



Apprentice



By Ardath Rekha

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Synopsis: Four and a half years after the crash of the *Hunter-Gratzner*, now-18-year-old Jack is released from the juvenile facility she's lived in for four years. Due to her refusal to help the authorities capture Riddick, they've done their best to ensure that her future will be as bleak as possible, until Riddick himself returns to rescue her. But the forces arrayed against them, determined to recapture Riddick at any cost, are enormous.

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Pairings: Riddick/Jack; Riddick/OFC

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1.

Jack: “Riddick’s Bitch”

Every morning when she woke up and every night before she fell asleep she told herself Riddick was dead. It made the pain easier to take.

She knew that he really wasn’t – the death of Richard B. Riddick, notorious serial killer, would be the biggest story on every planet’s newscast if it happened. But pretending he was dead made things easier. It kept the dreams at bay, the ones in which he showed up and rescued her from her purgatory and took her away with him again.

This morning was different. Riddick could live today – she was Getting Out.

Jack waited until the other girls on her floor were done before she headed for the bathroom to shower. She gave herself extra time – it was her Last Day, after all – and dressed slowly. Almost everything of hers was already packed. Today was about formalities. If she had to observe them, then she was also going to take advantage of them.

She was the last person into the dining room and she could feel the stares and the whispers. Everyone was watching her go through the Last Day rituals. Nobody would miss her after she left but it was still an Event. She’d kept them all at a distance for the last four years – no close friends, no confidants – so nobody would be coming to say good-bye or give her a hug before she boarded the shuttle. Nobody ever had before, so she didn’t care.

If she had no friends at the shelter, she also had no real enemies. The specter of Richard B. Riddick kept them at bay. A few whispered about her, calling her “Riddick’s Bitch” when they thought she wouldn’t hear, but none of them had been willing to take the risk of being on her bad side if her infamous protector actually did show up.

She made a point of enjoying her last meal at the shelter, although breakfast was her least favorite meal of the day. It was missing too much. It was missing *him*. Breakfast had been the one meal they had consistently eaten together during their few months on the lam, and he had never ignored her when they did. They would talk. He would tell her stories about life in Slam and life on the run, the places he’d seen and the people he’d met, and the lessons of survival he’d learned from them. It was the best part of her day, in those days, when she had him all to herself and didn’t have to deal with the cheap sluts he played with or the desperate scumbags who hired him for jobs she didn’t want to know about.

Finally she was the last one in the dining room, toying with her oatmeal and thinking about the man who might not even know she was still alive. Might not even care. She waited, knowing that eventually someone would come to take her through the next step of Getting Out. Finally they sent Mrs. Baxter to fetch her.

She followed the cold, prim woman through the quiet halls. She always got a kick out of Mrs. Baxter, who managed to look like a nineteenth-century maiden aunt even in the current times, and even in a standard-issue jumpsuit. They went to Parker’s office, of course. That was the routine. There was no other possible destination at this stage of the ritual. She’d play the game just right for them, and then she’d be gone.

One wrinkle in the routine appeared almost immediately as she entered the office. A man in military garb stood beside Parker’s desk, watching her intently as she walked over to the traditional seat. That was new. She remembered the man, too. She’d spat in his face four years ago and instructed him on how to do some things that were supposedly anatomically impossible.

“Please sit down, Miss Kowalczyk,” Parker instructed, as if she hadn’t done so already. She waited silently. If the rules of the game had changed, she was going to hear them defined before she started playing.

Parker glanced through her file. “Audrey J. Kowalczyk. Eighteen years old, real-time... nineteen years and five months from nativity. Daughter of Pyotr and Josephine Kowalczyk, deceased. Ran away from your uncle Boris eight years ago shortly after your parents died in a loader accident. Taken into custody four years ago, while in the company of Richard B. Riddick. That’s quite a career.”

She shrugged, waiting for him to get to the point. This was, in theory, the last day that anyone would be able to see those records. Tomorrow, and every day thereafter until she died, they would be sealed, inviolable.

In theory.

“You’ve been a most uncooperative young lady, Miss Kowalczyk. We’ve done everything we could to help you reintegrate into society, but you have continued to display disturbing anti-social tendencies. If there were legal grounds for us to continue holding you, be assured that we would.”

This part was a complete lie and it angered her. She bit down on the anger and hid it away, retreating behind the bland, deadpan face she’d perfected long ago. She’d been a good girl for the past four years, diligent in her studies, correct in her behavior. The only defiance she’d ever displayed was in her continued refusal to lure Riddick into a trap. She turned and glanced at the military man, one eyebrow raised. Letting him know she knew the truth.

The silence drew out for a moment. They seemed to be expecting her to say something. She didn’t bother. They’d strayed off of the script and she had no obligation to them until they got back to it.

“Be that as it may,” Parker finally continued, “it is my duty to inform you that your stay at this correctional facility is at an end. You are legally an adult and will be released on your own recognizance.”

“Thank you, sir,” she answered softly. Her voice was perfect, polite and diffident, utterly correct, utterly unimpeachable.

“I understand that you have requested training as a pilot. It is my sad duty to inform you that, despite your good academic standing, you did not test highly enough to be offered a scholarship to the flight academies. Your academic records have been forwarded to a placement agency. They will see about arranging an apprenticeship for you on a vessel.”

Another lie. Jack was an adept hacker and she had seen her test records long before now. Her score had been perfect, top percentile. But nobody was going to give a scholarship to “Riddick’s Bitch.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said again. Deep inside, she substituted another, cruder word.

“Lieutenant Jarvis here, however, would like to discuss another possible option for you,” Parker finished.

Jack turned her attention back to the military man. Lieutenant Jarvis. Yes, she remembered him well.

He tried for an avuncular approach. “How are you, Audrey?”

“It’s Jack. I’m fine. I don’t even walk with a limp anymore, thanks.” The last was said with as much sweetness and light as she could muster, but she hoped it stabbed into him. It was his fault; his bullet.

“Jack.” He accepted the correction with some distaste, not understanding why she would hold onto such an unfeminine name. Fuck him. Riddick had understood her logic, and that was what really mattered. “I’m glad to hear you’re doing well.”

Sure you are, dickhead. Get to the point. You want me to sell out Riddick, right?

“I have been authorized to make you an offer... Jack... by the Military Intelligence department.”

Now there’s one hell of an oxymoron.

Jarvis picked up a file folder with the official seals of the Tribunal on it. He held it out to her. “We would be willing to incur the expenses of training you as a pilot, and provide you with an immediate, honorable discharge afterward, should you wish to return to civilian life. In exchange for—”

“Riddick, right? You want me to rat him out.” She locked eyes with him and then dropped the folder to the floor, letting its contents scatter. “No deal.”

“Miss Kowalczyk, this is possibly your one chance to acquire the normal life you seem to want. I don’t understand why you’re throwing it away for someone who abandoned you four years ago.”

“I’ve never had a normal life, Lieutenant Jarvis. And thanks to *your* bullet, I never will. No picket fences and rug-rats for this lady, right? Anyway, I wouldn’t know what to do with a normal life if I got one. Thanks anyway.”

Jarvis had flinched when she mentioned his bullet. *Damn well should, you shithead. You’re the reason Riddick had to leave without me.*

She turned away from him without another word and fixed her attention back on Parker. He looked deeply offended. Too bad. They were the ones who decided to go off the page. It wasn’t her fault if they didn’t like her ad-libs. They could’ve stuck to the script. The silence spooled out for a long moment, growing increasingly tense. Jack merely watched Parker expectantly. It was his line now.

Finally he cleared his throat and returned his attention to her file. “Very well. Here are your travel documents. You will be going to New Ecuador, as you requested. The Herkimer Placement Agency has been forwarded your records and will assist you in obtaining an apprenticeship contract on a ship. Your shuttle leaves in two hours. I wish you the best of luck for your future.”

The scene, thank God, was concluding. Jack rose, collected the documents from his desk, and shook his hand. "Thank you, Sir," she said one last time. Still perfectly poised, perfectly correct.

She left the room with her head held high, pretending not to hear the angry muttered "Bitch!" one of them uttered just as the door swung closed.

She followed Mrs. Baxter down to the building entrance, where her bags were being loaded into the school's transport. Finally. She was almost free. She could begin building a life for herself, a life of her own. In fourteen more hours, she would officially be eighteen years of age, and her records would be permanently closed to the galaxy until her death. She'd be just another woman.

The thought carried her to the shuttle terminal, until she saw the stiff man with the "Kowalczyk" sign waiting for her. His expression, as she approached him with her baggage cart, was one of extreme distaste.

"Miss Kowalczyk," he began impatiently, "I am Matthew Saunders of the Herkimer Placement Agency. I will be accompanying you to New Ecuador. I want to be honest with you. With your history, it is going to be very difficult to find a ship willing to take you on as crew. Your association with Richard B. Riddick is not the sort of thing that inspires confidence. It will probably take a while to find a Captain willing to take the kind of risk you pose."

Understanding flooded through her and she realized that she'd been royally fucked. No wonder they'd let her leave a day early! It had been their backup plan, in case they couldn't convince her to become their stooge; they'd release her while her records were still public knowledge, so that everybody would know who she'd been. No clean slate for her. When her records were hidden from the public in fourteen hours, it would be too late. Everyone who counted would already know she was "Riddick's Bitch." They'd made sure of it.

Fucking bastards. She was well and truly screwed.

2.

Jack: Getting the Call

“Lights,” Jack muttered, entering her apartment. Nothing happened. “God *damn* it, lights *on!*”

One cheap halogen bulb finally flickered to life, illuminating her grubby one-room efficiency. Jack kicked the door shut behind her and pulled off her uniform. She smoothed it out carefully and hung it in her meager closet, trading it for a pair of sweats. She had four hours to sleep before her next shift started.

In the three months since her arrival in New Ecuador, she’d converted almost everything she’d owned into hard currency, including most of her clothes. There wasn’t any point in keeping them under the circumstances, and she needed the money. Even the combination of waitressing and working as a hospital porter while the agency clucked over her file was barely letting her scrape by. New Ecuador, that exciting, glowing, cosmopolitan planet, was prohibitively expensive to live on.

She’d calculated how long it would be before she couldn’t even afford to keep this place, and she had another month and a half left. Only a month if she wanted to have enough for the fare to New Mecca. Imam’s offer, as little as she wanted to accept charity, still stood. She could go live with him if nothing came through in the next four weeks.

She’d come to the conclusion that the agency had no real intention of placing her. They were abetting Jarvis and his military cronies, stalling her until she was destitute and had to trade her integrity for her survival. Didn’t matter. They wouldn’t get her to do it, no matter what.

She curled up in the lumpy bed and closed her eyes. Sleep was something she’d come to regard as a necessary evil. The nightmares had started again a month ago, the ones in which she was fleeing through the darkness, winged horrors at her heels. Only now, the creatures had Jarvis’ face as they pursued her. She ran, crying for Riddick to save her. He would appear out of the darkness, calling to her that she was safe now... only to be impaled on the Jarvis-Creature’s arm-spikes—

“NO!”

She bolted up from her bed, sweating and shaking. That final image still swam before her, Riddick staring at her in astonishment and betrayal as he realized he’d been killed, realized that she’d led his killer to him.

“Never,” she whispered, wiping away the tears that spilled out of her eyes. “I’ll never betray him...”

She flung herself back down on the bed. “Fuck you, Jarvis!” she shouted at the low ceiling.

She still had an hour until she was due to leave for work, but she knew she wasn’t going to get any more sleep. After a moment she dragged herself out of bed and headed for the shower.

She used almost no hot water; it was too expensive. After three months of shivering she had grown used to it, although she would never like it. It reminded her of that other rain, as she and her friends had fled through the louring darkness toward a salvation that not all of them would reach. She washed as quickly as she could and stepped out, wrapping a towel around her. At least New Ecuador was a warm planet.

She examined her face in the mirror for a moment. Not too bad. Dark green eyes, light brown hair with natural glints of blonde in it, curling halfway down her neck. She’d been so proud of herself when she’d shaved it off, but she’d been even more touched when Riddick asked her to grow it out. She wondered how long she would let it get. It was so thick it already gave her a lot of trouble.

The eyes were still a little bit red from crying, she noticed. Oh well. There would be no sign of that by the time she reached the hospital. She still had more than half an hour, though. Might as well call the Herkimer Agency and harass them again. She made a point of doing it once a day, ever since she’d come to her conclusion of their true intentions. If they thought ignoring her would make her go away, they were in for a surprise. At least, for one more month they were.

She pulled on some clothes at random – didn’t matter what she wore, she’d be changing into scrubs when she got to work – and headed for the comm unit. It surprised her by beeping before she could touch it. Someone was calling *her*.

It was probably a wrong number, but she might as well answer it. She hit the “Receive” button.

“Jack Kowalczyk.” Occasionally she toyed with the notion of answering the comm by calling herself “Riddick’s Bitch,” but she’d never gotten up the nerve.

She was astonished to hear Matthew Saunders' voice on the other end of the call. "Miss Kowalczyk, I'm glad I caught you at home. We may have a position for you with a small merchant vessel, if you are interested."

Was she interested? Damn right she was, but after three months of neglect she wanted to play the game right back at him. "How small?"

"The only other crew member is the Captain. He's looking for someone trainable and cheap."

Fuck you too, asshole.

"He'd better not be looking for a playmate on off-hours."

"Nothing like that, Miss Kowalczyk. Our agency has nothing to do with such transactions, I assure you." Man definitely had some kind of rod up his rectum.

"Sorry," she responded, not quite letting him know how sorry she wasn't. "It was that 'cheap' part. Wanted to make sure you didn't mean what it almost sounded like."

A pause. Saunders was reconsidering his phrasing and maybe realizing how rude it was. She doubted he'd apologize, though. He'd made it clear that he thought she was beneath dirt back when they'd first met.

"So what kind of shipping does this guy do?" she prodded. "Is this deep space or small hops?"

"A mixture of both, apparently. He's been in the business for about two years, according to his ships' records. We think he may be a smuggler trying to go legitimate."

"So is that the reason he's not spooked by my history?" She knew that they probably routinely told anyone who perused her file about her connections with the most dangerous escaped convict in the galaxy.

"He said it might even come in handy, actually."

Great. Just what she needed, someone hoping to capitalize on her shady past. Still... it was this or another month of rice and beans and sixteen-hour workdays before she took a trip to New Mecca.

"What are the terms?"

"He's offering full board and fifteen percent of the net profits."

Fuck it. She was off of this rock right now. Riddick had taught her a few useful moves before they'd been separated; if this guy was a perv she'd deal with him. She wanted out of here.

"Done. Where do I meet him?"

Yet another pause. Had Saunders actually thought she'd turn it down? Too bad for him if he had. "You will need to travel to Seti Station. His ship is berthed there undergoing repairs."

"Seti Station's two star-jumps from here. Is he paying for my flight there?"

"He's paid for a round-trip ticket, Miss Kowalczyk. He said that there was always the possibility that you would choose not to join him once you met, and he didn't want you to worry about being stranded if that happened."

Smart man. She liked him more and more, even though she'd never met him. She had a feeling she wouldn't be using the return ticket, suddenly. People who showed you where the exits were generally were safe to be around. Another thing Riddick had taught her.

"When can I leave?" She realized that she was actually starting to get excited about this. Adventure at last!

"The next ship we can put you on is in two hours. Can you make it?"

"I'll be there. You meeting me at the station, or should I just ask for my ticket at the counter?"

"I'll see you off, Miss Kowalczyk." He sounded a little *too* relieved.

"See you soon, then." She hit the disconnect button and punched in the hospital code. Time to tell them that she was shipping out.

She gave the diner the same courtesy, and then grabbed her meager possessions and tossed them into her pack. Ten minutes later she and all of her remaining worldly goods were on their way. On the way out the door, she coded the lock so that the landlord would know his tenant had vacated permanently. He could start fleecing someone else any time he wanted.

So long, New Ecuador... the planet had kinda sucked for her, anyway.

3.

Jack: “Total Eclipse”

Seti Station was a claustrophobic mass of unwashed humanity, much seedier than anyone let on. Jack threaded her way through the crowds with less ease than she once had. She kept feeling stabs of odd nostalgia for the time, five years earlier, when she’d worked crowds like these, snitching wallets from unwary tourists to finance her happy hobo existence. At least she knew what to watch out for, now.

She was heading for berth G-927, docking-place of the *Total Eclipse*, her new ship. She hadn’t met with the Captain yet, but he’d left an electronic message inviting her to check the ship out before their meeting. She’d hesitated, but then decided to go ahead and do it. If it had been *her* ship, she doubted she’d let some neophyte kid on board to explore, but maybe this guy was trying to set her at ease.

The name bugged her a little. If she believed in bad omens, it would have upset her. Jack and eclipses didn’t get along very well. Her parents had died the day after their mining colony had watched a spectacular lunar eclipse. Once upon a time that last day together had been a treasured memory, until she came to realize that eclipses were always harbingers of death and destruction for her. The last one she’d seen had been followed by the deaths of half a dozen people she’d come to care deeply about.

Fuck it. It was just a name. Maybe Captain Mason would change it if she found it really bothered her.

The ship was small and kind of old, but clearly well-maintained. She walked around it, studying the signs of hull-patching and modifications. Either this guy had lots of money for excellent mechanics, or he was one himself. Probably the latter. That was fantastic news; she’d be able to learn some ship maintenance, too.

Finally she went to the ramp and punched in the code he’d given her. The ramp descended slowly and she got her first look inside.

Kind of dark. Maybe he paid for his excellent maintenance by cutting corners in things like lighting. She boarded, closing the ramp behind her.

“Lights to full,” she called out, just to see if it would get any brighter. It did, but not by much.

It was pretty nice, though. Much more spacious than she would have thought. The cockpit appeared to be on the upper level. This area looked like it was mostly used as a cargo hold. There were a few cases in storage, wrapped and strapped down. She wondered how soon he was planning on leaving, and how much he’d be carrying.

There was one area that looked almost like a dojo. That would be cool. Maybe he could further her education in the martial arts. She was starting to really look forward to meeting him.

She climbed to the upper level and got her first glimpse of the working and living quarters. The cockpit was very small; the rest of the space had been adapted for daily use. It was a bit Spartan. Captain Mason didn’t appear to have much in the way of knick-knacks. Lots of reading materials, she noticed. There were three doors sectioning off parts of the ship. She tried one and found herself looking into what was obviously Mason’s personal quarters.

She shut the door quickly, even though there had been nothing embarrassing about what she’d seen. It was just a bedroom, one used by a man, and very tidy. With her luck, Mason would turn out to be a neat-freak.

The next door revealed a rather spacious bathroom. There was even a full-size shower, an oddity for a ship. She glanced around the main room again, noting the size of the furniture, the high placement of books and sundry. It looked like Mason was probably a pretty large man. He’d certainly had a large bed for a spaceship...

She was reaching for the third door when she heard the ship’s ramp opening. Looked like she’d be meeting her Captain a little earlier than anticipated. She put her pack down on one of the cockpit seats and headed for the ladder.

“Captain Mason?” she called down. “Hey, it’s Jack Kowalczyk. I took you up on your offer to look around. I hope that’s okay.”

Silence. She thought she heard footsteps, but she wasn’t sure. Shit, was someone trying to rob the ship? She could have sworn she’d locked the ramp behind her...

She noticed an object that looked like a blackjack near the ladder and grabbed it, holding it close to her chest as she rapidly descended. With any luck, whoever was down there wouldn't be expecting her to be armed...

The second her feet touched the cargo bay floor she whirled around, balancing her body the way Riddick had taught her. She still almost fell.

The two stared at each other for a long moment. His eyes briefly flicked away from hers when the blackjack fell from her nerveless fingers, and his mouth quirked.

"Not bad reflexes, kid," he drawled.

Jack was sure her heart had stopped. She opened her mouth but couldn't get anything to emerge. She closed it again. This was her captain, she realized. She should have known all along. She should have known the second she learned the ship's name.

