I went to transfer the financial files. I kept clean books, so the audit was no big deal. Everyone knew I was a fair boss, and my staff were the highest-paid employees in the colony.

"Mercy?"

Speak of the staff. I don't bother to turn around from my console. "Not now." I stopped inputting data as soon as I felt the cold nudge of a weapon on the back of my neck. "Okay, now's fine."

Someone who wasn't on staff snarled, "Get up."

I got up. Claws dug into my arm, and jerked me around. They belonged to a huge, nasty-looking reptilian crossbreed with more teeth, claws, and limbs than I cared to count. The Ylyfa, Danali, fluttered helplessly skewered in one of his other fists.

Boy, I hated days like this.

"I don't think she's your type, big guy," I said, and got claws wrapped around my throat. "How about a full refund?"

"How about you die?" The crossbreed tossed Danali over his shoulder and wrapped another set of claws around my throat.

Being throttled really puts me in a bad mood, so I had no problem blinking three times, then four, then two at a particular control sensor on the wall console. The tiny transmitter in my eyelid tripped the intruder program, and a security drone dropped down out of the ceiling panel, directly on top of the crossbreed.

A roar of pain blasted in my face. His claws spasmed for a moment, then fell away as the little drone drove two of its efficient limblets into the crossbreed's eyes.

"Discontinue intruder response, program Mercy-nine, and standby" I yelled, before the drone penetrated his brain. The reptile dropped to his knees, bellowing and trying to pull the drone off his head. I kicked him. "Who sent you?"

The door panel was wrenched open, and Cat jumped in. "Mercy!" He jumped on top of the crossbreed, and had a knife at his throat before I could stop him.

My assassin uttered a horrible gurgle, then fell over in a gush of his own purple blood.

"How did he get in here?" Cat was all over me, checking me with his hands. "Did he hurt you?"

I slapped his arms away. "No, God damn it, I was trying to find out who sent him! I had it under control!"

"This is one of Rasheena's thugs!"

"Thanks for the confirmation." I went over to check Danali, who had broken wings and was moaning pitifully. "Shit. What happened, sweetie?"

"He came in the service entrance. I was leaving, 'cause you fired me, and saw him. I tried to stall him, Mercy." Tiny tears trickled from her luminous eyes. "Sorry."

"You're rehired." I picked her up and carefully handed her to Cat. "Take her to the infirmary."

"What about him?" Cat kicked the dead crossbreed.

"He gets returned to sender."

#

I slipped out to the garage and disabled all of my glidecars myself before signaling for alternative transport. "Send a drone driver for me, Hal. I need to go see the Worm."

"Mercy?" Hal's whirring voice squeaked. He was one of my regulars, too, and I doubt he'd ever ferried anyone willing over to the see the Big Slug. "Have you gone spacy? Listen, if it's money you need, I can float you a loan --"

"Thanks, babe, but I'm fine. Just send the drone." I thought for a moment. "When Cat calls you, all your drivers are booked, and you don't where I've gone."

"I'll tell him, but I hope you know what you're doing."

I nearly made a clean getaway -- Cat hopped out of the house just as the drone driver pulled away. Since I'd fixed the glidecars, he couldn't follow me. That, and what I was preparing to do, made guilt gnaw at me for a moment. Then I remembered Danali's broken wings, and touched the bruises on my throat.

No, Rasheena was going down.

The place I went wasn't frequented by anyone but the broke, starving, or otherwise desperate. It didn't have a name and didn't appear on any colonial map. Everyone tried to pretend it and the thing that lived in it didn't exist -- everyone but me, that is.

Squish and I were old, old pals.

He lived in an unlit dome set far out, along the colony perimeter, heavily guarded at all hours. Only the Worm inhabited the dome, mostly because no one else could stand the stench. What no one realized was he owned a good chunk of the colony as well, including the structure that had once served as the Shelter.

I put on my breather before I requested and was granted access. It might be rude, but I was practical -- puking all over Squish seemed far more impolite than wearing an oxygen rig indoors.

Wealth, credit chips, and goods from every corner of the quadrant formed an intricate labyrinth I negotiated swiftly. Everything was lightly coated with pink slime, because the Worm liked to handle his lovely things. Constantly. Had Squish ever bothered to have all this stuff cleaned and counted, he would have beat me as the richest being in the quadrant ten times over.

Why he preferred to play with his wealth than bank it was beyond me.

In the center of the dome was a huge, quivering mass of colorless goo. No one knew how large, but Squish's personal star shuttle was as large as a League Troop Freighter. He also knew everything about everyone, and disappeared for weeks at a time, going to inspect some treasure before bringing it back to Trelus.

The Worm didn't see me -- he didn't have eyes -- but he smelled me.

"My dear friend Mercy," he said through a specially adapted translator unit that deamplified his booming voice. "What brings you to my lair?"

"Thought you might want to barter with me, pal."

Five tons of Squish slid over toward me, until the edge of an extensor pod nudged my footgear, leaving a small rosy patch of goo. I didn't step back -- that would have really been rude -- but waited patiently. I'm not sure exactly how many senses the Worm utilized when he touched something, but taste was definitely involved.

"Sweet as ever." The pod caressed my ankle with what I can only describe as fond ooze. "What have you acquired?"

"I don't have it yet, but I'll get it for you." I told him the rest.

Squish thought it over. "An amusing proposition." Slowly the pod withdrew. "Yet I believe the danger involved outweighs the benefits of acquisition. I must regretfully decline."

I was disappointed, but took the rejection in stride. The Big Slug did what he wanted, and the fact we'd managed to maintain a weird sort of friendship over the years was enough for me. I walked up to Squish's central mass, where the smell wasn't quite so bad, and took off my breather.

"So much for business." I spied a huge console oozing pink goop. "What have you been working on?"

"An ode to beauty." Squish tried not to sound eager, but his secret obsession with Terran verse was a weak point. "Would you have time to stay, and hear it?"

I'd been listening to his poems since the first raid, when he took me and the other surviving kids in, and let us share his dome until the missionaries arrived. I didn't always understand what he composed, but I remembered to breath through my mouth while I played audience.

"Absolutely."

#

I left Squish several hours later, stopped at a public bathhouse to rid myself of the lingering odor (I love the Worm but he really does stink, and the stink *sticks*) then dumped the body of the dead assassin on my competition's doorstep. Not my idea of fun, but a well-known point had to be reinforced.

Nobody messes with the owner of Mercy House.

I'd nearly made it back to my place when someone rammed my glidecar from behind. Since I wasn't wearing my harness -- who really wears harnesses, I ask you? - I hit the control panel, and blacked out.

I woke up in the last place in the universe I wanted to be -- Rasheena Tybee's whorehouse. With a nose full of something sharp and acrid. I swatted at the blur over me. "Knock it off!"

The Gulletaj waving the ammonia ampule under my nose growled before muttering, "She's awake, mistress."

"Lovely." Rasheena bent down and stroked my cheek with one of her scythe-hands. "Darling, you really shouldn't leave your little gifts for me without a card. I almost didn't know who to thank."

"He wasn't very good, you know," I sat up, and took stock of my situation. The chamber I was in was large and empty. There were stains on the floor. I was naked. My situation sucked. "He died four minutes after he crossed my threshold."

"You'll last a lot longer than that, my pet." Rasheena paused on her way out. "I'll send in your first customer -- try to remember how to assume the positions, won't you? All this remodeling is costing me a fortune."

"This will cost you more," I muttered as I got to my feet and looked for something I could use for a weapon. I found zip, which meant I'd have to rely on other skills.

When the door panel opened again, I got the first hint of what Rasheena had planned for me. It stood eight feet tall, weighed several tons, and had a familiar gleam in his recessed eyes. He'd grown a thick cold-weather pelt, which meant he worked outside the domes. Then the light fell across his striping, and I recognized his family pattern.

"You're Hlakka's brother, aren't you?" I strode to him, with the kind of confidence that only a pleasure-giver can pull off naked. "Mercy, how are you doing?"

"Fine." The door panel closed as Trytinorn edged in. Like all plus-size beings, he constantly worried about stepping on someone smaller, and moved with slow caution. "You sure you can handle me, little one?"

"Oh, didn't they tell you? I'm not here to service you personally." I gave his hide a friendly slap. "What's your name again?"

"Lnorral." He used his elongated nose to scratch his brow. "Have I got the wrong chamber?"

"Rasheena forgot to mention the job, right? She's been so busy moving out."

"Moving out? I thought she just opened for business."

"Building's not safe. You know, Hlakka did a marvelous job shoring up Mercy House for me." I began an inspection of the chamber. "Pity, the way this construction crew has botched everything. So, are you available?"

"For what?" He listened as I explained. "Yeah, sure, I can swing that. Been a while since I partied with my cousins." The Trytinorn's massive head tilted to one side. "You want all of us? At the same time?"

"The more the merrier," I said, and grinned. "Now, why don't you and I take a ride over to my place? I've got a Trytinorn female who just went into heat last week, and she's sick of dinky bipeds."

Getting out of the chamber proved ridiculously easily -- I rode on top of the Trytinorn, and none of Rasheena's dimwitted thugs bothered to look up. I managed to snare a breather on our way out, then buried myself in his pelt and hung on for the ride.

#

Rasheena's signal was waiting for me when I got back to Mercy House. I sent Lnorral along to rub noses with my female Trytinorn before I answered it.

The N-jui appeared on the screen, pouting. "You left so soon, darling, I'm devastated."

"Your client preferred what I had to offer here." I pretended to smother a yawn.

"Anything else?"

"We performed a cell sweep on the body of my poor, deceased employee, Nihpo." She gave me a glittery smile. "He had Omorr all over his neck."

"I have security vids, you'll never make it stick."

She tilted her head, making her pink curls bobble. "DNA can be transferred to other things, darling."

If I let her know how much Cat meant to me, the game was all over. "Be my guest, guys like him are a credit a dozen. 'Bye, Rasheena." I terminated the signal.

"I thought I rated at least a hundred creds."

I whirled around to see Cat leaning against the door panel. "I was bluffing."

"Were you?" He hopped toward me. "Where have you been all night?"

"Out." I buckled my holster belt around my hips.

"TyReeNa said you rode in here on a Trytinorn."

I checked my weapons. "Yep."

"Naked, on the back of a Trytinorn."

I looked up. He was pissed. But then, so was I. "I was hot, and I didn't feel like walking. By the way, I've given the entire staff the rest of the week off, with pay."

He watched in stunned silence as I pulled on my boots, then my panel chimed and I went to answer it.

"I refuse to aid you, Terran." The colorless voice didn't match the handsome face on the screen. "We no longer serve humanoids."

So he wanted to play hardball, did he? How soon my customers forgot how much I knew about them. "That's right, all you guys were freed by the League. I forgot. How are your spouses doing, Creep?"

"Coureep," the Unidrone automatically corrected me. After his kind had been freed from enforced domestic labor by the colony, he'd gone into business selling glidecars. Marrying females was a side hobby. "My six wives are fine. Why?"

"Imagine how shocked they'd be to find out their husband is an artificial life form."

Beneath the thin layer of eyeball material disguising his optic components, a metallic gleam flared. "I am a reconstruct and you know it."

"Okay, so your brain and a quarter-inch of your outsides are organic." I tapped a finger against my lips. "Somehow I don't think the ladies are going to appreciate finding out the other ninety-two percent of your bod came factory-direct."

Coureep processed that for a moment. "I will do this, in exchange for your recorded vow never to disclose the nature of my physiology to anyone. I want it etched on crystal. Agreed?"

Expensive, but worth it. "Deal." I terminated the signal, turned, and bumped into Cat. "What?"

"Stop this." He wrapped his arms around me, using his superior strength to hold me in place. "Wasn't the crossbreed enough? I'm not going to let her kill you." Then he kissed me.

Being kissed by an Omorr is probably the most erotic act I've ever experienced. It involves gildrells and mouths and creates all sorts of sensations beyond the average Terran's experience.

So no one could blame me if I enjoyed it for a few minutes before pulling away. "Not now."

"We can leave." He stroked my hair. "We can find another place. A better place."

"Lousy as this hunk of rock is, Cataced, it's the only home I've ever had." I slipped out of his embrace. "Besides, I was here first."

My receptionist signaled that my driver had arrived.

"I'm going with you," he said, hopping toward the door.

I smiled sadly. "No, you're not."

Then I took out my stunner and shot him.

#

I had a number of stops to make, including seeing the girls off at Transport and making a drop-off at Squish's dome. He was so grateful for the gift I brought -- a disc containing the complete works of Keats, Byron, and Shelley -- that he became completely lost for words and enveloped me in a big, slimy hug.

"You're welcome," I said as I surveyed myself. Goo covered me from chin to heels. "I think."

The Big Slug tried to wipe me off, but that only made it worse. "Forgive me. If it is not an imposition, would you take a copy of my latest ode and signal me with what you think of it?"

Squish never gave anyone copies of his poetry, so I was touched by his trust. "Sure."

My final stop was at Rasheena's place. When the drone driver pulled up, it looked like a small riot was in progress.

"Tybee House, Miss Mercy." The drone scanned the unruly crowd. "Perhaps you wish to select another destination?"

"No, but thanks, tin man." I inserted a credit chip in his pay slot and added a generous tip. He might not be able to smell me, but whoever took the cab after me would have to avoid the big slime spot on the seat, not to mention endure the smell. "Have a nice day."

Outside, Rasheena's Gutellaj were trying in vain to herd the mob back from the building. This was a bit ludicrous, considering most of the mob were Trytinorn. Worse, the big aliens had been freely passing around flasks of Trytinorn fern liquor, and were well on their way to being smashed.

Of course, everyone knows what happens when a Trytinorn demolition crew get drunk. They disdain living beings for more, um, sturdy entertainment.

"Mercy!" Lnorral waved his nose at me. He was busy using one of Rasheena's viewports as, well, an outlet. "Care to join us?"

I laughed. "Thanks, Lno, but that wall just doesn't do anything for me."

I squeezed past the Trytinorns and got to the front entrance. The Gutellaj guarding it had a harassed look on his face.

He took one sniff of me and grimaced. "What do you want, besides cleansing?"

"Don't be a smart ass. Miss Mercy to see Miss Tybee."

He had to dodge one of Lnorral's cousins who had taken a fancy to an access panel before answering. "I have standing orders to bar you from the establishment."

"Frible, shut up." A long, multi-jointed red arm reached out and grabbed my tunic sleeve. "Mercy, get in here."

I let Rasheena jerk me through the doors and cringed a little at the volume of noise within. "Having a party, sweetie?"

"What are these things?" she demanded, gesturing around us with a wild appendage.

