



Even Lions Have Their Pride



By Ardath Rekha

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1.

Raid

The feel of a hand over my mouth wakes me in an instant. Only the scent of that hand keeps me from going berserk. It's Riddick's. I lie perfectly still, unmoving, not even opening my eyes. Whatever's up, he'll know I'm awake. Now it's time for me to listen, pay attention, and he'll let me know what's happening, as much as he can.

His voice is the barest thread of sound, hardly even a whisper. "Raid in the building."

I open my eyes. It doesn't help, of course. We're in absolute darkness, as usual. Vision isn't the issue yet if there's a raid, though. Not unless we're the targets this time. I focus my attention on the sounds around us.

I can't hear anything unusual at first, but then I begin to pick up what Riddick's much more sensitive hearing has homed in on — cop sounds. They're low and quiet. They almost blend in with the normal sounds... almost. But like Riddick says, nothing else quite sounds like a—

The loud crash directly below me would have made me jump and maybe even scream four years ago. Now it just makes me flinch and my heart lurches. Riddick's pulse doesn't change at all; I can feel it where his chest is pressed against my back.

"Everybody down! Now!" someone roars below. Great. Another damn drug bust. Screams and gunfire erupt.

"Fuck," Riddick mutters, and grabs me around the waist. He's on his feet a moment later and three light steps bring us to the metal desk. Nine days out of ten that desk annoys the fuck out of me — I'm not allowed to put anything on it — but suddenly it's my favorite piece of furniture.

Riddick put it in the center of the flat, two days after we moved in. I can't figure out where he finds those damn things, because it's the same model every time, on every planet. It's not like we take them with us... there's always one waiting on the end of every jaunt. Heavy as fuck — I only *just* got strong enough to budge one a year ago — they're made of steel by some company that has factories on all the Frontiers. Most of the colony planets are barren rocks, so there isn't enough wood or plastic, but there's plenty of metal.

Anyway, all the desks are big-ass things and Riddick gets them every time we settle somewhere. They're our shields. Duck under the desk if it's an attack from above. Pull down the shield over the legwell and you're guarded along the sides, too. Climb on top if it's an attack from below. That's what we do now.

The cold surface slaps against my bare legs as Riddick dumps me onto the desktop. He's on me a moment later, his body pressing mine down. As always, getting between me and the danger. Hot on one side, cold on the other. Damn. Not that I don't appreciate the gallantry, but Sir Shiv-a-Lot is *heavy*.

But I know the drill. Appreciate it a moment later when a stray bullet smashes through the floor, a beam of brilliant white light marking its trajectory and casting the room into bizarre relief.

Bright! They must have the place downstairs lit up like Christmas. More bullets spew through, and more beams of light begin to appear throughout our flat. If they keep this up for long, our floor's gonna look like radioactive Swiss cheese and we're gonna crash through onto their heads.

Assholes. Law and order and collateral damage. Sometimes I hate this planet. I hope the desk squishes someone when it goes down. Of course, they don't know anybody lives up here; officially this apartment is vacant—

Hot breath in my ear. "You okay?"

"I'm good." I can barely breathe with two hundred-plus pounds of ex-con piled on top of me, but hell. I'm still breathing, and that's the important thing. Another bullet blasts through the mattress, tossing sawdust. If I'd still been on it, I'd be dead or permanently sterilized. My abdominal muscles spasm wildly for a moment with the bullet's phantom passage.

"Hurry up and kill 'em all," Riddick mutters. It makes my lungs twitch with an aborted laugh. You have to love it... he doesn't care which side it is that wins; he just wants the shooting to stop so we can go back to sleep.

"What for?" I manage, trying not to wheeze. "I'm getting comfy."

His low chuckle sounds almost guilty and the pressure eases up. Air! Whoo! I kinda like that stuff. His hand moves to my cheek and I press against it. Yeah, yeah, big guy, you're forgiven.

He always is. I never can stay mad at him for long, even on those rare occasions when I can get mad at him at all. Four years ago, he almost left my ass to die in a cave out in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by monsters who thought I should be their dessert. I wasn't even mad at him then, and when he came back for me, I kinda fell in love.

Okay, that is *not* the thing to think about. Not with his body pressing mine down like this. And why the hell am I able to think about sex with bullets flying around?

Riddick must be able to smell it. "You're sick, kid. You need help. I can't believe you're getting turned on by a gunfight."

Oh no fucking *way* am I telling him what really has me turned on! "That's right, man, yeehaaaaa, I just love the smell of gunpowder in the morning. Gets me all hot'n'horny..."

"Shit, Jack!"

"Oh what? Don't tell me screams don't turn *you* on, because I know better."

"Kid, you keep this up, and you're gonna sleep alone from now on."

"Yeah yeah..."

That's the funny thing. We've traveled everywhere, and yet from the first time we curled up together in the skiff — with the exception of a two-week period when the asshole had vanished on me altogether and still won't tell me what happened — we've never slept apart. No matter what woman he's banging, or how much money we have, we always have one bedroom, one bed... and when he's done with his current *thing* for the night, back he comes to it.

I asked him about it once... why we do this arrangement. Not that I mind or anything — except on those nights when I have to stop what I'm doing and stay high-and-definitely-not-dry because he's come home early and God knows I can't do *that* in front of him — but it's... unusual.

He told me, the night I finally asked, that I'm the only person he trusts. He can sleep alone just fine but he likes the company better, and there isn't anyone else in the galaxy he's gonna close his eyes on like that. Just me.

Funny, I feel the same way. Mostly.

"Keep *what* up, exactly?" I suddenly ask him.

"Huh?"

"Well, I mean, if you don't like it when I talk dirty, that's fine, but it's never bothered you before."

"Fine, I won't run out on you. Even if you are a casualty fiend."

"Well, I'm studying to be a blood-sucking freak, but it's not working out too well."

He laughs. "Why not?"

A loud clang rattles the desk.

"Holy FUCK!" I gasp. "Those bastards!" That's it; we're moving *on*. This planet is history.

"You just can't get good neighbors anymore," Riddick quips. "So how come being a blood-sucking freak isn't working?"

Right back into the distractions. Okay, what story should I make up, I wonder. This is a standard game for us.

"I have hemophobia," I mutter after a moment. Riddick lets out a roar of laughter. What the...? It's not *that* good a joke.

Oh. Well... shit.

He's trying to distract himself from — and keep me from noticing — the fact that *he's* got some morning wood.

"You jerk, if you're a casualty fiend too, you could've just said so. Making me feel like some kind of *perv*..." Nice indignant grumble. Points for the convincing acting... extra gold stars for not shifting my position or pressing back against him.

"It was all that talk of blood," he insists. "You know how I love it."

"Hah! I've got your number now! Blood! Bloooooood! Bl-bl-bl-bl—"

Shouts of "Clear!" begin to sound below us.

"Sounds like they're mopping up." Riddick sits up and moves away from me. I pretend not to notice the adjustment he makes as he climbs off of the desk.

"Yeah, about time, too. You'd kept me pinned for much longer and my ribs would've stayed frozen that way..." I sit up and give him a grimace. Anything but the cow-eyed look that's trying to creep over my face. Climbing off of the desk too, I head over to the bed and begin examining the damage to the mattress.

Right where I would have been lying. Jeez. My stomach muscles clench hard.

Riddick puts his hand on my shoulder. "That one was closer than I like."

"Well, at least they weren't after us or anything," I manage. My life keeps trying to flash before my eyes. I keep telling it to fuck off because if there's anything that would *really* make me puke, it's my past.

"No," Riddick agrees. "But you'd still have been dead if—" He breaks off whatever he was going to say. But I know what he's probably thinking.

If he hadn't heard them coming. If he hadn't understood what was going to happen. If he hadn't pulled me out of the path of that bullet moments before it hit.

If he hadn't been here... if he'd let that bimbo from Niko's club take him home with her, and hadn't come back yet.

He would have come back to the place to find me dead or dying.

But he didn't. Every time I've needed him, he's always been here. No matter what. I turn to tell him that, and the words stick in my throat.

Silence fills the room, heavy and charged, as we just... look at each other. Below us I can hear someone being read his Miranda rights. But *we* are the ones arrested. By each other.

Shit, he isn't supposed to look at me like that.

It takes every bit of strength I have, and leaves me feeling like a slug really *has* passed through my belly, but I force myself to look away.

"No big... we pulled through as usual. You ready to catch some more zees?" Nice and offhand. Perfect. Painful as hell, but necessary. Behind me, I hear him sigh.

"Yeah. And tomorrow we start looking for a ticket off this rock, what do you say?"

I lie down on the bed and turn on my customary side. "Sounds like a plan to me."

He climbs in behind me after a moment and puts his arm around my waist, drawing me back against him. I close my eyes and pretend that this is all I want... just to be held.

I can't have more. No matter how much I really want it, I can't. It would ruin everything.

There's no way I'm gonna lose the only real friend I've ever had. Not for something as shitty as love. No way. End of story.

I wish.

2.

Love

Love is shit. Idiot poets and rock stars may sing about it, but I know the truth. It's shit.

So Big Evil, king of the cat-naps behind me, dropped off to sleep again pretty quickly, but I'm still awake. I feel cold and shaky but I'm staying still as I can because if I wake him up, he'll get all *worried* about me. He might try to *comfort* me, and the worst part of all is I might even let him.

Life's a fragile thing; okay, I know this. Tonight's hardly the first time I've ever come this close to dying. Riddick *used* to tell me to suck it up and get over it. And you know what? I miss that, because that sure as hell worked better than that fucking "oh-my-god-I-almost-lost-you" look.

He always holds me close now. I'm getting used to it but I'm not sure how good a thing this is. Not that I'm sure I'd know what to do without it, but...

Fuck, this is a mess. I don't want to be in love. I don't want *him* to be in love with *me*, either. Forgetting the rest of the reasons, it could get one or both of us killed. Anyway, I thought we'd gotten *past* all that crap.

Love is shit. All those vids, where people are looking for it and finally find it... you ever notice how the shows end once they do? Yeah, they end right before the *real* trouble starts. All that hearts-and-flowers crap disguises a poison so vile it'll kill you where you stand.

I know all about love.

This-is-for-your-own-good-so-stop-crying love.

Come-sit-on-Uncle-Wally's-lap-and-pretend-you-don't-feel-his-hands love.

After-everything-I've-done-for-you love, in a thousand varieties. There wasn't a single day she didn't say that. The last time she ever said it to me, I was twelve. She threw me out because my latest stepfather/uncle/whatever liked me too much.

I used to watch my mom get ready for her "dates." She looked like this fairy tale princess and she looked way too young to have a kid my age. That was her stock in trade, so I was dead if I called her "Mom." She was Justine, and if anyone asked, she was my older *sister*.

Maybe she looked like a fairy tale princess, and I know I wished I'd be as beautiful when I grew up, but underneath, she was a witch... no, worse than that, she was one of those monsters straight out of a Grimm story. Cinderella on the outside, but her soul lived in the scummy water under a crumbling bridge, and ate anything dumb enough to try to cross over.

She was thirteen years old when she had me. No idea who my father is. Just some guy, I guess. For the first five years of my life we lived with her parents, and then something happened. I don't remember what. We moved out and I never saw them again. Never had another birthday cake, either, until Riddick surprised me with one.

I had my eyes closed and I could hear him moving around me. No idea what this surprise was gonna be.

"Okay, kid, you can open 'em up."

I blinked, and then blinked again. There was a peach upside-down-cake — my favorite cake in the galaxy — on the table in front of me, and fourteen small candles were burning on it.

"What's this?"

"Happy birthday."

More blinking. "It's not—"

"Yeah, it is. I got it all worked out. Your original birthday was March 12, right—"

"How did you—?" I'd never told him that!

"—and you spent thirty weeks in cryo, on the Hunter-Gratzner and the Sam Spade. That right?"

"Okay, yeah, but—"

"So that means your new birthday is October 8. Today. Happy birthday."

"Jeez, Riddick..." My eyes started to sting. The amount of effort it must have taken him to find that out, and all so he could give me a birthday cake on the right day...

"Make a wish."

I didn't need to. I blew out the candles without hesitation. My wish had already come true.

I still don't know how he found out. I'd never told him any of that shit, but he knows my real name and my birthday and all the shit I left behind. I think he keeps hoping I'll ask him about it. If he thinks I'm

going to ask him about my mother, though, he's crazy.

That day will never come.

Twelve years old, on your own, on the streets, and suddenly *everybody* loves you. Yeah, I know all about love. My friend Trey let me stay with her for a week but then her parents found out and next thing I knew, Social Services wanted to talk to me. Last time they'd gotten involved between me and my mom, once they weren't looking anymore, I couldn't lie on my back for a month. I got the hell out of there and her brother's friend gave me a place to stay.

Gary. I remember him vividly. I even thought I was in love with him. Probably was, too. More proof that love is shit. This time it was "you're-so-beautiful-and-smart-and-just-lie-still-okay?" love.

He was a college guy, all suave and smart. Maybe five or six years younger than my mom. The first week or two nothing happened. Then he and some of his friends had a little party at his place. I was the guest of honor.

I don't really remember much. Lots of booze. These guys telling me how smart and pretty I was while they kept my glass filled. Waking up the next morning, stiff and sore and with a pounding head, and one of them sleeping half on top of me.

Funny thing was I didn't care. Not then, and not for the next four months I lived there. I just drifted. Everybody liked me, nobody screamed at me or smacked me around when I screwed up... sometimes the things they did even felt kind of nice...

Then Gary got busted because the whole time, he'd been taking money from the guys who came over, and selling vids of the things they did with me. Social Services grabbed me by the scruff of the neck and didn't let go this time. I found myself in a "therapy home" the next day.

The first week was hell. Nobody even figured out right away that I was in withdrawal. Yeah, I'd been drifting alright... on a sea of narcotics. I ended up with two therapists, one for addiction issues and one for the rest of my fucked up existence. The addiction therapist had this great big sign on the back of his office that said "I.A.L.A.C." He never tired of telling me that it stood for "I Am Lovable and Capable" and that I needed to believe that about myself.

Hell, I already knew *that* much.

I went along with the therapy, though. Nobody was yelling at me or trying to hit me. The shakes and pains sucked, but they didn't last all that long and everybody kept telling me "you'll be just fine." Whatever. At least they seemed to really believe it.

Ten days after they pulled me out of Gary's place, my mother showed up.

Four months must be a long time or something because my *loving mother* had gotten religion and when they interviewed her, she was some kind of total fucking saint. Oh yeah, she'd been a "bad influence" on me, but in the World According To Sister Justine, I'd gone bad long ago. She'd never been able to control me. And she'd never thrown me out — I'd run away from home.

Yeah, like I'd have left Mister Grizzle and my aquamarine ring behind if I'd had a chance to pack before she locked the door on my face. And where the fuck did they think I'd learned to fake an orgasm, anyway?

The worst beating I ever got was when she caught me playing with Barbie and Ken, making them do all the things she and her "boyfriends" did. At age nine I could fake an orgasm almost as well as she could. Ooh yeah, baby, yeah!

But God had forgiven her. Wouldn't forgive *me* yet, but He'd forgiven Justine. And Imam wondered why I didn't want to pray with him, either. Riddick's got God's number much better.

She'd even brought her pastor with her. Reverend Luke Rubin. And he swore up and down that Justine was saved, she was clean, she'd turned her life around, and now she was a fit mother. If they had any further worries, he wanted to set them at ease — she was living in a home he maintained, for reformed sinners who'd seen God and wanted to live his way.

I remember thinking even then that the man looked familiar. I couldn't think why, though. Not until it was too late and I was back with my loving mother and her Reverend. Then things clicked. Then I realized where I knew him from. Up until I was about eight years old he'd been a regular of Justine's, until she started looking too old for what he wanted. Me though... I was just the right age.

Now I got to experience a whole *new* kind of love. "Love-me-and-obey-me-and-use-your-mouth-just-like-that-and-God-will-love-you-forever" love. Luke taught me how to do things that would have made Gary's knees buckle. Even so, I didn't last long. One minute you're a sinner, the next minute you're a pure lamb, with a man like Luke. Depending, of course, on how well you're obeying his whims. And when I disobeyed, even by accident, he had no problem reminding me what a whore I'd been.

Two months of that love and I had to get out. I couldn't live in his world anymore. Every instinct inside me was screaming I'd die, so I made a break. I decided that nobody was trustworthy — not cops, not Social Services, not “good Samaritans,” *nobody* — so I headed off-planet. Wasn't hard to find a ship where the captain would take my particular kind of currency —

Fuck. I let it happen, let my past come jumping out and grab me. Now I'm gonna puke.

Riddick's arm is heavy and hard to dislodge for a second — he's holding onto me really tightly — but I get him to let go and I head for the bathroom at a run. I can hear him sitting up behind me but I don't care. I'm barely gonna make it.

Fuck! I hate throwing up. I'm still dry-heaving when Riddick's hands come to rest on my shoulders and I let out a miserable groan.

“Still shook up?” His voice is sympathetic. It was easier back when he used to mock me.

I nod. I can't talk about all the shit that got dredged up in my head. I know he understands but it's still too much weakness right now. He'd want me to *lean on him* or something, and I can't.

Not the way it would end up, especially right now. Right now I want to drift, lose myself... the way I used to when I lived with Gary. The way Riddick caught me trying to, two years ago. And dammit, if I did, it'd mean too fucking much to him...

Finally, my stomach is no longer convulsing. Now I just feel completely hollow. I wipe my lips and he helps me climb to my feet. Staggering over to the sink, I grab my toothbrush. My mouth tastes like a goddamn sewer.

He's hovering. Goddammit. I brush my teeth and pretend it doesn't bother me. Does he have to worry so much? Doesn't he see what a great big fucking chink in his armor it creates?

The problem is, I don't think he cares about that.

He's given me five birthday cakes since we teamed up, the last one just a month ago. Every time it happens, I'm a little surprised. *I made it through a whole 'nother year?* Asshole won't tell me when his birthday is, but he insists on making a big deal about mine. We made *too* big a deal out of the last one and look what it got us.

I rinse my mouth out and look up at my face in the mirror, barely visible in the dim light. I look like shit. Bet *he* doesn't think so, though.

His hand on the back of my neck seems uneasy. Like it's one impulse away from fidgeting, fiddling with my hair, kneading my vertebrae. Something. I look up at him in the mirror and our eyes meet and hold.

“You ready for bed?” His voice is soft and carefully innuendo-free. Maybe I'm imagining the longing.

“Yeah, I think so.” The first word comes out as a pained croak but then my voice manages to normalize. I can see him frowning and his hand starts moving, as if he wants to put his fingertips on my throat and soothe it. I shift my position a little and break the contact. Too much. Way too much.

He puts his arm around my waist and turns me back towards the main room. I don't make a fuss.

Four years ago, when he was getting ready to move on after seeing Imam and me to safety, I told him I was moving on, too. I remember the argument we had about it. More than three hours of back and forth before he realized there wasn't anything that was going to make me change my mind.

Once he knew I was serious, and I was moving on with or without him, I made my offer. Hell, what *couldn't* he protect me from, right? And I figured hey, he was male, he'd want what I could give him.

He turned me down. Flat out. Said he'd take me with him, but he wasn't taking that kind of payment. Told me not to offer it again, either. Gotta say I loved him for it, too. Sometimes he pretended we *were* involved, if he caught someone looking at me the wrong way. In situations like that, I really didn't mind him pretending I was his property. His, as he puts it, “private stash.”

But I never have been and I can't change now. Not even if he *is* in love with me. Not even if it's mutual. Not even if I *did* almost die tonight.

We climb back onto the mattress in a weird kind of synchronized movement and curl up together again. He takes a breath like he wants to say something, but then stops. After a moment, one large hand starts moving over my hair.

Don't do this, please. I can't say it aloud, but I think it. *You know what'll happen if things go out of control.*

I close my eyes and swallow against the sudden, bitter taste of impending loss.

I already told you what'll happen, if they ever do again.

Love is shit.

3.

Crocodile

Richard B. Riddick is dead. He's been dead for more than four years now; everybody knows that. He died in the famous Hunter-Gratzner crash. Old history.

Except, of course, that he *isn't* dead. But only three people know that for sure.

Some suspect, of course. The similarities between the legendary Riddick and "Rick Cryer" are pretty interesting ones, but most people just assume that it's deliberate copying. He encourages it, even with his great big indignant act if someone accuses him.

"You think I'm tryin' to be another Riddick? Riddick was a *pussy*! Put me in a room with him and you'd better *know* who'd be walkin' out of there!"

So most people let it slide. After all, the crash is legendary now. All of the salvage crews that went after it lost members to the natives. Most of them didn't go looking for Riddick, either; they went because they wanted Ogilvie's stash.

Yeah, Paris P. Ogilvie's a bigger draw to that planet than Riddick. Our antiquities dealer and entrepreneur, it turns out, was one of the best smugglers of rare artifacts in existence.

You should have seen Riddick's face when I got my boomerang appraised and we discovered it was worth a cool million. I will treasure that look forever. Makes me wish I'd taken the blow-gun too. Oh well, not like we need it now. "Rick Cryer" makes a good living.

His price is going up, too. People like his work. You want somebody dead, and don't want it coming back to bite you on the ass, your best bet is Rick Cryer. It's a fact. Nine times out of ten, the police write the deaths off as accidents, but he always brings back the proof that they weren't. Proof that only his clients ever see, of course. Well, and usually me, too.

I picked out his new name. I'm pretty damn proud of that fact most of the time, too.

Shined eyes are a pain in the ass. The surgery is irreversible and even "normal" light-levels are horrendously painful. In those levels, your eyes sting. Under really bright light, they feel like someone's stuck knives into them. But you can still see. Or he can, anyway.

The man gives new meaning to the word Stoic.

I've seen people try to escape him by going into bright light. He follows them without hesitation. Imagine it: you're cornered, seconds away from death, and you look up at the man who's about to kill you and *tears* are streaming down his face. A lot of people think they can get mercy from him when they see that. They only realize those are crocodile tears when his matching crocodile smile appears. And another one goes down.

So a few months after we started out from Sufi Arabia, he still hadn't settled on what his new name ought to be. He was going through the aliases like nobody's business, but a permanent name? One to build a new professional reputation around? It eluded him. 'Til I noticed all the rumors that had started up about "the Cryer." People who had seen his kills in broad daylight talked about the assassin with the silver eyes and the tears... and I kind of liked it.

"You have gotta be kidding me," he snorted in response when I told him.

"Oh come on, it'd be great!" I was really kind of taken with the idea. "Like one of those old comic book heroes, you know, like Spiderman, Superman—"

"Crybabyman?"

A minute or two later he got worried and thumped my back. I couldn't stop laughing. Tears were running down my face and I could barely breathe.

"Jeez, kid! Look, no superhero names, okay?"

"But... but..."

He chuckled. If I was able to talk, I'd probably live. He sat back as I wiped at my streaming eyes, a huge grin on his face. "But what?"

"It'd be just so cool! You know, *The Cryer*! The ace assassin who mourns your death even as he's killing you—"

"Just how much time do you *spend* reading comics?"

"You don't think it'd work?" I really half thought it could!

"No, I don't think it'd work. I'd have a goofy-ass name and probably some goofy-ass uniform or something."

“Yeah! And the tears thing, that’d be like your *special power!*” God, I was such a geek!

Now Riddick was the one laughing. “Too many X-Men comics, kid! So what would *your* super-hero name be, huh?”

“Uhhhhhh...” That stymied me. What would be a good name for a—

“I got it, we’ll call you...” He deepened his voice dramatically, sounding exactly like a movie announcer for a moment. “...Minor Girl!”

“What?”

He gave me an evil smile. “*Your* power is jailbaiting men into committing illegal acts.”

Dammit. Ever since he caught me trying to charm my way into a free fifth of Stoli...

“Shit, Riddick, lay off! I promised I wouldn’t do it again.” He’d almost committed a free murder that day. I’m still not sure whether he would have killed my target, or *me*.

“Okay. But I’m not gonna be ‘The Cryer.’ You’d make me wear *tights* or something.”

The image of Richard B. Riddick, in *tights*, made me react in several ways. I didn’t know whether to laugh uncontrollably again, or excuse myself for a short trip to the bathroom for some privacy. “Oh come on! You’d look great, and you know the ladies would be lining up to look at your equipment!”

“Fuck! No way, Jack!” Was he blushing? I couldn’t be sure.

“Well, how about just a private show for me, then?” I’d discovered how fun it was to flirt with someone who wouldn’t take you up on what you were offering. It was very liberating.

“Kid, you’ve seen it. Many times. Why do you need to see it in tights, too?”

I *had* seen it, repeatedly. When you travel with a man, and you don’t have much money — and we didn’t, back then — you end up sharing everything. Bed, bathroom, toothbrush, your one-shower-a-day allotment... everything. It was no big deal most of the time, unless Riddick hadn’t managed to hook up with some honey for a while. Then he got weirdly shy with me. But honestly, he was a perfect gentleman about it all, even in the tiniest of shower stalls. Who woulda thought?

“Well, you’ve let me see, but you’ve never let me *touch*,” I mock-grumbled.

Riddick’s eyes went wide, half in genuine shock and half in mock-horror. His voice when he responded, though, was pure theater. “You’d *break* it!”

I gasped and burst into laughter. “Would not!”

“Yes you would! I know your plan now — this is all about breaking my dick!”

I grinned, trying to picture how *anyone* could manage to do *that*, and drawing a blank. “Well shucks, sheriff! You caught me. I’m one of those evil ballbusting twentieth century feminists. I traveled five hundred years forward in time just to get at your dick.”

He snorted with laughter. “Penis envy! I knew it! You know, Freud was right about you women!”

“Was not!”

“Oh yes he was! All you wanna do is get at my dick!”

I gave him a big pout. “Yeah, but you won’t let me.”

“I told you, you’d *break* it.”

“Hah. You *know* that thing’s unbreakable. That could be your *other* superpower. The Dick Of Steel.”

That made him *roar* with laughter. “Kid, I am *not* going the superhero route! No ‘the Cryer,’ no ‘Dick O. Steele...’ Give it up and let it go.”

The name gave me pause. Then I smiled. “What about Cryer as a last name?”

He frowned pensively, considering it. Well, he hadn’t said “no” yet, so I pressed on.

“You could be Rick Cryer.” I grinned. “Stick with your real first name and you don’t have to worry about accidentally answering to your old name when you shouldn’t. You can say you misheard ‘Riddick’ as ‘Rick,’ and you’ll *still* be a Richard.”

“It’s a possibility,” he conceded.

“Plus it’d be really cool. You know, people wanna know who you are, and when you tell them, they *know* you’re the Cryer... you just say ‘Cryer. Rick Cryer’ and they —”

“Oh that’s *it!* No more James Bond movies, no more comic books —”

“What, am I supposed to delve into your porn collection instead?” I snickered at his poleaxed expression.

“Shit, kid, aren’t you supposed to be into horse stories or something?”

Well *hell*. The only horses I’d ever seen in person came in three-packs. But he didn’t want to know about that, I was pretty sure.

Anyway, I more or less won. Richard B. Riddick became Rick Cryer. He actually bought me some books in the *Black Stallion* series but they were just way too alien to me. I tried, but honestly, if horses are

so smart, how come they can't survive on any of the colony worlds?

He always did want me to get to have a normal childhood. I think it really grieves him that it was too late before he ever reached me.

I haven't managed to go back to sleep. Riddick has, but I can't stop thinking. My brain won't shut the hell up. Now I feel... guilty. Like I should have been a better person all this time, somehow. Like I should have managed to have a normal childhood, normal adolescence, just so if I'd died tonight he wouldn't have to feel I'd never had a chance...

Shit.

I'm facing him now, in the loose circle of his arms. At least now he isn't holding onto me so tightly. He looks totally relaxed and at peace. I guess for him it's over. He comes inches from death so often that I think he lives totally in the present; anyway, his sin list is so long by now that there's no point trying to undo anything or think about might-have-beens.

But I wish...

I wish I could have things back the way they were before. When we still laughed and joked... and flirted. The flirtation stopped after *it* happened. Everything changed. Now I can't joke with him about ripping off our clothes and boning away... not when he really *wants* that. Tonight was the first time we managed to make any kind of jokes like those, and I wish I could believe it meant things were getting better. But I saw what was in his eyes.

I wish I could take everything back. Undo all the changes. Or find some way to feel what he needs me to feel.

Maybe if I'd had a normal childhood, things would be different now, and I could give him what he wants from me. Looking at him now, I wish I could. Would it be so hard? I could just... pretend...

More than five years since I last saw Luke but my mind has no trouble conjuring his voice or the feel of his hand on my chin.

"Did you like that?"

"Yes, I loved it."

That superior smile of his. "I could tell. That was real, wasn't it? Good girls really feel what whores only pretend to. And you're a good girl, aren't you? This is love, isn't it?"

My body ached and stung but my smile was Oscar-worthy. "Yes, Luke. I love you."

I close my eyes again and swallow against another bubble of nausea. I can't pretend. I can't lie to Riddick like that.

I can't be a whore again. Not even if I'm *his* whore.

4.

Bait

Sometime before dawn I must have finally managed to fall back asleep, because the room is bright when I wake up. I'm alone and the sun has obviously been up for hours. Riddick did what he usually does when I sleep in, tucking all the pillows and blankets around me. If he were around, I'd joke about him trying to turn me into one of Paris's mummies.

He always answers that joke by reminding me that those sarcophagi were filled with booze.

I frown a little, remembering the miniature King Tut's sarcophagus he put on the table after my birthday dinner. I opened it up and it was full of miniature liquor bottles. My own private Paris stash. Of which I drank entirely, irrevocably too much that night.

Give it a rest.

In broad daylight it's easier to cope with last night's gunfight. I glance around the apartment and notice that Riddick's cleaned the place up. Stray bullets and shredded bits of flooring have all been removed. And he did it all without waking me. Damn.

Usually, if I sleep *that* deeply, there's a surprise waiting for me when I wake up, a reminder of the fact that I've dropped my guard. Doesn't look like he did one today, though. I guess he decided I was feeling too vulnerable already.

Okay, I love him for that, but I wish he wouldn't worry so damn much about me.

I climb out of bed and look around. Something smells nice, so I head over to the kitchen area.

Well *Jeez*, he made me breakfast and left it in the warmer. I pick up the note on the counter.

At Niko's.

Call in the code before you touch the door or windows.

Back soon.

R.

Wow.

We have one of the top-line security systems on the apartment. Okay, it's not *our* apartment; it's one of several dozen safe-houses Niko lets people on his payroll stay in when they're planetside. They're not bad, but as we discovered last night, the neighbors can really suck. Riddick's only ever armed the security system here once before.

I guess this is a *gentle* reminder that my guard dropped so completely.

I shrug and take out the food. Mushroom omelet, bacon, and toast. Orange juice in the fridge. The man would make someone a great wife.

I can't cook for shit, myself. Once a year, I give it a try, and then we have to open all the windows and turn on all the fans to get the smell of burning *whatever* out of the place. I think the only reason he lets me try to cook at all is so he can make fun of me for the next few weeks afterward.

But *damn*, he makes a great omelet. Another of those "who woulda thought?" moments with Richard B. Riddick. Escaped convict. Murderer. Master *chef*. Just imagine the possibilities.

Or don't. Now that I think about it, some of them are kind of gross when you phrase it that way.

This kind of pampering isn't anything overly new. He's always watched out for me, protected me... long before *subtext* appeared.

I finish the omelet and juice and clear my plate, wanting to hit the shower and be dressed before Riddick gets back. There was a time when I didn't care if he walked in on me when I was naked. But back then, he didn't care about what he was looking at. Just another female body, one he was rather fond of guarding, but that was it.

Now his eyes *burn* into me. Now I avoid being naked around him.

He knows it, too. We both know how much has changed between us, but there's no way to undo it.

Riddick doesn't care what temperature the shower water is, but I like it hot. I turn the hot water way up and add just a dash of cold to keep it from raising blisters, strip down, and step in. I love showering. Sometimes I think I'd be perfectly happy to spend my whole life under a rain of warm water. The one time I told Riddick that, he rolled his eyes and started quoting *MacBeth* at me. He's right. There have been a few times, during our acquaintance, when I thought I'd never get clean again.

Riddick's methods of therapy when he catches me Lady MacBething around are extreme but effective. Jerk.

The shower is also where I usually go when I need to have a good cry on my own. Ironical that I keep doing it when he always catches me. The water really doesn't cover bone-shaking sobs too well. But nothing does, I guess.

Today, however, I'm just going to have a normal wash. Last night's events, scary as they were, ranked pretty low on the Trauma Scale. Maybe a four. It takes a seven or higher to make me get crazy in here.

I pour some shampoo into my hand and smile at the scent. The one time I switched away from this kind, Riddick bought me another bottle and made the new brand disappear from our apartment. He likes this scent in my hair, I guess. Never said a word about it, but that little antic of his was a pretty clear message. It wasn't worth fighting over; I'd only tried the other brand because the vid ads looked so interesting.

The shower is making a funny little sound, like the tinkling of crystal and silver and china in a fancy restaurant. Maybe I'm imagining it. It makes me think of the night Riddick and I were out, dining on an overly-lavish expense account because he'd secured his first big-time contract since he got his new name. The night his mark practically climbed into his lap.

The first time he ever used me as bait.

I'd never been in a place like that before. *Lagasse*, named after some twenty-first century chef from New Orleans, exactly the kind of place you'd find in the French Quarter of *New* New Orleans. I was in complete awe of the whole atmosphere, and even more amazed by the way Riddick was able to blend in. It had never occurred to me that he would be one of those men who didn't just look good in a suit, but made the *suit* look good. Where does a man who's spent half his life in prison learn that kind of grace and class?