Finally her mouth would work properly. She gasped out the only thing she could, the one word that was filling her whole consciousness.

"Riddick..."

4.

Jack: One Fine Freakin' Reunion

"My god, Riddick, I'm so glad to—"

She'd been throwing her arms around him as she was speaking, but the breath was abruptly knocked out of her as Riddick pinned her against the wall. His hands started moving swiftly over her body.

What the fuck? He's frisking me!

"Jeez, I'm not armed or anything! What the fuck is your problem?" She struck out at him only to have him catch her arm in mid-swing.

He turned her around so that she was facing the wall and continued patting her down in silence. His hands on her body were impersonal, the hands of a stranger.

Just when she thought he was finished his hands became *more* invasive, sliding under her shirt and across her bare skin. She began to struggle.

"*Goddamn* it, you sick psycho-fuck bastard, what the *hell* do you think you're doing?!"

"I'm checking you for wires," he growled, relentlessly continuing his search. His hands pushed under the waistband of her leggings.

"Jesus, do you think I'd have let somebody wire me? Dammit, watch where you're putting your hands! If you even *think* of doing a cavity-search I'll rip your fucking nuts off!"

"Don't tempt me, Jack," he laughed in her ear.

Finally he was done. She managed to take him by surprise as he turned her back around, striking him across the face with her open hand. He blinked, then laughed at her.

"Is that how you say 'hi' to an old friend?"

"Hell no," she seethed. "Was *that*?"

His face grew serious. "Not really. But I had to be sure that's what you really were."

She stared at him in appalled amazement. "What? Did you think I sold you out or something? You son of a *bitch!*"

"Easy, Jack." His hands were on her shoulders. "You know what my life is like. You remember."

His words enraged her even more. "You think I could forget?" She knocked his hands away and pulled her shirt up, away from her belly, so he could see the ugly, jagged scar that marred her side. "How could I with this *nifty* souvenir of our last day together? I was in the hospital for two fucking months!"

He winced. He actually winced! Thinking about how she'd been shot *hurt* him. He stared down at her midriff for a long moment, then reached out and gently touched the scar with the tips of his fingers.

"I am so sorry, Jack," he whispered hoarsely.

Jack stared up at the ceiling and blinked several times to ease the stinging of her eyes. She had to swallow hard against the sudden knot in her throat. She was not going to cry. *She was not going to fucking cry!*

He must have seen the look on her face because he brought his hand up to her cheek. She pulled away as if he'd burned her.

"Are we done now?" she demanded.

"No." His voice was composed again. He let her go and walked over to the med-locker. "I need to check one more thing."

He removed a device from the locker and brought it back over to her. Turning it on, he began passing it over her and around her. The scanner chuckled quietly to itself before letting out a sharp squawk as it passed over her upper right arm.

Riddick sighed and finished sweeping the device over her body, then brought it back to her arm. The thing squawked again.

"Yeah, that's it," he told her. "They inserted a beacon into you surgically."

She stared at him again. "The hell they did!"

"It's right here," he replied, touching her arm.

"No. That's my implant."

“Your ‘implant?’ What implant?” The skepticism on his face and in his voice brought her anger back, stronger than ever.

“It’s a hormonal regulator,” she snapped. “If I didn’t have one, I’d go into premature menopause.” She watched him grow confused. “They had to do a complete hysterectomy, Riddick. The bullet tore up a lot of things and my reproductive system was one of them. I’m sterile. Happy?”

He looked anything but. “They wouldn’t put it in your arm, Jack. They’d have to implant that kind of regulator deeper inside you, connected into your glandular system. I’m sure they did, but that’s not it.” He touched her arm again. “Now. We’re going to have to get the locator out of you.”

The mixture of fear and rage in her skyrocketed as she realized what he was planning to do. “You crazy fuck, you’re not cutting me open!” She tried to dive past him, heading for the ramp. She never made it.

He had her on the floor before she’d realized she’d been grabbed, pinned beneath him. She struggled against him fiercely, screaming incoherent obscenities at him. She saw the hypo only a second before she felt the sting on her throat. Everything went black.

5.

Riddick: Playing for Keeps

Two hours later, Riddick and two nondescript men entered the anteroom of the Seti Station morgue. At his nod, one of the orderlies approached. The man looked nervous, wiping his palms on his white coat.

“It’s time?”

Riddick nodded almost imperceptibly. “It’s time. Get her ready.”

The man hesitantly extended his hand and Riddick slipped the evidence bags, data packet and credit key into it. Final stage of the transaction completed, the orderly turned and disappeared into the morgue itself.

Ten minutes passed. Riddick’s companions shifted nervously, but he remained perfectly still.

Four months ago, in anticipation of this day, Riddick had “purchased” the body of an unclaimed Jane Doe who bore a strong superficial resemblance to Jack. The body had been held in stasis ever since. Certain modifications had been made to her to make the resemblance more pronounced. Final modifications, based on what he’d learned from his scanner sweep of Jack’s body, were being made now.

In a day or two, the woman’s body would be found by the police. They would quickly identify her as Audrey Jacqueline Kowalczyk. He’d already switched their dental, retinal, fingerprint and tissue type records in the computer systems, so the match would come up almost immediately. The hysterectomy and tracking implant would serve as confirmation.

Jack would officially be dead. The government might harbor suspicions, but all of the evidence would say that he’d hunted her down and murdered her. He – and the real Jack – would be long gone before they could even begin to make a move.

It was too bad he couldn’t fake his own death as easily, but his records, for whatever reason, had been plastered with electronic safeguards. He’d tried, several times, to get into them, but each attempt had ended in spectacular failure and he’d been forced to flee for his life as alerted shock troops closed in.

His first try at his records had resulted in his ride on the ill-fated *Hunter-Gratzner*. The second of those attempts had gotten Jack shot. He still winced whenever he contemplated it.

Funny how she’d grown up while he wasn’t looking.

Actually, he *had* been looking. He’d come up with a long-standing arrangement with a very talented photographer-cum-detective, years before. As a result, he’d frequently received packets of data and pictures at various drop-sites, showing him how the girl was doing. He’d known her vital statistics backward and forward – and had used them to select his Jane Doe – and had seen how her hair had grown out into a luxuriant golden mane, and how her thin, straight figure had blossomed into curves.

Still, knowing she’d grown into a beauty hadn’t prepared him for the impact it would have on him. He’d still envisioned her as his little teenaged tomboy sidekick – and she still talked like it, he’d noticed – but that wasn’t what he’d found himself face-to-face with.

Knowing she’d grown breasts hadn’t prepared him for the feel of them under his hands when he’d frisked her. That had been a startling moment that had almost cost him his composure. She’d saved him – possibly saved them both – by swearing a blue-streak at him, just like the Jack he remembered.

The door to the morgue opened and the orderly gestured them in. Riddick entered, followed by his two silent associates.

The body was on a gurney, draped. Riddick lifted the sheet and examined the handiwork he’d paid for. Somewhere deep inside him a tiny part of him shivered, imagining for a moment that this really *was* Jack on the slab. If it had been, the crimes apparently perpetrated upon her would have incited him to bloody vengeance. Only him, though. He was the only one who truly cared about her.

Ironical that everyone would soon think he’d murdered her.

The work was satisfactory. Convincingly brutal. The work of a true psycho-beast. He’d picked his accomplices well and gotten his money’s worth. He nodded and lowered the sheet.

Without a word, the orderly disabled the alarms on the emergency exit and opened it so Riddick’s colleagues could wheel the body out. He turned and left the way he’d come. Round over, game just beginning. Time to leave this dive.

He left the morgue and headed back to the *Total Eclipse*, making sure that he wasn't followed. Hadn't happened in years, but there had been a few occasions, and he made a point of being ready for them.

Once on board, he checked in on Jack for a moment. She was still under, and should be for several more hours. Excellent. He went to his room and quickly changed into his Captain Mason guise. It was a comprehensive outfit, complete with hairpieces and spectrum contacts that made his eyes appear hazel. When he was done, the man looking back at him in the mirror bore only the vaguest resemblance to Richard B. Riddick.

He left the ship a few minutes later, heading for the restaurant he'd booked. This part of the charade was absolutely essential to their getaway.

The *Ecliptic* was in one of the higher-rent parts of the station. He'd picked it for the name, mostly, but the ambiance was quite nice. He'd have to remember to actually bring Jack here next time they came through.

The hostess, a shapely woman he wouldn't have minded spending a few hours with, came over to him with a slightly-warmer-than-professional smile. "Do you have a reservation, Sir?"

He nodded. "Captain Mason, party of two."

Her smile widened a notch. "This way, please. Your companion has not yet arrived."

He gave a nonchalant shrug as she led him to a small table. This was working out well. The little spark of chemistry between them guaranteed that she'd remember this little enactment with clarity.

For old times' sake he ordered a glass of Shiraz and sipped it while he waited. The minutes dragged on.

He made a point of glancing at his chrono periodically. When his waitress returned to ask if he wanted more wine, he let out an exasperated sigh.

"I'm ready to order," he informed her. He followed up with a muttered aside that was deliberately pitched so that she'd hear and remember it. "I'm not waiting any longer for some damned flighty kid..."

She frowned a little but took his order without comment.

The food turned out to be excellent. He'd definitely have to bring Jack here someday. He took the time to enjoy it, in anticipation of the bland travel rations he'd soon be subsisting on once more. Every few minutes he glanced at the restaurant entrance with a look of growing irritation.

Finally the meal was done. He paid his check, tipping the waitress generously to make sure he stuck in her mind, too.

On his way out, he paused by the hostess. The smile he gave her was designed to enhance her recall of him and ensure that her memories had a very positive feel to them. He might need the Captain Mason identity again someday, after all. The real Captain Mason would never need it again.

"Excuse me... do you have a comm system I might use?"

She let him use the one in the manager's office, as he'd hoped she would. The call would probably be recorded, which was ideal.

He coded in his credit number and made his call. It took a few minutes to go through as the signals traveled to New Ecuador and back.

"Herkimer Placement Agency," a voice on the other end finally said.

"I need to speak with Matthew Saunders," he said brusquely. "Immediately."

A long pause. "One moment, please."

An even longer pause.

"This is Matthew Saunders."

"Saunders, this is Mason. Your girl never showed up," he snapped.

Saunders, when he finally spoke, sounded apologetic but unsurprised. "I'm sorry to hear that, Captain. Are you sure she has arrived on the station?"

"Yeah, I spoke to her earlier. We were supposed to meet at the *Ecliptic* to go over the contract, and she never bothered to show. I'm under a time-crunch here. My launch window is in two hours. I can't be playing games with some irresponsible know-nothing kid."

"Captain Mason, I did advise you against hiring her, if you recall."

"Yeah," he answered, making sure he sounded disgusted. "You did. Next time, I'll listen. If she calls you, let her know I had to ship out. I won't be back for three or four months. If she can afford to stay here until I get back, she's welcome to do so and I'll give her one more shot. Otherwise, tell her to use that damned return ticket."

He waited until Saunders' apologetic platitudes began before he switched off the comm system. He left the restaurant shaking his head and muttering sourly, the very picture of irritated disappointment.

Jack would soon be a "missing person," which would make the identification of "her" body even faster. And Mason had an alibi of sorts.

A good few hours' work. Round two over. Time for them to leave Seti Station.

6.

Jack: Reconciliation

She woke up with a pounding headache, a very sore arm, and no freedom of movement.

She'd been strapped down in a bed and covered with a blanket. The room was a small one but more spacious than she'd anticipated. There was even a small dresser, and her pack was resting on top of it. Usually apprentice spacers made do with the drawers under their bunks.

The hum of the ship's drive was omnipresent and almost soothing. Turning her head, she could make out the bandages neatly covering her upper arm.

That son of a bitch, she fumed. She wondered how much time had elapsed. Enough, she suddenly realized, for them to leave the spaceport and for the ship's deep-space drive to kick in.

"Riddick?" she called tentatively. No answer.

"RIDDICK!" This time she bellowed his name. After a moment she heard heavy, familiar footsteps outside of her room.

He filled the doorway, huge and laconic. "Yeah, Jack?"

"What the *fuck* do you think you're doing?" she spat. His casual attitude in the face of her pain was like a knife in her. She'd been dreaming of this moment for years and he had to go and turn it into a nightmare...

He shrugged and entered the room, coming over to sit on her bed beside her. "Right now? I was checking the System news to see if a greatly-exaggerated report of your death had shown up yet."

"You were *what*?"

He leaned over and began undoing the straps that held her down. "I'll show you when I find it. Another day or so and it'll be there. How do you feel?"

"Like a crazy shithead cut me up," she grouched.

The bastard actually chuckled. She slapped at his arm with her freed hand.

"It's not fucking funny!"

"Jack, I didn't *want* to do that," he told her patiently, fixing her with his silvery gaze. "I hoped you'd be clean. But they put a tracer in you because *they* hoped you'd lead them to me."

"So it *was* a homing beacon? Because if I go into menopause I *swear* I'll rip *your* equipment out and make us a matched set—"

He laughed. "Darlin', we're a perfect match already." His hand came down and rested against her cheek for a moment. "I've missed you."

She hoped the sudden lump in her throat and sting in her eyes didn't show. Why the hell did he have to go and be *nice* to her now? She'd just been getting used to the idea that he was an asshole and he had to suddenly get sweet...

His voice was very kind when he resumed speaking. "It *was* a homing beacon. High-tech. Designed to transmit a small signal that would slice into the nearest comm system and take it over, using it to boost its range. Serious black-ops equipment. They want me bad for some reason."

"So where is it?"

"Back at the spaceport. In 'your' corpse."

It was probably the most chilling thing she'd heard him say.

"My corpse?" She couldn't keep the tremor out of her voice.

He nodded. "A body will be found in the next day or so that will be positively identified as yours. There'll be enough evidence to link me to the crime. They're going to come to the conclusion that I thought you were luring me into a trap, and killed you in retaliation. If any of those fucks have consciences, it should eat at them some. Look what they got you, trying to use you like they did."

"Would you have?" she forced herself to ask. Her voice came out as a breathless, tremulous squeak. He looked over at her sharply, then frowned.

"Never, Jack. If you *had* tried to entrap me, we'd be playing this out much the same way. Except..." he grinned slightly and returned to undoing the straps. "...I probably wouldn't be untying you just yet."

“You didn’t... you didn’t kill some girl... just to—”

“No, kid, I didn’t. Last woman I killed was a merc who came gunning for me eight years ago. I don’t kill women if I can help it. Call me a softie... just not to my face.” He finished unstrapping her and sat back.

“So how’d she die?” She had to know.

He shrugged. “She turned up in the morgue a few months ago. Strangled, I think. From the coroner’s report, I’d say she was probably hustling and hooked up with someone who liked it rougher than she could take it. Happens all the time, you know. Only thing of interest to me was that her body went unclaimed and she had a strong physical resemblance to you.”

“So she was...”

“Just another teenage runaway who got eaten alive,” he answered levelly, understanding what she needed to hear. “The way I made sure *you’d* never be.”

This time she couldn’t keep the tears from filling her eyes. He saw them and drew her into the circle of his arms. Finally he gave her the welcoming hug she’d wanted. She let the tears out and sobbed into his chest, glad to be home again.

7.

Riddick: Remembering

He'd held her hand for the first time shortly after they'd left that desolate, unnamed planet. She'd come up into the cockpit and taken the seat next to his, he remembered. He'd been impressed by how brave she was.

At the time, he'd been trying to figure out what to do with the two of them, and not liking any of the options. He'd been at war, internally. There was a pitched battle between his old, hard, ruthless instincts honed by years on the run, and this new *thing* that Carolyn had left inside him.

It was a piece of her. She'd gotten inside him somehow and had left a sharp fragment of herself embedded in him when she was torn out of his grasp. It was like the bit of his shiv that had been left in Johns' back. He could feel it, pressing against his sleeping moral center, jolting it at odd moments.

He knew he should just ghost both of them and move on, but every time his mind began to turn in that direction, the shiv-that-was-Carolyn sliced at him again. So he was surprised when this crazy-brave little chit, with more guts than sense, sat down next to him and gave voice to some of his very own thoughts.

"Lotta questions, whoever we run into," she told him. "Could even be a merc ship."

She paused, watching his face to see his response. He made his expression stay deadpan. No point in intimidating her until he'd heard what she wanted.

After a few seconds she shrugged. "So what the hell do we tell them about you?" she asked expectantly.

No pleas. No demands. No attempts to fuck with him. It took him by surprise and silenced the voice of the predator inside him. The kid was telling him it was his call, that she'd follow his lead.

"Tell 'em Riddick's dead," he suggested. She nodded, fixing the thought in her mind. "He died somewhere on that planet," he mused.

It wasn't the complete truth, of course, but it *felt* like truth. The man who'd taken off from the planet was definitely not the same one who'd kicked his way out of his cryo-tube after the crash.

That's when he'd reached out and taken her small hand in his. They'd fallen asleep soon after, side by side in the cockpit, hand in hand, while Imam caught up on his prayers behind them. He'd had the funny feeling that she belonged to him even then. Not just to him, but *with* him. Part of a matched set.

He'd ended up telling them about how he'd almost left them behind, and had been surprised by the equanimity with which they took it. He'd expected histrionics from Jack, at least, but she'd shrugged philosophically, commenting that Fry had almost done something similar, but that both of them had come back in the end.

"'Almost did' doesn't count," she'd said with a funny smile. Imam later remarked, while Jack slept, that the girl had managed to take centuries of ethical expounding and condense it into a single, simple phrase.

She'd been the one to come up with his cover story, too. He'd already planned to claim that he was Johns, but she'd embellished it, proposing a back-story that would give them protection if he was ever caught in his lie.

They'd never met Johns, she suggested. Riddick had killed him and assumed his identity immediately after the crash. If anyone ever tried to accuse them of aiding and abetting a known felon, they could claim that they'd been under the impression that they were helping a cop. It was a brilliant idea, he'd reflected. No jury on any planet would send a mild-mannered cleric or a cute teenage girl to jail for being scammed, after all. Even Imam had agreed to be party to the lie.

By the time a prospecting ship picked them up, he'd heard her life story and knew that she'd be better off staying with him than Imam. She was deeply fond of the holy man, but he figured it wouldn't be more than a month before she bailed on him to continue her nomadic life among the stars. She had a surprising amount of wanderlust in her for one so young.

She was a nice kid, though, and he realized that he worried about her. On her own it was only a matter of time before she got herself eaten alive and for some reason he couldn't let that happen. Not unless he wanted to spend the rest of his life with a shiv-that-was-Jack slicing him alongside the shiv-that-was-Carolyn.

He'd taken her with him and kept her as safe as possible, until the day she'd been snatched out of his hands by Lieutenant Fucking Jarvis and his Elite Special Forces shock troops. That last moment was indelibly

burned in his mind. He would never forget the sight of her on her knees, clutching desperately at the gory wound in her abdomen, eyes glazing over with shock as the airlock door closed in his face.

He'd been completely numb for more than a month until he learned she'd survived. Taking her back had been his mission ever since.

Now, finally, he had her.

He held onto her tightly until her tears subsided. He didn't bother saying a word. What he felt coming off of her wasn't pain but the cessation of it and he knew that he was already giving her exactly what she needed.

When the tears finally ebbed and he felt her relax in his arms, he spoke at last. "Hungry?"

He felt her nod against his chest.

"You up for breakfast?"

She sat back, wiping her face. There was growing joy in the smile she gave him. "Hell, yeah. I've missed our breakfasts."

He grinned back at her, pleased. "Me too."

8.

Jack: The Best Meal of the Day

“Is that really all you have?” Riddick asked, gesturing at her meager pack.

Jack swung her legs out of her bed and began searching the floor for her shoes. “Yeah, well, I used to have a lot of stuff but I sold most of it while I was on New Ecuador. I planned to do a little shopping at Seti Station before we left... jerk.”

She heard his snort of laughter and rejoiced inwardly.

“What the fuck did you do with my shoes, anyway?”

“They’re by your dresser.” He reached down and snagged them for her, handing them over. “You always use such foul language?”

“Shit no, Riddick, I’m a proper fuckin’ lady.”

“So I see,” he chuckled. She followed him out of the bedroom and over to the food prep unit. It was a pretty good model, she noticed. Ought to produce some tasty meals.

“You’ve got some snazzy equipment,” she commented as he began punching buttons.

“Always have,” he smirked without looking up. She pretended not to get his meaning. God, she’d missed his sense of humor. Life had been bleak without him there to make fun of it.

“Well, it’s nice to know my standard of living’s gone up a little. You wouldn’t believe the crap I’ve been eating for the last few months.”

“Sure I would,” he chuckled. “I’ve eaten loads worse, kid.”

“Oh yeah? Like what?” she challenged. She knew it was true but it had been *too* long since he’d told her a story. She had this intense urge to roll the last four years back, knock them out of existence. At this moment, her greatest desire was to lose herself in one of his wild, harrowing tales about life on the run.

“You want me to tell you about the most disgusting things I’ve ever eaten? Over breakfast? Did they replace your intestines with Teflon, Jack?”

For the first time, ever, a reference to her injuries actually made her laugh. He watched her with an odd smile on his face.

“I have *missed* that sound,” he told her.

She wiped at her eyes, suddenly feeling serious. “I’ve missed having reasons to laugh.”

Riddick stepped over to her and crushed her in a swift, fierce hug. They stayed in the embrace, unmoving, until a tone from the food prep machine informed them that breakfast was ready at last.

He released her and pulled out two plates of steaming food, carrying them to the small table. He’d coded in all of her old favorites, she realized with a pang. Scrambled eggs, sausage, grilled pineapple... This was going to be the very best breakfast she’d ever had, she suddenly knew.

At first they ate in complete silence. Jack couldn’t decide which part was better, the food or the company, and she couldn’t take her eyes off of him. He seemed to be having the same problem, she noticed.

“I warn you,” he told her between bites, “most of our meals aren’t going to be this good. I just wanted to start things off nice.”

“Well I appreciate it,” she answered, grinning. “So where are we headed?”

“Gotta drop off a few crates on Troubadour, do a little job there. We’ll be there in about a week, and we’ll be staying probably ten days.” He shrugged, pouring himself some juice.

“A ‘little job’ takes ten days?” The Riddick she remembered handled “little jobs” in minutes.

“No, but getting you healed up will.”

She wasn’t at all sure what he meant by that. “Huh?”

“There’s a good Regen clinic there,” he explained. “I already signed you up. There’s something you should know. They lied to you. You’ve never had a hormonal regulation implant. They only removed one of your ovaries and the other one’s been working just fine.”

“Those fucking bastards!”

Riddick nodded, watching her closely. “They could have arranged to have your uterus regenerated any time they felt like paying for it. Probably woulda done it if you’d agreed to sell me out, too. Doesn’t matter. I

can afford it. Kinda figure I owe it to you, anyway. It was my shitheaded mistake that got you plugged in the first place.”

Jack sat back for a moment, no longer eating, no longer even seeing Riddick. It was all real, she realized. For the last four years, as her body changed and became more feminine, she’d felt as if it had been taken from her, as if it had become a stranger. She’d always assumed that the artificial regulator was the source of her hips and breasts and the other subtle changes she’d undergone. She’d even contemplated the possibility that the government had deliberately chosen to endow her with a hooker’s body because that was what they intended her to become.

But it was *natural*. It was all real. It was *hers*!

“Wow,” she whispered after a moment.

Riddick smiled and returned to eating his food.

“Shit, that means I’m gonna start bleeding again, doesn’t it?”

“Bet you haven’t missed *that*,” he chuckled.

“I’ll bet *you* haven’t missed it either,” she retorted.

“You’d win. You always did turn into a bitch right before you started—” His voice was cut off as a heaping spoonful of scrambled eggs hit his face.

“Asshole,” she smirked.

He wiped the eggs off of his face, a feral smile appearing, and then lunged around the table. “Bet you’re still ticklish!”

He won again; she was.

9.

Jarvis: Regret

Lieutenant Reginald Jarvis had informed his secretary that he was to receive no calls or interruptions. Ordinarily, this would have meant that he was working feverishly on some aspect of the Project, but today he found himself simply staring at nothing. Occasionally his eyes would move to the files on his desk. Two dossiers and a coroner's report lay in an untidy pile.

The Kowalczyk girl was dead. Her body had been discovered two days ago in the bowels of Seti Station, after she'd been missing for almost a week. Her erstwhile protector had caught up with her and tortured her to death.

He didn't need to open the file at this point. The images and the coroner's descriptions were burned into his brain.

My fault, he thought with anguish. All my fault. Never should have put the tracer in her.

Somehow Riddick must have detected the chip. It had been cut out of the girl's arm and put in her mouth, in the age-old traditional warning against people who turned State's Evidence. And that was probably the gentlest thing that had been done to her.

The body had been barely recognizable as human when it was found, but the dental and tissue type records had matched almost instantaneously. The authorities on Seti Station had been on the lookout for Audrey "Jack" Kowalczyk already. The whole time, that damned chip had been signaling that she was somewhere on the station, but it took a drunken janitor to find her.

It wasn't supposed to go down like this, he thought again futilely. Riddick should never have been able to detect the tracer, for one thing. The fucking device was supposed to be invisible to all available scanners! But there it was in a little baggie on his desk, still smeared with the girl's blood.

She'd been raped repeatedly, according to the report. Semen samples had shown a positive match with Riddick's DNA. Worst of all, the free histamine tests had shown that every single wound had been inflicted while she was still alive.

He wasn't supposed to be this unstable, Jarvis protested mentally, his eyes moving to the thick dossier that covered the life of RIDDICK, RICHARD B. They said his psychosis had passed!

There was no denying, however, the animal savagery of Riddick's latest and cruelest transgression. The poor kid had been devoted to him and he'd gutted her like a fish. It was a crime that surpassed even his earliest atrocities as a teenager.

Had the psychosis returned? If it had, the whole Project was in jeopardy. There were eleven operatives who might be similarly ticking time-bombs.

He wished he could just order the kill, but the Board was still adamant, even in the face of this latest debacle. The Kowalczyk girl was nothing to them, just a disposable tool that might have led them to their quarry, but hadn't.

He was the one who had to live with the guilt. He was the one who had to cope with the knowledge that he'd sentenced her to live out her final months in a flea-bitten dive before her life was snuffed out in an ordeal of terror and pain.

She'd been an amazing person, really. He'd desperately wanted to recruit her, to give her the training such sharp intelligence deserved. In time, he would have brought her into the Project, revealing the hidden truths about her old friend and the Tribunal's plans for him. Jarvis was sure that, once she'd been given full disclosure, she would have wholeheartedly assisted him in bringing Riddick back in...

It would never happen, now. She was dead and the "truth" about Riddick was in question. But the board wouldn't let him hit the purge button, not yet.

He cursed himself for authorizing Saunders to forward Mason's job offer to the girl. It had seemed ideal at the time – they'd let her hook up with a shady character, then catch her in the act of committing a smuggling offense. She'd be trapped in their web, finally, faced with either hard time in a real prison or the deal they kept trying to hand her.

But she'd never made it as far as Mason. Riddick had found her first.

Did she run to him? Was she happy to see him at first? When had her joy at their reunion been dashed aside by his animal cruelty? Had she even understood why he'd turned on her?

Jarvis was amazed to realize that his face was wet.

He picked up the small, woefully-thin file on Audrey Jacqueline Kowalczyk and leafed through it, perusing the photos. There was one that had always stuck in his mind... where was it?

Here. It was a candid shot, taken a month before her release, while she was on a field trip with some of the other well-behaved girls in the shelter. Even though it was only a picture of her face, he knew the whole story behind it.

She'd been at the zoo, walking from exhibit to exhibit. Finally she had found the Jaguar paddock. There had been trouble a few hours earlier – one of the keepers had been injured. The male jaguar was now confined in a tiny cage, chained and muzzled.

She'd watched him for three hours. When their hidden observer had snapped her picture, he'd caught her mood perfectly. Such compassion and empathy in her face, unlike the careful deadpan she usually wore. Such feeling for the suffering of a caged, restrained, supremely dangerous beast.

Had she seen Riddick in the jaguar?

Had she found the jaguar in Riddick when they were reunited? Had it found her?

He pulled the photo out of the file and spent several minutes gazing at it. Then he turned and opened a little-used drawer in his desk. He'd put his ex-wife's photo, frame and all, into the drawer when she'd left him six years ago and hadn't bothered to look at it since. Now he removed the photo from the frame and slid Jack's picture in. He set it on his desk.

From now on, her mournful eyes would watch over him.

Tossing his ex-wife's picture into his wastebasket, he made himself a solemn promise. Approval from the Board or not, he would never let another opportunity to kill Richard B. Riddick go by unused.

Even if it destroyed his career, he was going to avenge the death of Audrey "Jack" Kowalczyk.

10.

Riddick: On the Job

He had been crouched in the alley for three hours already, patiently awaiting his quarry. The man would come eventually.

He'd taken advantage of the "downtime" to think about his current situation and the last week of his life. He was going to have to make some changes, he realized. His usually-meticulous plans were in severe danger of coming unraveled if he wasn't careful.

Not that he blamed Jack in any way. It wasn't her fault she'd grown up; it certainly wasn't her fault that she'd turned into someone he wanted to fuck. She seemed completely oblivious to his growing distress, which was both a good and a bad thing.

That stupid tickle session had been his first real warning of how profoundly things had changed. She'd shrieked in mock-fear and run from him, as she had years ago, letting him corner her and tickle her until she was breathless. It had been an old game of theirs, a completely innocent one. He hadn't been at all prepared for the sudden surge of lust he'd felt when he'd really looked at her gasping, prone body below his. It had taken every ounce of his self-control to prevent things from getting completely out of hand, and to keep her from knowing how close to the edge they'd gone.

They'd finished their breakfast without further incident and he was recovered by the time they were done.

Thing was, he was pretty sure she didn't feel it. She seemed blithely unaware of any sexual subtexts that appeared; all the more reason for him to keep himself under control. He was a lot of things but he was no rapist, and Jack was far too precious to him anyway. He had no intention of hurting her.

He really should have seen this coming. He'd always known she was going to be a beauty, hadn't he? He'd figured that eventually he'd be stuck beating back the wolves from her door, but he'd never realized that he'd be *one* of them.

The bathroom had been their next problem. He hadn't lived with anyone for four years and his habits were a bit lax. Jack, meanwhile, was accustomed to sharing facilities, but only with other girls. They'd embarrassed each other several times before they got the rules straight. Bathrobes on at all times on the way to and from; door closed when the room was in use, always. Riddick had never been particularly body-conscious, and Jack didn't seem to be either, but it had to be done this way or he was going to end up doing something he was sure both of them would regret.

The newest rule had been imposed just this morning. Jack had had a violent nightmare the night before and her screams had wakened him. He'd rushed into her room and gathered her into his arms so quickly that he didn't realize at first that she was every bit as topless as he was. The only thing separating their upper bodies had been the thin, sweat-soaked sheet from her bed.

They'd had a heavy argument about it in the morning. Riddick still couldn't bring himself to tell her the real reason he didn't want her wandering around half-naked, so he'd retreated into a plausible, convenient excuse.

"You need to be ready to pick up and leave at a moment's notice, kid," he'd told her. "We won't necessarily get much warning before we have to vacate. You remember that from before. So you'd better be ready to head out in whatever you have on. And naked ain't inconspicuous."

It had backfired on him a little; now *he* had to wear an undershirt to bed, too. He really hated doing that.

He snapped back into alertness as a silhouette appeared at the end of the alley. Was this his man? Nah... just some kid lighting up... Guy wasn't due yet, anyway.

Tomorrow he would be checking Jack into the Regen clinic, which would give him a few days to get a little perspective. They'd still do their breakfasts; he'd promised her that. He'd be at the clinic every morning at 6 a. m. and they'd spend their traditional hour together over eggs and toast or whatever godawful food the clinic provided. She'd be bedridden for a week after the process began. It would be an excellent time for them to continue their re-acquaintance without any dangerous subtexts.

And his nights would belong to him, again. He had some serious plans for them, too.

First, though, this little piece of business. If he wasn't mistaken, his mark was approaching.

Yes, the man entering the alley was Benicio Godot, the drug dealer he'd been hired to kill. No bodyguards with him, either. This was way too easy. He'd hoped for more of a challenge, he realized. Bodyguards, body armor, weaponry, something.

Instead, all he had to do was rise to his feet as Godot passed and slide his shiv into the man's Sweet Spot. He stepped away as blood fountained out from the man's back. He'd hit the artery spot-on. The man crumpled soundlessly to the pavement.

Sighing, he cleaned his shiv off on the man's pants leg. Too damned easy. Jobs like this were the equivalent of found money to him.

He waited a few minutes until the body began to cool, then removed the man's thumbs as requested and put them into a plastic bag. Time to go collect his pay, and then get back to Jack. She'd be horrified if she knew what he had done, but he didn't plan on telling her.

"Never tell me," she'd said once, years ago. "I don't want to have to think about that stuff. I know you do it, but I want to be able to pretend you don't."

He still honored her request. He was actually fairly particular about the jobs he took; he only X-ed out crime kingpins. He wouldn't touch their families. He never took contracts on women or children. His first preference was to take contracts on people who were as dangerous as he was, but those were hard to come by. He'd been offered his own contract once or twice, something that never failed to amuse him.

But Jack would never know anything about these jobs. In his current guise, she wouldn't recognize him anyway.

He was wearing his Stan Kaplan disguise today. There really had been a Stan Kaplan once, who hadn't been a bad slice artist, until the day he'd gone after Riddick and met his untimely end. Riddick had held onto the man's papers and had slowly arranged to assume his identity. Now he performed his periodic hatchet jobs under that name. Just enough to keep Stan alive in everyone's minds and keep his coffers full.

"Stan Kaplan" entered the lobby of the Richelieu building and headed over to the bank of antique-style elevators. He rode up to the eighth floor and entered a small, unmarked door at the end of the hall.

The secretary inside smiled at him, seeing a green-eyed, sandy-haired man with a very deep tan and an expensive suit. Some millionaire playboy who spent all of his time on resort beaches, that's what Stan Kaplan looked like, when he wasn't out slumming. Layers and layers of truth, each more dangerous than the last. Below the millionaire playboy lurked a seedy hatchet man. And below the hatchet man lurked the most feared man in the galaxy.

Sometimes he thought it was the layers of deception that entertained him most, and were the reason he continued with the disguises at all. He smiled back at the secretary, enjoying how completely she was taken in by his appearance.

She motioned him to go through the inner door and he did so. Now he was in Vincenti's office.

"Got your package," he announced without preamble.

Vincenti was a man of few or no words, just like him most of the time. The man just held out his hand for the bag. Riddick turned it over. He waited in silence while Vincenti ran the thumbprints through a scanner. When the confirmation came up, the crime lord nodded in satisfaction.

"Very good, Mr. Kaplan. Most impressive. Would you have time for another assignment?"

"Sorry, I'm afraid not. I have some family business to attend to."

Vincenti merely raised an eyebrow. It was a statement that could be taken a myriad of ways. After a moment, however, he simply shrugged and let it go. He reached down and drew a briefcase out from under his desk. Opening it, he withdrew an encoded credit chip. "Your fee."

Riddick nodded, giving a tight smile. "Thank you. It was a pleasure doing business with you."

Vincenti nodded back to indicate that their meeting was over. Riddick turned and left.

He went immediately to the nearest cred machine and plugged in the card, starting his fee on its long, round-about journey to its ultimate destination – his carefully-hidden accounts. Once the card had been emptied of value he broke it in half and pocketed it.

An hour and two disguises later, he disposed of his Kaplan costume, including the broken card, in the bowels of a foundry. Now he could head home to Jack. And now her operation was paid for in full.

Blood money, sure. But she'd spilled enough of her own for him already. He owed her. If she asked, though, he was going to tell her he'd been watching a play at a local theater.

He even knew which one he'd claim he'd seen.

11.

Jack: Going Under

They walked through one of the roughest crowds that Jack had ever seen in her life. She pressed herself closer to Riddick, not liking the looks she was getting. If it had been up to her, she'd have been halfway back to the ship by now. Only her trust in her friend sustained her. That, and his arm around her waist.

"Are you sure this is the way?" she asked again.

He nodded, parting the crowd and drawing her forward through it. He had his meanest face on, the one that gave even *her* shivers. It was enough to get them through the mass of people without any trouble, but only just.

Finally he turned out of the thoroughfare and led her to the door of a building.

"You're kidding," she muttered, taking in the peeling paint on the bricks, the trash on the sidewalk. "This is it?"

"Best one in seven systems, 'Rebecca,'" he answered, simultaneously reminding her of her alias.

She had to admit that the interior was well-appointed, but it still had a shady feel to it. It didn't help that the waiting room was filled with hard men and bad women, most of whom seemed to fix on her as if a particularly tasty snack had been brought into the room.

Riddick kept her close as he headed for the nurse's station. A swing had appeared in his step as if he was showing off. The way everyone's eyes followed her was giving her the serious creeps. Riddick rapped on the station window.

The nurse behind the desk slid the window open. "Name?"

"Colin Tarsin," he answered, startling her. He sounded exactly like Zeke, suddenly. "And this is me bride, Rebecca. We're here to get 'er back in working order, if you get me meaning."

His grin was creepy. The nurse smiled in response, an insincere smile that never reached her eyes. "If you'll take a seat, the doctor will be with you shortly."

Riddick nodded and then led Jack to a nearby couch. He still walked with an odd swagger. Showing off... showing off what?

Me, she realized. *He's flaunting his "bride."* *Shit, what kind of place is this?*

He pulled her into his lap as they sat down and wrapped his arms around her. His mouth was by her ear. "Don't talk, kid, just listen. I know you're scared, and that's okay, that's in character. I'll explain everything to you once we get set up in the treatment room. Promise." His fake goatee tickled her jaw as he talked.

The next hour, while they waited for their name to be called, was one of the longest and least comfortable Jack had experienced. The covert looks and outright stares had her on edge. She finally hid her face against Riddick's shoulder so she at least wouldn't have to see them, glad it was "in character."

Finally a door opened and a man said their name. "Tarsin." Riddick helped her to her feet and walked her to the doorway. She was embarrassed to realize she was actually shaking.

The man looked them over with disinterest and then led them to an elevator. He consulted his clipboard as they rode up it.

"You'll be in room 9C. The doctor will be with you in half an hour. That should give you plenty of time to get settled... or whatever." The last was said with a barely-concealed sneer.

Jack glanced up at Riddick and was disturbed to see him smirking. *He'd damned well better be playing his role*, she thought.

Finally they reached Room 9C. Their guide gave each of them a key to the room and then pulled the door closed behind them, leaving them alone.

Jack sank down onto the foot of the bed. "Okay... I think you *really* need to explain a few things to me."

Riddick nodded, but didn't begin speaking. Instead, he took out a small scanner and began walking around the room, passing it over and around the walls and furniture. Finally he seemed satisfied. "No surveillance devices. Good."

"Dammit, Riddick, what the fuck *is* this place?"

"It's a Regen center," he answered, taking a chair across from her. "One of the best in the charted galaxy. We were lucky we were coming to Troubadour anyway."

"Lucky! Did you *see* those people? I felt like the fucking main course at a banquet hosted by the Marquis de Sade!"

"That's not an entirely inapt description, Jack. Most of the clientele that reproductive Regen centers get are of a pretty unsavory nature. Think about it."

She tried to, but all she could think about was the lascivious expressions that had been thrown her way. Finally she shrugged, looking at Riddick expectantly.

He sighed. "Okay. Reproductive regen clinics are technically illegal. If you give it some thought, you'll see why. In order to perform regenerative work, they have to use stem cells. For ovaries, there's still only two sources – aborted fetuses and illegal cloning. All of this happens under the table, but it's very much part of life in the underground."

"That doesn't explain people looking at me like I'm the Dish of the Day," she snapped. "Why couldn't we go to one of the legitimate clinics? I know they exist."

He sighed again. "First, someone might have noticed that your injuries were an exact match for a certain young lady who's *supposed* to be dead. This kind of place doesn't ask as many questions. Did you notice the women here? What would you say their mean age is?"

"I don't know... forties?"

"Most of them probably aren't even thirty yet, Jack. They're mostly from brothels. They were sold to the trade as kids and were sterilized for it. Hysterectomies, so they'd be able to work all month without time off for bleeding. Now they've lost their looks and aren't turning a profit for the brothels anymore." He shrugged. "So they get sold as mail-order brides to men heading for the frontiers, and they come here to have their sterilizations reversed so they can be breeders."

"That's horrible!"

"Life in the big bad galaxy, Jack. Anyway, they're not used to getting many customers as... fresh-looking as you. Most of the guys down there were wondering how much I had to pay to get you, probably."

"Jesus, Riddick, that's sick." She rubbed at her forehead, feeling the start of a headache.

"Jack, you're going to have to get used to some of this. You chose this life before we ever met, you know. Some of these are places you could easily have ended up in. We both know that the cheapest commodity around, on any planet, is a human life." He came over and sat down next to her, resting his hand on her knee. "I'm not going to hide this stuff from you. You want to be safe, you need to know what's out there looking to take a bite."

She nodded. She'd known some of this, really. It was why she'd spent her years on the run masquerading as a boy. Not that boys never got eaten alive, but they weren't quite the same automatic targets that girls on their own were. She still didn't know how, exactly, Riddick had seen through her disguise. Even her best friends on the "streets" hadn't known what she really was.

"So are all brothels like that? Staffed by slave labor?"

"No, not all, but enough."

"What about the kind you go to?"

"Shit, Jack, I thought you didn't want me to talk about that kind of stuff." She stared at him for a long moment until he relented. "No. I like women happy to see me."

She watched him for another long moment. He raised his eyebrows at her, encouraging her to challenge his assertion. Finally she let it slide.

"I'll just be glad when this is over and we're out of here. I feel like I have a fucking bulls-eye painted on me."

He took her hand and they sat in silence until the doctor arrived. It was a woman, for which Jack was infinitely thankful. She went into the bathroom and changed into the gown she'd been given while the doctor talked to Riddick.

"...may notice some behavioral changes in her as her body adjusts. She may display unusual sensitivities for a while," the doctor was saying to Riddick as she emerged from the bathroom.

"Sensitivities? To what?" she asked.

"Stressors, mostly," the doctor answered gently. "Physical and emotional stresses may trigger heightened reactions for a while. That's all. Now, if you'll lie down on the bed, we'll begin your treatment."

Shit, she'd known it would start fast, but... She shot a panicked look at Riddick, who was getting up off of the bed. "Don't leave."

"Wouldn't think of it," he said mildly. He hooked a chair over to the side of the bed, out of the way of the doctor's equipment.

The doctor looked oddly touched. Jack supposed that she rarely saw actual affection or caring displayed between the client pairs she worked with. How many of those men she'd seen downstairs saw their "wives" as real people?

Riddick helped her get comfortable on the bed. She snagged his hand and wouldn't let go. He grinned and enveloped her hand in both of his. "You're going to be fine, Rebecca," he told her gently.

Damn, she wished he could say her real name. Something cold and wet was being swabbed on the inside of her elbow. She kept her eyes on Riddick, not wanting to look. Then she felt the sting of a hypo.

Slowly, the world fuzzed out for her.

12.

Jack: Going Down

“Wake up.”

She grumbled sleepily and tried to ignore him.

“Damn it, Jack, wake up! We’re in trouble.” Rough hands clasped her upper arms and lifted her up. Her warm blanket was torn away, letting in the cold.

“Wha...?” She stared up at Riddick in confusion. Had something gone wrong with the treatment?

“Get up, kid, we have to get out of here.” Riddick pulled her to her feet. She staggered slightly, hand going to her head.

Huh? Her hair was short. Maybe two, three inches at the longest, a slightly fluffy mass around her head. What had happened to her head?

She looked around her. Shit, she knew where she was. She knew *when* she was... It was six months after the crash; it was that last night, the night that—

For a second it almost seemed that she knew what was about to happen. But it fled her mind before she could focus on it. Riddick was gone from her room. Suddenly he was back, carrying a small duffel bag.

“Fuck, kid! Get some shoes on or something, we have to *go*!” He grabbed her and started forcing her street clothes on her over her pajamas. She got it together enough to take over. He nodded and grabbed her bag, shoving her things into it as fast as he could. Then he grabbed her hand and pulled her out of the apartment.

She could hear strange voices in the stairwell below them. Hard voices. Military cadence to their speech. Riddick dragged her up the stairs. She had to take the steps two at a time to keep up with him.

They headed to the roof. Luckily all of the buildings were tightly-packed in this part of town and even she could jump across. They crossed four before they headed back down to the street. Riddick looked furious.

“Where are we going?” she asked as he pulled her through the thinning night-time crowds.

“Spaceport. We’re shipping out.”

“Just like that?”

“Yes! Just fucking like that, now shut up, I need to pay attention!”

She shut her mouth and concentrated on keeping up with him. At least he hadn’t bailed on her. That was her secret fear, that one day she’d wake up and he’d simply be gone. Every morning for the last six months had felt like a present, because he was always there. And now—

Now I’m slowing him down, I know I am, but he’s still not leaving me. God, I love him...

She’d still never told him that she’d bought her ticket on the *Hunter-Gratzner* specifically because he was on it. He’d been her outlaw hero long before then. When she’d heard that he was being transported to the Tangier System on the *HG*, she’d hocked practically everything she had and lifted ten wallets to make the fare. Anything, for a chance to say that she’d actually seen him, actually traveled in the same ship as him. Even if he *was* being sent back to Slam.

The idea that he would actually take her under his dark wing had been something beyond her wildest fantasies of the time. The idea that he would actually run the risk of being caught, just to keep her with him... it was beyond comprehension to her. But he was doing it.

They ran on and on until a fiery stitch formed in her chest and she stumbled. Next thing she knew he’d scooped her up and had her in a fireman’s carry. His pace was unbroken. He seemed to barely be breathing hard. Finally they reached the subways and boarded one headed for the spaceport. At this time of night it was almost deserted. They crouched down, hiding themselves from the windows as the train roared toward the port.

“You okay?” He reached over and put his hand on the side of her face, making her meet his eyes.

“Yeah. What’s happening?”

“I sprung a trap. Fucking stupid... Special Forces got wind of me on the Network. They might have people waiting for me at the port. You remember the drill if we get separated?”

She nodded. “There’s a ticket to New Mecca under the name Jack B. Badd.”

Riddick hated that nickname of hers, she knew. He'd shamed her out of using it by singing a mocking rendition of "Johnny B. Goode" constantly for a month, replacing the title name with "Jackie B. Badd" and changing other lyrics to lampoon her and her various personal habits. He had a wonderful voice, but he only sang when he was making fun of something. Usually her. Now he rolled his eyes.

"If we get separated, go stay with Imam. I promise I'll come for you." He squeezed her hand as if to seal the promise.

"Okay. But I'm staying with you."

"Jack, these people play *really* rough. There could be shooting. I don't want you anywhere *near* me if that starts. You hear even one gunshot, you run in the other direction, as far from me as you can get."

Never, she thought to herself, but she nodded to keep him happy.

Finally the train slid into the spaceport station.

"Where are we going?" she whispered.

"There's a ship leaving in five minutes at Berth 643. We can make it if nothing gets in our way. We're booked, but they're not gonna wait for us," he replied. He'd shouldered both their bags, and had her hand in his. "Ready?"

She nodded again, not really meaning it any more this time than she had the last. She was scared out of her mind.

They took off running, weaving through the late-night crowds, a strange and compelling sight that couldn't fail to attract attention.

Behind them, shouts and loud footsteps erupted. They'd been spotted. Riddick dragged her along with him; she forced herself to keep up. Her breath was already ragged and painful.

They almost reached Berth 643 before the first shot rang out. Suddenly Riddick let go of her arm. He shoved her pack into her hands. "Go!"

He raced toward the ship's airlock without her.

NO! her soul screamed. Ignoring his instructions, she charged after him. She wasn't going anywhere without him.

Another shot rang out. Ahead of her, Riddick had begun to zigzag as he ran. If she ran straight, she could catch up—

A giant, brutal hand suddenly shoved her from behind and she felt her feet leave the floor. The rough carpet rushed up at her face. Pain exploded through her as she hit.

Dizzy, she forced herself to rise. She was suddenly so weak... she could feel something hot and wet on her thighs. She reached down, feeling something warm and slippery in her hands.

A glance down brought her back down to her knees as she realized she was holding her own intestines. She'd been shot in the back by a high-velocity bullet. Blood and gore was splashed on the floor in front of her. Hers.

Ahead of her, Riddick had reached the airlock, which was starting to close. He dove through, hitting the ground and rolling. As he rose to a crouch, their eyes met.

She would always remember the look on his face. It would sustain her throughout the nightmarish months in the hospital, the gray, empty years in the shelter. It would give her the strength she needed to resist Jarvis' many attempts to manipulate her emotions. She would treasure it always... always...

He looked as if *he* had been shot, as if *his* life was the one that had just been blown to pieces. Agony. Anguish. Soul-crushing grief. Emotions she'd only seen on his face once before, when he'd stumbled out of the darkness without Carolyn Fry.

The last thing she knew before the darkness claimed her was that Richard B. Riddick loved her.

13.

Jack: A Greatly-Exaggerated Report

Jack was alone in her room when she regained consciousness. Her whole abdomen felt strange – tingly, crampy, sore. She tried to sit up and instantly regretted it as pain flared in her midriff.

Night was falling outside; her room was softly shadowed. “Riddick weather,” she’d called this light level for years. But he wasn’t anywhere in it.

After a moment she pushed the call button on her bedside table. She’d have been happy to lie still for as long as she could, but she needed to pee and *somebody* was going to have to help her up.

A few minutes later the door opened and an older woman in a nurse’s uniform entered. Now that she’d gotten over her fright from the lobby, this place really did seem like a cushy private hospital. Still, she wished she knew where Riddick had gone.

“Did you need something?” the nurse asked.

“Yeah, could you help me up? I need to use the head.”

The woman smiled slightly and helped her to her feet, leading her into the bathroom.

“Fuck,” she muttered. Every muscle in her abdomen was on fire. Nerves she hadn’t known existed were screaming at her.

“It’ll get better,” the nurse assured her as she helped her back to the bed a few minutes later.

“Do you know where...” Shit, she’d forgotten the alias Riddick was using. “Have you seen my husband?”

“He should be back in a few minutes. He said he was going out to get a newspaper.” The nurse shrugged at her, probably wondering why she cared. If she’d really been like the other women in this place, her “husband” would have just been her latest slaver. How many of the women here hated the men they were bonded to?

Probably a lot of them.

Riddick was standing in front of the door when the nurse opened it, reaching for his key. He grinned and stepped back so the nurse could leave, then entered carrying his newspaper.

“It’s finally here, Jack,” he told her after he closed the door. “It’s official. You’re dead.”

He didn’t seem either happy or unhappy about it. Like it was just a piece of news.

“Is it in the paper?” This planet had a serious *thing* for antiques. Keys and newspapers! Amazing.

“‘Course.” He sat down in the chair next to her bed. “You can read it if you want, but I’m not sure I’d recommend it. Seeing as how you’re supposed to be so sensitive right now and all.” *That* was definitely mockery.

“Turn on the light and gimme,” she answered. She wanted to see what kind of epitaph the galaxy would give “Riddick’s Bitch.”

He shrugged, and switched on the light over her bed. It was the old-fashioned, non-voice-activated kind. Probably cost a fortune. The room, she had to admit, was nicely cushy. “Your choice, kid.”

She took the paper from him with some trepidation.

Two very familiar faces stared out at her from below a screaming banner headline: **RIDDICK MURDERS TEENAGE GIRL!**

His picture, below the banner, was a great many years old, predating the Hunter-Gratzner crash. The savagery in his face was vivid and frightening. Her picture, beside his, was very recent. Her expression was one of forlorn sorrow. Who had taken that and when? She’d been so careful not to let *anyone* see her looking like that...

It was a deliberate “Beauty and the Beast” ploy, she realized, an inhumanly brutal man juxtaposed with a calculatedly tragic woman. Girl. They were intentionally downplaying the fact that she was a legal adult to make the crime seem all the more vicious.

She glanced up from the paper. Riddick’s face was expressionless, but she could feel his concern. She started to read the text.

In a moment she began to feel the urge to scream and throw things. Who the fuck was this sweet little innocent they were describing? They’d painted a heavily colored version of her life – poor little orphan who

ran away from an abusive uncle, only to crash-land on a desolate planet where the only shield between her and violent death was a dangerous serial killer. True, but they'd never believed it or cared before. Why the hell now?

Little Girl Lost continued her journey through the article, tagging along with her adored desperado until she was almost-fatally wounded in a gun battle between him and Special Forces—

Fucking liars, he never fired a shot!

—and he abandoned her in his escape.

Another fucking lie!

She spent the next four years staunchly refusing to betray her hero, naïvely believing that one day he would come for her and everything would be made better. Finally, according to the article, he did. And then he tortured her to death.

The writer claimed that she'd been on her way to meet with her new employer when Riddick abducted her, a piece of pure speculation disguised as fact. She was missing for five days before her mutilated remains were found. The article dwelled lovingly – almost pornographically – on the tortures Riddick had supposedly visited upon her before she finally died. She already knew about those, of course, and Riddick had promised her that everything had been artfully faked by the coroner.

The testimonials were the worst part. Mrs. Baxter was quoted as saying what a fine, upstanding young lady she'd been. Parker had contributed a line about the brilliant future she'd had ahead of her. Her true test results had been published to back him up. Several girls from the shelter – including ones she *knew* had called her “Riddick's Bitch” at every opportunity – came forward to tell the worlds how sweet and kind and generous she'd been, how close they'd been to her.

She wanted to smash something.

Finally the article turned to Riddick himself, rehashing his well-known history. Abandoned as a baby, he'd grown up in a series of unsatisfactory foster homes. At fourteen he'd developed violent psychotic tendencies and had ultimately orchestrated a horrific mass-murder, killing nine of his classmates and mutilating their bodies. Ten years later he'd engineered his bloody escape from a maximum-security prison, where he was suspected of killing a dozen fellow inmates over the course of his incarceration. By the time he met Jack, more than forty murders had been attributed to him. Another score had followed, including his slaughter of a barracks-ful of Special Forces soldiers two weeks after she'd been shot. Now she was the newest notch on his belt.

He was the cold, cruel Beast who took pleasure in the suffering of others and felt neither compassion nor remorse. She was the sweet, naïve Beauty who had adored him and walked into his lair, baring her throat to him only to have it ripped out.

She crushed the paper in her hands and threw it across the room. The deadpan on Riddick's face vanished, replaced by concern as he moved to sit next to her on the bed.

“Bastards!” she snarled out, clenching her fists so hard that her boy-short nails cut into her palms. “Lying bastards! *Why?*”

His hand was under her chin. “Why what?”

She stared at him through burning eyes. “Why are they suddenly pretending they gave a *shit* about me? *Every single one* of them called me ‘Riddick's Bitch’ and now I'm fuckin’ *Snow White*? I'm their fuckin’ best friend?”

“Maybe some of them wished you had been,” he answered slowly. “Maybe they saw deeper into you than you know. *I don't think they lied about you.*”

“*None of them ever cared about me!*” she grated out. “They don't have the *right* to say anything about me now! I was just a *thing* to them, something to use to get to you—”

He pulled her into his embrace, stroking her hair and back. “And that's all this article is, too, Jack. That's all it is. Just something to get everybody in an uproar.”

“Well they did a superb fucking job then!”

He suddenly chuckled. “I'll bet that holo-show, ‘Galaxy's Most Wanted,’ gets in on it, and gets a lot of Riddick sightings over the next few weeks.” He started humming the show's theme song.

The idea of someone pretending to be Riddick for a true-crime show struck her as ludicrous and distracted her completely.

“They’ll get some fuckin’ Mary Sue to play me, won’t they?” she found herself laughing. How did he *do* that?

“And they’ll go to the pound to find somebody to play me,” he joked back. “Probably a rottweiler.”

“Hah.” She sat back, wiping at her streaming eyes. “Rotts are teddy bears. Two-hundred-pound lapdog-wanna-bes.”

He quirked his eyebrow at her. After a moment, she laughed.

“Maybe it would be more accurate casting than they know.”

“I’m no teddy bear, Jack,” he growled with mock-menace. “Take that back.”

“Nuh-uh.”

A wicked gleam appeared in his eyes. “You’d better.”

“Make me.”

He had her pinned beneath him in a fraction of a heartbeat. “Better change your mind, kid...” He pulled her arms above her head and grabbed both wrists with one hand.

“Not gonna,” she laughed, delighted by how quickly he’d obliterated her anguish over the article.

“Okay, then, you asked for it...” He reached down and began to tickle her belly. Fire-white pain lanced through her.

“Oh *shit!*” She convulsed. He jumped back away from her.

“Jesus, Jack, I forgot.” He looked completely out of sorts, a startling sight in and of itself. She took a deep breath, gulping as the pain subsided.

“Not your fault... I forgot too...” She gingerly rubbed at her abdomen. “Man, how long am I gonna feel like this?”

Riddick let out a heavy sigh. “I should go. They said you’d need a lot of sleep tonight... and there are some things I should do.”

“But—” Something was suddenly wrong, she knew it. It was like the last time he’d tickled her, when he’d abruptly pulled back as if stung. She didn’t understand...

“Don’t worry. I’ll be here for breakfast. I promise.” He hesitated for a moment and then kissed her on the forehead. “Get some sleep.”

He left the room swiftly before she could form another protest.

*What the fuck was **that** about?* she wondered. Sleep was a long time coming.

14.

Riddick: “Cutting Loose”

Nobody messed with Riddick as he shouldered his way through the crowd. Not even the roughest of locals would have dared. He looked like walking Death, a force of rage that could plunder whole worlds in an instant.

It was all aimed at himself, of course, although none of them could have known it.

You stupid fuck! he fumed as he walked. He followed it up with dozens of even worse obscenities he'd learned on as many worlds. If he'd actually known his genealogy he would have added that into the mix.

He'd come so close, *so fucking close*, to doing something damaging to Jack. What the *hell* was the matter with him?

She'd been so upset by the article. It had surprised him because he'd been a little touched to realize that others in her life *had* known what a treasure she was. But their time apart had apparently been an emotional wasteland for her. None of the esteem others held her in had ever been revealed to her and their posthumous tributes had filled her with offended anguish.

All he'd wanted to do was make the pain stop. It had brought him dangerously close, however, to violating his careful resolutions because the only thing he could think about, suddenly, was kissing her. He'd wanted to bury his face in her hair and lose himself in the scent of her. He'd wanted to fuse their bodies into one. The depth of his feeling had been almost frightening.

He'd retreated into one of their old joshing games, but that had backfired. Their innocent rough-housing had taken on a distinctly new flavor for him. Once again he'd found himself teetering on the brink, wanting to crush her lips and body against his until they were fused. His attempt at yet another retreat had been a *royal* fuckup, literally causing her pain.

Oh yeah, you idiot, just tickle her on her super-sensitive belly, why don't you? How else can you screw things up?

Unfortunately, he knew the answer to that. If he'd really lost control, he might have ended up ripping her gown clean off of her and fucking her senseless. It had been a closer thing than he liked to admit.

He had to get himself under control, *fast*. If he didn't he was going to end up damaging or destroying the most precious thing in his life.

First thing he'd have to do is get laid, he decided abruptly. He hadn't been with a woman since several days before Jack's arrival at Seti Station. The frenzy of final preparations for her return had consumed his attention. That had been back when he'd still envisioned her returning as his sorta kid sister, not precisely sexless but certainly not so stimulating. The impact of her return had been a dead-on kick in the libido.

He'd never expected it; he certainly hadn't planned for it. Now the animal within was getting dangerously close to breaking out of its cage. He'd better let it stretch its legs for a while, or Jack would end up being the one it ultimately mauled.

He was *not* going to let that happen.

Suddenly he knew exactly where he needed to go. But he was going to have to change out of his “Colin Tarsin” guise first. He headed for the ship.

The brothel was dimly-lit, as always, making it possible for him to remove his goggles. He did so, then scanned the room for Barbour. The rotund man was discussing something with another client, so Riddick took a seat at the bar, nodding to Tonia. She set a glass of his regular poison in front of him without a word. He sipped it slowly, waiting for Barbour to approach him.

“Good evening, Mr. Fry,” the obsequious little man finally said at his side. “It's been too long since your last visit. Shall I tell ‘Carolyn’ to prepare for you?”

“Absolutely,” he grunted, not bothering to look up.

“The usual arrangements?”

“Yeah.” He took another sip of his drink. There was no need for this routine. They knew what he wanted.

“Very well. Give us five minutes and she'll be ready.” The man bowed nervously and hurried off to get the ball rolling. Riddick stretched his drink out in his usual manner. He took his last sip five minutes later, then

stood and collected the room key that had been placed before him. He headed upstairs without another word.

She was waiting for him, her back to him as always. Tight blue pants low on her hips, the small, sweat-stained blue top. Her short, dirty-blond hair was tousled and damp on her neck. Perfect. He crossed the room to her side and put his hands on her waist, sliding one around to rest on the bare skin of her stomach.

“Carolyn,” he whispered. “I’ve been meaning to catch up with you alone...”

She sighed and moved back against him as he rubbed his face in her hair. “You scare me, Riddick,” she whispered, the way she always did. “That’s what you want to hear, isn’t it?”

She didn’t believe it was his name. Hers wasn’t really Carolyn, so why should he really be Riddick? Just another night of role-playing for her. But for him, these nights... they were as close to solace as he found. He slid his hand into the front of her pants and heard her small gasp. His mouth fastened hard on her throat.

He was back in the skiff, holding her against him, feeling her try to hide her fear and try even harder to hide her desire. She’d wanted him and despised herself for it. Now he’d take her, make her his, possess her utterly...

He lifted her up and carried her to the bed, listening to her breathless protests. “No, please, don’t... Don’t, Riddick...”

It had confused him, at first, that he wanted to hear her protest, but he’d long since stopped questioning it. Maybe it was his inner belief that the real Carolyn would never have acquiesced to his ministrations. Maybe he was just a sick, sick man. But he wanted to hear her beg him, to feel her struggle before she gave in.

He pinned her beneath him, his legs holding hers still while one hand wrapped around both of her wrists the way it had with Jack’s only an hour ago—

Don’t think about that.

His other hand caressed her face and throat. She drew breath to protest again and he lightly, warningly touched his fingers to her lips. When she made a small noise anyway he covered her mouth with his and kissed her deep and hard.

It had cost him a lot of money and negotiation to get her to let him do that. For the price of his kisses he could have bought the services of a dozen women for the entire night, but it was important enough to him that he paid the extra without complaint. The real Carolyn had been kissable. She’d kissed him, just once, on their way back to the cave where Imam and Jack were waiting.

He’d spotted the cave entrance just as she was giving up hope of ever finding it. When he pointed it out to her, she’d turned and flung her arms around him, kissing him on the mouth for a moment before they hurried over to liberate their friends. His lips had tingled for the rest of their journey. After she died, they felt like they had been scalded.

Now he pressed his body hard against her surrogate, giving in to the fantasy that *she* was the one beneath him. This was the journey that they were supposed to have taken together. Now, once again, they would.

He released her at last, long enough to pull her top off of her body before he lowered his mouth to her breasts and began to ravenously plunder them. She cried out, her hands coming to rest gently on the back of his head and neck. Her legs slid out from beneath him as he shifted his weight and wrapped around his waist.

He was even rougher than usual – it had been too long and circumstances had left him *far* too hungry for this. After several minutes he pulled back, unwrapping her legs from around him. He pulled off the remainder of her clothing and followed up with his own. Usually he spent a *lot* more time on the preliminaries. Not tonight.

He was inside her almost before she realized what he was doing and her cry of astonishment was real. He covered her mouth with his again, thrusting into her over and over. He had his eyes closed tightly and his mind focused on Carolyn, his memory of her face, her voice, the taste of her lips. He groaned when another face abruptly superimposed itself over hers. Jack.

No. Go away, Jack, you can’t be part of this...

It took all of his will to banish her visage, and he was unable to summon Carolyn’s back in its place. He dared not open his eyes, though. He never had at this stage of the game before and the last thing he wanted to do was see the look of professional detachment that was probably on the face of the woman beneath him.

It was a hard, agonized ride to his release, and it was only achieved when he relented and let Jack’s face appear to him once more.

Dammit! the last sane part of him thought as his orgasm took him. *This can’t be fucking happening...*

He rolled off of “Carolyn” immediately afterwards and began to dress. Usually he spent the whole night, taking her several times, but he already knew that he’d found all the peace he was actually going to get from her tonight.

It had worked, more or less; the animal was back in its cage. But he already knew that its hunger for Jack had *increased*, not decreased. He left the brothel without a word after he settled his bill.

Great, he thought sourly, heading back to his ship. *I’ve been cured of my obsession with a dead woman, finally. But what’s gonna cure my **new** obsession?*

He showered immediately upon arrival. He would *not* go to his breakfast with Jack bearing even the slightest traces of another woman’s scent. He had in the past, but the very concept of doing so was offensive to him now.

The night was still technically young, but he felt exhausted. He climbed into his bed, expecting to drop almost immediately into slumber, but it didn’t come. Finally he got back up and paced the ship restlessly. He went down into the dojo and spent an hour trying to bring himself to a state of physical exhaustion, but the restless energy remained.

What the hell did he have to *do*? he wondered, fearing the answer.

He headed back up to his room, only to stop in confusion as his hand reached for the knob of *Jack’s* door instead. He spent several moments trying to resist the pull before he gave in and went inside.

In the scant week she’d lived in it, she’d already managed to impress her personality indelibly upon it. The room was filled with her scent, her presence. Almost hating himself, Riddick climbed into her bed, enveloping himself in the *eau de Jack* of the room, wrapping her sheets around him as if they were her delicate body.

Dancing on razor-blades here, he thought to himself, as he dropped into deep, satisfying slumber.

15.

Jack: Fear and Shelter

Soon after Riddick showed up for breakfast, Jack decided she'd been imagining his tension from the night before. His legendary composure was back in place (if it had been out of place at all) and he was completely relaxed.

The clinic, it turned out, provided a fairly excellent menu. They'd even been able to arrange for a bowl of pineapple chunks, her not-so-secret vice. Riddick jokingly commented that now he knew where the bulk of her treatment fee was going.

The pain wasn't as bad today... yet. Her physician had stopped by briefly after Riddick had left the night before, to go over the course of the treatment, and had told her that the next session would begin at noon. After what she had been told, she was desperately scared. She hoped Riddick would stay with her through it. She needed him to be there.

Jack waited until the breakfast was almost over before she got up the nerve to ask. Riddick beat her to it.

"Something's wrong, Jack. What is it?"

She took a deep breath. Why was it so hard, suddenly, to ask him to do this?

He reached across the small, portable breakfast table they'd been using and put his hand on her arm.

"C'mon, kid, what is it?"

"Today's... treatment... is gonna be bad." She felt like an idiot, saying it.

"Bad?" His voice was gentle.

"Very painful," she whispered, letting her fear show. She was surprised to see Riddick's expression soften.

"You want me to stay with you again."

She nodded, embarrassed. How come she'd suddenly turned into a total chicken about pain? "Please."

He lifted the tray off of the bed and climbed on, sitting beside her. "What did they tell you they were going to do?"

She twisted her hands together. "Dr. Cartwright says this is the main session. They have to inject the tissue into me in several key spots and then activate it. They can't use any painkillers or anesthesia while they do it. Somehow they'd interfere with the regeneration process."

"How long did she say it would take?" His arm came around her shoulder. She leaned against him gratefully.

"Three horrible hours. And she said I'd probably be in a lot of pain for the next six to eight hours after that. They're going to start at noon." She looked up at him, still ashamed. "I don't know why I'm so scared..."

"You'd have to be an idiot not to be, Jack. Sounds worse than what I went through to get my eyes shined." He patted her gently on the back. "I'll stay with you through the whole thing. Promise."

She closed her eyes and rested her head against his chest. She'd never had a friend like this before, she realized. She'd never known friends like this could exist. He was an uncanny find, the dangerous killer that she'd once idolized for his take-no-shit attitude and his spectacular clashes with the law. She'd tried so hard to impress him in turn, at first, only to discover that he was the most impressed when she was the most herself.

Back when she'd been passing herself off as a boy, she'd chosen the name "Jack" because it was easy for her to remember. Her mother had always called her "Jacqui," after all, preferring her middle name to the name she'd been given in honor of her intolerant, disapproving paternal grandmother. So when people said "Jack," she never forgot that they were talking to her. And *they* never considered that they weren't talking to a boy.

After Riddick had "outed" her, she'd considered her options again, wondering if she should go back to being "Jacqui." She'd decided not to, at least for then, since she had no idea what was going to happen once the three of them got picked up. When she'd realized that Riddick would let her come with him, she'd been beside herself with joy. And *he* called her "Jack," so that's who she was more than happy to be.

He never questioned her choice of "Jack" until two months into their sojourn. By then they'd come to know each other very well, sharing stories of their pasts and speculating on what their futures might be like in

an ideal universe.

“So why did you keep ‘Jack,’ anyway?” he’d finally asked.

“Because,” she’d said after a long moment, as truth and wit collided in her head, “nobody in the galaxy knows ‘Jack’ but you.”

He’d laughed and pulled her into his lap, the big brother she’d never had before. There were many moments in those days when she’d hoped he would take a very different role than that one. She’d had a huge crush on him and her nights had been full of breathtaking fantasies about him joining her in her bed, kissing her, touching her...

Funny, those fantasies had disappeared not long after the shooting. Not only the fantasies about him, but about any man. Like some switch had been turned off. She’d hardly ever thought about it, and when she had, she’d decided that it was because she was surrounded by girls most of the time and the only men she ever got to see were complete dicks like Parker and Jarvis.

The first year in the shelter, she’d decorated her room with every picture of him she could find. It had been a gesture of defiance as well as a mark of her continued love. The other girls had admired the pictures at first, commenting on how *hot* he was, until they learned exactly *who* he was. Then they’d thought she was sick. None of them had believed her when she said he was her friend, until Pamela Markham broke into the shelter’s file room and read her record.

Next thing she’d known, the whispers had started, the phrase “Riddick’s Bitch” peppering them. The girls, all of them, including the two or three she’d genuinely started to grow close to, kept their distance. By the time they got over it, she was fed up and wanted nothing to do with any of them. All she wanted was Riddick. Eventually, however, the pictures had come down off of her walls. They were too painful to look at.

Her dreams of him, when she let them come to her, had been like this moment, dreams of his arms around her, solidly supporting her through any ordeal. There had been little or nothing sexual about the dreams, any longer. She knew that a lot of the girls whispered that she’d been his personal sex toy, especially after Pamela claimed that her medical records said she was no virgin. Wrong, but only on one of the two counts. She didn’t bother to correct them. Better if they thought she’d fucked a serial killer and gotten off on it than if they knew the truth and pitied her for it. The concept of them feeling sorry for her was something that filled her with loathing.

That, she realized, was the reason their remarks in the article had upset her so much. She’d hated the notion of *any* of them thinking of her as “poor little Jack.” Not in life and certainly not in “death.”

Shit, that was why it had been so hard to ask Riddick to stay with her. She hated being pitied, and desperately hoped that she would never feel *him* pitying her.

“We have five hours until your treatment starts,” Riddick finally told her. “You wanna see if this place has a chess set?”

She was jerked back to reality and burst out laughing. “Jeez, I *suck* at chess, Riddick! You know that!”

His answering laugh was a deep rumble in his chest. “Which is why you need to keep playing. It’s a very good game, you know. Teaches a lot about strategy. And now that we’re back together, you’re gonna play a lot of it again.”

“Now I know the real reason you brought me back into your life,” she mock-grumbled. “You just want someone whose ass you can kick at chess.”

“That would be practically anybody, kid,” he boasted.

The clinic had a decent set. They played four games before noon. Riddick roundly trounced her every time. Big surprise.

“Your problem is that you only think in tactical terms, Jack,” he told her after she started coming dangerously close to whining at him. “You need to concentrate on strategy. See the whole board. Look several moves ahead.” He followed it up by “killing” her Queen.

“Jerk,” she muttered. He check-mated her two moves later.

They were resetting the board when the knock on the door sounded and Jack knew her time was up. Her hands abruptly began to shake, spilling several pawns to the floor. Riddick calmly moved the board and pieces out of the way and opened up to admit the doctor and her assistants. He frowned when he saw the restraints they’d brought.

“What the hell are those for?”

Dr. Cartwright looked a bit taken aback by his frown. He could throw a lot of menace into it when he wanted to. Jack had forgotten how much he *hated* restraints.

"It's okay Ri— Colin," she said in a hurry. "They told me about this. I'm going to need them."

After a moment Riddick stepped back and let the medical team wheel the cart of equipment in. He still looked angry. Suddenly he reached out, snagging the mouth bit on top of the cart. "You are *not* putting this fucking thing in her mouth."

"She's going to need it, Mr. Tarsin," the doctor said softly. "The pain is very intense. Please, give it to—"

Riddick threw it across the room. "No fucking way."

Jack had forgotten that, too. He'd spent twenty-two weeks fully conscious in a cryo-tube with a horse bit in his mouth; naturally he'd respond intensely. Dumb. She should have warned him. Not that she *wanted* the thing in her mouth...

The technicians were busy securing the restraints to the head and the foot of the bed. Jack was suddenly aware of how badly she was shaking. She hoped they'd let Riddick sit with her, or hold her hand, or something. She was going to need some anchor against the pain to come.

Dr. Cartwright sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. "Fine. No bit. But I warn you she'll probably scream... a *lot*. That's what it's for, to give her something to bite down on."

Riddick turned to look at Jack. "You really want that thing?"

Jack felt like a frozen rabbit. What she wanted to do was run away and hide. She gave a small shake of her head.

"No bit," Riddick growled.

Dr. Cartwright sighed again and shook her head in exasperation. "We need to get started. If you would lie down please, Mrs. Tarsin?"

"Wait." Riddick turned and stalked over to the bed. "Slight change of plans there, too."

Jack stared in wonder as he climbed onto the bed and lay down on his back. He drew her to him and made her lie down on top of him, so that the back of her head rested on his shoulder. "Now I'll be with you the whole time, kid," he whispered into her ear.

And she'd been hoping he'd do as much as sit next to her and hold her hand. This was the man everyone claimed had no connection to humanity? If he was the only one who truly knew Jack, she was the only one who truly knew Riddick. And even she was constantly amazed by him.

A deeply moved expression had appeared once more on Dr. Cartwright's face. She almost looked like she wanted to cry. Was compassion such a stranger to this place? She nodded to her assistants and they began securing Jack's arms and legs.

A glance at the equipment on the cart made Jack's blood turn to icewater. There were more than a dozen syringes, each one with a traumatically long needle attached. She shuddered, almost seeming to feel them invade her body already.

"Don't look at them, Jack," Riddick whispered, his voice pitched so that the doctor and her orderlies wouldn't hear him. Thank God he could call her by her real name instead of having to say "Rebecca."

She nodded and closed her eyes. She was securely fastened to the bed now, and more frightened than she'd ever been in her life, even when she'd been pinned under a huge bone with a monster from the realm of nightmares trying to smash through it and eat her.

Riddick had been her rescuer that time, too.

She felt Dr. Cartwright lift up her gown, pushing it upward until it only just covered her breasts, baring her whole abdomen.

As something heavy pressed against her belly and began moving across it, Riddick began to speak.

"It's okay. She's running a scanner over you to determine where the injections have to go." His voice was low and soothing, almost hypnotic. She swallowed.

"Alright," Dr. Cartwright said after a moment. "The preparation treatments have achieved the needed results. We're ready to begin. I'm going to mark the injection sites, Rebecca. It'll take a moment."

She felt the light pressure as a marker pressed against various spots on her tummy, leaving dots where injections were to go.

"Now I need you to try to relax, Rebecca. This is going to sting." She heard the doctor lift one of the syringes off of the cart.

"Here we go," Riddick murmured. A moment later she felt the needle break through her skin.

She winced and let out a hiss of pain, hoping the worst was past. But the needle kept pushing inward, deeper and deeper. How fucking long *was* it? *Oh god...* A small whimper escaped her lips. One of Riddick's hands came to rest against her cheek and she pressed her face hard against it.

"This is the part that's going to hurt, Rebecca. I have to inject the regen material into you now. It's going to take a few minutes and it will be very painful. You can still have the bit if you want." The doctor paused to give her a chance to respond.

"No bit," Jack whispered. She steeled herself for the pain to come.

Searing, molten fire spread into her belly as the injection was administered. Jack clenched her fists, feeling every muscle in her body tense. She whimpered again, louder. Riddick wrapped his arms around her chest and shoulders and held her tightly. The pain began to build.

"Oh... *god...*" she gasped.

"Try to stay relaxed, Rebecca," the doctor said in what was intended to be a soothing voice.

The agony was spreading, creeping through her whole nervous system. Her hands were spasming and the only things that kept her body from thrashing were the tight restraints and Riddick's presence.

"Oh shit, oh *shit!*" Her voice broke as she gasped in pain once more.

Suddenly the dam burst and the full, obliterating torment rolled through her body. Jack threw back her head and screamed.

16.

Riddick: New Forms of Intimacy

The moment the orderlies undid the restraints prisoning Jack's limbs, she curled into a tiny, fetal ball and pressed herself tightly against him. Riddick wrapped his arms around her equally tightly and held her close. If he'd had any idea that she would have to endure this much pain, he'd never have started this whole mess in the first place.

He could feel Dr. Cartwright's eyes on him but he didn't bother to look up. He already knew everything there was to know about her and she was a very good doctor, but she held no interest for him in any capacity right now. His only concern was the shaking, tormented girl in his arms.

For three hours she'd writhed in agony against the restraints, trying to hold back her screams. One of his ears *was* ringing a little from them, but he figured it was no less than he deserved. He'd held her and talked to her the entire time, trying to give her as strong an anchor against the pain as he could. They were both soaked with her tears and sweat now.

Finally the doctor and her assistants finished packing up and left the room. He was damned glad to have them gone, especially the younger of the two orderlies. The fucker had been getting off on Jack's pain and had set a murderous rage slowly boiling within Riddick. He'd found himself wanting to gut the man slowly, wanting to force him to experience an approximation of the agony he knew Jack was enduring.

Once upon a time the fact that he'd undergone his shine job with no anesthesia had seemed like a proud act of stoicism to him. No more. It didn't compare to what Jack had been through, and was still going through. She had another six to eight hours of residual pain as the regen process continued in high gear.

Once the door closed, Riddick put his hand gently under Jack's chin and brought her face up to meet his gaze. "Jack? You in there, kid?"

After a moment she seemed to become aware of him. She nodded, swallowing hard. The look on her tear-streaked face was heartbreaking.

"I'm so sorry, Jack. I had no idea it would be this bad." He stroked her sweat-soaked hair back from her face. Worst fucking present he'd ever conceived of. He'd wanted to do something nice for her, and instead he'd let her in for sheer hellish misery.

"It's okay," she whispered weakly. Her voice was hoarse from three hours of anguished screams.

"The fuck it is. This was a stupid idea."

"No," she answered, burrowing closer to him. "You couldn't have known. You were trying to give me my life back..." Her face twisted and a small whimper escaped her. Against him, he could feel the muscles of her belly spasming.

"Yeah," he answered, still furious with himself. "Give your life back. A nice return to the old hellified life, huh? For your nineteenth birthday I should go back to that fucking planet and get you one of those creatures for a *pet*."

She laughed for a second before the pain made her stop. "Thank you, Riddick."

"What the fuck for?"

She didn't answer for a moment as her body shuddered under the onslaught of yet more pain. Finally, her voice came to him, small and thready. "For loving me this much."

He wondered if the ache suddenly lancing through him even vaguely approximated what she was feeling. The two of them lapsed into silence, broken only when another wave of pain passed through his girl and she was unable to stop from crying out. He held her tightly, lost in thought.

"Love" was a word that he'd completely absented from his vocabulary, but by god she was right. He loved her. He'd loved her for years, he realized, since the days in the skiff when he'd opened himself up to another human being for the first time in his life and she'd accepted him exactly as he was. It was why he feared the animal within him now, the part that knew nothing of love, only possession, and seemed determined to own her at any price. A price that Jack would have to pay, not the beast.

He already belonged to her, he realized, utterly and completely. If he could have found a way to assume her pain on her behalf, he'd have done it in an instant without any hesitation or doubt. That kind of

selflessness was new and strange to him, and painful in its own way. The thought that he might one day lose her again, to anything or anyone, was agonizing.

A line from a centuries-old movie, a macabre comedy that he'd enjoyed as a child, floated through his mind. "I would die for her... I would kill for her... either way, what bliss..."

He knew it was true, completely true. If he could have rolled back time, knowing this, he would have taken Jarvis's bullet for her. He'd killed a dozen of Jarvis' best students in their sleep as retaliation when he'd believed she was dead.

He'd thought, for a while, that his feelings for Carolyn had been love, and maybe they were, but they paled in comparison to this. Jack was far more central to his existence, a much more fundamental part of who he was. Carolyn had given him back his soul and his humanity, but Jack was the one who had nurtured them ever since, even when they had been kept apart.

He held her for the next several hours as she suffered the aftereffects of her treatment. Finally, long after sunset, she fell into an uneasy slumber. Exhausted, he joined her in it soon after.

He woke when an orderly knocked on the door the next morning.

Jack squirmed uncomfortably as he got out of the bed, but she didn't wake up. A glance out of the window told him that they had slept longer than he'd planned. He opened the door.

The young woman outside must be new; she wrinkled her nose in disgust for a second before she caught herself and schooled her expression into professional blandness. He couldn't really blame her. The room reeked of Jack's sweat and pain and fear, as did he.

"They told me to see what you wanted for breakfast," she finally said, watching him nervously. He imagined that, under the circumstances, he looked more dangerous and frightening than usual.

He shrugged. "Don't know yet," he answered in his Zeke impression. "Rebecca hasn't come to yet. Wanna give us an hour and check again?"

The woman nodded. She began to turn away when he had a thought.

"Say... in half an hour could you have somebody come by and change our sheets? Bring a new gown for Rebecca, and maybe some scrubs I can wear while these are being washed." He gestured at his sweat-stained clothes.

She nodded again. "Half an hour. Got it."

"Door'll be unlocked."

This time he closed the door as she turned away. Jack was awake, watching him as he turned around. She looked much more lucid than she had the night before. He returned to the bed and sat next to her.

"How you feeling, kid?"

Her wry smile surprised him. "Not too hot... but better, I guess. How come you told her the door would be unlocked?"

"Because *we* need to get cleaned up." He leaned closer to her. "I'm not sure which one of us smells worse, you see."

She laughed for a few seconds. "Damn, that still hurts..."

"Sorry." He put his arm around her, watching her with concern. Next thing he knew, her head was on his shoulder.

"Don't be sorry, Riddick. I like it when you make me laugh. Nobody else makes me laugh the way you do. I've missed it."

"I've missed having someone around that could get my jokes," he answered. It was true, too. "You given any thought to what you want for breakfast?"

"Morphine."

Now it was his turn to laugh. "I don't think they have that on their menu, but I'll be sure to ask. Seriously, are you hungry?"

"Famished. I haven't eaten anything since last breakfast."

"Come to think of it, I haven't either. How about I leave them a note telling them to bring us everything?"

"Pineapple. They have to bring pineapple."

"Damned right, kid, you've earned it. Toast?"

"Pancakes. *And* waffles. Lots of syrup and butter. Scrambled eggs and sausage. I want it all."

"You'll have it," he whispered. *Anything you want, ever*, he added silently.

He leaned over and snagged the writing pad and pen from her bedside table and scribbled their requests on it. She watched, chuckling over the items he added for himself. "Most people don't have a steak for breakfast, Riddick."

"Some do. Anyway, that's my dinner. Never got one, you know."

"So what are you ordering for the lunch you missed?"

"I'll save that for today's lunch, I guess." He grinned at her.

"You know, at this rate, I'm going to get so fat I'll *look* pregnant by the time we get out of here."

The thought caught him by surprise and he found himself studying her, imagining how she would look in pregnancy. She wouldn't be quite as thin, he imagined. He bet she'd be one of those women that everyone claimed "glowed." Funny what an attractive image his mind conjured.

"What?" she asked after a moment, and he realized he was staring.

"Nothing, just trying to picture what you'd look like pregnant, that's all."

"Eeyuch! I'd be a freakin' whale."

"Damn right, but a cute whale. One of those belugas, you know, with the natural grins?"

"Those are *dolphins*, doofus. Dolphins are the ones with the natural grins."

"Hey, who's making this up, you or me?"

"Fine, fine, I'll be a beluga whale." She wrinkled her nose at him and he reached over and tweaked it.

"So, you wanna shower first or after?"

"Shit, Riddick," she answered, suddenly distressed. "I don't think I can manage that without help. I had to have the nurse help me into the bathroom just to pee the other night, and I felt *loads* better then."

He felt his heart plunge abruptly.

Oh fuck, he thought. He should have realized this was going to happen, and he'd just walked into a trap of his own devising. The animal deep within him *had* to be laughing at him now.

He swallowed. There was no way he could ask one of the nurses to assist her. They were here incognito and he'd checked her in as his wife. The last thing he could do was draw undue attention to them by asking someone *else* to help her shower when *he* was right here, supposedly her husband.

Shit. Shit. SHIT!

He took a deep breath. He'd just have to keep himself under control... somehow.

"You gonna be okay with me helping you?" He didn't care whether or not she could see his unease.

She nodded, her trust in him absolute.

Remember this, he told himself. *She trusts you. Don't you fucking dare betray that.*

Deep within him he heard the animal snarl in response.

You'd only get to once if you did, you dumb shit, he informed it.

He helped her to her feet and drew the gown over her head. He tried not to look at her body as he stripped off her underwear and piled the works on the bed. He shucked down out of his own clothes as well, grinding his teeth. He had to support her with his arm around her waist as he walked her to the bathroom, and it felt like her skin was burning his wherever it touched.

This was going to be pure hell.

Remember how much pain she's in, he admonished himself. *This isn't about you, it's about your kid sister and she's sick right now. This is your kid sister!*

He had her adjust the water to a temperature she was comfortable with before they stepped in. He was surprised to discover that she liked her water almost-scalding.

For the most part she was able to wash herself, but he did her back for her and steadied her at odd moments when the pain rolled through her body once more. He was getting good at spotting the signs, catching her before she started to get weak. It was a huge relief to him that she could do most of it, because he wasn't at all sure he'd have been able to *not* touch her sexually if he'd had to take over. He washed himself as quickly as he could. His control was still in place, but he could feel it starting to *want* to slip.

Dammit, he told himself, *this is not about you, you stupid fuck! This is about her and she needs you to be the man she trusts. Stay in the human race, for her sake!*

He could almost hear the beast within him growling in denial.

The exertion was starting to get to her. Her hands shook as she lifted the bottle of shampoo she'd brought from their ship. He took it out of her hand.

"Close your eyes, Jack. I'll do it."

He poured a small amount of her shampoo into the palm of his hand and applied it to her wet hair. She'd taken hold of one of the support handles on the shower walls and was concentrating simply on remaining standing while he washed her hair and massaged her scalp. Finally he bent her head forward under the spray and rinsed the shampoo out, careful to get it all.

Finally, he thought to himself with relief, *this is over... what the—?*

Jack had suddenly turned around and wrapped her arms around him, resting her head against his chest. He could feel how exhausted she was, the slight tremor in her body that signaled how close she was to running out of energy. Her cheek was pressed against his chest, her breasts against his stomach.

Oh god, Jack, no, don't do this...

He could feel the first stirrings in his groin.

No! NO!

Gritting his teeth, he concentrated his whole will on his body, forcing it to bend to his wishes. He was not going to hurt her. She would not know – ever – how close this had brought him. It was agony for him but he regained the upper hand over his treacherous body. After a moment he was even able to return Jack's embrace in the manner it was intended.

Finally he managed to switch off the water and steer her out of the shower stall. He grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his waist in a hurry before he helped her dry off.

Glancing out into the room, he was relieved to see that the bed had been changed. A new hospital gown was set out for Jack, and an extra-large set of scrubs had been left for him. He steered Jack back out into the bedroom and got her dressed as fast as he could.

As he pulled the scrubs on, profound relief washed over him. They'd survived. Somehow they'd survived.

Deep within him, the animal roared its thwarted rage.

17.

Jack: The Pawn in the Game

Feeling warm, safe, and utterly exhausted, Jack curled up on top of the made bed and dropped back to sleep for a while. She woke when their huge breakfast arrived.

Riddick helped her sit up while the food was brought in. Everything they'd ordered was there in enormous quantities. It took up three trays. Once Riddick had her in a comfortable sitting position, he arranged the trays in front of her and sat down on the other side of them, on the foot of the bed.

Despite her hunger she ate slowly, more out of lack of energy than anything else. She was aware that Riddick was deliberately matching her pace.

"So," he asked after a while. "Did they say what horrors they have in store for you today?"

She found herself chuckling. "They don't have any, thank God. Now I get to start healing up. They'll run some scans on me every few hours to make sure the tissue is forming properly, but unless something goes wrong, that's it. Bed rest and patience."

Bed rest, patience, and breakfast with Riddick. If only she could eradicate the pain, the day would be close to perfect. It still struck at her now and again, mostly cramping with the occasional stab-in-the-gut flash of agony. Nothing she couldn't withstand at this point, but she was looking forward to its end, when she could begin to forget how horrible it had actually been. The way she must have after her stay in the Special Forces hospital...

"You okay?" Riddick was watching her with concern.

She nodded. "Just thinking about how I seem to forget pain. I mean, I don't remember anything *like* this from when the Special Forces docs regenerated my digestive tract, but it *had* to be this bad, didn't it? So I guess I don't remember pain too well."

He frowned pensively across from her. "I guess not," he answered slowly.

"Funny thing is," Jack continued after a moment, "I hardly remember *anything* about that time. I know I was hospitalized for two months, but it really doesn't feel like it could be that long. There's just not enough there, for some reason."

Riddick, she suddenly noticed, had stopped eating and was watching her closely. "Do you remember any of the dreams you had while you were there?"

"No... why?"

"You've always had very vivid dreams, Jack. I remember. And you always remembered them afterward in detail. You used to tell me stories about them. Sounds to me like they had to have drugged you. Fuckers were trying to pick your brain."

"They *couldn't* have, though, could they? Drugs of that kind would interfere with the regen process."

"Maybe that's why it took you two months to heal," he suggested. "Or maybe..." his voice trailed off into a small, thoughtful growl.

"What?" she said after a moment of silence.

He shook his head. "Nothing. Something to check out later, that's all."

The expression on his face gave the lie to his words. It was the same look she'd seen him wear when he was listening to the ship engine, picking up a faint dissonance that indicated trouble to come.

"Riddick, if they did something to me I want to know about it." She was surprised to find herself getting angry with him. What was he keeping from her?

He gave her a funny look. "'Did something' to you? You sound like you think they molested you."

"Well maybe they molested my *head!*" she snapped, abruptly furious.

"Is the pain getting bad again, Jack?" Riddick asked softly.

It wasn't, but suddenly everything was aggravating her, including his latest question. "No! I just want to know what's been *done* to me!"

Riddick suddenly began lifting the trays off of the bed, moving them out of the way. He climbed up to the head of the bed and put his arms around her.

For a moment she almost wanted to shove him away. She felt like pounding her fists against his chest. She wanted to shout and kick things. Riddick's hand settled against her cheek and the rage abruptly melted into sorrow. She leaned against him, gasping at the intensity of the emotions she was feeling.

The first time he'd ever held her like this was after one of her nightmares. It was only because she'd literally flung herself into his arms. He'd had no experience with physical affection and had been completely lost as to how to react. Physical contact, for him, had up until then been limited to two things: violence and sex. She'd had to teach him how to hug. He'd taken to it quite readily, which was a joy for her.

She'd always been a physically affectionate person. Up until her parents' deaths she'd still insisted on sitting in their laps constantly. It had led her into terrible trouble after they were gone, of course, but she still needed this sort of contact. She suspected she always would. She listened to the beat of his heart against her ear, letting it soothe her.

"I don't think they did anything bad to you, Jack," he murmured into her hair. "They probably just asked you a lot of questions about me, about where we went and what we did during those months together. That's probably all."

"But what if they *did* do something?" she whispered.

"Like what?"

"What if they brainwashed me? Maybe I just *think* I'm your friend and I'm really getting ready to turn you over to them—"

"Hey. None of that B-movie stuff, kid. They couldn't do that to you." He sounded very certain.

"How can you be sure?"

"Because I know what they *can* do, Jack. I know what kinds of mental 'readjustment' procedures they have. And there isn't *one* of them that would leave your personality intact. You're still you." He leaned back for a moment so he could look her in the eyes. "I'd know better than anyone if you weren't."

His hand came to her cheek again, brushing at the tears resting on it. More tears abruptly poured onto his fingers. He pulled her up against him once more, stroking her hair. It took her several minutes to regain control of her voice.

"I'm just... so fuckin' *sick*... of being knocked around and having everyone *do things* to me. I *hate* being used, I hate it!" She pulled back now. At another time the empathy on Riddick's face might have left her speechless, but she still had so much she needed to say. "You know why I'm all tactics and no strategy when we play chess? It's 'cause all my life I've been everybody's fuckin' pawn!"

"Not anymore, Jack," he answered her, his voice suddenly equally fierce. "Never again. I'm going to see to it that nobody can pull that kind of shit on you anymore. Not even me. I promise you that."

Not even him? He'd never pulled anything on her, had he? It took her a few moments of thought to figure out what he meant.

Guilt. He felt guilt over the tenor and events of their reunion. He'd overridden her will then, drugging her, removing the tracer chip, and taking off from Seti Station without so much as a by-your-leave, before she'd even regained consciousness. It could easily have been a kidnapping if she hadn't still loved him. He'd more than made it up to her since then but he still didn't seem to think so.

He'd just made it up to her again, she realized.

He was watching her silently. A small, calm smile now touched his lips. "Feeling any better?"

She nodded, finding a smile of her own to give him.

"Still hungry?"

Was she? Yes, she definitely was. She nodded again and he brought the trays back. This time she dug into the breakfast with much more energy. They ate in silence but to her it felt like dialogue. The strong connection between them seemed to almost hum.

"What's happening to me?" she asked after a while. "What was that about? I'm not usually that... volatile, am I?"

Riddick reached across and, oddly enough, patted her hand. "No, you're not. But I remember Dr. Cartwright said you'd display unusual sensitivities. I think we just saw what she meant."

"Shit. How long is *that* supposed to last?"

He shrugged. "A few days, I think. Probably not much longer than that."

She felt sheepish suddenly. "Sorry about that."

He rose and carried the emptied trays one by one over to the door and set them out in the hallway. Closing the door, he returned to the bed and sat down next to her on it. "You don't have to apologize for anything, Jack. It's not like you said anything untrue, you know. You can say anything you want to me. Always."

She meant to smile at him, but what emerged was a splitting yawn. He laughed softly.

"Sounds like you need some more sleep, kid. You had a rough night." He stood and turned down the spread. "Get back in."

She complied and let him tuck her in under the covers. "What are you going to do today, Riddick?"

"Well, I have something I want to research a little. I'll be back later, though. Figure we can have dinner together, too. You up for that?" He smiled at her.

"I wouldn't miss it," she smiled back.

He leaned down, but hesitated for a moment. Then he bent and kissed her on the forehead. "Sweet dreams, Jack," he murmured.

She watched him as he left the room.

Funny... for a moment she'd thought he was going to kiss her on the lips.

18.

Cartwright: Seeing the Beast

Teresa Cartwright was damned tired by the end of her day.

Four primary regens in one day— who the hell made up that schedule? she grouched to herself. *Well, at least I didn't have to listen to any of them **scream**, like yesterday.*

It was the part of her job she liked least. Yesterday was actually the first time anyone had refused the bit since she'd joined the staff.

Oh well, she thought ruefully. *The Tarsins seem to **excel** at surprising convention.*

They weren't at all what she'd thought at first, she reflected. She'd assumed they were just like the other clients who came to this glorified dive, a rough frontiersman and a prostitute whose bond he'd purchased. She'd seen them in the waiting area after they'd arrived, and they'd certainly looked the part there, but...

When she'd gone into their room for the first time, they'd been sitting quietly on the bed, holding hands. That was a new one. Often the "husbands" didn't stick around at all, and if they did it was to get in one last "quickie" before the treatments started. She'd walked in on several couples *en flagrante delicto* before, but never one displaying genuine affection.

She'd since then come to the conclusion that Rebecca Tarsin was no hooker. After treating hundreds of that profession's veterans, she knew when she was seeing one, and when she wasn't. The story there was very different. It wasn't her job to ask questions, of course, but she couldn't help the natural curiosity that had drawn her into medicine to begin with.

Sometime in her past, Mrs. Tarsin had been shot. The mark of the entry wound was almost-invisible on her back, but the lurid scar on her abdomen made a good deal of her story quite clear. The damaged parts of her digestive tract had been regenerated long ago, but not her reproductive system, which was a real puzzler. Why wouldn't everything have been done at once? Even if she'd been a young child when it happened, it would have been no more expensive to do the both as to do one only.

It was none of her business, but oh what a tantalizing puzzle it was.

Then, of course, there was the newspaper. She'd picked it up on her way out of Rebecca's room the other night, and that same incorrigible curiosity had prompted her to open up the crumpled section. The picture inside had startled her.

Was Rebecca Tarsin related to Audrey Kowalczyk? The two of them looked a lot alike. They could be sisters, frankly, based on the photo. Certainly she seemed to have had a very strong reaction to the article. Another tantalizing puzzle.

The door to her office opened behind her. She turned around, annoyed. She *hated* it when people barged in without knocking.

Her stinging comment about rudeness died on her lips unuttered. Colin Tarsin was standing in the doorway and he looked *furious*. She was suddenly aware again of how *big* he was, how dangerous he might be.

He closed the door and flipped the lock before he began stalking toward her.

"We need to talk," he snarled.

"Certainly, Mr. Tarsin. What about?" Her voice, unfortunately, betrayed her unease.

"You told Rebecca," he growled, "that there were no painkillers that she could take during the regen process. I just found out that there are *three* that are approved for use with regenerative work! What the hell kind of shit are you trying to pull?"

Well, this accusation, at least, wasn't new. She managed to compose herself enough to answer.

"First of all, Mr. Tarsin, the *least* expensive of those medications costs one thousand New Francs per dose—"

"*I would have paid it!*" His hands slammed down on her desk and she recoiled from the savagery in his face.

Silence descended on the room. Dr. Cartwright found herself unable to look away from him. As she watched, his face became composed again, although the look of sarcastic anger wasn't much more reassuring

than the pure rage it replaced.

“So what’s the second reason?” he asked snidely.

“Sorry?” She blinked at him.

“What’s the next reason for you making Rebecca suffer like that?”

She sighed, rubbing at her forehead. “There isn’t one. Nobody’s ever made it past the first reason before. They never want to pay for the meds. I stopped even *asking* years ago.” She closed her eyes. “I’m sorry,” she added softly.

“That girl has gone through more traumatic shit in her life than *anyone* should have to experience,” he told her after a moment. She could hear a strange tone in his voice. Caring. Longing. How long had it been since she heard any of the clientele here sound like that? Simple answer: Never.

She opened her eyes to meet his. The last traces of savagery were gone from his face, but his gaze on hers was still intense.

“I don’t want her to feel *any* more pain,” he told her. “If she needs painkillers, *you give them to her*. I don’t care what they cost. I’ll pay it.”

She found herself nodding, feeling terribly guilty. She hadn’t felt this way in years, not since the debacle that had cost her her license to practice in legitimate clinics.

After a moment, Colin Tarsin sighed and turned to leave. As his hand reached for the doorknob, he stopped and turned back. “What would it cost to get the scars removed?”

“The scars?”

“Yeah. I know she hates them. How much? *Including* keeping her from suffering?”

Cartwright frowned, considering the damage she had seen. “It wouldn’t be more than five hundred New Francs. Skin regens are easy.”

“Do it. And she’d damned well better not feel any pain during it.”

She met his gaze point-blank suddenly. Her curiosity had taken over, and she had to ask, even if obliquely. “This is a lot of outlay for someone you already own, isn’t it?”

He answered her with a humorless bark of laughter. “You’ve got it all backwards, doc. *She* owns *me*. She always has.”

He turned and unlocked the door, stepping out without another word. Dr. Cartwright found herself staring at the door long after he left.

Who the hell were those two? Why the hell had they come to this dive? The man obviously had a *lot* more money than the prospectors who came here, and the woman was definitely out of her milieu. So why not go to one of the legitimate clinics? The kind where it was actually *customary* to offer the expensive painkillers?

Why here? Who the hell *were* they? *What* were they?

She’d been staring into the eyes of a killer for a moment, there, or so it had felt. God, maybe it was just the article she’d read, but she could swear...

She could swear that, despite the hair and beard, when Colin Tarsin had shouted at her, the savagery in his face made him look almost exactly like the serial killer in the paper. For one horrible moment, she’d felt like she was face-to-face with Richard B. Riddick himself.

19.

Riddick: Greater and Lesser Devils

Riddick sensed trouble as soon as he approached the door to Jack's room. The scent of her fear was suddenly sharp in his nostrils. Everything went still within him.

The locks in the patients' rooms were a courtesy only; most of the hospital staff had master keys, after all. Someone had unlocked the door. He opened it swiftly and stepped into the room, ready for mayhem.

The orderly jumped back away from Jack and grabbed clumsily for his chart. His eyes flicked toward Riddick nervously as he pretended to jot notes.

You fucking piece of shit, he thought, but he kept his face impassive. He stepped slightly to the side of the door, enough so that the bastard could leave but would have to pass uncomfortably close to him to do so. He held the man's eyes with his the entire time.

Shutting and locking the door behind the orderly, he turned back to Jack and hurried over to her side. She was still pressed against the mattress as if she could somehow melt into it, chalky-white and shaking.

"Are you okay? What did he do?" he asked urgently.

She swallowed hard. He pulled her up into his embrace, hugging her tightly and feeling the way she shook against him.

"Did he hurt you, Jack?" He felt her shake her head against his shoulder.

"He... didn't have... time..." she finally managed to gasp out.

The killing rage within him reached a molten level of fury. In his mind he could already see what he would do to the man. It was the same orderly who had gotten so excited over Jack's pain the day before. Apparently he'd come back for a second helping. He would die slowly for that.

"That motherfucker... he probably considers all the women here fair game for his fun." A horrible thought occurred to him. "Has he *ever* hurt you, Jack?"

He felt the lie as she shook her head again.

"What did he do, Jack? You *know* you don't have to hide anything from me."

She sat back and took a deep breath. "Earlier today... he *said* it was a routine exam, but..."

The tortured look on her face spoke volumes and stiffened his resolve. The man was going to die by inches at a time.

"Did he rape you?"

This time he knew she was telling the truth when she shook her head. "He just... touched me..." She swallowed convulsively.

"Did you report it?"

"No, not yet..."

"Good. Don't."

She looked confused. "Why not?"

"Because," he said with gentle firmness, "I don't want them wondering about *us* when they find his body."

The color that had been returning to her face fled again. She stared at him for a long moment, speechless. It hurt him to watch her face crumple and the tears begin, but she didn't resist at all when he pulled her close to him again. He hated having to let her see the other side of him, the untamed killer that still lived under his skin. She had been brave enough to face it down in the skiff, but he'd quickly come to realize that she'd had a very romanticized view of what he really was.

The little runaway he'd first met had thought of him as her Zorro, a righteous outlaw who actually fought for justice. The idea that part of him truly reveled in dealing death had no place in her dreams. He did his best to keep her from having to face that side of who he was. But it was always there. The only consolation was that it loved her every bit as much as the rest of him.

There was no death it reveled in more than the death of someone who had hurt her. Still, such a thing would be terrible for her to face. He rocked her in his arms until the sobs trailed away. He didn't blame her. He couldn't.

"This changes a bunch of things, kid," he said softly. "I don't trust this place enough to leave you alone here. Guess I'm going to be staying with you at night from now on."

He felt her arms tighten around his waist. "Thank you," she whispered.

Don't thank me yet, kid. Don't know if you're really going to be any safer this way. I hope to God you are...

He also hoped that God didn't still have the same sick fucking sense of humor the bastard had always had when it came to him and the people he cared about.

He fixed her image in his mind, the way she'd looked when the orderly had been menacing her. *You will never make her look like that, you fucker*, he told the animal within. Its acquiescence surprised him.

Yes, every part of him loved her.

"Hey, I found out that the doctors can start giving you painkillers now. I told them to get off their asses and do it. You won't be in any more pain soon, kid." He stroked her hair, wishing he could tell her the truth but knowing how much it would hurt if he did. "Oh, and they're going to remove the scars on your side. I talked to Dr. Cartwright and she says it'll be painless."

She sat back, wiping her eyes. She looked deeply touched. Good. Finally he'd found a gift to make up for the suffering he'd caused her. He hoped. He loved the sweetness of her smile and wanted to see it much more often.

"Cool," she finally said, life back in her voice. "I'll be able to wear bikinis."

The image shot through him like a powerful drug. That was going to be a dangerous sight. He hoped he'd be able to cope with it without turning into a complete idiot.

Not likely. These last few days he'd constantly felt like an adolescent kid again, a horny teenage boy confounded by his first serious crush. Damned undignified for a man in his thirties with a killer reputation...

"We'll have to see about that," he said after a moment when he realized she was waiting for a response. "Don't know if I can control the riots that'd follow."

I'm barely going to survive the riot in my own head, kid.

She laughed with the joy of the compliment. "Guess you'd better start up my self-defense lessons again, huh?"

"Damned right. I'm gonna make sure that the next fucker who tries to force himself on you has a *huge* surprise in store, Darlin'." He glanced at the door, frowning. "Meantime... gotta set up a bit of insurance against *that* fucker."

He thought for a long moment, considering the alternatives. Finally he smiled. "You know what, Jack? Your favorite ring is missing."

"My what?" Jack had never been interested in wearing jewelry. Now she looked at him like he'd gone off in the head.

"Oh yeah. This was an extra-special ring, too. Valuable. Hmm... let's see... white gold, with your birthstone... what month did I tell them you were born in?"

"I don't know. I still have a hard time remembering what you told them our last name was."

"Tarsin. Oh yeah, I said you were born in July. Excellent, the July birthstone is a ruby, those are valuable... Yeah, a white gold ring with a ruby in the center and two one-carat diamonds, one on each side. An antique... we'll say it belonged to my great-grandmother. Think you can remember all that?"

"White gold, ruby, two one-carat diamonds. Are the stones round or square?"

"Round."

"And it belonged to your great-grandmother. Got it."

"Good. Last time you saw it, it was on your bedside table. Now it's gone."

"Okay, why has my imaginary ring been stolen?" She grinned impishly. God, he loved that smile...

"Well, it gives me a good reason to demand that from now on any orderlies who come into the room have to have a supervisor with them, now doesn't it? Let's see. I gave that to you as an engagement ring, don't you think?"

"Absolutely. And I'm devastated by its loss." Jack grinned at him for a second before schooling her face into a woeful expression. He laughed.

"Downplay it a little, kid, you look like somebody just killed all ten of your puppies." He glanced at his watch. "Excellent. The shift will be changing over in a few minutes. I'm going to go for a bit, okay? Gotta report that theft, after all."

“We’re still doing dinner, right?”

“Absolutely. I’ll be back in an hour or two. Gonna have a little talk with our friend the orderly so he doesn’t sniff around anymore—”

“You’re not killing him *tonight*, are you?” She looked scandalized.

“No, just gonna scare him off. But the day you check out, he dies. Don’t bother trying to argue with me on this one, okay? It’s not negotiable.” He watched until she nodded in resignation. “I’m also going to pick up some stuff from the ship and lock it down a bit more, since I won’t be seeing it until we check you out of here.”

He stood up, and then leaned down to kiss her good-bye. Once again he had to stop himself from kissing her lips. His mouth just wanted to gravitate to them, he realized.

He paused at the door, turning to look at her. “Describe the ring.”

“White gold, with a ruby and two diamonds on either side. The diamonds are one carat each and all three stones are round. It belonged to your great-grandmother and you gave it to me as an engagement ring. It was on my bedside table the last time I saw it.” She frowned. “When was the last time I saw it?”

“This morning, right after I left. Perfect, kid. Remember it and stick to it if anybody asks.” He left the room, making a point of locking the door behind him.

Ten minutes later the theft had been reported, and he’d been promised that no one would be allowed in “Rebecca’s” room without a supervisor present.

Ten minutes after that, he was following the orderly from the clinic. Few people were as good as he was when it came to tailing somebody without being spotted. He had, on many occasions, rented out his services as a detective to various people. He had a whole, carefully-crafted identity at his disposal for use in that capacity. It had once belonged to yet another individual who’d had the misfortune to tangle with him. He’d kept it after he ensured that the man’s body would never be found and his disappearance wouldn’t be noted.

Damn, this kid was predictable. Right to a bar. This was going to be far too easy.

Riddick entered the bar a few minutes after his quarry, still in his Colin Tarsin guise. It was important that the guy knew who he was being threatened by and why, after all.

He watched the orderly for several minutes. Stupid kid didn’t know how to talk to a real woman, he noted. He pulled his little stunts at the clinic with a captive audience because no woman he encountered outside would sit still for his crap. When the redhead sitting next to him grabbed her drink and stalked away, Riddick calmly stepped up and appropriated the seat.

He clapped his hand on the guy’s shoulder. “Not bad lookin’, eh? Too bad. Looks like your luck isn’t going so good today, Pete.”

That had been the name on the orderly’s badge. Pete the fucking perv. Pete, who had been victimizing women at the clinic for ages, and had finally picked the wrong one to torment.

He gave Pete a smile that was filled with predation. He was gratified by the flicker of fear that appeared in the kid’s eyes. He smiled at the bartender and signaled for a round of drinks for the both of them.

“Course,” he continued as he sipped his beer, “Rebecca leaves that one in the dust, doesn’t she? Now *there’s* a real woman.” He raised his glass as if in a toast. “You ever go near her again, Pete, and I’ll cut you to pieces.”

Another wolfish smile. The guy next to him had frozen, one trembling hand resting on the shot of vodka Riddick had just bought him.

“Oh, come on, drink up, kid. No hard feelings, right? As long as you stay away from my woman I’m not going to do anything to you.”

Pete swallowed and tried to work up some nerve. “You c-can’t threaten me.”

“Wasn’t a threat, kid, it’s what’ll happen if you don’t use the shit between your ears. Stay away from her and you’re fine.” He treated the orderly to yet another cruel smile. “Of course, you could report me to your bosses, but they might want to know why I was so mad at you. You know anywhere else you can get a job as sweet as the one you have now?”

He took another sip of his beer. This was too much fucking fun.

“See, now, I don’t think Rebecca’s somebody you really feel like dying for, is she? But I’m more than happy to kill for her. So you’d better consider your options very carefully, boy.”

The idiot still wanted to posture. “You kill me and everybody will know it was you.”

“You think?” Chuckling, Riddick leaned close. The scent of the orderly’s fear pleased him no end. “If you make me kill you, little man... they’ll never find enough of you to identify.”

He patted the man’s shoulder with gusto and stepped back. Still smiling, he turned and walked away. Anyone observing them would have thought it was a pleasant conversation. And it had been...

For him.

He still planned to kill the orderly. But not until he’d gotten Jack out of there. Then the man would die. In the meantime, Pete’s fear should keep him in check.

Riddick left the pub to collect his things from the ship. He walked with a distinct swing in his step. It had been a long time since he’d looked forward to the kill so much.

20.

Jack: Checkout Time

Jack woke slowly, happily, feeling Riddick against her back and his arms around her waist. His chin was resting on the top of her head. By his breathing she could tell that he was still deeply asleep.

For four wonderful nights he'd shared her bed with her. It had been completely chaste, of course, but just having him so close to her was worth so much. The amazing thing was that she was starting to want much more than just this.

For the first time in years, she found her responding to stimuli in a sexual way, and realizing how completely *vacant* her life had been of such reactions. She'd finally asked Dr. Cartwright about it last night, while Riddick was out of the room for a few minutes. He made a point of absenting himself from those exams where she had to take off her clothes. She was kind of sorry about that.

Dr. Cartwright's response had been deeply enlightening. "That's very normal, Rebecca. A lot of women who have hysterectomies become sexually desensitized. It's not at all uncommon." Then she'd dropped the bombshell. "The regen procedure usually reverses the effect, of course. You and Colin should have some very lovely nights ahead, I think."

She'd blushed bright red at that, and hadn't been able to think about anything else since. Damn Riddick and his "ship rules..." She would love to take another shower with him, with this new awareness in her, but he would have none of it. He kept being the perfect gentleman...

Where the hell had he learned how to be that, anyway?

She snuggled back against him, imagining that they were naked, rather than fully-clothed at his insistence. Today was her last day at the clinic, which meant that it was the last day they'd be sharing a bed. *Damn*, if only she could get him to notice the way she felt about him now... if only she could get him to respond...

If only she could think of something – anything – else.

She was trying to resign herself to it. Riddick clearly still saw her as his little kid sister. It would probably never occur to him that she was a woman now with a woman's needs, unfortunately. She was stuck with his initial image of her, the dumb kid who'd shaved her head to imitate him. Now that she'd rediscovered another side of herself, she wanted to share it with him so much, but he was so fucking impervious.

She'd had to argue with him every night just to get him into the bed. He kept trying to come up with a good excuse for sleeping in the chair instead.

"Don't be an idiot, Riddick," she'd said. "You're always going on about verisimilitude. Get a *grip*. If one of the doctors walks in they're going to wonder why you're not in bed with your freakin' wife."

He never got the grip she *really* hoped for, of course. Damn it!

She kept daring herself to ask, to issue an invitation, but she always chickened out. The worst thing he could say was no, right? Wrong. He could say no and then start keeping her at an even greater distance. At least now she had a part of him, however small. If she lost what she had she didn't know what she'd do.

His breathing changed subtly and she knew that he had just wakened. "Good morning," she whispered.

"Hey kid," he replied as always, and moved away from her. Why did he always have to stop holding her right away when he woke up? Couldn't he wait a minute? Couldn't he?

He rose, stretching, and she couldn't help but admire the play of his muscles beneath the fabric of his shirt. Shit, that was *her* fault... she was the one who'd insisted that if she had to wear an undershirt to bed, he did too.

*I am a **total** idiot sometimes.*

"You showering first or after?" he asked, as always.

"After, I think. You go ahead." She frowned up at him. "I think you need to shave."

"That's fake hair, Jack." He grinned.

"Yeah, and it's not sitting on your head right. I think you have too much stubble underneath it."

Riddick frowned slightly and rubbed at his scalp. They both started laughing when the hair swayed back and forth slightly. "Damn, kid, you're right. I'd better fix that, even if I *won't* be wearing it again after today."

"Don't want people getting any funny last impressions, do we?" she joked.

"Definitely not. 'Specially given what I'm doing tonight." Riddick headed for his pack and the portable disguise kit he'd brought with him. Behind him, Jack was silent.

Tonight Riddick was going to kill a man. She'd been trying not to think about it, especially since she knew without being told that the man was going to die very slowly. He'd already told her not to bother arguing against it; she didn't think she could come up with a good argument anyway, given what the man in question had done to her.

But it still disturbed her. As much as she would like to pretend otherwise, Riddick still had his old taste for blood.

She loved him anyway, of course. She watched him wistfully as he gathered his disguise kit and a fresh set of clothes and headed for the bathroom. He closed the door behind him, of course. Fucking "ship rules."

She sat on the bed, listening to the sounds of his morning ablutions and imagining how he looked as he did them. He was almost done dressing when someone knocked on their door.

She wasn't sure what she was expecting, but the young nurse with excited dancing eyes on the other side of the door wasn't it.

"Mrs. Tarsin! I'm so happy! We found your ring!"

She backed away from the door, nonplussed, and the nurse practically danced into the room.

"You what?"

"We found your ring! It must have fallen off of your bedside table and gotten swept up by the cleaning lady. It was in one of the vacuum bags." Pure delight was on the young nurse's face as she held out her hand. A ring glittered on her palm.

Jack took it after a moment. White gold. Three stones, a large ruby with diamonds sparkling on either side. Round, of course. It *looked* like an antique. As God was her witness, Jack couldn't think of *anything* to say.

Riddick rescued her.

"Thank you, Miss. We really appreciate it. You guys must've looked really hard to find it." He was standing in the doorway of the bathroom, smiling at the nurse with apparent gratitude.

"Yes, thank you," Jack managed through numb lips.

"Oh, it was nothing. We all knew how much it meant to you, and we couldn't let you go away without it..." Still smiling in delight, the nurse left and closed the door behind her.

"What the?" Jack finally managed to say.

A strangled sound came from behind her. Turning around, she beheld one of the most amazing, unlikely sights she'd ever seen in her life: the supposedly-unflappable Richard B. Riddick had completely lost it. He was lying on the bed, convulsed with silent laughter.

She glanced down at the ring in her hand. "Did what I think happened really happen?" she asked. That only made him laugh harder.

She stared down at the ring again. "I don't believe it." She began to get the urge to giggle herself. "They went out and *bought a replacement* for my stolen imaginary ring..."

Still unable to speak, Riddick nodded and thumped the bed with his fist. Jack had seen him laugh before, but *never* this hard. He couldn't seem to catch his breath.

She went and sat down beside him. His laughter was silent, another rarity. Usually if he bothered laughing at all it boomed out of him.

He must really not want them to hear his reaction, she thought.

"Do you think it's real?" she giggled.

"No," he managed after a moment. "It's obviously a hallucination, Jack." She swatted him on the arm and he began to laugh silently again.

"I mean, do you think it's real gold and real jewels? Shit, if it is, they had to have paid a fortune..." The full absurdity of the situation finally hit her and she fell onto the bed beside Riddick, covering her mouth with her hand to muffle her own laughter.

They kept setting each other off, too. They'd get themselves under control and then their eyes would meet and the laughter would bubble out again.

Finally Riddick managed to sit up. "Hey, does it fit? Because if it doesn't, this'll be even funnier..."

Still giggling, Jack tried the ring on. "Jeez. It's a perfect fit. How'd they figure out that one?"

"Dunno. Guess it really *is* yours, then." His eyes were still dancing with suppressed laughter.

“How much of our fee did they have to eat to do this, do you think?”

He chuckled. “I think you just got your scar removal done for free, kid. Assuming it’s real, that is.”

“Holy shit.” They laughed together for another moment.

“You’d better get your shower in, Jack. It’s almost time for our last breakfast here and then we check out.” He gently propelled her toward the bathroom. “C’mon, scoot.”

She gave him the finger and altered her course so she could grab some fresh clothes. Today she could quit wearing hospital gowns and could go back to her own things. Too bad she still had nothing fun to wear. She’d sold all of her *really* cool outfits back on New Ecuador, and still hadn’t had a chance to buy replacements.

Oh well, maybe she’d get a reaction out of Riddick once she did.

The food had arrived when she emerged from the bathroom, and the two of them ate it with great enthusiasm. Jack didn’t know how much longer they’d be on Troubadour, but once they got back to ship rations she was going to *miss* this cuisine. Throughout the meal, Riddick kept glancing at the ring on her finger and chuckling.

They finished the meal and Jack packed up the few things she’d brought from the ship, mostly toiletries. They were ready to leave. Her regen treatments were finished; her body had been completely restored to health and wholeness.

And *oh boy* did she know who she wanted to use it on!

She didn’t even mind the people in the lobby, staring at her as if she was a snack they wanted to eat. She was too energized, too full of life. She only barely managed to keep a straight face when Riddick thanked the staff for their tireless efforts to find her ring.

The rough crowd outside of the clinic didn’t seem threatening to her at all this time and she found herself frisking about like an excited puppy as they walked back to the space docks. Bedridden for a week, all she wanted to do now was run and jump...

...well, *almost* all she wanted to do.

She wondered what Riddick would do if she *did* pounce him. He was watching her with indulgent amusement. She *had* to find a way to turn “fraternal” into “fraternizing.”

They reached the ship and got settled back in quickly. Riddick surprised her when he turned to her abruptly and handed her a card.

“Go get yourself some decent clothes, kid. This should see you outfitted properly.” He was removing his Colin Tarsin disguise as he talked, careful to keep the hairpieces from ripping.

She glanced down at the card. “How much is on here?”

“Five thousand New Francs. Have fun with it. It’s your first paycheck.”

“Paycheck?”

“Yeah, don’t you remember the deal? Full board and fifteen percent of the net profits. That’s your cut.”

“Holy... just what were you *carrying* here, anyway?”

“Don’t ask. Just go have some fun. Be back before dusk, though... I want you safe inside when our friend Pete gets off-shift.”

“Are you going somewhere?”

“Yeah, got a few things to take care of. I’ll be back briefly, but then I’m gonna go see a man about his death.”

She couldn’t help the small shudder that passed through her. He spotted it and stepped closer, hugging her for a moment.

He tilted her head up so that she had to meet his eyes. “You know you’re not the only one he did that shit to. You want him to keep it up?”

She closed her eyes and shook her head. Justification. Truth, but still justification. She knew that Riddick *wanted* to kill the man, that this was as much about his bloodlust as about any kind of justice. She knew that the man was going to die horribly, and that Riddick was going to enjoy every minute of it.

She felt his lips press against her forehead. “Go on, kid. Go have some fun. Just be back before sunset. I’ll be here by then myself, for a bit.”

She opened her eyes and smiled up at him. On tip-toe, she reached up and kissed his cheek. She wished she was brave enough to kiss him on his lips. Someday soon, maybe.

At least, she thought as she left the ship and headed for one of the nearby shopping centers, *I know he loves me. At least I have that.*

She was already coming up with a few ideas of outfits that might just make him feel something stronger.

21.

Riddick: The Animal Unrestrained

The sun was setting on the ship currently registered as *Tarsin's Chance*. Riddick had put the ramp down and was watching the tarmac, trying not to give into the anxiety percolating deep within him. Jack should have been back before now, he thought for the umpteenth time. He growled low in his throat, wondering where the hell she was.

His day had been both productive and dissatisfying. He knew everything about Pete now, his full name, where he lived, his extensive rap sheet... the works. But other things hadn't gone well at all. He'd been forced to admit that his encounters with "Carolyn" no longer did nearly enough for him. They'd gone from poetic acts of fantasy-fulfillment to impersonal fucks. He couldn't even get off without imagining Jack in the woman's place any more.

He'd have to find a new outlet for his needs, and fast. They couldn't leave Troubadour until he knew for a fact that he was under control and wouldn't end up breaking down Jack's door some night and ravaging her.

One of the planet's fleet of taxis, he noted, was approaching the ship.

How much did she buy? he thought with abrupt amusement. Five thousand New Francs would buy a lot, he realized suddenly. He wasn't all that accustomed to the acquisition of material possessions and most of his money went toward much rarer, more expensive items. High-tech black-ops gear from the black market, for instance. Even if he'd had a clue what girls liked to buy, he figured this would have taken him by surprise.

The cab pulled up and the driver began to unload. Jack emerged, glanced at the ship, and waved cheerfully. As the bags and boxes began to pile up, Riddick found himself shaking his head and chuckling.

He walked down the ramp and approached the cab, where Jack was now paying the driver and punching in a generous tip. As the vehicle pulled away and she turned toward him, he raised an eyebrow and nodded at the enormous pile of merchandise.

"How many stores did you clean out, kid?"

She laughed and began gathering up bags. He moved to help her, taking several of the largest, heaviest packages. They ferried the things inside and he handed them up to her before joining her in the living quarters level.

"You know, I was starting to get worried about you." He glanced at his chrono. "You almost didn't get here before Pete's final shift ended."

Her smile faltered for a second but she hoisted it back into place. Poor girl. He wasn't sure whether it was Pete's treatment of her or his imminent death that was bothering her. Neither one could be pleasant for her to consider.

She was wearing a new perfume. He'd noticed it when they'd been carrying the packages in. Whatever it was, he liked it. It made her smell more like herself than ever, oddly enough. Her scent had subtly changed in the last few days, he'd noticed, becoming more... more *female*. This new addition to the mix was intoxicating.

If she wore this around him all the time he was going to have a *really* hard time keeping his hands off of her.

"I like that perfume. Did you buy it, or just try it on?" He tried to keep the comment as offhand as he could. It was hard to keep from saying what he really wanted to: *will you always smell this fuckable?*

She looked delighted that he'd noticed. "I bought it! Isn't it wonderful? It was my mom's favorite."

"What's it called?" He helped her carry her packages into her room and pile them onto her bed.

"*Charmante*. My mom used to get it shipped to her from New Belgium; that's where she came from."

Riddick leaned against her door and smiled. He had to physically restrain himself, for a moment, from moving to her side and engulfing her in his arms so he could inhale her scent and lose himself in it. He wondered if it had driven Jack's father to distraction on the mother the way it already was driving him on the daughter.

"It's very pretty."

"I thought so. I was *thrilled* to find it, but I guess I should have expected it on a planet full of Francophiles. You know what I saw in one of the stores? A picture of *Paris*, of all things!" She glanced over at him and saw his confusion.

"Why would that be unusual?" he asked. Pictures of the Eiffel Tower abounded throughout the town.

"Not the city, sorry... Paris Ogilvie. The guy we met on the *Hunter-Gratzner*. This one curio shop had his picture up, a little 'In Memory Of' plaque, you know the type? Seems he supplied them with all kinds of fun things. I got some earrings there. Expensive stuff."

She was chattering, trying to stall for time before he had to leave and begin his killing ways. Poor little thing. He moved to her side and rested his hand on her shoulder.

"I have to go now, Jack." He said it as gently as he could and felt her heavy sigh in response. She turned and put her arms around him, resting her head against his chest for a moment.

"Don't get caught," she finally said in a ragged whisper as she stepped back. He tilted her face up and kissed her forehead.

"Never happen," he answered softly, before leaving her room.

He locked the ship up and headed out into the darkening streets of New Paris, Troubadour's capital city. A town where anything could be bought or sold, and human life was the cheapest commodity... and where a particular human life would come to a bloody end tonight.

It didn't take him long at all to find his quarry, and in the process he learned a new facet of Pete the Perv's sickness. Pete was stalking a young woman from bar to bar, obsessively following her through the thronging crowds of early-evening revelers. It was the redhead from the bar the other night, he realized.

Riddick wondered how often he did this, and what might normally have happened to the hapless lady if he hadn't been about to hijack Pete's evening plans on this night. He decided to let the play unfold. If Pete actually planned to commit a crime, he'd make it *so* easy for Riddick to catch him; he'd want a secluded place to make his move, after all. Perfect.

He stalked the stalker to a deserted alley off of a sparsely-populated side street. Pete had gotten ahead of his target. Now he planned to catch her and drag her into the dark passageway when she passed. Riddick waited until all of Pete's attention was focused on the approaching woman before he moved.

The woman never saw either one of them. She never knew how close she had come to a night of horror. Riddick clapped his hand over Pete's mouth and lifted the man off of the ground, dragging him back into the depths of the alley. He slammed him hard against the wall, knocking the breath out of him.

"Hey there, Pete," he whispered, baring his teeth. "Remember me?"

He saw the man's eyes go wide. As feeling returned to the hapless orderly's diaphragm and he began to draw breath, Riddick slammed one fist directly into his stomach. Pete doubled up around his fist, gagging, still unable to breathe. Two more quick blows and he was unconscious.

Riddick dragged him back behind a dumpster, to the little "love nest" that he'd watched Pete preparing for his target. The spot had been used several times before, he noted with disgust. Pete was quite something. Nobody was going to miss him once he was dead. Certainly not the women he'd brought here. If they were still alive.

Rummaging through the man's clothes, he quickly realized that none of them were.

"Oh, Pete, Pete, Pete..." he chuckled softly. "I think I'm going to *really* enjoy this."

Riddick had the man trussed up before he regained consciousness, and had put a bit in the man's mouth. He'd swiped it from the clinic before he and Jack checked out. Now he watched the orderly's eyes flutter open, grinning.

"You're really something, guy," he remarked conversationally. "Here I thought you were just a sicko who made the mistake of touching *my* girl, and now I find out you're a fuckin' *trophy hunter*. You know, when the cops find you, these little goodies of yours are going to solve a *lot* of their most puzzling cases."

He watched Pete's reaction. The man still didn't get it.

"Oh relax, Pete, you're not gonna go to jail." He leaned in, whispering in the man's ear. "You'll be dead long before they find you. Well, not *too* long. I think there's a whole bunch of women on the other side of the grave who will appreciate what I'm going to do to you first."

He unsheathed a knife and examined it for a moment, letting it catch the light and transfix Pete's attention. He glanced at the man after a time and grinned.

“It’s a nice one, isn’t it? Surgically precise, the way I like ’em. You know all about that, don’t you? I’m almost tempted to use one of your own knives on you, you know. But this one...” He smiled fondly. “This one is special. I haven’t used it in four years, since the *last* time I paid someone back for hurting my girl.”

He smiled down at the man, who was now shaking.

“Oh yeah. It’s a simple rule. You hurt what I love, I hurt what you love. Problem is, Pete, you don’t love *anything*, do you? Except yourself, of course. Guess I’ll have to make do with that, won’t I? Last guy who messed with my girl lost his twelve best students.” He leaned in close and whispered in Pete’s ear. “I always give back with interest, you see.”

With deliberate gentleness, he lifted Pete’s shirt away from his belly. He smiled almost-kindly at the pathetic human being below him.

“They were luckier than you, though. I’d already snapped their necks by the time I did this to them. But that’s because *they* weren’t the ones who’d hurt her. You did. You get to pay the full price.”

He made three clean cuts on Pete’s abdomen, each every bit as surgically precise as the knife he used to make them. Pete was gagging, writhing.

“Careful, Pete, you don’t want me to damage any organs, now do you?” He moved the skin aside and began slicing through the membrane beneath. Finally he reached his destination.

“There we go!” He grinned wolfishly into Pete’s eyes. “Did you know that you have twenty to twenty-three feet of small intestine? Amazing, isn’t it? But I forgot, you work in a medical clinic, of *course* you know that. I wonder how many times I can wrap it around your neck.”

Smiling into Pete’s eyes, he carefully reached into the open cavity. He intended to do this without even the slightest bit of damage to the organs themselves. It was so much better that way; Pete would last so much longer. “Let’s find out, shall we?”

Hours later, the first blushes of dawn began to appear in the sky of New Paris. Riddick felt the change in the air. Time to end the fun.

He took a small swig from the bottle of Peppermint Schnapps he’d brought with him, and walked over to Pete.

“Hey. Pete. You want a sip? One last little drink before we go our separate ways?” He grinned into the man’s pain-glazed eyes. “You’re not passing out on me, are you? You want to be here for the denouement, you know. Appropriate term isn’t it? ‘Specially on a planet like this. Where you from originally, Pete? You’re not a local.”

He studied Pete for a long moment. The man’s defiance had long since vanished, of course. He was barely clinging to life at this point, but he was still clinging, still aware.

“Oh, come on, Pete. How many planets have you pulled this shit on, anyway? How many worlds have Jane Does with missing pieces in their morgues thanks to you? Hmm?”

With the bit in his mouth, Pete couldn’t actually answer. Riddick wasn’t really interested in anything the man would have to say, anyway.

“Well, it’s been fun, boy, but I’ve gotta get back to Rebecca. Not that her name’s really Rebecca, of course. Mine isn’t Colin. I thought I’d let you know ’cuz maybe it’d make your ride to Hell a little easier, knowing who you fucked with.”

He took the knife back out, pressing the tip against the underside of Pete’s chin, right above the grisly scarf he’d wrapped around his neck, and leaned in. He’d whisper the final answer into Pete’s ear.

“You poor, stupid kid,” he chuckled. “*Nobody* fucks with Richard B. Riddick and walks away from it.”

Horried comprehension dawned in the orderly’s dazed eyes seconds before Riddick jammed the knife up into his brain.

He took a moment to clean the blood off of his hands and then left the alleyway. He felt good, burning with life, his own and the one he’d just stolen. That kill had been every bit as good as he’d hoped. Better. Jack hadn’t been the only one he’d avenged in the process.

What delicious irony. That was the best part of all.

He showered upon his arrival at the ship. He'd no more sit down to breakfast with Jack with Pete's blood on him than another woman's scent. The clothes and hairpieces that had belonged to "Colin Tarsin" he bagged. He'd make sure to incinerate them later.

By the time Jack emerged yawning from her room, he had their breakfast on the table. He smiled at her and didn't mention the events of his night. She already knew more than she wanted to.

"So now what?" she finally asked.

"Well, we're going to stay on Troubadour for a bit longer, but not under our current aliases, obviously. So... we're going to switch to a different space port later today." He poured some more juice for both of them. "I'll need that card I gave you so I can reroute its balance to a different account. Rebecca Tarsin is about to cease to exist."

She grinned at him. "Sure." She pulled the card out from inside her shirt and handed it over. Smart girl, she'd anticipated him... damn, had she been keeping the card where he *thought*?

He took a moment to really look at her clothes. He suddenly thanked the sick fuck on high that there was a table between them so she couldn't see his abrupt response. The tight little top accentuated her high breasts entirely *too* well, filling his head with intensely carnal thoughts.

She can't possibly know the effect she's having on me, he reminded himself. *Behave yourself*, he added.

What he really wanted to do was pick her up and carry her into his bedroom. He forced himself to swallow and return to eating.

Life with Jack was sure going to be complicated, he thought ruefully.

He sat back from the table once he was back under control, taking a moment to stretch. Once they took off and he got them in their orbit he needed to catch up on his sleep... what—

Jack had jumped into his lap and put her hands on his shoulders. She was facing him, straddling his legs. The smile she gave him was pure, innocent sweetness. "So who are we going to be now?"

The images that flashed through his mind were vivid and intense. He saw himself grabbing her hips and pulling her against him, grinding himself against her spread crotch and burying his face between her breasts, carrying her into his room and ripping her new clothes clean off of her body—

Oh god, no, oh no Jack...

The scent of her was overwhelming. In another moment he was going to... going to...

His hands went to her waist and he gently lifted her, pushing her backward off of his legs. He steadied her and stood up from his chair as well, taking a step back from her.

"Jack, you can't sit on me like that."

She looked confused, completely oblivious to the mayhem she'd almost unleashed. "Why?"

"It's just..." He shook his head, wishing he could explain, not daring to. "It's not appropriate."

He turned, leaving the table and moving over to the cockpit. He started the preflight checks.

Behind him he could hear Jack clearing the table. After a moment, she cleared her throat. "Um... I'm gonna make sure everything in my room is... locked down for takeoff. That's where I'll be."

He heard her door shut, and took a moment to close his eyes and let out a long, ragged sigh.

*Oh Jack, you have **no** idea how close to the brink you just took me. I hope you never find out.*

22.

Jack: Unrequited

“Not appropriate.” The words had struck at Jack like an indictment.

She’d cleared the table in a huge rush and retreated to her room as quickly as she could manage. Now she flung herself down on her bed, choking on that one devastating phrase.

Stupid! she thought, her eyes stinging. *I’m so fucking stupid...*

At least, she consoled herself, he didn’t realize the move had been intentional. She’d managed to play dumb fast enough, the moment she’d seen the censure in his gaze. She’d learned long, long ago how to strike exactly the right sort of “who-me?” pose of confused innocence to fool even the most suspicious of cops. It had come in useful on numerous occasions back in her street-urchin days.

She’d never thought she’d be using it on Riddick. For one thing, she’d always figured he’d see right through it. But he’d bought it. Thank God, he’d bought it.

She couldn’t have stood it if he’d realized what she’d been trying to do when he rebuffed her. She couldn’t have taken the look of pity that would have followed.

Back at the shelter the other girls had believed that she’d been his sex toy. They’d whispered, when they thought she wasn’t around to hear, about how she must have traded her “services” to him in exchange for his protection. They’d speculated extensively on what sorts of things he’d made her do. At the time, she’d eavesdropped out of amused, purely intellectual curiosity. Some of the acts they’d come up with had been *extremely* inventive. A few, she was sure, were physically impossible.

One girl had actually gotten up the nerve to ask her. She could still remember the answer she’d given, with her head held proudly and a knowing, defiant smile on her face:

“I did everything he wanted me to... and I *loved* everything he did to me.”

Too bad both, in reality, had been a big, fat Nothing.

Face it, “Kid,” she told herself sourly. *He just LJBF’d you.*

The boys she’d hung with in seedy spaceports around the Known Systems had all talked about The Dreaded LJBF, the deadliest four words any girl could say to a guy: “Let’s Just Be Friends.” She’d never really been able to understand why hearing it would be so painful.

At the time, she’d told herself it was probably a “guy thing,” something she would have to pretend to understand for the sake of her masquerade, but never would truly comprehend. Now she knew so much better.

Oh *God*, did it hurt. He hadn’t actually said it, but the unspoken version was every bit as searing.

“The worst part,” Ben had commented, a week before she shipped out on the Hunter-Gratzner, “is having to watch her with other guys, *knowing* that she’s just getting taken for a ride... *again*... and knowing that you could give her so much more if she’d just *wake up*...”

She dreaded the day Riddick got serious about someone. The day he brought the Love Of His Life home to meet his little kid sister. That would be the day her heart died completely.

She sighed morosely. She’d just have to learn how to hide it better.

The boys had been right, though. Once you knew how you felt about someone, hearing “I love you... as a friend” would never, ever be enough again. She wanted more, *much* more, but he wouldn’t give it to her.

All those clothes... wasted. He hadn’t even noticed how she looked. She bet if she pranced around *naked* in front of him he’d just stand there, shielded by his All-Seasons Riddick Cool, and give her a stern reprimand about how fucking *not appropriate* it was.

What did I expect? she thought bitterly. *I’m just a kid to him. What could I possibly offer him that he couldn’t get better elsewhere?*

She had almost no experience, after all. What meager experience she did have was limited to such come-hither lessons as “how to hold still and not scream,” a lesson she’d learned once and made sure she’d never have to repeat. Riddick was the first – the only – man she’d ever wanted. And, ironically, the man she could never have.

What was it she’d wanted him to say about the perfume, anyway? That if she wore it he wouldn’t be able to keep his hands off of her? Just because that’s what her father had always said to her mother...

Stupid. Stupid.

She rolled over, pressing her face against her sheets. