LAST TRAIN TO MORDOR

A Kuiper Belt Novella

K.M. O'Connor

Copyright © 2026 K.M. O’Connor

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously.

Definitive edition, July 2026.

1. Nix System

Anja Petrovic didn't know if Clément's ship really had a transparent hull or if the bulkheads and decks were coated with light-emitting elements that turned the whole passenger compartment into a VR suite, but she could see the linked spheres growing larger. She'd never been to the Nix system before.

"So that's Nix," Petrovic said.

"No," Losada said. "That's Pluto and Charon. Nix is much smaller. It orbits the other two." He held up his slate and swept it around, using it to locate the smaller moon. "There," he said, and pointed.

Red and white Pluto was connected to Charon, its cratered gray companion, by what looked like a fat cable. Compared to that visual extravaganza, small, irregular Nix didn't impress Petrovic.

"It's just a rock," she said.

"It's got spin habs inside it," Losada said.

"Huh, I think I'd rather live on one of those ring habs," Petrovic said, looking at the four ring-shaped habitats that rotated around the 19,000-kilometer-long bridge connecting Pluto to Charon. "Better view."

"There used to be more moons, but the Nixians dismantled them to build the Link," Losada said.

"Shit," Petrovic said. She couldn't doubt that the Link and its ring habitats existed. They were right there, but the idea that humans built all that didn't fit her worldview. "The Nixians did that? Not the Powers?"

"That's what my history instructor said," Losada said. "Britannica says the same thing."

Petrovic had gotten herself into enough trouble with her sexual indiscretions. She didn't need to risk further damage to her career by accessing unsanctioned sources of information. She was surprised to hear that Losada had consulted Britannica. He seemed like such a straight arrow.

They entered into a polar orbit around Charon.

“See that dark brown patch?” Losada said, pointing out a dark region near Charon’s north pole. “That’s Mordor Macula. The main spaceport is there.”

“Isn’t there supposed to be a train?” Petrovic said.

“Subsurface,” Losada said. “People take the Link from Pluto to Charon and then travel from the Link station in Minas Tirith…”

“You mean Minth?” Petrovic said. Their scant mission briefing mentioned guarding the train station in Minth.

“Yes,” Losada said. “Minth is short for Minas Tirith. That’s where passengers transfer from the Link to take the train to the spaceport in Mordor. There’s another spaceport on the equator, but that’s for cargo. Water, ammonia, and nitrogen, mostly.”

“Damn, Losada…”

“Everyone calls me Mikey,” Losada said.

“Damn, Losada,” she repeated. “You should be a tour guide. Maybe you missed your calling. Any idea why they put the spaceports on…”

“Charon,” Losada supplied.

“Why are the spaceports on Charon when most of the people live on Pluto? Why not just land and take off from Pluto?”

“Pluto has an atmosphere,” Losada said. “Charon doesn’t. Ships that can’t land on Pluto can land on Charon. Plus, the gravity is a little lighter on Charon. It takes less specific impulse to reach escape velocity.”

“Specific impulse,” Petrovic said. “Listen to you.”

2. The Grand Atrium

The refugees bunched into clusters in the Grand Atrium of Minth Central Station. There were other atriums in the adjacent complex of hotels and shopping arcades, now closed, that radiated out from the Charon Link terminal. Some of those other open spaces were big, but this was the biggest. The most grand.

Under normal circumstances, people wouldn't linger in the Grand Atrium for more than a few minutes. They either approached the security stations to be identified and directed onto the boarding area, or they said goodbye to their loved ones and left the train station. It wasn't normal for people to loiter in clumps of seated and reclining bodies, practically camping.

Under normal circumstances, most travelers said their goodbyes on the Pluto side of the Link. The nearly 20,000-kilometer trip up the Link took three days. Assuming you spent at least one day on Charon to shop and take in the sights before heading back, that was a seven-day gesture. Easier just to say goodbye on the Pluto side.

The locals said, "Down on the Pluto side," regardless of whether they were on Pluto or Charon when they said it. The locals also used the Old Earth calendar. To them, the seven-day trip up and back down the Link was an entire week.

Petrovic wasn't a local, and she never would be. To her, you looked up from Charon to see Pluto, so Pluto was "up the Link." And a week was ten days.

Soon, if the panic was justified, there wouldn't be any locals in the Pluto system. No human locals anyway. The Powers would scour all life from the system when it reached perihelion like they did 87 KB years ago, the last time Pluto got this close to the Curtain.

"Corporal?" Losada said over the comm link. He was just a few meters away, but they used comms so they didn't have to shout over the din of voices.

“Call me Petrovic,” she said. “Our ranks don’t apply on private jobs.”

“Sorry,” Losada said. “We’ve got a weird situation over here. Would you come over?”

“Fine,” she said, and mentally plotted her course through the crowd. She was wearing a powered combat exoskeleton. It made her a full head taller and tripled her mass. It was completely unnecessary for this job. She’d done lots of crowd control ops wearing nothing more than regular tactical armor, and those were in one-g spin habs, places where these willowy Pluters couldn’t even stand up.

“Plutonians,” she corrected her inner monologue. “Pluters” was a slur. She’d corrected Manx on that point.

The Plutonians posed no threat to Columbian soldiers. Raised in Pluto’s feeble gravity, they could grow taller than Columbian soldiers, even though Columbians were taller than most full-g Spinners thanks to their genetic enhancements.

The power armor put Petrovic at eye level with even the tallest Plutonian man. She understood the psychology of it, but the armor was overkill. Even if she were naked, these stick figure people couldn’t hurt her, but to realize that, some of them might have to fuck around and find out. In the power armor, she radiated invulnerability and menace. That was the point of it.

She clicked her tongue, and her suit emitted an ultrasonic pulse. All the civilians within two meters of her took an involuntary step back. She didn’t enjoy doing that. She knew it came across as bullying, but she could cripple people without meaning to if she just pushed through the crowd in her armor.

She approached the checkpoint. Losada stood in front of the narrow entry to the passenger concourse, blocking a well-dressed family from proceeding.

“What’s up?” Petrovic said.

“Uh,” Losada said, “these people have confirmed passage and an entry visa atMakemake.”

“So? What’s the holdup?”

“Their visa is for four,” Losada said.

Petrovic looked at the family. Their clothes identified them as well off. The man was probably some kind of technical professional. The adult woman with him, presumably the wife, had a tiny baby in her arms. Petrovic had little experience with babies, but she thought this one couldn't be more than a few days old. There was a boy, about 3.5 by Petrovic's reckoning, nearly as tall as his mother, and a girl. She was younger. Maybe 1.4 or 1.5. The girl clung to her mother's leg.

"Are you in charge?" the man asked.

"I'm in charge of this checkpoint," she said. "Mister…"

"Tholin," the man said. "Adam Tholin. I'm a nuclear engineer, and we're expected on Makemake."

No doubt. If what the man said was true, and by the look of him, Petrovic assumed it was, he would have no trouble arranging immigration and passage for himself and his family. With his skills, they would be welcome on any hab or rock in the Kuiper Belt.

Petrovic's suit sensors scanned the man's face and produced his documents in her heads-up display.

"Mr. Tholin," Petrovic said. "Your visa is for a family of four. I count five of you."

"Yes," Tholin said. "My wife gave birth on the Link ride up from Pluto."

Petrovic looked at the woman. Her face was full and round for a Pluter… for a Plutonian, but she looked haggard.

"Was your wife pregnant when you applied for admittance to Makemake?" Petrovic said.

"Yes," Tholin said. "We told the immigration office that we had another child on the way. They said their system didn't allow them to issue visas to the unborn. They assured us it wouldn't be a problem if my wife was pregnant when we got there."

"She's not pregnant now," Petrovic said. "Is she?"

"The baby was early," the mother said.

"I'm sure they'll admit us all on Makemake," Tholin said.

"Probably," Petrovic agreed. "But we're not on Makemake. The question is whether the captain of your

transport will let you board at the spaceport inMordor. If the captain signs off, we'll let you on the train."

Petrovic left the "otherwise" part of that statement implied.

"How long will it take?"

"I don't know," Petrovic said. "Step out of the line. You and your family can wait here at the checkpoint."

Petrovic did not want to talk to Andranic Clément, the chief executive of the small and newly formed Exodus Security LLC. Her boss. She moved away from the checkpoint and composed a text summary of the situation, attached the Tholin family's travel and immigration documents and sent them to Clément.

She thought to move a few more paces away from the checkpoint to monitor the crowd, but she could tell that the next man in line was going to be a problem.

"That's impossible," the man shouted at Losada. "Do you know how much I paid for these tickets?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Losada said. He sounded deferential, which struck Petrovic as absurd given that Miguel, or "Mikey" as she refused to call him, wore a suit of Nixian battle armor like her own. Losada was a rhinoceros deferring to a piglet. Deferring in tone only, though. This man would not be boarding the train to Mordor.

Petrovic joined Losada, forming an armored wall between the angry man and his intended path.

"What's the problem?" she said.

"I bought tickets to Haumea," the man said. "And this pissant has the nerve to tell me they're no good."

"Let me guess," Petrovic said. "You booked passage on the *You'll Own Nothing and Be Happy*."

"That's right," the man said. He was short for a Pluter, and fleshy. He clearly didn't do any sort of physical labor, and he didn't strike Petrovic as a skilled technician like Adam Tholin. She pegged him for a small business owner. He probably owned but didn't actively manage a resource extraction operation or two.

An attractive young woman stood beside and slightly behind him. She had "normal" proportions to Petrovic's

eyes, which is to say she looked like someone from a full-gravity environment.

Petrovic guessed that the man was over twenty-five, though his flab might have made him look older than he was. The woman couldn't have been more than nine.

"Well, it's like this, Mr…" His identity and fraudulent travel documents appeared in Petrovic's HUD. "…Puddin…"

"Fudim!" he shouted.

"The *Be Happy* departed the day before yesterday. The departure date is right there on your ticket."

"It was delayed," he said. "Rescheduled! It's leaving today. Look!" He tried to forward an interchain link to her. She rejected it.

"The ship is gone," she told him and glanced over at Manx, the third member of her team and the only one not wearing a powered exoskeleton. Manx wore standard riot gear, though he had discarded the helmet. He also wore a Nixian control collar.

Manx was talking to a young woman, doubtless, lying to her, telling her he could arrange passage for her if she made it worth his while. He turned and made eye contact with Petrovic and half smiled. She nodded, and his half smile grew into a malevolent grin.

Petrovic turned back to Mr. Fudim.

"I suggest you leave before my associate gets here," she told him, not really caring whether he followed her advice. She remembered someone telling her that the key to giving advice was to not give a shit if the other person took it or not. Once you gave it, your part was over.

Losada turned his head and stepped away as Manx approached the checkpoint. Petrovic knew Miguel "Mikey" Losada had never worked crowd control before. Losada empathized with these people and did not want to see what came next.

Fudim blustered. "Is that supposed to be some sort of threat? Do you know who I am?"

Manx reached out a casual hand and took hold of the pinky finger on Fudim's left hand. Fudim looked from his captured digit to Manx's face. Manx held the fleshy man's gaze while he broke the finger. Fudim howled.

Manx punched Fudim in the solar plexus, and the man doubled over. Manx took him by the throat and stood him upright again. He struck Fudim in the ear with an open palm. Petrovic knew how much ear cartilage trauma hurt, but the punch to the solar plexus had emptied Fudim's lungs. He didn't have the breath to give adequate voice to this fresh pain.

Manx was powerful. A bastard son of the Columbian military establishment. Either a parent or grandparent had been a purebred Columbian soldier. Manx inherited the strength, size, and reflexes of a Columbian. What he lacked was the training and the discipline.

After Clément paid to furlough Petrovic and Losada from the garrison on Galtz, he took his new employees to the original Columbia spin hab. Officially, Columbia counted as abandoned and had been since the Blackout. But people still lived there. Now it held thousands instead of tens of millions, but it still had an atmosphere and rotational gravity. Of course, some people would make a go of it there. Hardy people. People like Manx.

Clément, Petrovic and Losada went hunting in the darkness of the abandoned habitat, formerly the seat of wealth, culture, and power in this quarter of the Kuiper Belt. They took a score of Nixian control collars with them, and with all twenty collars locked around squatters' necks, they picked the biggest, meanest-looking one and made him an offer. He could face "justice" for the crime of looting, or he could go to work for Exodus Security.

Scavengers had been running illegal salvage operations in the abandoned habitat for generations. They weren't looting in the traditional sense so much as slowly strip-mining the place, but Columbian military tribunals still charged scavengers with looting. Looting was a capital crime.

Faced with the choice of death or working security for Clément, Manx took the security job. He did not know at the time how much he would enjoy the work.

Manx continued to work Fudim over, pausing once to appraise his victim's female companion and then returning

to inflicting intense pain without knocking Fudim unconscious or spilling blood.

Eventually Fudim went limp and Manx dragged him through the crowd out toward the middle of the Grand Atrium, where he deposited the flaccid body and turned his attention to Fudim's companion who had followed Manx out into the Grand Atrium.

Petrovic didn't like working with Manx. He was a sadist. Maybe even a psychopath. She realized, not for the first time, that she really shouldn't be fucking him.

3. The Solution

Another Link capsule from Pluto disgorged its human cargo at the terminal. The passengers, after enduring the punishing g-force of deceleration, staggered out of the tunnel from the Link terminal into the Grand Atrium of the train station.

Far more people arrived on the Link than would be allowed onto the trains. Those trying to escape Pluto before perihelion had to pass through three gauntlets. The first was on Pluto. To get on the Link, they had to present proof that they had booked and paid for passage from the spaceport on Charon. They also had to prove that they would be allowed to disembark at the ship's destination. That meant a work contract, an emigration permit, or possibly a student or cultural visa. The captain of the ship needed to know that he or she would not be taking on a passenger they couldn't get rid of.

The security teams at the Link terminal on Pluto were supposed to turn away anyone who could not produce these documents, but it was clear to Petrovic that most of the people accumulating in the Grand Atrium should never have been allowed onto the Link.

Employees of Exodus Security LLC screened the passengers on Pluto, here in Minth, and at the Mordor spaceport. Petrovic suspected that Clément told his employees on Pluto to solicit bribes and let unqualified passengers onto the Link. He probably set a quota. Petrovic and the other security teams here on Charon were supposed to hold the line, take no bribes, and only let qualified passengers board the train.

What were the crowds of people accumulating in the Grand Atrium supposed to do? Where did Clément expect them to go?

Not everyone stuck between the first and second gauntlet had bribed their way onto the Link. Many paid for what they thought were legitimate tickets. One popular

scam involved selling passage on ships that had already departed and would not be returning.

The scammer explained that complications caused flight delays that had not yet been reflected in the official departure schedule. They provided a link to a “provisional” departure schedule that looked nothing like the official schedule. People desperate to believe the lie overlooked obvious signs of fraud.

Mr. Fudim, the belligerent would-be passenger whom Manx had escorted away from the security checkpoint, tried to direct Petrovic to a fake timetable. She rejected the link because she’d already seen it. Mr. Puddin wasn’t the first person to fall for that scam.

Where the adults staggered and dragged their exhausted bodies into the Grand Atrium from the Link terminal, the children bounded ahead, delighted to be back in a low-gravity environment.

Charon’s gravity was 2.9% of what Petrovic was used to, having been born and raised on Galtz, a one-g spin hab. To her, this sliver of gravity was more annoying than full weightlessness. She’d had extensive microgravity combat training. Charon’s paltry gravity was just enough to invoke her one-g reflexes, but nothing behaved the way she expected it to.

It amused Petrovic to overhear Plutonians commenting on Charon’s low gravity. Charon’s surface gravity was 0.029 g, while Pluto’s was 0.063 g. Petrovic couldn’t imagine feeling such a slight difference.

Her Nixian exoskeleton annoyed her when she had to pick her way through a crowd of fragile human bodies, but when she had open ground to cover, it was a blessing. It tripled her mass, and countless tiny actuators in the suit adjusted themselves to adapt to her stride. When she had room to walk at a comfortable pace, the suit made her feel like she was striding across the presidio parade ground back on Galtz.

The sophistication of the Nixian armor put the Columbian stuff she’d used in the past to shame. She understood that even the standard power armor the Columbian military used came from Nix. They must sell

their low grade stuff to the Columbians and hold their high end gear in reserve for people like Clément.

“Speak of the devil,” Petrovic muttered to herself when she caught sight of her employer making his way through the crowd. He wore a long gray coat with a military cut but no insignia. He went bare-headed, something no Columbian officer who wore a coat like that would do, and the coat was slate gray rather than the familiar Columbian green or black.

Andranic Clément was definitely not of Columbian stock. He was shorter than Petrovic and lightly built, bordering on gaunt.

She couldn’t pin down his age. His white hair had receded into a pronounced widow’s peak, exposing lots of shiny scalp on either side. His neatly trimmed mustache and goatee were also white. He had deep lines around the corners of his eyes and in his perpetually scowling brow, as well as deep vertical creases in his cheeks, but his skin had the elasticity of youth. If she had to guess, she would say he was seventeen.

As he got closer, Petrovic could see that he was wearing his own Nixian armor under the long coat. Where Petrovic’s armor was deliberately bulky, his was so form-fitting that he could conceal it under loose clothing and still strike a slender profile.

He’d worn that armor on their hunt through the darkened remains of Columbia hab when they captured Manx and the other squatters Clément pressed into service. She couldn’t be certain how much of his speed, agility and strength came from his body and how much from his Nixian tech, but she didn’t take her physical advantage over him for granted.

“Where’s the family?” Clément said when he reached Petrovic.

“This way.”

Petrovic led the way, but when Clément saw the Tholin family seated on their luggage, he overtook her and made directly for them. The crowd parted for him. Clément showed no reservations about using ultrasound pulses to

clear a path through the throng. Petrovic followed in his wake.

“Mr. Tholin. My name is Clément. I am a private security contractor,” Clément said, not offering to shake Adam Tholin’s hand.

“Did you talk to the ship captain?” Tholin said. “Did you explain…”

“The captain will only take four of you. To do otherwise would void his insurance policy,” Clément said. Petrovic doubted Clément ever contacted the ship’s captain.

“If it’s a matter of money,” Tholin said. “Most of our funds are tied up, but with a little time…”

“Money will not solve your problem,” Clément said, cutting Tholin off again. “I have a contact who works for a relief agency who might be able to get one of your children on a ship bound for Olympus.”

Mrs. Tholin listened quietly until Clément mentioned splitting up her children. She erupted into protective motion, gathering the boy and girl to her. She held the newborn in her left arm and wrapped her right arm around her son’s shoulders with the girl nestled between them.

“You can’t take my children! I won’t let you!” she said.

“Correct,” Clément said, making no effort to affect a reassuring tone. “I cannot be responsible for a child’s welfare. I have a contact in a relief agency. She has one open seat, but the ship departs from Mordor shortly. If you refuse this opportunity, I wash my hands of this matter.”

“Mr. Clément,” Adam Tholin said. “There must be some other way. Olympus habitat is for Martians. The gravity…”

“The gravity would be unworkable for you or your wife,” Clément said. “But a young child could adapt.”

Clément looked at the children. His gaze swept over the boy without pausing and landed on the daughter who shrank back. “The girl stands the best chance. The boy’s skeletal development is too advanced.”

Horrified, Mrs. Tholin turned to her husband. “Adam, we can’t!” Mr. Tholin joined his family in their protective huddle.

Clément raised his hand and signaled to someone in the crowd. A portly woman, clearly not from Pluto, approached

them. Her facial expression radiated maternal care and compassion.

“This is Ms. Doré,” Clément said. “Direct your concerns to her. I have other matters to attend to.” Without saying goodbye or excusing himself, Clément disappeared into the crowd.

The plump woman approached the family, her eyes wide with exaggerated compassion.

“Mr. and Mrs. Tholin. My name is Yvonne. I work for Protéger les enfants Martiens. We have come from Olympus to catch the young children who have, as they say, fallen through the cracks in this crisis,” Doré told them. “Andranic has told me of your predicament. I believe I can help, but we must move quickly.”

“This can’t be the only way,” Mrs. Tholin said, tears streaming down her face.

“I know, it is heartbreaking,” Ms. Doré said, stroking Mrs. Tholin’s cheek, all beneficence and reassurance. “Believe me, your precious darling will be well cared for. We will strive to place her with a loving family on Olympus, and in the fullness of time, she may join you on Makemake.”

“Ms. Doré,” Mr. Tholin said.

“Call me Yvonne, please,” Doré said. “I understand this is all very sudden, but we must move quickly. If you endorse this document placing your daughter in my care, we can all board this train together. I will answer all of your questions on the passage to the spaceport. If you are not satisfied with my answers, you may all return here to Minth together. But I must board the next train to Mordor. Won’t you come with me? Won’t you let me help your precious little girl?”

Petrovic could not see the blockchain agreements they passed back and forth. It all took place on the interchain, but when the process was complete, she let four Tholins past the checkpoint and one aid worker with the now-orphaned girl in her custody. They all disappeared down the tube to the boarding area together.

Petrovic swallowed and opened a voice connection with Clément. “They’re never going to see that girl again, are they?”

“Unknown,” Clément said.

“She’ll end up in a brothel. Or worse.”

“Not your concern,” Clément said. “I assume that you will reject your finder’s fee as a matter of conscience.”

She cut the voice connection before she told Clément how much she wanted him dead.

4. Sugar

At the halfway point of their shift, Petrovic told Losada to take a break, get something to eat and be back in half a watch. That was a long break, but the traffic through their checkpoint had slowed to an intermittent trickle. At the start of their shift, passengers with tickets and legitimate documents formed a long line at the security checkpoint.

Now, the Grand Atrium was more crowded than ever, but few people approached the checkpoint. Those who did came to plead, wheedle, or bluff their way past the checkpoint and onto the train.

Petrovic turned them away at the first failure to produce a document, but Losada listened to everyone's story. Petrovic knew when to clamp down on her empathetic impulses, but Losada didn't have that skill. He lacked the necessary psychological and emotional barriers for this work. Every hard-luck story drew him in.

Petrovic sent him on an extra-long break and told him to find a restricted area in which to rest. She was explicit that he was not to remove his armor or talk to the locals.

Manx, on the other hand, had won the lottery. Word of his brutal assaults had spread through the crowd of refugees, and their fear of him stoked his self-importance.

He used his presence and implied promises to assemble a harem. He kept a trio of attractive young women in an area just off to the side of the security checkpoint. He dismissed the least attractive of them every time he found one he liked better.

He did it right in front of Petrovic despite their sexual relationship. Petrovic had no interest in a monogamous arrangement with Manx, but his complete lack of conscientious pretense impressed her.

While Petrovic did what she could to insulate Losada from the desperate Plutonians, she encouraged Manx to circulate and gather intel. He ran a gang on Columbia hab, and he was quick to recruit older boys to act as his informants here on Charon. Conversations went quiet when

Manx passed nearby, but his young spies took the temperature of the growing crowd, eavesdropped on adult conversations and returned to the security checkpoint to report to Manx.

Manx did not bother to learn the names of his concubines or his soldiers. He assigned tough-sounding nicknames to the boys and salacious ones to the women. For the boys, the monosyllabic nicknames he gave them, Pike, Grif, Tar, Rak, served as their own reward, or so Petrovic imagined. The women probably put up with diminutives in the hopes of getting something down the line.

One of the older boys, the one Manx called “Pike,” approached his leader with some new report. Petrovic knew that Manx would not relay the information to her until she asked for an update.

Manx kept his harem and his young recruits just far enough from the checkpoint that Petrovic could not overhear them without leaving her post, something she couldn’t do while Losada was on break. When Pike slipped back into the crowd, Petrovic called Manx over.

“What’s the latest?” she asked when he reached her.

“That fat Martian bitch showed up again just like you said she would,” Manx said.

Yvonne Doré, when she convinced the Tholin family to transfer custody of their daughter to her, claimed that she was leaving Charon on the next transport, but she appeared back in the Grand Atrium within a watch, convincing other distraught parents to entrust their children to her.

Doré had an arrangement with Clément, so Petrovic could not act openly to disrupt her operation. She told Manx to use his young recruits to spread the word to parents that the woman was a front for a child trafficking operation. Doré barely escaped an angry mob. Petrovic let her pass through the checkpoint, and the woman disappeared down the tube to the train boarding area and did not return.

“What else?” Petrovic said.

“Some wise guys have set up a toll booth,” Manx said. “They’re charging to use the toilets. The Pluters that can’t

pay are pissing in cups and bottles and dumping them in the planters and fountains and whatnot."

"Wise guys?" Petrovic said. "Organized?"

"Could be," Manx said. "Want me to check it out?"

"Yes," Petrovic said. "Put an end to it, and make a show of it. I don't want to smell piss and shit all day."

"On it, Boss," he said, and set off into the crowd. He didn't have the means to part the crowd with ultrasonic pulses like Petrovic could, but his bearing and reputation had the same effect.

Petrovic knew she was walking a fine line. If the toll booth operation was organized, Clément probably had something to do with it. Either he arranged it or he took a cut in exchange for tolerating it.

Before Petrovic left Galtz with Clément, a woman in a black uniform paid her a visit. The woman didn't identify herself, but Petrovic recognized a Columbian intelligence agent when she saw one.

The woman impressed upon Petrovic the need to provide top-flight service to Clément on this job. It was obvious to Petrovic from Clément's gear that he worked with, if not directly for, the Nixian technologists. The woman from the intelligence service confirmed this. She reminded Petrovic that the Columbian military needed to maintain excellent relations with the Nixians.

Clément engaged in the sorts of extra-legal activities that the Columbian military normally tasked itself with disrupting. In this instance, Petrovic was not to interfere with Clément's business. Higher ups had instructed her to turn a blind eye to criminal activity in the past. It was out of the ordinary, but there was precedent.

What the intelligence agent said next changed Petrovic's view of the universe and her place in it.

"For the duration of this assignment, the Columbian military code of conduct with regard to the treatment of civilians is suspended."

Petrovic had killed civilians in riot suppression operations. She had crippled civilians who approached her clients on bodyguard assignments. In no instance had she been reprimanded or even called upon to account for her

actions. The Columbian military was not fussy about the uniform code of conduct when it came to civilian collateral damage. The intelligence officer told her that even the nominal civilian protections, which rarely amounted to more than an empty gesture, did not apply while she was assigned to Clément's service.

For the sake of her career, the smart move was to set her conscience aside and give Clément her active cooperation. She couldn't bring herself to do that, but if she couldn't change his course, she could at least create drag and slow his progress. She wouldn't go against explicit instructions, but as long as she could maintain plausible deniability, she would resist where she could.

Petrovic's stomach growled. She hadn't eaten since their early breakfast. She normally ate five meals a day, and she could feel her muscle mass evaporating by the minute. Her genetic enhancements delayed the muscle and bone atrophy that came from extended periods in low gravity and then slowed the deterioration once it set in, but she wasn't eating and working out like she did in the garrison back on Galtz. She knew she could regain the lost weight when the job was over, but she hated to give up her hard-won gains, even temporarily.

She looked over at the three women in Manx's harem. Two of the women were as tall as Petrovic and Manx, but the third had more standard proportions. She looked like she could be from Galtz or Twain or some other one-g spin hab.

Petrovic focused her attention on the shorter woman until she looked up then gestured for the woman to join her.

"What's your name?" Petrovic asked the woman when she reached the checkpoint.

"I guess it's 'Sugar Tits' now," she said without any hint of joking. Petrovic rolled her eyes and shook her head.

"Yeah," Petrovic said. "He's a real piece of work, but good in bed… if you like it rough. What's your real name?"

"Why don't you call me 'Sugar?' If he hears it often enough, he might call me that too."

"You sure?" Petrovic said.

“My real name is Astoria,” she said. “But I don’t want him to know that.”

Petrovic imagined the creativity Manx would apply to any woman’s name starting with “ass” and laughed.

“Yeah,” Petrovic said. “That wouldn’t go well. I’m Petrovic, but call me Anja while he’s around.”

“Only when he’s around?” Sugar asked.

“Whatever,” Petrovic said. “I’m not picky. We go by our family names in the service. I’m used to being called Petrovic, but Anja’s fine. Were you the one traveling with that Puddin guy?”

Now Sugar laughed. “His name is Fudim, but Puddin fits him better. And yes, he said he could get me out of the Pluto system before… You know.”

“Where is he now?” Petrovic asked.

“Dead to me,” Sugar said.

“Did you work for him?”

“Not exactly. I’m part owner of a bar. At least I was. Fudim was a regular client. He entertained his business contacts there. He was in my bar most nights. Paid monthly,” Sugar said. “I wasn’t his mistress. I’ve got my own money, but money won’t get you on a ship right now. Fudim said he had connections, and, like an idiot, I believed him.”

“You were fucking him?” Petrovic said.

“Only twice,” Sugar said. “Thank the stars.”

“And now you’re with Manx,” Petrovic said. “Did he promise to get you out?”

“No,” Sugar said. “I’m mostly just with him for protection. This crowd is getting crazy. They’re desperate. He said that he’s got a luxury hotel suite. Is that true?”

“It’s not his, but, yes,” Petrovic said. “Our employer has a whole floor at the Anor. Me, Manx, and Losada all have private rooms off of a luxury suite. It’s posh. Did Manx say you could spend the night there?”

“He implied it,” Sugar said. “If I’m still in his little club by the end of the day. Look at those other two. They’re like models. I’ll be the one he kicks out if something better comes along.”

“Nah,” Petrovic said. “You’re good. Show me your palm.”

Sugar held up her hand, and Petrovic's helmet sensors scanned her palm and retinas. "I've got your biometrics in the system under Sugar Petrovic. That'll get you into the lobby, elevator and our suite."

"Petrovic, huh?" Sugar said. "Does that make me your wife?"

"Or sister," Petrovic said. "I know I don't look it, but I'm mostly into men. Anyway, you're set. For tonight anyway."

"Thank you, Anja."

Manx returned with his young henchmen. He had a flat box in one arm, and his mouth was stuffed with some kind of food. As he came closer to the checkpoint, Petrovic could see that the shallow box was half-full of individually wrapped snacks.

"What's that?" Petrovic said, pointing at the box. Manx pointed at the snacks and looked to his shortest protege, Tar. Manx made muffled mouth noises, his maw too full of food to form intelligible speech sounds.

"Cheesecake cups," Tar said. He had crumbs at the corners of his mouth and on his shirt. All of Manx's minions showed similar evidence of having gotten a share of the bounty. Manx was a tyrant and a bully, but he had the good sense to buy loyalty when it was cheap. He held the box out to Petrovic. The cheesecake cups looked inviting, but she knew better than to eat food of unknown provenance while on duty. She shook her head.

Manx held the box out to Sugar who didn't hesitate. He looked from Sugar to Petrovic. "She yours now?"

"We can share," Petrovic said, not wanting Manx to think he had an open harem slot he could fill. "What's the situation at the public toilets?"

"Amateurs, I think," Manx said, passing the box of treats off to Tar and gesturing toward the two Plutonian beauties who were drifting toward the checkpoint.

"Pluters," Manx continued. "They tried to blend into the crowd when they saw me coming, but the crowd wasn't having it. Pushed 'em right to me, and I gave 'em something to think about."

"Dead?" Petrovic asked.

“Probably not. Pretty sure they were still breathing, most of ‘em.”

“And the cakes?” Petrovic said.

“Show of appreciation from the community. They cheered like anything. I’m on my way to being a local hero. Ain’t that right, Grif?”

“That’s right, Chief,” his flunky said. “Everybody loves you, or they’re afraid of you.”

“Believe that,” Manx said, beaming.

Petrovic saw Losada making his slow and careful way through the crowd, coming back from his break early and not using ultrasonic pulses to clear a path across the field of delicate Plutonian bodies. Petrovic scowled and wondered if Command handpicked soft-hearted “Mikey” Losada for this moral cesspool of an assignment. If so, why? To shock him out of his moral delusions or just for the sheer, perverse cruelty of it?

“I’m going on break,” Petrovic said to Manx. “Losada is in charge until I get back. Sugar, you’re with me.”

“There you go, Boss. Now you’re getting into the swing of things,” Manx said, leering at Sugar. “Enjoy the perky sets of the situation.”

“It’s ‘perquisites,’ you animal,” Petrovic said. “Even a dumb grunt like me knows that.”

“All I know is they’re pretty perky,” Manx said. He pantomimed pinching his nipples through his armor. “Show the boss a good time, Sugar Tits.”

Petrovic led Sugar to an off-limits area. As they approached, a security gate opened and an obsequious computer voice said, “Welcome, Anja. Welcome, Sugar.” The gate closed behind them and they moved into a seating area where upside-down chairs were stacked on round tabletops. The sound of voices from the Grand Atrium was a distant burble.

“Pick a table,” Petrovic said. “I’m going to do something I told Losada not to do. Don’t tell.”

She undid various clasps on her exoskeleton, and within a minute she stepped out of it wearing a skintight black bodysuit and a gun belt with a holstered pistol.

“Wait here,” Petrovic said and walked behind a serving counter to retrieve two boxed meals.

Petrovic stretched for a moment before sitting down at the table and opening her meal box.

“Oh, stars,” Sugar said. “Is this pheasant?”

“Is it?” Petrovic said. “I don’t know. This fancy stuff is wasted on me. I usually focus on nutrients over taste, but this is what we’ve got.”

“This is amazing. Do you always eat like this?” Sugar said.

“Not normally,” Petrovic said. “Not like this, but our boss on this job has expensive tastes. Do you drink?”

“Yes,” Sugar said.

“I don’t. Not anymore,” Petrovic said. “Our suite has a full bar, and the bottles all look expensive. You owned a bar. You’ll know better than me if it’s high end stuff.”

“May I ask why you stopped drinking?”

“Impulse control,” Petrovic said. “I have a problem with sex. I can’t go without it, and alcohol makes everything worse. I make bad decisions around sex when I’m sober. Get me drunk? Forget about it.”

“I take it you’re sleeping with Manx,” Sugar said.

“I’m fucking him,” Petrovic said. “I sleep alone. You can come get in my bed if Manx gets too rough or if he just won’t pass out and you want to get some sleep. He’s not allowed in my room.”

The conversation trailed off and both women focused on their food. Petrovic finished her pheasant and root vegetables but left her risotto untouched. She fetched a third box and demolished the pheasant from that one as well.

When Sugar finished eating she resumed her questions. “Do you… like Manx?”

“Fuck no,” Petrovic said. “He’s a psychopath. I should be fucking Mikey, but the cunt wants what the cunt wants, if you know what I mean. I’m going to break it off with Manx. Soon, but not now. This situation is too stressful. Stress makes me horny.”

“I think you and I have lived very different lives,” Sugar said.

“Truth,” Anja said. “Are you from here? You don’t look like a Pluter. Sorry. Like a Plutonian.”

“I’ve lived in the Pluto system all my life, but when I was little, my family lived on one of the ring habitats on the Link; the point-seven-g ring. That’s why I’m short.”

“A lazy-g hab? Nice,” Anja said. “That means you’ve got more options than most Plut… Plutonians. You could go to any Luna- or Mars-equivalent hab. You could probably even do a full one g. It would be a rough transition, but I bet you could tough it out.”

“I just need to get on a ship,” Sugar said.

“Look,” Anja said. “I don’t want to lead you on. I can’t promise anything, but I’ll be on the lookout for some way to get you out of here, and I’ll do what I can to protect you for as long as I’m here. Manx will protect you too. He’s a fucking savage, but if he sees you as his property, he won’t let anyone else touch you. So play along.”

“Oh, sorry. That was too blunt. I’m sorry. I don’t really know how to talk to women. You look like you’re going to cry,” Anja said. “Don’t hold back. Go ahead and cry. You’ll feel better. We’re not in a hurry. We can wait until you’ve got it out of your system.”

“Thank you, Anja,” Sugar said, tears filling her eyes and spilling over and down her cheeks.

“I can leave you alone if you want privacy,” Anja said. “Or we can hug. Do you want a hug?”

Sugar nodded, and Anja pushed her chair back from the table. She didn’t stand, but patted her massive thigh, inviting Sugar to sit on her lap. Sugar got up from her chair and seated herself across Anja’s thighs, her legs together and perpendicular to Anja’s. She twisted at the waist so her torso faced Anja’s and wrapped her arms around Anja’s neck. Sugar nearly disappeared from view when Anja enveloped her in a protective hug. Anja stroked the back of Sugar’s head.

“This is a fucked up situation,” Anja said. “It’s normal to be scared. You just go ahead and cry.”

When Sugar had cried herself out, Petrovic handed her a cloth napkin from one of the boxed meals. Sugar wiped her eyes and blew her nose.

“Damn!” Petrovic said. “That’s some hardcore make-up you’ve got on. It still looks perfect.”

“It’s permanent,” Sugar said in a soft voice. She leaned into Petrovic and tilted her head up, lips parted.

Petrovic snorted. “You want to kiss? Naw. Save that for later when Manx is watching. C’mon, I gotta get back. Hey, grab a couple more meal boxes for your sister wives while I get back into this armor.”

“Thank you, Anja.”

“Shit,” Anja said, transforming back into Petrovic. “It’s all good, Astoria.”

“Call me Sugar,” Sugar said. “I need to be somebody else right now.”

5. The Squeeze

Petrovic opened a comm channel to Losada. “Losada, what’s the situation at the checkpoint?”

“Quiet, I guess,” Mikey said.

“You guess?”

“The people seem really tense. More so than when you left. What? Okay. Manx says the vending stations have shut down. People can’t get anything to eat.”

“I’ll check it out,” Petrovic said and closed the channel. “C’mon, Sugar. Little detour.”

Petrovic changed direction and made for the perimeter of the great open space of the Grand Atrium. Clusters of tables announced the locations of banks of food dispensers set into the wall. The sound of an impact cut through the sonic fuzz of overlapping voices. She heard it, but she couldn’t identify it. A third impact allowed her to pinpoint the general direction of the source, and she headed that way, sending ultrasound pulses ahead of her to clear a path.

The standard setting was for an omnidirectional pulse. She adjusted it to send a cone of nerve-jangling vibration ahead of her so as not to zap Sugar, who followed in her wake.

Petrovic chuckled when she identified the source of the sound. A Plutonian man, tall and wispy like the rest of them but maybe a little broader than normal across the shoulders, swung a chair into the clear face of a vending station. Instead of four legs, the chair had two loops of metal, flattened on the bottom to provide a base of support. When the leading loop hit the clear face of the vending station, the momentum of the chair transferred up the man’s arms and into his body. He lost his balance and fell, but he fell with athletic grace and wasn’t hurt.

Petrovic cut off the crowd-dispersing pulses as she got close to the man, but he shuddered as if he’d caught at least some measure of the last pulse. The man used the chair to push himself back up to a standing position. He looked at

Petrovic in her imposing armor and released his hold on the chair.

“Don’t let me stop you,” Petrovic said. “It looks like you’ve just about got it. One more swing ought to do it.”

The man looked over at the transparent panel that separated him from the displayed dishes. After all his effort, the vending station showed no sign of damage.

“What are we supposed to do? The prices have been going up all day, and now it doesn’t list any prices,” the man said. “It’s got power, and if the food was all gone it should say, ‘out of stock,’ but it doesn’t say anything.”

“So you were going to break the transparency and eat the display model?” Petrovic said. “You think that’s edible?”

“What do you mean?”

“The display items are made of cast resin,” Sugar said. “You can’t eat them.”

“What are we supposed to do?” the man repeated.

“I honestly don’t know,” Petrovic told him. “Are you traveling alone?”

The man looked over his shoulder at an attractive young woman dressed in an expensive-looking tracksuit and an older woman who wore more formal clothing. Petrovic turned and took one of the boxed meals from Sugar. She handed it to the athletic-looking man.

“Here. You’ll have to share it,” she said.

The man looked at the box. “One meal for three people?”

“Or you could be a man,” Petrovic said. “And let your women split it. That’s what a Columbian man would do.”

The man looked indignant. He drew a breath as if to respond but then thought better of it. He turned and walked toward the two women.

“Give that other box to someone with kids,” Petrovic told Sugar. “The beauty queens will have to wait till supper. Trust me, you don’t want to be carrying food through this crowd.”

As they made their way back to the checkpoint, Petrovic noticed that the great ornamental fountains had been turned off. She saw people filling water bottles from the basins of the still fountains and remembered Manx telling her that people had been pissing in bottles and dumping

them into the fountains earlier in the day when the thugs were barring access to the public toilets.

“Shit,” Petrovic said. There were water dispensing stations where people could refill bottles for a small fee or even catch a mouthful for free. She looked around and located the nearest water station. A cluster of agitated people jostled around it. She imagined that she could see waves of anxiety radiating out from the water station as the news spread that there was nothing to drink.

“What the hell?” Petrovic said.

Back at the checkpoint Losada gave her a pleading look. He was on the verge of panic and needed direction.

“Where’s Manx?” Petrovic said.

“He took those other women to the Link,” Losada said. “Mr. Clément came by. He said they’re going to send out a public announcement in a few minutes. To get food or water, people will have to board the Link back up to Pluto. Down to Pluto.”

“There’s going to be a crush of people rushing to the Link terminal,” Petrovic said. “People are going to get hurt.”

“That’s what Manx said. He went to make sure the women and the boys got there ahead of time,” Losada said.

“He did?” Petrovic said. She adjusted her opinion of Manx. He was a savage, but even savages looked after their own.

Petrovic heard a commotion and spotted a tight group of people driving their way through the crowd. The two in the lead wore exoskeletons like hers. They were clearing a path through the crowd, and by the way the people shrieked and spasmed as they struggled to get out of the way, Petrovic understood they had their ultrasound crowd dispersal gear on the highest setting.

Behind the two armored figures came Clément. He told Petrovic over voice comms to clear the checkpoint. His group would be passing through without showing documentation. She confirmed and warned the few people near the checkpoint to move back or get hurt. The people scattered.

When Clément's group reached the checkpoint, the two armored figures, one male and one female, peeled off and stood by Petrovic and Losada, forming an armored corridor for the group of people to pass through on their way to the tube that led to the boarding area.

Clément passed by and disappeared down the tunnel at the head of the group. Petrovic noticed that none of the people Clément escorted to the train platform were Plutonians. They looked like the sort of civilians Petrovic was used to seeing on Galtz. Not Columbian, but adapted to life in one gravity.

On impulse, Petrovic moved out of position, took Sugar by the arm and pushed her into the back of Clément's group.

Sugar locked eyes with Petrovic, stunned by the sudden development.

"Anja, I…"

"Shut up and go," Petrovic said and watched Sugar disappear down the tube.

There were two more armored figures at the back of the group who turned around when they reached the tunnel entrance. Petrovic approached one of them. He was stocky, with broad facial features. Definitely not Columbian. She'd fought Khanate forces in the disputed regions at the edge of Pax space. She recognized this man as a Mongol. The Khanate bred a robust soldier caste just like the Columbians did.

The man wore Nixian armor like Petrovic's, including the Exodus Security corporate logo.

"Speak Pax?" Petrovic asked the man.

"Little," he said in a deep, thickly accented voice.

"What's happening?" she said.

"From now, Pluters no." The man made a fist and thumped his chest plate. "Only strong go."

"Tell me in your language," Petrovic said. She only spoke Pax. She understood a little bit of Martian French, but she could not understand a word of what the Mongol mercenary told her. She recorded his words, intending to translate them back at the hotel. The mercenary understood what she intended, and he spoke at length until Petrovic looked over

his shoulder to let him know that Clément was coming back. The man stopped talking in mid-sentence.

“Shit,” she said.

Clément had Sugar with him.

6. Benefits

Clément approached Petrovic and released his grip on Sugar's upper arm.

"You can each take one civilian," Clément said. "They will leave with us. Not before. They must be able to adapt to a full-Earth-gravity environment. Consider her your bonus. If you interfere with my business, your bonus is forfeit."

Petrovic gritted her teeth.

"Where is Manx?" Clément said.

Looking over Clément's shoulder, Petrovic saw a black-haired boy bobbing up and down above the heads of the crowd. Clément turned to follow her gaze. She recognized the boy as one of Manx's little recruits. The youngest, Tar. Most likely named for his black hair. His skin was Plutonian pale. The crowd parted to reveal Manx walking toward the checkpoint carrying Tar on his shoulders.

Clément spoke to one of the Mongol mercenaries in a language that Petrovic didn't understand. The mercenary, a woman, handed Clément a small black pouch which Clément passed to Petrovic.

"The child will need therapy to adapt to full gravity," Clément said. "One injection daily before bed."

Again, Clément spoke to his Mongol mercenaries in what Petrovic assumed was their native language. They formed up around him, and the five of them set off through the crowd without explanation.

"What'd I miss?" Manx said.

"Our employer just explained the benefits package," Petrovic told him. "We can each pick one civilian to go with us when we leave. I've got Sugar. If you want to take Tar, he'll need injections."

Petrovic pushed the black pouch into Manx's chest. As soon as he put a hand up to support it, she turned away. She wanted to hit something, but there was nothing within easy reach except human bodies. If she punched someone in her exoskeleton it would kill them. She clenched her

fists, her jaw, her brows, squeezing her eyes shut tight. She willed her need for violence to stay inside her. She crushed it down into a dense, black sphere. Her own little black hole, eating away at her from the inside, and no one died.

"Corporal?"

It was Losada. She opened her eyes. When she saw the expression on his face, she wished she hadn't. He was lost. Bewildered. She checked the impulse to remind him that her rank didn't apply here. He needed the familiarity of the rank structure. He needed a superior to tell him what to do.

"What is it, Losada?" she said.

"I don't understand," he said. "They're paying us in people?"

"Not exactly," she said. "Did you get a briefing from military intelligence before we left Galtz?"

"No," Mikey said.

"Clément is a criminal," she said. "And until this job is done, we're criminals too. Command knows about it. They signed off on it."

"I don't understand," Mikey said.

"That's because you're a decent person," she said. "I know you've seen combat, but you've never quelled a food riot. You've never put down a strike or helped squash an insurrection."

"I'm a soldier," Mikey said.

"That doesn't mean what you think it means," Petrovic said. "Look. It's like this, if you see someone here who's trying to get out, you can get them out. One person. But Clément is going to use whatever you feel for that person against you. If you do something he doesn't like, you lose your bonus. The person you tried to help will die here with everyone else."

"Command knows about this?"

"Not the specifics," she said. "But they know what Clément is, and they don't care."

"What am I supposed to do?" he said.

"Just get through this. That's all I can tell you," Petrovic said. "You can go back to being a good man when this is all over." She didn't believe that last part, but an encouraging

lie didn’t even make the first page of her list of her transgressions.

“Losada,” she said. “Things are about to get much worse around here. Why don’t you take Sugar and Tar to our suite and then come back here?”

“Are you sure?” Mikey said. Petrovic looked out and saw the crowd starting to flow toward the Link terminal. She knew that the ones who didn’t make it onto the Link would come back more desperate than ever to get past the security checkpoint and onto a train to Mordor spaceport. Some of those people would not take a verbal no for an answer.

“Actually,” she said. “Don’t come back. Just have a nice meal ready for us when we get there. Go on. Get going.”

By the time Petrovic and Manx made it back to the Anor hotel, even Manx was tired of hurting unarmed, frightened people. Petrovic looked at their reflections in the polished metal of the elevator doors. She thought they should try to wipe some of the blood off of their faces before they got back to their hotel suite. She would hurt herself if she tried to wipe her face while wearing the exoskeleton. Manx could wipe his own face, but the blood didn’t seem to bother him the way it bothered Petrovic.

Clément had reserved an entire floor of the hotel for his use, and Petrovic saw five empty exoskeletons squatting on the landing outside the elevator. She gestured for Manx to go on without her and set about getting out of her armor. It took her twice as long to undo all the straps and locking mechanisms as it had earlier in the day when she’d taken her meal break with Sugar.

She stepped out of the armor, leaving two thirds of her mass behind. She glided down the carpeted hallway to the door to their suite. She wondered which suite the Mongols were in, but she couldn’t spare any mental energy to try to puzzle out the answer.

She opened the door to her suite and stepped into luxury. She would describe the space as fancy, but a wealthy person could give a more specific description of what made it fancy. Petrovic just saw a lot of fussy details.

The space was vast. It had a full bar, a long dining table, a kitchen, a seating area with chairs and couches, and an enormous tub set into a raised platform by the panoramic window. The table was set. One plate was dirty. The window looked down on the Grand Atrium, and Petrovic realized that Mikey, Sugar and Tar had had a balcony seat from which to view the carnage of the last two hundred minutes.

Sugar stood behind the bar. She stared at Petrovic with what looked like a combination of shock and concern. Manx was on the other side of the bar drinking from a bottle of some clear liquor. Tar slept on one of the couches, and Losada stood in the doorway to his private room. He was fully dressed in combat fatigues. He even had his boots on.

“Relax, Miguel,” she said. “We’re in for the evening, but thanks for being ready to help out.”

Petrovic crossed the shared portion of the suite toward her private room. As she walked, she unzipped the front of her bodysuit and peeled the top portion off so that she was naked from the waist up. She paused at the bar.

“Manx,” she said. “Hit the shower. Take the bottle with you, but I don’t want you in the hot tub until you’re clean.”

Manx glanced at her but said nothing. He started to raise the bottle to his lips again. She grabbed him by the Nixian control collar around his neck and said, “I’m fucking serious, asshole. Shower! Now!”

She moved into her own private room, not bothering to close the double doors behind her. She took off her gun belt, threw it on the bed, peeled out of the bodysuit and left it on the floor.

Her private bathroom had a walk-in shower. She stepped inside and the flow of hot water from multiple directions started automatically. She wiped her face and short-cropped hair, leaned against the wall and sank down. The shower heads followed her movement.

She didn’t know how long she sat there, knees bent, back against the shower wall with the water flowing over her. Eventually she stood up, pumped liquid soap from a wall-mounted dispenser and scrubbed her pits and crevices.

When she'd dried off, she dug into the pack on her bed and pulled out her personal slate. She crossed back across the expanse of the shared area, naked with her bath towel draped around her neck.

"Uh, Anja?" Sugar said when it became clear that Petrovic intended to go out into the hotel hallway naked.

Petrovic ignored her, though she did notice with satisfaction that Manx had wet hair and was dressed in silk pajama bottoms. He hadn't spent as long in the shower as Petrovic had, but he was clean.

Manx laughed. "Get used to that, Sugar Tits. Petrovic ain't no kinda shy."

Once again, she glided down the luxurious carpeted hallway in long, floating strides. On the landing, she touched her personal slate to a contact patch on the helmet of her exoskeleton. She transferred the recording of the Mongol mercenary's explanation about the change in mission parameters to her slate and then deleted it from her exoskeleton's memory. She uploaded it to the interchain for translation.

It read: I am Batu Twelve of Khunttai Nöker (Wandering Comrades). The low-gravity rocks and habitats have taken as many refugees as they want. Our focus now is on getting all of the high-gravity people out and containing the willow ghost people. Mars and Luna-adapted populations are running their own operations. Our assignment is to evacuate people who can live in full or lazy Earth gravity. Clément is focused on those who can pay, but anyone who can stand in full…

She remembered that the man had cut his explanation off in mid-sentence rather than let Clément catch him talking out of turn.

"Great," Petrovic said aloud, and returned to her suite.

7. The Strong

They ate in silence. Sugar attempted light conversation but got no response. Petrovic imagined Mikey, Sugar and Tar watching from the safety of the suite when the Link module departed and the refugees, thirst stoking their panic, looked for other ways out. They hadn't all tried to get onto the Mordor train platform, but enough did that the crush of bodies prevented those at the front of the wave from retreating in response to the ultrasound pulses from Petrovic's exoskeleton.

Petrovic increased the strength of the pulses and instantly regretted it. The more powerful waves of ultrasound sent the front rank of desperate refugees into convulsions. Most fell to the ground and were trampled by those behind them.

There was no way to close off the tube to the train platform. Petrovic stood in the entrance to the tunnel. Her armored form nearly filled the entrance to the tube, but not quite. Manx stood behind her, ready to bludgeon anyone who got past Petrovic with a stun baton.

She broke arms, legs and ribs of the fragile Plutonians who tried to squeeze past her or pass between her legs. She didn't mean to. She was just trying to push them back into the Grand Atrium, but they were like sticks of uncooked spaghetti.

There was no way Clément could have gotten any more privileged passengers through this crowd and onto the train. She sent a message to Clément telling him to tell the train to depart. There was no reason for it to remain in the station.

"Maintain your position," was the only response he sent. The train sat stationary at the platform until its scheduled departure time. A pressure change let her know that the last train to Mordor had left the station. She'd never been to the end of the tube she was guarding. She'd never seen the train.

After it was gone, she told Manx to let the people through the tube and onto the platform. There was nothing for them there. She didn't know how the two of them were going to get into the hotel at the end of their shift without letting in a flood of refugees, but by then another Link module had arrived, and the crowd flowed back to the Link terminal.

Sugar and Manx drank through dinner. Anja and Mikey drank water. One of Sugar's failed attempts at conversation involved the quality of the liquor behind the suite bar. Compared to Manx, Sugar drank moderately. But only in comparison to Manx. By the time their plates were empty, she was slurring her words.

Sugar started to gather the dishes from the table.

"Don't bother," Petrovic said. "Housekeeping will get that."

Manx pushed back from the table and staggered in the direction of the oversized hot tub, nearly falling over as he struggled out of his pajama bottoms. Expensive vodka flowed out of the dropped bottle and onto the plush carpet.

"Good night," Mikey said and disappeared into his private room, closing the doors behind him.

Sugar approached Anja while she was still seated at the table. Sugar had showered and changed into hotel pajamas like the ones Manx was wearing. Unlike Manx, Sugar wore both the bottoms and the pajama top. Anja had put on a silk robe for dinner. That was for Mikey's sake. She would have preferred to be naked. She liked her big muscular body, and she liked to be looked at, but she knew it made Mikey uncomfortable, so she covered up.

Sugar positioned herself on Anja's lap. Unlike last time, Sugar straddled Anja. She placed her fingertips at the base of Anja's throat and traced the collarbone out to Anja's right shoulder, gently pushing back the robe and exposing a good deal of skin. Anja glanced over to see if Manx was watching. He was in the tub, his back to the room.

Anja liked being observed and examined, but without Manx watching and responding, Sugar's touch did nothing for her.

“How did you get this scar?” Sugar asked, her fingers taking in the texture of a large white scar between Anja’s neck and right shoulder.

“Fire axe,” Anja said. “My collarbone is made of titanium. I could have the scar removed, but I like it. It’s a reminder.”

“Of what?”

“Of my vulnerability,” Anja said.

“I like that,” Sugar said. Anja sensed Sugar’s breathing start to pick up.

“Hey, I know how I look,” Anja said. “But I really am into men. Manx stayed up most of the night drinking last night. I think he’s going to pass out soon, but I really suggest that you fuck him. Seal the deal while you can.”

Sugar pouted, and Anja realized that Sugar was drunker than she let on. Anja considered giving Sugar what she wanted until Sugar said, “But I’m *your* bonus.”

That brought Clément to mind. Anger drove out any glimmer of arousal. Anja stood up, setting Sugar on her feet.

“I have to do something,” Anja said. “If Manx gets out of hand, go to my room. The control collar won’t let him go in there. Don’t let him fall asleep in the tub. If he does, just pull him out of the water and leave him on the tiles. Don’t let him lie on his back.”

“I ran a bar,” Sugar said. “I know what to do with passed-out drunks.”

Anja stood in the hallway, her ear pressed to the door of a suite. She heard voices and knocked. She wanted to strip off the robe and be standing naked for whomever opened the door, but she really needed to talk to these people, so she resisted the impulse.

A woman answered the door. She was not as tall or as large as Petrovic, but she had a powerful build. The woman’s eyes and nose identified her as Mongol. She was dressed in the same silk pajamas that Sugar wore.

“What is it?” the woman said in only lightly accented Pax.

“I’m looking for Batu,” Anja said. “Is he here?”

“What is your business?” the woman asked.

“No business,” Anja said. “I thought he might want to fuck.”

The woman’s stern expression broke. She laughed and opened the door wider, turning to announce Anja’s arrival.

The suite was nearly identical to her own, but the Mongol mercenaries had pushed the couches and lounge chairs against the wall and arranged large flat cushions around a low round table. The table was covered with plates, glasses and bottles. Three men lounged around that low table. She recognized one as Batu Twelve.

Now, Anja felt like she was on safer ground. She let her robe slip to the floor. Her gaze flicked from face to face, reading their reactions. Even if they disapproved, this moment of exposure and uncertainty quickened her pulse and would be worth the weight of their disapproval.

The men looked from her to one another with stony expressions. Then Batu smiled, and the other two men laughed. Anja turned to look at the woman, who shook her head in what Anja guessed was amazement. Anja made her way over to Batu and set her slate down on the table. She had it configured to translate between Pax and standard Mongolian.

She settled down behind Batu, reached around him and ran her hands over his torso. He was hard and muscular. Columbian men worked hard to keep their waists trim. Batu had a round belly, but it was rock hard.

“My name is Anja,” she said loud enough for everyone to hear. “You can be rough with me. Command me.” A voice from her slate translated her words. She kissed Batu’s neck from behind and pressed her breasts into his back.

Batu turned his body and got up on his knees. He took hold of the back of Anja’s neck in an iron grip. His strength exhilarated her. “Tell me what to do.”

The woman spoke up. “Pinch your nipples.”

Anja looked over at the woman. “Yes, ma’am. Like this?” Anja pulled at her own nipples and pinched them vigorously. They were already erect, but they stiffened further. She moaned but kept her eyes open, watching the woman’s expression. “Lick his nipples,” the woman commanded.

Anja leaned into the big Mongol and licked his right nipple, keeping her eyes on the woman. She moved to his left nipple and looked up at Batu.

“Bite him,” the woman commanded, and Anja brought her teeth together on Batu’s left nipple. She didn’t draw blood, but she bit hard, and Batu gasped. The other two men laughed. Batu released his grip on the back of her neck and wrapped it around Anja’s throat. She did not resist.

“Play with yourself,” the woman said.

Anja slid her middle finger between the lips of her labia. She moved her finger to make as much noise as she could, to let everyone know how wet she was. Batu was squeezing her throat and her vision started to darken around the edges. She shifted her focus to her clitoris. She tried to moan, but she couldn’t catch her breath. Her vision continued to contract into darkness. The woman said something in her own language. Batu released his grip on her neck. Batu pushed her down onto her back. He put force behind the push, but she impacted gently with the floor cushions in the minuscule gravity.

She looked up at Batu, ready to comply with any instruction, but she really hoped he was about to fuck her. That’s what she needed. She enjoyed submitting to authority as long as she got fucked.

“Hands and knees,” the woman said. Anja complied and rejoiced when she felt Batu’s hands on her hips. He entered her, and she got what she came for. She played with her clit and kept herself at the threshold of orgasm until she felt Batu spasm, and then she pushed herself over the edge and came with him.

She hoped the other two men would each take a turn, but they didn’t. That was okay. Batu was enough. She lay sprawled on her stomach for a moment. She would love to let herself drift off to sleep and wake up naked among strangers, but she needed information. She also knew she should check in on Sugar. She pushed herself up.

“Oh,” she said. “Thank you. I needed that.” Her slate followed up with a translation. To the woman, she said, “That was good. I like a stern woman. Are you in command?”

“No,” the woman said. She pointed at one of the men. “Monkh Erdene is senior among us, but we obey Clément.”

“What do you make of Clément?” Anja said.

“We will not speak ill of our employer,” the woman said.

“But you’ve got nothing good to say about him?”

“We will not speak ill of our employer,” the woman repeated.

“Gotcha,” Anja said. “What’s your name?”

The woman said something that had too many syllables and no familiar elements for Anja to grab onto.

“I’m sorry,” Anja said. “One more time.”

The woman leaned across the table and picked up Anja’s slate. She held it to her mouth and repeated her name slowly. She passed the slate to Anja, who read the transcribed name.

Erdenechimeg. Anja read it aloud and watched the woman’s facial expression to see how she did. Not good. She tried again. The woman shrugged.

“Can I call you *Meg*?” Anja asked.

“*Erd* is better,” the woman said.

“Okay,” Anja said. “Erd, and…” She looked at the man Erd identified as their leader. “Monk?”

The man said something which the slate translated as, “Close enough.”

“Batu, I’ve met,” Anja said. “And…”

“Gerel,” the third man said. He lifted his glass to Anja. Batu started to pour a cup of whatever it was they were drinking.

“Sorry,” Anja said. “None for me. I don’t drink alcohol.”

Erd laughed at that. The other three followed her example when the slate translated Anja’s words.

“Are all Columbian women like you?” Erd asked.

“We’ve all got strong sex drives,” Anja said. “Something about what the Nixians did to our genes, but I’ve got it worse than most. Plus, I started early.”

“How early?” Erd said.

“I don’t know. I don’t remember my first time. Or I don’t remember which time was my first. I don’t ever remember being a virgin,” Anja said.

“Did a man take you as a child?” Erd asked.

“Several men,” Anja said. “Women too, and plenty of kids my age and older. I was the one who initiated it. Usually. Maybe a man got me started. I respond most strongly to men. But I really don’t remember.”

The Mongols all looked very serious.

“In the Khanate, it is a crime to use children that way,” Erd said.

“Here too,” Anja said. “In the Pax, I mean. But it still happens, obviously. Sorry. I didn’t mean to bring down the mood.”

Monkh Erdene, the senior member of their team, spoke. Anja watched his eyes while she waited for the translation. “You did not just come here for sex.”

“That’s true,” Anja said. “Clément tells you more about the mission than he tells us. He keeps my team in the dark and shocks us with how he treats these people. I thought we were here to run an orderly evacuation, but Clément only seems to care about scamming and extorting people.”

The Mongols said nothing, even after the translation came through. Erd moved over and sat next to Anja. She put her mouth to Anja’s ear and whispered, “He could be listening.”

Monkh Erdene spoke again. The slate translated. “These willow ghost people are not human. Their ancestors were human. They could have constructed rotating habitats. Nobody made them live on balls of rock and ice without proper gravity. Now they need to move, but they are too weak to live in proper human spaces. Nobody wants them. They deserve no consideration.”

Erd whispered in Anja’s ear, “He speaks for Clément to hear, but this is our true belief.”

Monkh Erdene continued, “The willow ghosts with the technical skills to make themselves useful elsewhere are gone, as are those with political power. All that remain are useless. Now we focus on transporting the strong. Clément will use the fear of being left behind to take their money, but in the end, there is a place for anyone who can stand in full gravity.”

“Where?” Petrovic said. “Not on Galtz, that’s for sure.”

“Nix,” Monkh Erdene said. Anja didn’t need the translator to understand that.

“But the Nixians are bugging out. That’s what started this whole panic,” Anja said.

Monkh Erdene spoke again, and Anja’s slate translated, “The Nixians have use for all strong people. There will be a place for them.”

Anja nodded. “Okay. Thanks for the information and for the hospitality. If we can do this again, I’m all yours. If you see me in uniform, keep it professional.”

Everything was quiet back in her suite. Tar was still asleep on the couch. Losada’s door was closed. Manx’s door was open. Anja looked inside and saw Manx and Sugar asleep in his bed.

“Good,” she said to herself, and went to bed.

8. Caretaking

Petrovic opened her eyes the instant before her alarm would have woken her. She looked at her sleep record. She'd gone right to sleep and slept deeply through the night. Her slate said that she'd been dreaming just before she woke up, but she didn't remember any details. She usually didn't.

She went into the bathroom to pee and attend to her oral hygiene. She put on workout clothes and walked out into the shared area of the suite. Housekeeping had been there. She didn't like that people had been in here and that she'd slept right through it, but she appreciated the clean space.

She saw that Tar now had a pillow and a blanket. She felt a flash of self-recrimination that she hadn't draped one of her own blankets over the boy. She saw the black medical pouch on the end table by the couch. She opened it and read through the instructions.

She poured a glass of water and took it to the boy. He slept with a pained expression on his face. She nudged him gently.

"Hey, kid. Wake up."

"What? Where am I?" he said.

"You're safe. You're in a hotel. On Charon," Petrovic told him. "Here, drink some water."

She helped the boy sit up. He winced when he tried to take the glass from her, so she guided it to his lips and supported it while he took a few sips.

"What happened? Why does it hurt so much?"

"We gave you some medicine. It will help you adapt to high gravity," Petrovic said. "You'll feel better once you start moving. Get up. The toilet is over there," she said and pointed him toward the shared bathroom.

The boy disappeared into the bathroom, and Losada emerged from his room. Like Petrovic, he was dressed for the gym.

"Sleep okay?" she asked him. He shook his head, and she didn't inquire further.

Petrovic walked to the window and looked down on the Grand Atrium. It was empty. Not only were the refugees gone, but so were the bodies of the dead and injured. She wondered where the injured people had been taken, but then she put the thought out of her mind.

When Tar emerged from the bathroom, Petrovic asked him, “Where is your luggage?”

“We couldn’t find it,” Tar said.

“You’ll need clothes. We’ll get you some stuff from the gift shop,” she said. “C’mon. We’re going to the gym.”

The boy objected, but Petrovic insisted. There was no attendant at the gym, but there was an automated station where she could request workout clothing. She positioned Tar in front of a scanner which took his measurements. A countdown timer appeared. The clothes would be ready in five minutes. The system asked for the guest’s name. She started to put in the name Tar Manxson but then thought better of it.

“What’s your name, kid?” she asked.

“Anders,” Tar said.

“Anders what?”

“Ascanio,” Tar said.

“Say it again for the desk system,” she told him. He did, and confirmed the spelling.

“Should we call you Anders or Tar?”

“I like Tar,” the boy said.

“Fair enough,” she said. “Tar, I’m going to show you some exercises. You need to do them every day. It will make adapting to the gravity of your new home easier.”

“Where will I live?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

The gym was equipped with free weights. Petrovic thought that was stupid. The tungsten plates were more than three times as dense as iron, but in Charon’s gravity, you had to load a cartoonish number of them onto a bar in order to generate a useful amount of resistance. Most hotel guests, she reminded herself, weren’t genetically enhanced killing machines.

She kept things simple for Tar. She had him do squats and deadlifts and record the weight and number of reps for

each set. He didn't have a slate with him, so she added that to the list of the things she would order for him and created a separate workout profile for him with her own slate.

She didn't get much of a workout herself. That was fine. It would take weeks for low-g atrophy to affect her or Losada. The morning gym routine was as much a psychological anchor as a practical necessity.

Like the gym, there were no humans in the gift shop, but the place seemed to run fine without them. She found a station that took an exact measurement of the size and shape of Tar's feet, and she let him choose the style of shoe he wanted. She thought he should have a military pack like she used, but the gift shop did not have anything like that. She picked out a rolling carry-on bag for him and loaded it up with underwear, socks, sweatpants and T-shirts. She had him pick out a jacket. He selected one that was bright red. It made him conspicuous. Bad in a firefight, but good for keeping track of in a crowd. Every article of clothing they picked out for him bore the hotel's elegant logo. Tar would be a walking advertisement for the Anor hotel for the foreseeable future.

Back in the hotel suite, Sugar was up and looking hungover. Manx was still in bed. Petrovic triggered a warning tone on his control collar, and he sprang out of bed. The tone was a prelude to a shock, which she canceled.

"Fucking bitch!" he shouted.

"Yep," Petrovic said. "Good morning."

There were two tall glasses of a thick green liquid on a tray on the table; breakfast for Petrovic and Losada. Manx would want some kind of meat. Sugar was making something in the kitchen that smelled like eggs. She didn't need to cook. She could order from room service, but Petrovic understood the value of keeping busy.

Petrovic snorted when Sugar brought the pan of eggs to the table and set it on an insulated round pad. That was cute. Petrovic didn't think the pan would hurt the table. As Sugar set three places at the table, Petrovic saw the livid blotches on Sugar's neck.

“Oh, yeah,” Petrovic said. “I forgot to warn you, he likes to suck. You’re marked now. I suggest you not cover them with makeup.”

Sugar looked at Petrovic but said nothing.

“Did you give Tar his injection last night?” Petrovic said.

“Yes,” Sugar said. “After dinner. It knocked him right out.”

“Will you take charge of that?”

Sugar nodded.

“And encourage him to eat. He’ll need lots of protein.”

Sugar nodded again, and sat down to eat. Petrovic wondered if Sugar resented her for pushing her into bed with Manx. It couldn’t be helped. Sugar’s soft femininity didn’t motivate Petrovic. She felt compassion for Sugar, but she didn’t crave her body.

Erd, the mercenary woman who had barked orders at Petrovic the night before, was a different story. With or without the involvement of the Mongol men, Petrovic would jump at the chance to take more of Erd’s strong direction. She pushed the cascade of lesbian sex images out of her mind. Time for work.

There were no scheduled departures from the Mordor spaceport that day. She didn’t know what they would be doing, but it was time to get started. This wasn’t Petrovic’s first civilian assignment. She understood that she couldn’t count on the sort of robust predictability of garrison life, but she needed to know if she’d be back in the exoskeleton before she got dressed.

Losada had the same question. She checked the duty schedule even though she knew her slate would alert her when Clément posted new orders. There was nothing.

Petrovic shrugged. “Tactical armor and sidearms, I guess.” She immediately regretted the “I guess” part. Mikey looked to her for structure. Better to be resolute and wrong. *Since when am I the fucking morale officer?* she thought to herself.

“Everybody, get dressed, packed up and be ready to move,” she said. “We don’t have orders, but I don’t think we’ll be on checkpoint duty again today.”

Petrovic left the suite and knocked on the Mongols' door. No answer. She walked to the landing and saw just two exoskeletons where there had been six; hers and Losada's.

She did not want to initiate contact with Clément, but she sent him a one-word message, *Orders?*

"Link terminal. 10 minutes. STU. No dependents." STU was not an abbreviation the Columbian military used, but she understood it to mean *standard tactical uniform*, which is what she was already wearing.

Back in the suite she relayed the orders and opened the weapons locker. She passed a combat rifle and spare clips to Losada and the stun baton to Manx, who was not yet dressed. "Be at the Link terminal in 8 minutes to avoid correction," she told him. He moved as quickly as the low gravity allowed.

To Sugar, she said, "I don't know when we'll be back. Relax, but be prepared to move."

She noticed that Tar was asleep on the couch again. *Hard at work on the metabolic level*, she thought.

Manx caught up to them at the Link terminal with less than a minute left before the deadline. Petrovic canceled the planned shock. She knew Manx would make her pay for every erg of control collar discipline she inflicted on him the next time she spoke the phrase that reversed the power dynamic between them. That was fine by her.

A Link module waited at the terminal, doors open. An address appeared in her HUD.

"This is our ride," Petrovic said, crossing the threshold into the Link module. She picked a seat near the doors, sat down and pulled the harness down over her shoulders.

"Where are we going?" Mikey asked.

"The lazy-g ring," she said.

9. So Many Martians

When loaded with Plutonian passengers, the Link modules accelerated at 0.12 g until they reached their cruising speed. With just three Columbian soldiers on board, this one got to show off its capabilities. It started with a hard takeoff that peaked at 5 g and maintained 1.5 g until it was time to slow down.

Four ring habitats rotated around the axis of the Link between Pluto and Charon. Each ring spun at a different rate to produce a specific environmental gravity. The Link module carrying Petrovic, Losada and Manx bypassed the first two rings.

The first ring, the one that matched the gravity of Earth's moon, was the smallest of the four. Petrovic had never visited a spin hab with lunar gravity. During the Turmoil, the Columbian military had seized lunar-g habs, and in every case, they either increased the rotation speed to increase the gravity, or they stripped the habitats and left them lifeless. In either case, the surviving residents had to flee. With no other lunar-g habitats in Pax space, they became zero-g refugees. Some, Petrovic knew, had fled to Pluto. Most of those acclimated to Pluto's much lower gravity. A privileged few pooled their resources and had the lunar-g ring habitat constructed on the Link.

The next ring habitat matched the gravity on Mars. The gravity on the actual planet Mars was 0.38 g, but anything between 35% and 40% of Earth gravity counted as Mars gravity in the Kuiper Belt. The Mars ring was the largest of the four. That matched the composition of the human population of Pax space.

In the time since Pluto's last perihelion, the portion of the Kuiper Belt population adapted to Mars gravity had eclipsed the population adapted to Earth gravity. Human bodies adapted to full Earth gravity could step down to Martian gravity for months or even years at a time and still reacclimate to full Earth gravity. Even so, the longer a

person stayed in Mars gravity, the less likely they were to ever make the transition back to a one-g environment.

After the Columbian government fell and the military abandoned the Columbia Cardinal habitat, they established their new command on Galtz. From there, they coerced a declaration of submission from every one-g habitat in the Columbian quarter of the Kuiper Belt.

Unlike the lunar-g and Earth-g habitats, the Mars-g habs had the means and the will to resist the Columbians. They put up a credible fight, but gravity worked against them. Columbian troops could operate in Martian gravity, but the reverse did not apply. No Earth-gravity habitat fell to a Martian invasion. Martian soldiers in powered exoskeletons could fight effectively in full Earth gravity, but without the support of Nix, they could not replace lost units. One by one, Columbian forces seized every Mars-equivalent habitat.

Once pacified, the Columbians only kept small garrisons on Mars-equivalent habitats. Columbians didn't want to live in Mars gravity; not everybody had the luxury of remaining so pure.

People displaced from full-g habs to make room for incoming Columbian settlers often moved to Mars-g habs. The longer they stayed, the more daunting the prospect of moving back to a full-g environment became.

After the Turmoil, the Columbian military government turned its attention and resources to building new habitats to relieve the crowding. Responding to the need at the time, almost all the new habitats were Mars-equivalent.

Mars lost the war, but won the peace. Mars-adapted humans now made up the largest demographic in the Pax.

Their destination, the third ring habitat out from Charon, spun to produce 70% of a full Earth gravity. Some people called these structures *point-seven-g* habs, but most people said "lazy-g." The lazy-g hab on the Link was roughly a third the size of the Mars ring, but it was still the second largest of the four.

Their Link module exited the express channel at the Mars habitat and switched to a deceleration line. They could have decelerated at 1 g, but the Link module

maintained its speed. When the deceleration finally kicked in, Petrovic's group endured a prolonged 4-g deceleration that would have killed most Plutonians. Manx flipped up his harness and walked around the Link module to show off.

"Back in your seat, Manx," Petrovic said. He smiled and obeyed. He enjoyed the genetic benefits of being a Columbian Bastard, but he hadn't spent his life cultivating his potential in a consistent and rigorous way. He might have been as strong as Petrovic. He was certainly no match for Losada. Not even close. Manx couldn't have stayed on his feet for much longer, and Petrovic told him to sit down so that he wouldn't push past his limits and injure himself.

The Link module came to a stop. At the very end, the g-forces peaked at over 5 g, but only for a few seconds. When Petrovic stood up, she held still and took several deep breaths. Losada did the same, but Manx stomped around and whooped before his eyes lost focus and his knees buckled. He plopped down into a cross-legged seated position in what almost looked like a deliberate action. He shook his head, placed his palms on the floor, and took his time standing up.

Petrovic bent her knees and ankles and bounced up and down, enjoying the gravity. Losada dropped into a plank position and did push-ups.

The hatch opened, and they filed out. Clément was waiting for them.

10. Mikey Finds His Groove

“The ring is in full lockdown,” Clément said. “All residents will remain in their compartments until you release them, after which they will come here to board the Link module.”

Clément handed Petrovic a large tablet.

“Here is a list of evacuees,” he told her. “Each family has traded their ownership rights and all of the contents of their living spaces for passage out of the system. Proceed to each living unit and visually account for the items listed. When the items are accounted for, allow the residents to proceed here to the Link terminal.”

Petrovic paged through the list. They had over two hundred living units to cover. If they spent just five minutes at each residence, they still couldn’t work through the whole list in what remained of their five-watch shift.

“Where did you get this?” Petrovic asked, pointing to the tablet.

“The homeowners insured these objects against theft or damage,” Clément said.

“You got this from their insurance companies?” Petrovic asked.

“You will remain on duty until you have processed the list,” Clément said. “If a family cannot produce one of the listed items, they must accept an indenture contract for the listed value. Authenticate the items with this,” Clément said, handing Petrovic a scanner with a large display and a pistol grip.

“It can also scan for swallowed items or ones inserted into body cavities,” Clément said. “It may save you a few cavity searches.” Clément gestured toward what looked like a piece of rolling luggage. Petrovic recognized it as a collapsible table.

A map to the first residence on the list appeared in Petrovic’s HUD.

“Manx,” she said. “Grab that kit and follow me.”

They set off. Petrovic had never been on this ring habitat before, but they were all quite similar in their layout. She navigated without difficulty.

Behind the first door, Petrovic found a family of three in a luxurious living space: two women and a young boy. All three were proportioned like the civilians Petrovic was used to seeing on Galtz rather than the willowy Plutonians.

Losada unfolded the portable table, opened the attached container and set a box of disposable gloves and a pump dispenser of lubricant on the tabletop. The women looked at each other. They understood the implied threat of the gloves and lubricant.

“Ms…” Petrovic said while she tried to work out the pronunciation. “Ogorodnikova?”

“Yes,” the older of the two women said.

“We’re with Exodus Security,” Petrovic said. “We’re authorized to release you to travel to Charon once we have verified the presence and authenticity of these items.” The surface of the folding table acted as a display. It was linked to Petrovic’s tablet, and she adjusted the position of the box of gloves and lubricant dispenser so that Ms. Ogorodnikova could read the list.

The woman looked at the list and said, “These are all personal belongings. Family heirlooms and mementos.”

“Please place the items on the tabletop for authentication,” Petrovic said.

“You don’t understand,” Ogorodnikova told her. “The sentimental value…”

“Ma’am,” Petrovic said in a curt tone, “you are welcome to stay here in the Pluto system, but the deposit for your passage is non-refundable. Are you going or staying?”

“We’re going,” Ogorodnikova said. “We’re definitely going, but this item…” She pointed to an image of what looked like a sports trophy to Petrovic. “My mother’s ashes are…”

“Produce the items now or go to the back of the list,” Petrovic said.

“You don’t understand,” the woman said.

“Alright,” Petrovic said to Losada. “Pack it up. We’re moving on.”

“No, please!” the woman said.

Petrovic gestured to Losada to wait.

“You have ten seconds to put an item from the list on that tabletop,” Petrovic told her.

The woman reached behind her head and undid the clasp on her necklace. She put it on the tabletop, and Petrovic aimed the pistol grip scanner at it. There was a chime and a green light.

“Authentic,” Petrovic said. Losada swept the necklace into a large, clear bag with a resealable strip. “Next.”

The women set various pieces of jewelry on the table for authentication. They led Petrovic to other items, like framed paintings and sculptures, for scanning and authentication. When they’d worked through the entire list, Ogorodnikova put her thumb to the designated spot on Petrovic’s tablet and they were free to go.

“Shit,” Petrovic said. “That took more than twenty minutes. We need to average five minutes per household.”

A middle-aged man and a young woman waited behind the next door. They did not argue, but they also couldn’t produce all of the items on the list.

“I sold them,” the man said. “I sold them to pay for our visas.”

Petrovic passed the scanner over each of their bodies. Nothing.

“Fine,” Petrovic said. She tapped the option to generate the indenture contract. “You may still travel to…” She checked the tablet. “Twain, as arranged, but you will be responsible for the cost of the missing items. Authorize here if you agree to the terms of the indenture.”

“Indenture?” the man said. “Doing what?”

“I don’t know,” Petrovic said.

“This can’t be legal,” the man said.

“I’m not a lawyer,” Petrovic said. “Authorize the contract now or we’re leaving.”

“I can’t sign a contract I haven’t read,” the man said.

“Fine,” Petrovic said and motioned for Losada to pack up the portable table.

Petrovic turned to walk to the door.

“Okay,” the man said. “We’ll sign.”

He and the woman each pressed their thumb to the tablet. Petrovic looked at Manx who pushed the man and woman out the door of their former home. She checked the time.

“Shit,” she said. “That took seven minutes. We’ve got to pick up the pace.”

Petrovic sealed the door and led her team to the next residence where they expected to find a married couple and their two children, a young boy and an adolescent girl. The man balked at parting with the listed items. Manx tapped him with the stun baton and the man relented. They were short one piece of jewelry. A ring. Petrovic ran the scanner over all of their bodies. The scanner located the ring in the girl’s vagina.

“Get it out, now,” Petrovic said, pulling a pair of exam gloves from the box. The girl looked to her parents, as Petrovic pumped lubricant into her palm.

“Get her pants off,” Petrovic said to Manx.

“Penelope!” the girl’s mother shouted. “Give her the ring!”

With the ring authenticated and bagged, Petrovic hustled the family out into the passageway and locked their door. The next address on their list was the next door down. Petrovic said to the father, “Do you know your neighbors?”

“The Romadins?” he said. “Not well, why?”

“Will they recognize you?” Petrovic asked.

“Well, yes,” the man said.

Petrovic took the man by the back of the neck and marched him to the next door down. An older man with white, mad scientist hair answered the door.

“Mr. Romadin?” Petrovic said.

“Doctor Romadin,” the white-haired man corrected.

“Exodus Security. Do you recognize this man?” she said, gesturing at the father.

“Yes,” Romadin said. “He’s my…”

“He dragged his feet and cost me time,” Petrovic said. She drove her fist into the father’s nose, stunning him and releasing a torrent of blood. “Are you going to cooperate?” she said to the white-haired man.

“Yes.”

Petrovic shoved the father in the direction of his family and went inside Romadin's unit. The old man and his companion cooperated. Petrovic and crew sealed the door six minutes and fourteen seconds after Romadin opened it.

"That's more like it," she said. "But we still have to go faster."

In the next residence, the single traveler, an older woman named Litvinov, cooperated without hesitation, but there was a complication. A painting came up as inauthentic. It was a life-size portrait of a man in an ancient military uniform in a wooden frame covered in gold leaf.

"Ma'am," Petrovic said, "this painting is a forgery. You'll need to sign this indenture contract to make up for the value of the original painting."

"Indenture contract?" she scoffed. "That's absurd. What work could I do that would be worth so much?"

"I have no idea," Petrovic said. "Authorize the contract or we're leaving."

The woman dithered and Petrovic packed up the table.

"Alright! Alright!" the woman said.

Petrovic left Mrs. Litvinov in the corridor, locked out of her previous home, with two automated rolling suitcases and a painting she could not lift and would not be able to take aboard her transport.

Time and again, items on Petrovic's list came up as *inauthentic*. That didn't mean that they were forgeries like Mrs. Litvinov's painting. Inauthentic could just mean that the item, according to the scanner, was worth less than the value the owner had reported to the insurance company.

Instead of telling the owners to agree to indenture, she told them they could still travel provided they authorized a *correction form*. They asked what that meant, and Petrovic repeated her multipurpose phrase, "I'm not a lawyer." They pressed their thumbs to the tablet and Manx hustled them out the door.

They took a short break after clearing a family of five for departure. They lingered in the home for a few minutes after pushing the previous residents out into the corridor. They helped themselves to snacks from the kitchen.

Petrovic snapped at Manx when she saw him take the stopper off of a crystal decanter.

“No drinking until the work is done,” she said. She followed up with a warning tone on the control collar when he didn’t put the bottle down quickly enough. He threw the crystal bottle. It shattered against a wall in a spray of glass and expensive liqueur.

“Losada,” she said. “You ready to take point on the next one?”

“What?” Mikey said. “You want me…”

“We’ve still got more than two hundred of these to get through. My voice will be gone if I have to do all of the talking.”

“I don’t think I can…” Mikey said.

“Manx,” Petrovic said, talking over Losada. “In the next one, give Losada thirty seconds. If the clients don’t have the first item on the table by then, use the stunner.”

The next *clients* were two men, one older and one younger, with different last names. Petrovic stood back and let Mikey do the talking.

“Mr. Junqueira,” Mikey said to the man who opened the door. “My name is Miguel Losada. I’m with Exodus Security. We’re here to do a final punch list and authorize you and your…” Mikey looked at the younger man. “Your, uh…”

“My husband,” Junqueira said.

“Your…” Mikey said, bewildered. “*Husband*?”

“What is this business about a punch list?” Junqueira demanded. “I don’t appreciate being a prisoner in my own home.”

Petrovic had the table set up and the tacit threat of the gloves and lubricant on display. Mikey stared at the lube.

“We have a list of items…” Mikey said, poking at the tablet and sending the list to the table display.

“Time,” Petrovic said, and Manx stepped forward and gave the younger man the slightest tap with the stun baton. The man went rigid. Manx stepped back, breaking the connection between the baton and Junqueira’s husband, who doubled over and vomited.

“What are you doing?” Junqueira demanded.

“We need you to produce these items, sir,” Mikey said.

“You need?” Junqueira said.

“Please, sir,” Mikey said. “The first item is an art…” Mikey puzzled over the next word.

Petrovic stepped up and tapped Losada on the shoulder.

“Tag,” she said. “I’m up. The first item on the list is an Art Nouveau headdress. You have ten seconds to put it on the table or I cut off your husband’s ring finger.” With a seemingly casual motion she knocked the younger man unconscious with a blow to the jaw. The younger man collapsed face down on the carpet, and Petrovic drew her knife and leaned down and placed the blade on the younger man’s finger.

“It’s in my bag!” Junqueira shouted. “It will take me more than ten seconds to get it out.”

“Better hurry,” Petrovic said. Junqueira opened one of his suitcases and dug through the folded clothing.

The younger man jolted back to consciousness with a howl when Petrovic applied downward pressure to the blade and the man’s ring finger came away from his hand.

“Stop it!” Junqueira screamed. “I’m getting it!”

“Better hurry,” Petrovic said, her voice steady.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ about!” Manx said, delighted.

From door knock to door lock, Losada’s first stop took over ten minutes, but it wasn’t all Mikey’s fault. Junqueira had an impressive jewelry collection, and much of it was tucked between expensive dress clothes in his luggage.

“Less preamble,” Petrovic said to Losada. “They don’t need to know your name. Just tell them to hand over the stuff. At this rate, we’ll still be at it this time tomorrow.”

At the next stop, Mikey streamlined his approach. Things moved more quickly.

On the seventy-third door knock Manx set up the table and Mikey stepped forward and punched the head of the household with his hard-knuckle gloves. He landed the blow on the man’s septum, the sensitive spot between the nose and upper lip.

“Do I have your attention?” Mikey shouted. “Good, now get the shit on this list. Move it, fucker!”

Petrovic leaned against a wall. Manx and Mikey had a rhythm going. She hung back and let them work. They'd been at it for over three watches, and they were only a third of the way through their list.

They were all tired and exasperated. They tolerated no resistance. No dithering. They were all quick to violence, but Mikey Losada was the quickest. He didn't wait for provocation. He said hello with a punch in the face. Nobody fought back.

Some of the clients had clearly called ahead to warn their neighbors. Some families had all of their insured valuables spread out for easy scanning when Petrovic and crew arrived at their doorsteps. Many of them still ended up in indentured servitude because they had reported inflated values for their insured property.

Then the apartments got smaller, shabbier. The people inside didn't have collections of insurable items. There were no checklists. They had already agreed to indentured servitude to pay for their passage. They were packed and ready to go and never hesitated to put their thumbs to the tablet screen.

The last two thirds of the list went faster than the first third. They were back on the Link module headed for Charon at about the time they would have normally ended their shift, but they still had a long Link ride ahead, and this time, with civilians on board, there'd be no cutting transit times with hard accelerations and decelerations.

Petrovic took Manx to the toilet for a fuck, but there was no way the two of them could fit into the tiny Link module toilet at the same time. They did it outside the toilet compartment in full view of several of the passengers they had threatened, assaulted and even maimed. After that, Petrovic was able to sleep for the rest of the Link ride.

It was morning by the time they got back to the Anor hotel. Mikey said nothing on the walk from the Link station to the hotel. When they were back in the suite Mikey headed for his private room. Petrovic stopped him.

"Miguel," Petrovic said. "I need your sidearm."

"Why?" Mikey said.

"Just hand it over," Petrovic said. "Your knife too."

He complied, and Petrovic secured his weapons in the locker with their rifles and the stun baton. Petrovic showered, ran a towel over her limbs and climbed into bed only half dry. Sugar was in the bed. Petrovic rolled onto her side, putting her broad wet back to Sugar. Sugar, naked, pressed herself against Petrovic’s back and slipped an arm under Petrovic’s arm and around her torso.

Petrovic didn’t want the company, but she didn’t object. Before long she slipped into blessed oblivion.

11. None of Your Business

The surface transport had windows. Mikey called them *portholes*. Whatever. Tar's nose was stuck to one.

The surface transport traced a parabolic trajectory from Minth to its destination. At the apogee of its trajectory, Petrovic looked for any curvature of the horizon. It looked flat to her. Clément's ship stood on a compact landing field far closer to the Link station than she thought ships were allowed. Yet another rule that didn't apply to Clément.

They pulled a couple of deceleration g's on their approach to the landing pad. Sugar gasped and Tar whooped. Petrovic wouldn't even have noticed the deceleration were it not for their reactions.

After touchdown, the surface transport taxied on its wheeled landing gear, and Clément's ship slid into view.

"We're going on that?" Tar said, eyes wide. "What's it called?"

Petrovic realized that she didn't know the name of Clément's ship. She never cared enough to ask.

Losada answered. "It's called the *Senny Regar Dupah*. I think he was a Martian general."

Petrovic snorted. She leaned closer to the window to get a look at the ship. It was small compared to a troop transport or general-purpose ship. Its organic curving profile left no room for doubt. Nixians built that ship.

The name of the ship was printed on the hull near the nose. It read, "Ça ne te regarde pas."

"It means 'none of your business,'" Petrovic said.

The surface transport moved next to the Ça ne te regarde pas and raised itself up to match the level of the ship's passenger airlock. Clément took the lead, and Petrovic had to stop Tar from following Clément to the cockpit.

Tar gasped in amazement when he climbed down into the passenger compartment. It seemed like they were stepping into open space. They had a panoramic view of the Charonian landscape. They could see the white spires of

Minth at the base of the Link. Overhead the four spin habitats seemed to overlap one another along the Link between Charon and Pluto.

Petrovic decided the ship couldn't be transparent. It was opaque from the outside, and if it were really transparent, she should be able to see Clément in the cockpit above them. This had to be some sort of advanced projection technology. When she looked straight up, she only saw black space dotted with a few faint stars.

She helped Sugar into her seat.

"This seat will act like an acceleration couch," Petrovic told her. "This membrane will wrap around your limbs and inflate. Don't fight it."

Sugar nodded but Petrovic thought she looked nervous.

"Honestly," Petrovic continued. "I think Clément will hit us with hard g's just to be an asshole. There are tranq patches there in the pouch. Put one on your neck if you'd rather sleep through this."

"We're going to Nix?" Sugar said.

"I think so," Petrovic replied.

"How long will it take to get there?"

"No telling. I would think that it would take a day or more, but Clément doesn't seem to worry about fuel consumption. We might be there in five watches for all I know."

"*Watches*?" Sugar said.

"Yes," Petrovic said. "You know. Ten watches to a day?"

Sugar's facial expression suggested an effort at mental calculation that she soon abandoned.

"Will you wake me up when we get close?" Sugar said.

"No problem," Petrovic said.

Sugar peeled the backing off of a tranquilizer patch and stuck the patch to her neck. She asked Petrovic, "How long will it take to…"

Sugar's voice trailed off and her eyes closed. Petrovic took the tranq patch wrapper and backing from Sugar's now limp hand. She fastened the straps around Sugar's wrists so that her arms would be in the right place when the seat enveloped her.

"Good call," Petrovic muttered.

One look at Tar and Petrovic knew he wouldn't want to miss a second of this. She did not mention the tranq patch option to him. "Welcome to the big world, kid."

Manx pulled a small silver flask with the Anor hotel logo inscribed on it from his jacket pocket and tilted it to his lips. Petrovic let it go. She remembered using the *hair of the dog* hangover cure before she quit drinking.

"We're not likely to get a countdown from Clément," Petrovic said to Tar. "As soon as you feel movement, lean back and grab the knobs on your armrests."

Clément took it easy until they were away from Charon's surface and the Link. It didn't take much thrust to achieve escape velocity. Petrovic had heard that a genetically enhanced Columbian could leap into orbit from the surface of Charon with just the strength of their legs. She didn't know if that was true, nor did she intend to put it to the test.

Once they were away from Charon and the Link, Clément let them have it with a sustained five-g acceleration. After a quarter watch, he cut the acceleration to 1.5 g. The Columbians, including Manx, could move around the cabin without difficulty, but if Tar or Sugar needed to hit the head, they'd be out of luck.

The inflated membrane that held them still and squeezed their legs to keep blood from pooling in them retracted. A chime sounded to let them know that they could get out of their seats.

"How you doing, Tar?" she asked, looking at the boy. "You need to pee?"

Tar nodded.

"Manx," she said. "Help Tar go to the head."

Manx made a lazy gesture, pointing in the direction of the toilet, as if Tar just needed directions. Petrovic got up and pulled Tar up out of his seat. The boy was accustomed to one-twentieth of an Earth gravity.

Rather than trying to help Tar walk, she just carried him to the head and sat him on the toilet. She tried to help him pull his sweatpants down, but he insisted that he could do it himself. She looked away to give him some kind of privacy, but she refused to let him close the door. When he was

done, she held him in a standing orientation with her hands under his arms so he could pull up his pants.

“Is this one g?” Tar asked as she carried him back to his seat.

“No,” she said. “This is one point five. Clément is being a dick.”

Dick move or not, they made good time. When Clément cut the acceleration, Petrovic knew he was reorienting the ship for deceleration. They would have a brief interval of weightlessness.

“Tar,” she said. “We’ll be in zero-g for a few minutes. You might want to move around and stretch.”

The boy wriggled out of his seat, laughing. The hull was still invisible to them, and Tar looked as though he were floating in the void. If Tar was afraid, it was a delicious fear. He pushed himself into the middle of the compartment to complete the illusion of total isolation and vulnerability.

“Sugar,” Petrovic said, squeezing Sugar’s hand. When Sugar didn’t respond, Petrovic patted her cheek. Still no response. Sugar snapped awake when Petrovic crushed an alert capsule and held it under Sugar’s nose.

“What?!” Sugar demanded. “Are we there?”

“Not yet,” Anja said. “But I suggest you empty your bladder before we start decelerating.”

“Okay,” Sugar said and tugged at straps holding her wrists in place. Petrovic released the straps and guided Sugar to the toilet.

“Have you ever used a zero-g toilet?” Petrovic said.

“No,” Sugar said. “Is it hard?”

“Dead easy,” she said. “Have a look.”

Petrovic pulled an elongated cup attached to a flexible metal hose from a slot in the wall. Fully clothed, she pantomimed holding the cup in place.

“You don’t need to activate it. The suction will kick in as soon as the collection cup detects liquid.”

“Hmmm…” Sugar said. “Maybe I should just hold it.”

“I wouldn’t,” Petrovic said. “If we hit five g on the way in, and if you’ve got a full bladder, holding it won’t be an option.”

Sugar closed the door to the compartment, and Petrovic turned her attention to Tar. He had located the longest axis across the empty space of the passenger compartment and was launching himself to sail back and forth across it.

Petrovic had trained in zero-g since she was Tar's age. For her, there was nothing fun or exciting about it. Tar had grown up in gravity so weak Petrovic couldn't imagine the slight difference between Plutonian gravity and zero-g amounting to much of a novelty. Tar's glee said otherwise.

Kid, she thought. *If you live through the next few days, you're going to have an interesting life*.

Petrovic turned her attention to Losada. He had not spoken since they left Charon. She could see that he was awake, but he avoided eye contact. She knew she was supposed to say something to him. The days following his transgressions on the lazy-g ring would be formative. She knew there were things she was supposed to say to him to help him come to terms with what he'd done, but she couldn't bring them to mind.

Petrovic was nearly nine years old on the Blackout calendar. Losada couldn't have been much younger. She wondered what kind of charmed life he must have led to receive a perfect string of morally pure assignments. He'd seen combat, but he'd never had to *keep the peace*.

Petrovic returned Losada's sidearm and knife to him before they left the hotel. She couldn't do her job, protect their civilian *bonuses* and maintain a vigil over Losada in the aftermath of his psychic unmaking.

She couldn't do all of that, but she could talk to him. She knew for a fact that there was something she was supposed to say to him. Something she'd been trained to say.

She imagined floating up to him, putting a hand on his forearm and saying, "Mikey, you good?"

But she didn't.

12. Nix

A notification chimed and Petrovic helped Sugar and Tar get situated for a punishing deceleration. Manx emerged from the toilet and sailed back to his seat without a glance at Petrovic.

Once in their seats, they could not see the approaching moon. Clément had reoriented the ship for deceleration, so Nix was behind them. Petrovic interrogated the interface in her seat and got it to rotate the view so that their destination seemed to be in front of them. Having Nix in view made the force of their deceleration feel like acceleration.

“We’re going to crash!” Sugar cried.

“Stay calm,” Petrovic said over an open comm channel. Their passenger compartment was insulated against the sound of the engine. She could feel a vibration and what must have been the force of three gravities, but she didn’t need to use the comm for everyone to hear her. She used it so that she could speak in calm and soothing tones rather than raise her voice to be heard.

“Clément is piloting,” she told them. “You know he’s not going to risk his own skin. He’ll get us there intact.”

Petrovic studied the approaching moon. She was not impressed. It looked more like a potato than a proper planetoid. It wasn’t spherical or even symmetrical. From the outside, it gave very little indication of human habitation. It looked like any one of countless trans-Neptunian objects. Gray, dotted with impact craters and red-brown splotches of organic molecules called…

What were they called?

The face of Mrs. Tholin popped into Petrovic’s mind. The woman sobbed as she embraced her daughter for what Petrovic was sure would be the last time.

Those red-brown molecules that looked like rust-colored mold on Nix and on Charon, the molecules that darkened Charon’s north pole and defined the Mordor Macula, were called tholins.

“Fuck,” Petrovic said.

The crush of deceleration intensified. Clément didn’t use Nix’s gravity to bleed off momentum. He didn’t even insert the ship into orbit around it. Using the ship’s own propulsion, he positioned it at the mouth of a massive tunnel that led into Nix’s interior. The tunnel dwarfed the *Ça ne te regarde pas*. It could accommodate much larger ships, and Petrovic knew that it was the departure of several enormous freighters from Nix in recent days that set off the panicked exodus from Pluto.

The Nixians had not issued any official explanation regarding the departure of that freighter convoy. Nix didn’t explain its actions. Their technical sophistication was indispensable to humanity’s long-term viability in the Kuiper Belt. They answered to no one.

The Nixians did not announce or even acknowledge their departure, but the increased ship traffic was impossible for Pluto to miss. The timing of the Nixian exodus, so close to perihelion, told the Plutonians everything they needed to know. It was time to leave.

The tunnel opened into an enormous cavern. Massive transports extended from the walls of the chamber, their hulls slotted into openings in the rock walls. Smaller vessels and what Petrovic assumed were remote-piloted tugs and construction drones attended the larger vessels.

The view shifted. The seeming transparency of the ship’s hull faded. Petrovic released her own harness and floated out of her seat. She drew her sidearm, held it at eye level and released it. It drifted toward the deck, but it moved too slowly for Petrovic to describe its motion as falling. She plucked it from the air and put it back in the holster. Nix had the merest suggestion of gravity, not enough to give her inner ear the minimum guidance needed to designate an up and a down.

Petrovic unfastened the elastic netting that held all of their luggage in place and pushed everyone’s packs and bags toward them.

She got a text from Clément. *Cargo exit*.

“Down and out, everybody,” she said. “Losada, take point.”

Losada made his way to a ladder and pushed his pack down the vertical shaft. He followed it down head first.

“Tar,” Petrovic said. “Just like Losada. Push your bag down ahead of you. Head first or feet first.”

Tar followed Losada’s example and went head first. Manx followed without being told, again head first.

“Give them a moment to get clear,” Petrovic said to Sugar, who was happy to put off her entry into the vertical shaft. “Okay, go ahead. Feet first is fine, but don’t touch the ladder with your feet. Just your hands.”

Petrovic gave Sugar a much longer head start than she would have given Manx or Losada, and she still caught up to her in the shaft. Petrovic was used to bodyguard duty, looking after the children, wives, and mistresses of powerful men. The clients themselves always had male bodyguards, but they preferred to entrust their wives, daughters and girlfriends to female soldiers.

Petrovic was used to matching pace with civilians whose minds seemed to be running in slow motion. Even so, the children of wealth and privilege tended to be well-traveled. They rarely needed the level of minute-to-minute guidance that Sugar required in this situation.

By the time Petrovic exited the vertical tube at the bottom of the ship, the cargo bay doors were open and workers in exoskeletons were already unloading the standardized, interlocking cargo modules. Something about their movements agitated Petrovic. The workers moved using a combination of puffs of air from attitude jets and magnetic locks to attach themselves to the metal deck of the cargo bay. Something about the way their arms and legs bent wouldn’t resolve into a sensible picture in Petrovic’s mind.

“Are those robots?” Tar asked.

After Tar supplied that answer, Petrovic could see it. Those metal bodies did not contain human workers.

“They must be remote-piloted drones,” Petrovic said. That was the sensible interpretation, but she knew Tar was right. Their coordination evoked the movements of insects. These were robotic workers. They might be autonomous, or they might be tele-operated. Even if they moved according

to remote guidance, the coordination of their movements told Petrovic that they were not being driven by humans.

The Nixians used AI.

Clément arrived in the cargo bay. Petrovic saw that his long gray coat maintained its shape and proximity to his body rather than billowing out behind him as one would expect in near zero-g.

“Are those robots?” Tar asked Clément.

Petrovic put a hand on Tar’s shoulder and gave him a firm squeeze to remind him not to speak to Clément unless Clément asked him a question.

“Yes,” Clément said. He gestured, and four of the machines approached. He spoke to the robots in a language Petrovic couldn’t identify, and the robots grouped into pairs. The robots in each pair took hold of one another and rearranged themselves into walking sedan chairs.

Petrovic directed Tar into one of the seats, and Sugar positioned herself in the other. The chairs formed a second rib cage around each passenger that held them in place. They provided support to the passenger’s arms and head but left them free to look around and gesture.

Without another word, Clément walked through the ship’s enormous open cargo bay door. There wasn’t enough gravity for Petrovic to walk like that, so Clément must have been wearing magnetic boots. If so, they were slimmer than any magnetic boots Petrovic had ever seen.

The sedan chair robots also gripped the metal deck with magnets in their feet. Petrovic took hold of a textured grip on the side of Tar’s chair. Manx and Losada followed her example and latched onto Sugar’s chair. The group made their way across an enormous warehouse space swarming with robotic workers. Clément walked through orderly lines of robots, and the robots adjusted their course to flow around Clément’s party.

Petrovic watched Losada’s face. Every human culture in the Kuiper Belt expressed disgust at the prospect of making themselves dependent on artificial intelligence, but everybody used computers. Every KB culture defined their notion of artificial intelligence for their own convenience. Some allowed ships to chart their own courses and pilot

themselves. The Columbian military did not tolerate autonomous ships in Pax space.

Everyone used remote-piloted robots for construction work in space. In Pax space, one drone required one human pilot. She'd heard that in the Han portion of the Kuiper Belt, one human operator managed the work of twenty or more worker drones simultaneously. That was too much autonomy for the Pax, but Petrovic imagined that even the Han would balk at this swarm of robotic laborers in the Nixian docks.

Petrovic saw Losada and Manx exchange words. They hadn't used the comms, and she didn't ask them what they were talking about. Petrovic watched Losada for some reaction to the robots, but she couldn't read his expression.

Coming from Columbian families, both Petrovic and Losada had been raised on anti-AI propaganda. Petrovic remembered when she learned the definition of propaganda. She understood the meaning of the word instantly. She'd been looking for a way to describe the stock phrases that her parents and teachers used whenever the topic of AI or the inner system Powers came up.

She could always count on adults to say things like *heathen machines* and *devil minds* whenever they talked about AI. Such discussions always came up in the context of criticizing other human factions over their use of machine intelligence. The level the Pax leadership authorized was the correct amount. More was reckless and irresponsible. Less was timid and needlessly inefficient.

Petrovic understood that she was supposed to feel a certain way when she recited these mandatory phrases. She repeated the words, but she didn't feel anything in particular as she said them. Machines were machines. They didn't want anything. If they didn't do what you wanted them to do, you were using them wrong.

Command knew that Clément was a criminal and that he worked for the Nixians. Did they know the Nixians used autonomous machine workers? *They must know*, she thought. They knew, and they were so committed to maintaining good relations with Nix that they told Petrovic to assist Clément in his predatory schemes.

How did Command expect her to feel about what she'd done on the lazy-g ring hab? How was she supposed to feel about the level of machine autonomy on display here?

Petrovic did not believe Pax propaganda. When the situation called for it, she repeated the approved phrases on the topics of social order, military honor, faith versus secularism, sexual morality and machine intelligence. Everybody recited the familiar shibboleths. Some people said what they needed to say to avoid a hassle. Others got genuinely worked up about those topics. Petrovic was in the former camp. Where was Mikey?

Tar was openly fascinated by the robots, and he didn't share Petrovic's caution about voicing his enthusiasm. Petrovic thought back to the lack of hotel staff at the Anor. The gym and the gift shop had been completely automated. Room service orders arrived on a rolling cart with no human attendant. Did the Plutonians share the Nixian attitude on AI?

While Pluto's oblong orbit passed through Pax space, it was not part of the Pax. Human settlement on Pluto and Charon predated the sphere of solar collectors that enclosed the sun between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter known as the *Curtain*. The human settlement of Pluto predated the Blackout, the Turmoil, or the re-establishment of Columbian power on Galtz.

The Pluters knew how to deal with the Pax, without submitting to it. They all spoke Pax better than Petrovic did, even though it wasn't their native language. They made a lot of subtle consonant sounds in the backs of their throats that Petrovic could not even approximate, and their lips and tongues maintained a tension that emphasized terminal consonants that native Pax speakers often omitted. Words like *ship* or *kit* became two-syllable words when Pluters said them aloud.

The Pluters thought they were better than Pax Spinners. They communicated it with every gesture, with the way they looked down their noses at *spin hab dwarves* like Petrovic. Not only do they think they're better than everyone else, they tolerate AI. Is that why so few Plutonian refugees found open doors even in the low-gravity

settlements on rocks like Haumea or Orcus? Even Pluters with money?

Could the Pluters flout Pax prohibitions on the use of machine intelligence because of their proximity to Nix? If Clément's actions were any guide, the Nixians regarded the Plutonians as a resource to be mined. As cattle. Was Clément a Nixian or just an agent of Nix? Petrovic assumed he was Martian based on his accent and mannerisms.

Clément led them into a transport pod. The doors closed behind them and the pod accelerated along a track. It had windows on all sides, and she saw smooth rock speed past them on both sides until the tunnel opened up on the starboard side of the module. As the rock face slid past them, she felt the increasing tug of gravity.

The stone tunnel continued to fly past the module on the opposite side, the side by which they'd entered the module. The other side looked onto a great cylindrical expanse filled with greenery, lakes and rivers, and elegant, low-density clusters of buildings. The interior landscape slowed relative to their transport as the gravity increased.

The doors slid open. The walkway outside the open doors was stationary relative to the floor of the transport module. The rock wall on the opposite side of the module flew past. The transport module had accelerated to match the spin of the cylindrical habitat inside Nix. Petrovic held onto a support and took deep breaths. Losada did the same. Manx swayed on his feet for a moment but then acclimated to the new gravity.

Petrovic looked at Sugar who had a glazed look. Tar was alert, but his arms and legs were pinned to his sedan chair under their own weight.

"Whoa," Manx said as he stepped onto the platform. "This is the real shit."

Petrovic felt it too when she took her first steps outside the transport module. This was more than one g. The original Columbia habitat's gravity was one point two times Earth gravity. This Nixian spin habitat was the same.

"Hard fucking core," Manx said. "The Nixians ain't Pluters."

"Some are," someone said.

13. Regn

Petrovic located the speaker and could not decide if they were male or female. The spindly robed figure waited on a nearby landing down a short flight of stairs from the transport platform. They had the willowy build of a Plutonian, but they walked with athletic assurance in the robust Columbian gravity.

Clément said something to the tall figure as he passed them and continued down the switchback stairs. Sugar and Tar's walking chairs did not follow Clément. The tall figure stepped onto the passenger platform and spread their arms to gently block access to the stairs they'd just ascended.

"You will be reunited with monsieur Clément in due time," they said. Petrovic strained for any hint as to the speaker's sex. Their crisp consonants and vocal cadence marked them as a Plutonian, but Petrovic still couldn't assign a sex to this person.

"Who are you?" Manx demanded.

"I am Regn," the tall person said. "Some of you have special needs. I will see that you are looked after. Please," Regn said, gesturing to a flight of stairs going up. The two sedan chairs climbed the stairs with a nimble quadrupedal gait.

Manx sprinted up the stairs after Tar and Sugar. He had lived in the darkness of the abandoned Columbia habitat for years. Petrovic understood that he wanted to show off the fact that he was at home in heroic gravity.

Losada used the handrail and walked at a deliberate pace. He had nothing to prove.

Petrovic also used the handrail. She caught the lip of the first stair with the top of her booted toes. She made a conscious effort after that to raise her foot higher than felt natural with each step. Regn walked beside her, not using the railing for support. They let Petrovic set the pace as they climbed.

"Are you using an exoskeleton?" Petrovic asked.

Regn pulled one sleeve up to reveal an expanse of naked forearm. There was no mechanical support. “No need,” Regn said.

Regn wore their wiry gray hair swept back. The mass of hair split into three segments. One went down their back, the other two flowed from behind their ears, over their collarbones, and onto their upper chest.

Regn was like Clément in that they appeared older at first glance than they did upon close inspection. They wore loose robes, but their movements were confident and athletic. The muscles in their neck and forearms rippled under tight, supple skin.

They climbed flight after flight of metal stairs. Petrovic’s pulse ticked up, but she could, quite literally, climb stairs in one g all day. She moved a lot of air in and out of her lungs, but she could still carry on a spoken conversation.

“Where are we going?” Petrovic said.

“That’s not really what you want to know, is it?” Regn said.

“Are you a man or a woman?” Petrovic asked.

“Better,” Regn said. “I will answer in a moment, but before I do, tell me how it feels not to know.”

“It’s awkward,” Petrovic said.

“How so?”

“I don’t know,” Petrovic said. “It’s just one of the first things I want to know about someone.”

“*One* of the first?” Regn said.

“If someone is pointing a gun at me, that’s more important than figuring out if they’re a man or a woman,” Petrovic said.

“But once you determine that a stranger isn’t trying to kill you, your next priority is to determine whether they are male or female?”

“That’s right,” Petrovic said.

“Why?” Regn asked.

“So I know who I’m dealing with,” Petrovic said.

“And how to deal with them?” Regn asked.

“That’s right.”

“Suppose I tell you that I was born male,” Regn said.

“Were you?”

“Suppose I was,” Regn said.

“Okay,” Petrovic said. “I’m supposing. Now what?”

“How will that color our interactions? Will you attempt to seduce me?”

Petrovic laughed.

“I’ll take that as *Not interested*,” Regn said.

“I’m sorry,” Petrovic said. “I didn’t mean…”

“Didn’t mean what?” Regn prompted when Petrovic failed to complete her sentence.

“No offense,” Petrovic said. “That’s all.”

“One more question, and then I will resolve your uncertainty,” Regn said. “Knowing that my appearance and behavior will be the same either way, would you rather hear that I am male or female?”

“Male,” Petrovic said without hesitation, and she didn’t wait for Regn to ask for an explanation. “I’m more comfortable with men. I don’t get normal women. I get men.”

“*Normal* women?” Regn asked.

“Pretty women. Girly women,” Petrovic said. “They spend time and money making themselves attractive to men, and then they pretend that they’re not interested in sex. And they shame women who don’t play their games.”

“Women like you,” Regn said.

Petrovic nodded.

“You say you understand men,” Regn said. “Why do you think men like *girly* women?”

“They look good,” Petrovic said. “I like the way they look in their make-up and pretty clothes. I tried to learn that stuff, but look at me.”

“You felt inauthentic when you tried to make yourself look pretty,” Regn said.

“Are you a shrink?” Petrovic asked, scowling.

“Among other things,” Regn said. “I can help you. All of you. For some, like the woman…”

“Sugar,” Petrovic said.

“Sugar’s need is clear. She needs to be stronger. I can help her grow stronger.”

“Can you help Losada?” Petrovic asked.

“What sort of help do you think he needs?”

“Counseling,” Petrovic said. “Yesterday, Clément put us in an impossible situation, and Mikey… Losada did what he had to do.”

“What was that?”

“Crack the whip,” Petrovic said. “He knocked unarmed civilians around. We were supposed to be conducting an orderly evacuation, but really we were there to help Clément rob people. Losada is a decent guy. He’d never worked with civies. He’d only ever fought armed enemies. He didn’t know the kind of stuff we have to do sometimes.”

“And now that he knows?”

“I took his sidearm from him last night,” Petrovic said.

“You think he is at risk for self-harm,” Regn said.

“Yes.”

“And you? Did you use excess force against unarmed civilians?”

“Fuck yeah, I did,” Petrovic said. “I cut off a guy’s finger.”

“Are you thinking of harming yourself to atone?” Regn said.

“No,” Petrovic said. “But I’m not like Losada. I’m not a good person. That ship left orbit a long time ago. I’m career military. I’m no good for anything else. I’ll do what I have to do to keep my place.”

“But at one time, you were more like Mikey? More idealistic?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Petrovic said. “More naive.”

“How did you get over your own moral injury?” Regn asked.

“*Moral injury*?”

“When you first violated your own moral convictions,” Regn said, “how did you adapt?”

“I drank and fucked myself into oblivion,” Petrovic said.

“And that helped?”

“I didn’t put my sidearm in my mouth,” Petrovic said. “I’m still here.”

“Did you arrive at this solution by yourself?” Regn asked.

“No. Everyone in my squad,” Petrovic said. “We all went on a long bender.”

“Together,” Regn said.

“Yeah,” Petrovic said. “We all went through it at the same time. Misery loves company.”

“Does Mikey have the benefit of company?” Regn asked.

“No,” Petrovic said. “Manx gets off on hurting people, and I’m…”

Regn waited.

“I don’t know what to say to him,” Petrovic concluded. “But you’re a shrink. You can tell him that it wasn’t his fault, that Clément set us up to be the bad guys.”

“Did you tell Mikey that?” Regn said.

“No.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know how,” Petrovic said. “How far are we going? We’ve been climbing these stairs for a fuck of a long time.”

“We can stop whenever you like,” Regn said. “I thought you would enjoy the exertion. Was I wrong?”

Petrovic stopped climbing at the next landing and took stock.

“No,” she said. “You weren’t wrong. I feel good.”

Regn smiled and gestured. The switchback metal stairs rearranged themselves, bringing everyone in their party onto a single level. A door appeared in a wall that Petrovic hadn’t seen before, and Regn swept their arm in a welcoming gesture.

“So?” Petrovic said. “Which is it?”

“I was born female,” Regn said.

14. Adjustments

Sugar luxuriated in a bath of translucent white gel. She was naked, but the gel blurred the details of everything but her face, which barely broke the surface of the gel.

“Are you comfortable?” Regn asked Sugar.

“This feels amazing,” Sugar said.

“I’m glad,” Regn said. “You’re going to sleep now. When you wake, you will be better able to move around in our gravity.”

“Mmmmm…” Sugar said, her eyelids drooping.

Tar was already asleep in the next tank. He’d refused to remove his underwear, and when Petrovic started to insist, Regn said he was welcome to wear his thin briefs into the bath. Tar, a Pluto native, would need more time and intervention to get him up and walking in this environment.

“Mr. Manx,” Regn said. “You’re already quite at ease in our gravity. Clément reports that you have performed your duties with great enthusiasm. He has authorized me to remove your control collar.”

“Fuck, yeah!” Manx said. “That’s what I’m talking about.”

Regn took the collar in both hands and pulled it into two half rings. It came apart easily.

Manx rubbed his neck then jumped in circles, pumping his limbs. “Fuckin’ A, right!” he yelled. He locked eyes with Petrovic. “Ooo, this is gonna be fun.”

“Doesn’t change a thing between me and you,” Petrovic told him.

“Think so?” he said. “Wanna wrestle?”

“Later,” Petrovic told him.

“Ms. Petrovic,” Regn said.

“Just *Petrovic* is fine,” Petrovic said.

Regn gestured toward a door. “Just down that corridor, you will find a space where you may relax and take nourishment,” Regn said. “Please escort Mr. Manx. Mr. Losada will join you presently.”

Good, Petrovic thought. *Help Mikey out*.

When Petrovic imagined how the Nixians lived, something she rarely did, she envisioned white corridors with rounded contours and suffused with indirect lighting. The corridor she and Manx followed to the lounge was paneled in what looked like dark wood. Carpet with ornate patterns woven into it covered the floor. Framed paintings of landscapes, still lifes and portraits of people in historical costumes adorned the walls. Light came from lamps ensconced in the wood-paneled walls.

They turned right into a large room appointed in the same style. A buffet table against one wall beckoned with enticing aromas of cooked meats. Manx pushed past her and made for the buffet. Petrovic tripped him from behind. He went down hard, but the carpet and his long experience with enhanced Columbian gravity allowed him to escape injury.

“You fucking cunt!” He turned over, sat up and saw that Petrovic was undoing the top of her tactical uniform.

“What are you going to do about it?” She discarded her long-sleeved top and pulled her tight tank top over her head. He tackled her while she had her arms raised. She wrapped her legs around his torso before they hit the floor. Lying on her back, she made no effort to free her forearms from the tank top. She acted as if her hands were bound and kept her arms above her head.

“Shoulda waited till I had my pants off,” Petrovic told him. “What are you going to do now, idiot?”

He slapped her across the face, and she whipped her head back to glare at him. “That’s all?” she said. “Weak.”

He took her by the throat and hauled her to her feet. She clutched her tank top with both hands, committing to the idea that her hands were bound. He spun her around and reached for her belt. She pretended to struggle, but they both knew she wanted her pants off as much as he did. She dropped the pretense of resistance.

“C’mon, fucker,” she said. “Get it in me.”

They were dressed and had plates piled high with brisket and pulled pork by the time Regn and Losada joined them in the lounge.

The room had a floor-to-ceiling window that looked out onto the vast interior of the rotating cylinder. Petrovic could see people in the distance. They were tiny, but there were a lot of them. Some moving, others lingering in park-like spaces or sitting at *outdoor* tables in public plazas.

Petrovic stood in front of the window and ate pulled pork with her fingers as she took in the landscape. Unlike most cylindrical habitats she'd visited, this one had structures that extended across the expanse of the cylinder, forming a bridge that linked one side of the barrel structure to the other.

There were clusters of two- and three-story structures as well, and plenty of open land and forests separated by roads, lakes and rivers. Multiple small suns blazed in the middle of the cylinder.

Regn came and stood beside Petrovic.

"This is delicious," Petrovic said. "This is real meat, isn't it?"

"Yes," Regn said without elaboration.

"I see a lot of people," Petrovic said.

"In theory," Regn said. "This cylinder alone could sustain a hundred million inhabitants. I believe we have fewer than twenty million between the two habitats on Nix."

"You're cutting it pretty close, aren't you?" Petrovic said.

"Cutting what close?" Regn said.

"The evacuation. Perihelion is just a couple of days away."

"We are not participating in the evacuation," Regn said.

"What?" Petrovic said. "I thought that's what started the panic; the Nixians bugging out for Columbia."

"In conjunction with your government, we are in the process of rehabilitating some of the industrial facilities on Columbia," Regn said. "We have positioned some personnel there, but we are not relocating our entire population."

"You've been moving big cargo carriers in and out of here for weeks," Petrovic said. "The Pluters thought you were bugging out. That's why they're scrambling to get out of the system."

"The timing of our movements bears no relationship to the position of the Pluto system in its orbit," Regn said. "If

the people of Pluto assumed a causal connection between the approaching perihelion and the movements of our cargo vessels, they have extrapolated to an unwarranted conclusion."

"'If'?" Petrovic said. "What do you mean *if*? You *know* they're trying to evacuate because they think the Nixians have some inside information and are getting out."

"They are mistaken," Regn said.

"You could tell them that," Petrovic said.

"I don't manage relations with the Plutonians," Regn said.

"Clément is using the panic to rob and exploit people," Petrovic said.

"As are you," Regn said.

"Not by choice," Petrovic said. "Clément furloughed us from the Galtz militia. Columbian intelligence knows he's a criminal, and they told me not to interfere with his business."

"So," Regn said. "You have no agency?"

"What are you talking about?"

"You have assaulted civilians. You have participated in seizing their property and coercing them into accepting indentured servitude in exchange for passage," Regn said. "What is your level of agency and culpability?"

"Look," Petrovic said, lowering her voice so as not to be overheard. "I've got my coping mechanisms down. Mikey's the one who needs talking to about this stuff."

"You may counsel him if you wish," Regn said. "I have medicated him so that his negative emotions will not compromise his cognitive process or impair his ability to complete his assigned tasks."

"You *drugged* him?"

"Not my preferred phrasing," Regn said. "But, yes."

"What did you give him?" Petrovic asked.

"A psychedelic dissociative," Regn answered.

"What does that mean?"

"It means he will feel detached from his body, his emotions, his thoughts," Regn said.

"For how long?" Petrovic said.

“A few hours. I supplied him with enough to last several days,” Regn said.

“Will he be able to work?” Petrovic asked.

“Oh, yes,” Regn replied. “In fact his sensory acuity, reaction time and cognitive processes will likely improve while the medication remains in effect.”

“He just won’t feel his emotions?” Petrovic said.

“He will be aware of his emotional responses,” Regn said. “But he will not be overwhelmed by them. Would you like to try the medication for yourself?”

“Maybe,” Petrovic said.

Petrovic swore off all recreational drugs when she stopped drinking. Total abstinence was easier for her than moderation. In exchange for total sobriety, she allowed herself full indulgence of her sexual cravings.

“You say this drug is a psychedelic?” Petrovic said.

“Correct,” Regn replied.

“Does it cause hallucinations?”

“It can, at high enough doses,” Regn said. “But, taken as directed, the psychoactive effects will be mild to nonexistent.”

“What about judgment?” Petrovic said. “Does it impair judgment?”

“That’s an interesting question,” Regn said. “If you make different choices while dissociated, I would not say that it is because your judgment is impaired. You might make different decisions because you are detached from your normal obsessions and emotional compulsions.”

“You’re saying it improves judgment?” Petrovic said.

“No,” Regn said. “Not necessarily. It depends on how you view the role of emotion in cognition. Do you favor an analytical approach, or are you one to listen to what your *gut* tells you?”

“I follow my training,” Petrovic said. “I use my brains where I can, but I’m no genius. When the stakes are high, I follow my gut.”

“If you value your intuition, you may not like the effects of dissociation,” Regn said. “But I must disagree with you on one point. I have extensive experience with the Columbian genetic upgrade project. You are, in several

dimensions, demonstrably more intelligent than most unmodified humans."

"I know I think faster than civilians," Petrovic said. "But I don't feel like I'm smarter than most people. I don't think of smart things to say."

"That is likely a result of your education and developmental environment," Regn said.

"You think I feel like a dumb grunt because I was raised to be a dumb grunt?" Petrovic said.

"Perhaps you identify as a *dumb grunt* because it absolves you of responsibility," Regn said.

Petrovic didn't like that.

"Or maybe my genetics are screwed up," she said. "Maybe I got the horndog upgrade instead of the egghead upgrade."

"The enhanced libido is deliberate," Regn said. "Columbian military command specifically requested it. It results in lots of feral Columbians like your Mr. Manx. They make good subaltern recruits."

"Oh, I know that Command wants male soldiers to plant lots of seeds when they're in the field," Petrovic said. "But I can't do that. Why make women soldiers so horny?"

"Males like the idea of sexually receptive females," Regn said. "Even when that trait is maladaptive."

"*Receptive?* Shit, Regn," Petrovic said. "I *wish* I was just receptive. I can't *not* have sex. I think about it all the time. Other women soldiers aren't like me. They can pretend they don't want sex. I can't do that. I'm not normal. This can't be how I was supposed to be."

"You may be on the far end of the standard distribution," Regn said. "Or your early childhood experiences could have amplified your baseline libidinal impulses. Would you say that your sexual appetites have harmed you?"

"Are you serious?" Petrovic said. "My whole life is messed up. I used to be a sergeant. I got demoted for fucking married officers."

Regn held Petrovic's gaze but said nothing.

"I got pregnant twice," Petrovic said. "My family took my ovaries after my second abortion. They took my ovaries, Regn." She put a hand to the side of her abdomen.

“Your eggs have considerable monetary value,” Regn said. “It makes economic sense to conserve them.”

“They were part of my body,” Petrovic said. “Now they’re in a freezer somewhere. They’ll never let me be a mother.”

“Do you want to bear a child?”

“Not right now,” Petrovic said. “But maybe someday. But my family will never allow it. They wouldn’t trust me to raise a kid. I hate it, but they’re not wrong. I’m a fuck up. I’ve got no business passing my fucked up shit on to some poor kid.”

“There are libido dampening drugs,” Regn said.

“I tried those,” Petrovic said. “They made me sluggish. Dopey. I stopped working out. My diet went to shit. I didn’t feel like me.”

“What if I could design a course of RNA treatments that would remove your sex drive but leave your high level of energy and motivation intact?” Regn said. “Would you want that?”

“No,” Petrovic said. “That woman might have a better career, but she wouldn’t be me.”

“You’d rather be a *fuck up* than have a successful career?” Regn said.

“No,” Petrovic said. “But Anja Petrovic likes to fuck. That woman who’s got her shit together but doesn’t fuck… I don’t want her life. That’s not a good trade. Do you fuck, Regn?”

“I do not,” Regn said. “I used the RNA treatments I mentioned. I have no interest in sexual activity, nor is my body capable of a sexual response.”

“Don’t you miss it?”

“Not in the least,” Regn said.

“Did you have a problem like me?” Petrovic asked.

“Not really,” Regn said. “I merely decided that sex was a distraction and that I’d rather focus my attention elsewhere.”

“Damn,” Petrovic said. “I can’t imagine.”

15. Emergency Orgy

Regn left the lounge, and Petrovic returned to the breakfast table. She'd eaten enough, but, contrary to her customary attitude toward food, she continued eating simply because the food was so delicious. The doors to the lounge slid open, and instead of Regn, Sugar stood in the doorway.

The first thing Petrovic noticed when Sugar joined them for breakfast was that her hickeys were gone. Then she noticed that Sugar was walking in 1.2 g. Sugar was born and raised on the lazy-g ring on the Pluto/Charon Link, but she'd lived in Pluto's negligible gravity as an adult. She shouldn't be able to stand in Columbian gravity, yet here she was filling her plate at the buffet table.

"Damn, Sugar Tits," Manx said. "Look who got the deluxe upgrade package."

"I'm sick of hearing that," Petrovic snapped. "Call her *Sugar*!"

"Or what?" Manx demanded.

"Say *Sugar Tits* again and find out," Petrovic said.

Manx was bigger and stronger than Petrovic, but she had a lifetime of military training and conditioning. She had no doubt that she could put him down even now that he was free of the control collar. Their sexual roleplay, in which she submitted to his physical dominance, required active suspension of disbelief. He was no match for her. She knew it, and she knew that Manx knew it.

"Whatever," Manx said and reached out to put a hand on one of Sugar's breasts. Petrovic watched Sugar's expression. Sugar gave no indication that she objected to Manx asserting his authority to handle her as he pleased. Petrovic did nothing to intervene.

"Damn," Manx said. He put down his fork and kneaded Sugar's breasts with both hands. "They're firm. Total upgrade package. Petrovic, feel these."

"I'm good," Petrovic said.

"She never felt them back on Charon," Sugar said to Manx. "She wouldn't feel the difference."

Sugar put her plate down on the table and stepped close to Petrovic. She held out her right arm for Petrovic to inspect. Up close, Petrovic could see an ornate mesh of clear material encased Sugar's arm.

"Is that an exoskeleton?" Petrovic asked.

"Yes," Sugar said. "It supports me, but Regn says that it provides the minimum help I need. It challenges me so that I keep getting stronger."

Sugar twitched, and Petrovic saw the muscles in Sugar's arm flex.

"Looks like it's stimulating your muscles too," Petrovic said.

"It is," Sugar said. "This feels amazing. Oh, Anja. Thank you for this." Sugar leaned in and kissed Petrovic on the cheek. "Thank you."

Petrovic waved Sugar away. It occurred to her to deny that she'd done anything for her, but they both knew that wasn't true.

"How's Tar?" Petrovic asked.

"He's not ready to move around in this gravity," Sugar said. "Regn moved him to where they're treating the other children."

"What other children?" Petrovic asked.

"I don't know," Sugar said. "I didn't see them. Regn just said that they had other Plutonian children that needed help adapting to this gravity."

"Where are they?" Petrovic demanded.

"I don't know," Sugar said as she sat down at the table with them. "You'd have to ask Regn."

"I will," Petrovic said. She got up and headed for the door. She expected it to slide open as she approached it, but it did not. She looked around for a sensor she could wave her hand in front of to activate the door. She didn't find one. She quelled the impulse to pound on the door.

She was a prisoner.

Petrovic returned to the table and sat down.

She sent a message to Clément. *Orders?*

No reply.

Calm down, Petrovic, she told herself. She looked at Manx. He devoted his full attention to his third helping of

steak and eggs. Sugar sat next to him and ate with more grace, but Petrovic could see that Sugar was just as ravenous as Manx.

Seeing Manx and Sugar sitting side by side, indulging their appetites, Petrovic imagined them having sex. The physical dominance that Manx could only pretend to exert over Petrovic would be a solid reality with Sugar. Petrovic imagined him using his size and strength to control Sugar, and she felt a wave of arousal.

Not now, she told herself, but she imagined Manx taking a fistful of Sugar's hair and forcing her head to his crotch. Petrovic kept her hair too short for Manx to do that to her. She imagined what it would feel like to be in Sugar's place in that situation, and her sexual arousal blossomed.

"Fuck," she said out loud and pushed herself away from the table. She walked to the window and looked out into the vast open space of the Nixian spin habitat. Thoughts of Manx manhandling Sugar gave way to images of Petrovic naked with the four Mongol mercenaries. Erd, the woman, barked orders at her as the three men fucked her in turn.

Where Manx could only pretend to be in physical control of Petrovic, it would be real with the Wandering Comrades. They could be truly dominant over her. Now she was going to have to change her underwear. But she needed to get off first.

Petrovic knew herself. There was no coming back from this level of sexual arousal. She was going to have an orgasm. She considered stepping into the restroom and masturbating in private. That would be the considerate thing to do, for Mikey's sake.

"Sugar," Petrovic said. "Get over here."

"Hmm?" Sugar said, her mouth full.

"Get your hot little body over here," Petrovic said.

Sugar's eyes went wide. She chewed and swallowed, took a quick drink of water and hurried over to Petrovic. She didn't touch Petrovic. She stood within arm's reach and watched Petrovic's face.

"Let's see your tits," Petrovic said. Sugar unbuttoned her blouse and pulled it open. She was not wearing a bra, but

Petrovic could see that the ornate mesh of the second skin encompassed and supported Sugar's breasts.

"Turn around," Petrovic ordered.

"Yes, Anja," Sugar said and turned to face Manx.

Petrovic stepped close to Sugar and cupped her hands over Sugar's breasts from behind. The Nixian support mesh was pliable. It flexed along with Sugar's flesh. Beyond the support from the lattice, Sugar's plump breasts felt remarkably firm. Petrovic was sure they would stand up and hold a pleasing shape without the mesh, even in this robust gravity. She pinched Sugar's nipples and watched Manx's face. Sugar gasped, and the look on Manx's face told Petrovic that she had his full attention.

Manx stood up, his pants stretched over his swelling penis. He rubbed his cock with no hint of self-consciousness, and Petrovic caught movement in her peripheral vision. Mikey disappeared into the toilet and closed the door.

"Good," Petrovic said. She leaned down and bit Sugar's ear lobe. "Panties," she whispered.

"Yes, Anja," Sugar said and pulled her panties down to her ankles and stepped out of them. Still standing behind Sugar, Petrovic ran a hand down the front of Sugar's right thigh and pulled up the pencil skirt of Sugar's business suit. Sugar wasn't wet. Petrovic worked her finger between folds of Sugar's labia and kissed her neck. Sugar yielded to her, and Petrovic's fingers were soon slick.

"Nice," Manx said, stepping closer.

"Remember when I threatened to shock you with the control collar?" Petrovic said to Manx. "Remember how mad you were?"

"I remember," Manx said.

"Take it out on her," Petrovic said and shoved Sugar into Manx.

"Oh, yeah?" Manx said, taking Sugar by the throat.

"Yeah, do her like you'd do me if you could," Petrovic said. She gestured toward a nearby couch.

Sugar stumbled backwards as Manx, still gripping her by the throat, pushed her toward the couch.

Petrovic sat on the couch and pulled off her right boot. She pulled her right leg free of her pants and underwear and slipped her right hand between her legs. “Show her she’s got no choice,” she told him.

Manx grabbed Sugar by her upper arms and lifted her off her feet.

“Get naked, fuckers!” Petrovic demanded. She masturbated with her right hand and slipped her left hand under her uniform top to caress her breasts. Manx put Sugar down and they both stripped out of their clothes.

“Spank that ass!” Petrovic ordered.

Sugar turned around, put her knees on the edge of the couch and her hands on the back.

“Slap that ass, you fucking animal!” she told Manx.

Manx obeyed, and each slap drove a cry from Sugar’s mouth that cascaded through Petrovic’s body as a jolt of pleasure.

“Harder!” Petrovic said. “Pull her hair!”

Manx took a handful of Sugar’s hair and slapped her ass even harder. Sugar squealed with pain and passion.

“Show her she’s helpless!” Petrovic said, and moaned when Manx positioned himself to enter Sugar from behind. “Wreck that pretty little cunt!”

Sugar gasped as Manx penetrated her. Within two strokes, he was all the way inside her. Petrovic slid her one naked leg against their bodies. She caught the first glimmer of her orgasm and pursued it with a vengeance. She moaned and growled as she scrubbed at her own clitoris.

Petrovic knew Manx’s sexual rhythms and could time her orgasm to coincide with his. She listened to his moans and read his movements. “Faster,” she told him. “Don’t hold back!”

Manx had already come once that morning. She knew he could last a very long time in this second round, and that’s not what she wanted. “Faster, you fucking animal!”

Their familiar roleplay put Manx in the dominant position, but he took this role reversal well and obeyed Petrovic’s commands.

“Come with us,” she told Sugar, and Sugar’s moans swelled with hers.

“Oh, fuck!” Sugar cried, her body convulsing. “Oh, stars!”

When Petrovic was sure her own orgasm was past the point of no return, she told Manx, “Shoot, fucker.” Manx thrust hard into Sugar and shivered. He was silent except for his breathing. Petrovic knew that meant he’d climaxed. He always came in silence, no matter how vocal he’d been up to that point.

Petrovic’s orgasm extended and expanded. “Look at me!” she ordered. She plunged her middle finger into her own depths and squeezed her legs together. Her eyes wanted to close, but she kept them open and locked with Sugar’s. She couldn’t move her hand now. It was caught between her own clenched thighs, but her orgasm crashed over her with unstoppable momentum.

“Impressive,” Regn said from the open doorway. Had Petrovic known Regn was there? She couldn’t be bothered to interrogate her memories. She relaxed and enjoyed the sensation of her ebbing orgasm. Her stress meter reset to baseline.

“Get dressed,” she told Manx and Sugar. She reached down to pull off her left boot so she could slip out of her pants and soaked underwear.

“We’re done,” she said to Losada in a raised voice. “You can come out now.”

She wondered if Losada took care of himself in the privacy of the toilet or if he just retreated in there to spare himself the spectacle of Petrovic’s emergency orgy.

Petrovic carried her underwear to the corner of the room where she, Losada and Manx had deposited their packs. She fished out a clean pair of underwear and draped the old pair over the top of her pack to dry.

She didn’t slip into the clean pair right away. She walked over to towering Regn and faced them, naked from the waist down.

“You like to watch?” Petrovic said. “How was it?”

“I don’t feel aroused, if that’s what you mean,” Regn said.

“So,” Petrovic said, “that was like, what? Watching people work out for you?”

“More like watching people dance, I would say,” Regn told her.

“Do you like to dance?” Petrovic said.

“No,” Regn said. “I danced as a child, but not for pleasure. It was a discipline that my parents imposed on me. But I can take vicarious pleasure in watching other people dance if they seem to be enjoying themselves.”

“Yeah,” Petrovic said. “So what did you think of our dance?”

“You did not seem to enjoy yourself,” Regn said.

“Then you’re way out of touch,” Petrovic said. “I came hard.”

“No doubt,” Regn said. “But it looked like an involuntary action from my detached perspective.”

“I didn’t plan it,” Petrovic said. “But it felt great.”

“Could you have stopped?” Regn said.

“What?”

“When all three of you were on the couch, could you have stopped and done something else? Did you have a choice at that point?”

“If armed gunmen had burst through that door,” Petrovic said, “I could have stopped to deal with the situation.”

“But barring a threat to your life…”

“Barring an actual threat, why would I not want to get off?” Petrovic said.

“To demonstrate self-control.”

“Oh,” Petrovic said. “I get you. No. I don’t have that kind of self-control. Stress makes me horny. When it builds up, I can’t hold back. Hey, would you please acknowledge that I’m standing in front of you half naked?”

“Anja,” Regn said, putting one knee to the carpet and leaning forward to inspect Petrovic. “I can see your genitals. They are engorged.”

“Thank you,” Petrovic said and put on her clean underwear. “Now, where’s Tar?”

16. Tanked

Regn led Petrovic, Losada, Sugar and Manx through a series of corridors that looked more like the sterile, high-tech setting that Petrovic first expected than the wood-paneled rooms they'd seen so far. The floors of some of the longer corridors must have carried them forward to speed their passage, but Petrovic couldn't see where the conveyance began and ended. There was no abrupt change like she would expect when stepping off a moving walkway.

Regn instructed them to bring their luggage and all of their possessions. They'd spent one sleep cycle in the lounge. The couches were long and comfortable enough for sleeping, but the space was clearly not meant for long-term accommodation.

They entered a long bay filled with vertical tubes. Most of the tubes were empty, but some, near the far end of the long space, were full of a nearly clear liquid. Each of these held one naked human occupant. A few held adults, but most occupants were children. They looked alive, but they were not wearing any sort of breathing apparatus.

"Are they breathing liquid?" Petrovic asked.

"In broad terms, yes," Regn said. "Obviously, they are unconscious. They are not in any pain, and while they may experience frightening dreams, the experience is no more intense than they would experience in normal REM sleep."

Regn stopped in front of Tar's tube. "Here is Mr. Manx's client."

"How long does he have to stay there?" Petrovic said, looking at Tar's sleeping face and halo of floating black hair.

"We could extract him at any time without complications, but I would recommend that we leave him for a few more days. He will be stronger and more adaptable by then. If we remove him now, he will have more difficulty adjusting to our gravity."

"Leave him in," Manx said. "Let him get strong."

“A few more days?” Petrovic said. “Perihelion is tomorrow. Our contract is for the evacuation of Pluto. That’s over. We should be leaving.”

“I am not familiar with the terms of your employment,” Regn said.

“But we are leaving,” Petrovic said. “Right?”

“That is a question for monsieur Clément,” Regn said.

“What will happen to these other kids?” Petrovic said.

“If you’ll forgive my being blunt,” Regn said. “That is not your concern, but if it sets your mind at ease, I can assure you that these children are not destined for exploitation. Nor will they all be set on the same life path. Each will have opportunities and roles suited to their disposition and talents.”

“Does that mean they’ll be Nixians?” Sugar asked. “Are you adopting them?”

“Not exactly,” Regn said. “Nix is not a family, a corporation, or a nation. Your familiar notions of membership or citizenship do not apply here except as rough analogies.”

“What will happen to Tar?” Sugar said.

“Mr. Manx is Tar’s custodian,” Regn said, gesturing at Manx.

Manx beamed with pride. “My little soldier,” he said. “He’ll be my right-hand man.”

“Great,” Petrovic said. “Manx is basically a slave.”

“The fuck I am!” Manx said.

“You wanna compare pay stubs?” Petrovic said. “Until yesterday, you did what you were told to keep from getting shocked. Now that the collar’s off, you’re working for what? Room and board?”

“And benefits,” Manx said, winking at Sugar.

The situation irritated Petrovic, but she didn’t know exactly what she wanted to happen. She looked from Manx to Sugar to Losada. She saw Losada take a pill before breakfast, so she assumed that he was still medicated against the effects of what Regn called his *moral injury*. He showed no signs of dopiness or impairment. Looking into his eyes, he seemed lucid and alert. But also detached.

Losada turned his head to look at a child in a nearby tube. Petrovic tracked his gaze to see what had captured his attention.

“Oh, shit,” Petrovic said when she recognized the sleeping child’s face. “It’s the Tholin girl.”

“Elfa,” Losada said.

Petrovic didn’t remember ever hearing the girl’s name spoken aloud. Losada spoke to the Tholins before he brought their situation to Petrovic’s attention. He might have heard it then. And he remembered it.

Petrovic turned back to Regn and said, “Clément and some fat Martian woman tricked this girl’s parents into giving her up for adoption.”

Regn raised their eyebrows to indicate they were listening and waiting for Petrovic to make her point.

“They stole this child from her family,” Petrovic said. “Are you okay with that?”

“I doubt that Mr. Clément and Ms. Doré would agree with your characterization of their efforts,” Regn said.

“I’m asking you!” Petrovic said. “Do you approve of kidnapping children? Are you okay with this?”

“This child will have a richer choice of life paths here with us than she would with her parents. Doubtless, they were bound for some ultra-low-gravity settlement.”

“Makemake,” Losada said. “The father had a job offer on Makemake.”

“If she matures on Makemake, her options will be extremely limited,” Regn said. “If she develops here with us, she can go anywhere. She will have access to material support and advanced technology. She will have opportunities unknown to any child raised in a low-gravity Kuiper Belt settlement.”

“And that justifies kidnapping?” Petrovic said.

“An emotionally charged term laden with moral condemnation,” Regn said. “As a matter of courtesy, I do not make moral judgments about the projects of my peers.”

“*Courtesy*? *Projects*?” Petrovic demanded. “This girl’s parents love her. They must be going crazy with worry. This isn’t right!”

“I understand that you disapprove,” Regn said.

“And?” Petrovic said.

“You asked to see Tar. Here he is,” Regn said. “Now, I will show you to your accommodations.”

“We’re not moving in!” Petrovic said.

“I am,” Manx said. “This is way better than what I had going on back on Columbia.”

“What about Tar’s parents?” Petrovic said. “You think you’ll be a better father to him than his real father?”

“Hey,” Manx said. “Pluto’s right there. If Tar wants to look for his folks, he can.”

“Anders,” Petrovic said.

“What?” Manx said, scowling.

“His name is Anders. You don’t even know his name, but you think you can make life decisions for him?”

“Pretty much,” Manx said.

“If you will all follow me,” Regn said and started back the way they came.

“We are not staying here,” Petrovic said.

“You are welcome to wait in the lounge for the rest of your stay,” Regn said. “But you will be more comfortable in the quarters Mr. Clément has arranged for you. May I at least show them to you?”

“Fine,” Petrovic said.

17. Le Ranch des Steppes de Clément

As much as she loved them when she was a child, adult Anja Petrovic understood the absurdity of keeping horses in the Kuiper Belt.

Every square centimeter of a spin habitat was precious and valuable. Petrovic was from Galtz, the habitat the Columbian military command had taken as its new base of operations after the Blackout. A cloud of smaller habitats and ships surrounds Galtz. Some have full gravity. Most have less than 1 g. Many have none at all.

Those are the slums. Kids born and raised without gravity will never set foot on Galtz or any other spin hab in the Pax. Every horse in a military stable means two or three humans who might have enjoyed a place on Galtz live in a low-gravity favela. Command kept hundreds of horses for recreation and ceremonial use.

Petrovic's own family was a blend of Galter and Columbian lines, though her genes were pure Columbian. Her birth mother was a Galter, but her family had purchased both the egg and sperm that combined to form Anja. Her family had more money than Anja's status in the Columbian military establishment would suggest. Enough money for horseback riding lessons when she was a cadet.

They even owned a share of one horse, though they didn't have anywhere to board it. The horse lived in the same stable as all of the horses owned by the high-ranking military families, and Anja rode with the daughters of those families.

After riding lessons, the daughters of the high-ranking military families dismounted and led their horses to Anja. In their minds, Anja, not being one of them, was the help. She unsaddled all the horses, stored the tack, groomed them and put them back in their stalls. She never complained. She loved spending time with horses.

Clément kept horses. He had a stable, but most of his horses ran in a herd on a pasture so large that Petrovic couldn't make out its exact shape and extent.

Petrovic expected to move around inside the Nix habitat on a fixed-course transport. Even the Columbian military, which squandered resources keeping horses and elephants, did not use free-roaming ground transport to move around inside a habitat. Spin habitats were not built to accommodate cars and trucks.

The Nixian spin habitat had a network of roads built into it. This one did anyway. Petrovic understood that there was another spin hab built inside of the potato-shaped chunk of rock and ice called Nix. She had no idea what that other habitat was like. Did it have heroic gravity? Did it have roads? Did it have forests and rivers and grasslands like this one? She didn't know.

Regn piloted the four-wheeled ground vehicle. It had a reinforced canopy structure but no doors or windscreen. Regn and Petrovic sat in front, with Sugar sandwiched between Losada and Manx in the back.

Regn sometimes followed the roads, which were mostly devoid of other vehicles. At other times, they cut across open country. Sometimes they followed worn paths, and other times they rolled over untouched grass, through streams, and over ridges that left everyone floating above their seats for an instant.

Manx whooped after one such jump, and Petrovic put her arm on the seatback and twisted her body to look at the passengers in the back seat. Manx was ecstatic. He had declined to secure his safety harness, and he kept himself in place by gripping the lip of the roof with his right hand. He kept his other hand clamped on Sugar's thigh.

Sugar's facial expression communicated a mixture of excitement and fear. Her shoulder-length hair flowed in the rushing air of the open vehicle. Petrovic imagined what it would feel like at this moment to have hair as long as Sugar's.

Losada took in this novel experience with an inscrutable expression. Alert but seemingly immune to the novel thrill.

Petrovic pointed to a cluster of small structures on the sea of grass. “What are those?”

“Those are portable structures called yurts,” Regn said. “The ranchers who manage Clément’s herd live in them. Or at least they sleep in them. They *live* in the saddle. I believe you met some of them on Charon.”

“The Mongols?” Petrovic asked.

“Yes,” Regn answered. “The Khunttai Nöker.”

“They’re here?” Petrovic asked.

“I assume so,” Regn said. “Some of them, at least.”

They turned onto a gravel road and followed it through open wrought iron gates in a tall stone archway. Inside the stone walls of what Petrovic thought of as a *compound* stood a complex of buildings. The main building was made of stone. It had a round stone tower with a peaked roof to the side of the main entrance. Other buildings were made of stone on the first floor but were a mixture of vertical timbers with some sort of lime or plaster mix between them on the second and third stories. The construction gave the buildings a striped appearance.

The word *lawn* was not in Petrovic’s working vocabulary, but the compound featured a large expanse of manicured grass and flowerbeds. A single horse nibbled on the grass. Petrovic noticed that its bit and bridle hung from its saddle. The horse had only a halter on its head. The halter was attached to stone by a long lead. The horse made slow, placid orbits around the stone as it grazed.

As everyone climbed out of the wheeled vehicle, Petrovic headed toward the horse. Petrovic was much larger now than she was when she rode horses as a child, but even accounting for her own growth, this horse looked smaller than the Arabians and quarter horses she grew up riding. If she mounted it, she thought her feet might reach the ground or nearly so.

The horse’s close-cropped mane stood straight up like the manes on the zebras at the Galtz zoo. Its muzzle looked blunt and squared off compared to the horses she was used to seeing.

Petrovic approached the horse. It glanced up at her approach but kept its nose to the ground. It didn’t object

when she stroked its neck. She bent over and tapped the back of the horse's left front leg just above the hoof, and the horse lifted its hoof and allowed Petrovic to hold its foot off the ground. There was no horseshoe, but the hoof looked to be in good shape. She released her hold, and the horse put its foot back down, shifted its balance and continued grazing.

She turned to find Manx and Sugar staring at her as if she had lifted the horse onto her shoulders and given it a ride around the compound. Losada looked at her with a wry grin on his face. As a Columbian soldier on Galtz, horses were a familiar sight to him. Petrovic, in demonstrating her familiarity with horses, had let her relatively privileged background slip. He snorted when she made eye contact with him. He turned and walked toward the entrance of the main building where Regn stood waiting.

There was another figure at the entrance with Regn. Not as tall, but more massive. A woman. Petrovic smiled when she got close enough to recognize Erdenechimeg, the Mongol woman from the Anor hotel on Charon.

"Erd," Petrovic said, and nodded to the woman.

"Anja," Erd said. "You know horses."

"I've never seen one like that," Anja said. "Is it a horse or a pony?"

"We make no distinction," Erd said. "That is Börte. She is mine."

"You own a horse?" Petrovic said. "A whole horse? Just you?"

"I own many horses," Erd said. "Some will seem more familiar to you than Börte."

"Erdenechimeg," Regn said. "Would you show Anja and her client to their accommodations?"

Erdenechimeg closed her right hand and tapped her fist to the left side of her upper chest.

"Please follow Erdenechimeg," Regn told Petrovic. "A valet will bring your luggage."

Erd led them through an entrance hall and up a wide staircase. The interior of the house surprised Petrovic. It was more rustic and utilitarian on the inside than the exterior led her to expect. She'd worked as a bodyguard to

a wealthy family on Olympus hab. She knew how aristocratic Martians decorated the interiors of their châteaux. This was more like the home of a prosperous rancher than the country estate of some soft seigneur.

Erd led them into a spacious bedroom. It held a large canopied bed, a couch, and a plush chair as well as a hard wooden chair at a writing desk.

"We can bring a bed for your client," Erd told Petrovic. "If you wish it."

"We can share that one," Petrovic said.

"You chose this woman as your bonus?" Erd asked.

"Sort of," Petrovic said. "I tried to help her get on the train to the spaceport in Mordor. Clément caught her and returned her to me. That's when he explained the bonus situation."

"You do not fuck her?" Erd said. Petrovic enjoyed Erd's directness.

"That's complicated," Petrovic said. "Mostly, no."

Erd led Petrovic to a set of double doors that opened onto a balcony. Sugar followed.

"Stars," Sugar said when she saw a nearby village on the banks of a river. "It's gorgeous. Is that part of the estate?"

Erd looked from Sugar to Petrovic.

"Does Clément own all of that too?" Petrovic asked.

"No," Erd said. "The river is Beuvron. The Martians call the village Beuvron-en-Auge. We just call it *the village*."

"Is Batu here?" Petrovic asked.

"Batu is there," Erd said, pointing away from the village and out onto the vast plain of grass. "We live on the steppe, with the horses."

"In the yurts?" Petrovic asked.

"Yes," Erd said. "We say, *ger*."

"Can I stay with you?" Petrovic asked.

"If Clément does not need you here," Erd said.

"Sugar," Petrovic said. "Would you mind staying here by yourself?"

Sugar swept her gaze over the comfortable bedroom.

"I'll manage," Sugar said.

18. Swap Meet

Petrovic knocked on the door to Losada's room.

"What is it?" Losada said when he opened the door.

"Let's take a walk," Petrovic said.

"Why?"

"I'd like to talk to you, and I'd rather be outside," she said, leaving Losada to work out the implied *So Clément won't eavesdrop on our conversation*.

"Give me a minute," Losada said and walked back into his room. He left the door open, but he didn't invite Petrovic to come in. She waited in the hallway. Losada returned wearing a brimmed cap.

"Good call," Petrovic said. "It's bright out there. Let's stop by my room so I can get mine."

Losada followed Petrovic back to her room, and when she left the door open, he followed her inside. Sugar was exploring the clothing in the wardrobe and did not look at Petrovic. She had taken several articles of clothing from a wardrobe and laid them out on the bed. Petrovic recognized the tight-fitting garments meant for horseback riding. She'd worn clothes like that for riding lessons in her youth.

"That was fast," Sugar said to Petrovic over her shoulder. "I didn't expect you back so soon."

Sugar slipped out of her skirt and picked out a pair of black riding pants. She walked across the room to stand in front of a full-length mirror. Petrovic was digging in her pack for a cap like Losada was wearing when she heard Sugar gasp.

"You could have told me we have company," Sugar said.

"What?" Petrovic said. "*Company*? It's just Losada."

"Sorry, Miguel," Sugar said. "I just wasn't expecting you."

"It's fine," Losada told her.

Petrovic didn't say anything to Losada until they were well away from the house. They followed a path around a landscaped pond. Ducks and swans on the surface swam parallel to Petrovic and Losada.

“Miguel,” Petrovic said. “I’ve been thinking a lot about what I did on the lazy-g ring, about what I pushed you to do.”

“Okay,” Losada said.

“I pushed you to do things…” She paused. “I think our assignment on lazy-g was a test. I think we passed. You passed.”

“What kind of test?”

“A test of our willingness to bully civilians,” Petrovic said. “I don’t like doing it, but I’ve done it before. Many times. I don’t know how you got this far without ever having to work crowd control. Maybe Command insulates some of us from the reality of what we do. I don’t know, but I remember how it fucked me up, the first time I…”

Losada declined to fill the silence when Petrovic trailed off.

“But I had people to talk to,” she said. “People who knew what I was going through. I’ve been meaning to talk to you about it, but I’m not good at this stuff.”

She paused to give him a chance to speak. He didn’t.

“I know that Regn gave you meds to keep you on track, but I’m not sure they’re a good idea.”

“You want me to go back to hating myself?” Losada said.

“Maybe,” she said. “Not because I want you to be miserable. I’m just not sure you can get past it without a struggle… without some pain. I don’t know. It just seems like you can’t get over it until you live with it for a while.”

“What do you want, Petrovic?”

“I want to know where you’re at. What you need,” she said.

“You’re lying. You want me to do something. What?” he said without any hint of anger or hostility in his voice. He remained detached. What was the word Regn used? Dissociated.

“I want you to help me get Elfa Tholin back to her parents,” Petrovic said. She realized, only as she said the words aloud, that this was her actual agenda, that giving Mikey a too-late, half-assed pep talk was her way of establishing context. Could Losada read her better than she understood her own motivations? Was it the drugs?

“How?” Losada asked.

“We can each rescue one civilian. I’ve got Sugar, and Manx has Tar. You haven’t chosen anyone. You could tell Clément that you want Elfa for your bonus.”

“Why would I want that?” he said.

“Think about what her parents must be going through right now,” she said.

“They’ll get over it,” he said.

“Will they, though? They think she’s gone to an orphanage on Olympus,” Petrovic said. “Doré let them think they’d get her back eventually. They can’t even start to *get over it* until they understand that Elfa isn’t coming back. They might never give up hope. This could haunt them for the rest of their lives.”

“She’s better off here,” Losada said. “If she goes to Makemake, she’ll be locked out of hab life. She’ll practically be a Floater.”

“But she’ll be with her family. She’ll be with her people.”

Losada shrugged, and they walked in silence for a few moments.

“Erd told me that Clément will probably invite us to join his operation,” Petrovic said.

“Who’s Erd?”

“She’s the woman who was waiting for us when we got here,” Petrovic said. “She’s a mercenary from the Khanate. She lives here and herds animals when she’s not on assignment.”

“She herds animals?”

“Sheep and horses,” Petrovic said. “Erd says there are wolves.”

“Wolves? Why would the Nixians let dangerous animals run loose in their habitats?”

“Who knows? The point is, Clément is probably going to offer to buy out our contracts from Command. I hate Clément, but I wouldn’t mind staying here, riding horses, chasing off wolves. It sounds pretty good to me, but you’ve got family back on Galtz, right?”

“Don’t you?”

“Yeah,” Petrovic said, “but my family kinda sucks. I’m more like an employee or an investment to them than a daughter. I think I’d rather stay here.”

“And you assume I don’t.”

“I don’t know, Miguel,” she said. “I just thought that if you were going back to Galtz, you could take Elfa with you and then send her on to Makemake.”

“Alone? That little girl?”

“Yeah,” Petrovic said. “People do that. You’ve heard the phrase *unaccompanied minor*. It’s a thing.”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“Because I don’t know if I’m going back,” he said. “You see the opportunity here. You think I don’t?”

“You just seem like the kinda guy who wouldn’t want to be away from his family,” Petrovic said. “And while you’re taking Regn’s drugs, you don’t even know what you’re feeling. Don’t you think you should stop taking them and really think about what you want? What you need?”

“You want me to get off the meds so I’ll feel guilty. Then you can use my guilt to make me do what you want me to do,” he said. “You get to feel like the hero for helping the girl, and you get to stay here, ride horses, and not have to think about what you did to me.”

“What I did?” Petrovic said. “I didn’t put us in that situation. That was Clément.”

“Did Clément tell me to take point? Did Clément give me thirty seconds to do what took you twenty minutes on our first stop? Did Clément cut that man’s finger off?” Accusation and anger crept into Losada’s voice. He paused, took a deep breath, exhaled slowly and continued without any hint of emotion. “You did all that, Petrovic. That’s on you.”

“I’m sorry, Mikey,” she said. “I know I fucked up.”

“Oh, it’s *Mikey* now? Now that you need something you can’t order me to do?”

“I’m really sorry, Miguel,” Petrovic said. “You’re right about what happened on the ring. That was a shitty thing to do. But I can’t change that now. All I can do is try to make

the best of the current situation and help get that girl back to her family."

"Then you take her," Losada said.

"I can't," Petrovic said. "I've already claimed Sugar. You're the only one who doesn't have a…"

"A slave?"

"Sugar's not my slave. She doesn't work for me," Petrovic said. "She's a… What did Regn say? A *client*."

"She's your sex slave," Losada said.

"Oh, fuck off, Mikey! She is not my sex slave," Petrovic said, but then she remembered the look on Sugar's face at breakfast when Petrovic ordered Manx and Sugar to fuck. They wanted to do it. They were already lovers. Because Petrovic left Sugar alone with a drunken Manx in the Anor suite while she went to have fun with the Mongols.

"Oh," Petrovic said. "Shit."

"Yeah," Losada said. "Welcome to reality, Anja."

"Fuck," Anja said as the realization sunk in. "But what about Elfa? What about her family?"

"You take Elfa back to her family," Losada said.

"I can't. I've already got…"

"Give Sugar to me," Losada said.

"What?"

"Sugar can be my *client*, and you can claim Elfa and take her back to her family."

"But…" Petrovic said. She didn't want to complete the sentence. She didn't want to admit, *But I want to stay here and ride horses with my new fuck buddies*.

"But then Sugar really would be a…"

"A slave," Losada said. It wasn't a question. "If you trade her for something you want, that makes her property."

"Are you just doing this to make me look at myself?" Petrovic said. "Or do you really want Sugar?"

"I want Sugar," Losada said.

"Why?"

"For the same reason Manx wants her. I can be honest about what I want. I want Sugar, and I don't want Manx to ever touch her again. Give her to me, and you can take the Tholin girl."

"Elfa," Petrovic said.

“Give me Sugar, and you can go back to Galtz and take Elfa with you.”

19. Honeypot

Petrovic did not follow Losada back to the house. She stared at the pond so long that the ducks and swans decided she wasn't going to feed them and paddled away. She wandered without a conscious destination as Losada's accusations echoed in her mind. The smell of sawdust, hay and horses brought her out of her trance of self-accusation. Without meaning to, she'd found her way to the stable.

She stepped inside and moved along the stall aisle until her eyes adjusted and she could see the horses in their stalls. The horses looked more familiar to her than Erdenechimeg's compact horse. She did not know the names of the Martian horse breeds, but she understood that she was seeing a mixture of saddle and draft horses.

The horse in the next stall thrust its head over the top of the stall door and looked at Petrovic. She thought the horse was black at first, but as she approached she could see that it was a deep shade of brown.

"Sorry," Petrovic said. "I don't have any food for you."

She approached the horse and moved her hand slowly toward its neck. The horse could have easily retreated into the stall and out of Petrovic's reach. Instead, it pressed into her touch, and she brought her other hand to the horse's forehead.

"He likes you," a female voice said. It was Erdenechimeg. She approached the stall with a halter and handed it to Petrovic. Acting on muscle memory, Petrovic slipped the halter onto the horse's head and secured it.

Erd opened the stall door, and Petrovic led the horse out into the aisle.

"This is Zephyr," Erd said. "He will be yours if you stay with us."

Erd showed Petrovic how to saddle Zephyr. The saddle was bigger than the ones Petrovic remembered using. It was a Western saddle, a *cowboy* saddle, as her riding instructor called them. Her instructor did not approve of trail riding or rodeo competitions.

Erd took Petrovic on a horseback tour of Clément's compound and then to the nearby village. The village streets were wide enough for wheeled vehicles even larger than the one Regn drove to bring Petrovic's group to Clément's ranch, but the only traffic consisted of people on foot, on horseback or in horse-drawn carts and carriages.

The people they passed in the village greeted them in Martian French, the closest thing Petrovic had to a second language. In addition to working as a bodyguard to a wealthy Martian family, she'd done three months in the garrison on Olympus, the center of Martian culture in the Kuiper Belt. Petrovic hated the half-assed Martian gravity, but she loved everything else about the place.

She was still drinking in those days. That led to some poor decisions, but it also placed her in bars and at parties outside the garrison. Without intending to learn the language, she'd started to recognize words and phrases. She never achieved conversational fluency, but she learned enough to keep herself fed, drunk and laid when she was away from the barracks.

Most Martians spoke Pax, so Petrovic had never really needed to learn the local language. Without any pressure on her to learn it, she listened and spoke for the pleasure of it. She loved the sound of the language. She loved the way it felt in her mouth.

If she stayed here, she would really learn it.

The Beuvron river cut through the center of the village and under three stone and timber bridges. Petrovic wondered briefly how a river could flow on a spin habitat. Where did it flow from and to? She asked Erd, who didn't know. After touring the village on both sides of the Beuvron, Erd led them out into the grasslands, which Erd called *the steppe*.

The green blanket of grass rolled off into the distance and then curved overhead. It didn't extend all the way around the interior of the cylinder. Directly overhead, on the opposite side of the habitat from Clément's base of operations, was an enormous lake with several towns and villages along its shores.

Erd said the blue of the lake overhead was like a sky. Petrovic wasn't much of a gamer. She didn't enjoy simulated environments, but she'd experienced historical simulations set on Earth as part of her military training. She knew what Erd meant by *sky*, but she didn't romanticize the idea. The fact that when you looked up on a planet you saw a vast blue emptiness instead of the far side of the habitat was a disorienting stimulus to tune out so you could focus on the tactical aspects of the simulation.

Petrovic was a Galtz-born Columbian. That made her a Spinner. Spinners were adapted to life in rotating cylindrical habitats. They didn't long for the skies of lost Earth.

Once they were away from the village and off the road, Erd urged her little horse to a canter. Zephyr matched the pace without any urging from Petrovic. They cantered for several seconds before Petrovic gave Zephyr permission to open up into a full gallop. Erd's horse, with its shorter legs, couldn't keep up.

Petrovic's cap flew off of her head, and she looked back to see Erd lean hard in her saddle and snatch the lost cap from the ground. Facing forward again, Petrovic felt the wind in her face. If she stayed, she would grow her hair.

They followed the river until they reached the cluster of round, white structures that Regn identified as yurts. A large brown and black dog met them before they reached the camp. It had a long coat and light brown patches above its eyes. The dog barked at Petrovic until Erd assured it that all was well.

Petrovic had expected to see horses like Erd's. And sheep. She did not expect camels. Erd explained that the shaggy, two-humped animals pulled their carts when they moved camp, something they did four times a year.

"That's not very often," Petrovic said. "Why not just build permanent structures at each location?"

Erd scowled, and then her face lit up with understanding. "We move four times each Earth year," Erd said. "I think that would be ten or eleven times in a Pax year."

That made more sense to Petrovic.

They dismounted, and to Petrovic's surprise, Erd took the saddle from her horse's back. She brushed the horse quickly, and released it to wander and graze.

"Clément will meet with you in the morning," Erd said. "You can stay here with us tonight."

Erd carried her saddle to one of the round white structures. "Bring your saddle into the ger," she told Petrovic. "It will rain tonight."

"Really?" Petrovic knew that, before the Blackout and the ensuing Turmoil, some Kuiper Belt habitats simulated particular Earth biomes and functioned as wildlife preserves. Rain and other weather events still occurred on those habitats, even though human refugees from Columbia had overwhelmed all of those constructed wilderness habitats generations ago.

"Is this habitat some kind of game preserve?" Petrovic asked as she stepped through the open door of the yurt.

"I don't think so," Erd said. "There is another habitat inside Nix. The human population there is more…" Erd paused while she searched for the right word in Pax. "More dense. More like most spin habitats."

"And this one? Is this habitat for upper class Nixians? For the rich?" Petrovic asked.

Erd placed her saddle on a stand and had Petrovic place hers on the floor near the door. Then she removed her boots and put them in a wooden cubby near the door. She laid out a pair of soft slippers for Petrovic. Anja pulled off her boots and left them by the door.

"I don't understand much about Nix," Erd said. "I have been here three years. Earth years. I believe that Clément is the master here in Auge. I don't know if that makes him rich or powerful among the Nixians. Everyone here, except for us, is from Olympus."

"Is Clément Nixian or Martian?" Petrovic asked.

"I don't know," Erd said.

"Columbian intelligence thinks he's an agent of the Nixians," Petrovic said. "Now? I don't know. Maybe he's the King of Nix."

Erd laughed. "I don't think Nix has a King or a Khan. I don't know. I follow Clément's orders, go where he sends

me, and I get to live here on the steppe with the Khunttai Nöker. That's all I know."

"That sounds pretty good," Petrovic said. "Did Clément tell you to recruit me?"

"Yes," Erd said.

"You're doing a great job," Petrovic said.

"Good," Erd said. "But we have barely begun."

"I take it there will be food and sex?" Petrovic said.

"Yes," Erd said. "Perhaps even sex, food, sex, food again and more sex."

Petrovic felt a rush of pleasure every time Erd said the word *sex*. She undid her top outer layer and pulled it off. Erd took it from her and laid it on a nearby bed.

"Now?" Petrovic asked.

"Monkh Erdene, Gerel and Batu are out with the flock," Erd said. "They will return for the evening meal. I think you prefer men."

"Normally," Petrovic said. Her heart raced, and she made no effort to hide or stifle her arousal. "But I'll do whatever you tell me to do, Erd. Please, tell me what to do."

"Take off your pants," Erd said. "And the rest of it."

Petrovic obeyed.

20. Decision Point

Petrovic could see her breath in the cold morning air of the ger. That made it hard to get out of bed, but Batu had been up long enough that his residual body heat had faded. And she had to pee. She inhaled the lingering smell of Batu's body in the bedding and pushed back the covers.

Standing up, her inner thighs reminded her that she had not been on a horse in years prior to yesterday's long ride. She'd gone out naked into the cold night to pee. Now, she could hear the sounds of children playing, so she got dressed.

Her tactical uniform was back in Erd's ger. The Khunttai Nöker had given her clothes like theirs. She pulled on her base layer, which was Columbian standard issue, but thereafter, she was all Mongol. She wrapped herself in the long woolen robe they'd given her, tied it closed with a sash and pulled on a pair of leather and fur boots.

The robe, Erd had called it a *deel*, was loose-fitting and could have belonged to one of the men, but she was sure the boots had been made specifically for her. They fit perfectly. She pulled on a sheepskin and fur hat and stepped out into the cold.

Spin habitats tended to develop little microclimates. They weren't a uniform temperature throughout, but Petrovic had never felt air this cold inside a cylindrical spin habitat. The grass, which was green at dusk when the artificial suns in the middle of the habitat dimmed, now had a white coating on it. She bent down to touch the grass and decided that it was sheathed in ice crystals.

"*Khyaruu*," a deep male voice said. She turned and saw Batu approaching with an armload of firewood. "Frost," he translated. Batu, it turned out, had a large Pax vocabulary, but he'd never mastered sentence construction. He'd let Erd translate for him, even during sex.

Petrovic smiled when she saw him. His broad face and perpetual squint appealed to her in a way she'd never

anticipated. He touched his own deel and pointed to Petrovic. “Good,” he said.

Petrovic smiled. She pressed her knees together and did a little dance to let him know that she had to pee. Batu gestured with his head in the direction of what looked like a small ger.

Inside the ger, Petrovic found a toilet. She was expecting a hole in the ground, and there was a deep cavity below the toilet seat rather than water. She braced herself for the sensation of the cold toilet seat against the skin of her thighs and buttocks and was delighted to discover that the rugged Mongolian herders, living according to ancient traditions, allowed themselves the luxury of heated toilet seats.

She returned to Erd’s ger but paused in the middle of the camp to take in the sight and sounds of people and animals. She inhaled and savored the smell of wood smoke from the stove pipes that poked through the canvas roofs of the gers. Steam rose from the nearby river. This could be her daily reality, she realized.

All she had to do was accept Elfa’s parents’ emotional suffering. The girl herself would be fine. She would have opportunities on Nix that neither Pluto nor Makemake could match. And her parents would spend years trying to locate her and bring her home.

Petrovic had never been to Makemake. It was in Pax space now, but Columbia didn’t claim it or extend protection to it. Makemake’s orbit was inclined nearly 30 degrees from the ecliptic plane of the solar system. At present, it wasn’t far off the ecliptic, but over time, it would drift farther from the protection of Pax space and out into the territory of the Floaters.

Worst of all was the gravity. Toners, humans living on trans-Neptunian objects, even the large ones like Makemake or Haumea, could not stand up in one gravity. Columbians despised the weakness and frailty of low-gravity humans. The Mongols shared that prejudice.

Depending on Petrovic’s choice, the Tholin girl, Elfa, could mature in the heroic gravity of Nix or in the feeble Toner gravity of Makemake. One would make her strong.

The other would rob her of that physicality. If she grew up on Makemake, she would be forever limited to life among the Toners.

But she would be with her people.

What did that even mean? *Her people*.

Petrovic's family treated her like an employee. The Columbian military shaped her from before her conception and then punished her for being what they'd made her. Petrovic would never be a Mongol, but she knew she would be much happier here on the steppe near Beuvron-en-Auge than she would be back in the garrison on Galtz or in her own apartment in her family's metropolitan complex.

Petrovic returned to Erd's ger. Erd's horse and Zephyr were both saddled and grazing near the entrance. She stepped inside and found Erd dressed in the same style of uniform that Petrovic was about to change back into. The only article of Mongol clothing she retained was a peaked, sheepskin hat.

"It is time," Erd said. She gestured to the bed where Petrovic's folded uniform lay.

Petrovic slipped out of her leather and fur boots and crossed the ger to the bed. She undid her sash and shed her deel. She looked at Erd and wondered if they had time for one last tumble.

"Tonight," Erd said. Petrovic wasn't hard to read. "Now we must return to Clément."

Petrovic followed Erd's example and wore her sheepskin and fur cap for the ride back to Clément's ranch. Unlike her brimmed uniform cap, the fur cap would not blow off her head when she let Zephyr gallop across the steppe.

Back at Clément's compound, they removed the bridles and left the horses to graze on the manicured grounds. They entered the house through a servant's entrance which led into the kitchen.

The Mongols drank milk tea rather than coffee. Petrovic liked it well enough, but she poured herself a large cup of coffee from an insulated carafe in Clément's kitchen. She usually drank black coffee, but here she added a bit of fresh cream to her cup and enjoyed the silky sensation of the cream as she swallowed.

A woman in an apron pulled hot croissants from a masonry oven with a long-handled wooden paddle. Erd plucked a pastry from the baking sheet, tore it in half and handed half to Petrovic. It was too hot for Petrovic to hold. She shifted it from hand to hand and then dropped it onto the white-tiled countertop. Erd laughed and took a bite from her half of the croissant, which she had no trouble holding in her bare fingers.

Petrovic bent down and blew on the croissant half until it was cool enough to pick up. She took a bite and marveled at the complexity of its texture in her mouth.

“Come,” Erd said and led Petrovic out of the kitchen and into a spacious, sunlit dining room. Clément sat at a small round table near the windows. Losada sat opposite him.

Erd and Petrovic waited near the door to the kitchen while Losada and Clément concluded their meeting. Losada made eye contact with Petrovic as he left, but he did not smile or nod. Erd gestured for Petrovic to join Clément. She approached his table, and he pointed at the chair Losada had just vacated. Petrovic sat down.

Clément refilled his cup with coffee from a small press on the table. He gestured to Erd, and she disappeared back into the kitchen.

“Your assignment is complete,” Clément said. “I will report to your garrison commandant that your service was satisfactory. The escrow wallet has released your payment. I understand that you do not control your own finances.”

“No,” Petrovic said. “My family gives me an allowance, but all of my earnings go into a managed trust.”

“Erd has explained that there is a place for you here,” Clément said.

“Yes,” Petrovic said. She heard movement behind her and turned to see Erd coming back from the kitchen with a fresh press pot of coffee. She set it on the table, took the old pot and left. She touched Petrovic on the shoulder as she passed.

Clément pressed the plunger, compressing the coffee grounds at the bottom of the pot. Petrovic waited for him to ask her a question. He added sugar and cream to his cup

and stirred it slowly. He placed the spoon on the saucer and raised the cup to his lips.

Petrovic said, “Is Mikey staying? Losada, I mean. Is he going to stay here?”

“He is,” Clément said. “There is only the question of his bonus to resolve.”

“He wants Sugar,” Petrovic said.

“He does.”

“That’s fine by me,” Petrovic said. “I don’t want a slave.”

“Nix condemns slavery,” Clément said.

“What about Manx? Is he free to go?” Petrovic said.

“Manx is a convicted felon making restitution through service,” Clément said. “He is working in lieu of a sentence of death, so he will serve indefinitely.”

“But he gets a human bonus,” Petrovic said.

“The boy,” Clément said, “is free to return to Pluto.” “Given that he would be returning to state custody, I expect he will stay and take Manx as his mentor.”

“Tar’s an orphan?” Petrovic asked. Clément did not answer. He’d already provided that information.

“Manx is a charismatic personality,” Clément said. “He has much to teach the boy.”

“If I go back to Galtz, can I take the Tholin girl with me?”

“You want me to say *no*,” Clément said. “You want me to take the choice out of your hands.”

“Yes,” Petrovic admitted.

“The decision is yours,” Clément said. “I have no use for a mercenary with a conscience.”

“Fuck,” Petrovic said. She really wanted to stay.

21. The Library

Elfa wanted Aunt Anja to stay with the Tholins in their spacious new home on Makemake, but Petrovic wasn't comfortable around Elfa's parents. Adam Tholin was more than happy to pay for Petrovic to stay in a capsule hotel pod in Makemake's main spaceport while she waited for her transport to depart. She had days to wait.

The Tholins had offered Petrovic a reward for returning their daughter to them, but she had refused it. She allowed them to pay for her passage, and they paid a furlough fee to the garrison on Galtz so that Petrovic could accompany the girl to her new home.

There were no transports that made direct trips from Galtz to Makemake. They had changed ships twice, and one transfer involved waiting several days on a seedy ring habitat that Petrovic had never heard of. This was no journey for an unaccompanied minor.

Elfa spent weeks in the Petrovic family complex on Galtz. The Nixian therapies had worked a miracle. Elfa could walk in the full Earth gravity of Galtz habitat, and Petrovic's family had taken a liking to the girl. They suggested that Elfa stay on Galtz, and they offered all the familiar arguments about how she would have better options in life if she grew up in a full-g environment.

Petrovic did not argue. She contacted the Tholins, told them she had their daughter, and let them make all of the travel arrangements.

Now she was killing time in the Makemake spaceport. She'd told Elfa that she would come by the Tholin family home to say goodbye before she left.

That was a lie.

The girl bore no responsibility for Petrovic's expulsion from paradise. All the same, Petrovic felt no emotional bond with the child. She had worked as a bodyguard for the daughters of wealthy families, and that's how she related to Elfa Tholin. She was laser-focused on the girl's safety and

welfare on their journey, but she formed no emotional attachment.

She wasn't good at goodbyes. The last thing she'd said to Sugar was, "You're with Mikey now." She never saw Erd again after the Mongol woman had touched her shoulder in Clément's dining room.

There was little for Petrovic to do while she waited for her transport to depart. The wispy Toner men were not to her liking. There were spaceport bars where crew members from Spinner ships caroused. Petrovic looked for sexual hookups in those bars with some success, but she avoided them now.

Without thinking, she'd ordered a drink. It was close enough to her lips that she could smell the liquor in the glass before she realized what she'd done. She put the glass down and walked out.

No more bars.

She didn't like simulations, but with nothing to do, she tried a few horseback riding sims. That was torture with the experience of actual riding still fresh in her memory.

She tried a sex sim and stopped it in disgust. It was a group scenario with multiple men, something she relished in real life, but it was like horseback riding. The simulation only emphasized what she was missing.

It occurred to her to study French. She accessed a free introductory lesson, but it was Earth French. It didn't delight her ear like the French they spoke on Olympus. The exercises bored her. She didn't finish the introductory lesson.

She wondered why anyone would bother learning Earth French. No Kuiper Belt human could ever go to Earth. Then she realized that no human born on a low-gravity rock like Makemake could ever visit Olympus or any other Mars-gravity habitat. For Toners, those habs were as far out of their reach as Earth. For them, Martian French was about as useful as Old Earth French. They might as well study Latin for all the practical use it would be to them. She remembered that the catalog from which she selected her French course also offered Latin.

She left the spaceport and wandered the city. She looked up at a great stone lion perched outside of an imposing building. The building looked like an ancient fortress to Petrovic. It was a library.

Petrovic didn't know if word would get back to Command if she went inside, but her career was in shambles anyway. What could they do? Bust her down to private? That wouldn't change anything other than the rank insignia on her shoulder.

She didn't think her mother could increase the intensity of her withering disapproval. It was already at maximum.

The family wouldn't dare withhold or reduce her allowance. The last thing the Petrovic family wanted to see was what Anja would do when she was desperate for money.

She climbed the stone steps to the imposing library building. Inside, she didn't know where to go. She saw Toners carrying stacks of books to tables and lounge areas. She could see long rows of books on shelves, but she didn't know how they were organized.

She saw a desk with people behind it who answered questions from patrons. Anja approached the desk, and a good-looking young man said something to her in the local dialect.

They spoke Pax on Makemake, but the local dialect was difficult for Petrovic to follow. The man held up one finger, and Petrovic understood that he was asking her to wait. He returned with an older Toner woman.

"May I help you?" the woman said in standard Pax.

"Maybe," Petrovic said. "I've never been to a place like this before."

"Are you looking for anything in particular?" the woman asked her.

"Not really," Petrovic said. "Maybe information on military conflicts? Revolutions, civil wars, anything that Columbian military command might respond to."

"Current events?" the librarian asked. When Petrovic nodded, the woman said, "You can access news feeds in the periodical section, but it's the same information you can find on the local chain."

“Oh,” Petrovic said.

“Do you like to read novels, dear?” the librarian asked.

“I had to read a few when I was in school,” Petrovic said. “But I never read one on my own.”

“Are you in a hurry?” the librarian said.

“I’ve got time,” Petrovic said.

“Then may I suggest you take a few minutes and complete a reading assessment and interest survey?”

Petrovic shrugged. Might as well. The woman led Petrovic to a room so small that it was little more than a closet. It held a desk and a chair.

“Please read the following aloud,” a voice said, and text appeared on the wall in front of Petrovic. She read it aloud. The text was replaced by more text. Petrovic read it and stumbled over a couple of unfamiliar words. That text disappeared and was replaced by sentences that made no sense to her, though they were written in Pax. The words disappeared before she’d read them all.

After the words disappeared, a series of images flashed on the wall where the words had been. The sequence of images was too fast for Anja to make out what she was seeing, though she caught glimpses of naked bodies, food, weapons, animals, and ships.

“Thank you,” the voice said. “A librarian will assist you.”

The older woman led Petrovic to a lounge area and invited her to have a seat in a wide, soft chair. She left Petrovic alone for a few minutes and returned with three books.

“These are reproductions,” the librarian explained. “You are welcome to take them with you. You don’t need to return them.”

“Okay,” Petrovic said. She took out her slate. “What’s the payment address?”

“There is no charge, dear,” the librarian said. “Literature is a public good. If you meet someone who would enjoy these books, you can give them away when you are finished with them. Or keep them if you decide they are special to you.”

Whether she read the books or not, she certainly wouldn’t be taking them back to the barracks on Galtz. She

might be able to keep them in her apartment, but she had no doubt that her mother would discover them.

Petrovic looked at the books. The first one, *Misty of Chincoteague* by Marguerite Henry, featured the image of a horse on the cover. She felt a pang of regret and quickly moved the book to the bottom of the pile.

The next book also had a horse on the cover, though the image was more impressionistic than the cover of the previous book. Petrovic read, "*The Horse Whisperer: A Novel* by Nicholas Evans."

Again, she shuffled the book to the bottom of the pile.

The final book had a pink cover with white text: *The Ethical Slut: A Guide to Infinite Sexual Possibilities: Kuiper Belt edition* - Inspired by the Old Earth classic by Dossie Easton and Janet Hardy.

Petrovic laughed.

"I've been called a slut a million times," Petrovic said. "But never by a computer. Not until today."

"The curator is a narrow mind," the librarian said. "But it is very good at what it does."

"Have you read this?" Petrovic asked.

"Only the back cover," the librarian said.

Petrovic turned the book over. She read aloud, "Slut: noun - a person of any gender who has the courage to lead life according to the radical proposition that sex is nice and pleasure is good for you."

Petrovic laughed again. Of all the people who'd called her a slut over the years, she was sure that none of them had that definition in mind.

Petrovic didn't think of herself as a smart person, but she understood that she had some advantages over baseline Spinners. She read *The Ethical Slut* from cover to cover there in the library. She made no effort to speed through the book, but a few library patrons marveled at the speed at which she turned the pages and her intense, unbroken focus.

When she put the book down, her full bladder jumped to the forefront of her attention. She left the books on the small side table next to her chair and sought out a toilet. When she got back, she gave an amused snort. The pink

book was gone. She had the main points committed to memory. No need to ask the librarian to fabricate a new copy for her.

While reading the book, she realized that it wasn't her voracious sexual appetite that had caused so much turmoil in her life. It was the lies she told and the lies of omission that had scuttled friendships, alienated her family and sabotaged her career. She committed herself to practicing honest and transparent communication on the topic of sex going forward. She wished whoever took the book well, collected the two horse-themed novels and returned to the spaceport.

She ate all of her meals in the same restaurant. It was next door to a gym, and it was the only restaurant in the spaceport that disclosed the caloric and macronutrient content of its menu items.

She started reading *The Horse Whisperer* while she ate. She closed the book when she wiped tears from her face and realized that she'd been crying in public. She finished reading the novel back in her sleeping pod.

Columbian military training did not tolerate self-pity. Even when she was light-minutes away from the garrison on Galtz, Petrovic would not cry for her own loss. But she could cry for the characters in the novel. She sobbed like she had encouraged Sugar to do in the empty train station restaurant in Minth. She wished that she could surrender herself to the embrace of someone bigger and stronger than herself and cry herself out.

Even without a shoulder to cry on, she felt better when her tears ran dry. She left *The Horse Whisperer* in her capsule hotel pod when she left to board her transport.

She read *Misty of Chincoteague* on the first leg of her journey home. Like *The Horse Whisperer*, it took place on Old Earth before the creation of machine intelligence. It told the story of a brother and sister who captured and trained a wild pony. They loved the animal, but they came to realize that she belonged in the wild with her own kind. In the end, they let the pony rejoin her wild herd.

When Anja closed the book, she felt a mixture of bittersweet loss, contentment and gratitude. She wiped

away a single tear and saw that a young boy was staring at her over the top of the seat in front of her.

“You’re reading a book?” the boy asked.

Anja nodded.

“What’s it about?”

“It’s about people who love horses,” she said.

“Are horses real?” the boy said.

“Oh, yes,” Anja said. “They’re real.”

“What happens in the story?”

“Would you like me to read it to you?” Anja said. “We have lots of time.”

The boy nodded and rested his chin on the seat back.

“Okay,” Petrovic said, turning back to the beginning of the book. “Chapter one. Live Cargo!”

“A WILD RINGING NEIGH shrilled up from the hold of the Spanish galleon.”

“What’s a neigh?” the boy said.

“That’s one of the noises that horses make,” Petrovic said. She read on, “It was not the cry of an animal in hunger. It was a terrifying bugle. An alarm call.”

“What’s a bugle?” the boy asked.

“Stop interrupting,” another child’s voice said. A girl.

“A bugle is a musical instrument. It’s very loud.”

When Anja returned to reading, she was so intent on sharing the story with the boy and unseen girl that she didn’t notice the conversations around her dying down as both adults and children tuned in and followed the story.