I just felt awkward. The dress he'd gotten me was gorgeous and probably could have bought a year's groceries for the two of us, and I was terrified I'd get a stain on it. I even had makeup on. There wasn't much I could do about my hair, though. It was only about three inches long, anywhere on my head, so the only thing I'd been able to do was give it a bit of curl and let it sit there. Around me, most of the women had sleek, upswept chignons and elaborate French braids. I looked like a Chia Pet in comparison.

Riddick chuckled when I muttered that observation. "Nah, you look great. C'mon, eat up."

"I have four forks and no food."

At that moment a large bowl of salad miraculously appeared in front of me. I glanced up and saw that a bowl was in front of Riddick as well. The pair of waiters who had pulled this amazing move were already quietly disappearing on us.

"Jeez!" I hissed once they were *hopefully* out of hearing range. "It's the Restaurant On Haunted Hill!"

He chuckled again. "They like to do that. They appear and put down the plates simultaneously. Look to your left."

I turned and watched as six waiters descended upon a party of six at a nearby table. Again, the plates went down in unison, but nobody seemed alarmed, even though I was *sure* the people hadn't seen the waiters coming until the last second.

"Where do they train to do that? Pierre's School For Ninja Waiters?"

He grinned. "Nah, but they do train. That's part of why this restaurant has four stars, kid. Now eat."

I glanced at the array of forks and then looked over to see which one Riddick had picked. Asshole! His hand was poised over the lot of them, waiting... waiting... just *waiting* for me to pick one first. It wasn't like he was going to follow my lead. No sir. He just wanted another chance to laugh at me. Dork.

I felt like we were two gunslingers standing in the middle of a dusty road, for a moment. Hands poised not above guns, but above forks. I scowled at Riddick.

"Draw, pard'ner."

He smirked and selected his weapon of choice. I picked up mine as well and hoped he wasn't going to do the "clean-it-with-your-napkin-and-put-it-back-down-and-choose-the-*right*-fork" routine on me. I waited until he actually had some lettuce speared with it before I did the same.

Now, I still wonder this — salad is salad, right? Lettuce, veggies... how the hell is it so much better at a restaurant like *that*? The salad was damn amazing and I still don't know how they did it.

"Salad fairies, kid," the big dweeb across from me said when I asked him. "Salad fairies. Now eat."

"That would have worked eight years ago, but not now. Dick."

"Rick," he corrected me.

"Crybabyman."

Hah, I got him! He'd just taken a sip of wine and had to spit it back into his glass. Point to Jack B. Badd! Behind those shades of his I wondered what his eyes were doing. Probably sparkling.

There was the salad course and then the soup course and then the main course, and we were halfway through dessert when he stiffened, moving into what I thought of as "alert mode." He only stayed that way for a second and then went back to being unaffected, but it was long enough for me to know something *big* had happened.

"What is it?"

"My mark just came in."

"Here? Wow."

Riddick looked unsurprised, though, and it suddenly occurred to me that the reason he could put a place like this on his expense account was that it was a "hunting ground," somewhere his mark *would* come. I wasn't sure why he'd brought me along, except that Autrichien had smirked at me in a strange way when we were finalizing the arrangements. Whatever that smirk meant, though, was beyond me.

I raised an eyebrow at Riddick.

"François Renault," he replied, understanding my question. "Real estate tycoon who has made more than a few enemies. He owns some of the best riverfront property in New Louisiana and hasn't been..." He quirked his eyebrow back at me. "...receptive enough... to Autrichien's offers. So now he's made a *mortal enemy*."

I grinned with a bloodthirsty eagerness I'd never feel again after that night. "This sounds like a job for The Cryer," I proclaimed.

He smirked and shook his head, and then answered me in equally theatrical tones. "Actually, this is a job for... Minor Girl!"

"Huh?"

He took a moment to finish off his pie before answering. I'd already bolted mine down, it was so good, and had grabbed a passing waiter and asked for a second piece to be boxed up for me. Finally Riddick set down his dessert fork and grinned at me.

"Renault has a very large weakness. Girls. *Young* girls. I think if the right girl winked at him, as he was leaving this place, he'd follow her into any number of dark alleys."

My heart had jumped into my throat. I felt suddenly breathless, a mixture of elation and trepidation overwhelming me. Riddick wanted me to lure his mark to him? Hot damn, I'd hit the big time!

"Okay, what do I need to do?"

He grinned. "I'll settle the check. You go into the ladies' room and get yourself ready. Give him the eye when you leave the restaurant, so he notices you. I'd say *he'll* be leaving in about half an hour. Walk around and window-shop until then, and then be back so he'll see you when he comes out, and lead him to the Trois Soeurs alley a block east of here, between the antique shop and the adult bookstore. I'll do the rest."

I took a deep breath. *I'm ready for this. I'm ready.* "Okay, which one is Renault?"

"He's two tables behind us and one over to your right. Gray hair, brown eyes, pale gray suit. Eating alone. When you come out of the ladies' room you can walk right past him on your way out. Make sure he gets a good look at you and wants to see more."

"On it."

He winked at me and signaled for the check, and I rose to my feet. My legs wanted to be unsteady but I made them behave. Picking Renault out, I reached into my purse and grabbed the little perfume atomizer inside, spritzing a bit onto my wrist. Heady stuff. Sexy. Expensive as hell. I wanted my scent in his nose for the rest of his meal. I wafted past him on the way to the ladies' room, adding an extra sway to my walk. *That's right, mister. The sexiest girl alive just walked past you. Don't you wonder what she looks like from the front?*

I went into the bathroom without a backward glance. Half an hour... I had plenty of time.

Five minutes later I decided that I couldn't look any sexier. It was a good thing I'd already taken out the lip-ring and nose-ring earlier, in preparation for this swanky meal. I loved them, but I suspected Renault would have found them a turn-off. The first time Riddick saw them, he'd made snide jokes about getting some little leashes made up for me.

I leaned forward and kissed the mirror. "You're a hotter piece of jailbait than your mother on her best day," I whispered, and then grimaced, wishing to *God* that things like that didn't matter to me.

Showtime.

Renault looked like he'd been struck by lightning when he spotted me. I swayed past him again, never breaking eye-contact, and gave him a very special smile, just for him, on my way out. Once on the street I had to restrain the urge to giggle insanely. Now I just needed to play it cool, and be handy when he emerged. I spent my time checking out the nearby stores, coveting some of the things inside, and speculating on the kinds of security systems they used and how to beat them.

Finally he emerged, running about ten minutes late. *Shit, don't let him have taken a trip to the Little Boy's Room to "shake off" my effect...*

I walked past him again, heading towards the alley. His eyes widened as I passed. We both turned, in an almost-mystical synch with each other, and our eyes met again. I gave him my most promising smile, suddenly wondering if he might even recognize me. I'd seen the title of one of Gary's vids in a nearby adult store, the week before, when Riddick and I were playing at being tourists. It was a good thing Riddick hadn't noticed it, or realized its star was standing next to him, or there might have been a mass killing spree that day.

But if Renault had a kink for little girls, he might indeed have seen my "work." And since the vids were only about two years old, if he had, he would probably recognize me.

I might as well have grabbed the man's tie and pulled, the way he followed me. I glanced back now and then, giving him encouraging smiles, until we reached the alley and I turned in. For a moment he hesitated at its mouth, so I ran my fingers over the neckline of my dress and pushed it down, a little, over one shoulder. That was all it took and he was mine again.

Back and back I went, until I was an inch away from the trashcans at the dead end. Where the hell was Riddick? *C'mon, big guy, your turkey is dressed and ready for carving. Where are you?*

Renault moved up to me and reached out, touching my cheek. "I know you," he said in a strange, breathless voice.

Shit, I had to improvise. Keep him going until Big Evil made his move. "Do you?"

"I've seen you before... somewhere..."

I took his hand and pressed it to my lips, drawing one finger in. He gasped. Releasing it, I gave him my naughtiest, dirtiest smile. "Maybe in... dreams?"

Dammit, Riddick, you asshole, would you just get here already? The son of a bitch was bending in for a kiss!

That was when a strong set of arms suddenly jerked him back.

"Jack, you idiot, this is the *wrong alley!*"

Shit!

Renault's eyes and mouth went wide as brilliant silver skated across his throat. I reeled away, but not fast enough, and a gout of hot crimson liquid splashed over my chin, throat, and chest.

God! I staggered back, sputtering and gagging even as Renault fell. Standing behind his twitching body, Riddick glared at me.

"The alley I *told* you to go to leads to a deserted street. Just how the fuck are you planning on walking home on Rue Dauphine covered in *blood*, you—"

"I didn't *know!* I thought this was the one you said! Between the antique shop and the adult bookstore—"

Fuck, I hadn't even looked at the signs. Practically *every* shop in the New French Quarter was either hawking antiques or porn. My first time helping Riddick and I'd fucked up.

He sighed, exasperated, and pulled off his suit coat. "Put this on over your dress." He took a handkerchief out of the pocket before handing it to me, and then began to wipe at my chin and throat as I shrugged into it.

I'd never felt anything like that blood. It was hot... it was *living*. He'd sprayed Renault's life force all over me and for a moment I'd felt it clawing at mine, as though begging me not to let it die. At our feet, Renault made a final, horrific gurgling sound and went still. A hard shudder suddenly passed through my body. Oh God, what had I *done*?

We got home safely, thanks to Riddick. The second we were in our apartment I threw his jacket on the bed and practically ran for the shower. Ripping the dress off, I tossed it in a wastebasket as I headed into the bathroom.

Riddick followed me, leaning in the doorway behind me. "You know, blood does wash out."

"I don't want it." I kicked off my shoes as I dialed the water up to its hottest setting.

Riddick watched me silently for a moment as I stripped, and then shrugged. "Suit yourself." He left, then, and I climbed under the water.

My first time as bait, I thought, and I'd blown it. I figured he'd never use me again. In fact, I was wrong. He used me as bait three more times. But after the fourth time, and the disaster that followed, he never did it again. He never even asked, thank God.

But that night was the first time I'd ever had a hand in someone's death, and I felt changed. Irrevocably altered. I suppose it's the way most girls feel after they lose their virginity, although I can't be sure. I lost mine in such a chemical haze that I didn't feel much of anything. But that night... I definitely *was* changed. I crossed over a line that I could never cross back over... and I lost a piece of myself, for good or ill, that I could never, ever recover.

It's the way I felt a month ago, the day after my eighteenth birthday. When I woke up in Riddick's arms, our naked flesh pressed together in a way that it never had before, and realized just what we had done... and what our drunken tryst had probably cost me forever.

5.

Stuck

Well, wouldn't you know it? I guess I'm not going to make it after all.

I'm still wearing a towel, and using another one to dry my hair off, when a low buzz I hadn't really noticed suddenly cuts out. It's the security system and someone has just disarmed it. Riddick. A minute later I hear the key in the lock. Guess I'll just have to let him see me get dressed.

It occurs to me that this is really, really stupid. Why should I care if he sees me naked? He's seen me that way repeatedly, for more than four years, and I've seen him. We have no secrets. We've showered together a lot. He's seen me take god only knows how many pisses and craps and change dozens of tampons. Hell, the time I was going crazy with my first yeast infection, *he* was the one who figured out what was wrong and ran out to the store to get me a treatment kit. And *I* know exactly how far over the street-legal weapon length his equipment is.

So how the hell is it that, after all we've seen and done, one stupid, drunken roll in the sack turns me into some blushing-virgin-wannabe? How can something as meaningless as sex have that kind of power?

It's not me. Well, I don't *think* it's me. After the first week we got over it and things went back to normal. Except for the way he sometimes looks at me. And it's that look that drives me crazy and makes me want to cover up whatever part of my body his eyes have fallen on. Intense. Beyond intense. His eyes aren't just on me, they're *in* me.

It's not like those guys at Niko's place, either, who I swear can rape you with their eyes. That just rolls right off me. What do I care whether they're looking? A pig's a pig's a pig. Sometimes it's tempting to tell them "go buy the fucking vid and it'll last longer." Three or four titles are still in circulation, from what I hear. No, what Riddick does is different.

When he looks at me like he does, I feel guilty for not just *giving* myself to him. Jeez. It's bizarre. It's some mixture of lust and wistfulness and dammit, how the hell can a man who's killed more than a hundred people at close range look like a *hurt puppy*?

He doesn't look like one right now, though, as he comes into the apartment. He just looks tense. Like he's holding in a breath and not looking forward to letting it out. That means he has bad news. But a smile twitches over his face when he sees I'm up.

"Hey, there." He closes the door behind him and begins to pull off his jacket. "You get enough sleep?"

I nod, dropping the wet hair towel into the hamper. "Yeah, I think so. Thanks for breakfast. It was delicious."

Never, ever fail to compliment a good cook. For a man who says "fuck" in almost every other sentence, Riddick can be a real stickler for manners. He grins at me now.

"You're welcome. Feeling better?"

I hold out my hand, palm down. No shakes.

"I'd call that a good sign," he says with a grin.

I nod. "So, how soon can we get out of here?"

Now he sighs. Yeah, I was right. "That's the bad news. Not for at least another two weeks."

"*Two weeks*?" It pops out like that before I can help myself.

"He promises he'll do something about the apartment below us," Riddick tells me, holding up his hands in a weirdly conciliatory gesture. "He's not any happier about having his place shot up than we were."

"Yeah, because market devaluation is *right there* on par with having your guts splat—"

"Jack, come on. Calm down. We've been through worse, haven't we?" He looks a little exasperated.

I try to calm myself. I don't know why Niko creeps me out as much as he does, but I shouldn't take it out on Riddick. I know that. I really do. Taking a deep breath, I nod. Yeah, we've been through worse. Much worse. "So, uh... how come we have to stay another two weeks?"

"He says he has some jobs for us. Looks like one of the other syndicate heads is playing power games, and he needs muscle. But he also says he's got some stuff for you."

For me? Okay, I *am* starting to make a name for myself but I wouldn't even be *noticeable* to a shark Niko's size except for the way I'm Riddick's little sidekick. He's got *tons* of thieves and hackers at his disposal. What would he want with me?

Riddick sees the question in my eyes, I guess, and shrugs to indicate that *he* doesn't know either.

“Well, could we maybe move to another place?”

“All his houses are full up. He’s brought in helpers from all over. Either he thinks someone is about to make war on him, or he’s planning on a preemptive strike of his own.”

“I thought that was the kind of thing we didn’t get involved in.” Last night sure reminded me just how literal being caught in the crossfire can get.

“Me too, but I had to give him something. If I’d flat out said we were leaving he might’ve decided we’d jumped whatever fence he’s worrying about, and had us killed just to be sure we couldn’t.”

I sigh and rummage through my dresser drawers, pulling out some fresh clothes. “You sure can pick ‘em, Rick. I’m almost missing New Vancouver, with all this.”

I’m done dressing by the time I realize I just stripped down in front of him without a thought. Maybe we’re getting over things after all. That’d be nice.

“Look, the second we can go, we’re out of here.” Riddick’s voice is exasperated and firm. That little jibe about New Vancouver hit home. “Okay? Let’s just get through the next two weeks.”

Deep breath. I hold it for a second, and then release it. I can make it two weeks in this shithole. I’d better be able to. I know what the penalty for losing it will be. “Okay.”

His arm comes around my shoulder. “Look, if you want to stay out of Niko’s place, or something—”

“I’d better not.” I lean back against Riddick and let him put his arms around me. “Like you said, we don’t want him thinking we’re anywhere near the fence. And anyway, after last night I think I like being right next to you if the shit’s gonna hit.”

He chuckles. “That’s my girl.”

Argh! Not your girl, Riddick, can’t *be* your girl... shit. Shit! Where the *fuck* is my head? He’s called me that for years; it’s just a brotherly thing, right? If he called me his *woman*, we’d have a problem, but he didn’t *say* that. Why is it that now I can’t stop hearing subtext in even the most innocent remarks?

Because it’s right there. I can feel it in the way he’s holding me. There’s a strange tension in his body that never used to be in him. But now he almost hums with it. He’s restraining himself. He knows what it’ll ultimately cost him if he doesn’t; we *had* that talk. Afterwards he slept on the opposite side of the bed from me for a week, and moved to the couch the one time I rolled over and put my arm on him.

Again the temptation comes to just let go. Let it happen, drift and be his. I could do it. He’d never know that I wasn’t having the time of my life...

I’d know. That’s bad enough, isn’t it? I’d know I was a liar and a faker and a whore. I close my eyes and swallow, fighting against the sting in my eyes and nose.

“We’ll be okay,” Riddick murmurs. Thank God he’s misreading my reaction. “It’s just two weeks.”

“Yeah,” I manage. “We’ll be fine...”

He must really think I’m upset about that, because now he’s leading me over to the bed. “C’mon. I’ll scratch your back, and you’ll feel better, okay?”

I grin against my will. *That* started up the night he killed Renault, and it’s become our tradition. It’s a very literal “I’ll scratch your back and you scratch mine” deal. I don’t even remember whose idea it was. Pulling my shirt back off, I lie down on my stomach and pillow my head on my arms. This is safe. This is the essence of safety. Riddick has almost no nails but they feel great as they begin to abrade my skin. Sometimes he doesn’t even get his turn because it’ll relax me so much, I’ll go right to sleep.

That first time, though, I was wound too tight. That first time, I had too much screaming inside me. At least he managed to calm it.

I didn’t realize I’d been scrubbing at my skin like someone demented until I’d been at it for fifteen minutes. Sometime during then, I’d begun to cry. Whether out of remorse or because I thought I’d fucked up and disappointed Riddick, I still don’t know. I never even knew I *was* crying until the shower curtain was pulled back and Riddick stepped into the stall, fully dressed, and pulled me into his arms.

He was clean, and in fresh clothes. He must have cleaned himself up in the kitchen while I was hogging the shower. But he didn’t bother turning off the water, just held me and let my tears soak the part of his shirt the shower stream couldn’t reach. His hands stroked me, from the top of my head to my lower back, and then starting the journey over, but no other part of him moved. He stayed still and resolute until I was cried out.

The water had noticeably cooled when he reached over and shut it off. Tilting my chin up, he gave me the tiniest hint of what *might* have been a tender smile. “You okay?”

I sniffled. “Yeah... I think so.” My voice hitched between every word, but we both pretended I sounded fine.

“Good... how about we get you dried off?” Now one of his normal, ironic grins appeared.

“Sounds good... you could use a towel yourself.” It was a lame joke but he did me the kindness of giving it a better laugh than it deserved.

We stepped out and he wrapped me in a large towel. As I began to dry myself off, he stripped out of his soaked clothes and wrung them out before dropping them into the hamper and grabbing his bathrobe. I pulled mine off of its hook and drew it on, too. Glancing over at the wastebasket as I left the bathroom, I noticed that my blood-stained dress was gone. I frowned but let it slide. I didn’t want to know where it was. Instead I headed for the tissue box so I could blow my nose.

“Sorry about all that, Rick.” Honk.

“‘Bout what?” He sat down on the edge of our bed, tilting his head the way he often did when he was both serious and amused.

“Screwing up like I did... and losing it like that.”

“You didn’t screw up, Jack. I should’ve showed you the alley, not just told you where it was. I just said ‘east’ and forgot how you can get turned around if you don’t know the French Quarter. You went west by mistake. That’s all it was. A mistake anybody could have made.” His voice was unusually gentle.

“You wouldn’t have made it.” One more honk into the tissues to make sure I was clear.

“I’ve been at this game since I was your age. I made a *lot* of mistakes when I started out. Now c’mere.” He held out his hand, the arm a little to the side, the way he did when he wanted me to let him put it around my shoulders. I came over and sat down beside him, letting him pull me into his embrace.

What a strange place to find peace and security, held by one of the most accomplished, cold-blooded killers the galaxy has ever known. He could snap me like a twig if that was what he wanted to do. But I felt safer with him than with anyone else I’d ever met.

“Okay... but I’m still sorry... for losing it like that...”

“Kid, sometimes I envy you.” Now that was an eye-popper of a statement if I ever heard one.

“Huh?”

“When I’m on a job, I don’t feel much of anything. Not fear, empathy, anything. I haven’t felt anything... hell, in decades.”

I glanced up at him and was surprised by the pensive look on his face. He drew another breath, so I let my surprised words die, and just listened.

“First time I ever killed a guy, I puked my guts out. Sometimes I miss that. Being able to feel... even feel sick. I felt it when Carolyn died, and... I dunno.” He frowned and looked away for a moment. “Were you crying for him? Renault?”

I shrugged, and tried to figure out the answer. The man in the alley had wanted to use me. He’d stared at me with the romantic fever of someone completely enslaved by an obsession, not seeing me, just seeing a dream that he couldn’t shake. But he hadn’t seemed like a *bad* guy, otherwise... Autrichien gave me the creeps just by *being* in a room, and did much worse things for much worse reasons. Hell, on a moral scale, Renault had probably been a better person than the man holding me and stroking my hair right then. But... I hadn’t been crying for him. I’d been crying for...

“No, I think I was crying for me.” Funny. That’s who my tears had been for, back on the planet, when he told me not to cry for Johns. Not the merc. Not the man I’d heard telling Riddick to kill me. *Me*. I could be very self-centered at times.

“Oh.” Absolute understanding was in Riddick’s voice. “I’m sorry about that.”

I wasn’t sure why, exactly, but I felt a thousand times better. “Thank you.”

His hand was moving over my back, restless, scratching at my skin through the fabric of my robe. I arched against his touch like a happy cat, and heard him chuckle.

“Here, lie down and I’ll do this right.”

Then I was on my stomach, my robe gone, a part of my brain wondering if he’d changed his mind after all and this was the start of a very *different* relationship. But he just scratched my back. Just. By the time he was done I was ready to *purr* like a cat. It was the loveliest thing anyone had ever done for me, so it was only natural—

“Your turn.”

He chuckled and slipped out of his robe, lying down on his stomach. I pulled mine on and grinned to myself. This was definitely new territory for me. New, but right. I felt safer and more at home than ever before.

“Jeez,” I commented, my fingers skating over his skin. “I gotta be really careful here. Or do you want me to scratch that deep, too?”

Riddick's back had seen some action. Of course, I already knew what a lot of his predilections were, but this was one of the first times I'd really examined the damage his girlfriends would do. That could get as fierce as a snarling catfight. He bit; they scratched. It was this whole *thing*. Some of the welts on his back from his games were deep. Some would leave scars, even.

"Nah," he chuckled, "this feels great."

"You're crazy, you know. One of these days your back is going to get *infected* on you."

"...Lets me... feel..." His voice was drowsy and thick. I scratched his back for a little longer, until the first snore. Then I covered him up and climbed into the bed beside him, at peace.

Ah, that memory calms me. It reminds me of what we have that's worth keeping, that I never, ever want to lose. I frown a little, though, remembering *our* night together. How come he didn't try to play any of his usual games with me?

"You okay?"

"Yeah..." My voice is a relaxed purr. "I think it's *your* turn."

He chuckles and I sit up, pulling my shirt back on even as he removes his. Just like old times. My fingers begin to skate over his skin, moving gingerly to avoid—

Nothing. Not a *thing*.

There are no scratches on his back. No welts where a woman's nails bit in deep and then raked across his skin. Nothing but old, old scars...

Well shit.

Nobody's scratched him in weeks, I realize. In a *month*, to be exact. Since my birthday. Since the night we—

Fuck.

It suddenly snaps into focus for me. Early nights. No disappearing into back rooms with scantily-dressed women on or off Niko's payroll. How the fuck did I miss it?

Riddick hasn't *touched* another woman since the night *we* had sex.

Just what the hell do I do about *this*?

6.

Confessional

Okay, I'm going to admit it. I fantasize about Riddick having sex with me. A lot.

But there's this funny thing that happens on the road from fantasy to reality and it's called fear. Actually, it's called flat-assed, yellow-bellied, chickenshit terror. Not of him. Of myself.

There are moments when I know how ridiculous it is. I don't *always* have my vision clouded by ghosts from the past. I know that most of the women Riddick's been with have enjoyed his attentions, and the few who didn't were too professional to let it show and probably wouldn't enjoy *any* man, anyway.

The problem is, those last women... they're what *I'm* like.

So I have these elaborate dreams about the things the two of us would do. I imagine him on top of me, inside me, his hands and mouth everywhere... but if I see the look in his eyes that means he actually *wants* me, I lock up.

And I've seen that look a *lot* since my eighteenth birthday.

He hid it from me for years, damn it. I never realized. Hell, I *offered* to exchange sex for protection back at the beginning, and he turned me down. And the whole time, he really *did* want me. Or at any rate, he came to at some point.

I'm pretty sure he wanted me two years ago after... the disaster... but he didn't take me then, either. Well, at least, I remember him trying to hide his hard-on from me. Maybe he thought I was too fragile at that point or something, but even after I was over the whole thing he *still* didn't make any moves, and I was legal on nine out of ten worlds already.

I'm obsessing over this. And I'm obsessing over *him*, too. Now I finally know, for real, what it feels like to have him inside me, and my fantasies are even hotter and more vivid than ever. They just turn to ice if he's actually in the room.

This is Luke's fault. Before him, I was every man's girl. After him, I wasn't *any* man's. Not to say I didn't do a *lot* in the space lanes. But I stopped being able to feel. Two months with Luke and a year on the run before Riddick got to me, and everything inside me just shut down... at least, where *sex* is concerned.

Funny how that makes Riddick and me the biggest, most whacked-out pair of dysfunctional bookends in the universe. He kills and can't feel anything, and wishes he could. I fuck and can't feel anything, and wish I could.

I'm lying when I say that. That's not what I'm afraid of and that's not why I threatened Riddick the way I did, after our one night together.

When it's him... when it's Riddick... I feel entirely *too much*.

It scares me, okay? It just scares me. I thought I was going to explode and die. Especially at the end when he—

Dammit, I'm trying to *forget* all that.

He fell asleep while I was scratching his back. Now my hands are just resting on the planes of muscle and bone that compose him. He's beautiful. A little darker than when I first met him, but he still doesn't get a lot of sun. I don't either. Sometimes I'm surprised he doesn't complain about my pale skin blinding his shined eyes or something.

But *his* skin is just beautiful. Everybody thinks so. The women at Niko's talk about him all the time. They compare it to caramel and toffee and speculate on whether it tastes as good as it looks. They say it where I can hear them, on purpose. After all, who would know better what his skin tastes like than Rick Cryer's "private stash?" I usually smile and say "better." There was one night when I had to fake a huge coughing fit after a girl said he had *taffy*-colored skin. It got worse when my mind, which can be very cruel to me at times, took it one step further. Just imagine the taffy-pulls *that* would engender.

And just try keeping a straight face in a public room after a girl puts *that* image in your head. Jeez.

Riddick roared with laughter when I told him, and started speculating with me about which flavor of taffy she might have meant. I tell him all that stuff, you see. He loves it. We don't have any secrets from each other. I've even walked in on him having sex, and sometimes afterwards I've commented on his technique — or his partner's technique — just to see if he'd blush. The only time I ever succeeded was the time I told him I could give a much better blow job than the one he'd gotten that night.

“Shit, Jack!” He was half out of his clothes, getting ready for bed, and damn if he didn’t suddenly walk over to the closet door, open it, and stand behind it to finish changing.

“What? It’s the truth.” Seriously, I could have. The woman was a *total* amateur and I thought she was afraid she’d gag or something. Maybe my walking in on them had made her nervous, too, but she didn’t seem to have a clue what she was doing. I was *way* past that league; I knew all the tricks.

“Fine, whatever. You’re only fifteen, kid.”

“So? By my guess she was ten years older, and she *still* sucked at... uh... sucking.”

“Would you give it a *rest*?” He changed out of his pants and into his boxers without emerging. Damn, I’d rattled him good.

“Well, I just think you didn’t get your money’s worth.” I shrugged and lay back on my side of the bed, grinning.

Riddick gave me an exasperated look as he dropped his clothes into the hamper. “I didn’t pay her anything, Jack.”

“I rest my case.” Now I was just being evil. I felt my grin widen when he growled at me.

“You,” he grumbled, pointing a finger at me, “are supposed to be trying to have a normal teenage existence.”

“Oh *yeah!* I’m going to find that on Ballard’s premises? Rick, the oldest of the other kids around here is *eleven*. And they’ve all spent their whole lives with blinders on or something because they have no *idea* what their fathers do—”

“That’s the whole *point*, kid. You’re supposed to be getting *shielded* from this stuff.” He hadn’t used me as a decoy since the fiasco with Renault, having somehow decided that I needed to be protected from his “dark side.” But a reminder of that night still lurked in our closet.

“Only way that’d work is if you got me a room in the girl’s wing of the kiddie dorm, and I’m *not* moving in there.”

He froze. A funny look came over his face, and I knew again that he was weighing that option and finding it sorely lacking. He didn’t *want* to sleep alone, without me next to him. And hell, I didn’t want that to happen either. I still don’t, no matter what I told him a month ago.

Sometimes in the middle of the night, if I have one of my awful dreams, I’ll wake up and just watch him for a while. His calm power, even in sleep, always soothes me and reminds me that *nothing* can ever sneak up on me again. Not a monster from that planet, not a ship’s mechanic with a coil of rope, a box of tools, and a hard-on, *nothing*.

He does the same thing, too. There have been plenty of times where I’ve wakened to find him hovering over me, gazing down. One time he watched me for more than an hour, even though he knew I’d woken up and was watching him right back. It was surreal but it felt *right*, somehow. In the last month there have been a few moments when I wondered if he was about to break the deal and pounce me, the hell with the consequences, but even so, it felt right to see him watching over me.

I guess it’s an important part of what we have, something we don’t want to lose no matter what. I know it must have been important to him, that night almost three years ago. Because the second I even brought up moving into the dorms, he dropped the whole “normal adolescence” shtick.

Ballard’s place was huge. At least twice the size of anything I’ve seen of Niko’s. It was different, too. Ballard had this whole “Family Values” vibe going. Part of that probably came from the fact that more than half his business was technically legitimate, defense contracts with the Colonial Governors. Nobody there really approved of us. A thirty-year-old man sharing his bed with a teenage girl half his age didn’t exactly figure well into Family Values. Our usual smokescreen almost got us kicked out, but Riddick almost didn’t know it.

There were apricot trees growing wild on part of the estate. I’d found them on one of my rambles, one day when Riddick and a number of Ballard’s other enforcers were off handling a “complication.” The trees weren’t ripe yet, laden down with fruit that was mostly green but was starting to acquire a hint of a golden glow to it. But among them I could find a few ripe fruits. You had to be careful. Usually when they ripened early it was because a worm had invaded them. I was meticulously slicing a fruit with my knife and cutting out the ruined part, when Mrs. Ballard showed up.

“There you are, Jackie. What’s that you’re eating?”

I’d just put a thick sliver of nectar-sweet fruit into my mouth and had to clear it out of the way before I could answer. “Apricot.”

She frowned, and then looked around at the wild orchard. “Is that what these are? I didn’t realize. I’ve always loved their flowers, though. I think this is the first year they’ve fruited.”

They were fruiting a *lot*. In another week or two, there were going to be tons of free fruit for everybody.

I searched through the small collection of fruit in my lap for one that looked the least worm-eaten. “Want one? Gotta be careful of worms in them, but they’re really good.”

“Yes, thank you.”

She smiled and accepted the fruit I was offering her, and took out a knife of her own. In that moment she reminded me — so powerfully it *hurt* — of Shazza. The same mixture of fine breeding and rustic resilience. Shazza’s death had almost crippled me, back on the planet. She’d offered to take me in. She and Zeke had, but after his death, she’d told me she needed me even more than ever.

For two days, between then and the eclipse, I’d had a mother. One I knew I could really love and would never have to be afraid of. Her death had been a brutal reminder that the universe didn’t want me to be happy.

Mrs. Ballard looked nothing like Shazza but in that moment it felt like they could have been twins. I watched her as she carefully cut her apricot, flicking its worm down onto a rock and crushing it beneath her boot heel, and excising the ruined flesh from the fruit. She looked up at me and gave me a kind smile.

“How long have you traveled with Mr. Cryer?”

I shrugged, counting up. “Almost a year and a half now.”

I could see her doing the math, figuring out how old I must have been. “How did you two meet?”

Nobody knew we were survivors of the *Hunter-Gratzner*. After all, the only legitimate passenger left, who was using his own name, was the Holy Man. I shrugged again and gave her my usual story. “I got into some trouble and he bailed me out. Decided we should stick together.”

Usually I punctuated the story with a knowing, insinuating wink, but this time for some reason I skipped over that embellishment. In a few minutes I would be glad I had.

Mrs. Ballard’s mouth flattened a little. “I can’t say I approve. Especially given the way he also cuts a swathe through the... *doxies*... who show up at all of the parties. I’ve asked George to have you moved into the dormitories —”

“No.” Maybe it was rude to interrupt, but there was no way I was letting that happen.

Disapproval melted a little, or at least thawed, and gave away to some curiosity. “Why not?”

“I have nightmares.” That part was even true, although they hardly ever happened anymore. “Bad. Bad nightmares. The things he rescued me from.” I looked down and messed around with one of the apricots for a moment, thinking about monsters. Monsters of all shapes and sizes... a few of them hadn’t even been human. Riddick had saved me from all of that.

Mrs. Ballard didn’t make a sound. She was watching me intently when I looked up.

I shrugged and tried to finish my explanation in a way that didn’t make me sound like a total emotional basket case. “I just need to know he’s there when I wake up from one of those dreams, you know? So I know I’m still safe.”

Her expression was shrewd. “You two *aren’t* sexually involved, are you?”

Fuck. Caught. But I couldn’t bullshit her any more than I could Shazza, and *she* figured out I was really a girl even before Riddick did. Slowly, I shook my head. I hoped I hadn’t just fucked us both, but her face cleared.

“A smoke-screen. Yes, I can see that. He’s worked for a lot of unsavory characters... he would need a way of making sure they didn’t try to touch you... without revealing how much he really *cares* about you.” She smiled, and ate another slice of apricot. “I have to say I feel a lot better about this, now. I don’t especially mind the fact that many of George’s men are killers — there’s no way around that when one is in his business. But the idea that we had a pedophile on our estate just didn’t sit well at all.”

“He’s not a pedophile.” My voice had gone indignant.

“Oh, I know that now... and don’t worry. Only George and I will ever know the truth here. Although I would appreciate it if Rick would tone down the ‘private stash’ remarks a little, while you’re here.”

I found myself grinning. “I’ll tell him.”

Mrs. Ballard grinned back at me and stood up, dusting off the back of her elegant slacks. “Thank you, Jackie. I’m glad we had a chance to talk. I feel much better about things now. If you ever need anything...?”

“I’ll come right to you.” I had to grin over it. If I’d still been in the market for a mother I’d probably have ended up *glued* to her. But I had Riddick now, and that was even better.

“See you at dinner, dear.”

I watched her walk away, and marveled at how the next few apricots were even riper and sweeter than the ones I'd eaten before. Even now I can taste them.

I'm resting my head on Riddick's back, remembering those apricots, when he growls and begins to roll over. I lift myself up to let him and start to sit up, but he draws me back to him as he finishes shifting onto his back.

"How long did I sleep?" His voice is partially drowned out, in one of my ears, by the sound of his heartbeat.

"Maybe half an hour."

"Hmm. You feel up to coming with me to Niko's tonight? See what it is he wants you to do?"

I sigh. I hate Niko's place. I wish we'd never left the Ballard estate. Even Autrichien was better.

"Yeah, I guess."

"Whatcha thinking?"

"I was remembering Veronica Ballard."

"Hmmm." Apparently he's in one of his growly, thoughtful moods.

"Why'd we leave there, anyway? I liked it there." Hell, I'd even gotten into camelback riding there, the ultimate genteel sport.

Yeah, camels have managed to survive on worlds where horses can't, even worlds as lush and green as Tepper's World. They have a kind that has no hump, as a result, which I think was bred just for that planet. They're cool, unless you piss them off, and then they'll spit at you. I'm not talking about a little bit of wet hitting your face either. It's a great, big, smelly gob of camel-phlegm and masticated hay, and if you've ever wondered where the expression "gob-smacked" *came* from—

"Politics. There were gonna be a bunch of planetary elections, and Ballard needed his staff to be squeaky-clean. We'll go back there someday. It's not like he'll never need my services again. But you know how it is. Can't have a tabloid snapping pictures of 'The Cryer' and his Private Stash riding camels around your estate, you know."

"I was just *thinking* about camel-riding." I grin up at him. True to my promise, I got Riddick to drop the "private stash" references for the rest of our stay there. The Ballards pretended to turn a blind eye to our ostensible relationship, but they became much friendlier toward Riddick after that talk. It was a shame we had to leave.

Riddick chuckles. "Go pick out something to wear tonight, okay?"

I grin and get up, heading for my closet. Luckily, it doesn't seem any damage was done in there by the gunfight. My hands start pawing through my outfits, and come to a stop.

The silk dress. *The* silk dress. It feels cold against my hand.

After Renault's death, I'd tossed it in the trash. And it had vanished from there, only to show up in my closet, spotless and as perfect as the day Riddick had bought it for me, a week later. I didn't wear it, though. I couldn't bring myself to. But no matter where we went, it was always in my closet, even when I'd tried to "forget" it and leave it behind.

I finally got used to seeing it, and even started to like it again after a while, but I couldn't get up the nerve to actually wear it for the longest time. Part of me thought it was jinxed.

I was right, too. I hate it more than ever, now. I never should have put it on again.

Did seeing me in it *do* things to Riddick's head, or something? If I'd been wearing some other dress for my birthday, last month, would everything be different?

That's really stupid, I know. My dress didn't seduce him. And it sure as hell didn't seduce *me*. I can't really blame it for what happened between us.

But I want to burn it anyway.

7.

Vipers

I hate Niko's place.

You walk in and it's like some old-time bordello. I probably wear more clothes than any other woman in the building, and the only reason I can get away with it is because I'm Rick Cryer's Private Stash, and a professional criminal in my own right. Almost all the other women my age are strippers and whores. There are a few others more or less like me, scattered around, but it's definitely Dirty Old Man territory.

Then there's the political bullshit. There's a definite pecking order, and if you make eye contact with the wrong person, there'll be a fight. You have to know where you are on the totem pole, who's above you and who's below you, and you have to keep track at all times because it changes. And you have to be careful, too, to not let the people *below* you on the totem pole get any legs up, because they will try. And I'm usually not the one who has to fight when this shit happens; Riddick is. I fuck up and he pays.

He's taught me how to fight, though. Just in case some bitch decides that *she* wants to be Rick Cryer's Private Stash and tries to take me down from my "throne." I'm very well trained but he tells me I should never show it off.

"The less people know about what you can do," he's told me repeatedly, "the less of it you have to do. Fight to win, but don't go far enough over their level that the bigger fish realize you're a threat to *them*. Not until you're ready to *be* that threat."

And it's not my job to be the threat. That's his job.

My job is still undefined, but it definitely falls into the "sneaky" category. And, as with my fighting skills, he's been adamant that I never show off my full range of abilities there. So people know I can pick pockets, but not that I can pick locks or crack a simple safe. They know I can hack into computers and write basic viruses and worm programs, but not that I can write ones they'll never find on their systems, but which will let me remotely control anything I want. Hell, as a precaution, Riddick had me slip a little something into Niko's system weeks ago, and his sweepers haven't spotted it yet.

That doesn't make me feel *any* better about going into his place tonight.

I've picked out my outfit and Riddick's picked out his, and we've gotten changed. He's moving around in the kitchen while I take a few more deep breaths, trying to get my equilibrium in order. Going into Niko's place unnerves me worse than handling a job. I'm not sure I'm ready for *either*.

That gives me an idea.

Riddick's putting away dishes when I walk up and give him my sweetest, most innocent hug. I feel the way he tenses up, and that sends a spark of guilt through me. Especially given what I'm doing.

"Did I remember to thank you for breakfast?" Pure innocence.

He forces himself to relax and gives me an almost-natural smile. Damn. More guilt on me. "Yeah, you did." Now real affection appears on his face and the moment of awkwardness is past.

I grin up at him. "Good. Couldn't remember if I had or not. Maybe sometime you could teach me the recipe?"

That gets a genuine laugh out of him. "For what possible point?"

I giggle and lean away, mission accomplished. "You got me there. I'll just have to get you to make omelets more often by threatening to try, myself."

He shudders theatrically and I move away. One step. Two. Behind me I hear him turn on the water. Three. Four.

"Okay, little girl, you bring my wallet right back here." He mostly sounds amused, but there's a current of annoyance mixed in.

I turn around and take the wallet out of my pocket, giving him a rueful grin. I'd like to have gotten farther away before he realized. Still, I lifted it without him noticing.

He turns off the water, leans against the counter and just watches me for a moment, accepting the wallet when I hold it out to him. "You know," he finally says, "I was really nice to you this morning. Didn't put you through any tests or anything, and now —"

Now I *do* feel ashamed, on *several* levels. "I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to take advantage of you. I was testing myself to see if I was really up for Niko's. I mean, steady hands are all well and good, but that still doesn't mean they're ready for a heist."

His expression softens. Damn. Now I feel even more ashamed. I feel like the biggest user, taking advantage of his affection for me to sneak up and steal his wallet, especially since I knew my physical proximity would distract him with thoughts of a relationship we can't have.

Then again, at least I know my hands are ready for tonight. Which is a good thing because it's showtime.

"It's okay, Jack." Riddick puts his arm around me and steers me toward the apartment door. "I know what you mean. Been there more than a few times myself."

I nod, remembering. For weeks after we escaped that planet, Riddick was in a state of deep confusion, unsure of who or what he was anymore. Fry had found a chink in his armor and pried it right open and he wasn't sure how to close it back up or even if he should. Imam tried to open it up even more and save his soul or something, but eventually he had to resist.

After all, no matter how repentant he might get, he was hardly going to willingly go back to prison. I saw the list of the things lined up for him if he was recaptured and I can't blame him. They use chemicals now instead of scalpels, but lobotomized is lobotomized and castrated is castrated, and that's just for starters. By the time it was over, he'd be harmless as a kitten but they'd still toss him back in with the man-eating tigers.

So he could hardly stand up and announce "Hi, I'm Richard B. Riddick, and I'm really sorry for everything I did, and I'm ready to take my medicine now." Some pills are going to choke you to death no matter what.

One of Niko's cars is in the apartment garage, there for our use. Riddick opens the door for me and I get in, treating myself to a few more deep breaths. It's a short ride but we never talk anyway; there might be bugs in the car that eluded our detection, or were added since our last sweep. Instead, I find myself thinking about that moment when Riddick slipped back into crime.

Maybe he could have made a new life for himself, but not one he liked. He was thirty years old and he had no money, no identity papers, and no formal schooling. He could *get* those things, and get all the credentials he needed, but not legitimately, and he could barely get a job bussing tables without them. When nobody *wants* the Straight-laced You, it makes recidivism easy. And maybe, like me, he just discovered he couldn't *fit into* that tidy, orderly, *innocent* world Imam wanted us to belong to.

That world's a cage, and I still don't know which one of us — me or him — started wanting to break out of it first. At least he took me with him when we did. I know for a fact the only reason I'm not back at my old trade — or dead in some ditch by now — is that he took me in. Instead, I was able to take up my hobby and make it my trade. From hooker to hacker in under five years. Not bad at all.

And fortunately, nobody's looking for Richard B. Riddick anymore. Still, he has to be careful. His fingerprints have been changed but if some law enforcement guy grabbed him and decided to run DNA, it wouldn't matter that Rick Cryer has a clean record. He'd be royally fucked.

One day soon I'll be good enough to fix that for him. I'll be able to breach the security systems of the GBI and then he really *will* be safe, and Richard B. Riddick will be dead forever. I owe him that much, and more.

Riddick pulls up in front of the club and we get out. He hands the keys over to one of the valets, a big man with tattoos peeking out from under the wrists and collar of his formal coat, and we head inside.

The front room is a front, all right. It's thronging with revelers, and most of them have no idea who owns the club or what he really does. They're just here to drink and dance. Occasionally one of the pettier criminals will come out from the back and do a little of that, too, but not often. All the *real* stuff happens in the lounge and the back rooms. A nod from Riddick to the man guarding the lounge doors, and we're in.

Nightclub glitz gives way to a bordello ambiance. High-tech tinsel gives way to gilding. The thump of dance music is replaced by the sweep of the violin. All the markings of wealth and culture, so why is it that I always feel like we've dropped into a viper pit when we step in here?

We move off in different directions; until it's actually showtime, we'll be circulating in different groups, among our own professional peers, watching and listening. We'll only meet up if there's something important we need to discuss, some development that might need our immediate, united action. That's when we do our "horny couple" act and one of us will drag the other into a back room for some very authentic-looking alone-time.

One guy who walked in on us several months ago thought we really *were* having sex, which was a damn good thing too, because we'd been talking about how Riddick was going to have to kill him later that night.

But here I am, threading my way through Niko's main room, carefully avoiding conflict. Looking down my nose at Stithey, who flashes me one quick look of resentment before dropping his eyes because he knows he'd *better*. Avoiding looking directly at Marengo's girlfriend, Ginger, who's looking me over like a posh couturier spotting a bargain rack shopper. Well hell, that's pretty much the score. If I'm not mistaken, Vittorio Caparzo made every bit of her outfit, and his cheapest accessories run in the upper hundreds. Show off.

I keep it simple. Denim's out, but my leather slacks are worn enough that they might as well be a pair of jeans. Dressy jeans, anyway. A shirt that displays no cleavage, even though I don't have much to show anyway. Make-up designed to say "I am *not* fuckable." The rings help a little. The nose ring imparts a little bit of a sneer to my face just by being on, and the lip ring says "do not kiss" better than anything else I could come up with.

I don't care if people think I'm a nasty bitch. I hope they do. Anything that'll make them fuck off and leave me alone is fine by me.

What I don't do is look around for Riddick. He'll show up when he needs me, or if I need him. My job right now is to keep my ears open, listen to the currents. I find a nice, comfortable seat in the midst of things and sit down in it, pulling out the palmtop Riddick bought me and farting around with it while I home in on the conversations around me.

Boring. The guys behind me are talking about VR Shooter game cheats. Amateurs. I don't recognize their voices, which means they're probably just starting out. I focus on them for a moment. Young. College age. New recruits by Niko, probably pushing designer drugs on their campus so the frat boys can get laid whenever they want to. I know that type... I'll have to pay extra attention to anything I plan to eat or drink.

Not that they can actually pull anything on me here. Riddick'd kill them, but that's not the really big problem. There's a three-headed dog I have to worry about, too. And I know how sharp his teeth are.

Moving on. Not gonna think about that. As long as nobody puts something in my food or drink, I'll be just fine.

A woman walks by. I glance up just in time to see the sneer she gives me, and look away fast.

What the fuck?

I recognize her. Last night she was hitting on Riddick when I passed by. She seemed more than a little drunk at the time and I'd figured that was why Riddick had turned her down. The way she dresses, she probably belongs to *somebody* important. She makes *Ginger* look like a bargain rack shopper.

I glance up at her again. She's walking away with her back to me, so I can look safely at her. Not a hair out of place, gleaming golden-blond down to the small of her back. That dress is amazing. Even if I had the curves to pull it off I'd probably look like a clown in it. Even assuming I could possibly afford it. I know I'm looking at a dress that costs more than I can make in a *year*, honestly or dishonestly. Whoever pays her bills has to be pretty damn powerful, and I know it's *somebody* because nobody who's actually out there *earning* something like that can make it look so perfect.

I'm glad Riddick turned her down. I just wish it wasn't because he's too hung up on me to say "yes" to *anybody*.

Damn, I wish I could pull off looking like that. My hair isn't golden, just a kind of dark, dirty blonde. Maybe if I was out in the sun more, or went to a hairdresser, it'd be lighter and shinier, but it still wouldn't be that pretty. I'm pretty sure those are *real* blue eyes, too, the kind I've wished for ever since I saw Carolyn Fry, and not contacts.

Well, maybe she's all pretty packaging and nothing inside. Shit, I'm jealous. I shake my head and look away, smiling. Maybe I don't look like that... but I'm not the one Riddick turned down. I'm the one he whispered was the most beautiful woman he'd ever held, while we—

And how bitchy to think about *that* when I'm the one turning *him* down. I'm so fucked up, getting territorial over a man I won't get intimate with. I suddenly feel like a real jerk.

"You okay, baby?"

Wouldn't you know it... one of the College Boys has homed in on me. I give him my smallest, chilliest smile.

"Just fine." I stare down at my palmtop as if it's the most fascinating thing on the planet. It kind of is. I loaded a whole bunch of hackerware onto it tonight, taking out my usual hardcards with all my personal stuff. Just in case. I love this little baby but if a job goes sour I have to be ready to dump it and *not* have it traced back to me.

"You look kinda out of place here, 'sall."

Yeah, he's new. Only newcomers hit on me. Most guys know I'm as off-limits as Ginger or that blonde. "I'm right where I'm supposed to be."

Unspoken: and you're not.

"What's your name?" he asks, not taking the hint.

Am I just being cynical? Maybe this really is a nice guy who just wants to make friends. Wait. Just what am I thinking? We're talking about *Niko's* place. Nice guys get chewed up and spit out the minute they try to walk in the door. I wonder if he realizes that. Angelfish don't swim in this shark tank.

I know what he thinks I am. He thinks this is like some party at his college, where the girl in the drab clothes, sitting alone, is lonely and naïve and will fall for his friendly act. Maybe there are lonely girls at the colleges who do. This isn't college but I don't think he gets it. A whole new set of rules applies.

I wonder why he's not going after any of the girls *advertising* their wares. Hell, any man who really wants to get laid can arrange it within five minutes in here.

I've paused a little too long and he's thinking about taking offense. Damn. I hold out my hand, keeping things as businesslike as possible. "Jack."

He raises an eyebrow in a way that I suppose is intended to charm, and tries to shift our hands' positions so he can raise mine to his lips. Man, this is getting old. I make sure he has to shake it normally.

Fuck it if he gets offended. He won't get much help when people realize he's trying to move on Rick Cryer's Private Stash.

"What's with the boy name?"

I hate it when people fuck with me like that. You think I'd be used to it by now, but no. Fine. I'm going to fuck right back.

I shrug and give him a confused look, like it should be self-evident if he had half a brain or a third of a clue. And really, it ought to be. If he'd stop playing Big Man On Campus and pay attention to his surroundings, he'd already know he was venturing into dangerous waters. "Professional reasons."

If I wasn't sitting down, I'd steal his wallet just to prove my point. Of course, that's exactly the kind of showing-off Riddick doesn't like me doing.

"Professional reasons?" the guy repeats back at me, his voice dubious.

"Yeah." I grin. "You ever heard of Hackerjack? Puts a toy surprise in every network?"

That had been my big test-run. The Hackerjack Virus made interstellar news and it's *still* on a lot of computer systems. Fortunately it's totally benign, as long as you don't mind a little sailor and his dog walking across your screen every few months and mooning you.

He blinks, genuinely astonished. "That was you?"

I nod. Okay, I love that. I just eat it up. I don't get to tell many people anymore. "That was me. Hacker Jack, at your service."

Oops. Bad phrasing. Dumb.

"Dave Sampson. It's a pleasure." Oh lovely, there go the innuendos.

Back to cutting this guy off at the knees without him realizing I'm doing it. "So what do you do, Dave?"

"I'm a Junior," he says without thinking. I only let out a hint of a smirk as a flush rises on his face. Really, the smirk wants to jump out and dance and make noises, but laughing at him would be bad even with Riddick as my protector. He finds his dignity and changes his answer. "I'm a distributor for Niko on the East End Campus."

"Ah." I suspect he's in it for the sex more than the money. Probably most of what he "distributes" he gives out for free in exchange for a roll in the sack, or slips into unwary dates' drinks. A rich boy like him can afford it.

Then again, he probably also does a lot of business supplying uppers and memory-enhancers to students who are cramming for exams... and then there are the parties. Damn. The more I think about it, the more I suspect this boy is raking it in. He probably has that whole shield-of-respectability thing going for him too... but he'd better never try to plea-bargain if he gets caught. Niko likes to bail people out and then drop them in the river if they even look like they might think of doing that.

"So, you think you might wanna..."

"What, buy from you? Can't." I don't even bother hiding my amusement now.

He frowns, and tries to go for the insult. "Why not? Scared?"

Here's my ace-in-the-hole. "Cerberus."

He blinks. Then a look of awe appears on his face. Not many people can say that, not even the rich girls he's dosing. Most of their daddies can't afford it, I guess, or think their little angels won't possibly

need it. I wonder if I'm the first one he's met.

"Really? Wow. What's that like?"

"It hurt like hell," I answer truthfully.

"How... who did it?"

Perfect. Set them up and knock them down. "Rick did, of course." The expression on my face is a *you don't know?* look. Yeah, Dave, you're missing something important here.

"Rick?"

"Yeah, you know, Rick Cryer. My guy."

He blanches. I just love it when they do that. Hackerjack's antics make people laugh, but The Cryer makes them piss themselves. It's really very poetic. And now Dave is dealing with the idea that he's been coming onto a professional killer's girl. I've just gone from "Sarah, Plain and Tall" to "Gun Moll" in his head. How lucky for him his drink is almost empty. Look at him run.

"That was impressive."

I grin and tilt my head. Rat is next to me, leaning over my shoulder.

I like Rat. He's one of about three guys here who *don't* get weird at the idea of talking to The Cryer's girl. Probably because he's gay, thinks Riddick's *hot*, and he hacks, too, so we compare notes professionally anyway.

"I love to watch them run," I tell him, grinning.

He sits down in the seat next to me, impish humor on his face. I swear, he makes me think of a large pixie. If he walked in wearing a Peter Pan costume or something, I wouldn't be shocked at all.

"Got something to show you," he tells me, energy crackling over him to the point where I swear it should be visible.

"What's that?"

Out comes a red hardcard, which he holds out to me with a flourish. "My latest masterpiece."

"Ooooooh." Rat isn't the same kind of hacker I am, but I do have a lot of respect for his work... as long as it stays off my computer. "Does it have a cure yet?"

His work always *needs* a cure, because the programs he writes are deadly. They can wipe out infrastructures in seconds. I've never seen anyone write such elegant code. His viruses are ominous plagues that can take out a whole planet's network in minutes. Like me, though, he generally holds back from disseminating them... and he always has a cure ready before he does. It's a good thing, too, because the hunt for the creator of one of his masterworks would be *relentless*, far more so than when they hunted for me after Hackerjack hit the networks.

He chuckles and holds out another hardcard. This one is green. "That's the cure right there."

"Cool. What's your baby do?"

"Complete meltdown."

"Holy shit."

"Yeah, well, it's special. Limited viability. It goes in through a single unit connected into a network, and kills the network's ability to communicate with the outside world, and then destroys *everything* inside the system."

"It doesn't reproduce? But I thought good parasite programs don't kill their hosts until—"

"This isn't a parasite. This is a tactical nuke." He sounds so proud. "Oh, it also destroys the original unit, but nothing's perfect."

For the umpteenth time, I wonder what he's doing here. Niko deals in human vice, mostly. Drugs, gambling... Autrichien's territory is organized labor and Ballard is the semi-respectable arms supplier. If either of *them* had a man like Rat, they'd be deadlier than ever, because they'd *really* know how to use him. The things they'd have him do would be a lot more spectacular than the petty annoyances Niko has him pull on unpaying clients.

"I'm impressed." I hold the cards out for him to take them back, but he grins and shakes his head.

"You hang onto 'em. Never know when you might need a nuke, you know."

I chuckle, but pocket the cards. "Not really my style."

"Survival is always in fashion." There's something weird there. Beneath his joking tone, there's something serious. I don't understand it, but I mark it.

He suddenly composes his face in a much more innocuous expression. Looking up, I can see a group of men moving through the room. Niko is leading them, and there's Riddick among them. Riddick nods to me as they pass. This is it. I lean over and give Rat a kiss on the cheek.

"Thanks, Rat."

“Anytime, Jackie.”

I can feel his eyes on me as I walk away. Okay, *something's* up. Above and beyond whatever assignment Niko has in mind for me tonight. I suddenly feel ten times more awake.

We file into Niko's office and one of his boys closes the door. That blonde is in there, near his desk. She stands as we enter, and brushes past Niko suggestively on her way toward the door. As she passes me, our eyes briefly meet.

Again, what the *fuck*?

That wasn't just scorn or annoyance or something... that was a look of pure *hatred* she gave me. Just what the hell did I do to deserve that? I never even *saw* her before last night. The door closes behind her and I decide I'd better close my mouth, too.

Rubric, a professional thief I assume is on whatever team I'll be working with tonight, leans against the wall next to me, his hands in his pockets. Funny, I thought he was out of favor right now. I lean back, too, and turn to him.

“Psst.”

He glances over at me and gives me an inquiring look.

“That woman, who just left... who is she?”

Now he's giving me an “*are you stupid?*” look, like the one I was giving Dave earlier. “You mean Mrs. Papadopoulos?”

Oh shit.

Niko's wife. That was Niko's wife hitting on Riddick last night... and staring at me like she wants to tear my guts out.

We are *so* fucked.

8.

Heist

Fucked. We are so completely fucked.

The whole time Niko's man is filling us in on the job, that's all that keeps running through my head. Just how fucked we are.

Niko's definitely the kind of man who buys into that whole Machismo bullshit; if he knew his wife had hit on Riddick, even though she got turned down, he'd still take it as a grave insult against his manhood. And somehow I don't think Mrs. Papadopoulos would be the one he'd blame.

And that look *she* gave *me*... I don't even want to begin thinking about what that means.

Shit, I need to pay attention; this stuff is important.

Riddick and three other men are on the other side of the room, getting *their* briefing while Rubric, Bates, Malawi and I get ours. They're on a totally different kind of job. All four of them are professional killers, although I'd say Riddick's the absolute best of the group. *We're* knocking over a business in a nearby office complex. It doesn't sound like that hard a job; the building's security system is so laughably simplistic that they must be paying Niko protection money on the side or something. No wonder he picked me to break it; a child could do it and that's probably all he thinks I am, even after Hackerjack ran wild.

All I have to do is take control of the system and let the boys go in and play. While they get instructions about where, in the complex, they need to go, I load up the security specs on my palmtop and try not to roll my eyes. Too easy. I could do this even *with* my hands shaking.

So how come I'm on edge like this?

My hand steals into my pocket and fondles the pair of chips Rat gave me. That's why... or part of it. Almost getting shot to death in my bed last night is another factor. Plus Niko's wife. Shit. We are so fucked.

Okay, already. Stay alert. Fine, you're fucked... concentrate on the briefing! Riddick would kick my ass if he knew how scattered my thoughts are right now.

I close up my palmtop just as the final instructions are being given. It's showtime, it's go-time. Riddick and his boys are moving out, too. He heads my way for a moment.

Yeah, showtime.

We call these "stage-kisses." That's what they are. A little bit of theater to keep everybody convinced that our relationship is what we say it is. They've been harder for me to do lately, though. Still, especially after what Mrs. Papadopoulos has been doing, it's definitely time for one.

I'm more aware of our audience than of Riddick as he pulls me into his arms and bends his head to mine. *Take a good long look, boys.* I smile as I raise my face to him, opening my mouth.

Truthfully, Riddick's probably the damn best kisser I've ever met, and I kissed a lot of guys back in the days. Strong lips, no drool. From a spectator's stance this probably looks like the hottest kiss they've ever seen in a public place... but it's all theater.

Well, it used to be anyway. The confused knot in my stomach is very new, and very real.

"Jeez, Cryer, get a *room*," one of his colleagues mutters. Riddick chuckles and pulls back. I do the same. Someone always says that. Always to him, too, like they assume I'm too dumb or slutty to know better.

As we head out, our teams splitting apart at the doorway, I try not to feel Niko's eyes on me. Shit, if he's gonna stare that hard, he might as well pull the damn things out and throw them at my back.

I did *not* want to think that. A shudder passes through me before I can stop it. Eyes are a big issue for me. God knows I can't enjoy cartoons anymore whenever they—

"You ready, Jackie?" Bates is dangling a set of keys in front of me. Oh. Yes. Makes sense for me to be the wheel-man, too, since I'm the only one not going in. I take the keys and give him a grin.

"Always."

The keys belong to a van that looks like it's seen better days, from the outside, but when I pull it out of the lot it drives silky-smooth. Markings on the side say we're a janitorial service, as do the jumpsuits we've donned. I head for the complex while the guys discuss their strategy.

"We'll be fine long as the security system stays out," Bates is saying behind me. "All the employees of that company are clock-watchers. Even the management. Nobody ever puts in overtime."

“Good thing the system’s an easy one,” Malawi chuckles next to him. “Gee, I wish *my* boyfriend could get *me* plum jobs.”

Motherfucker...

I slam on the brakes.

“*Shit*, Jack, what the fuck’s your—” Rubric stops when I turn and glare at him.

It’s not *his* fault but it pisses me off, too. *None* of these guys take me seriously. They think I’m some stupid little girl they’ve been saddled with, who dabbles a little in hacking and has already made as much of a name for herself as she ever could.

Oh yeah, you assholes? Take a good fucking look! I’m the one who got Luke’s bank to give her a thousand dollars of his money when she ran, in spite of the fact that the ATM daily maximum was five hundred. I’m the one who cracked the Malone Station security system and got it to add her to the Hunter-Gratzner’s passenger list and issue a boarding pass. I’m the one who blacked out Ring Colony 1 three years ago so Riddick and a bunch of Ballard’s men could steal the missing VX canisters back from the New Taliban—

I’m the one who can’t say *anything* about *any* of that shit.

I take a deep breath. Okay, can’t fuck this up. Riddick will *kill* me if I tell these guys just how advanced I really am, and how much I can do. No showing off... no posturing... shit. But I still have to deal with this *now*.

Be more than you seem. I can hear Riddick saying it to me, the way he always does when I’m feeling that urge to prove myself and show off. *Be more than you seem.*

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Malawi demands. No wonder this guy keeps pissing people off. No wonder he gets all the shit jobs.

Oh, I know what to say *now*! The rage fades and I’m back in control.

“If you want,” I tell him in a poisonously sweet voice, “we can turn around and go back and you can tell Niko you don’t think I’m qualified for the job. Maybe he’ll give you a better hacker if you ask.”

Suddenly part of me is cracking up on the inside. I’m like some demented *mom* asking her bratty kids *do you want me to turn this car around?* Jeez. Riddick is gonna love this when I tell him.

Malawi blanches a little. No, he doesn’t want to do that. None of them do. It occurs to me that I’m in this van with three of Niko’s least favorite people.

“You don’t want to? That mean I’m good enough for you?” Silence for a long moment until they realize the van isn’t going anywhere until I get an answer. Three heads nod.

“Yeah,” Malawi mutters.

“You boys need any help doing *your* jobs?”

They look affronted. Bates, at least, has the grace to look thoughtful about that. I like him. He shoots off at the mouth a lot and pisses people off, but underneath it, he’s a nice guy. I’ve worked with him once before so he, at least, knows I get the job done.

Three heads finally shake “no” when they realize I’m waiting. Man. I could get used to this power thing.

“So we’re all cool, here? No issues?”

“No issues,” Malawi manages after a pause. Yeah, he’s trouble. This isn’t over between us. But at least it looks like he’s got the brains to realize that for now, while we’re on this assignment, he’d better treat me like part of the team.

“Good.” I put the van back into drive. My satisfaction at having dealt with that mess lasts less than a block, though. The knots are back. How the hell did I get into this whole damn situation?

We could’ve stayed on Sufi Arabia. The Sufi sect is pretty tolerant of nonbelievers, all things considered. We could have gone straight, gone legit. How’d we end up back in this shitty underworld?

I know the answer. We *tried* to go legit. We really did. But they didn’t want us. The best Riddick could get was janitorial work, and that was with Imam singing his praises. He tried. He gave it his best. But eventually he gave up and went looking for trouble. Trouble pays better.

Except that right now I wish we’d stayed back there. Bad things are happening in the dark and I don’t have shined eyes to see what they are.

I wish I’d had a chance to tell Riddick what I found out. He needs to know. Well... maybe not right this second. He’s on a job. I’m on a job too, and I need to fucking *focus*.

I pull into the complex’s lot, and over to the utility entrance. Now it’s time to strut my stuff for these clowns. Funny having to prove that you’re *in* someone’s league, when the truth is you’re way past them. But all these pricks see is “young girl” or some shit.

Jeez! Focus! *Focus!*

Splicing into the connections takes maybe a minute, and then my palmtop is starting its cycle. By the time I'm back in the van, we're halfway through the security system. Just a little bit of guidance from me, and we'll be all the way in.

Hell... this setup is so pathetically easy I'm surprised this place doesn't get cracked open every *week*.

Okay, I'm into the main system, and it's down. Automatic locks, unlocked and disabled. Motion detectors, disabled. Contact with the alarm company... disabled.

"We're clear."

"'Bout time," Malawi grumbles. As if anyone else could have moved faster.

"Better get going..." I glance at my watch. 11:45. "You have half an hour before the alarm company is gonna wonder why the system is offline."

The three men pile out, Malawi muttering something about me telling him how to do his job. Shit. What an ass. I pull the van door closed behind them and move back up to the front, and my palmtop. Putting on my headset, I switch it on.

"Guys, can you hear me?"

"Check," Bates answers. "We're at the front door."

"Okay, let me know if you need anything."

"Like what?" Malawi demands. Jeez, doesn't this guy ever know how to play nice?

"Give it a rest," Rubric grumbles in my headset. "We're in. On our way... you keep watch, kid."

"Got your backs," I say, and wait a moment. No shit from Malawi. That's something. I lean back in the seat and peruse the screen. Might as well play while I wait, see what kinds of companies are in this complex. Maybe make a few back-doors and leave a few tendrils, for all those Just-In-Case scenarios.

Huh. The directory isn't coming up. Okay...

Now this is getting weird. I switch over to the control panel page again and try to go in "from behind."

Where is it? This makes no sense.

Something in my belly curls and forms a tight knot. This is very, very wrong. I'm *in*. So... where is everything?

I can feel the thought forming in my mind but I don't want to look at it. I don't want to believe it. Not at all...

But I'd better find out anyway.

I pull open another program and start tugging on "strands."

Strands, or tendrils... or as Riddick likes to call them, "hairs," are little programs I slip into existing systems. I can travel along them and slip inside the system, which assumes that I'm part of the strand, and therefore part of the system. They're deceptively simple-looking programs. I showed one to Rat and he called it "elegant." I glowed for days after he said that.

I have one into the police system, and I'm riding it in now.

Okay, I've got access. Time to take a look around.

11:27 Unit 7 dispatched to deal with domestic disturbance report at 1427 Oriole Lane. ETA 11:58.

11:31 Unit 4 dispatched to 3-car collision at 9th and Masswell. ETA 12:03

Shit, how slow are these dipshits?

"*Every day they don't never come correct, you can ask my man right here with the broken neck...*"

"Hey!" Malawi barks through my headset. "Quit with the singin', little girl!"

"I like it," Bates says, cutting him off. "Keep going."

"Sorry guys, didn't know I was doing that out loud." Shit, I *never* sing in front of people. Shows how distracted this has me. I scroll down further.

Oh, fuck me.

11:38 Units 2 and 3 dispatched to the Wellington Office Complex, burglary in progress. Suspects armed and extremely dangerous. ETA 12:13

Everything inside me has turned to ice. I feel like I'm floating, weightless. The knot in my stomach is gone... because I'm completely hollow inside.

"Guys."

"Would you quit interrupting?" Now Bates is sounding impatient with me.

“I need you to get out now.”

“*What?*”

“Out of the building. Now.” I glance at my watch again. It’s 12:01, eighteen minutes since we got here. That son of a bitch.

That motherfucking backstabbing son of a bitch.

“What the hell are you on, girl?” Malawi snaps. “We’re only just getting started!”

“The cops are on their way. They’ll be here in less than twelve minutes.” I try to keep my voice steady, but it’s beginning to shake a little.

“What the fuck did you do?”

I swallow against the nausea inside me. Okay, my guts have returned, in one enormous, buzzing, queasy knot. I hate Malawi. I really, really hate him. But even *he* doesn’t deserve what’s coming.

“I didn’t do a thing, dammit!” I shout. “It’s a fucking *setup!* Do you understand me? *Niko set us up!*”

9.

Denouement

We're going to die.

Everything inside me is screaming it as I grab the latex gloves out of my kit and snap them on. Over the headset, there's complete, stunned silence.

Finally Rubric breaks it. "We're on our way out. What happened?"

I'm wiping down the van as I talk. Anywhere I touched, anywhere the guys touched. "The security system was a fake. An overlay. It gave off all the right signals for a normal shutdown, but the *real* security system is still up and running. It never turned off. I found that out when I decided to have a look around."

"So then the cops are coming because you never shut down the system?" Malawi interrupted. "Maybe if you'd been more careful—"

"I *was* careful! The system I shut down was dead-on with the specs Niko's man gave us! Hell, the only reason we know it's a decoy *now* is because of how fucking careful I am."

"You still fucked up and the cops are on their way! Don't sound too careful to me!"

My hand balls into a tight fist and I drive it into the seat, wishing it were Malawi's gut. "So how do *you* explain the fact that the cops were fucking dispatched *three minutes* before we even pulled into the *parking lot*? Piss off anybody important lately?"

Silence, for a long moment. I spend it trying to find out more about the real security system. Fuck me, it's a good one. I've broken through ones like it before, but it took me hours. I'm gonna have to set a speed record.

Shit, Niko covered all the bases. He'd even planned for the idea that one or more of us might get out alive and have questions. If I hadn't stopped the van over Malawi's asinine crack, we'd have gotten on site just as the call had gone through to the cops. None of us would have ever been able to be sure, afterward, whether or not I'd tripped an alarm.

Someone jumped the gun just a little, and used our ETA instead of waiting for me to patch in.

*Fuck, let me **in** you piece of crap. At least let me turn the cameras off so the boys can make a clean exit—*

Bates comes over the headset. "Jack! We're in trouble!"

I shoot a panicked glance at my watch. 12:05... no cops yet. "What?"

"The locks are engaged. We can't get out!"

Fuck! *Fuck!* Someone must be watching, and able to see them making their retreat. Those locks weren't engaged before! "Workin' on it..."

*Let me **in**, you son of a bitch!*

"Work fast, girl," Rubric says.

I'm sweating. I unzip the jumpsuit as I keep working. I have five minutes left to get the guys clear or they'll be dead. Maybe I will be, too, but at least I'm not locked in the building with nowhere to run.

"Almost there..." The locks are starting to go down, but they're starting awfully far away from the boys. Ten, twenty, thir— *fuck!* They're re-engaging. "Shit!"

"What *now*?" Rubric asks.

"Someone's fighting me."

"What?" Malawi squawks.

"There's someone on the other end, controlling the system. A live human being. The machines are doing what I tell them to, now, but someone else is going in and undoing everything I do."

"You've gotta be kidding!" That's Bates. Now they've all had their say.

"Look, I know the difference between dealing with a machine and dealing with a person, and I'm fighting a *person* here. And unlike me, they're an authorized user!" I groan. I *know* who has to be on the other end of it. The chips he gave me earlier in the evening clatter in my pocket.

Survival is always in fashion...

I pull the jumpsuit off of my upper body and reach into the pocket, jumping when my pocket comm begins to buzz. What *now*? I don't have time. I switch it off as I grab the chips.

"Time for a tactical nuke..." I swallow. Shit! Not yet. I'm still connected into all of my tendrils. If I set it off while they're in, I'll take down half the city. I begin backing out of the tendril program. 12:08. Fuck!

ETA is five minutes. While the tendrils shut down, I pull the jumpsuit off the rest of the way. Odds are the cops know *exactly* what to look for. I don't want to look anything like it.

"What's taking so long?"

"Just another minute and I'll have the locks down!" I yank out the tendrill card and pocket it. Time to do this... for a moment I look at the red chip in my hand, and shudder.

HackerJack is about to go cyberterrorist. I hope Rat's got a good explanation made up to cover his ass.

"Jack??"

Deep breath. 12:10... no more time. I shove the chip into the vacant port.

My screen goes scarlet. I swallow as a message appears on it.

**Sorry, Jackie. I was hoping you wouldn't have to use this. Take the chip with you when you go.
Rat.**

There's only one prompt below. Execute.

I click it.

One second, two, three, four...

The lights in the parking lot flicker off. My palmtop screen dies and the unit goes silent.

"Guys?"

"We're moving," Rubric says. "Good work, kid."

"We have two minutes before the cops are supposed to arrive. Don't go to the van; they probably know exactly what it looks like."

"You running out on us?" Yeah, thanks, jump to *conclusions*, Malawi.

"No, but we're gonna have to sneak out of here at this point. Look, you wanna take your chances with the van, fine. I'll leave the keys in it. But the dispatch said 'armed and extremely dangerous' so my bet is the van's gonna get shot full of holes first thing."

I've pulled the jumpsuit off the rest of the way and am wadding it up. Inside my toolbag I have another, empty bag folded up. I bring it out and open it, stuffing everything inside. It's the kind of bag a mallrat a year or two younger than me might carry around.

With luck, if I get spotted, I can pass myself off as some tipsy little schoolgirl out past curfew. Assuming, of course, that I'm here because I'm the most expendable hacker in Niko's arsenal, and not because he actually wants me dead.

The look his wife gave me hits me again and I shudder, yanking Rat's chip out. I slip it into my pocket and climb out of the van.

What I wouldn't give for Riddick's eyes right now. Shit, I should warn him. I might not be the only one who's been set up tonight.

Focus. Now is not the time to think about that.

I wipe off the door handle and begin to head towards the building at a run. There goes my palmtop. Of course, Rat's little bomb has totally wiped it anyway. And if someone found it with me, there would go my "I'm just a fluffy bunny" act. Still, an irrational lump forms in my throat. Riddick gave it to me a year ago.

What if I never see him again?

Quick glance at my watch. 12:12.

"You guys out yet?"

"Almost," Bates says. "We're coming out the back door. Where are you?"

"I'm over by the du—" Light flares at the edge of the lot and I hear the screech of tires.

Shit!

"They're here! Get to cover!"

I don't have time to meet up with the boys, and I'm in a *bad* place if someone spots me. I make a dash for the dumpsters and slither between them. If I'm lucky, they won't even look here. I'm smaller than most people realize and I can get into tiny spaces nobody would ever think I could. Maybe they'll pass this spot right by.

My comm rattles in my pocket. I have a message. Fuck! I pull it out, meaning to shut it off.

It's a Priority One.

I'd better grab it... only one who leaves those messages for me is Riddick. I should have a few seconds. I key in my code, and the screen glows to life...

Oh god. I shut off the comm and slip it back into my pocket. I feel numb and ill. My hand moves to the headset's controls and presses the Mute button. I can still hear the guys, but I don't want anyone hearing me. Not them, not the cops.

I'm sorry, guys. I got you as far as I can... The urge to puke my guts out grows worse. What if they don't make it? What if they die?

I go still as I hear voices approaching. Not the boys. They're silent on the headset, probably creeping along and hoping they're not spotted.

"Fan out. We're looking for four people, dressed like janitors. Don't take any chances."

Maybe nobody briefed them that one of the "people" was a girl... please God...

Riddick's code flashes in my mind again. 72. 18. 98. Fuck.

We set the code up years ago, and worked it all out. If you know what it means, it passes on a lot of information. Riddick made me memorize all of his hundred two-digit messages, and tested me periodically to make sure I wasn't getting them confused. I did, at first, but haven't for a long time. I even have fun with combination locks, pretending that their combinations are messages from him. My favorite one translated to "New job. Grocery shopping. Boss is an asshole. Pick up some toilet paper."

But that's not what this translated to.

72. "Job is a setup."

18. "I'm safe."

98. "You may be in danger."

Niko tried to take us both out. Bastard... bastard...

I want to send Riddick a message back but I can't. Not now. I don't know if I'm safe or not, and I can't ask him to roar in here and get himself killed, coming to my rescue. I'm stuck.

Now I hear the cops over the headset. They're near the guys... and they're still near me. Oh god. This is gonna be bad.

"Freeze! Don't move! Hands over your head! Now!"

Head. Singular. The boys must have split up.

"I said *now!*"

Rubric's voice over the headset... and echoing from a distance into my free ear. "Okay, man, relax, I—"

Gunfire greets his words and makes me flinch against the cold metal of the dumpster. Tears escape my eyes and begin rolling down my cheeks, hot against my icy flesh, as I hear Rubric's dying scream in two places. Worse is hearing the labored, hitching breathing through the headset.

Worst of all is hearing it rattle to a stop.

They're not even trying to capture. This is an execution.

"Oh fuck..." Bates.

No, dammit! Don't talk, don't say anything, don't attract attention...

Too late.

More shouting. He's given himself away and they're closing on him. Oh god. Out of all of them, Bates is the nicest. He's never treated me like an idiot.

Don't die, please don't die, please god don't let him die—

I can't even make out what anybody's shouting but gunfire overrules it. I struggle not to let out a scream, not to sob out loud. I don't want to die. I don't want to die.

I don't want to die like Rubric and Bates.

My eyes snap open as I hear the sound of running feet on asphalt. Someone's coming my way, in a big damn hurry. Fuck, it's Malawi... he's making for the dumpsters.

No! Go away, don't come over here, they'll kill us both—

Of its own accord, my hand reaches up and turns off my headset. There's nobody else left to hear, nobody else left to talk to. And I don't want them looking for my carrier wave. Assuming they're looking at all.

Malawi's almost reached me when the shooting starts. I can see him clearly in the police lights as the slugs hit him. And keep hitting him. I stop counting after the fifth bullet slams into his back. He drops to his knees.

His eyes widen a little as he sees me.

Oh fuck.

Recognition fills his gaze. Confusion. Anger... he blames me for this. In a moment he'll shout something and they'll know where I am.

Then his face empties and his eyes glaze over, awareness fleeing altogether. He slumps down onto the pavement, hand outstretched toward me, dead eyes locked on mine.

I'm all alone.

I listen to the sound of approaching men, and try to melt back into the darkness. Part of me feels as if I've already died, and I'm just waiting for the bullets to actually strike.

10.

Amy

I can't move. If I do, I'll die.

I'm half-between, half-behind the dumpsters, as low to the ground as I can get. A puddle of something I don't even want to think about is soaking into my shirt. And less than ten feet away, three cops are searching Malawi's body.

If I make a sound, I'll be as dead as he is.

"Any sign of the fourth man?" one of them asks into a headset. I can't hear the answer. "Well, keep looking. He has to be around here somewhere."

He. Thank god. Maybe this isn't personal after all.

I remember the coded message Riddick sent me and suppress a shudder.

"Thought it was a girl," one of the other cops remarks as he digs through Malawi's pockets.

Well, fuck.

"With a name like Jack? Right."

Double fuck with a side of oh shit!

"Maybe this Jack bolted before we got here. Our informant says the guys headed out of the building early, like they were spooked." The third cop holsters his gun and steps away from Malawi's body as he's speaking.

Why *didn't* I just bolt? I should have. Not like I was able to save the others. Staying and trying to get them out didn't make them any less dead.

I should've just run.

"What's the word, boys? You find the fourth?"

"No sign of her," says a voice over the cop's radio. "Looks like she must've cleared out before we got here."

"Fine. Do one more sweep and tell the coroner's office we have three bodies for them." The cop is fiddling with a plastic evidence bag. Shit, check *that* out. How *nice* of them to give Malawi a gun to defend himself with, now that he's *dead*. "Stand by, shots about to be fired from the dumpsters."

I wonder how they plan to explain the fact that when they shot *back* at him, all the bullets hit him in the back.

The shots are almost deafening in this enclosed area. Even bracing myself for them, I almost jump out of my skin.

I watch as the cop moves Malawi back into position, so that he's sprawled again on the pavement, his eyes once more balefully fixed upon mine. Even in death I can feel the weight of his hatred, his blame. I'm trapped by his gaze. By his eyes.

They are *not* the most terrifying things I've ever seen. I've seen far worse than this. Other eyes gave me nightmares for months and almost sent me over the edge of sanity. New Vancouver... I was stupid to say I wanted to be back there. Now it's come to me.

It was the fourth time I played decoy for Riddick. The fourth and *last* time. After what happened, he never asked me again. At first I thought that was because he thought I was a fuckup or something. But when I finally got up the nerve to ask, he told me that he knew it had almost destroyed me, and he never wanted that to happen.

I think he wishes he could undo that night almost as much as *I* do. We'd planned it all out, very carefully, but we hadn't been quite careful enough.

There were dumpsters in that alley, too, but it was cleaner than this place. I'd been drawing Riddick's mark to him for a week, and this time he'd followed me back to a quiet rendezvous spot. That night was *the* night.

I was sixteen, but unlike my mother, people were starting to *overestimate* my age, rather than underestimate it. Bart Harper actually thought I was legal, if barely. He wasn't a pedophile like Renault; he just liked tall blondes. Now he thought he was going to get a taste of one.

Riddick had other tastes planned for him, though.

We retreated into the darkest part of the alley, my flirtatious gestures growing more and more promising as we did. I wasn't nervous. Riddick and I had rehearsed this over and over; Bart here would never even get a kiss in.

He didn't. Riddick seemed to materialize out of nowhere, stepping up behind him and pulling him back. This time he wasn't going to kill with a knife. The man who had hired him had made a special request.

"Shit!" Bart shouted, misunderstanding the situation. "Look, man, take my wallet, it's in my jacket—" His eyes widened and his voice cut off when he saw the hypo in Riddick's hands.

Riddick hates it when he has to do drama. He prefers to just stick his knife in and be done with it. But when his employer has a message, he will deliver it.

"Mr. Alonson wants me to tell you something, Harper. You know who that is?"

"Huh?"

"He's the father of the kid you hooked on this stuff." Riddick nodded at the syringe. "Well, he's the father of *one* of the kids. The one who died a week ago along with everybody else you sold that contaminated shit to. He wants me to give you a taste of what it's like to be that boy."

Bart's eyes had grown huge. For a moment, when Riddick had talked about "a message," he probably thought he was going to walk away with just a beating. Until that.

"Shit, man! Look, whatever he's paying you, I'll—"

"Doesn't work like that. I don't back out on a contract once I accept it." Riddick had him immobilized, his hand on a bundle of nerves that, when pressed, could paralyze a victim. He showed me where they were, but I've never had the strength to press hard enough. It meant that Bart couldn't fight him, though, as the hypo came down to his throat.

"It won't work!" Bart insisted, desperation showing on his face. "I'm protected!"

Riddick smirked. "Cerberus?"

"Yeah, so why don't we just—" His words were cut off as Riddick injected the contents of the syringe into his throat. Then, suddenly, he began to convulse, agony contorting his already-homely features.

Riddick rose and stepped away from him. The seizures were growing.

"I didn't know Cerberus did that to you," I whispered at Riddick. He was wiping the syringe clean and swapping a half-full vial into the cartridge chamber.

"It doesn't." He smirked at me and moved back to Harper's side as the convulsions stopped. "But a half-and-half mixture of morphine and industrial cleanser? That will."

Half of me was horrified but the other half almost laughed. It was probably the most macabre thing I had ever heard of, but it also reminded me of a movie I'd once seen, involving an evil prom queen. "Oh shit. Why'd you do that?"

"Because that was what Mr. Alonson wanted."

"Won't it be obvious that it was murder, though? I mean, if Bart had Cerberus protecting him, why'd he be shooting up?"

"That's the beauty of the cleanser. It'll have fried all of the nanites when they tried to take up the morphine swimming in it. Won't be any sign of them by the time an autopsy's done. He'll just be another hype who was sampling his own wares and got hold of a contaminated batch."

"Ouch." I took a deep breath and was about to ask him if he could warn me next time, but that was when everything got totally screwed up.

A loud clatter from the direction of the dumpsters made me jump and Riddick whirl. A knife appeared in his hand as if by magic, despite the fact that it would probably just be a cat. Then a small, *human* form darted out from between the trash cans and raced towards the mouth of the alley.

Riddick reversed the knife in his hand, preparing to throw it. "Fuck!"

I blinked as the figure vanished, and looked at Riddick. The knife was still in his hand, unthrown. His face looked stricken.

"What?"

"It's a kid."

Riddick's big weakness is children. Hell, that's how I ended up with a protector, more or less. That was how Johns caught him, too, the second time they went head-to-head, and how he ended up on the *Hunter-Gratzner*.

"Shit! Look, you finish up what you gotta do here. I'll go after him."

"Her."

That was all the permission I had time to get if I wanted to catch up to the kid. I took off down the alley after her, not looking back to see what Riddick was doing. My mind was racing faster than my feet.

Any girl who was hiding in that alleyway had to either be homeless or on the run from a really shitty home. She was probably scared out of her mind, after seeing that. I couldn't really blame her. Anyone who

thinks they won't shudder in the face of Death has never actually faced it.

I had to stop her from telling anyone what she saw, but I didn't want to hurt her, any more than Riddick did. Funny thing, but I kind of felt an automatic sense of kinship with her.

There she was, half a block ahead of me. She'd stopped running and was leaning against a light post, catching her breath. I'd figured she wouldn't have much stamina. I didn't either, back when I was on my own.

She turned and saw me.

That moment was frozen for me. A delicate, pixie-ish face framed by downy blonde hair. China-blue eyes widening in terror. For a second I thought I was looking at Carolyn Fry, but that was impossible. The girl couldn't be more than thirteen years old.

Then she began to run again.

I was gaining, and fast. Two and a half years of sparring with Richard B. Riddick meant that I was stronger and faster than anyone could guess by looking at me.

"Kid! Stop!" I wasn't even out of breath. "I'm not gonna hurt you, I just wanna talk to you!"

She darted into the empty street, heading for a side road. I swerved and followed. I knew where she was heading now. There was a drop-in shelter three blocks away. If she got there, they'd want to know what she was running from. Part of me wondered if I was going to have to cold-cock her and drag her back to the apartment.

If necessary, I would.

I was almost on her. I reached out with one hand and grabbed hold of her grubby denim jacket.

She screamed, slithering free of the jacket's hold like a wild animal, whirling to face me. Her eyes were enormous.

I dropped the jacket and held up my hands in a gesture that was half-warning, half-conciliation. "Just stop! I'm not gonna hurt you!"

She stared at me, panting. Her mouth moved but nothing came out.

I tried to gentle my voice down a little. "I just wanna talk to you, okay? Look, what you saw back there—"

"You killed him!"

Fuck! Thank god the street was deserted.

"You know who that guy was? He sold drugs to kids our age, okay? A bunch of them died last week."

I tried to take a step closer to her hand she scrambled back from me. But I could see she was thinking about what I'd said. Maybe she was remembering Riddick's conversation with Harper. I could hope. Thank god this hit had been on someone dirty.

Then again, Riddick only ever let *me* see him hit people who were dirty. The other hits — and I knew he did them — he never let me know any details about.

"Are y..." She swallowed and started over. "...You gonna kill me too?"

"No." I held up my hands and then gestured at my clothes. No hidden weapons in this skimpy outfit. "I just... look, I wanna help you, okay? I don't want you telling anybody what you saw, and it looks like you could use some help anyway."

She stared at me as if I was totally insane. Well, that *had* been a shitty sales pitch.

Deep breath; try again. "How long you been running?"

"F-five months." Her face suddenly looked haunted. Couldn't blame her there. I knew what kinds of things I'd had to do when I ran, just to stay alive. And she was beautiful. Total catnip to predators. You could see the scars they'd left on her soul if you knew how to look. I did. I had my own collection.

"Look, I probably shouldn't offer without asking Rick, but... you want a safe place to stay? Nobody trying to use you or hurt you?"

"You expect me to believe he doesn't make you..." The gesture she made with her body was very descriptive.

"Yes. He's never touched me like that."

"What, is he gay?"

"No, he's just a good man."

She blinked and then a derisive laugh exploded out of her. "I just saw him kill a man!"

"What, like you don't have a few people you wouldn't like to see dead by now?" Most of the time, if I had to think about what Riddick did for a living, and what it meant, that was the rationalization I used. I'd imagine him killing Luke for me, and the mechanic on the *Bonnie Lynn*, and I'd tell myself murder could be a righteous thing.

I couldn't examine it more closely. I didn't dare. If I did, I might have had to conclude that Riddick was evil... and that I was, too, for helping him. There were some things that just couldn't be scrutinized. Not if I wanted to stay sane.

But I'd reached her. She probably had a long list of her own, guys who had hurt her or made her do humiliating things for a meal or a place to crash. The sense of kinship between us grew inside me. I wanted to get her off the streets. I wanted her to be safe with Riddick and me.

Shit, if she said yes, I'd have a *sister*. Where did that warm tingle come from?

"What's your name?" I asked her.

"Amy," she said. Her voice was calmer... speculative. I had her interest.

"I'm Jack." I grimaced and shook my head. Riddick called me that, but most everybody else called me — "I mean, Jackie."

She smirked. "Let me guess, you used to dress up like a boy?"

I nodded and grinned back. Yeah, she knew the drill. That disguise would never have worked for her, though. Tiny as she was, she had a pretty ample bosom that would be almost impossible to bind down.

"And this guy... Rick?"

I nodded.

"You promise he won't hurt me? Or try to fuck me or something?"

"I promise. Look, I've been with him since I was going on fourteen, that's two and a half years now, and he's never once tried any —"

Suddenly we were caught in a brilliant spotlight. I turned my head, blinking. All I could see was a pair of lights, bearing down on us, getting brighter and larger, *fast*.

"Shit!" I heard Amy shout.

"Run!" I threw myself to the side.

Something struck my hip and sent a wave of fire through my body. I stumbled to the ground, more fire igniting on my knees and the palms of my hands as I hit. A loud screech of rubber on concrete sounded nearby. I winced, shaking my head, and looked up.

Fifteen feet away, a van had come skidding to a stop. The driver's side door opened and a man leaned out, his mop of shaggy brown hair illuminated by the streetlight.

Not Riddick. For an awful, ungrateful second I'd been afraid it was.

"Oh fuck, man, we gotta get *out* of here!" He disappeared back into the van, the door slamming. Tires screamed again and the van continued down the road, barreling around another corner.

I climbed to my feet and winced as my hip sent another stab of pain through me. "Oh fuck me, that was too close —"

Amy.

I turned to look for her, and suddenly felt like I was falling.

She was lying in the middle of the road, her body flopping like I'd seen fish do when the bully-boys in my sixth grade class pulled them out of their tanks to laugh at them. I limped as fast as I could over to her and dropped to my knees, barely even feeling their scream of complaint, beside her. The second my raw hands touched her, she went still, the convulsions ceasing.

"Amy! Just stay still, you're gonna be o —"

Then I saw her face. Then I saw her *eyes*.

Then I couldn't stop myself from screaming.

Oh god, Amy, I'm so sorry. I'm *so sorry*.

I want to scream, all over again, just remembering that moment. Those eyes locked on mine, the way Malawi's are, but so much worse.

But I can't scream. I can't make a sound. I can't even move.

If I do, I'll die too.

WARNING! This was not an easy chapter to write, at all, and may not be an easy chapter to read. I tried to be as realistic as possible about Amy's death, and its impact. You will see things in this chapter that are probably quite squicky.

11. Circling

I can't feel my legs.

They've gone numb on me, I guess because I've been lying still for so long. I wonder if I've turned to stone from the waist down. That's what it feels like.

About a dozen feet away from me, unaware of my presence, two medical examiners are bagging Malawi's body while they talk about baseball. The press has been and gone. I think the cops are gone, too. A tow-truck took away the van a while back.

Now if these guys would just get done and gone, maybe I can get out of here before I lose all the warmth and feeling I have left in my body.

I need to stay still. I need to wait. They'll be gone soon. After the bodies are picked up and everybody's gone, I can get out of here. I just... can't... make a sound.

The knots inside me are tightening and tightening. My stomach feels like it's a solid mass of macramé. By the time this is over, I'll have turned to stone all the way.

I want Riddick. Shit, I even want my *mother*. I close my eyes and feel tears burn against the lids. I don't want to die in this place.

Did Amy feel like this? Is this how it was for her when she ran? Were her guts twisted into elaborate braids like mine are now?

Oh god, kid, I'm so sorry. Every time I think about her, I cringe and curl in on myself. New Vancouver. We vowed, afterwards, that we would never go back.

*I'm so sorry, Amy. I never meant any of it to happen. You must have been so scared—
"Shut the fuck up!"*

My head jerked upward at the man's voice. He was hanging out of a third story window, glaring down at me. In that instant, I hated him with virulent intensity. It should've been *him* down on this pavement, not Amy—

"Call an ambulance!" I screamed at him, my voice cracking and inhuman.

"What the *fuck* you kids been doing!?"

"*Fuck you!*" If he'd been in front of me I don't know what I'd have tried to do to him. "*A van hit her! Call a fucking ambulance!*"

"*Shit!*" He disappeared from his window like one of the moles on the Ballards' lawn, realizing it had been spotted. *Bastard!*

I swallowed and forced myself to look back down at Amy. I didn't want to, and yet I did. Maybe, this time, she'd be okay instead of—

Oh god.

She was staring up at me, her expression one of absolute terror, almost a rictus. Something about her face was *wrong*. Off. But I couldn't figure out what it was because I was completely transfixed by her eyes.

They were *bulging* forward, the lids pulled back away from them, almost like they had popped out of their sockets. White surrounded her irises on every side, making her once-beautiful face look like something from a horror movie. They stared up at me with fixed intensity while she tried to breathe.

I didn't know what to do.

"Amy? Can you hear me? You're gonna be okay..." I knew it was a lie. Nobody whose face looked like that was going to be *okay*. But I had to say something. She looked so scared.

Her only answer was another rattling gasp as she tried to breathe. Her chest heaved with the effort.

Oh god, what do I do? Did she need help breathing? Should I get her out of the street? I didn't know, I couldn't think. Nobody was around—

"*Somebody help me!*" The words exploded out of me before I even knew they were coming.
"*Somebody—*"

The apartment door opened, spilling several people out, including the man who had been shouting at me. He headed my way at a run, holding a white box.

“Ambulance is on its way! What happened, you said a van hit her?”

The box had a red crescent on it. I abruptly hated myself for the awful thoughts I’d had about him. I couldn’t say a word, suddenly, and had to just nod at him. My eyes were stinging. Did they look like Amy’s? Oh god...

He set the box down next to us and knelt over Amy for a second before lurching back. “Oh fuck! Allah have mercy...”

Then he was stumbling away. I stared after him, watching in confusion as he sagged against the light-post and retched. Irrationally, the thought that went through my head was that my eyes probably didn’t look at all like Amy’s.

Next to me, she made a sound between a rasp and a whine, pulling my attention back to her. A small pink froth had appeared at the corner of her mouth. My shaking hands grabbed the first aid kit and struggled to open it.

“Amy, just hold on, help is on the way, just hold on...” She couldn’t die. Not now. Not when I’d finally found a friend who was like me.

The box finally opened up and I grabbed at a packet of gauze. I couldn’t figure out where to begin. I started by dabbing at the froth on her mouth. My throat felt like it had closed and knotted shut. Around me the light seemed to be flickering, strobing red and throwing everything into eerie, gory relief.

“Miss, we need you to move out of the way.” The arm around my waist pulled me out of my daze. I was being lifted up. I turned my head and gaped at the man holding me. He was dressed in the white uniform of an emergency tech, and looking not at me but at someone else. “What do we have?”

“Train wreck. Female, probably early teens.”

My head snapped around to see the other speaker. For a moment I thought Imam was there. Only this man was younger and had tight black curls on his head instead of a shaved skull. Not Imam... just...

It was another emergency technician. He shoved the first aid kit out of the way and set down his bag. A beam of light shone down from the small rod in his hand, moving over Amy’s face and head.

“Depressed skull fracture, proptosis, blown pupils...” He bent closer, tilting his head to examine her. “Grab the board. I’m gonna tube and bag.”

“Sh-she was convulsing before,” I managed. Neither man responded directly but the one hovering over Amy nodded as though it confirmed his thoughts.

“Cervical obstruction to airway; we’ll need the crico tray and a ten-gauge Seldinger.” The man looked up, ignoring me and focusing instead on his partner. “Stat. She’s circling.”

The arm that had been holding me was suddenly gone. I glanced back and saw the tech by the ambulance, grabbing supplies. Moving back to Amy’s side, I crouched down next to her and took her hand. Her eyes looked even bigger than before. Dark circles were forming under them.

The man who wasn’t Imam looked up at me, frowning. “Clear out.”

“What? But—”

“Get her out of here! Will someone *please* get her out of here?”

“I’m not going anywhere—”

“Roy, a little help here?”

A new hand, hard and undeniable, grasped my elbow and pulled me back. An arm snaked around my waist and I was lifted up, kicking wildly at my captor’s legs.

“Easy! Easy!” The man’s voice was yet another new one. Shit, how many people were sneaking up on me here? A wild glance around showed me dozens of onlookers, more than half of them in nightgowns and pajamas. Several of them looked ill. The once-deserted street was more crowded than it probably ever got in the daytime.

How much time had elapsed? Where had it gone? Four police cars had somehow come and I hadn’t even noticed, hadn’t so much as heard the sirens. They were road-blocking each of the streets leading into the intersection, while their occupants were stringing yellow tape around us and shooing spectators back.

I was surrounded. I didn’t know what to do. If he put me on the other side of the yellow tape I could run before anyone realized I’d been involved, but what if Amy talked? I’d never gotten to ask her to keep quiet about what she’d seen...

“Yes, I woke up and looked out, and she was kneeling over the girl, screaming for help. I think she called her Amy.”

Mr. Red Crescent. I wasn’t sure if he’d just saved me or doomed me.

Instead of escorting me past the tape, my captor set me down once we were over by the ambulance and a patrol car. I grabbed onto his arm as my knees almost gave out. Dark blue sleeve. Cop. Roy? Was this Roy? I turned and found myself face-to-face with some rookie who, I thought, couldn't be much older than *me*. He was thin-faced and pale, with a light sheen of sweat over his face. He looked nauseated, his eyes flicking over to Amy again and again while he watched me.

"You need to let them work," he told me, supporting my elbows until I could stand on my own. "If you want to help your friend, you need to stay out of their way."

"They'll help her, right?" I looked back over at Amy. One of the paramedics was swirling a wet pad over her throat.

"Yes, but you have to let them work."

"I don't want her to die, she can't die..." I was babbling. Worse yet, there was another voice, *inside me*, babbling back at me, telling me horrible things. Telling me that if Amy died, nobody would ever know Riddick killed Bart. Telling me she was better off dead, the shape she was in. Telling me that now I was a killer, too, as if I'd somehow pushed her in front of the van.

I suddenly hated myself. Why wasn't *I* the one lying beneath the paramedics? Amy deserved to be the one with a safe place, a home, a protector... a future...

"C'mon. You let them work, and tell me what happened." He pulled out a small palmtop and a stylus with trembling hands. "Tell me what happened."

Was he repeating himself for my sake or for his?

I swallowed, shoving my self-loathing aside as best I could, and tried to collect my thoughts. They were scattered all over the street, fragmented by the van's passage, glittering like the pool of red that had formed beside Amy's head. I couldn't think.

"There was a van..." I remembered a van. "Lights... coming at us."

"Did you get a good look at it?"

I closed my eyes, trying to focus on the memory. When I opened them, hot liquid splashed down onto my cheeks. "It was light green. I think. It looked light green... um... the guy driving it... had brown hair. He took off..."

"Did you see the license plate? Do you remember?"

"I need you to move the crowd back another ten feet on this side, Richards. Clear a space for the crash team and the air-evac."

"Are you nuts? You can't take her up! Look at her eyes. Any more pressure change to her skull could kill her instantly—"

I shuddered and covered my ears, closing my eyes again. I needed to concentrate, remember. Remember the way Riddick showed me to. Focus... The van, apple-green beneath the street-light. Red tail-lights bright in contrast. The plate...

"One... five...seven... D... six... I can't remember the last number..." I opened my eyes and more hot liquid spilled down my face. Tears? I hadn't cried in front of anybody other than Riddick in years and years.

Roy the cop nodded. Maybe I was imagining it, but he looked paler than ever. "Okay, that should be enough to get a lead. How did it happen?"

"We were talking, and suddenly these bright lights hit us and we looked up..." I rubbed at the wetness on my cheeks. For some reason this made Roy flinch back a little.

He swallowed. "Um..." He must have *really* been young, the way his voice cracked. "What... what were you doing in the road?"

I groaned and shook my head. Obviously I couldn't tell him the truth, but... "We were *crossing*." I pointed to Amy's abandoned jacket, which lay at the edge of the crosswalk.

It was a lie. But I figured it wouldn't hurt at this point. Saying we'd been standing there added about five feet to the distance Amy'd been thrown, but who the hell was counting, right? And we *had* been in the crosswalk, for a moment...

"Okay. Can I get your name, Miss?"

"J... Jackie. Jackie Martin." That was the name on my fake ID. I was amazed I could remember it. For a second, my real name had tried to climb out of my mouth.

"And your friend's name?"

"Amy."

He looked up at me. "Amy what?"

I shook my head, feeling exposed. "I don't know."

“You don’t know your friend’s last name.”

“Look, we just met tonight, okay? We were hanging out, and—”

His eyes were shrewd. “Heading for the drop-in shelter?” I hesitated a moment too long and he nodded, pegging us both as runaways.

“Okay, let’s get her on the board— oh shit.”

“What?”

“Fracture’s open and leaking pink matter. I didn’t see it before because we were keeping her immobile. There’s no saving this one.”

“Let’s just get her downtown.”

“Crap, hold her still a second. The three-lead— shit, convulsions!”

“She’s circling. Call it.”

“If I pronounce I need an officer backing the call. Who’s supervising this mess?”

“Todd, we’re losing her. Think you could witness here?”

Pronounce? Witness? Losing her...?

“No!”

Roy tried to grab my arm but I was already running, my aching legs suddenly weightless. Blinding pain lanced through my body as I dropped to my knees beside Amy again. She was twitching rhythmically, her heels drumming the pavement. I grabbed her hand and felt it tighten around my fingers.

“Shit, Roy, get her—”

“Cool it, Chuck, you said there’s nothing you can do. Let her say goodbye.”

“No!” I stared up at the men standing around us, unable to believe they were just *standing there*. “You gotta help her, you can’t just let her die!”

All three men looked ill. But none of them moved. A fourth joined them, a much older policeman. The grave look on his face said he’d seen all of this before.

I felt like I was being strangled. A long, painful wheeze escaped Amy and I turned back to her, trying not to look at the awful *thing* sticking out of her crooked neck.

“Amy? Amy, please! Hold on, don’t let go, don’t leave me!”

For a moment I thought she was trying to say something. She seemed to be straining toward me, trying to sit up. I reached down, wanting to help her, and put my hand on her shoulder only to jerk it back as it touched something unspeakable.

“Amy? Can you hear me?” I reached down again, promising myself this time I wouldn’t pull back.

Then her body relaxed and she sagged back to the pavement, still. Her arm twitched, several times in rapid succession. Her hand went limp in mine.

The paramedic who wasn’t Imam knelt down on the other side of her and put a stethoscope to her chest.

“Okay, I’m pronouncing. Time?”

“2:13 a.m.”

“Do you concur, Officer Bardwell?”

“I concur.”

“No...” But I knew it was true. The body beside me was just that, now... a body. Amy wasn’t there anymore. All that was left was wreckage... *train wreckage*... Only the impenetrable knot in my throat was keeping sobs from exploding out of me.

I watched as the older policeman thumbed a button on his collar and began speaking into his suit’s comm. “This is officer Bardwell. Cancel the air-evac and send for the M.E. And put out an APB for a light green van with partial license plate 157D6...”

“The M.E. is three blocks away, processing a probable O.D. They’ll head your way next,” said a voice over the collar-com. I shuddered. I knew exactly whose body was being processed there.

Every death tonight had my fingerprints on it.

More people were arriving, a man in municipal coveralls tugging at Roy’s arm. “Yeah, dispatch sent me out, what happened here?”

“Never mind that. We need you to pull the vids for the intersection.”

Pull the vids for the intersection... Fuck. They’d see what really happened. I didn’t think traffic cameras had sound, but shit. They’d have a lot of questions once they played those vids...

Riddick and I needed to get out of town fast.

I barely noticed Amy’s body beside me, now, as I stood up. My knees and hip protested fiercely but I began to move away from the scene. Away from a broken dream that had been killed in its birth.

"Where are you going?" One of the medics was standing next to me. Light exploded in my face as he pointed his little penlight at my eyes.

"I'm just..."

"Pupils are responsive, no sign of concussion. You sure she was hit too?"

"Look at her hands and knees, and the side of her dress."

I glanced down at my hip and noticed, for the first time, that my dress was ripped. The beads and sequins had been torn off of the fabric... I'd seen glittering on the street...

"Officer Holloway found red sequins over by the skid marks. She was struck."

"Miss, we're gonna have to take you downtown for some x-rays. If you'll come over here, we need to put a brace on your neck, okay? It's just a precaution."

"No..."

"She's refusing treatment."

"Is she competent to?" The older officer turned to Roy, who shook his head.

"Her ID's fake. Underage, probably another runaway."

"In that dress? And she's too clean and well-fed."

"Okay, maybe a hooker..."

"What?" Half the women at the nightclub had been dressed in tackier clothes than this! And it had been years since— fuck!

"She's definitely a minor, and look at her. Concussion or not, she's not all there."

"Not competent to refuse treatment, then?"

"That's my assessment."

"I concur. We'll take her for x-rays and take the rest of her statement on the way."

"Look, I'm not going *anywhere* with you guys, okay?" I had to get out of here. I started moving towards one of the tapes. Get past the tape, past the crowd, and out of here... I had to go.

Strong hands grabbed me.

"Come on, we need to make sure you're okay."

I wanted to scream. "I'm *fine*!"

"Nobody's gonna hurt you, just come over here and lie down—"

My past exploded and rioted through my head, those words echoing back to one of the times I never, ever wanted to think about. That night I'd been hurt worse than ever before in my life.

Not this time. *Not this time! Not this time!*

I was moving on instinct, the things Riddick had taught me flowing through me. The twelve-year-old girl I'd been was beating back her attackers with my knowledge, my skills. Vaguely, I was aware that I was *not* surrounded by a group of dockworkers who'd caught a stowaway. I was aware that I was in another place. But it was too late.

Then they were on the ground and I was running. Almost free, almost safe—

Falling, the weight of a man's body bearing me down.

"Got her! Fuckin' wildcat! You really wanna take her downtown?"

"Oh, she's going downtown," an infuriated voice growled. "We'll even stop at the *hospital* on the way. You got the hypo?"

I struggled against the hands, more and more of them pinning me down. A face appeared above me, the man who wasn't Imam, now even less like him with blood pouring from his broken nose.

A glimpse of a hypo in his hand. Terror crushing at my chest. *Riddick, help me—*

Blackness, and no Riddick. No Riddick anywhere.

It's dark. And so quiet. The bodies are gone, and the detectives. Everyone has left. I can see the ghostly shape of the tape outline, beyond the dumpster, and the flutter of yellow tape. But it's quiet now. So quiet.

I'm afraid to break the silence. What if they come back?

I have to.

My hand is numb and has trouble digging into my pocket. Finally I have my comm out. I flip it open.

Here goes... I hope I'm really as alone as I think...

I turn it on, and fumble in my message, and press SEND.

Just two codes.

88.

I'm scared.

00.

Help me.

Note: This chapter is a bit of a mind-bender. I'm doing an experimental technique of having two time-lines overlap and converge. I hope it's not too confusing.

12.

Perfidy

When I was a little girl, I was afraid of the dark. I knew, with the certainty of any small child, that monsters lived in it and would take me if they could. Monsters, or maybe devils. I remember someone telling me about how you'd see the glowing eyes of the Devil when he came for you in the dark.

I guess that means Luke's right about me, and how I'm going to Hell. Because the Devil's eyes shine silver in the night when he comes for me, and I am always glad to see him.

I took them for coins, as I lay in the hospital bed. My thoughts were murky and I thought they were the silver coins that used to be put over the eyes of the dead, to grant passage into the underworld. Coins to cover Amy's frightening eyes, hide them from view... was that her in my room, her eyes hidden behind silver circles that marked her as one of the departed? Was she coming for me?

But no, that wasn't her, then. And it's not her now, either. It's the eyes of my Devil, my savior... Riddick has come for me.

He kneels down in front of the gap between the dumpsters, and I know he can see me clearly. His voice is a hushed growl when he speaks.

"You okay, Jack? *Can you move?*"

I murmured something unintelligible and felt his hands, hot against my drug-chilled skin, touching my face and throat.

"I think so..." I try, but my limbs won't obey me.

He leans in a little, as much as the narrow passage will allow. Too narrow... his fingertips are about four feet away when he reaches towards me. "Come on. Just a little way. Then I can help you, Okay? *I'm gonna get you out of here.*"

Strong hands lifted me into a sitting position and the blanket covering me was pulled back. I swayed, dazed, as he tore off my thin hospital gown. Then the warmth of his hands was back as they traveled over every inch of my skin.

"You're okay, I've got you now."

I relax, shaking, as his hands grasp my upper arms, and let him pull me the rest of the way out. He lifts me to my feet as he steps back from the dumpsters, nimbly side-stepping Malawi's taped outline even as I start to gasp a protest. We don't touch it.

I shiver against him and feel his hands on me again, checking every inch of my body for damage once more. This time, though, he isn't disguised in scrubs and smelling of hospital cleansers. He's got his trench coat on, and his arsenal under it. I can feel one of his guns pressing against my thigh, and the holster of another against my breast. And I smell blood on him.

"Whose... blood...?"

"Not mine."

"Oh." Then it's not important.

"Let's get you out of here."

He finished dressing me in scrubs and helped me to my feet. I could barely feel the floor beneath them; my steps were shuffling and slow.

"Just another minute and..." The lights suddenly died. "There. Thank you, Russell, I knew you'd come through for me."

My mouth was having a hard time working right. "Li... supp..."

"Wrong floor. Nobody's gonna be hurt by this power outage. Unless they try to stop us from leaving." Grim iron entered into his voice. "You think you can walk or you want me to carry you?"

"I can walk." I hope I can walk. I have almost no strength in my legs, but I don't want to have to be carried like a child this time. Not if I can help it. I feel too damn powerless as it is.

He walks slowly, tension thrumming through his body while I limp against him. My legs are slowly waking back up. In a few minutes they're gonna hurt like a son of a bitch. I hope we'll have made it to his car by then.

“How did you find me...?” All I managed to send him was the one message for help, and I swear he appeared a minute later.

“Knew where you’d be. It’s the kind of place you always go to ground.”

Part of me wants to laugh at that because he’s right. But I wonder what it says about me. Maybe it says more about the kinds of things I’m afraid of. Even Luke never thought to look for me behind the dumpsters when I’d hide.

Shit, I want to puke...

“Goh... be... si...”

He turned his head sharply to look at me, frowning a little as he carried me through the garage.

“Think you can wait a few more minutes? ‘Til we’re out of here?”

“...try...” It was hard speaking around the drugs and the knot in my throat.

“We’re almost there.”

The car is in front of us, now. My legs are prickling, more and more painfully, as we maneuver around to the passenger side. I lean against it while he opens the door for me. I’m shaking worse than ever now, and still struggling against the rising nausea. I can’t even get into the car without Riddick’s help.

He straps me in and then his hands are on my cheeks. It feels like the glittering steel of his gaze is slicing through me. I don’t even know what he’s seeing.

“Let’s get you home, okay?”

I nodded, closing my eyes for a moment. Time was strange for me. I kept losing pieces. The car was in motion. We were leaving the hospital’s garage. Riddick had parked in the section reserved for physicians, and nobody challenged us as we left, even though everyone else was being stopped. Someone must have sounded an alarm.

“How... did...” Damn, those words were actually coherent!

“Heard about the accident on the newscom. I didn’t know what happened, so I had to check the morgue while you were still in radiology—”

The morgue.

“Oh fuck, pull over!”

My stomach tries to escape when the car shudders to an abrupt halt. The belt’s fighting me and, as a hideously sour taste floods my mouth, I’m afraid I’m not gonna make it. Large, deft hands come to my rescue, snapping open the belt and pushing the door ajar for me. I launch myself to the side and half jump, half fall, to the curb.

Didn’t I just do this *last* night? Fuck.

Riddick’s arms are around me again. Déjà vu. Déjà vu all over the place. I’m floating in time or something. Last time, though, *he didn’t have a coat on. His arms were bare below the short sleeves of the scrubs as he supported me.*

“Easy... you okay, there? The records said you weren’t concussed or anything, but—”

“I’m fine...” It came out as a pained groan. As he helped me to my feet, I struggled to find the words to tell him what was wrong. “You... saw her?”

The grave expression on his face told me everything I needed to know. “Yeah. I saw.”

I wiped at my mouth as he helped me back into the car, not even realizing that I’d begun to sob. “She’s dead, Rick, she’s dead and it’s all my fault.”

Riddick frowns down at me, the expression on his face confused. “What are you talking about? You didn’t set them up. You stayed and tried to get them out of there.”

“The security system was too easy, I should’ve known it was a fake.” The sobs are getting harsher. It’s Malawi’s face I can’t shut out. He died with the two of us still hating each other. I don’t hate him anymore. And I can never tell him that.

“Look, we’ll talk about it when we get home, okay?” Riddick belted me back in and closed the car door, climbing in beside me a moment later. For several long seconds he just stared at me, his expression unfathomable. Then he started the car again.

“Okay,” I whispered. I didn’t want to talk. I didn’t want to think. I didn’t want to be. All I could see were Amy’s eyes and the macabre accusation in them. I cried softly the rest of the way back to our apartment, despising myself for being unable to suck it up. The drugs wouldn’t let me. Everything was flowing out. At least only Riddick could see it.

“We’re here.” This time Riddick’s voice is grim and wary. He doesn’t park our car in the apartment garage but instead pulls it up to one of the metered spots along the curb. He pulls out one of his guns and checks it, snapping the safety back.

He doesn't think it's over. Shit. What *happened* tonight?

"Stay put. I'll come around and get you."

I nod. That's easy enough to do. My legs are in serious agony right now. I'd *better* figure out a way to suck it up because if we *are* going to be ambushed, he can't afford to carry my weight.

Doesn't mean he won't try to. Fuck. I knew things had gotten too complicated.

Funny. For a moment I had this weird flash back to the dumpster. But it wasn't Malawi on the ground on front of me. It was Amy. I really need to get a grip.

He's helping me out of the car. "Come on now. *Easy... think you can walk now?*"

I nodded and slowly made our way towards the elevator, his arm tightly around mine. I was still crying, my emotions still controlled by the drugs that left my legs wobbly. As the elevator rose, I leaned against Riddick and sniffled. His arm is tight around me. But his other hand is free, a gun cocked and ready in it. I can feel how on edge he is.

The elevator door opens on an empty hallway. Slowly, after several breathless moments of listening have passed, we edge out into it. Nobody there.

"He's playing this smart," Riddick mutters. I'm not sure what he means. I don't ask. Until Riddick says it's safe, I'm not gonna make a sound that I don't have to. Because that sound might cover up something important that Riddick needs to hear.

We spend a moment in front of the door while Riddick checks all of his telltales. They haven't been tampered with. Bizarre. Finally he disables the security system and we go inside, still tense. He's *thrumming* with contained energy.

Empty. Well, not *totally* empty. But nothing has moved or changed since we left earlier. We move over to the metal desk.

"Stay here," he murmurs. I lean against it, ready to duck beneath it if required, while he searches the place.

Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Finally he returns to my side.

"Okay. Let's get you cleaned up. *No* Macbeth stunts in the shower, okay? We don't have time for it."

I nod. There are hysterics inside me, waiting to bubble up and out and let loose... but I can keep them at bay for now. I have to. This all might not be over yet. More visions of Amy crowd at me but I shove them ruthlessly aside. Later. I can't crack up now or we could both end up dead. I begin fumbling at my filthy clothes.

Riddick's a patient man, most of the time. Not now. He starts helping me pull things off. My shirt rips, but I'll never be wearing it again so I don't give a shit. Did it really bother me this morning that he was going to see me naked? Now I don't care. At all. Let him see me, let him look all he wants. I toss my ruined shirt and bra into the trash can as I head for the bathroom.

He follows, shrugging out of his duster. Underneath it he's wearing an arsenal, alright. I wasn't imagining it. His eyes on me are intense. I finish stripping down and turn on the water.

This is when, in the past, Riddick would disappear. Well, when a job was over and done with. He'd vanish with some woman and re-emerge with all of the tension gone. What does he do now that he's stopped playing his games? Is that why he's staring at me like this?

Part of me is grateful that he's staying dressed, and not getting into the shower with me. If he made a move, I know I'd let him right now. And part of me is disappointed. Part of me *wants* him to make that move.

Shit, I'm glad *one* of us has a backbone.

He's standing guard, I realize as I soap myself down. In case an attack is still imminent. No wonder he's not getting in. Would he, if he was sure we were safe? It makes me scrub faster. If an attack *does* come, I don't want to get caught like this. Not for anything.

I'm out of the shower in what *has* to be record time for me. Feeling stronger now, too. I grab my bathrobe and pull it on.

"Is it safe?"

He glances at me, his eyes still intense. Slowly, he nods. He unholsters one of his other guns and hands it to me, butt-first. "We should be okay, but you hold onto this just in case."

Fuck, I hate having to use a gun. I can do it, but I hate it. I take it, and head over to the bed. My body is exhausted but my mind is racing. Riddick follows me. As I lie down, he puts his hand on my back. I roll over to make room for him. He doesn't lie down on the bed, but sits down beside me. Still on edge.

"What happened tonight?" I ask him.

A muscle jumps in his cheek and his jaw clenches tightly. Before he can answer me he has to blow out a heavy breath through his nose. Then, at last, he makes eye contact with me. "Niko tried to have us killed."

I shudder. "You and me?"

"Looks like it. Looks like he decided to get rid of a bunch of people he didn't like. But put it together... both our teams went down. And last night, we almost got shot full of holes." His jaw clenches again. I think his glare could cut through sheet metal, and I'm glad it's not aimed at me. "Too many coincidences there. I just don't know why."

Cold moves through me. "I do."

Now the glare *is* aimed at me. "What? Why?"

"That woman... the one who was in Niko's office tonight. She was hitting on you last night, right?"

"Yeah..." I can tell by his reaction that he doesn't know.

"That's Niko's wife."

Riddick goes completely still. He's not even breathing. He stares out into space, comprehension slowly dawning over his face. "Mother fucker," he finally whispers, his voice almost admiring.

"Kind of what I was thinking..." I can't stop myself. I put my head — wet hair and all — on Riddick's lap. I need the contact. I need him.

"That explains why the cops had orders to kill the others, but apprehend you." The fingers of his free hand slip into my hair.

It takes me a moment to figure out what he just said. "They what?"

He nods. "Yeah. I found that out just before you called. They were supposed to arrest you."

"But... I'd still have ended up dead, Niko doesn't take chances that people will squeal on him..."

"He had other plans for you, Jack. I don't guess you've noticed that he has a real *thing* for you."

"He *what*?"

Another nod, and Riddick's voice becomes hard. "He's been at me for weeks. Wanting a taste of you. Just one time, he keeps saying. I tell him I don't share my Private Stash, and he goes on and on about gestures of loyalty and shit like that. So last night he sent his wife to seduce me. Jesus."

"How would that...?"

The smile he gives me is devoid of humor. "So he could catch me, and give me a choice. Since I'd have gotten a taste of what was his... only way he'd have let me live was if I gave him a taste of what's mine in return. They just didn't figure I'd turn her down."

Now I know what the hatred in her gaze was about. Shit, I don't blame her.

"So, when it didn't work... why'd they try to kill us?"

"Me. Not you, just me."

"No, I was the one who almost died last night. That was totally out of control, and we could have both ended up dead. Why'd that happen?"

Riddick shakes his head. "I don't get that either. But tonight it looks like the idea was that I'd die on my assignment, and you'd get arrested... and Niko would offer you *his* protection now that you didn't have anybody else to watch out for you, in exchange for sexual favors."

"Jeez. And when the novelty wore off I'd have ended up in the river, too." I shudder. Riddick's hand leaves my hair and settles on my back and begins to move in a slow circle.

"Probably." At least he's honest with me. No saccharine claims that I'd have somehow survived this in the long run. "But I'm still trying to figure out why he took the chance of hurting you last night."

Another shudder passes through me, because I *know*. "He didn't. She did. Last night was her."

Riddick's hand stills on my back. "Mrs. Papadopoulos? Why?"

I sigh. "It's what *I'd* do. Think about it. Your husband — *husband* — gets sexually obsessed with some other girl. That's bad enough. But then he makes you help him snare her. To do it, you have to seduce some guy you don't know. But it doesn't work, because that guy rejects you for *that same girl*. Someone put me through that, I'd want a *bunch* of people dead."

"So she set up last night?" I can hear in his voice that he knows I'm right. His hand begins to move again, kneading my spine.

"Makes sense, doesn't it? This building was supposed to be protected."

He sighs. "Yeah. From everybody except the protectors. And they couldn't come at us from the front."

I roll over so I can look up at him. For a moment his hand rests on my ribcage, just below my breasts, before he draws it back. "Why couldn't they?"

His expression becomes strangely sad. “If they betrayed their employees like that, so obviously, it’d be the end for them. Not unless they could show that we’d turned on them first. They have to make it look like an accident. Or everybody’d walk on them.”

It makes sense. I wouldn’t work for someone I knew stabbed employees in the back, either. Not when there are other crime bosses out there looking to hire. One or two spectacular treacheries like this, and suddenly the only people they’d be *able* to hire, anymore, would be guys like Malawi, who’d burnt every other possible bridge already.

I close my eyes and sigh. Okay. They aren’t going to try anything obvious against us; they have to be stealthy. But even so, someone’s going to figure out that they set things up. They’re not doing it on their own, after all — fuck.

“Rat knows. He warned me. I’d probably have gotten caught if it hadn’t been for him.”

Riddick’s hand goes still again. “Tell me.”

“Tonight... he came over and started showing off one of his new toys. A virus designed to destroy a computer system. When I tried to give the cards back to him, he wouldn’t let me. I told him that kind of stuff isn’t my style, and he told me survival always is. And when I was fighting the security system... I’m pretty sure it was him on the other end.”

“Fuck.” Riddick’s voice is speculative. “I wonder what kind of hold they have on that kid. We’ll have to be careful how we play this. If he’s on our side, we don’t want to give them any idea that’s the case. So you were using his program to escape?”

I nod.

“Glad it worked, but that puts us in a bad spot. Only way to keep them from realizing it’s *his* is if we let the cat out of the bag about *you*.” He pauses, and his tone shifts again. “Actually, that can pay off. We let them know about all those tendrils you have in their system, we have leverage over them. We can turn the game around on them before they try to pretend the botched jobs are our fault.”

“Would they?” Now there’s a scary thought. I’m only *just* making a name for myself; getting saddled with a reputation of having fatally fucked up a job —

“Damn right they would. We’re the sole survivors, you know. They might try to pretend we’re the ones who sold everybody out, and use that as an excuse to take us down.”

I shudder and look up at him. “What happened on your job?”

A muscle jumps in his cheek again. “The mark wasn’t even there. *I* was the one up for execution, not him. They had it finessed so it’d look like an accident but not well *enough*.”

“The rest of your team was there to kill you?” That’s frightening.

“Yes and no. I’m pretty sure Catrall was in on it. Not positive about Davies and Murphy. Didn’t matter. My rule about situations like that is clear.” The coldness that creeps into his voice could freeze a man to death on its own.

I shiver and nestle closer, needing to feel the warmth in the rest of him. “What rule is that?”

A wry grin appears on his face and his expression softens as he looks down at me. “I revised it a while back, but it still works. If I ended up in a firefight where I couldn’t tell friend from foe, the rule used to be this: kill everybody who isn’t me.”

Well, that certainly explains the Wailing War legends. “So what’s the rule now?”

His free hand begins moving over my hair again. “Kill everybody who isn’t Jack.”

Now I’m the one going still. Two years ago he’d told me something that had made me cry for hours. About two years before that, I’d thought he was going to leave me to die in a cave. But this is the place I have in his heart. Mine begins to ache in response.

Was he thinking about me during that firefight tonight? Worrying that we’d never see each other again? I’ve always told myself that he lives entirely in the here and now, but what he’s just told me... that doesn’t match up. Our eyes meet and lock.

There it is again. There *I* am, caught in twin silver mirrors hanging above me. I’m prettier, in those reflections, than I remember being. Is that what he sees when he looks at me? Is that who I am to him?

He gazed at me like this before, holding me in our bed and warming me once we got home. I was shaking, cold from the drugs they’d given me, and from my nerves. Everything I’d experienced was hitting home at last. Above me, silver eyes kept watch over me, and I knew I was safe from everything but myself.

“Would you have taken care of her?” I asked, crumpling up yet another spent tissue and tossing it at the wastebasket. It missed. We ignored it.

“Her?”

“Amy. If... I’d been the one to...”

"You didn't." His voice was short suddenly.

"But if I had. I'd asked her if she wanted a place to stay... would you have...?"

His mouth pressed down into a narrow line. Finally he answered me. "I don't know, Jack. Maybe. If she'd asked. But losing you..." He looked away. "Don't think I'd have wanted to let anybody else in after that."

It was suddenly so important to me. I couldn't figure out why, but... there were so many of us. Girls like Amy... and me. With no one to look out for them. "Promise me, if anything ever happens to me, you'll—"

"No."

"But she—"

"No, Jack. I'm sorry, but no. If something happened to you, that'd be it. Anyway, I wouldn't just run out and get a new girl like I was buying a new pet. That's not what you are."

I took a deep breath, and forced myself to let it go. I knew how long it took us to get to know each other, two wary people who were accustomed to living at arms' length from anyone else in the universe. If Riddick had died that night, I might have had to find a new protector, but I wouldn't have gone looking for a new soulmate. I couldn't ask him to do that either.

And what a strange word that was, to have in my head suddenly. Soulmates. Was that what we were?

"What am I?" I asked him, wondering if it would be the word he used.

It wasn't. He didn't use any word at all. It was as if the question had suddenly robbed him of the ability to speak anything. Our eyes just remained locked, our gazes snared and tangled, for a long time. There were no words for the things I saw in his eyes, and on his face.

The spell was only broken when he shifted his position, a look of discomfort on his face for a moment. A look of embarrassment, almost. Our scrub-clad bodies were no longer pressed together in quite the same way that they had been. I couldn't figure out what, exactly, had changed at first. Then I realized... he'd moved his pelvis away.

I wanted to glance down, but I couldn't, my eyes still locked with his. So I shifted my position a little, bringing us back into contact for a fraction of a second before he moved again.

Oh.

He had an erection.

Something changed on his face, a strange mixture of longing and shame crossing it for a moment before it vanished and was replaced by a strange blankness.

And I didn't understand it until now. I must have been so out of it, two years ago, not to get what I was seeing, and feeling. All the way back then, that was what he wanted... he just wouldn't take it.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

He tilts his head a little, quirking the corner of his mouth at me. "What for?"

*"I only just realized how long you've wanted me." I shouldn't be bringing this up. There are much more important things we should be talking about, like our next move against Niko. And *this* is supposed to be a forbidden topic, but... realizing this... I'm not sure what's changed inside me, but *something* has.*

That same look of longing and shame appears on his face. And he looks away. "That's not anything you have to apologize for."

*My god... "Rick, how long *have* you wanted me? I know it's at least since the night Amy died, but..."*

*He shakes his head. His eyes meet mine again, and they're shocking. I've seen Riddick without his clothes hundreds of times over the last four years. But I feel like I'm seeing him *naked* in this moment. "From the start, Jack."*

He bows his head in shame, and turns his face away, swallowing. I have no words in me.

"From the start," he whispers again.

13.

Cerberus

If you ever wanted a sign of just how fucked up the universe is, try this one: the best sense of honor I've ever found lives in the remorseless heart of a professional killer.

I know that really makes *me* think.

I'm doing first watch, sitting on the bed, holding my gun at the ready, while Riddick catches a little sleep. I'm supposed to wake him up in two hours and we'll switch off, which I'm not looking forward to at *all*. His sleep is light. I can tell. An unexpected noise or movement from me, and he'll snap into wakeful readiness. So I have to just sit here.

Well, hell, it's not like he never gave me any sentry training. I can do this shit... but I can't shut up my thoughts.

And they keep going back to the bombshell I made him drop on me tonight. Because, you know, I really never thought he was attracted to me until things *happened* between us on my birthday. That's how well he hid it, and how well he resisted whatever kinds of temptations I posed.

Half of me is confused as hell, but the rest of me is just plain damn impressed. I mean, hell, I *offered* myself to him. I figured, at the time, that the reason he refused was because I had no appeal to him, but now I know better. He refused for *my* sake, not his own.

You ever feel like you didn't give someone enough credit? Like you made unflattering assumptions about them when they deserved more respect from you than that?

He looks so peaceful. Well, hell, he usually does. He always exudes such an air of confidence and power. I remember marveling at that years ago, after the crash. Chained to the wall of the *Hunter-Gratzner*, he looked like an emperor on a throne, not a prisoner. Fry was scared to death of going near him.

Such power.

That's my big consolation. When I actually go to sleep, he'll hold me. No matter what I dream — and I know it's gonna be bad — he'll have me and the only thing I won't be safe from is my own mind.

Unfortunately, that's still gonna be pretty bad.

I had nightmares for *months* after Amy died. Several times a night, at first, but at least once every night. There wasn't a single night that I didn't wake up shaking and crying in his fierce embrace. He never tried to hit me with platitudes or words of empty comfort. He just held me and kept his eyes turned away until he knew I was awake and wouldn't think they were *hers*, gone spectral in pursuit of me.

I'm going to dream of Malawi's eyes tonight. And Amy's. I know it already. It scares me because we have *real* enemies to worry about without my fucked-up head getting in on the act. What if I have hysterics and he's too busy trying to calm me to hear *them* coming?

He'll hold me through them, I know that. The way he's always held me. I remember wishing, last time, that I could just sink into him, make my riotous thoughts vanish inside him. If I'd had any idea how he really felt about me —

God. I'd have taken *advantage* of him.

I'd have *used* him. What a nauseating thought. I'd have seduced him and slipped into one of my old dissociative trances while we had sex, a place where I could just float mindlessly. No thought or feeling. I'd have exploited my best friend to get there.

How much more disgusting can you get? Jeez. I'm glad I didn't know. I hope nothing like that happens tonight. It'd be so cruel of me. He'd be trying to give me pleasure and all I'd be trying to do is escape from feeling at all.

I tried that last time, too. Not with sex. Well, not exactly. But I knew what else I needed to do, to escape... and boy did I ever try to do it.

Riddick had gone off on an assignment. I knew he would be gone for several hours, possibly even overnight. He'd set me up with everything I might need, including a mild sedative I could take to keep my dreams away. And that was what gave me the idea.

I decided I wanted something *stronger*.

We'd left New Vancouver and headed for Wallalong Station only a few days after Amy. The station was Niko's territory, now that I think about it. Which meant vice. Drugs and hookers. I knew I could find what I needed. And I'd been through there once before, about a month before I made the dumbass mistake of stowing away on the *Hunter-Gratzner*. I knew exactly where to go.

There was a guy on the lower levels, Teddy. I'd gotten some stuff from him once before and his prices were reasonable enough. Especially considering I hadn't had any *money*. If he was still in business, I could pick up some serious forgetfulness and Riddick would never know.

He was still there. Best of all, he recognized me. In fact, that knowing smirk said he knew even more about me than the first time around.

"Well, if it ain't the Good Girl." He smirked at me. "You know, if I'd known I was getting blown by a movie star that day, I'd have given you some extra. I got all your videos now."

That made me feel really sick, but I didn't let it show. Maybe I'd get some extra this time around. "Like 'em?"

"Oh hell yeah. These *assholes*—" He gestured around at the other men in the room, who chuckled in response. "—wouldn't believe me when I said I knew you."

I pasted a smirk on my mouth and gave him a knowing look. After all this time, that was a role I could still slip into without thinking. "And boy did you ever. Your guys don't have any faith."

They laughed, not taking offense. Maybe they were hoping that if they played their cards right, I'd spread my legs for them while I was riding Teddy's white tiger.

Teddy grinned at me. Yeah, he knew the score. But he wanted to hear me say it, so he asked anyway. "So what can I do for you today, baby?"

Time for the inviting grin. "I thought we could do a little more business, like before."

The lewd comments started to fly in the background. Teddy's smile widened. "Excellent. Tell you what, I'll throw in an extra roll if you take me all the way like you did in 'Good Girls Cum Last.'"

Ugh. *Why* had I come here again? Oh yeah. I needed to forget, in a big way. Even if it meant dredging up older memories I'd tried to put behind me... at least those were memories that didn't make me wake up screaming. Time to pull out my trademark "Fuck Me" smile. I knew it was what he wanted to see.

"You've got a deal, Teddy. Show me what you got." Double-entendre there. I was disgusted with myself.

Just get through this, get home, and you can pretend it never happened. Riddick'll never know.

Teddy reached into his pocket, chuckling, and drew out three plastic rolls of white powder. He set them on the table next to him, and then his hands moved to the fastenings of his jeans. A minute later he'd pulled his dick out.

I blinked. How bizarre... it looked way too pale and little to be normal. It had looked fine last time around, had he gotten sick or something? I hid my expression, trying to figure out what was wrong with it.

Shit, *nothing* was wrong with it. I'd just gotten used to a different standard. That was what sharing a bathroom with Richard B. Riddick would do to you. His was the only equipment I'd seen in more than three years, and damn if it hadn't changed my standard of "normal" on me.

If there's one thing you *never* do, though, it's let a guy know you think his dick is less than the biggest, most beautiful one you've ever seen. *Never ever.*

"Don't think I can exactly take it all in at that angle," I told him. "You got somewhere we can lie down?"

"That won't be necessary." I didn't know which chilled me more, the familiarity of that honey-graveled voice, or the coldness in it.

Oh fuck. FUCK! Riddick had to have followed me there.

Teddy went pale. I was pretty sure I did too. He, at least, went for the bravado. Suddenly I had none in me.

"Hey... Cryer, isn't it? How they hangin', man?"

Riddick ignored him, walking over to me. I forced myself to stand my ground, but it was hard work. The tight rage on his face was daunting. I was probably the only one who could see it, though. To everybody else he probably looked expressionless. But you don't live with a man for three years without learning how to read his moods, and I had *never* seen him this furious.

His voice was mild and cold when he spoke to me. "Slumming, baby?"

Shit. He was doing the Private Stash act... making sure everybody in the room knew I was his property and untouchable. I wouldn't have thought it possible but Teddy blanched even more.

Stand your ground... stand your ground... I wanted to hide from him but I didn't dare. That'd just piss him off worse. "Shopping."

He raised an eyebrow at me and glanced pointedly at the three white rolls. "That your merchandise?"

"Gonna be." I hadn't bought it yet, and couldn't try to claim I had.

Riddick's eyes slid towards Teddy and his open fly, the man's half-deflated dick still poking out of it. "Forget your purse?"

What was he doing? He knew I hadn't brought money. He knew how I'd intended to pay. What was this game?

"Shit, man, I'm sorry, I didn't know she was with you—" Teddy's apology died abruptly as Riddick shot him a single glance. Around the room, his friends were tensing up, preparing to fight if it became necessary, *knowing*, from Riddick's reputation, that most of them would probably die if it came to that.

Riddick's eyes came back to me, but he was addressing Teddy when he spoke. "What's the tab?"

A pause. "Two-fifty, man."

Never taking his eyes off of me, Riddick reached into his pocket. He drew out his wallet, opened it, and counted out the money without even looking at it.

I had never been so ashamed of myself. The look in his eyes speared through me. He was *disappointed*. He wasn't just angry. What I'd done had *hurt* him. Why had it *hurt* him?

He held out the wad of money to me. "Go get your stuff, baby. We got things to do."

For a moment I thought my hand wouldn't manage to take it, but my fingers closed around the bills. They felt hot with his rage. I took a deep breath and walked over to Teddy, *not* looking at his now completely limp dick. Picking up the rolls, I set the money down in their place. I even managed a muttered "thanks, Teddy" as I turned and walked back to Riddick's side.

He put his arm around me. His hand on my shoulder was like a vise that had not yet begun to close, but might at any second. It wasn't hard to play the cowed Private Stash being escorted out. That was how I *felt*. Thoroughly cowed.

His station-car was parked outside and he opened up my door for me. I climbed in and took a deep breath, closing my eyes. He didn't speak as he got in and keyed the ignition. Our drive was silent, and I had no idea where we were going. Home, I assumed.

Why hadn't I told him how bad things had gotten for me? Why had I hidden it from him? Why hadn't I told him that I'd been obsessing over Amy, over her eyes, to the point where I could think of nothing else? I'd kept it from him, hidden from him just how far down I was spiraling, until I hit the rock-bottom and he found me out anyway. It had been a long time — years — since I'd felt so disgusted with myself.

I opened my eyes when he finally stopped the car, and stared with surprise at the complex in front of us. Oren's factory. What were we doing here?

Riddick's eyes were already on me when I turned to ask him, and the intensity of his gaze kept me silent and still. Anger. Sadness. Hurt. Yes, that was *hurt*. And determination. A long, interminable moment passed while he looked at me like that, before he finally broke the silence, holding out his hand.

"Give me the rolls."

I handed them over without a sound. A thousand things to say crowded in my throat — apologies, pleas, recriminations — but they jammed there and I got none of them out.

"Don't move a muscle." He opened his door and climbed out, slipping the rolls into his pocket. I jumped a little as the door slammed, and flinched again as he locked me in. He vanished into the factory.

My mind was racing, wondering what he was going to do. Whenever Justine had had that look in her eyes, it had meant a beating. But Riddick had *never* laid a hand on me. Was that about to change?

He was gone for a long time, while I considered and discarded a thousand possible scenarios, and a thousand ways I could try to control the situation. It was out of my control. I'd let go of that, completely, when I'd gone looking for Teddy's wares. When was the last time I'd *been* in control? No, I'd given it all up. Riddick owned the game now. A huge part of me, I suddenly realized, was *relieved*.

He climbed back into the car and dropped the rolls back into my lap. "Here. Hold onto them." Without another word, he started the engine up.

I still couldn't talk, and he still wouldn't, for the entire drive home. When we got there, he opened my door again and helped me out of the car. Damn good thing, too, because my legs were shaking. My hands could barely hold the drugs. I felt like I'd sold my soul for them.

He headed straight for our room, carrying a duffel bag I hadn't noticed before. Opening the door, he walked over to the chair and sat down, turning it to face our bed. "Okay, kid. You wanted it. Now use it."

I'd just climbed onto the bed, the urge to curl into a tiny ball strong inside me, when he said that, and it made my head jerk up with surprise. "Huh?"

His liquid silver eyes had hardened into flint. "Take. Your. Medicine."

Oh...fuck. I sat up and stared down at the vials. Shit.

I hadn't thought any of this through. I had no rubber hose or syringe. A spoon was easy, but the rest... I didn't have any of it. If I'd been at Teddy's, he'd have let me use his, or maybe thrown in the equipment in exchange for a few more favors. But this had been an impulsive idea. I hadn't planned around taking the drugs here, even though I knew, on some level, I would have been sooner or later.

I had nothing to work with. I looked up at him nervously and he arched an eyebrow at me, silently asking me why I was stalling.

Well, shit. This was the kind I could do in lines, too. Was Riddick really going to *watch* me do it?

Yes. He was. Fuck.

I climbed off of the bed and walked over to the dresser, grabbing my hand mirror. Part of me wanted to stomp as I walked, glare at him for being so unreasonable. But I couldn't. I was the one in the wrong here. I carried the mirror over to the bed meekly, along with a nail file that was just going to have to serve as a straight razor.

I hadn't done lines in years and years, and mostly those had been prepared *for* me. They were thick and sloppy on the glass and I wondered if Riddick was going to laugh at me for them. I looked up and met his intense gaze. There was no mockery in it. I didn't understand what *was* in it.

Fine. Dammit, fine. I can do this with you watching... I took a deep breath and closed one nostril with my finger. At least, I thought, I knew he'd watch over me. He'd be a better babysitter than Teddy or his boys, right? Better by far.

One line. Two. Three. I rubbed at my nose and sat up, feeling light-headed. I hadn't done that in forever. It burned. Had it burned like that before? I couldn't remember. My eyes were watering. Riddick was opening up his duffel bag and taking out something made of white cloth that jingled a little.

Just relax, I told myself. Won't be long before you start to feel it—

Pain, white-hot, lanced through my temples, making me cry out. It vanished as swiftly as it came, leaving behind a strange, heavy gray buzz. I felt dizzy. The cloth jingled again and I tried to focus on it, but I could barely make it out.

Then the pain *really* hit.

My body spasmed, arching and then curling into a ball, and then my legs kicked out. Vaguely, over the rising roar, I heard my mirror shatter. Then strong hands had me. For a moment my eyes managed to focus. Riddick was pushing me down onto my back. I turned my head and got a good look at the white cloth. A jacket. A white Jacket with long, long tapered arms... and buckles. And... a gag.

It was the last thing I saw before the madness rolled over me.

You think you know what nightmares are. Maybe you've even had fever dreams and you think you know what that madness feels like. It's a dark world where galaxies weigh less than feathers and a single atom is as dense as a black hole. You feel it. You taste it. It shreds your sense of the real. Do you know what those dreams are like?

They're nothing compared to the dreams you have when Cerberus gets you.

I can spot anyone who has Cerberus inside them, now. When the word is spoken, there's a look that comes into our eyes. We know that darkness. We know those dreams. And we can see them, again, when we look at that wise expression in one another's eyes. But we can never, ever explain it. It's something you have to live through.

Of course, you want to die when it's actually happening.

It lasts hours and hours. When it's over, you're wrung out, weak as a kitten, your mouth dry and your throat hoarse from spending the whole time screaming or trying to. If you're lucky, someone's gagged and bitten you and you haven't bitten your tongue. I was, I guess, lucky. I hardly felt that way.

Riddick had moved the chair next to the bed and was sitting quietly in it. I could hear his breathing and it seemed hyper-loud in my ear. The dim light of the room, just a hint of dusk left, was glaring to my eyes. I felt like my skin had been sloughed off.

"Can you hear me, Jack?" His voice hurt my ears.

I winced and managed a tiny nod and a grunt, and promptly decided I wasn't ever going to do that again. My head began to pound.

"I'm gonna take the gag off now." His hands brushed my cheeks, startling a whimper out of me, and then he was unbuckling the bit and gag. When he removed it I became aware that my jaw and teeth were aching.

I groaned, closing my eyes against the light. His arms moved around my torso and he began to fiddle with my back. It took me a moment to puzzle that out, and to realize that I was wearing a *straitjacket*.

He took it off of me, pulling the long sleeves off of my limp arms. Something smelled acrid. My nose wrinkled as I tried to identify the smell and then suddenly I wanted to die all over again. I'd fucking *pissed* myself.

"What... did... you..." It hurt like hell just to form those three words.

"We'll talk about that later. First let's get you cleaned up." He lifted me off of the bed and carried me into the bathroom.

He had to bathe me like I was a baby. I could barely move and couldn't even sit up, let alone stand. It took forever and he ended up soaked before we were done. And it hurt. The nerves of my skin were raw, like every layer but the very last one above my meat had been peeled away. There were tears, and even more humiliatingly, there was drool. But slowly, towards the end, my body began responding to my commands again.

He helped me into my bathrobe and led me back into the bedroom, sitting me down in the chair. I watched as he stripped the bed.

I had the strength and spit to ask my question, finally. It came out as a pained croak. "What did you do to me?"

He glanced over at me, his expression sober. "I replaced your heroin with Cerberus. Oren got it for me."

I could only stare at him in shock as I tried to fathom what he'd just said. Strange knowledge was in his eyes, the echo of my dreams swirling in their mercurial depths.

Cerberus?

I'd heard of it, of course. Who hasn't? It's the finest product of nanotechnology ever created, the "living" vaccine against narcotics. Rumor has it that the technology comes from *them*, the Others, but most people don't even believe in the Others anyway. It's the most expensive substance ever created. An ounce sells for ten thousand dollars, which is why so few people have ever been inoculated with it.

Well, that and the fact that you have to be gagged and straitjacketed or you'll tear yourself to pieces from the pain and hallucinations as it enters and sets up shop in your body.

Ten thousand dollars. He'd just spent ten thousand dollars making it so that I could never, ever shoot up again.

"Why?"

He dumped the sheets in the hamper and began wiping down the surface of the mattress. Fortunately it was a waterbed and my... fluids... hadn't soaked in.

"Because you can't do that shit anymore, Jack. Ever." His expression brooked no contradiction.

Rebellion flared to life in me. How dare he just hijack my mind and body like that? He'd fucking put me through hell because he didn't like my ways of letting off steam? "I wasn't hurting anybody."

"Sure you were." His voice was flat. "Both of us. You coulda told me how bad it was, kid."

Suddenly, weirdly, Amy's eyes seemed like nothing to me, compared to the maw of hell I'd just peered into. "What good would that have done?"

"Well *fuck*, Jack, I've been trying to get you to *talk* to me about it for the last four months. You know what your little game tonight could've cost us?" Real fury entered his voice.

I shook my head. *Ten thousand dollars* popped into my head, but I had more sense than to get shitty with him now. Something bigger was going on.

He knelt down in front of me, putting his hands on my knees. "I kill people for a living, Jack. You know that. I'm paid well, by my employers, to make sure that nobody ever connects them to the deaths they've ordered. There can be *no* loose ends."

I nodded, but his gaze kept boring into me, like I was missing his point.

"The last thing my employers would ever, *ever* stand for is my... girlfriend... getting strung out on heroin and maybe babbling when she shouldn't or trying to cut a deal with the cops to beat a drug rap. They even *thought* that was a possibility, do you know what they'd do?"

The room was freezing. I shook my head silently, even though I had a horrible suspicion.

"They'd want you taken care of. By me." The truth of what he meant was in his eyes.

My lips were stiff, bloodless and nerveless, but I forced them to move. "They'd tell you to kill me." He nodded.

The next words were even harder, with my throat closed so tight I couldn't breathe or swallow. I managed them at last. "Would you?"

He was silent, motionless. He didn't know the answer to that, himself. Suddenly I understood everything. Maybe he'd refuse to again, the way he had when Johns had ordered him to kill me. But

maybe, just maybe, he'd stand back and let them do it. He wasn't sure. He didn't know. Maybe he'd turn and fight for my life, the way he had on the planet when I'd been trapped under the bones... but maybe he'd walk away, like he'd *also* tried to do after Suleiman died. He had no idea. But I could see his suspicions in his eyes. To fight for my life in that situation would be to commit suicide... and Richard B. Riddick, whatever names he goes by, is *not* the suicidal type.

I would die, no matter what happened.

The silence was dragging out, becoming sepulchral, almost as if the worst-case scenario had unfolded. I could barely feel the residual pain that still plagued my skin and bones, over this new, horrible, hollow ache. So I think I was as surprised as he was when I suddenly screamed and shoved his hands away from me, scrambling back and away from him. I fell off of the chair and scuttled across the bedroom, forcing open the closet door and crawling inside.

I curled into a ball, rocking myself and sobbing. He only let me stay like that for a minute. When he pulled me up to my feet and out of the closet, all of the resistance had fled my limbs.

Our bodies were pressed together in a way that would keep me from struggling if I started up again, and his mouth was by my ear. "That is never, *ever* gonna happen, Jack."

I shook my head, still crying too hard to even try to speak.

"*Listen* to me. For that day to come, you'd have to fall awfully far. And I'm *never* gonna let you fall." The iron in his voice was no longer cold. "Do you hear me, Jack? *I will never let you fall.*"

He rocked me on the bed while my raw emotions and nerves began to settle. I felt like every door into scalding darkness had been flung open inside my mind. Slowly we settled, curled together on the sheetless bed. I knew he wasn't lying to me, but...

"If... that day ever does come..."

"It won't."

"*Rick.*"

He understood what I was asking, finally. "You won't know. You won't feel a thing. But that day is never coming."

I closed my eyes, perversely relieved by his promise that my death would be fast.

"I will never let you fall," he murmured again.

It was weeks before I felt normal. He never actually said so, but the way he knew what I was feeling, and needing, told me that Cerberus lived inside him, too. I wondered when he'd taken it, and what he'd seen in his dreams, but I never asked. You never do. Not once you've got it inside *you*.

Funny how, once I got over my panic, my trust in Riddick wasn't merely intact... it was stronger than ever. You'd think I'd feel a little *resentment* or something, for the man who inflicted that on me. But I don't. Nobody'd ever cared enough about me to do something like that, not until him. Not many people can do *normal* Tough Love, let alone *that*.

My nightmares about Amy, and her eyes, vanished. Or if I still dreamed about them, I no longer woke up screaming. It felt like my brain had turned a corner, but slowly that trippy feeling faded, too.

We've never spoken about that day, since. It's not hanging over us or wedged between us. When I think about it now, it's with a weird sense of almost nostalgia.

I can't explain that, either. But he showed me just how deep his caring for me goes, that day. Ten thousand dollars deep. Risking that I'd hate him forever deep. Seeing me at my absolute worst, and not turning away deep. That's love. That's real. Like the way his hands moved over me tonight as he checked for any possible damage or injury.

He'll never let me fall. I feel like I've just remembered something hugely important, something I'd forgotten for a long time. I'm suddenly not afraid to go to sleep, now.

His eyes open and he looks up at me with a faint smile. "My turn."

No, there's no stain between us. He sits up and holds his hand out for the gun. There's another under the pillow, just in case I need to grab for one in a hurry, but the one I'm holding is the best. I give it to him and lie down, impulsively putting my head back in his lap. As I close my eyes, I feel his hand on my hair. He has me. I'm safe... and loved.

Never let me fall...

14.

Darksider

Cops don't knock that softly. Raiders don't knock at all.

I wouldn't even be waking up if Riddick's legs weren't sliding out from under my head. How did I fall asleep that deeply? And I was so sure I was gonna have nightmares, too. I don't remember any dreams at all.

Riddick has his comm in his hand and is disarming the lock as he approaches the door. His other hand is still holding the gun, but his posture is relaxed. He's not worried. I slip my hand under the pillow anyway, and feel the reassuring steel of the backup gun. Just in case. As the door opens, my fingers close around it and then relax.

Rat slips in through the door, as scurrying and nervous as his namesake. His eyes meet mine and the tension leaves his body.

"Thank *God* it worked! Are you okay, Jackie!?" He hurries over to the bed and sits down next to me. Next thing I know my hands are in his, the gun still under the pillow and irrelevant.

I never had a brother or sister. Is this what one would be like? A hard knot forms in my throat as I try to answer him, and next thing I know he's hugging me.

"She was right, then? You were on the other end of that connection?" Riddick's voice is cold and cautious. Rat tenses, but just a little.

"Yeah. That was me." He's patting my hair now like I'm a little kid. "How come you took so long to use it, Jackie? I kept waiting for you to."

The way he's hugging me, my first words come out sounding like "Aychagoohagow."

Rat chuckles nervously and draws back. I wipe at my eyes and try again.

"I had to log out of some places I was in. Hall of records, the police dispatching system, things like that. So they wouldn't go down with the security system."

I've wanted to see this look of awed respect in Rat's eyes for months. Funny how I wish I could have come by it another way. "You have taps in all those?"

I nod and get myself a tissue.

For a moment Rat looks severe. "You two been holding out on me." Then his smile dawns brightly. "I'm glad."

"The others," I start. "They're—"

I choke on the words. Riddick is behind me on the bed, suddenly, and his arms are around my waist. Rat nods solemnly.

"He was gonna try to pin it on you if you made it out. Until you used the chip. He doesn't know I made that program and I'm not telling him. Far as he knows, it's yours and that means he doesn't know if he can control the situation. I'm supposed to bring you guys to him."

I feel Riddick's low growl in the base of my spine before it becomes audible. "I'm not letting him anywhere near her."

Rat looks me over and nods. "You're probably right. She gonna be safe here while you two deal?"

I grin, feeling a need to show that no, my vertebrae have *not* turned into one big floppy Twizzler, and reach under the pillow. I take out the gun and arm it, and watch astonished respect of a new kind dawn in Rat's eyes.

"I didn't know you *packed*, Jackie."

I shrug, feeling Riddick chuckle behind me, the sound vibrating down my spine. "Most of the time I don't. When I need to, I do."

Rat nods. Then his face becomes nervous again. "Look, uh, I hate to rush you, Rick, but if we don't get moving soon, he's gonna wonder what we're talking about."

There's something funny in Rat's face. Like there's something he doesn't want to say in front of me. I think Riddick must have noticed it too, because he's stiffened a little.

"Yeah, let's get going. Jack, I want you on the wires. You watch what's going on and you buzz me right away if there's any kind of setup."

"Will do."

Another funny look from Rat. He didn't know I'd tapped into the club's cameras? I never told him but I always figured he *knew* and was leaving them alone. I nod up at Riddick and lean back against him for a

moment, taking what brief solace I can from his presence. Since Rat probably thinks we're fuck-buddies like everybody else, I can do that.

Just like Riddick can kiss the top of my head before he stands up. He doesn't bother with any weapons. Going into Niko's club armed after last night would be an invitation to war. And he has *himself* as a weapon.

I don't know much about where he trained but he's one of the most brilliant fighters I've ever seen. He always tells me that the weapons you have at the start of a fight are less important than the ones you can take away from your enemies. I've seen him do that, too, go into a fight bare-handed and end up with everybody's guns and knives.

Niko had better not be trying to play us today. It's been a long time since anyone's given Riddick an excuse to go after one of his employers. That resulted in the legendary Wailing War Massacre, so the story goes.

He doesn't take treachery kindly.

It takes him about three seconds to get ready as a result, during which time I finally realize I'm still just in my bathrobe and the damn thing's hanging partway open. At least Rat's gay and Riddick's... Riddick.

I pull the robe closed as I get up, and go over to my laptop. Damn, I'm going to miss that little palmtop. It was perfect for heists. I hope Riddick will let me get another one like it. Not that I have any idea what's going to happen now.

Riddick is at the door now, with Rat. "I'm arming the security system. Stay near the desk and keep your gun close."

I nod and watch them leave. Then I power up and begin my infiltration. I'm into the security system in moments, calling up all the camera angles and sifting through them.

The cleaning crews are hard at work on the nightclub, its last revelers probably only having gone home a little bit before dawn. That blonde bitch is pacing in one of the suites, smoking. Mrs. Papadopoulos. Niko's wife, who hates me because her husband wants something from me he's never going to get.

More guards on the doors than usual, armed with weapons-scanners. They're expecting Riddick to make a play. I look at a few more angles and then dial him.

Usually he answers within two rings. This time it's four.

"Cryer."

"It's me. Niko's got a shitload of extra muscle and it looks like they're packing." Funny. Those background sounds are like the ones in our garage, not traffic noises. Shouldn't he be halfway to Niko's by now?

"Formation?"

"Um... three on the main entry. With weapons scanners and automatics. Two on each of the side entries. Looks like they're all wired in and talking to each other."

"Just on the outside entries?"

I check the images again. "Yeah. Niko's got one guy on his office door but that's it, and it's Dmitri."

"Good. Sounds like he's expecting me to make trouble but not expecting to make it himself. Smart move on his part. Anything else?"

"No, that's it."

"Get yourself a front-row seat to Niko's office, and record everything for posterity. I'll be there soon."

Right as he clicks off I hear two sounds that puzzle me. Brakes, echoing like in our garage. And a weird, wet cough.

What was that?

Oh well. Maybe I'll find out later. I take his advice and work on getting a good feed of Niko's office up, complete with sound, and hit "record." And wait.

And wait.

Finally the door opens and Riddick enters the room, his arm around Rat. Rat's hunched over or something, his face turned away from the camera. Niko looks up and goes still for a long moment.

"You didn't have to get so nasty, Cryer," he says after swallowing.

"Sure I didn't. You tried to have your flunkies kill me, and the cops on the payroll arrest my girl, out of the goodness of your heart." Riddick's voice is cold, cruel, and a little poised. Like he's putting on an act of some kind. I'm probably the only one who'd notice that, though.

"That had nothing to do with—"

“Him? Right. Jackie said she could recognize him on the other end of the line, fighting her. And he admitted it, too, after a little persuasion. Didn’t you, rat-boy?”

Rat straightens a little and I feel cold flood through my body as I finally get a good look at his face. *What the fuck?*

Riddick beat the shit out of him. Jesus, he must have done that in our garage before they went to Niko’s place! *Why?* Rat was being totally honest with us, why’d he need to do that?

I like Rat. He’s one of the few friends other than Riddick I’ve *got*. What’s going on here?

Rat coughs. Again. That was him I heard in the garage before. I wonder if Riddick knocked out any of his teeth and I hope not. Rat’s always had the sweetest smile.

“What the fuck happened?” I whisper, and for a second I’m afraid somehow they’ll hear me.

“Yeah,” Rat wheezes. “That’s right... sorry boss, I tried not to tell him.”

The look Niko gives Rat is a mixture of impatience and false kindness. “That’s okay, Rat. I know you couldn’t stand up to him.”

Rat hobbles over to one of the chairs and sits down, another wheeze escaping him. Niko ignores him, now, his attention entirely on Riddick.

“So what happens now, Mr. Cryer? Under the circumstances I’m surprised you came here at all. You’re outgunned. In fact, you don’t have any guns at all.”

“I got something better,” Riddick replied. Then his voice changed, aimed up at the air. “Jack, baby, I want you to shut down the security system for the nightclub, please.”

Jesus, Riddick, couldn’t you have clued me in beforehand? I almost expect my fingers to snap off as they race to execute the command. A moment later it’s done. Niko almost jumps out of his chair as the club’s system first squeals and then goes dead.

“How did you...?”

“I didn’t. She did. You know, the girl you set up last night. She doesn’t like you much. And there’s a lot more to her than you ever knew.”

Niko is silent for a moment, digesting that. I get up and go to my mucky clothes from last night, digging out the chips Rat gave me. The green one, the inoculation, goes into my drive and whirs to life. I’m not going to lose the laptop, too, to this game. As Niko begins to speak I begin taking myself out of all the other networks I’m connected to. In a moment it’ll be just the two of us... me, and Niko’s system.

“So what’s the play, Cryer? Your girl can’t disarm my men’s guns.”

Riddick chuckles. “You really ain’t thinking this through, are you? Jack has control of your *entire security system*. You’re on Candid Camera right now. Everything you’re saying, she’s recording. You do me dirty, you won’t survive the week, assuming you survive *your own gun emplacements*. It’s too late to pretend you didn’t try to betray us. It’s all on disc now. So maybe we should start with what you are gonna do for me. In reparation.”

I have to wonder why Rat isn’t warning Niko about the “tactical nuke” he gave me. I hope Niko’s system isn’t already inoculated. That’d leave us dead...

“Reparation? Your girl sent Rat’s whole system into meltdown last night with that whatever-it-is she did.”

That answers that question. Niko thinks the nuke came from me. He doesn’t know its real origin, and that means he probably isn’t protected from it.

Damn it, why’d Riddick have to beat Rat up? He’s on *our* side!

“Maybe if you hadn’t been trying to fuck us over, that wouldn’t have happened.” The sneer is practically dripping off of every word Riddick says.

Niko looks tense. He forces himself to relax, maybe remembering that there *are* automatic weapons installed in his walls, but they aren’t under his control anymore. Calling for a guard would be an exercise in futility and a waste of a good guard.

“What do you want?”

“First, your word. You’re never gonna try to make another play for Jack again. She’s off limits. Forever. You don’t touch her.”

Niko tries to get away with a nod.

“Say it.”

“I won’t ever touch her.”

“Swear it.”

A pause. Tension running up and down the lines of Niko’s suit. “I swear it.”

“Second, you keep your skank of a wife away from me. And if she tries any more stunts like the other night, with the raid on the apartment below us? I’ll kill her and you’ll watch and enjoy it.”

“Wait, that was—”

“That was her. I know you only want me dead, but she wants Jack dead too. She pulls even one more scheme like that and she dies slow.” A creepy note enters his tone, like he’s imagining the act of killing her and enjoying it a little too much. I’m glad I know Riddick well enough to know he’s faking.

Niko probably has no idea, though. Given the way Riddick used to play Dracula with all the women he picked up at the club, I’ll bet Niko’s imagining some really twisted shit about now. And imagining having to watch it.

I wonder if he loves his wife. Would he fight Riddick to stop that from happening, if the threat were real? Risk his life for her? Hell, he started all this crap when he told her to seduce Riddick. I can’t even begin to guess.

Of course, the threat’s not real. *If* Riddick kills Mrs. Papadopoulos, it’ll be over fast. That’s just his style, even when he’s dealing with someone he really hates.

Niko gives a little shake of his head. “Agreed. Wait, this means you’re...?”

“Staying on. Unless you want us to move on. But it seems to me like you’re short some of your best wetworks men now.”

Niko shudders. Yeah, the guys who were supposed to kill “Rick Cryer” are very dead now. I wonder if they’d even have been willing to try if they’d known who they were really facing.

The last time an employer turned on Richard B. Riddick, he and five hundred of his troops ended up dead. I rarely ever think about that because it gives Riddick this superhuman vibe that’s hard to relate to. He never talks about it anyway.

The old Riddick, before the planet and Carolyn and taking me in, would have done it again. The walls of Niko’s club would be running with blood by now. I wonder if that would still be the case if he didn’t have me to protect.

“I’ll have to give it some thought,” Niko hedged.

“My loyalty ain’t in doubt here, Mr. Papadopoulos,” Riddick said, impatience entering his voice.

What the hell? Why aren’t we taking advantage of this opportunity to *leave*?

“Very well. This stays between us?”

Riddick nods. “Just the four of us. Well, and, anyone you told who didn’t die last night.”

I suspect there are going to be a few “accidents” on the police force in the next few days. I hope he doesn’t try to get Riddick involved in those executions.

“This doesn’t get out. Ever.” Hard spine re-enters Niko’s voice.

“That’s up to you. Try to play us again and it will.”

I watch Niko’s face. There’s no guilt or shame there. No sense that he did anything *dumb*, let alone anything wrong. As far as he’s concerned, the only thing that went wrong is that he got caught. He’s got no conscience. Not even a hint.

Riddick turns toward Rat again. “Gonna give you a little present, too. Call it job security. You’re gonna get to try to repair Niko’s security system in a few minutes.” He turns and waves at the camera. “I’m heading home, baby. After I clear the building, you know what to do.”

Yeah, I *knew* that red chip was coming out again.

Riddick moves to the door. He pauses and glances back at Niko, irony in every line of his body, every word. “Good doing business with you.”

I watch him leave, switching cameras on and off to track his passage. After he pulls away, I load the red chip. As the camera dies, Rat’s already trying to fight the “nuke” on Niko’s terminal. This time my system doesn’t die too.

I’m hanging onto these things.

It’s addictive. I didn’t make these programs but suddenly it’s like I’ve found a good tool and I want to use it on everything. Jesus.

But thinking about Rat is tying my stomach in knots. Why the hell did Riddick beat him up?

When I hear the buzz of the security system cut out, I rise from my seat, surprising myself a little with the fighting stance I step into. I’m not really going to try to take him, am I?

He raises his eyebrow at me as he enters and sees my stance, but doesn’t say anything. He just closes the door.

“Why...” I start slow, but suddenly all of the impotent fury from last night is pouring through my words. “...the *fuck* did you beat up Rat, Rick? He’s on our side.”

He leans against the door and folds his hands in front of him. "It was his idea."

"It was *what*?" That made absolutely no sense. Why would Rat ask for a pounding like that?

"Don't worry. I wasn't as rough on him as it looks. It's all bruises and swelling. No broken bones or teeth. It's mostly for show. So Niko won't realize he was helping us last night. You realize Rat'd end up in the river if Niko thought for a second he couldn't trust him. But a beating like that... made it clear to Niko that *we* didn't trust Rat, and blamed him for what happened."

I shake my head, trying to picture this. Rat's a skinny, scrawny guy, frail almost. He has a reputation for physical cowardice, he wouldn't ask—

Unless, of course, that reputation of his is as misleading as mine is.

"He asked you to do it? Really?" I think part of me needs to believe it, but I *will* ask Rat when I can get him somewhere secure, just to be sure.

Riddick gives me a rueful grin and pushes off of the door. "Truth is, I think he kinda enjoyed it."

Appalled laughter explodes out of me. "He *what*?" Talk about rationalization...

Riddick shakes his head and the grin widens. "That boy's a darksider. Never woulda guessed, but it gets kind of obvious when the guy you just punched in the face gets a *hard-on*."

"Oh shit." I cover my mouth. My belligerence has given way to slap-happy giggles.

Riddick shrugs out of his coat, chuckling himself now. "I promise, I didn't hurt him much. He'll be okay. Anyway, Niko needs him too much, to fix the mess you made of their systems, to take him out."

"So you, uh..." I have to swallow down the laughter that keeps trying to bubble out. "...mangled his face to keep him from getting killed?"

"Pretty much. And like I said, it was his idea." Riddick heads into the kitchen and I follow him. "You hungry?"

I think about it for a moment and realize that yes, by God, I *am*. "Bring it on."

By the time Riddick's done making breakfast for us, I'm over the whole thing with Rat's face. I wonder if I'd have the guts to take a beating like that in his position, or if I'd just run. Not that it's ever going to be an issue. I'm *Riddick's* little sidekick and I never have to be afraid of him pulling that kind of treachery on me.

That's what happens when you sign on with an honorable man. I'm feeling and understanding Riddick's sense of honor better than ever now. He's kept me safe from monsters, human and otherwise... and he's kept me safe from himself. All those years, he never once let me see anything of his interest, so that I'd never feel some sense of obligation to him...

"What?" He raises his eyebrows at me and I realize I've been staring at him. Half the answers that pop into my head shock me.

"Sorry, I was... thinking." I clear my throat and then take the plate he's holding out to me.

Riddick shrugs it off and begins eating, but damn if my mind is racing now.

Wasn't *I* the one who told *him* that it could never happen again? Wasn't I the one who made those threats about what would happen if it did?

Shit. I'm so confused. Something's changed inside me and I don't understand what. Is it that sense of obligation he was trying to shield me from? Is that why I want to drag him over to the bed? I don't recall ever feeling like *this* over a mere gratitude fuck, though.

What the hell is happening to me?

Oh. There's food in front of me, isn't there? I suppose I'd better get to eating it before Riddick gets curious.

He's fine. He's *relaxed*. Mission accomplished, problem dealt with, casualties — the few he cares about — at a minimum. For him it's all over now. I know I'm going to take a lot longer to process it. There's a lot, there, to get over.

A lot to figure out.

Done eating, I clear the table and start washing the dishes, still lost in thought. Riddick's hand comes to rest on the back of my head. I look up into his searching gaze. He's just making sure I'm okay; I give him a reassuring smile.

I'll be fine. I just need to figure all of this out. I'm acting, on the inside anyway, like some lovesick schoolgirl or something, and that's just too weird for me. I need to work this out, figure out if it's the near-death experience talking or genuine desire. I can't upend our relationship all over again if this is just a knee-jerk reaction to almost getting killed.

But how I wish I could have woken up this morning with him holding me.

Dishes done, I venture out to see what Riddick's up to. He's stretching, pulling his limbs in various directions to make them as flexible as possible. Given how double-jointed he is, that's pretty damn flexible, too.

"So, now what happens? I notice you said we're sticking around?"

Riddick nods. "Gotta keep an eye on him for a while, just in case he smells a rat in Rat. I asked Rat if he wanted to blow this planet with us and I think he was *tempted*, but something's still got a hold on him here. Until I find out what, he's at Niko's mercy. I don't much like that."

Any lingering doubts I had about the beating vanish. I didn't realize Riddick had ever noticed Rat, let alone liked him this much. Or is it Rat's apparent loyalty to *me*?

"Yeah, I don't want him getting into trouble for saving my ass. So, what else happens now?"

Riddick chuckles. "Well, Niko's got a huge mess on his hands to straighten out. It'll probably take him a few days before he can open the club back up. He *might* call on one or both of us to help out with the cleanup, but I doubt it. So we got some free time to kill."

"And we're safe?"

He nods. "Very definitely." He gives me another searching look.

I wait, sensing that he's about to ask me something, or tell me something, that he's a little unsure of.

"In fact," he finally says, "we can finally do something I've been meaning to do for a while."

I keep waiting expectantly. He gets up and walks over to the closet, opening the door and kneeling down. As I watch, he pulls out a dark blue duffle bag that clanks heavily as he sets it on the floor.

He pulls the bag's zipper open and begins drawing out the chains inside.

Jeez. And he calls *Rat* a darksider...

15.

Elephants

Richard B. Riddick wasn't just known for his massive kill-count. He was known as the best escape artist in the history of humankind since Houdini. No cell could hold him for long. No prison could contain him. And there wasn't a restraint made that he couldn't get out of.

That kind of reputation hasn't adhered to "Rick Cryer," of course. As far as I know, he's never been arrested unless it happened during those two weeks he was missing. But if he ever is, it will. Of course, if he's arrested before I can find a way to get into the GBI's records, the universe will know that Rick Cryer is Richard B. Riddick.

But as far as escape artistry goes, he's not rusty. At all. He doesn't let himself get that way.

That's where a lot of our money goes, and why we're not living it up after some of the jobs we've pulled. Every time a new lock, or security system, or restraint comes out on the market, Riddick buys one and works on learning how to beat it. He teaches me how, too, after he's figured it out. Most of them give up their secrets *really* easily to him, but there's the occasional alarm system that takes more than one unit before he figures out how to crack it without destroying it. One time he went through five before figuring it out. *That* was expensive.

It's like me with computers. Any new security program comes out and Riddick gets hold of a copy for me, so I can learn how to beat it if I can. I've gotten to the point where I can do it five times out of ten with no assistance, which really isn't too bad. It means most of the ones in common use are vulnerable to me. Another three out of ten, I get with a little help. I show Riddick how to do it, but most of the time he leaves that to me. He's decent enough at it, but computers are *not* his thing. He doesn't understand how they think, so if something goes wrong, he's lost without a map.

But then again, there are a lot of locks and restraints he has no problem with that I've never been able to *budge*, so we're even. Makes us a pretty complementary set, come to think of it.

Anyway, that's Riddick's big hobby: picking up new restraints and learning how to get out of them. My role is to help him get them on, the way a cop or a merc would put them on him, and to watch his back while he's indisposed, just in case.

Riddick lays out the new set of restraints and tosses me the manual for their use. I start reading through it, studying the diagrams of how the chains are supposed to be put on a "perp."

"So, what's so special about these?" I examine the diagram carefully. Lock his hands behind his back, with a short chain down to ankle cuffs. The prisoner is forced to kneel by the shortness of the chain, or can be made to lie on his stomach or side. Damn uncomfortable-looking.

"Redundant locking mechanisms," Riddick tells me, straightening out the chains and separating the cuffs. "Two locks per cuff. The idea is that you might be able to stress-pop *one* lock, but not both."

"So you figured out how to stress-pop both?" I'm pretty sure I can put this on him, now.

"I think so." He gives me his *I'm invincible* grin as reassurance.

"I gotta see this." I grin back at him and come over to his side. He gets down on his knees and puts his hands behind his back.

Damn, he's almost *eager* for this.

Come to think of it, he always has been. I don't know for sure if he's ever done this with anyone else, but I don't think he has. He gets like a kid about to go to the circus when it's time for one of these rounds. I kneel down beside him and pick up the cuffs—

Weird. His breath caught when he heard me lift them. Like he's excited and trying not to show it or something. I've often wondered...

No, no way. Not Riddick. That's just silly.

He's been in and out of prison for a huge chunk of his life. He *hates* it. Why would he have a thing for being chained up? That's what mercs do to him, not what the women he used to pick up did...

My mouth seems to have an impulsive mind of its own. "If I didn't know any better I'd think you were getting turned *on* by this."

His head swings sharply towards me. For a moment emotions flash across his face — confusion? Alarm? *Guilt*? — before his expression settles back into calm. There's something inauthentic about the smirk he conjures.

"You know me. King of kink." He winks at me. "Whip me, beat me, make me sign bad—"

"I'd almost think you were trying to hide truth behind hyperbole." Shit, now he just looks uncomfortable. I have *got* to get my mouth under control. I reach down and take his wrist in my hand. His pulse seems faster than usual.

Deep breath. I can do this for him. It doesn't help that part of me *wants* him to be turned on by this... by me...

The first cuff locks on smoothly. I check it to make sure it's tight and tell myself I'm imagining how shaky Riddick's breath just sounded. Second cuff. I test it, *not* giving into the urge to sniff *his* neck the way I've seen him sniff the necks of the women he'd pick up. What's *up* with that?

Now I'm way too aware of his scent. I don't think any other man in the history of *ever* has smelled so *male*. It was a scent I thought I knew, when I was younger, and I thought I knew its meaning. But it means something totally different now... and smells so totally different.

I want to bathe in it. What the hell is wrong with me?

"Okay..." Jeez, how'd my throat get so dry and crackly? "Time for the ankles."

Riddick stays still. I push the cuffs of his pant-legs up and start to fasten the cuffs around his work-boots until I remember the instructions. *For best security, we recommend removing the perp's shoes*. Oh yeah, I need to do that first.

Why does it feel like I'm undressing him? I mean, undressing more than just his feet?

His breathing is slow and even now. It's taking me too damn long to get these things off. I keep fumbling with the laces until I get it right. Socks? I don't think they have to come off, but for some reason I'm removing them.

Riddick has large feet. Well, every part of him is large, but so are his feet, and I'm not sure why I'm staring at them like I've never seen them before. His toes are long and elegant, I notice, like his fingers — not *that* long but you know what I mean — and I'm suddenly having the strangest urge to tickle his soles.

That'd be a great way to end up being the one in these cuffs. On with business.

I lock the cuffs around his ankles, making sure they're secure and pretending not to notice the way his breathing seems to have gone uneven again. I'm not going to think about that. I'm not going to think about that. I'm not going to think about that.

I can't think of anything else. It's like that "whatever you do, don't think about elephants" thing. Never works.

"Locked solid?" he asks me. It figures he'd know exactly when I finished.

"Yeah." I do one last test. They feel tight to me. I don't know *how* he's going to get out of them.

He sits back on his heels, bringing his hands down closer to his ankles. Now the chain is slack, a little. Supposedly, according to the manual, that doesn't give him any advantage. It does, however, bring his shoulder into contact with mine. I feel like a million volts just went through me.

Deep breath. Hold it. Okay, safe to release it. Now *I'm* the one breathing shaky.

Riddick turns his head a little, looking at me with heavy-lidded eyes. Can he sense it? That gaze is pinning me.

"Thank you, Jack."

"Y— you're welcome." Jeez. Who put a frog down my windpipe?

Just look at that knowing smile on his face. Man, he's got some ego. What, does he think he's got me now, all weak-kneed and melty in the middle? The nerve...

Damn it, he's right. I can't believe I'm doing this.

He raises an eyebrow at me as I climb onto his lap. "Jack?"

I swallow. For some reason, I can't tell him. Not what I really want to. Not yet. I don't know why, but I can't. "I'm sorry, Rick, I just..." Another swallow as I try to word this as innocuously as I can. "I'm still kinda shook up from last night. Could I sit here for a few minutes?"

His expression makes it clear he's dubious about my claim. Well, as long as he doesn't throw me out of his lap I'm okay with it. "Yeah, of course."

I curl around him, lowering my head onto his shoulder and putting my arms around his wide ribcage. This is nice... it really is. Feeling the extraordinary power thrumming through him... it's so comforting. Solid muscle and bone beneath my hands... and power.

I close my eyes and drift, trying not to remember specific things. That night from a month ago seems to be conjuring itself up, reminding me of the way his hands felt on my skin, the way his mouth tasted... the intense, filling, liquid joy of him sliding inside me...

Whatever you do, don't think about elephants.

I can't just go back on what I said. I can't. Not on impulse. But part of me wishes we hadn't gone through all the liquor, or that we'd replaced it afterwards. I want to let go. Stop holding myself together, and for a little while, feel him holding me together instead.

He tilts his head a little, rubbing his chin against my upturned cheek. The move sends shivers through me. He knows. He has to. That felt so good, his bristles on my skin. Should I ask him to do it again?

Don't think about it. Don't think. Stay still.

I'm going to do something stupid. I don't know what. But it'll be stupid and I'll end up regretting it and despising myself for having done it. Things are so complicated.

I stay still and quiet, trying just to rest on him. He shifts a little, stirring the butterflies inside me for a moment. I wait as they careen around my belly and finally calm again. If I don't find something innocuous to say, and fast, things are going to get very complicated.

"So... uh... Rat." *There* was a safe topic. "What do you think is holding him here?"

"No idea. He's almost as secretive as we are. I'm guessing it's some kind of sentimental attachment."

"A boyfriend?" The thought makes me grin. "I don't know, man. He seems to have the hots for *you*."

"I'm spoken for."

Just like that. Hanging out there. Shit. What the hell do I say to that? The silence is dragging out now... I'd better think of something. Something other than *I'm taking the chains off so you can take me over to the bed, right now*.

I lift my head so I can meet his eyes. Funny. I was expecting something demanding in them. But they're just... kind of sad. Looking at his eyes suddenly makes *my* eyes and nose sting, and I have to swallow.

He turns his head away for a moment and I take advantage of it to close my eyes and rest my cheek on his shoulder again.

What am I going to do?

The chains jangle and clatter a little as Riddick shifts his weight. I wonder how he's doing with them.

"I'm sorry," I whisper.

"I know." His voice is gentle. I can't tell what feelings he's hiding, from his voice, but I swear I can feel them. Want... need...

...And shit. An erection against my thigh. I'm such a fucking tease, cuddling on him like this.

He's stroking my hair, holding me close, making me feel warm and loved, and I'm giving him nothing back. Just taking strength from him, his physical presence, the gentleness of his hands...

Hands?

"Oh shit," I find myself laughing. "You got out. How long was that?"

His low chuckle rumbles through my ribcage. "Let's see... chrono says it took me forty-five minutes."

"Wait, that's how long I've been sitting on you?"

"Yeah. Um... Jack..."

I look up at him and his expression surprises me. He looks both embarrassed, and like he's trying not to laugh. "Yeah?"

"You do know you didn't get dressed this morning, right?"

Oh *shit*.

I've been sitting on Riddick, for the last forty-five minutes, in nothing but a robe. *Straddling* his lap... in *nothing but a robe*!

"OhmygodRickIamsosorry —"

His fingers rest on my lips. "It's okay. I just... wasn't sure what you meant by it."

He wants to know if I've changed my mind. Have I? Is that why I'm straddling him? Oh my god.

I need to answer him. I need to tell him what I mean.

I don't know what I mean.

He must have realized. I probably look confused and scared. I don't know. But he presses his lips to my forehead, whispering.

"It's okay."

His hands are on my waist and he's lifting me off of him. Shit, I've blown it completely, haven't I? And my *God*, I didn't even notice that my bathrobe was practically hanging *open*. Jeez. For all intents and purposes he had a naked girl on his lap...

Any other man would have used me. On the spot. Taken it as an invitation, a retraction of the things I said last month, and had me on the floor.

"I am such a fucking idiot..."

“No. You’re not.”

I turn to look at him. He’s putting away the chains, still barefoot, his eyes on me.

“A near-death experience like you had last night... leaves a person kinda disoriented. And turns on all of your drives in a *big* way once you realize you’ve survived.”

His words are registering and all, but holy shit, there’s a stain on his pants leg. From *me*. I can’t believe I did that.

“Jack?” Bringing me back to reality.

“So, uh, you’re saying this is... like, instinct?”

Riddick nods. He follows my gaze and glances down at his pants. “Definitely.”

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean—”

“It’s okay, Jack. It happens. That was what I needed to know, before anything *more* happened.”

I nod, swallowing. Part of me *wants* more to happen. Part of me wants to drop the robe and lie back on the bed and feel his huge body covering mine—

Stop that!

“I should get dressed.” I fiddle with the tie on my robe for a moment, still toying with the idea of just ripping the damn thing off and telling him that I take it all back, everything I said last month.

“That’s probably a good idea.” Dry humor there. Shit, it *is* rough on him, having me like this. I can’t torment him anymore.

“I’m gonna take a shower,” I tell him, grabbing my towel and ducking into the bathroom. As I close the door I hear a low, wry chuckle.

I’ve got to get this shit together. If I don’t figure out what I want, and soon, things will go out of control, worse than they already have.

I turn on the water and climb into the stall, every nerve on my skin crackling. It feels like the water hitting me should be raising sparks.

He could step in, behind me... cover me with his hands, smooth the soap over my skin... I’m imagining that my hands are his...

What the fuck is wrong with me? Didn’t I learn my lesson last month?

Oh, that was the *wrong* thing to think about. Now it’s his mouth I’m imagining on my skin, his soft, warm, strong tongue sliding over me. Oh shit. I feel like I’m losing my mind in here. There’s this empty, hollow void between my legs and I have to clap my hand over my mouth to keep from calling out to him. I want to beg him to come in and fill me.

I *knew* that night. My God, I knew what was going to happen, and I wanted it to, I connived to help it happen. I didn’t realize, but I did.

He’d gone out to get my birthday dinner, telling me he’d arranged to have something special made. Even though we were staying in, he’d asked me to dress up, and he would, too. “Ain’t every day you turn eighteen.”

And for the first time since I’d played dress-up with Trey — okay, with the exception of the times I dressed up to be bait — I spent more than a few minutes getting ready. I spent a whole freaking hour figuring out how to put my hair up in this one style I’d seen on the fashion pages, and another half-hour getting my makeup just right. And then I’d stared into my closet, stymied, trying to pick out the perfect thing to wear.

I’d even had the perverse thought that nothing looked good so maybe I should just be in lingerie when he came back. But I wasn’t even sure, then, that he was even *interested*. I visualized him taking one look at me in my skivvies and scolding me... and went right back to hunting through the closet.

The silk dress brushed against my hand and I stared at it anew. I hadn’t worn or even wanted to look at it since the night in New Orleans, but now I took it out of the closet for another, closer look.

I’d thought it was beautiful beyond all imagining when Riddick brought it home for me. My first Grown-Up-Woman dress, was how I’d thought of it. Dark green — “*brings out those big eyes of yours*,” he’d told me — with a narrow bodice and a flaring skirt. The neckline was scooped and the fabric fell in soft folds to accentuate my small bosom. Damn, I’d put it on and felt like the sexiest girl on any planet.

There was no sign of Renault’s blood on it. Not a speck. I wondered how Riddick had managed to get it all out, or if he’d actually replaced the dress. In the intervening years, I’d never asked. But for whatever reason, he’d kept the dress, even when I’d tried to throw it away. He *liked* it. Tonight, I decided, I’d wear it for him.

The look in his eyes, when he came through the door and saw me in the dress, told me I’d picked *just* the right thing to wear. He carried the huge boxes of food over to our table, set them down, and turned

around, just leaning against the edge of the table and looking me over. And over and over.

“Beautiful,” he finally murmured.

I felt like a princess in it.

“You like?” I walked over to the table, checking out the boxes. Damn, he’d come in loaded. Most of them were big white food boxes — one definitely looked like it had a cake in it.

“Hell yeah.” He began opening things up and taking food out. All of my favorite foods began appearing. Damn, the man didn’t miss a trick.

I cleared away the empty boxes into the kitchen while he fooled around. When I came back, a big pile of presents had appeared at the end of the table, and he was lighting candles.

“Wow. You sure know how to make a girl feel cherished,” I told him. His smile in response left my stomach feeling *fluttery*.

I knew even then, I think, that this wasn’t exactly the kind of dinner an older brother arranged for his younger sister. Hell, I wasn’t dressed like Little Sister either. Maybe there was some kind of unspoken knowledge, or accord, about what was coming.

The dinner was wonderful. Riddick had stopped at at least three restaurants to put together my perfect meal. I couldn’t imagine what it had cost!

“This is incredible. How’d you do all this?”

“I called ahead.” He grinned and winked. “For an extra tip, they agreed to have it ready exactly when I was gonna pull up. I was only two minutes late to one place, too. Like clockwork.”

Like one of his jobs. He’d gone all *Mission Impossible* on my birthday dinner. “Did you have to get shiv-happy on any of it?”

“Just the cole slaw.” He winked.

“There’s *cole slaw*?” I went on an eager hunt through the containers I hadn’t opened yet until I found it, noting all the incredible goodies he’d gotten along the way. The cup of lobster bisque almost derailed me in another direction. “Damn, you know me *too* well!”

“Don’t eat yourself sick, there. Still got cake and presents to go.”

“There’s food in the *presents*?” My chocolate radar started sweeping the room.

Smug grin. He knew he was a god today. “You’ll see.”

Every year he did my birthday bigger and better. When I turned thirty he’d probably buy me a whole amusement planet for the day or something. Funny how logical that seemed, and seems... we’ll be together, still, when I’m thirty.

Part of me wanted to rush through the rest of the meal, but how do you rush through your absolute favorite foods? I had to eat at least a little of *everything*.

“You are gonna have to work me *so* hard in training to keep this off my hips,” I joked, as he put a huge slice of chocolate cake in front of me. Eighteen candles lay on the side of my plate, licked clean of chocolate frosting. This was the richest and most delicious cake I’d ever tasted in my life but I wasn’t sure I’d survive an entire piece.

“Will do. But I like your hips.”

I grumbled. Sometimes it seemed like they were awfully wide given how I was only a B cup. Once I hadn’t had to hide my femaleness, I’d started wanting to be able to *flaunt* it, wishing I had a body like the actresses on the vids even if Riddick *did* mock their breasts as “antigravity flotation devices.”

“I do,” he repeated. “Now... let’s start off with one of your presents, too... this kinda goes well with the food and the cake.”

He put a long, rectangular box in front of me. Once I got over the oblivious ecstasy of a bite of cake, I unwrapped it. “Oh my *god*, this looks just like that mummy case *Paris* had!”

“Yeah, it does.” Smug! He was so *smug*! “Open it up.”

I lifted the lid, and my eyes widened in shock.

Back on the ship, after we’d made our big getaway plan, we’d gone to Paris’s mummy case. I’d never seen so much booze stored in one place, in my life. He’d had at least thirty varieties of hooch in there, but it was all for burning, not drinking. Riddick had caught me staring into the case, coveting it all, and had smirked at me. “We’ll drink a toast to our survival when we’re on the skiff,” he’d told me. It hadn’t actually happened, of course. When we finally got to the skiff, the booze bottles were filled with glowing bugs and anyway, *Imam* was with us.

Now I had my own little mummy case full of miniature hooch bottles. I lifted one out. Was “hpnotiq” really a word?

“Wow! Is this all for me?”

“You ain’t gonna share with me?” He tossed back, grinning.

“Well, yeah, of course, but *wow!* Hey, is this legal?” Riddick had never let me drink before, although I’d managed to sneak a few glasses here and there from unwary bartenders.

“Drinking age is eighteen here.” He nodded and winked. “Anyway, I promised you we’d toast our survival, didn’t I?”

“You did, but that was so long ago—”

“You thought I forgot?” He winked again, and pulled out a small bottle that said *Grey Goose* on it. “A toast. To our survival. Together, we made it through your adolescence intact—”

“*Hey!*”

The smirk on his lips was threatening to explode into laughter. “And we didn’t kill each other even once.”

I wrestled the cap off my little bottle, trying hard not to laugh. “We could make up for that tonight, you know.”

“Could be.” *His* cap came off easily. Dork. I bet he’d tightened the cap on the bottle he knew I’d pick first.

We clinked our little bottles together, still trying not to descend into a laughing fit.

“To our survival,” I told him.

“To us,” he replied.

We drank. Three or four swallows and my little bottle was empty. Oooh, that was good stuff! I had another bite of cake while I picked up the other bottles, one at a time, reading the labels.

“Shit, I recognize some of these. They’re in that locked aisle. Expensive!”

He chuckled. “Yeah, well, I was going all out so why not? You’ll share with me, right?” A wink.

“Absolutely. Which one do you wanna try?”

He reached over and lifted out a small, round bottle full of deep amber liquid. “How about this? Can’t pronounce the name for shit... they make it on New Catalonia. It’s amazing. C’mere.”

I climbed out of my chair and walked over to his. Whee, that *hpnotiQ* stuff already had me feeling floaty and free. I sat down on his knee and grinned at him as he unscrewed the lid.

“Close your eyes.”

I obeyed, and felt him put the tiny bottleneck to my lips. Sweet, tangy warmth poured into my mouth, so intense I wanted to wince, so delicious I wanted to grab the whole bottle and suck it down. I cradled the last of the liquid on my tongue for a moment, savoring it, before I swallowed.

“Oh wow.”

“See why that’s worth four hundred creds a bottle?”

My eyes flew open! “That bottle was *four hundred creds?*”

“Nah, but the full-sized ones are.” He chuckled and put his arm around me as he took a swig of the last little bit and set the empty bottle down. “These’ll be nice additions to your bottle collection too, you know.”

“Yeah, they’re pretty.” I rested my head on his shoulder, contemplating them. I’d been collecting glass bottles for the last two years, since things finally started stabilizing enough that I’d stopped worrying we’d have to run out on our things. I loved the collection. My favorite bottles were the little blue ones.

“So... happy birthday so far?” His hand petted my hair as he asked.

“The best,” I grinned up at him. “But I swear, the way I’ve eaten tonight, my ass is going to be *huge!*”

His grin was a bit... loopy. Like he was getting tipsy on me. He hardly ever drank, and usually not liquor, just beer or wine. Liquor was stronger, wasn’t it? “Tell you a little secret,” he said as he reached for another pair of little bottles.

“I love secrets.” This one’s cap twisted off easily, and we clinked our bottles together and drank. **WHEW!**

Riddick grimaced as he set his bottle down and then grinned at me. “You, Jack... have the best ass in the galaxy.”

Now I no longer had the control to keep startled laughter from exploding out. “I what?”

“I’m serious. Your ass is just... *damn*. I’m surprised you fooled anybody with your boy masquerade. All they’d have had to do was stand behind you even once and they’d have realized.”

I was blushing. And feeling delight pool in me. Warm within and without. I wanted to hear more. “Oh, is *that* how you figured out I was a girl?”

“Uh huh. I smelled you before I ever saw you, though, so I knew there was a third female *somewhere* in the group. Wasn’t sure who it was at first until I saw you climbing around the crash ship. There was *no*

mistaking that ass.”

“Sheeit! It’s a good thing I teamed up with you or I’d’ve been outed in *no* time.”

“Yeah, you woulda. With those big eyes of yours and that *killer* ass...” Riddick blinked. “Shit, I think I’m drunk or something.”

I giggled. I’d never seen Riddick drunk. But then, I’d never seen him go through... how many bottles? I coulda sworn we’d only drunk a few but *look* at those empties. “Me too... I think we need some cake or something to fight it...”

“Might work,” he agreed, reaching forward to pull his piece towards the two of us. “I gotta watch my mouth now.”

“How come? Can I watch it for you?” Whoa, where did *that* come from?

He turned to look at me, blinking, and a slow grin crept over his lips. “‘Cause if I don’t I’m gonna end up telling you how much I want to *grab* your ass sometimes.”

I found myself laughing. “So what’s stopping you?”

His hand was on my back, and it began to move lower. “It’s a bad idea. Could have repercussions.”

“Like what? Squeezing?”

“Maybe...” As his hand moved lower still, his eyes locked with mine. “You got any idea how beautiful you are? ‘Specially in this dress...” His voice had gone wistful on me.

His hand gently cupped around my backside and I felt something amazing move through me. It was like I was on one of those great big rollercoasters and suddenly we’d hit a drop. I gasped.

“You think... I’m beautiful?” The faces of dozens of the women he’d been with, in the last few years, floated through my mind’s eye. Did he think I was in their class? Really?

He nodded. His face was moving closer to mine. “Most beautiful girl ever,” he slurred.

Hunger like I’d never felt filled me. Hadn’t I just eaten? I couldn’t possibly want more food—

His mouth touched mine and I knew exactly what I was hungry for.

“Jack?”

My eyes fly open. I’ve been leaning back against the shower stall’s wall, touching myself, remembering. It takes me a moment to get my voice to work as something other than a shrill squeak.

“Yeah?”

“This gonna be one of your marathons, you mind if I take a quick leak?”

“Um, sure...”

I stay still in the shower, trying to control my breathing, while he uses the toilet. I have to stay silent. I don’t dare say a thing. If I do, the next words out of my mouth will be an invitation for him to join me in here. And then history will repeat itself.

And even though I know exactly how bad an idea *that* would be... there’s nothing I want more.

16.

Majority

I stay as quiet as I can while Riddick's in the bathroom, the tip of my tongue caught between my teeth so it can't try to initiate a new adventure. He isn't in the room long. I wonder if he can sense how *wound* I am.

The door closes and I sink down to sit on the shower stall floor. *God*, the temptation to invite him in was strong. I wouldn't have lasted much longer. Especially not with the memory of the way his mouth tasted still coursing through me.

Shit, I want him.

That kiss...

It was hardly our first kiss. For years, since he'd started fending other men away from me, we'd pretended that we were involved. When needed, we'd deliberately engaged in crass public displays of affection to make our supposed relationship crystal-clear. But that had always been *theater*. Simulated clinches, choreographed kisses.

This was the first *real* kiss we'd ever shared. Really, it was the first real kiss I'd ever *had*. His lips on mine seemed to annihilate my whole past. For a while I wasn't even sure who I was. It was like I was a virgin all over again.

His mouth was strong and gentle, sweet with the flavor of the liquors we'd been drinking, and every bit as hungry as *I* felt. It was like we were trying to drown in each other. His hands were clutching at me but I could feel how he was holding back his full strength. One of his hands slid from my shoulder to the back of my neck.

Finally we pulled back, both of us gasping. He looked nervous as he gazed at me, as if he thought I'd slap him or something. I'd never seen this side of Riddick before, shy and almost vulnerable. Maybe it was just the alcohol, making me imagine it. What could he possibly have to be afraid of from me?

His fingertips brushed my cheek. "Jack..."

My heart was hammering. Hunger like I'd never felt was *filling* my body. I'd felt hints of it before, from time to time, but nothing this intense. "Yeah?"

I felt like my skin was igniting everywhere his fingers touched. He leaned towards me, pressing his forehead to mine. I gasped, breathing him in while his fingers stroked my cheeks and throat.

"Is this what you want?" He was turning his head, nuzzling my temple and cheek, sending shivers through me.

"*God*, yeah..." It felt like I should say something else, something more. Then his mouth found my ear. Suddenly speech was out of the question.

My whole body arched and shivered; I felt like I might explode. All of my attention was focused on the tip of his tongue as it played over my ear. I felt half ticklish, half something else unfathomable. His tongue was driving squeaks out of me and I couldn't sit still on his lap. Something was building inside me, running the length of my spine like an electric current and pooling between my legs. I didn't understand it. Half of me wanted to cling tightly to Riddick and the other half wanted to pull away. His arms were iron around me, holding me close, making the decision.

Something wild was happening between my legs, a new, strange feeling I'd never experienced. Kind of like a tiny, weird little tickle... or trickle... or something. What was that...?

"Oh shit, Rick..."

He drew back. "Did I hurt you?" His eyes were searching my face, but I wasn't sure what for.

"No, I... I'm not sure... that was just so..."

"Intense?"

"Yeah." Good word.

A hint of a smile was creeping over his mouth. "Did you like it?"

I swallowed. Did I? Apparently so because I was nodding.

Riddick's smile was out in the open now. It was both predatory and... *goofy*. I suddenly realized that he was right. We were drunk.

"You want more?"

"Please!" Now suddenly I was giggling. "Lots more!"

"I was hoping you'd say that." He tilted me back and I grabbed onto his shoulder as my head began to spin. Then his mouth was on my throat.

"Oooh boy..." This felt so amazing, too. How did he do this? I didn't know my throat was so sensitive. His tongue was startling more giggles out of me. After a moment he began to laugh too, his teeth nipping at my skin.

"You got a problem with this?" His voice was sly and amused.

"...Just...tickles..." I kept having to wriggle in his grasp from the onslaught of feeling. Phantom fingers were scurrying along my spine.

"That's the *idea*." His mouth fastened for a moment on my shoulder in a gentle bite.

"I can't figure out if you're planning to tickle me, fuck me, or eat me," I giggled.

"Maybe all of the above," Riddick purred. He leaned me further back. My belly seemed to lurch within me as I felt his tongue running along the neckline of my dress. The intense hungry ache was back between my legs... and that other feeling I didn't understand. What was causing that?

"Oh my god..."

"Maybe we should get you out of this dress," he murmured into my cleavage.

This was probably the only chance the dress had of coming off without being torn to shreds, I realized. "Probably a good idea."

Riddick lifted his head and drew me up. Turning me around on his lap, he bent me forward. I tried to stay still as his fingers drew down the dress's zipper and caressed my skin. My spine wanted to arch as his touch stirred frissons along it. A gasp escaped me when his tongue took the place of his fingertips, and I couldn't stop a moan from following when his teeth gently scraped my skin.

There was that strange feeling again, that trickle-tickle. What was it? I didn't understand what it meant. His hand was on my knee, slowly moving upward along my inner thigh, pushing my skirt higher and higher.

"I don't think you're gonna get in there with me folded in half."

Behind me, Riddick shook. The wind of his silent laughter played along my back and made me shiver. "Maybe we should move this to the bed," he said after a moment.

I swallowed hard and nodded. "Yeah, that sounds like a plan to me." Reaching over to the table, I grabbed up a small handful of bottles. I might need a little liquid courage for this. Riddick pushed back his chair and rose, holding me against him.

He held me close to him, my bare back pressed to his chest, as we staggered from the dining area to the bed. I clung to Riddick, feeling dizzy as we swayed closer and closer to the mattress. One of his hands was on my stomach and the other had moved to cup my breast through the loose dress.

"We're almost there," he murmured into my still-electrified ear. All I could do was moan. If I'd been walking on my own I'd have fallen over.

There. We'd made it in time.

I dropped to my hands and knees on the mattress, gasping. He was on top of me, his body spooning around mine, the guttural sound of his breath in my ear sending shivers through me again even as the heat of his skin on mine seemed to scorch me. His hand left my stomach to slap the mattress, his arm straining to hold his weight up before he might crush me down. I could feel his erection pressing against me.

That was going to be inside me, soon. I knew it was, and the mere thought of that sent another wild jolt through me. I *wanted* this. I'd never known it was something you *could* want, before. I'd always known guys had a real thing for it, but for the first time it occurred to me that maybe it was fun for women... that maybe it'd be fun for *me*.

"You okay there?" he asked, his mouth near my ear again. Another shiver moved through me.

"I... am fantastic." I had no idea exactly what I wanted to do, but my body was alight. I shoved the small handful of bottles to the side and began working the sleeves of my dress down my arms.

"Here, let me do that." He was nuzzling my back again, making me squeak and wriggle. I couldn't think straight. How was he going to get my dress off in this position?

"How?"

He rose to his knees and put his large hand flat on the center of my back, pushing me down onto my stomach on the mattress.

"Hey, you know, you coulda said—"

He chuckled, knowing I wasn't really mad. "Roll over."

With him straddling me, it took me a little extra work to get turned over. My skirt ended up twisted around my hips in the process. "That better?"

“Much.” He was grinning down at me, and I swore, he was swaying! Just how many of those bottles had he downed? He began drawing my sleeves down my arms while I sat up a little and held them up to make it easier for him.

“Look at you,” he breathed, as he drew the dress down to my waist. I was braless beneath it, naked from the waist up. “So beautiful.”

His expression softened as he looked at me, his eyes glued to my breasts. It was funny; he’d seen them before, many times. But here he was acting like *he* was a virgin too, and this was the first time he’d *ever* seen breasts at *all*. He tilted his head a little and his eyes met mine, asking...

Asking for permission.

My throat was suddenly much too dry to speak so I just nodded, swallowing. He put his hand on my chest, gently pushing me backward. I leaned back, resting on the mattress and watching him as he climbed over me and lowered his head.

The wet warmth of his mouth fastened around my left nipple and I gasped as a jolt of pleasure ran along my body again. That was new. Everything was so *new*. The feel of his teeth grazing my skin was incredible. I arched my back, trying to somehow get him even closer to me.

“Yesssssss...” Was that me? Did I really say that? It barely sounded like my voice!

Riddick answered with a growl, his mouth growing more demanding. His hands slid beneath my back, lifting me even closer to him. Somehow he’d ended up kneeling between my legs. I wasn’t quite sure how or when that had happened. Hadn’t he been straddling me?

As his teeth grazed my nipple I felt *it* again, that weird trickle-tickle. I wished I knew what was causing it. Not that it felt bad or anything. It felt *good*. But it was an unfamiliar sensation, and in such a sensitive place. Was it normal?

His hand began to stroke my other breast, massaging it and squeezing it gently. I’d had no idea that my breasts could feel so much. They never had before, and I could have sworn I’d done it all.

He was kissing his way down my abdomen now, I realized. My nipple felt deliciously cool where his mouth had been. His hands were on the scrunched fabric of my dress, tugging it downward past my hips, and he was straddling me again. I lifted myself upward a little, to help, and felt him pull the dress off of my legs even as his tongue darted into my belly button and made me squeal.

Hot damn, he was kissing his way lower, his hands repositioning my legs so he was between them again. Oooh, boy... he had his *face* there...

As he nuzzled my panties I realized, at last, what that trickly feeling was. Something slick, warm and wet had settled between my flesh and the fabric. Fluid. A *lot* of fluid. Had *I* made it? *Weird*... I didn’t think *that* had ever happened before. I wondered if it was normal and hoped it wouldn’t put Riddick off.

His low growl sent shocks of sensation through me and I felt his teeth catch at the fabric. He began to pull my panties off with his mouth, his expression almost savage. When he noticed me watching, it softened again. His hands slid under me, lifting my hips off of the mattress while his fingers pushed the elastic down. Another shiver moved through me as my panties finally slid down my thighs. Now I was naked.

Why did this feel so different from all the other times he’d seen me?

As he finished pulling off my panties, he bent my legs, spreading them wide. “Hold still.” Hot breath blew against me and then—

“Oh my god!” I lifted my head, trying to see what was happening. He was *licking* me... and...

Bolts of pleasure unlike anything I’d ever felt started flying up my spine in time with his tongue. My body was writhing, held in place only by his hands on my hips. It was so intense, it was too much—

“Rick...”

He stopped, to my relief. I caught my breath, my hand on my throat, as he lifted his head and looked at me.

“You okay?”

I nodded. “Yeah, but aren’t we going to... you know?”

“You don’t want me to keep doing that?”

I’d explode if he started it up again. “Maybe later?”

He looked a little disappointed for a moment, but then that grin of his appeared again. “So I guess we’d better get *my* clothes off now?”

Ooooooh! “Yeah!”

He smirked, and began untucking his shirt. Before I realized it, I was belting out the tune from one of those Ancient West bordellos, like he was Mae West or something. His shout of laughter was muffled by

his shirt as he pulled it over his head.

Damn, all of that was *mine*... The tune faltered for a moment but then I started belting it out again. He was still laughing, twitching his hips in time with my crazy tune as he took off his belt. For a moment he climbed to his feet, looming high above me as he stepped out of his pants and tossed them aside, and then he was kneeling before me again...

Magnificent.

"And just look at the size of your dick!" The words popped out of my mouth before I could stop them and made him throw his head back with another shout of laughter.

But *seriously*, I was transfixed!

I'd seen it before, lots of times, but never standing at attention like this. If I'd thought it was large before, it was amazing now. Veins I'd never noticed before were distended, ridging it. Before I thought to ask, or anything, I'd wrapped my hand around it. I wanted to know how it felt.

It was warm, rock-hard, and silky. As I stroked it, Riddick groaned and covered my hand with his.

"That feels so good... but I wanna be in you."

I looked up at him, meeting his eyes. That look was back, asking my permission. I nodded, feeling my heart lurch in excitement. Soon he'd be *in* me. We'd be *joined*. I couldn't believe this was the same act I remembered from my "Good Girl" days. It felt so different, more important somehow.

He drew my hands upwards, over the rippling muscles of his abdomen, onto his chest, and then his shoulders. Slowly, his eyes never leaving mine, he lowered himself down until he was hanging above me on hands and knees. He lifted one hand and slid it down my body, his fingers startling and parting my most intimate flesh, and then—

Damn, he was big... he was rubbing the head of his erection against me, and it felt so good. Then he stilled for a moment, bit his lip, and began to lean forward.

This was it.

I could feel him, now, pressing into me. It *was* different. Always, in the past, it had burned a little, and I'd assumed it would with him, too, because I'd *never* been with a man as big as him. But he was entering me like liquid silk, no pain, no discomfort... something amazing instead. There was this intensely pleasurable tug, as though he was pulling me inside myself.

"You okay?" His hand stroked my cheek again as he locked eyes with me.

Was he worried about hurting me? It was suddenly so obvious to me that our bodies had been made for each other, made to join like this. There was no other explanation.

"Yeah..." I strained upward and he understood me, lowering his head so we could kiss again. As our mouths clasped, I felt him slide even deeper inside me. A bolt of intense pleasure, almost too much to bear, fired along my nerves from deep in my belly.

After a moment he lifted his head, gazing down at me. The silver of his eyes flashed with the candlelight as his body began to slowly move. I felt him pulling back and it amazed me again that I could feel every inch of him so *vividly* and pleurably. Nothing had ever felt like this. I'd had no idea.

"You're smiling," he told me, a wide grin on his own face as he slid deep into me again.

I was, and was feeling almost giggly, but suddenly I felt shy. "Should I stop?"

"No way, keep smiling, just..." He began to pull out again.

I couldn't possibly have *stopped* smiling.

"...like..." He was almost completely out of me again.

I waited, watching him. He stayed still, poised above me, grinning down at me with mischief on his face. His eyes blinked shut slowly and reopened. Yeah, drunk. When he still didn't move, I raised an eyebrow at him. What was he waiting for?

"...that!" He slid deep into me, *fast*, startling a loud cry out of me even before I felt its cause. My nerve endings shivered with the impact, starting deep in my belly and moving out to my fingertips, toes, and prickling scalp.

"Holy *shit*!" I managed when I could breathe again.

"Too much?" Was that worry in his voice?

"No way... that was... wow!" I knew there were bigger words than *wow* to describe it but damned if every word above one syllable hadn't been knocked out of my head with that thrust!

Riddick chuckled and lifted his hand to my face, stroking my hair back. "Think you'll be okay if I keep doing that?"

"I think you *won't* be okay if you *stop*!"

"Hey, was that a threat?" he demanded, laughing.

“Damn right it was! I want *more* of this!” I turned my head and spotted a little bottle of amber liquid right by me. “And some more of this...”

“Gimme one, too.”

“Yes, *sir*, you just keep doing what you’re doing, there...” It took a little work to get his bottle open because my hands kept going weak on me with his thrusts, but finally I was able to hand it to him and start struggling with mine. He waited for me, holding his bottle as still as he could, until I opened mine up.

“Cheers, baby.” He clinked his little bottle against mine and I felt a few drops of coolness spatter my chest.

I lifted my head and tried to bring the bottle to my lips. Sweet fire poured into my mouth even as coldness dribbled down my chin onto my throat. I swallowed before the laughter trying to get out could make me choke. “Oh man... I think I just lost half of it!”

Riddick’s laugh was low. “Well, it’s mine now.” He lowered his head to my throat and began sipping up the spilled... what? What was it I’d spilled? I couldn’t read the writing on the little bottle in the dim, flickering candlelight. Screw it, more important stuff was happening. What Riddick was doing felt *wonderful*. I dropped the bottle and stopped worrying about it.

As Riddick’s tongue ran over my chest, I closed my eyes. I wanted to focus just on his movement, his touches, the sweet liquid feelings inside me that were getting stronger and stronger. His lips were moving up my throat again, the kisses in perfect time with his thrusts, reaching my chin and then claiming my lips. The liquor on his lips tasted different from what I’d drunk. Funny, I could have sworn I picked two identical bottles.

He deepened the kiss, picking up the pace of his thrusts at the same time, one of his hands moving down my body to touch me between my legs. My hands were tingling. I felt so strange, suddenly, like his body pinning me down was the only thing that kept me from floating up off of the bed. What was this? What was happening to me? I couldn’t think clearly. It was all too intense. If it didn’t stop I was going to lose consciousness—

It wasn’t stopping. It was getting even stronger. I’d lost control of my voice, I wasn’t sure when exactly, but cries were exploding out of me in time with Riddick’s thrusts and I couldn’t stop them. I could barely hear what he was saying to me.

“That’s it, Jack... I got you... that’s it...”

Was this *right*? Was this the way I was supposed to feel? He couldn’t be right; this had to be fatal. Nobody could survive this onslaught of feeling. Spots were swimming before my eyes and my whole body was writhing, at war with itself. I was trying to get closer to him and get away, all at once.

My head was buzzing and my body was completely out of control now. I couldn’t fight it anymore, falling down into the roaring maelstrom that was sweeping over me. Fragments of thought tried to form but couldn’t. Just one word. *Home*.

Home...

I was gulping for air, the sensations that had made me thrash abating. Riddick’s pace had increased but the thrusts were no longer trying to knock me into orbit. I needed to figure out what had happened to me. My limbs were tingling and felt weightless.

Was *that* coming? Was that what everybody made the huge fuss over? If it was, I was surprised more people weren’t *scared* of ever having sex again afterward, because by God—

Riddick began to shudder against me, his face twisting in what looked almost like agony. Now *he* was coming, I realized, and I slid my arms back around him. As confusing as everything else was, this part I understood well. His mouth brushed my ear and he gasped even as his whole body went still within me.

“Love... you... Jillian...”

I felt like my heart had stopped and shattered in my chest.

No, oh **God** no...

I managed to keep it off my face. He shuddered against me again, holding me close, and by the time he had regained his senses, I was recovered too. There was no sign on my face of the cold running through my veins and the hollow ache in my chest. I smiled up at him and returned his gentle, reverent kiss. I wanted to bury my face against his chest and cry... but that would spoil the mood for him.

Why? Why did he have to call me that? Of all names he could have said, why *that* one? Even now it makes me want to cry, thinking about it.

I turn my face up to the cooling water, rinsing away the tears that started in my eyes with that memory. Turning off the shower, I take a few deep breaths. It’s a month later but the pain of that moment is still with me.

Why? Of all the things he could have called me, names that could have slipped out, why did it have to be *that* one? The question won't leave me alone as I dry off and get dressed.

Damn, what if I'd given into my impulses, earlier, and he'd called me that again? Shit. This is all too complicated. Painfully complicated.

He's sitting on the bed as I come out of the bathroom, reading a security manual, looking relaxed and at peace. His smile as he glances up at me reflects none of *my* inner turmoil. I wonder again if he even realizes how much he hurt me that night.

Of all the names you could have whispered, it had to be that one. It still hurts. It hurts like hell. But I can't let him see that now, any more than I could let him see it then. We're supposed to have moved past that moment, and here I am hanging onto it.

So what happens if I can't let go of it? Or if I do, and he calls me that again? Of all the names...

You just had to call me Jillian.

17.

Her

I really don't think he knows what he did.

Well, he definitely has no idea at the moment. He's relaxing on the bed with a technical manual, and Richard B. Riddick is *not* a man for dwelling in the past.

I wonder if he knows what I'm thinking about. What I was thinking about in the bathroom. Sometimes I think he *can* read my mind, which is why it's so weird that he doesn't get the whole Jillian thing. You'd think it'd be the sort of thing he understood instinctively. Then again, I'm not entirely sure he remembers saying it. People do and say some pretty whacked-out things when they're coming; I used to think I'd seen and heard it all. So maybe he didn't realize he was saying that name by mistake. Technically, he was still talking about me, even if that just makes it worse.

I've known, since I turned fourteen, that he knew exactly who I really was and where I really came from. No idea how he found out, but I did know that he knew. I just figured that meant he *understood* better. That name is a distillation of everything I came to hate in my life, and for him to say it right at that particular moment...

He couldn't have known, could he? But *shouldn't* he have known?

Even thinking about it ties me up in knots. Right after he said it, I wanted to die. I wished the bed would just swallow me up so I could cease to exist. Instead, though, I lay there and we held each other and I just... tried not to think or feel. All the alcohol helped, I think.

The next morning I woke up unsure where or who I was. I thought, for a moment, that I was back in Gary's place. The smell of booze and sex in my nose, and the feel of naked skin against mine, were things I'd once woken to on a regular basis.

In that moment, I was *her* again. I was Jillian.

And I never wanted to have to be her again.

I'm not going to say that Jillian is dead, or that she was weak, or any cheap melodramatic bullshit like that. It'd *be* bullshit, for one thing. Jillian Beatrice Goodwin is alive and well, and sometimes she's so strong it scares me.

My mom didn't pick the name out. If it had been up to her, I'd have had some name she thought was *exotic*, but my grandparents picked it. That was back when they were trying to raise me for her so she could have a normal adolescence, as if Justine Bernadette Goodwin was capable of having a normal *anything*. That name is the only thing I have left of my grandparents, but I still hate it after everything it came to mean.

I was Jill when Sister Justine wasn't paying much attention to me. I was Jilly on the very rare occasions when she liked me. "Jillian" meant I was in some kind of trouble, and my *full* name meant it was too late to duck-and-cover.

When she threw me out and Gary took me in, I was Jill to him. In fact, he shortened my whole name for those videos he was making. There are dozens of different illicit porno vids floating around with "Starring Jill B. Good" on their credits. A lot of them have titles punning on that name, and my other, related trade name: "the Good Girl."

When the cops finally shut him down and took me from him, Social Services called me Jillian... and so did Luke when he and Sister Justine took me from *them*. But late at night, when Luke came to my bed, he would call me "pretty little Jilly" while I tried to be *his* idea of a Good Girl and yearned for my old cushion of drugs and alcohol.

So when I finally took off, it was a name I never wanted to hear again. Ever, in *any* of its variations. And when I hit on the idea of passing myself off as a boy, I knew exactly what name I needed. Jill B. Good became Jack B. Badd and stayed that way, even after Riddick exposed my secret.

So like I said, I knew that he'd found out my real name long ago, since he'd figured out my birthdate and tracked down my back-trail, but I thought he *understood* why I didn't use the name, why I hated it... and why it kind of scares me. Luke used to preach on the power of names, to all of us in his twisted halfway house, and how saying the Devil's name could call him to you. Jillian is *my* devil, and I often worry that somehow she'll be invoked.

So waking up to find her world all around me again, and Riddick in it with me, was definitely not a shining moment. The "harsh light of day" struck me as painfully as if *my* eyes were shined.

Riddick was still partway on top of me, nuzzling my throat. That was what woke me up, in fact. He was ready for another round, or *getting* ready, and I couldn't figure out who the hell I was, but the Jillian in me was getting ready too. He'd invoked her, and there she was, numbly preparing for his body to invade hers – ours – again. Only I wasn't ready. I was still confused, trying to piece together what had happened the night before. The dinner, the drinks, the incredible cascade of fire he'd awakened in my nerves... it was slowly coming back to me. And that word, that horrible word.

So I pulled away. He looked groggy and confused as I dragged myself out from under him and headed for the shower. My head began to pound as I stood under the water, trying to wash the scent of Jillian and her world back off of me. I hadn't been that hung over in years. Hell, I'd maybe never been that hung over.

When I finally got out of the shower and got dressed, breakfast was cooling on the table and Riddick was watching me with a wary, concerned expression.

"We never finished opening your presents last night," he said as I sat down.

No, we hadn't. We'd pretty much stopped when I'd unwrapped Pandora's box. My eyes moved to the now-empty mini-sarcophagus down at the table's end. I wasn't at all sure if I could keep my breakfast down. Which was a shame because he'd made my favorite.

And he was still waiting for an answer.

"Maybe later?" I looked up at him for a second. Only a second. I couldn't face that bewildered, searching look on his face. He knew something was wrong, but he didn't seem to be sure what it was. Didn't he remember?

No, of course he didn't. He probably remembered us having a great time, and wanted to do it again. He'd been gearing up for it when I woke up, hadn't he?

But was it Jillian he wanted to have that fun time with, or me? Didn't he know there was a big difference?

"Sure," he said. Yeah, he sounded awkward now. I wondered if he was feeling anywhere near as vulnerable as I felt.

I ate breakfast in silence, trying to ignore the fact that he was watching me. I couldn't think of anything to say. Anything that wouldn't open up a whole mess on us, anyway. How I wished I could take the night before back. Okay, yeah, I'd had no idea anything could feel so good and beautiful, but... I'd also had no idea that anything could hurt so terribly. What if the two had to go together?

I wanted to take it all back, roll back the clock, undo those hours... just find a way to stay *sober* and *careful* the night before. But it was too late. Maybe completely too late.

The same thoughts kept going around and around and around in my head. I could barely eat. After about an hour of trying, I gave up and cleared my plate, mumbling "sorry" to Riddick. He followed me into the kitchen.

"Maybe we should talk."

Fuck. "Yeah, okay..." I swallowed and took a deep breath. "We should talk."

When his hand touched the back of my neck I almost jumped right out of my skin. "Are you okay, Jack? Did I hurt you last night or something?"

"Hurt me? No..." Not physically, anyway.

"You sure?" His hand was still on my neck, and now his other hand had moved to my waist.

You called me Jillian. You called me a whore. I swallowed. He must not have understood that *that* was what he was saying, but that was what it had felt like to me. "Yeah, I'm sure. It uh... it's kind of a blur, but I know you didn't hurt me. I just had too much to drink..."

I drew back from his hands and turned to face him. I needed a little distance between us.

His expression was guarded. I hadn't seen him look like that since we left Sufi Arabia. He'd always had this look on his face like he was expecting moral condemnation at any second, back then, and that was how he looked again. "Yeah... we were drunk."

I could barely get the words out. "And maybe... things went a little too far."

I was hurting him. I knew it. I was *hurting* him! He was trying to hide it from me, but my words were painful to him. His voice was cautious as he answered; noncommittal. "Maybe."

"Maybe we just need to, um..." Fuck. Fuck. "...take a step back... to where things were before we... uh... before we..."

"Before we had sex?"

My throat was completely knotted shut. I nodded, my lips pressed tight together.

"How far a step back are we talking about?"

I remembered most of the night now, including some moments that made my skin want to burn and made my body ache for his touch again. But another ache was moving through me as well. He'd called me *Jillian*. And the thing he'd done before then, for a moment I'd thought I was going to die of all that feeling. I couldn't handle that. It was too much. How could anybody stand feeling like that, like the whole universe was exploding inside them? This whole thing was way too dangerous.

He was still waiting for me to answer. No matter where I stopped in my recollections of the night before, it was still *too much*.

"Like last night never happened," I finally managed.

I'd seen that look on his face once before. It was a week before he'd told me he was leaving Sufi Arabia. The night Imam had cornered him, demanding to know if he'd returned to his old ways, demanding to know if the murder of a well-known drug lord was his work. The night Imam had raged at him that Carolyn Fry had died for *nothing*. I'd hidden while the argument raged, out of sight but still in hearing range, and had found Riddick sitting outside afterwards, staring out into the darkness that, for him, wasn't darkness at all. He'd had the same expression on his face and I'd wrapped my arms around him and hugged him tightly, wishing somehow I could do more to comfort him, to reach inside his armor and heal the part of him that had been wounded. Now I was the one who'd dealt the wound.

"Never happened at all." His tone was flat, but somehow it sounded like a question.

I couldn't look at his face anymore. "Yeah."

"Jack... it's not that simple."

"Well, why *can't* it be? We were *drunk*. We shouldn't have *done* that. Why can't we just say we *didn't*?" I stared at my hands, which pulled at each other in desperation, as I talked. I couldn't look at him.

"Why shouldn't we have done it? You said I didn't hurt you. I'm pretty sure I remember you enjoying what we were doing—"

"I can't do that again, Rick! I can't be that girl again!" It was out of my mouth before I realized. But her name went unspoken. I couldn't be Jillian again, but I couldn't say her name for fear of somehow invoking her.

"What girl? You aren't making any sense."

"I can't be a whore again, Rick!"

"A *what*?" I sneaked a look at his face and he was staring at me in shock. All of his layers of careful deadpan had been knocked right off his face.

I can't be Jillian again. Not even if that's who you want me to be. I couldn't get the words out.

But I did find myself shrinking back against the counter as Riddick stalked forward. His hands were on my shoulders and his face was close to mine, his eyes pure steel. "You're not a whore. That wasn't what last night was for me at *all*."

I swallowed as I remembered what his other words had been, right before he'd cut my heart open. "Love you." He'd been talking about *love*. Was that what it had been for him?

But love was just an illusion, right? The word people used when they wanted to make the ways they intended to use you seem *noble*. I knew better than anybody the damage love could do, and I wasn't going to fall into that trap again.

"Jack, I swear, you wanted it last night as much as I did—"

"I was *drunk*! I couldn't *think*!" I knew that was a lie, though, or at least partly one. It wasn't the booze that had turned off all of the higher functions in my head; it was his touch. I'd been with more men than most women twice my age and nobody had *ever* made me feel like that.

Riddick moved even closer to me, gathering me into his arms. "Maybe we should try now that we're not drunk, then, and you'll see—"

"No, Rick!" I pushed him back, panicked, as my body began to respond. For a second he resisted but then he let me. "We're not doing it again, and I mean it. The next time we have sex will be the last time you ever see me. *Ever*."

He stared at me for a moment, his face displaying shock and hurt unlike anything I'd ever seen before. And then it was gone. His face was calm and expressionless. "Okay, Jack. If that's the way you want it." Like it was nothing.

My heart was pounding. Had I really just threatened to run out on him? To desert him? I wanted to take it back, but I couldn't, any more than I could take back what we'd already *done*. "It is. I mean it."

"Fine." He turned and headed for the door. "I'm heading out for a while."

"Where?" Suddenly I was panicked anew. Had I just driven him away? Was he going to desert *me*?

“Not really sure.” I heard him pick up his keys and his jacket, but the outer door had swung closed before I got out of the kitchen.

I spent the rest of the day alone in the apartment, feeling sick. For a while I stared at the pile of unopened presents, part of me thinking I should open them just so I’d have something to do, but the rest of me feeling like I had no *right* to them anymore. I could barely eat lunch or supper, just picking at leftovers from the huge birthday dinner.

Riddick came home, finally, a few hours after I’d given up and gone to bed. Not that I’d fallen asleep. I heard him come into the apartment as I lay in the bed, and pretended to be asleep. I listened to him as he undressed and showered, and slipped on one of his pairs of boxers. Finally he climbed into the bed. I waited for his arms to come around me the way they always did. And waited.

He didn’t touch me. He stayed on the opposite edge of the bed from me, and wouldn’t touch me.

The next day he didn’t vanish on me, but we barely spoke to each other. The pile of presents on the table continued to be ignored, neither of us mentioning them. He made me breakfast, and lunch, and dinner, and we ate the meals in complete silence. And again, he didn’t hold me when we slept.

The third day was both worse and better. We spoke of a few inconsequentialities, even managed to turn on the vid and watch something together, although I can’t remember what it was now. All I could think was that I’d ruined everything, but every time I tried to nerve myself up to say I took it back, the sound of his voice gasping “Jillian” returned to me and I couldn’t. That night I tried to cuddle up against him after I thought he’d gone to sleep and he pulled away as if burned. Then he got up and went over to the couch, and slept there the rest of the night.

I left him alone on the fourth day, while he handled some routine matters for Niko and I tried to focus on the latest encryption codes I was trying to crack. We slept on opposite sides of the bed that night. I stayed well over on my side and didn’t try to touch him.

The fifth and sixth days passed the same way, and I was absolutely certain I’d destroyed everything. That night, after Riddick was asleep, I went into the bathroom and turned on the shower. I needed a good, long cry. The only problem was that once it started, I couldn’t get it to *stop*. Every sob just got louder than the last. My knees gave out.

When the water abruptly shut off, I barely felt it. It was only when he lifted me up off of the floor of the tub, wrapping me in a large towel, that I realized he was there. He carried me out of the bathroom and over to the bed and lay down with me, holding me close, still wrapped in the towel like a soaked, sobbing mummy.

“I’m sorry, Jack,” he whispered into my hair. I couldn’t get the sobs to ease up enough to answer. “I’m sorry.”

It took me a long time before my chest stopped spasming enough that I could talk. “I... I don’t...”

He was stroking my hair and back. “It’s okay... take it slow...”

“I... want things back... the way they were...” Before. Before everything got fucked up. Why couldn’t things go back to the way they were before it all got so fucked up?

“Me too, Jack. We’ll make it happen.”

“...don’t wanna lose you...”

“You won’t. I don’t wanna lose you either. So we’ll just... go back. To how things were. Like this. I never meant to hurt you, Jack.”

“...wasn’t your fault, it’s me...”

“Shhhhh.” He held me close, the way he had before everything had changed on us. “It’s all gonna be okay.”

I fell asleep against him, all cried out. When we woke up the next morning, things weren’t *really* back to normal, but they were closer. By the late afternoon things felt almost normal, and he asked me if I’d like to open the rest of my presents.

It was strange, opening them. He’d bought me things I’d been coveting for ages – a pair of expensive boots I’d longed after ever since seeing Ginger strutting around in some, a series of technical course chips I’d been salivating over, a state-of-the-art palmtop system and, of course, chocolate – but there was something intangibly different about the gifts, compared to the kinds he’d given me in prior years. Those had been things I wanted, too, but they’d been slightly more practical... the gifts that a brother might give a sister. These, somehow, felt more like the gifts a man would give his lover. I told myself that I was imagining it, that I’d never have interpreted them that way if it hadn’t been for our drunken *indiscretion*, but I still just don’t know.

I've thought about it, over and over again, since then. My birthday was a month ago, and three weeks after I finally opened my presents, they still don't feel like brotherly gifts to me. Of course, the palmtop has been destroyed now, and I still have yet to wear the boots out in public. I've eaten some of the chocolate, but not much...

And I still don't know.

What if I was wrong?

What if the thing I was running away from was never there? Oh, I know what I've always said – love is shit – but that's not the kind of love *Riddick's* ever given me. Is it? He wanted me from the start, but he waited, and didn't drop any hints at *all*, until I was legally old enough to say what *I* wanted. And he did ask me... and I did say I wanted him. And I meant it, didn't I? Right up until the end when he said that name.

Jillian.

The name that means the worst part of me. The name that came to mean whore, sex-toy, little girl-doll with a pulse that men could use how they pleased. The name he somehow learned when he found out my birthday and traced my backtrail. Which means, although I've tried not to think about it, that he probably knows everything I did when I was Jillian. He probably knows all about the vids, the drugs, the first few months on my own in the space lanes before I cut off my hair and became a Jack instead of a Jill and finally got the great big "use me!" sign off of me.

I told myself before that, when he said he loved Jillian, he was saying that he loved the whore, the way all the men before had loved her... as a thing to eat. A thing to be used.

But that's not Riddick. I've never been a thing to him.

What if what he was really saying was...

What if...

If Jillian is the absolute worst part of me, maybe what he was trying to say was that he loves all of me, even my most horrible, darkest, dirtiest side. Could that be it? Is that what he meant?

He's still reading his manual. I want to ask him. I need to know. But even as I start walking over towards him, damn my nerves, I can feel my throat closing up around the question.

He looks up and his brows raise a little. I'm probably standing before him like a nervous supplicant, and given how I was acting earlier, there's no *telling* what he thinks I might be about to say.

"Everything okay, Jack?"

"Well, um... actually..."

He waits.

"You know, last night, my uh... palmtop got destroyed..." *Shit*. I'm such a fucking coward.

"Rat's virus?" He nods along with me. "We can go pick out a replacement tomorrow if you want. And the first thing you put on it, girl, is that inoculation."

"*Oh* yeah. Definitely." I sit down on the foot of the bed, still trying to get my nerve up.

"Something else?" He gives me a smile that warns me, in a moment he's going to start teasingly interrogating me to find out what I want. I've never managed to stand up to that.

Better just take the plunge, huh?

"I was wondering... when you found out about me." Well, that's a start. Sort of.

"Found out what about you?" Still that teasing smile.

Hey, Big Evil, I'm serious here!

"Who I was. Before."

He sets down his book, his eyes locked with mine. "You mean Jillian Beatrice Goodwin of Mount Healthy, Ohio, on Earth?"

Wow. Right in the gut. Ouch. "Yeah."

"You sure you want to know?"

"I asked, right?" Maybe I'm getting in way over my head.

"Well, it was maybe a month or so before we left Sufi Arabia. Things weren't working out for me there. You remember. I'd been keeping tabs on the news from the merc network about me, making sure no rumors were circulating about my survival... so sometimes I'd make trips down to the black market. Some of the shops had all kinds of illegal shit in them. I'd bought myself some equipment so I could tap into some of the law enforcement databases, and I was leaving the store when I saw your face."

Oh... fuck. "On a video."

Riddick nods. "On a video. I asked the store's owner about it, and he said there was a whole series. Made on Earth, he said, only about a year or two earlier. Seeing that explained a lot to me about why

you'd stayed disguised as a boy. So that night, once I got into the law enforcement databases, I started doing a little research to see what I could find out."

"And?"

"And it was all there. Well, the story from law enforcement's perspective, anyway. You'd supposedly run away from home, something your mother had never reported until after you were in police custody, ended up being exploited by a bunch of college boys who figured they could use you to pay their tuitions, spent a while in detox and therapy, and then someone was stupid enough to give you back to your mother. When you disappeared again, her 'spiritual advisor' or something reported you missing, not her. But you'd gone off-planet. Did a good job of hiding your trail, too, at least to the cops. But I'm used to staying a dozen steps ahead of them, so I found your trail."

"All of it? How long did that take?" He really does know everything about me, doesn't he?

"A while." He shrugs. "I started before we left the Holy Man, and kept going, putting each piece together. Figured out how long you'd been in cryo, total, in time for your birthday, at least."

"I remember." Okay... that's the how... "Do you um... know why I didn't go back to using my birth name?"

"Jillian? I figure it reminds you too much of bad times."

Well, yes, obviously yes it does. So why...? "Rick, you've called me Jillian."

He blinks. "I have? When?"

Fuck. Now I have to tell him. Well, maybe this way I'll actually *know*.

"Last month. The night we... um..."

He stares at me. He looks completely aghast. "I called you Jillian when we were having sex?"

The lump forms in my throat all over again and I can only nod at him.

"Oh fuck." I've never, ever in my life, seen Richard B. Riddick turn pale. But I'd swear his skin's lightened in the last minute and taken on an ashy color. He looks *nauseated*. The technical manual he was reading thumps to the floor.

Now he's holding me, his arms tight around me. For a moment a little part of me – the part that still hears him gasping *that name* – wants to struggle and pull away. But there's nothing sexual about this. My grandfather hugged me this way the last time I ever saw him, and for a second the sense-memory overwhelms me and leaves my eyes and nose stinging.

"I'm sorry, Jack," Riddick whispers. He's stroking my hair and my back. I can't really reply; anything I tried to say would be muffled against his chest. "No wonder you wanted to forget it ever happened the next day."

Oh shit... is he right? Would we have done it all again, the next day, and the weeks after, if he just hadn't said that name? Could I have made it through the scariness of how much he made me feel, if I hadn't had to feel *that*, too? *God*, I don't even *know*.

"When did I say it?" he asks me after a long time.

"At the end," I manage, turning my head a little to speak. At that moment when things had felt their most beautiful, and their most frightening. At the moment when I felt more alive, and more vulnerable, than ever before. At the end.

One soft curse into my hair, and his embrace becomes fierce again. "I can be so fucking stupid sometimes, Jack," he finally says. He sounds baffled. After a moment, he speaks again, in that same confused tone. "I guess... maybe I said it because sometimes..." He stops and I can feel him shaking his head.

I pull back so I can look at him. He's frowning a little, the way he sometimes does when he's cooking and something doesn't taste quite right to him, and he's not sure what he needs to add to *make* it right. "Sometimes?"

What, sometimes he thinks of those vids? I wasn't much older when he met me, and he's said he wanted me from the start. But the idea that the vids would interest him just creeps me out. *Please let it not be that. Please let it not be that.*

"Sometimes I wish I could just go back in time somehow, stop it all from happening... so you could have had a normal childhood instead of that horror you went through."

I swear, this is the first time in my life I've ever heard Riddick talk about anything this abstract, about wanting to change the past. I always figured the past was something he left there, didn't look back at. But yeah, he kept trying to find a way to get the trappings of normal adolescent life for me, the first few years we were together.

"So, when you think of Jillian... she's what?"

“Maybe she’s sort of my Amy.”

That takes me by surprise. I was just thinking about her last night. “Your Amy?”

He nods. “The girl I didn’t get a chance to save. For a moment that night, last month, I thought I saw her face.”

“*Her* face?”

“You looked so innocent, like I was your first. Like you’d actually *had* a normal life, and nobody’d exploited you or hurt you. You looked happy.”

Oh fuck, my eyes are stinging. So that’s why he said it. That’s why he did it, and what he meant by it. He really *was* making love to me that night.

Ever feel like you’re just the most horrible person in the world? Jeez, and he’s apologizing to me again.

What am I going to do? I want him to do it again. I want to kiss him and pull him on top of me and get him to do it all again, but...

What if the other thing I said is still true? What if our next time together is the last time he ever sees me? What if I still end up running?

In spite of what he thinks, Jillian’s no innocent. There’s nothing good about her. And there’s still enough of her inside me to destroy us.

I don’t know what to do.