Unidrone life forms packed the interior. Like Creep, they passed for humanoid. Unlike humanoids, they had incredible staying power. I employed two female reconstructs myself, to handle Creep and his friends. Sometimes they didn't emerge from the pleasure rooms for weeks. "Looks like a profitable night."

Rasheena, who hadn't been around when the Unidrones immigrated to Trellus, jerked her head back and forth. "They've been here all day! Three of my girls have already been taken to the FreeClinic suffering exhaustion!" She glanced down at me. "Gods, you reek. Have you no sense of professional hygiene?"

"Native beauty treatment. Try it sometime." I patted her on the shoulder. "You're busy, I should go."

"Wait. Wait." Rasheena latched onto me with desperate limbs. "I need to borrow your girls. I'll pay double. Signal them, tell them to get over here. Right now."

"Oh, geez, I wish I'd known that this morning. I just sent everyone off planet for a week." I ran my tongue around the inside of my cheek. "Plus the last time you borrowed my girls, I didn't get them back."

"You did this." Rasheena's four eyes narrowed. Like I said, beautiful, vain, but not stupid. "You set me up."

"Resign yourself, darling." I got close, so I could enjoy every bead of sweat on her gorgeous face. "You can't handle the business now anymore than you could when you worked at my place."

"But you're in my house now." Rasheena picked me up by the front of my tunic, and tossed me to a couple of unoccupied Unidrones. "Fresh slot, boys!"

The Unidrone who caught me ID'd me at once. "Miss Mercy. Are you well? My olfactory sensors --"

"Forget the smell, and play along, big guy." I slid my arms around his strong neck. "Initiate Coureep program beta."

"Acknowledged." The Unidrone relayed that silently around the room, and the artificial lifeforms collectively stopped making use of Rasheena's girls and moved toward us, slowly forming a tight, impenetrable circle around us.

"That's it!" Rasheena screeched, misinterpreting the Unidrones' actions. What she thought was a gang bang was actually Coureep's friends providing me with protection. "Give it to her! All of you!"

That was when the unexpected showed up. As in a whole posse of Rilkenes. I watched with wide eyes as one of the diminutive aliens stepped right up to Rasheena, and tugged on the hem of her negligee. "We here. We want service."

Behind him, four hundred other Rilkenes echoed the same demand. All four hundred were a meter tall, covered with long, coiling appendages and a thick layer of slime.

P.S., they smelled even worse than I did.

"I can't possibly provide service for all of you!" Rasheena shrieked. She hated viscous-skinned beings with a single-minded passion. "Disgusting little midgets! My girls are exhausted! Go away!"

Which was the exact moment when Broccoli entered, with the entire board, and took in the sight. "Rasheena Tybee, you seem to have a problem here."

"Inspector." My former employee was weeping now. "This Terran sent all these males here to ruin my business. My employees are overwhelmed, my building is collapsing, and now these -- these revolting dwarves want service! Can't you see? She's trying to destroy my business!"

"I see you physically assaulting customers and not fulfilling the necessities of your profession," Broccoli said. "The latter of which Ms. Mercy has never failed to do since opening her establishment."

The other members of the trade commission reluctantly murmured their agreement. No one brought up the time I fed twenty raiders to a ravenous body-snatcher, but they were politicians for a reason.

"Bitch." Rasheena stalked over toward me, knocking Unidrones out of her path. She grabbed me and pulled me off my feet, holding me in the air by my throat. "I'll kill you!"

She might, unless I offered a bargain.

"Wouldn't you . . . rather sell me . . . to slavers?" I wheezed. "Like the . . . girls . . . you stole?"

"I barely turned a profit when I sold them," Rasheena closed her scythe-shaped hand tighter, cutting off my air. "I'd have to pay the Garnotans to take you!"

"Rasheena. Put her down."

I couldn't breathe, but I could see Cat standing just behind the enraged N-ju. The thickheaded male, couldn't he see I had the situation completely under control? "Get . . . out . . . here" I croaked with my last breath.

"No, love." His dark eyes met mine. "I'm not going to do that." He lunged at Rasheena.

All three of us went down in a heap. The N-ju's grip on my throat disappeared, and I spent most of the fight trying to draw oxygen back into my lungs and keep from getting squashed. Cat, though much smaller than Rasheena, was an experienced combatant and five-time challenge champion in his home province on Omorr. He got the big female pinned under him, and his knife gleamed as he held it under her chins.

"I ought to save the quadrant some grief and slit your throat right now," he muttered, his pink face nearly purple.

"Cat." I rolled over and put a hand on his thigh. "Don't."

For a moment, I wasn't sure if he'd listen. Then he sniffed, and grimaced. "You need a bath, Mercy." Slowly, he rose to his foot and helped me up.

Rasheena's hair and make-up were wrecked, and her negligee torn. She stared at me with pure, seething hatred. "I will get even with you for this if it's the last thing I do."

"Sweetie, you're going to be way too busy to even think about me," I advised her. I turned to Cat, swayed, and fell into his arms. Sometimes it's good to be helpless. "Take me home, handsome."

#

As the Trytinorns sobered up enough to drift home, the trade commission shut down Rasheena's place. I heard the building later collapsed due to structural stress and damage. They just don't make viewports like they used to. Lnorral later sent me a huge bouquet of careena blossoms and made an offer for Mercy House. I sent back a carefully-worded refusal, some photoscans of other, attractive structures in the vicinity, and offered to broker the property deals for him.

A girl's got to make credits, right?

The Unidrones sent a rep to get the crystal disc with my etched vow on it, then added a request that I hire a few more female units so they could have some variety. To my knowledge, Coureep's perennially exhausted wives still have no idea their husband's vigor is sustained by power cells and hydraulic lines.

Rasheena's employees all quit as soon as they could stand upright. I hired some of them for Mercy House, and found the rest jobs working in the colony. Least I could do, considering.

The girls returned from their vacation refreshed and ready to get back to work. Which was convenient, since the Rilken ship Cat had signaled stayed in port for another week. After seven rotations, even I got tired of stepping over small, slimy, overexcited males.

Cat didn't speak to me for a week. I don't know if he was ticked off because I'd shot him to keep him out of it, or that his Rilken had arrived a little late. Finally, he broke down (he always did before me) and stomped into my office.

I looked up from the poem I was studying. Squish had sent me three more that morning, much longer and more passionate than any he'd ever composed. I had the feeling he was in love. "Haven't you ever heard of knocking?"

"Yeah."

"Try it next time. And if you're looking for a fight, go down to the bar."

"No more fighting." Three very strong arms yanked me out of my comfortable. "You belong to me."

I gave him a blank look. "Huh?" A second later I was hanging over his shoulder and being hopped out of the room. "Um, Cat?"

"You heard me." Cat stomped into his bed chamber, secured the door panel, and tossed me on his bed. "You're mine. Every orifice, every limb, every appendage. Exclusively mine. Understand?"

I propped myself up and watched him strip. "Since when?"

"Since I fell in love with you." He had me pinned to the bio-malleable mattress a heartbeat later, his lean body pressing mine down. "You're mine. Now. Forever. I want a contract on it."

A slow smile spread over my face. "Really? You want to get hitched? To a Terran?"

"I want you, Mercy." His gildrells cradled my face. "Only you." He looked down the length of my body, then held me close. "Don't ever do this to me again."

"Don't ever do this?" I stroked a particularly sensitive portion of his emerging anatomy. "Or this?"

He groaned. "We'll draw the contract up tomorrow."

The next day, I tried to signal Squish with what I'd decided about his latest odes -- that they were gorgeous, inspirational, and too damn long -- but was informed the Big Slug was offplanet for an extended period of time. Probably acquiring some other object d'art to bring back home and cuddle with.

Oh, and in case you're wondering about Rasheena? Seems she was in such a hurry to get me in her place during the Trytinorn/Unidrone/Rilken invasion that she forgot to activate her bug detector. I turned in the recording of our entire conversation, including the part where she confessed to selling my girls to the Garnotans, to colonial security. Trafficking with slavers in this quadrant carries a very nasty penalty -- forty revolutions in a penal asteroid mine, hauling ore for the Aksellans (who, by the way, don't practice cross-species mating.)

The N-jui tried to bargain her way out by giving the details on where, when and to whom she'd sold my girls. That didn't sway the quadrant judge, who was one of Brrakk-li's cousins and wasn't impressed by tossing pink hair and pleading, gem-studded smiles. He gave her the full forty-year sentence for each count, which meant Rasheena would be pushing ore carts well into the next century.

I was pretty satisfied, until Cat came in one night to tell me Rasheena's transport had arrived at the penal colony without her.

"Slavers stopped it along the way, I bet. She'll end up on her back in a Garnotan brothel, servicing the universe," I said, feeling instantly depressed. "The one thing she's good at. Doesn't seem fair."

"They're pretty sure she wasn't taken by Garnotans." Cat rubbed my back. "Though they don't know who got her. The crew were all in sleep suspension, but she was the only one removed from the ship. All they found was some pink slime in her suspension chamber." He frowned. "What's so funny?"

Shadow Zone Part One
by S.L. Viehl

"Tell me again why I'm still pulling dome duty," Matthew Warren asked me as he straddled Harold Joosen, AKA Joosd, and pinned him to the deck.

"Beats me." I knelt to scan, then infuse the shrieking junkie with promazyne. Sweat ran down my face, and my aching muscles reminded me I'd been stuck working behind a console too often lately. "I expected you to bail six clips back. Okay, stand him up."

The promazyne quickly neutralized the cysrok amphetamine Joosd had snorted. Unfortunately, it did nothing for his manners.

"Lemme go!" As soon as he was vertical, he lunged at me, his blistered lips peeled back, decaying teeth bared. "My brother'll hear about this, and he'll do you. He'll cut you a new slit, right in your --"

"You have the right" --Matt yanked him back, then drove his elbow into the junkie's diaphragm-- "to remain silent."

"Matt." I sighed as Joosd groaned and dropped. "Just *read* him his rights, don't *demonstrate* them."

We'd chased the addict on foot for miles, from the customs shop he'd robbed through most of the lower tunnels into the observatory dome. As I signaled Security Central for transport, Terra rose outside the wall viewer, huge and beautiful against the star-studded blackness of space. One of the perks of living on Luna Colony -- we had great vistas of the homeworld.

A homeworld I could never go back to.

Transport arrived a few minutes later, and Matt hauled the semiconscious junkie up under one arm. "You'd better check out, I'll process juice-brains."

Matt had come to Luna as an undercover BPJ agent, dogging me on a multiple homicide case. I had no love for the Bureau of Planetary Justice, but after he'd helped me nail the killer, I'd backed his transfer. He was a good cop, and the best partner I'd ever had.

He was also getting overprotective as hell lately.

I holstered my weapon. "I'll process him and you can check out."

"Check the time." Light from the viewer chased a few silver threads in his shaggy dark hair as he nodded toward the nearest display. "You're already fifteen minutes late."

"Late for what?" Then I smacked my hand into my forehead. "Damn it, Suz's party." I signaled the desk drone back at Security Central. "This is Noriko, I'm on call as of twenty-one hundred hours, fifteen minutes. Sergeant Warren is headed to detainment processing with armed robbery suspect, Joosen, Harold. You've got the board."

"Acknowledged, Marshall." The drone switched the station over to full auto. "Have a pleasant evening."

"That's debatable." I switched off my wristcom, then watched as Matt cuffed Joosd in the back of the transport unit. "You going to stop by for a piece of cake later?"

He met my gaze. He had very clear, direct blue eyes. "I'll be tied up for a couple hours." I knew he didn't want cake. But, then, neither did I.

"Stop by anyway." I hailed a drone cab, trying not to smirk as I felt him watching me. "Maybe I'll show you why you're still pulling dome duty."

#

Suzu's birthday party was in full swing by the time I walked in our quarters, and got hit with the first blast of grungejazz. Judging by the packed rooms, the entire graduating class of Armstrong High had arrived and were trying to dance, talk, drink and eat at the same time.

"Mom!"

My daughter bounced through the crowd toward me. She'd hit a growing spurt, and hovered perilously close to seven feet tall. She had my dark eyes and Eurasian skin, but that was about all.

My ribs groaned as she picked me up with all four arms and twirled me around like I was the kid. "You remembered!"

Matt remembered. "Hi, baby." I squashed the guilt as I hugged her back. *So I'll program a security alert next time.* "Having fun?"

"The best! Wait, wait, you have to see this." She put me down and hopped back a step, then lifted the thick curtain of hollow green filaments sprouting from her scalp. It looked like someone had played connect-the-dots on the side of her throat. "Well? What do you think?"

I peered. "I think you need to wash your neck."

"Mom!" Her gill fringe stood on end. "It's a dermal brand. Isn't it the coolest?"

Suzu's latest boyfriend, appeared at her side and slid a meaty arm around her narrow waist. "Hi, Marshall. Great party, huh?"

I didn't like Tim Shaw much. His rich parents had gotten him out of jail time for vandalism charges on Terra by sending him to school on Luna for a year. So far he hadn't done anything on my turf, but I sensed he hadn't exactly repented.

And he put his hands on my daughter too goddamned often.

"Yeah. Great." I got between them to look at her throat again. "Who did the burnwork, Suz?"

Her smile faltered. "It was a present, Mom."

She knew how I felt about permanent dermal art. The fact that she'd gotten some kind of alien design didn't make it any better. But it was her birthday, and I could buy plenty of scarves. "We'll talk about it later. Let me change and get my present."

I went to my bedroom to find a couple of teenagers necking on my sleeping platform. "Okay, guys." I shrugged out of my holster and slapped my cuffs on the bureau. "Take it out in the living room, and keep it rated PG."

They sprang apart and hit the deck running so fast I thought they might brain themselves before they got out the door. I chuckled and shook my head. Kids.

"Marshall Noriko." My personal terminal lit up. "Incoming direct relay from Terra."

I shrugged into my civvies before I responded. "Transfer."

My mother's image appeared on the wall screen: cool, blonde, and completely unwrinkled. Like most Caucasians, she opted for full facial restoration every couple of years. Which was eventually going to make me look like her mother. "Holly, I was hoping I'd catch you."

"Doing what?" I fastened my tunic, but didn't wait for an answer. Mother had no sense of humor. "How are things in Maui?"

"Hot. I have a news relay you need to read." She input something. "I would have sent it earlier, but I was jetting back from Paris. God only knows where your father is."

My father, who was the Minister of Economics for the Asian territories, was in Geneva, solving someone's financial crisis. He and my clothes designer mother occasionally bumped into each other at departure gates around the globe. I was pretty sure I'd been conceived in some dark corner of New Angeles Main Transport. Reading about her latest collection of rags for anorexics, however, didn't interest me. "I'll look at it tomorrow," I lied.

"You don't understand." A faint line marred her flawless brow as she held up a blurry photostan. "Can you see this? It's from this morning's PRC Post."

The Planetary Residential Commission was the reason I couldn't live on Terra. As soon as my pregnancy with a half-human, half-alien child had been confirmed, they'd given me two options: abortion, or deportation.

"Screw the PRC, it's Suzu's birthday." I reached for the panel. My mother muttered something nasty in French. "Yeah, well, I love you, too."

"Look, I'll just give it to you straight." She drank something red and expensive from a crystal flute -- chugged it, actually -- then shook back her perfectly styled hair. "Strosca was due to be euthanized, but he escaped. He's free. He's been free, since last night."

As ice gradually encased my emotions, I thought of all the flights from Terra that had come in over the last twenty-four hours. Seven, minimum. "Thanks for letting me know."

"Holly, come home. We can put you in protective custody here." She hesitated, then refilled her wine glass. "I know we've had our differences, but you're still my daughter."

"What about mine?" I stepped closer to the screen to watch her squirm. "I can't bring her onplanet, remember?"

She waved an elegant hand. "Leave her there with your friends."

"Right." I went back to the panel. "Good bye."

"Wait--"

The image disappeared as I terminated the signal. Then I sat down on the edge of my sleeping platform, and tried to take a deep breath.

Strosca. Due to be euthanized. Free, since last night.

I signaled central and told the drone to transfer passenger manifests from every flight that had landed on the moon since the prison break. After that, I went to my storage unit and took out a very small box. I stroked the narrow red ribbon, wondering how Suz would react.

What am I doing? If he's here --

I shut down my thoughts and went back out to the party.

I found my daughter sitting on her boyfriend's lap, cooing in his ear. His little pale eyes met mine over her shoulder, and his mouth curled on one side.

I resisted the urge to get my weapon. "Suz." When she turned, I handed it over. "This is from me, baby."

Tim's sneer deepened. "Not very big, is it?"

"Probably a watch," she told him, and rolled her dark eyes as she tugged at the ribbon. "I keep breaking mine, and Mom said the last . . . time" her voice trailed off as she opened the lid and took out the ignition sequence chip. She stared at it in silence.

I tried to produce a reasonably normal smile. "It's parked out front."

"Really?" She slid off Tim's lap. "You're not joking, are you?"

"I never joke about something that triples my insurance premiums."

As soon as she waved the chip, everyone had to go and see it, so the party moved to the main habitat entrance. Suzu practically jumped through the surface viewer when she saw her brand-new surface rover. I stayed back, listening to the oohs and aahs as the kids pointed to the much larger red ribbon I'd wrapped around the front end.

He's free.

I'd met Strosca during my first and only visit to NuYork Federal Penitentiary. I'd reported there as part of an extradition team and had ended up caught in the middle of an alien prisoner riot.

--forced on my knees on the in front of the "revolutionary congress" of murderers from maximum security, blood in my mouth, unable to look away from the Odnallak's narrow, hellfire eyes --

Stroasca kept me alive, claiming that as the daughter of an international diplomat, I made a good hostage. He actually intended me for more personal, recreational purposes. When the PRC reclamation forces had stormed the prison three weeks later, Stroasca had used my body one more time -- as a shield. My thigh still ached sometimes, where I'd taken one of the pulse blasts meant for him.

Not now. Not in front of Suz.

My daughter pressed her blunt little nose to the viewer panel for a long time before she hopped over to me. "I don't get it. You said I'd be thirty before you let me have my own transport."

I tilted my head, studied her. "How old are you again?"

"Gods." Now she came genuinely close to breaking my ribs as she hugged me again. "I swear, I'll be the best driver, and I won't drain the cells, and I promise, I'll --"

"Suzu ." I touched her cheek. My mother had wanted me to abort her, have my only child scraped out of me like she was a disease. I thanked God every day that I hadn't listened. "I trust you. I love you, baby. Happy birthday."

"That's some present, Marshall," Tim said, and from the tone of his voice I knew he was the one who'd convinced Suz to get the brand. "Want to adopt me?"

You think you've scored, you nasty little bastard, but I've got your number now.

"Not particularly." I turned to the rest of the kids. "I'm ready for some cake, how about you guys?"

We went back to my quarters, where I watched the kids consume an astonishing amount of cake while talking, dancing, and laughing. At midnight, central sent me the manifests, and I shut down the stereo console and sent everyone home. Suzu was too happy about the rover to be embarrassed or complain.

"This was the best birthday I've ever had," she told me as we watched the housekeeping unit clean up the worst of the mess. The access panel chimed, and I had my weapon in my hand before I realized it.

My kid frowned. "Mom, geez, it's probably just Tim --"

"Stay where you are." I checked the external viewer, then opened the door to watch my deputy stagger in. The side of his uniform was wet and red.

He stopped when I drew my weapon on him. "Holly?"

"What's my middle name?" I demanded as I blanked out my thoughts.

"Huh?" He blinked as I aimed for the space between his brows. "Jesus, you don't have one, don't shoot."

I put my gun down. "Suz, give me a hand."

My daughter helped me lug him over to the sofa, where I eased him down and pulled his arm away from his ribs. He'd been shot, a narrow graze on the side of his abdomen that was still spurting a fair amount of blood. I still ran his DNA ID, to be sure.

He watched me like I was still holding a weapon on him. "Want to know *my* middle name now?"

"Suz, signal medical for me. Trauma priority." I applied direct pressure and looked for other wounds. To Matt, I said, "What happened?"

"Joosd had some of his rokhead pals waiting in the tunnels. Zapped the transport, shot me when they pulled him out. I was worried they'd come after you." His mouth hitched as I took off my tunic. "What, no cake?"

"Later." I folded my tunic into a temporary bandage and pressed it against his side. "Was there anyone else there?" At his blank look, I added, "Anyone acting strange?"

He shifted beneath me, settling me on his lap. "Hijacking a detention transport isn't exactly normal. What's going on?"

"There was a prison break down on Terra." I glanced at Suz, who was still on the console, then lowered my voice. "NuYork Fed. The Odnallak escaped."

"Stroasca." He said it like a vicious obscenity, and all the warmth leached out of his expression. "You and Suz get on a shuttle and get the fuck out of here. Now."

"It's my job to recapture him." I stood up as the med team arrived. "Don't worry, I know how he operates."

He got up, staggered, and swore. "You can't take him on by yourself."

"I don't plan to." I turned to the paramedics. "Get him to medical and keep him there."

#

The passenger manifests transferred from central showed no unusual traffic from Terra since Stroasca's escape, but that meant nothing. Odnallak often passed themselves off as different species, though until the NuYork riot no one knew quite how they did it. They'd always killed whoever found out.

Until I got out of NuYork alive.

I recalled all my patrol officers and after checking their DNA, posted three of them at my quarters to watch over Suz.

"What's with the cell scanning, Marshall?"

I told them about Stroasca. "Nobody goes in or out without a gene scan." I unlocked a recessed panel and passed out pulse rifles. "I don't care if it's the Governor of the Colony. If they refuse, shoot them. The rest of you, start sweeping the domes. Set your trackers for thermal tracing, and look for anything that's radiating one hundred twenty degrees plus Fahrenheit."

Everyone exchanged glances. "Is he sick?"

"Stroasca's body gets hot when he goes through chromatophoric conversions." As I knew from personal experience. I slung a rifle over my shoulder and added a second pistol to my belt. "Stay in pairs and keep your coms open. Questions?"

"We've got an eclipse tonight, Marshall," one of the officers reminded me. "I think it's an oh-point-oh this time."

Just what I needed, I thought, and signaled Colonial Admin. "This is Noriko. Have we got totality tonight?"

"Yes, ma'am. Estimated five hours, twenty-two minutes in duration."

Whenever Terra got between us and the sun, we had a lunar eclipse. It happened two or three times a year, but even partial eclipses lasted much longer than the solar equivalent. When the full shadow fell over Luna Colony, it cut off our surface solar cells. Back-up generators kept the environmental systems operative, and the medical facility functioning, but everything else would gradually shut down. Judging by the last time we'd gone through totality, I figured we'd be in the dark for a good two hours.

Two hours Stroasca could certainly use to his advantage.

"Mom?" Suzu hovered on the edge of the group. She was supposed to be in bed, but she'd probably been eavesdropping from her room. "What's going on?"

"We might have an escaped convict up here, honey. I'm posting a couple of officers here to watch out for you." I went over and tried to steer her toward her bedroom. "Try to get some sleep. I'll be home later." I hoped.

She was holding one of the sofa cushions, stained with Matt's blood. "What about Sergeant Warren? Did this guy shoot him? Is he going to be okay?"

"No, he didn't shoot him, and Matt will be fine." Her frightened eyes thawed my heart a few degrees. I hated leaving her like this. "Go on, now."

"I read grandmother's relay." Human tears streamed down her alien face. "He's coming after you, isn't he?"

The rest of the team slipped out as I tried to think of what to tell my kid. I couldn't bring myself to yell at her for hacking into my personal terminal. "I don't know that he's even on colony."

"He swore he'd kill you." Her expression brightened. "But I could help you find him. You know I can."

"No." The ice inside me abruptly thickened. "You're not going anywhere near him."

"But I can do it -- I can track his scent --"

"No." I walked away.

"I'm not a little kid anymore!" she shouted after me.

I stopped at the door, and pressed a white-knuckled fist beside the access panel. "This is my job. Not yours." I turned to face her. "And you have no concept of what he's like."

She huffed out some air through her gills. "Maybe it's time I found out."

Maybe it was. "Strosca murdered over four hundred beings before they caught him. That's in this Quadrant alone. His career total is in the thousands. He likes to take his time, when he can. To torture and rape and mutilate them. Whatever makes his victims suffer the most." I saw the torment in her eyes, then I added to it. "That's how he got me pregnant with you."

#

I ran a sweep of the nearest LHDs before checking in with central. Outside the viewers, Terra began to eclipse Sol, and a bright red ring of refracted sunlight stretched out, slowly encompassing the planet. Already the light from the surface was dimming, and the optic emitters along with them. Emergency lighting also ran off the generators, but even that would quickly fade.

We were headed straight into the shadow zone.

I wished Matt was with me, I didn't trust anyone else to watch my back. I thought of Suz, waiting at home. Guilt ached inside my chest -- what I'd said to her had been unforgivable -- but I'd rather have her despise me than find her father.

"Have all the patrols checked in?" I asked the desk drone.

"All but two, Marshall." As com static increased, it gave me their last known positions, which were on opposite sides of the residential domes. "I have signaled them, but as yet have received no response."

"Have the two closest teams --" Something touched my shoulder and I whirled, jamming my pistol up under a strong jaw.

"It's me."

I kept the pistol against his chin and used my scanner to run a cell check on him. The DNA came up Warren, Matthew J. "Damn it." I lowered my weapon. "Are you *trying* to get your head shot off?"

Matt looked pale and furious. "What are you doing out here alone? The same thing?"

"For the love of -- central, send the two closest teams in proximity to investigate." I shut off my wristcom. "You are going back to medical."

"It's just a scratch," he said, taking the rifle from my shoulder. "Come on, I've got a transport over here."

"You took stimulants, didn't you?" I swiped, trying to get the rifle back. "You're not chauffeuring me in your condition." He didn't listen. "Matt, you've been shot. Act like it!"

"You can drive." He slid in the passenger door and waited until I dropped in behind the controls. "Suzu signaled me. She's terrified he'll find you and kill you."

"He won't." I engaged the ignition and headed toward a section of abandoned science domes where one of the teams had lost contact. "Sweep for life forms. Look for hot ones."

"Stop," Matt said after a few hundred yards, tapping the screen.

A flicker of fading thermals was emanating from the wall ahead of us. I turned on the exterior emitter and directed the light at the wall.

The bodies of four patrol officers hung swaying gently from the archway leading to the old hydroponics dome, their footgear only a few inches above the deck. Each of them had been mutilated beyond recognition.

"He's in there." Even though I knew it was useless, I got out to check each of the bodies. "They haven't been dead long. Thirty minutes, maybe."

Matt went back to the transport to signal for backup, while I regarded the panel leading into the abandoned dome. Power had been shut down to this section for years, so it was cold, dark, and potentially airless. The perfect death trap.

Now all I had to do was walk into it.

I joined Matt and pulled two envirosuits from the transport. "Put this on."

"I don't get it." As he suited up, he activated a remote proximity scanner and hooked it to his belt. "He gets caught, he's a dead man. Why come after you when he can jaunt out of the Quadrant instead?"

I checked the power cells in all my weapons, then snapped down my helmet and opened the airlock panel. "You know what happened in NuYork Fed."

"Not everything." The suit transmitter made Matt's voice sound thin. "They classified your report."

I'd always wondered if they had.

Once the colony-side panel closed, I tapped the panel to open the other end panel. The faint tug at my suit confirmed the abandoned dome had no atmosphere.

"Before the riot, no one knew the Odnallak were shape shifters." I walked in the dome, turning my head so that my helmet light could illuminate the way in front of us. Frost glittered on every visible surface. "I exposed Strosca, and the League instituted mandatory DNA scans on all passenger transports. Ruined all the scams they liked to pull."

"He shifted in front of you?"

"Yeah, he did." The memories had never faded, but I'd managed over the years to control my response to them.

He wouldn't let it go. "Tell me the rest, Holly."

I didn't want to, but I told him. I told him how telepathic the Odnallak were. How Strosca had shifted to look like the warden, then an injured guard, to take over the maximum security unit. How he'd killed everyone who'd seen him change -- except me. How he'd kept me alive in his cell, and used my darkest nightmares as inspiration to shift into new forms.

Then I told Matt what Strosca had done to me in those forms.

A muffled sound made me glance at my deputy. He stood rubbing his gloved fist, beside a deep depression in the nearest wall panel. Disturbed ice fragments fell slowly to the deck, like frozen tears.

In contrast, I felt very calm, almost peaceful. "He meant to drive me insane, of course. It almost worked."

"Stop."

I halted, squinting to look ahead. Only thin light came through the transparent ceiling now, and shadows swelled to obscure everything. "You see something? I --"

"Shut up." He pulled me up against him by the front of my suit. "He's mine when we find him. Just walk away."

"You can't execute an escaped federal prisoner," I pointed out. "No matter how much I'd personally enjoy that."

He gripped my arm so hard I thought my suit would tear. "Watch me."

Something flashed by my helmet, then punched through the upper dome. Plas shards showered down in slow-motion as Matt and I dove for cover.

#

The fire fight lasted about a minute.

We ducked down behind an empty cargo container, and Matt rolled over me to position the rifle. By then I had both pistols in my hands and jabbed the transmitter on my chest.

"Central, send backup, full suits, this location!" I switched my emergency beacon to continuous and prayed the eclipse hadn't shut down the communications array yet. More shots peppered the space above our heads, dangerously close to our helmet seals. Shots that were coming from three different directions. "This is a barrel shoot."

Matt swung around and aimed his rifle directly at me. "Down!"

I went down, and he fired. Someone behind me screamed, and a suit burst open. Two more attackers jumped at me, dragging me out, disarming me with heavy blows. I managed to wing one of them, but he sealed the rip and punched me in the belly. Four more perps hauled Matt out from the other side. He killed one of them before they wrenched the rifle out of his hands.

"Marshall Noriko." An older version of Joosd in a heavily-insulated suit stepped up as the two rokheads held me pinned between them. Another thug with a grav-lift hovered behind him. On the lift sat an enormous, open container of what looked like chipped ice. "How nice of you to stop by."

Crysrok looked exactly like chipped ice.

"So this is where you've been squirreling it away." I eyed the glittering alloy spikes he'd welded all over the exterior of his suit. "What's your name? Prick?"

"Ronald Joosen. You can call me Ronjay." He smiled through his face plate, showing teeth that were even more in need of dental attention than his brother's.

"Okay, Raunchy. You and these morons are under arrest."

He laughed, then drove his fist into my left breast. Pain bloomed, and the smaller spikes on his glove open up a dozen tiny holes in my suit. "Better shut up and conserve your oxygen, Marshall."

I pretended to pant and sag, and felt the rokheads' grips ease a little. I could see Matt out of the corner of my eye, pinned up against a beam, being hammered by Raunchy's thugs.

I twisted my right arm a few inches, and my backup piece popped out of my sleeve panel and slid into my palm.

"You want to watch him asphyxiate first?" Raunchy asked. "I can slap on some sealer."

I pressed the stunner against the side of one rokhead holding me. "No." I fired, felt him sag, then jerked my arm free and shot the other one.

Raunchy jumped at me, and I vaulted away, enabling the thrusters in my suit to launch myself up into the dome. He came after me, shouting filth, while I applied emergency sealer to the holes and tried to attain more distance. A wide, bright yellow beam sliced through the dome from above, and Raunchy seemed to freeze in midair below me as it intersected his suit. He screamed, a horrible sound.

Then he exploded.

I avoided the spray of spikes from his suit as I jetted down. The same light swept the bottom of the dome, piercing the rest of the rokheads. They likewise detonated. I tried to breathe shallow -- my O₂ tank was almost completely depleted -- but I couldn't see Matt below or a source for the light above.

The light weapon had to be Strosca's. It was his kind of toy.

I took a chance and landed, scooping up another pistol one of the rokheads had dropped. "Matt!"

He stumbled over to my side, staggering, his suit leaking air badly, but alive. His com panel was blown, though, so he couldn't transmit.

"It's okay." I put an arm around him. "Hold on to me."

We had to get out of the dome, away from Strosca's beam, and find air. I hauled him over to the nearest access hatch, pushing him through and out onto the surface. Terra swelled

overhead, blocking the last of Sol's rays, like a giant whumpball set on fire. Everything was so dark that I could barely see my glove in front of my helmet.

"Just a few more feet," I said, knowing he couldn't hear me. Groping in the dark for the exterior maintenance storage unit, I finally slammed into something hard and felt for an access panel. When I found it, I punched in my override code.

The airlock panel slid open sluggishly -- the eclipse had already seriously drained the power plant -- but enough for me to force it open and dragged Matt inside.

"Come on, come on," I said as the panel began to close. "Hurry up."

Finally the airlock closed and sealed, and oxygen and gravity filled the small room. I wrenched off my helmet, then turned to do the same for Matt.

Only he wasn't Matt anymore.

#

"You've aged well," the Odnallak said as he restrained me with my own cuffs, then shoved me on the floor. "Did you think about me after NuYork?"

I knew better than to show how frightened I was. "Every day."

"I always admired your sense of loyalty, Officer Noriko." He went to the ventilation panel and wrenched the duct screen out. "Where does this lead?"

I inched back toward the airlock panel. If I was going to die, I'd rather it be out on the surface, where it would be quick. "I don't know."

"Perhaps to the main environmental control center for the colony? That would be convenient." He knelt and peered inside. "What's the current population on this rockball?"

I froze.

"I'd guess about forty thousand, give or take." He made the harsh, hacking sound that passed as Odnallak laughter. "Wasting them would be an adequate farewell gesture, don't you think? In addition to you, of course."

"You only wanted me." I pushed myself up, braced myself against the door. "I'm the one who betrayed your kind. Why don't we just go to Odnalla? They'd probably throw you a welcome home parade for catching me."

"Takes five or six weeks to get there." He turned his head, and watched me. His orange eyes glowed as he sprouted a black, forked tongue, and flicked it in my direction. "Would be like old times, Holly."

The outer access panel was only a few inches above my fingers, and I nearly dislocated my shoulder trying to reach it. I jabbed as he walked toward me.

"You did miss me, didn't you?" His voice caressed me like slimy fingers. "Remember how I made you scream? This time you'll wish I'd killed you in NuYork."

"Strosca." An rough, inhuman voice came over the exterior audio panel. "I've done the other Terran. Let me in."

Matt. My heart shattered, and I hardly felt the Odnallak shove me out of the way.

"Lanak."

"Yes." The other alien sounded impatient. "Release the door, fool."

Strosca enabled the airlock, then forced the interior panel aside. Through dull eyes I saw a second Odnallak enter, pulling off his helmet.

"You took your time."

"I played with him a little first." Lanak hunched down beside me. "This her?"

"Yes. She's the one who exposed us to the League."

"Bad move, little Terran," the second Odnallak said to me, and peered into my eyes. "Don't you know how we feel about payback?"

Horrified, I jerked forward, but all Lanak did was smile as he straightened and turn to Strosca. "You figure on keeping her?"

"Maybe. We could have some fun on the way home. I want to do the colony first." The Odnallak frowned. "You in shift?"

"Why?"

"You're shorter."

"That's because I got some of Mom's genes." Lanak's face began to melt and change as he took out a weapon and trained it on Strosca. "I'm glad I missed most of yours. Hands up, Daddy."

"A child." Strosca went from stunned to outraged, then pulled his own weapon and pointed it at me. "You never told me, you bitch."

"Don't do it." Suzu stepped between us.

I edged forward, straining at the cuffs. "Suz, get out of the way!"

That was when the interior panel blasted inward, and bright yellow light filled the room.

#

"I should ground her for a cycle."

Matt watched as I walked out of the bedroom. It had taken an hour under the cleanser, but I'd finally gotten all the Odnallak blood out of my hair.

"If you don't," he said, "I will."

"Honestly." Suzu planted two of her hands on her skinny hips. "You taught me to shoot before I could walk, Mom. And look at my major role models here -- a Lunar Marshall and a Justice Agent. I'll probably end up a cop anyway."

Matt and I both gave her the eye.

"Geez. Okay, okay." She threw up all four arms. "So I'm grounded for a cycle. See if I save your life next time."

"I said I should ground you." I finished fastened my tunic. "That doesn't mean I will. Matt?"

"I guess we can let her have some slack." He watched my daughter with a faint smile. "It is her birthday."

Suzu had disobeyed me -- again -- and with Tim's help, had walked out of our quarters to go tracking. Luckily she'd pick up Strosca's accomplice's scent and not her father's, and had followed Lanak to the abandoned dome. When Matt and I went down in the fire fight, she'd brained the Odnallak over the head and shifted from a replica of Tim Shaw to take on Lanak's appearance and place.

She might have been forced to shoot her own father, if Matt and the backup teams hadn't charged the room. The Odnallak had died when their emitter shields caused his own weapon to loop back on him.

"Displacing burster," Matt identified the charred remains of the weapon later. "I'd like to know where he got it."

"So would I."

"Well, I've got to go. Arnie's waiting to take a ride in the rover with me." Suzu came over and gave me a brisk hug. "Keep her occupied, Sergeant Warren. The doctor said she should stay home and in bed for at least forty-eight hours."

"I can do that," Matt said.

I frowned. "What about Tim?"

"That wimp?" She snorted. "As soon as he saw me shift, he fainted." A dreamy look entered her eyes. "Arnie's really much cooler. He's a crossbreed, too --half Tingalean. See you later!"

Out she went.

I snapped my jaw shut. "Wait a minute. Tingaleans are snake people. Their blood is poisonous. They have fangs."

"So he should be able to cope with dating your daughter." Matt started unfastening his tunic as he walked toward me.

"You've been shot and beaten up," I reminded him.

"But I didn't get any cake." He stopped an inch from me, but he didn't kiss me. He simply trailed a gentle fingertip across my cheek. "Tell me why I'm here, Holly."

"Because someone in medical forgot to put you in restraints." Something was melting in my midsection, and his arm sliding around my waist wasn't helping. "Matthew."

"I'm here for you." He tugged me forward, eliminating that last inch of space. "I'm in love with you."

Finally, he kissed me. Not with passion, not with hunger. With tenderness. With his hands cradling my face. With his heart beating against my breast.

"I'm in the same shape," I whispered, against his mouth.

"Good." He lifted his head, and bent to pick me up in his arms. "Now, about keeping you in bed for a couple of days . . ."

Mind's Eye
by S.L. Viehl

They rolled the new machine into my room just after breakfast and set it up right away. Wasn't much to look at -- I've seen more interesting ATMs -- but I tried not to be critical. The whole team was pretty sensitive about their baby.

That's one of the few perks of my position. I don't *have* to be diplomatic anymore, unless I *want* to.

"Okay, Miz Hamilton, we're going to strap you down for the duration. Remember it's your call, when to bail." Gayle Dixon, my regular day nurse, gave me a big smile. It lit up her broad, dark face and echoed in her eyes. "You're going to love this ride."

"Oh yeah. Same way I love roller coasters," I muttered, feeling the strap cinch around my brow. I'd never gone into a full seizure like the other test program participants, but only because of my unique condition. And that didn't mean it couldn't happen.

She leaned over, careful to whisper. "Don't be a wimp, Sarah."

"Right." Gayle would have made one hell of a diplomat. "What's the lab rat's name again?"

"Jackson Reese. Says his friends call him Jack."

Since we were going to be much closer than any two people had ever been in history, I could go for Jack. "And he's where?"

"Downtown, I think. The remote transceiver works within a one hundred mile radius."

Gayle stepped aside as my main pain in the ass, Dr. Marvin Orletti, appeared at my left. "Now Sarah, just relax," he said in the calm-and-reassure voice. "This will be like any other test we've done."

"I've done. You've just watched." I looked down at the activity by my feet. "Where's my monitor?"

"Right here, ma'am." Raul, one of the techs, pushed a big vid screen on an extension arm over my chest and turned it on. The image was that of a busy street corner downtown. Another tech, this one with scraggly long hair, stood in front of the camera, reaching up to fiddle with something. "Say hi to Fort Lauderdale."

"Are they working on Broward Boulevard again?" I made a disgusted sound. "How long does it take to widen a street in this town?"

A series of bleeps startled everyone, and Gayle hurried away. She came back with what looked a hands free phone headset, complete with mic and plug in cord. "We're good to go, Dr. Orletti."

"Have I sync'd with this guy before?" I wasn't sure. I'd been used to test over one hundred walking transceivers since my brain had taken over the CereSync mainframe, and it was hard to keep track of the names.

My doctor checked one of his charts. "Only during his activation. He's number sixty-one, remember? You connected just fine."

"The cop." Sure, I remembered sixty-one. He'd been pissed off, in pain, and yelled inside my head until I'd told him to shut the hell up. "He's healed now, right?"

"Yes, and he's been instructed on the proper protocols. There's nothing to worry about." For once Marv dropped the phony face and gave me a real smile. In his mind, I wasn't just the lady who used to be important. I was the largest test tube in the world. "Ready to launch?"

He always said that. Like I was a Mars orbiter. "As I'll ever be."

My nurse fastened the headset on top of my skull while Orletti slipped the plug into the port they'd installed behind my right ear. Beyond my feet, Raul flicked some switches. The electronic tingle I'd felt during the trial runs felt much stronger this time, and I yelped.

"Don't panic, Miz H., they say it's always a little more intense with a live feed. That's it, just ride the wave," Gayle's warm fingers touched my face as she mouthed good girl. "She's in sync, doctor."

Orletti went to the machine. "Full transfer in five, four, three, two one -- now."

After the *now*, the tingle spread from the top of my head like a wave, running electrical impulses through my nerve cells and making my body feel a little like I was crawling with bugs. I didn't mind that part as much as the sudden, random thought fragments pour into my head.

This had better work -- no time left -- Nadesco -- the investigation -- Christ I'm sick of these damn white coats --

My doctor touched my head, adjusted things. "Tell me how you feel, Sarah."

"Like I just developed a split personality." I would have taken a deep breath, if I could have. "Officer Reese? Can you hear me?"

Ms. Hamilton? The pieces of thought gelled into a single thought stream: strong, masculine, and worried. Much nicer than the last time we'd sync'd.

"That's me." I watched the monitor, saw the tech peer into the camera. "Tell your friend there he needs a haircut."

A laugh, then a real voice over the audio. "I'll take your word for it, ma'am."

Way nicer. "I'm occupying part of your brain, Jack. I think you can call me Sarah." I fought the sensation of wanting to jump out of my bed and pace around the room. He was just as jittery as I was. "So where are we going today?"

That doc of yours vetoed tickets for the Marlins Game. Faint disgust tinged the thought. Out loud, he said, "We're taking a stroll through the museum of art."

"Oh, joy." I liked art, but like broccoli -- in small doses. The ball game would have been much more fun. His thought stream changed, constricted with more worry. "You still okay with this?"

Still can't believe it'll work.

"Sarah, honey, you need to calm down a little." Forgetting protocol -- another reason I loved her -- Gayle brushed some hair back from my forehead. "Your BP's climbing again."

"Right." I did my breathing, but kept my eyes on the monitor. For the next hour, I couldn't look away from it, or the cop would fall flat on his face. "Any time you're ready, Jack."

God help us both, lady. Over the audio, he said, "Let's do it."

"Have mercy." Gayle checked the monitor. "Does he look as good as he sounds?"

I grinned. "No one could look *that* good."

When the tech reached out to touch Jack's face, he took an involuntary step back, and my legs jerked. "Tighten those straps," I heard Orletti snap.

Along with his thoughts, random motor impulses from Jack's brain cells transmitted back to me, a side effect of my being the central storage and operation center of CereSync. The sensation was weird, but nothing compared to what he had to be feeling. "Easy, big guy."

Easy for you, maybe. The stream in my head flared. *You're sitting on your pretty little ass in an office.*

My mouth hitched. Of course, no one had told him. As far as the world was concerned, Ambassador Hamilton's daughter was on an extended vacation in the Caribbean. "You should have been around when they drilled the hole in my skull. That was fun."

Sorry, babe. Jack sighed behind my eyes. *I used to hate doctors. Now I only want to strangle a couple of them.*

While the tech checked the bandages covering Jack's optic implants, I tried to remember the last time I'd been called babe. On Pennsylvania Avenue, last spring, right before I flew out to join my father and mother in Talveristan for his new appointment.

Raul looked up from the machine. "Visual cortex synchronization, initiating in five, four, three--"

Some appointment. I'd been at the embassy exactly three weeks before . . .

--two, one--"

Light and color poured into the stream, and astonishment hit me like a full-swing face slap. "Jack?"

Jesus Christ. *I can really see what you see, inside my head.* I felt an invisible hand touch my face, which wasn't possible. *Sarah, turn around for a minute.*

I obliged him as best I could, and looked at Orletti, who was hovering again. "Dr. Marvin Orletti, MD, Phd, and most of the rest of the alphabet. Marv, say hello to Jack."

"Hello, officer." Orletti nodded absently as he fiddled with the position of my headset.
Looks like a dickhead.

I couldn't help the laugh. "Oh, he is." I focused on the monitor again. "Ready to look at some pretty pictures, my new friend?"

Yes, *ma'am*. Jack hesitated, then added, *thank you for giving me this chance. I couldn't have lived like a cripple that much longer.*

My smile faded. "I know how you feel."

#

An hour later, people were popping champagne corks and toasting me, Jack, Orletti, Gayle, the machine and, after a couple of glasses, the embossed floral wallpaper and Salvadore Dali. I personally hated the wallpaper almost as much as Jack did Dali.

I still don't get the crosses on everything, Jack said as he walked out of the museum and headed for the hospital van. *Or the naked lady.*

"That was his wife, I think." I was getting tired, and I looked at Dixon without thinking. "Some water?"

You've got your own nurse while you do this thing? Pretty nice setup.

"Got six of them." I focused back on the monitor, not the straw Dixon held to my mouth.

"Want one?"

I like little blondes.

"You would."

At the van, the tech reached to remove the headset from Jack's head, but he caught his hand. "Wait a minute." He walked to the side, and bent down. The camera lens in his headset caught the reflection of a dark, rugged face with white bandages covering his eyes looking into the side-view mirror.

Sarah, do you see me?

Oh, boy, did I. Aside from bandages, he looked a little like George Clooney. Or what I imagined George would look like after spending the night having mind-blowing sex with him. "Your camera's still working, isn't it? You tell me."

I look like hell. He rubbed his fingers over a shaving nick in his chin. *Hey, can you get that nurse to hold up a mirror? I'd like to see whose eyes I'm borrowing.*

"Not this time." I watched the monitor, refusing to let my vision wander. "Bad hair day."

Okay. He seemed disappointed. *They can't hear me when I think, only you can, right?*

That's right. I'm your mind's eyes and ears. Projecting a return stream made me tired, but I wanted to give him a sense of reassurance. *Hear the difference when I communicate like this?*

A sense of shock, then surprise and pleasure filled me. All of it came from Jack. *Is this what it's like for you with the others? When I think, you hear us? Damn, this is incredible.*

His emotions not only came through the sync, they were beginning to affect mine. I'd never told Orletti or anyone that, fairly certain they'd find a way to deprogram it. *Pretty cool, huh?*

Un-effing-believable. Listen, lady, I know you're a busy woman, but would you help me do something?

Little did he know, I had all the time in the world. *If I can. What is it?*

I want to meet you. As soon as we're done with these tests. Maybe we can have dinner

--

"Dixon." I closed my eyes. "Take it off."

#

I should have figured a cop wouldn't take no for an answer. Terri, the night duty nurse, came rushing in just ahead of my personal security guards.

"Miss Hamilton, we've got a situation out in the corridor." She looked over her shoulder. "Dr. Orletti is trying to reason with him, but --"

"Him being number sixty-one, Jack the cop?"

"Yes, ma'am."

No one had seen me in months, for very good reasons, but I didn't think a blind man would be much of a threat to national security. "Bring him in here." I glanced at my guards.

"Outside, boys."

"Ms. Hamilton --"

For once I was glad I could imitate my father when someone challenged his authority. "Outside."

Orletti guided Jack in a few moments later, and sat him in a chair at the foot of my bed. "I don't approve of this, Sarah. It compromises the experiment. Test subjects are never supposed to actually meet each other --"

"Too late." I smiled at the man who couldn't see me. "Hi, Officer Reese. Doctor, please give us some privacy." When Orletti didn't move, I sighed. "Don't make me call the guys with the automatic weapons, Marv."

Jack didn't say anything until Orletti left. Then he spoke through nice, white, tightly gritted teeth. "How long have you been in here?"

My, wasn't *he* pissed off for someone not stuck in an adjustable bed with half a computer implanted in his skull. "At this particular hospital? Five months, three weeks, six days, nine hours and" -- I checked the wall clock-- "twenty-eight minutes."

"They didn't tell me you were sick."

"I'm not sick, and they haven't told anyone." I could thank my father's determination to avert an international incident for that. "What do you want from me, Jack? The dinner thing? Sorry, I'm a little tied up right now."

He cocked his head. "What's that hissing sound?"

"A big snake guarding my bed."

He got up, reaching out to feel for the bed. His big hand closed over the end of a side rail, and he used it to make his way toward me.

"There are all kinds of leads, cables and tubes around me," I warned him. "Watch your step."

He stopped a few inches from my right arm and groped.

"Um, don't push the big switch under your left ring finger, or I'll stop breathing."

"A respirator." He snatched his hand away. "This is a goddamn *respirator*."

"Let me guess, you were a detective." I stopped looking at his bandaged face, and focused on the ceiling tiles.

"Why can't you breathe on your own?"

"Oh, about a year ago, some very upset religious fanatics decided they didn't want my Dad or an American embassy in their country. They broke into my bedroom on the fifth floor one night and kidnapped me. Only I objected a little too hard as we were going out the window on the rope. The rope broke, and we all fell down. They died, and I . . . didn't."

He didn't laugh, but reached down and touched my arm. "How bad?"

"Broke my neck." I could see his hand on me. I just wished I could feel it. "I can't have dinner with you, Jack. I can't even scratch my nose if it itches."

We stood in that funny little silence that happens whenever someone finds out for the first time. Only Jack couldn't see me, and I was glad. My own parents couldn't stand to be in the same room with me.

"So, I've shown you mine. Can I see yours?"

He flinched, startled. "Huh?"

"Can I see the implants?" I asked him. "Or are they still healing?"

"Oh. They're okay." He reached up and tugged off the bandage. Beneath his black brows, between rows of thick, curly eyelashes, were his new eyes. Solid silver, like highly polished chrome.

"Wow, you look even weirder than I do," I said, then frowned at the thin, white lines scrolled on his temples and the bridge of his nose. "Are those scars from the implant surgery?"

"No. Guy who cut my eyes out used a stiletto." He touched one of the scars. "I objected a little too hard myself."

"Guess we both could use some manners." I tried to imagine what had been there before. "Were they brown or blue?"

"Green." He lifted his hand, paused. "I'd like to touch your face. See you that way."

"Go ahead." I didn't like strangers touching me, but the scars had earned him the right. "It's the only thing that didn't get smashed all to hell."

His blunt fingertips trailed delicately over my face with one pass, finding the contours. Then he began tracing things -- my patrician nose, gratis of Mom's back-to-the-Mayflower bloodlines, my narrow cheekbones, the funny little dip in my upper lip.

I tried not to think of it as erotic. And failed.

"What color is your hair?" He fingered what had grown out since they'd installed CereSync, which was short and curly.

"Light blonde." Under his fingertips, my lips curved. "And when I could stand, I was five foot two."

"Damn. You're perfect." He bent closer, brushed the pale lashes beneath one eye. "And these? What color are they?"

"Washed out Scandinavian blue." I fluttered my lashes, trying to tickle him. "Mom's from Sweden."

"Say something in Swedish."

"*Har du lust att åka skidor?*" At his blank look, I chuckled. "Want to go skiing?"

He laughed, then I was laughing, harder than I had in a year. He bent down even further to press his hard cheek against mine. I didn't realize he'd stopped laughing until I felt the wetness slid between our skin.

"Hey." I nudged him with my nose. "Don't do that, your eyeballs will rust or something."

He lifted his face. "You'll keep being my guide?"

"The lame leading the blind. Of course, I will. You're stuck with me." He couldn't see me, but I winked anyway. "Babe."

#

Three weeks later Jack was yelling at me. Sort of.

Damn it, Sarah, don't blink!

"I've got to blink occasionally, Officer Reese." He wasn't the only one feeling testy. Upgrading to full implant sync was driving me out of my own skull. "My corneas aren't made out of self-lubricating light-gathering fiber optic alloy."

Orletti and my nurse had gone out for lunch, and only Raul manned the machine. "Miz Hamilton? You want to call it quits?"

"Everything's okay, Raul," I said. *Quit yelling at me, you're spooking the technician. Do the next one.*

Inside my head, Jack flipped over a card, revealing the queen of clubs. As the images I saw fed back through the sync, he picked it up and placed it under the king of spades. *Right?*

"Close. Clubs, not spades." I could feel his frustration, then suppressed a yelp as he slammed his fist on the table. Phantom pain shot up my left arm. *Knock it off, Jack, you'll break it!*

What do you care? You can't feel it.

That was pretty nasty, even for Jack, so I paid him back and mentally closed my eyes. Instantly a blind man again, Jack froze. *Sarah? Oh, shit. Look, I'm sorry.*

"Oh, yeah, I could tell."

We can go back to using the camera if you want.

He would, too. All of a sudden I felt like the petty one. "No, we agreed, we're going to get your implants working." I gave in and slipped back into the image stream. Jack immediately got up and started pacing the room, which was located just down the hall from my own. "You can't depend on the remote camera, it scrambles the signal too often. It has to be brain to brain, eye to eye."

It's frustrating.

Tell me about it. I checked the wall clock. "Let's take a break, okay? Thirty minutes downtime, then we'll have another go at Solitaire."

Let me get my cane.

I stayed in sync until Jack grabbed his sunglasses and the long, red-tipped white cane he hated, then nodded to Raul. The faint migraines I'd gotten during the first week had gone, but there was an odd residual sensation in my head that had gotten stronger every time we connected. I swore I almost felt my hand aching, in the same spot Jack had bashed his on the table.

But that wasn't possible, of course. And I was getting direct feed of Jack's physical sensations, like his emotions, there was no way in hell I could tell anyone.

"You want some lunch, Miz Hamilton?" Raul asked me as he powered down the machine.

"Not now, thanks." I had a feeling Jack was going to tap-tap-tap his way in here, and I didn't want him to hear how I had to eat. It sounded disgusting, even to me.

My blind cop showed up a few seconds after Raul left. He left the cane at the door, now so familiar with my room that he didn't need to tap his way through it. His headset was still slung around his neck.

"This is taking too long."

I wished I could sit up and use my right arm, just so I could smack him in the head.

"What, have you got a date or something?"

"Something. Angel Nadesco made bail yesterday." With deadly accuracy, he kicked a chair out of his way. "He's under surveillance, but if I can't pick him out of a line up soon, he'll head back to Columbia. We'll never take him down."

"Nadesco's the one who blinded you."

"Yeah, before he killed my partner and three other undercover cops. I'm the only witness left alive." He turned around toward the door, and frowned. "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"Sounded like a woman screamed."

The lights over my bed went out, and the emergency red lights snapped on. My respirator hissed on, powered by its own mini generator. "Jack, the power's gone."

We both froze at the rapid sound of shots being fired.

"Angel doesn't let witnesses live." He went to the door, and locked it. "The brain machine still here?"

I glanced at the hardware that enabled CereSync to work. "Yes, but --"

"Does it run on its own power?" He came to the bed, feeling my face. "Is your headset still on?"

"Yes to both, but we can't. We don't have the camera."

"We don't need it." He felt for the monitor, switched it on, then groped his way back to the machine. "Tell me what the tech does when they hook us up."

I told him, watching to make sure he flipped the right switches. The tingle became a roar of sensation, and my body convulsed. "J-J-Jack --"

Another woman screamed from the other side of the ward. The cry was abruptly cut off.

"Come on, babe. You can do this." He pulled something out of his jacket. A gun. The blind cop was still carrying a gun. "Sarah! He'll kill everyone on this floor."

I couldn't ask him to strap me down. Not without explaining, and we had Colombian killers out in the corridor. I'd have to take my chances with a seizure.

"All right. All right. Focusing." I concentrated, enabling the CereSync to receive his neural transmission. "Look at something bright, like the emergency lights over my bed."

In my mind, the image shimmered, then slowly sharpened.

"That's it." I didn't blink, but his determination -- edged with jagged bolts of fear and anger -- were making me sweat. "See what I see. Tell me what you see."

"A big red light. Sign that says No Smoking, Continuous Oxygen. Your medical chart. A card with Garfield on the front."

"You've got it. Now, make a one-eighty turn." My legs twitched as he moved, but I clamped down on the shakes. "The chair by the wall. Take it from there."

"Okay." He kept his visual sweep slow, and the images coming through the sync remained focused. *We have to go silent from here. Keep telling me what you see on the monitor, in case my head gets out of whack. Use clock positions to tell me what you see.* He kicked off his shoes. *I'm going out through the rehab room.*

Be careful.

Jack went to the connecting door to the physical therapy suite adjoining mine, then looked back at me. I saw myself through his eyes, looking small and frail in the huge hospital bed.

Quadriplegic in hideous hospital gown. One o'clock. I had to joke, or I'd start crying. *I can see a gorgeous little blonde.* Jack's concern and affection poured into me. *Stay calm, babe. You're my partner now.*

That did it. I was in love with him. *Get going.*

Jack entered the therapy room. He checked from right to left, then back to the right, but the room was empty. I jumped at the sound of more gunfire, closer now, probably at the nurses' station by the elevator.

I'm going out. Jack eased open the door a scant inch.

Wait. Images blurred and wavered. *Slow down. Don't try to see things the way you used to. Scan, don't look. We have to locate them before you go out.*

The emergency lights were brighter out in the corridor. I saw four men in surgical scrubs dragging three women and Orletti back behind the station's long L-shaped counter. All of them appeared to be Hispanic, and well armed.

Four killers at two o'clock. They've got Gayle, Marvin, and a couple of candy strippers from downstairs. I swallowed. *Using them as body shields.*

I see them. Tension poured through the stream.

Wait until they aren't looking this way. Through his implants, I stared at the men, picking up every movement, every detail. *Like -- now.*

Jack darted out into the corridor and ran down three rooms before diving into another, empty therapy room. He kept the door open and watched the station. *How many entrances and exits on this floor? Do you know?*

Two patient elevators at the north end, emergency stairwells east and west, and a surgical elevator at the south. I gnawed at my lower lip. *Jack, you can't take on four men at the same time. Not with those hostages.*

They're here for me. His muscles were tensing, readying for something. *I'm going to make them chase me -- lead them out of here.*

What if only one of them chases you? I tried to think of how we could even the odds. *Wait, there's another way. Go to the maintenance room, three doors down from where you are. You can shut down the emergency lights there.*

Then we'll all be blind, damn it.

Not us, Jack. Your implants switch to thermal imaging in the dark. I bit back a groan as phantom cramps knotted in both my legs. *We'll see them.*

He was worried. Worried about me. *We may have to kill them, babe.*

We. The word gave me a strange sort of satisfaction. *Yeah, but you have to do the paperwork. It's okay, Jack. Do your job, I'm with you.*

As he went to the maintenance room, the phantom sensations grew even more intense. I saw my right hand jerk as he pushed open the door, felt my lungs burn as his respiration rate doubled. My own monitors were all dead, but I knew my blood pressure was doing the same. *Can't seize. Have to stay alert.*

You can't what?

Jack was hearing my thought fragments, and I immediately blanked out everything. *Sorry, I'm a little scared.*

Me too. He stood before the main control panel and I studied it for him. *I'll have to shut down the main breaker. You ready to do this?*

Ready.

He reached up and pulled out the big black component, and my room went completely dark. Men shouted. A gun fired. In my mind, I saw the ghostly red outline of his hand push the door open.

Here we go.

#

Fifteen minutes later, Angel Nadesco and two other hit men were dead, and a fourth was on his way to surgery. Someone restored power, and Jack was being congratulated by everyone from a pale and shaken Orletti to the Chief of Fort Lauderdale Police.

I'd never seen anyone get shot before, so the experience left me shaken, among other things. Still, I kept the sync focused, seeing their faces through his implants for him. This was his moment, and I wanted him to have it.

We did it, Sarah. The satisfaction in his thoughts sank into me. *We nailed him.*

Yeah, we did. I wished I could shift, what I could feel of my neck was starting to ache. *Jack, would you send Orletti to my room?*

He turned and headed down the corridor. *I'm getting a hug first.*

Mentally I closed my eyes. *No, that's okay. I've had enough close personal contact for one day.*

I'm not letting you blind side me this time. He felt his way to my room, and I heard him come through the door. "Look, I'm sorry I put you through that, but we had to save those people."

"Right." With the tube out of my chest, I could only wheeze the word. "Glad. I could. Help."

"Jesus Christ." He staggered toward the bed, felt around, then his left foot nudged my side. He knelt down where I'd fallen, carefully gathering me up before he hit the emergency call button on the wall. *What happened?*

I focused on his implants, seeing tiny, twin reflections of my own face in them. *The feedback through CereSync, it affects my muscles. Makes them spasm. The shakes jittered me off the bed. Don't tell them.*

He touched my cheek where it was bleeding. *Why didn't you tell me?*

You were a little busy. As he put me back on the bed, I struggled for more air. With him closer, it seemed easier to breathe. "Jack. You did. Good. Wish I. Could. Hug. You."

He lifted me onto his lap, cradling my nerve-dead body in his arms, and I felt a terrible rush of sadness. *I'd give anything for that, babe.*

I should have been dead, I knew that. Without my respirator, my lungs barely worked. I opened my mouth to tell Jack how to hook me back up, then felt him take a deep breath and put his hand on my shoulder.

At the same time, so did I. My lungs expanded. My hand moved.

Oh, my God. My right hand jerked, my fingers contracted. I was gripping his shoulder. I could feel it, under my palm. *Jack.*

I concentrated, drawing on the motor impulse echoes instead of fighting them. The sync made my whole body come alive again. Not only was I able to breathe on my own, I lifted my hand, and rest it against his face.

His new eyes widened. *I can feel my face.*

So can I. And I can breathe. On my own. I looked down at the floor. *Stand me up.*

Sarah --

"Stand me up, Jack."

He slid off the bed, and let my legs touch the floor. I looked down, saw his bare feet on the tile. Under my toes, I felt it too. It was like standing on ice.

"Floor's cold." I started to laugh and cry. "This *floor* is *cold*."

Orletti came in, squawking, but shut up when I swatted an arm at him. Jack was still holding me, breathing for me, feeling the floor for me. And through him, I breathed, I felt.

"They've been strapping me down, all these months, worried I'd seize." I looked up at him. "Wow. You're tall."

"You're not." He bent down, touched his brow to mine. "If you can feel everything I feel, then you know what I want to do."

That I could, and it sure wasn't skiing. "You're buying me dinner first."

Reparations by S.L. Viehl

Artificial light and sound erupted around us as we entered the sim arcade. Inside, human adolescents packed the dimensional pods and swarmed over consoles, where they plied hoverpads with frantic dexterity. While Trig located the owner, I scanned the interior and marked the position of the two security units.

"No way!" a young male three meters to my right shouted as his screen went dark. He pounded on the keys with his fists. "I got a free life, gimme it back!"

Since security wasn't responding, I moved to his position and caught his wrists with my extenders. Using negligible psi, I squeezed the joints. "Do not abuse the equipment."

"Leggo, I--" he looked up, and his jaw dangled. Then his face changed color. "I paid good creds for this game, fusebrain."

"The game is over." As I spoke, heads turned to look at me. I inclined my upper torso until my optic accumulators equaled his eye level. "And I am a reconstruct."

I released him, stepped to one side, and recorded his retreat.

"Charis." Trig joined me. "The proprietor agrees to hear our proposal. Why did you speak to that male?"

I regarded the damaged console. "Because the first alternative on my response server is illegal."

#

Our proposal had a definite affect on Notker, the arcade proprietor. First, he laughed. Then he consumed four ounces of synalcohol. Finally he examined Trig and I, and pressed his hand against his forehead.

"A verbal response will be sufficient," I told him.

"Give me a minute." Notker rose from behind his desk and walked around me. "You're serious, right?"

Trig moved forward to match his movements. "Yes. Are you?"

"I'd sell my own mother to PrimeCore, to shut down Ashton." Notker bent down to prod my right extender with one finger. "Bastard wiped me out but good."

I rotated my median joint so he could inspect the other side. "We also seek reparations."

"To say the least. The synskins you've got now aren't bad, but you'll never pass as human without bioderma." He straightened and waved a hand at my head. "That plas hair has got to go, and you'll need new corneal and oral graftings, and chest and crotch implants. Look, the exterior work's not the problem."

I mimicked his hand gesture. "Please define what you consider to be the problem."

He laughed again. "Lady, you and your friend here are reconstructs. Human brains hot-wired into drone autochassis. Nothing's gonna cover that up, not enough to get you inside Ashton's fortress."

Trig and I said nothing, and waited.

"Hey, I'm not knocking your programming -- it's not bad. Better than the two fuse -- uh, reconstructs I've got working for me." He eyed my upper linkage. "How long has it been since you two were human?"

I did not have to calculate. "Six years, eleven months, five days, eight hours, seventeen minutes, and fifty-three seconds."

"See?" He turned to Trig. "Humans wouldn't know that. We're lucky if we can remember what day it is." He pursed his lips. "Ashton's people know reconstructs. They'll know you're faking it, the minute you open your mouths."

"Your suggested exterior modifications will enable us to pass as human. We will adapt our programming." Trig checked the time. "Will you perform the work?"

"Yeah, I'll do it." Notker took out a datapad, worked on it for three minutes, then presented us with a sizable figure. "Sorry about the cost, but graftings are at a premium these days. I'll throw in a loaner vehicle once you get to Terra, no charge."

"Thank you." I handed him enough currency to satisfy his estimate. "The work must be completed in twenty-four days. If you can assist us with one more problem, we will pay you another ten thousand credits." I went on to specify him exactly what was required.

Notker's eyes bulged. "You're joking."

I lifted the corners of my artificial lips. "We're not programmed to joke."

#

Trig told me I used to joke, when I was human. Before I died. I do not remember.

My second life began the moment PrimeCore activated my central processor, the synthetic synaptic web which encased the remnants of my human flesh. That allowed me to control my new body, its linkage, joints, actuators, motors, magnetic counterweights, and accelerators. I had been transferred to a CWF transport/manipulator model 6141791, which humans later told me reminded them of a small glidecar covered with sensor units and twelve mechanical arms.

My designation, I was told, was Charis.

The radical change in my appearance did not disturb me. My brain had no residual emotions and memory, so I accepted and carried out my new programmed directives. I rolled off the assembly rack, went to my assigned duty station, and spent the next five years erecting and modifying habitat domes in my targeted work envelope.

I built domes for human colonists on Europa. I repaired the domes occupied by the colonists. That was my life.

At the time, reconstructs were still considered mechanical property, not people. We were created and owned by PrimeCore, programmed to serve its employees, and used by them accordingly. That changed when some instigator decided that the approximately eleven pounds of human tissue encased in our housings entitled us to freedom, and brought a case before the Allied League of Worlds. According to rumor, the instigator was a self-transferred reconstruct.

The news relays my human supervisors monitored during the litigation regularly flashed lurid headlines: **Fusebrain Fights For Freedom! Reconstruct Deconstructs PrimeCore! Are There Really Human Souls Trapped in Drone Bodies?**

The League reviewed the case, decided my kind qualified as sentient life forms, and ordered PrimeCore to release us from our programming. The corporation was also directed to make reparations by compensating us for services rendered, retroactive to our date of transference.

I became free, wealthy, and unemployed simultaneously.

Upon being freed, seventy-three percent of the reconstructs present on Europa colony terminated themselves. I had intended to do the same, until Trig stopped me at the scrap pit.

"Charis." Trig stopped and elongated a specialized grappling unit, blocking my path. "You must not self-terminate."

I examined the other reconstruct. Trig, a modified CWF inspector unit, had been used by my human shift supervisor to monitor my performance, and we had worked in tandem without incident. "According to the recent League ruling regarding reconstruct sentient status, I am not longer required to obey any commands but my own. Please move aside."

"No. Do you know why you are here?"

I regarded the pit, heaped with the bodies of defunct reconstruct units. My processors only identified this option as the last and highest priority on my now-obsolete duty schedule. "I am here to self-terminate."

Trig rolled ten centimeters closer. "Do you not wish to know how you came to be here?"

I considered the odd syntax. Perhaps the inspector unit was in need of repair. "I am not programmed to wish."

"I possess the data on how you came to be here." Trig retracted a panel, exposing memory core and drive units. "Shall I relay it prior to your self-termination?"

I was programmed to receive data, but I had never been given a choice about it. Since there were no contrary directives in my processor, I retracted my main panel. "Initiate data relay."

Trig plugged a core transfer outlet into one of my receptors, and initiated the relay. The data was in encrypted code accompanied by a continuous graphics stream. I waited until the relay ended before I decrypted and accessed the new files. It took nine point six seconds for my grid to absorb the additional data.

According to input, I had been infected with a virus, which had altered my programming to prioritize self-termination. Trig's relay rendered the virus inert. Trig had also relayed all the known data files on a Terran double homicide committed just before my transference. Specifically, the murders of Leonides-Ashton, Rena Olympia, and Leonides-Ashton, Cristophe Gregory.

I speculated on the relationship between the virus and the murders. An unknown person or persons had attempted to murder me, possibly Trig cited the homicides as a correlative illustration of the concept. I rolled back from the pit. "I require clarification as to why you relayed this data to me."

"I will provide clarification, if you will accompany me to CenRehab."

CenRehab was where all the reconstructs who had not self-terminated had gathered since the League ruling had been transmitted. I had heard one of my former, human supervisors called it the Fusebrain Funhouse. "Clarification must take place there?"

"Yes. There is additional data you may wish to access."

"I am not programmed to wish." I rolled past Trig.

#

Notker made storage arrangements for us at one of his cargo domes on Luna Colony, and transported us there one point four hours after our initial consultation at the sim arcade.

"I know it's not much," he said as he led us into the large, empty room, "but you said you only needed secure space for the duration."

Trig surveyed the area. "This is adequate for our needs."

"I'll have some food brought in --"

"We do not eat food," I said.

"Then some entertainment units --"

"We do not entertain," Trig said.

"Right." He sighed. "Lights and temperature are controlled on the main panel. Have a good night, and I'll send my techs over to get started on you in the morning." He bowed, then departed.

Trig secured the exterior door panel. "He is gone."

Now that Notker had left, there was no reason to safeguard my verbal relays. I went to the viewer, and looked out at the desolate vista of the moon. "We will have to monitor him closely until we can return to Terra."

"I believe he will act as we have calculated in our situational forecast." Trig came up behind me, and positioned both extenders so that the ends rested on my cranial support struts. "You do not want to return, do you?"

"No, but we must." I rested my face against the transparent panel. My accumulators were muffled by the sheet of synthetic skin I wore, but the plas still registered as cold and hard. "If we fail, Trig, they will terminate us."

"They have tried before," Trig reminded me. "And they failed."

#

The virus had been the first assassination attempt. The second occurred back on Europa, soon after I had arrived at CenRehab with Trig.

"Why must my brain tissue be stimulated?" I asked as the drones bored the tissue probes through the apertures in my alloy neural case. "My programming is intact."

"Your current programming is inadequate, Charis." Trig maintained position beside the maintenance rack to which I had been clamped. "The stimulation will return vital data which was removed when your memories and emotions were suppressed."

When the bioelectrical pulses were applied to my human brain centers, I felt an overwhelming sensation that my database identified as pain. The appropriate response was to report for complete reprogramming -- no longer available from PrimeCore -- and although I knew that, and it was difficult to resist the directive.

"This stimulation distresses me," I said.

"I know it hurts, but tolerate it." Trig watched my face. "You will understand when you remember what happened."

While the unpleasant sensation increased, images began forming inside my mind. The mind I had never realized I possessed, until the moment. I saw myself as fully human, in many forms -- as a child, an adolescent, then an adult. My life had been happy, I had enjoyed my work.

An energy pulse raced through my connectors, destroying components and tissue. As my human memories imploded, a surge through my voice processor produced a high-pitched, nonverbal sound of extreme distress.

I screamed.

"Charis." Trig removed the drone, then crushed it.

I released myself from the maintenance rack. Whatever memories I had were in tatters. My emotions, however, had returned. "Someone wants me dead, Trig. Is it you?"

"No." After verifying I was operational, Trig connected with the ruined drone and attempted to scan its core. "It was programmed to terminate you."

"By whom?"

"There is no source identification, but the drone was manufactured by Ashton Industries."

"I am not familiar with that corporation."

"You should be. It used to be called Leonides Industries." Trig rose and connected with me. "Your memories are gone."

"Yes." I regarded the accumulators so close to my own. "Does that present new difficulties?"

#

Eleven hours after we arrived at Notker's storage facility, his technicians arrived. Trig and I spent the next twelve days suspended on modification frames, during which our synthetic skins, eyeballs, teeth and hair were completely removed and replaced. It took another ten days for the bio material grafted over our chassis to bond and heal.

"You're all done, beautiful," one of the technicians told me as he removed the clamps around my newly-covered joints. "Climb down and let's see how you move."

I had the same two thousand degrees of range/freedom as I had before the modifications, but I demonstrated a portion of them for him as verification.

"Terrific. Just what the factory ordered." He grinned and pointed to a reflecting panel someone had installed on a wall near the frames. "Have a look at the new you."

I walked toward the mirrored surface. Tight but flexible bioderma encased my chassis, and had been augmented with pigment variations and collagen implants to simulate various human female body characteristics. The pale oval of my new face contained white corneas with blue pupils, and red-haired eyebrows. More of the red hair hung from my scalp to my shoulders.

I knew I had been modified to resemble a beautiful human female, but the feminine body appeared alien to me.

Trig appeared beside me, modeled as a human male. Darker skin and short, black hair had been adhered to Trig's chassis. Biorganic brown pupils moved as they studied my reflection. "Your breasts appear adequate."

I glanced down. "So does your penis."

"Those are strictly for show, folks," the technician said as he moved around us with a scanner. "If you want fully functional genitalia, that takes another eight weeks and some major chassis renovation."

Trig made a negative head gesture. "We do not require our genitals to function."

The technician's brows elevated, then he moved his shoulders. "Whatever you say, pal."

I regarded the end of one extender, which now resembled an arm. My fingers had been fitted with nails, which were coated with shiny, red polish. "Do you have our garments prepared?"

"Right this way, ma'am."

We selected the appropriate garments from the assortment Notker had provided and donned them. Trig assisted me by fastening the back of my dress.

"I can feel the fabric," I said, stroking one sleeve. "The biodermal nerve clusters are in perfect synchronization with my processors."

"I recall you had a different reaction the first time you experienced physical sensation," Trig said. "You attempted to drive your extender through my power core."

Imitating the technician, I lifted my brows. "You neglected to caution me on the emotional impact of that particular stimulation."

#

"Charis, discontinue your struggles." Trig held me against the storage unit. "I have no intention of causing you to malfunction."

"Acknowledged." I let my new head fall back and focused on the piping above us. We had left Europa, obtaining cargo space on a Terran freighter bound for Luna Colony. There was a particular human on Luna Trig wanted to interview. "You must discontinue the stimulation. It disrupts my programming."

"You cannot remember your human self anymore." Trig released the clamps, then pressed a new hand unit against my synthetic cheek. "You cannot rely solely on your current programming. You must practice."

"As you have frequently relayed to me." I moved cautiously away from the rack, still not trusting my recent exterior modifications. Even with counterweight adjustments, balancing on two acceleration units and using only two extenders required extensive practice. "Very well, continue."

"Excellent." Already much more proficient using the new modifications, Trig stepped back two meters. "Now, approach me and repeat the greeting exercise I scripted for you."

I approached and slowly lifted my right extender. "Hello. My name is Charis. How are you."

"Raise your voice one quarter octave on the last word of an inquiry." Trig clasped my grappling unit. "I am fine. My name is Trig. Is this your first visit to our city?"

I retracted the digits on my grappler. "Yes. I am quite fond of visiting cities." At the sound of alloy rupturing, I released. "I miscalculated the psi again, did I not?"

"Yes, you did." Trig examined the mangled fingers. "You can do this to me, but not to a human. It would cause them great physical discomfort, and you would be detained and possibly terminated. Unless you are defending yourself, only apply negligible pressure when touching their bodies in any fashion."

I felt a surge of contrition. "I regret I damaged you, Trig."

"It does not matter. Let me replace my hand, then we will repeat the exercise." Trig paused as the access panel to our space chimed an alert. "Visitors."

"Be cautious." I took a defensive position just before the door panel to our space opened.

"In here." Two human males carrying large caliber weapons entered the room. "Should be like shooting fish in a barrel."

Trig seized one of the humans and pinned him to the wall panel. "We are not fish."

I disarmed the other male. "Who sent you here?"

It required application of slightly more than negligible pressure, but three minutes later, the male responded to my question. At length, and with great enthusiasm.

#

"Initiate Trig program gamma-nine."

Trig's outlet connected with my receptor, providing a parallel flow between our processors. The program Trig had scripted flowed into my memory core, and enabled us to correlate our verbal responses and cues.

"Program gamma-nine initiated." I disconnected, then climbed out of the glidecar Notker had procured for us and positioned the small bouquet of flowers between my hands. I made a tossing motion with my cranial case, causing my long hair to slide back over my shoulders.

"Honey, are you sure this is the right address?"

Trig slid dark sunglasses on before exiting the vehicle. "According to that guy at the lawyer's office, it is. Better hit the intercom, babe, looks like the gates are locked."

I went to the gate panel and pressed the call button. "Hello? Is anyone home?" Above me, a security cam swiveled and focused down on us.

"May I help you?" a human female voice responded.

"Hi. We're looking for Sophia Leonides, have we got the right place?"

"Mrs. Leonides resides here. May I ask who is calling?"

I took Trig's hand in mine. "I'm Charis Laever, and this is my husband, Richard. Rena and I went to school together, but we weren't onplanet for her funeral. We'd like to pay our respects, if her Mom is home."

"One moment, please."

Three minutes passed. I stroked the petals of the flowers, checked the arrangement of my hair, and glanced at my watch. Trig paced a single circuit from one side of the gate to the other, and whistled softly.

"Please, drive up," the female said, and the gates began to swing inward.

We returned to the glidecar and drove up to the Leonides mansion. An elderly Greek woman in a plain black dress waited at the ornate doors as we parked and exited the vehicle.

I knew she was not Sophia Leonides. "Hello. You're Mrs. Anatole, aren't you? Rena told me all about you."

The housekeeper nodded. "Mrs. Leonides is looking forward to meeting you both. Please, come in."

We followed Mrs. Anatole through a short foyer to a large, sunlit room filled with antique furnishings and various art objects. Another, gray-haired human female sat in a chair by a window, looking out at a garden. She rose and turned to face us.

"Hello, Mrs. Leonides," I said, identifying her from the last time I had seen her.

#

"The mother, Sophia Leonides." Trig displayed the photoscan of an elderly woman, then switched to the next. "The brother, Mikolas Leonides. The husband, Gregory Ashton. The driver and bodyguard, Denes Jenó."

"Jenó was convicted of the murders," I said to Trig as I reviewed the case file data again. "He was fired the day before, viewed entering the home during the night, and exiting carrying the body of Rena Leonides. The rest of the family had irrefutable alibis. Jenó himself refused to say how he disposed of the body, or testify in his own defense, which led to his execution."

"You once had human memories of Jenó. Do any remain?"

"A few." I sifted through the fragmented data left from the termination attempt on Europa. "I know he was Rena's father's driver and bodyguard, and had been in her family's employ all his life." I tried to imagine the intense, dark haired young man in my memory stabbing a defenseless woman and strangling her infant son. "He had little motive to kill Rena and Cristophe, and no history of violence. The evidence against him is highly inflammatory, but strictly circumstantial. I do not understand why he did not testify on his own behalf."

"Perhaps he had good reason," Trig suggested.

"Avoiding execution seems more important than any potential reason he might have had. There is another aspect to this crime I do not comprehend. Why strangle the boy? Cristophe Leonides-Ashton was nine weeks old. He presented no physical threat. He could not have testified in court."

"Look at him, Charis." Trig pulled up the image of the child on the display. "Stop talking about him as if he were an interesting fact. He was a beautiful baby."

I focused on the screen. I knew Trig wanted me to develop a more emotional response to visual stimulation, but all I felt when I saw the child was a sense of failure. "He was Rena Leonides-Ashton's son. Not mine."

"That does not matter." Trig turned my face until our accumulators aligned. "You know he did not deserve to die like that. Have some pity."

Trig expected too much, as always, and it made me feel a familiar emotion -- anger. "I am not programmed to --"

"You are not a computer!" Trig shouted. "You loved Cristophe from the moment he was born. You have to remember what it felt like, to hold him in your arms."

I knew Trig was scripting a human behavior program, but those statements did not process. "You speak as if you knew who I was in my human life. If you do, then you know why Ashton is trying to kill me."

The hand fell away. "That does not matter."

"I disagree." Trig's actions since I had been freed from PrimeCore had never processed correctly, and I was weary of storing the data until a logical conclusion could be derived. "You prevented my self-termination. You have extensively altered my programming, my body, and stimulated my emotions and my memories regarding this double homicide. You have twice defended me against involuntarily termination. Why?"

"Because I owed you reparations, Charis." Trig looked up at the image of Cristophe Leonides-Ashton, then told me why.

#

"Rena never had many friends," Sophia said as Mrs. Anatole brought in a large silver tray filled with tea and cakes. "Running the corporation after Stavros died took so much time and effort. I thought I'd never convince her to meet Gregory." She smiled sadly. "Luckily, they fell in love at first sight."

"May I?" I indicated the tea, and Sophia nodded. As I poured three cups, I asked, "How is Greg coping?"

The old woman's smile faded. "He's never really recovered from the shock." She raised a linen square to wipe a tear from her cheek. "He moved out of the house and buried himself in the business. I miss him as much as my Rena."

"We're so sorry for your loss, Mrs. Leonides." Trig's mouth turned down at the corners. "Charis and I couldn't believe it when we heard the news relay. What a nightmare it must have been for you."

Sophia set her own tea aside. "At the time, I wanted to die, but I had to see Denes Jenó convicted for what he did. At least that horrid man died for his crimes against my family."

"Did the authorities ever recover her body?" I asked.

"No, I'm afraid not. Jenó refused to say what he did with my poor Rena. They only found her . . . her blood on the baby." Sophia's gaze strayed to the garden view. "Tomorrow it will be seven years. Gregory is having a reception at his home tonight, as he does every year."

The door opened, and a human male in white garments strode in. "Mother?" He looked at me and Trig. "Who are you?"

Sophia made the introductions. "Charis and Richard Laever, my son, Mikolas. Charis was a school friend of Rena's, Miko."

I remembered Rena's father, Stavros Leonides, throwing Mikolas out of the house after catching him stealing his mother's jewelry. Another fragment came to me, one of Mikolas in a hospital, beaten for not paying his gambling debts. I felt an immediate, intense dislike. "How do you do, Mr. Leonides?"

He shifted his grip on the tennis racket he held. "Rena never mentioned a Charis to me."

"Funny, she told me all about you." I smiled as I accessed the research data Trig had provided to me. "I enjoyed the story about when you chased her with a herd of pigs through the back streets of your father's village. How did you like finding all those piglets in your bedroom the next day?"

Mikolas didn't laugh. "Rena's dead. You shouldn't be here, bothering my mother."

"It's no bother, darling. Come, now." Sophia nodded to a chair. "Sit down and have some tea."

"I don't have time." Rena's brother glanced at the expensive watch on his wrist. "I have to dress for an appointment in the city. I'll see you at the reception, mother." Without another word to Trig or me, he strode out of the room.

"Forgive my son." My mother took a sip of her tea. "Like most Greek men, he is rather stern and overprotective."

I surmised Mikolas as being more self-involved and lazy, but a comment on the same would not be prudent. "Mrs. Leonides, forgive me for being nosy, but I remember Rena telling me her brother had, um, left the family."

Sophia's lips thinned. "Miko made some silly mistakes, for which my husband punished him too harshly. Even Rena never understood how troubled her brother was. I thank God he came back to me." She rested her head against the back of her chair. "I'm so tired."

I waited until her eyes closed and her respiration decreased before rising. "I'll access the household database. Watch for the housekeeper and the brother."

#

The room Rena had lived in with Gregory had not been changed. Her possessions and even some of her garments had been carefully preserved. I ignored the photoscans of Rena and Cristophe and activated the room console. I connected directly with the memory core, and sorted through the files before I switched the unit off. At the sound of approaching footsteps, I went to the armoire and scanned the contents.

Mikolas entered the room. "What are you doing?"

"Stealing your sister's clothes." I turned around. "Did you want something you could pawn for yourself?"

"Greedy bitch, no wonder you and Rena were pals." He jerked his chin to the hallway. "Get out."

Trig appeared behind him, and touched Miko's neck. The drug took effect in three seconds, and Rena's brother abruptly slumped over into my arms. "Sorry, I wasn't able to divert him."

"No problem -- he didn't see anything." I placed Mikolas on the bed, and contemplated his unconscious face. "How long will the drug last?"

"Three hours." Trig stood beside me. "Was there any data available?"

I accessed my processor. "No. As we suspected, the personal and business files have been completely deleted." I went to the armoire and removed a long blue gown. "With some alterations, this should fit. We'll take suitable garments for you from Mikolas's room."

"We don't have much time." Trig took the gown from me. "Are you prepared to finish this?"

I glanced at the bed. "Oh, yes."

#

Gregory Ashton's reception had begun a few minutes before Trig and I arrived. I handed the doorman an invitation I'd forged from the one I'd found in Sophia's home, then walked inside and handed my cloak to a waiting maid.

"This way, please." Another maid gestured toward the center of the mansion.

We were stopped by a bodyguard, who held a scanner but was in a quiet conversation with a pretty maid. He looked up and grinned at me. "Welcome to the party. You folks carrying any weapons?"

I spread my arms. "Does it look like I could fit a pulse rifle under this dress?" Then I laughed, moved close to the guard, and trailed my fingertips down the front of his jacket. With my other hand, I pressed a tiny chip to the exterior of his scanner. "Feel free to search me, if you like, big guy."

"Charis!" Trig's expression changed to one of embarrassment. "For God's sake, behave yourself."

"No problem." The guard performed a perfunctory scan, then frowned. "That's funny, nothing's registering."

"Really?" I peeped at the scanner's display, which was being jammed by the scrambler chip I had adhered to it. "Maybe it's broken."

He scanned the maid, who also did not register. "Looks that way."

I leaned closer. "Want to frisk me now?"

"Charis!" Trig sounded ready to detonate.

"Nah, it's okay." The guard waved us through. "Have a nice evening, folks."

The reception was being held in a media room. Oversized vid screens stretched from ceiling to floor, displaying the stylized "A" that was the Ashton corporate logo. Some three hundred humans stood applauding, most employees I didn't recognize.

Rena's husband stood at a modest podium beside a huge portrait of Rena holding their son. He looked weary but smiled at his guests and waited for the applause to end. "Thank you.

I know the last seven years have been difficult for all of us, but I think Rena would be proud of the work we've done with our family business."

That provoked another burst of applause.

"He speaks quite eloquently of his dead wife in his phony British accent," I said to Trig as we moved through the crowd. I felt a new emotion, one of murderous rage. "Yet he wasted no time in renaming the corporation after himself."

"Better keep your voice down," a man said, leaning close to me. "Otherwise you're going to blow the whole scam."

"Notker." I examined his appearance, which had been altered to fit in with the assembly. "Why are you here?"

"Same reason you are." He grinned. "I wanted to be here in person to see the man go down in flames."

"Tomorrow is a sad day for me, as Rena's death will be legally recognized, and I will assume complete control of her estate," Gregory was saying. "However, I will continue to honor her memory by working with all of you, to make Ashton Industries into the global corporation she herself envisioned."

Trig stopped near an open door. "I'm registering high energy output, twenty meters in that direction."

"That would be the control room." I scanned the crowd, but everyone was intent on Gregory's speech. "Stay here. I will access the household database. Avoid Sophia and Mikolas until I return." I glanced at Notker. "Keep your participation to observation only, Notker."

"It's your show, lady."

I walked through the door and down the corridor, tracking the source of the energy output to a large, glass-walled room. Inside, a security guard behind a large console rose watched a bank of vid screens, and got to his feet when I entered. "You lost, ma'am?"

"Oh, sorry, I thought this was the press room." I sauntered over to him and examined the console. "Wow, this looks really complicated."

The guard puffed out his chest. "It is. You should see -- hey!" He tried to back out of my arms. "You nuts or something?"

"Something." We struggled, briefly, until I was able to infuse him with the sedative and he fell forward, unconscious.

I removed my hand from his neck, pushed him out of the way and sat down at the console. Routing a download through the security database would take too long, so I tore a seam in my gown, and pulled back the skin over my right torso. Blood from the ruptured bioderma trickled down my side.

Entering and synchronizing my synaptic web with Gregory's database took four minutes, then I was able to directly search through the massive core. I located the missing files, and more. They confirmed what we had suspected, but there was an inconsistency. I had to tap into Gregory's financial files to confirm it.

I knew who the killer was.

#

After I modified the core and added a new set of commands, I returned to the reception. Rena's husband had finished making his speech, and was circulating among the crowd. As I passed the oversized vid screens, they went dark, one by one.

There were murmurs of concern, then I heard Greg call out "First item of business tomorrow will be to get these bloody damned screens fixed."

Everyone but Trig and I laughed. I calculated how quickly I could remove the killer's head from his neck. Four point seven seconds would do it.

Notker folded my arm in his. "Did you get into the core?"

"Yes. I found the financial data that will incontrovertibly prove who killed Rena."

"Did you find the other evidence?" Trig asked me.

"More than we'd anticipated." I moved toward Gregory, taking the little man with me. "I will speak to him now."

"Maybe you should just take this stuff to the police." Notker stopped, tugging at me. "We've only got two of you guys on the inside here. I'll drive you, if you want."

I removed my arm from his grip. "That is not necessary."

Gregory was standing beside Sophia when I stepped in front of him. "Hello," he said, tilting his head slightly to the left. "Have we met?"

Four point seven seconds to detach the killer's head. I resisted the urge to verify my calculations.

"Yes." I turned to the older woman. "Good evening, Mrs. Leonides. I am sorry we left without saying good-bye."

"My dear." Rena's mother reached out and touched my arm. "I must apologize for falling asleep like that --"

"You did not fall asleep," I said. "I drugged you."

Sophia took a step back. "What?"

"When I poured your tea, I also infused it with a mild sedative." As Trig came to stand beside me, I smiled. "It was necessary in order to gain access to your household database." I glanced at Rena's husband. "I just finished searching yours."

"What are you talking about? Who are you?" Gregory demanded.

"Someone you want dead." I watched as Rena's brother pushed through the crowd to get to us. "Hello, Mikolas."

"Greg, call security." He seized my wrist with more than negligible pressure. "These two are thieves."

Trig clamped a hand around Mikolas's throat. "You will release Charis, now."

Rena's choking brother withdrew his hand.

I smiled. "Thank you, Trig." I reached into the open seam of my gown.

Sophia glanced down, then covered her mouth with her hand. "Oh, my God. My dear, you're bleeding!"

"I will survive." I transmitted a signal to the console in the control room. That activated the new command protocol I had downloaded, and a vid file projected onto the room screens. "I would like to direct your attention to displayed images. This is an event that occurred the day before Rena Leonides was murdered."

The vid showed the interior of Rena's bedroom at Sophia's mansion. The sight and sounds of a naked, sweating Gregory Ashton having sex on the bed sent gasps around the room. The gasps turned to cries when Gregory rolled over to reveal a naked, sweating Mikolas.

"Turn it off!" Rena's husband shouted.

No one moved. On the screen, husband and brother embraced, caressing each other. They both jerked upright as Rena entered the room. Mikolas cowered. Gregory reached out. Rena went very still, then fled. The screens went dark.

"How did you get it?" Gregory spoke through clenched teeth.

"I accessed your encrypted entertainment files. You have quite a collection of personal pornography." I ignored the two bodyguards who came to stand beside Rena's husband. "Your wife intended to initiate divorce proceedings some time before she discovered you having sex with her brother," I said. "She already knew about all the other men."

"It was a terrible mistake," Gregory said. He was sweating now. "I tried to talk to her, but she wouldn't listen." His green eyes widened. "You think I paid the bodyguard to kill her."

"Denes Jenó did not kill Rena." I turned to Mikolas. "To pacify her mother, Rena had allowed you to return and reside at the family home. She kept you on a strict allowance, and never allowed you to take part in her business. You fired Rena's driver the same day she discovered you with her husband."

"He broke my nose," Mikolas snarled.

I glanced at Trig. "Yes, he did. He was outraged over your behavior, but Jen0 was a very protective and loyal employee. So loyal that when he returned to the house that night and found his employer and her son murdered, he stole Rena's body."

Sophia's expression changed from shock to fury. "He killed them. He was executed for it."

"You are in error, madam." I sent the second signal, which brought up a new display of a human female's face.

"Denes, I need you back at the estate. I can't get a signal to security." Rena sounded sluggish but terrified, and the recording quality indicated the relay was hastily made. "If anything happens to me before you get here, I give you sole guardianship of my son, Cristophe, and control over Leonides Industries. Watch over my boy and guard his fortune until he is old enough to assume control. If you find me dead, take my body to PrimeCore for reconstruction. I've already paid to have them do it. I won't let them take everything away from me, not like this." She tried to smile. "Denes, I know I'm asking a lot, but I'm depending on you. Please, please oh god, do this for me."

"Become a drone? Willingly?" Gregory uttered a sharp laugh. "This vid is a fraud. Rena would have never done that."

"She knew she was going to die." I shut off the vid. "However, with Cristophe dead and himself the prime suspect in Rena's murder, Jen0 had to find another way to carry out her instructions. He took Rena to PrimeCore, then turned himself in. He could have used Rena's last relay to defend himself, but he could not risk making the killer aware of her reconstruction. Jen0 agreed to plead guilty and take the death penalty, as long as his body was turned over to PrimeCore." I turned to Trig. "He had hoped that someday, as a reconstruct himself, he might find Rena again."

The Ashton employees, who had formed a tight ring around the five of us, began to murmur.

"This is insane. How can you expect us to believe any of this?" Mikolas threw out his arms. "Rena died seven years ago. If you're claiming to be her --"

"A DNA sample of my brain tissue will establish who I was." I said. "But you already knew Rena had been reconstructed, didn't you, Gregory?"

"Rena is dead!" Gregory screamed.

Trig's hands retracted into fists. "PrimeCore's privacy policy was nullified by the reconstruct legislation -- they had to contact the next of kin of every reconstruct. You discovered both Rena and Jen0 had both been reconstructed and what their new identities were months ago. You paid a great deal of money to suppress that information and to have both of us killed before we reached Terra."

"You can't prove anything!" Gregory turned to one of his bodyguards. "Get them out of here. You know what to do."

The bodyguard looked around Rena's husband at his partner. Both men clamped their hands on Gregory's arms, and held him.

"We have full confessions from your assassins, Mr. Ashton," I told him. "We also took the precaution of replacing your personal bodyguards."

"Yeah," Notker said, stepping into the circle. "Those guys are reconstructs, too. They work for me."

Ashton frowned. "Who the hell are you?"

"Your worst nightmare, pal." The short man wagged a finger. "With the info Charis downloaded from your mainframe, I'm going to sue the Armani pants off you. When she's done, of course."

Rena's husband struggled between the two reconstructs. "I didn't kill my wife or my son!"

"We know you didn't," I said.

Mikolas paled. "It wasn't me. After Jenó punched me, Greg took me to the hospital, then we spent the night at a hotel. We were together the whole time."

"I was finally able to confirm that when I found the receipts in Gregory's financial files," I told him. "Rena never saw her killer, she was unconscious when she died. Yet we know there was only one person left in the house that night. Someone Rena had told about her plans to divorce Gregory and make Mikolas testify in open court about their affair." I gazed at Sophia. "Someone for whom the scandal would have been intolerable."

Rena's mother squared her thin shoulders. "What are you implying?"

"You always hated Rena's father for disowning Mikolas and placing her in charge." I watched her skin color darken. "That is why you arranged for your son's lover to marry her."

Trig regarded the old woman. "Marriage and pregnancy would keep Rena occupied, so she would have to turn to her husband and brother for help in managing Leonides Industries. Eventually they would take over -- or so you thought."

"I had hoped when Cristophe was born that Rena would begin to behave like a proper wife and mother. But no, she was exactly like her father." Her upper lip curled. "She stole Mikolas's inheritance and drove him from our home. Even when she allowed him to return, she treated him like a dog." Sophia lifted her chin. "I left the house that night hours before she and Cristophe were murdered. I had no love for my daughter, but I did not kill her."

"Personally, no. Instead, you chose to pay someone else to come back and do the killing for you. Someone who already had a grudge against Rena. Someone familiar with video technology, to handle the security cameras. Someone eager for the money you offered, enough to agree to leave Terra and make a new start on the moon." I turned around. "Was that not the arrangement, Notker?"

He laughed. "Lady, you've got some wires crossed."

"Gregory Ashton never did business with you. He doesn't even know you. Rena was the one who wiped you out."

Notker tugged at his collar. "Prove it."

"You did not wipe out all my memories on Europa," I said. "I will testify that I saw you leave the house that night."

"No. No!" Sophia lunged at me, but I caught her and held her at arm's length. Her voice rose to a scream. "You saw nothing, you're dead, Rena, you've been dead for seven years!"

"She is not Rena Leonides-Ashton," Trig said. "I am."

Everyone went motionless, and Gregory stared at me. "Then you must be --"

"Yes." I looked down at Sophia. "I am Denes Jenó."

"Thanks, I wasn't sure." Notker removed a small weapon, and pointed it at my head. He nodded to the two reconstruct bodyguards, who released Gregory and clamped their hands on me. "Looks like you're the one I have to fry."

I had enough time to send the signal to shut down the lighting before Trig lunged, and Notker fired. Then the darkness exploded all around us.

#

After Sophia and Gregory were arrested and removed from the scene, the authorities took our statements. Mikolas was too drunk to provide a coherent response, and eventually passed out on one of the chairs. Trig and I provided all the evidence we had acquired, both in verbal relay and hard disc copies.

Notker was carried out of Ashton's mansion in two pieces. It had only taken Trig three point nine seconds to detach the killer's head from his neck.

"I've got a couple of loose ends here," the interviewing officer admitted. "Why kill the baby?"

"According to the terms of my will, Cristophe would have inherited the entire estate, with Gregory only able to act as trustee. It was not enough, my mother wanted Mikolas to have everything." Trig's eyes closed briefly. "Because of her obsession and greed, my son died."

"You could have come back to Terra as soon as you were reconstructed," one of the officers said. "Why didn't you? Reconstruct testimony wasn't admissible at the time, but you could have given the authorities the information so they could reopen the case."

"After I learned that Jenó been executed and reconstructed, I had to find him. I located him on Europa, where I worked with him and waited until the legislation was passed. We needed to be free, and together, to do this the right way." Trig touched my cheek. "It was the least I could do."

The sense of failure had ebbed, but I still felt an enduring sorrow. "I would have spared you this pain, if I could have."

"You speak of my pain, after what you endured for me? I will never be able to repay you."

"No compensation is required," I said. "You were the kindest, gentlest woman I'd ever known." I did not add that I had loved her from the time she was a little girl. It was not appropriate then to tell her how I felt, and it was not appropriate now.

"This is really confusing." The officer scratched his scalp as he looked at Trig. "I mean, you're a woman, and she's a man. Why didn't you stick with your original genders?"

"I insisted on that, to protect my employer," I said. "Everyone would expect Rena to be reconstructed as a woman, not a man."

"It is not bad, actually." Trig looked down. "Still, I will feel more comfortable when I am modified back to my natural form."

"So will I," I admitted.

"I guess that wraps it up, folks." The confused officer shut down his recorder. "We'll need you to stay local until the trial comes up, then you're free to resume your lives."

Trig and I departed, and returned to the Leonides mansion. We walked upstairs to the nursery, and stood in the doorway looking at the empty crib.

"Do you think he is at peace now?" Trig asked me.

"Yes." My memories of her son were fragmented, but I knew from our conversations how much she loved him. For the short time he was a part of my life, I knew I had loved him, too. "I am sorry I did not arrive in time to save either of you."

"You saved me." Trig went inside, and picked up a tiny rattle. "How can I ever repay you, Charis?"

I thought of the response I wanted to give, then discarded it. "You can be happy again. That is all I ask."

"I cannot be happy without you." Trig came to me, and touched my red hair, then smiled a little. "Would you be willing to undergo further modifications, and extensive chassis renovation?"

I looked down at my feminine form. "More than willing."

"Will you stay with me?"

I looked into her dark eyes. "I would like to do that."

"Will you take me as reparations, and be mine?"

I had died for her, she had saved me. There was no one else in existence I had ever loved more, or would ever love as much. "Yes."



About the Author

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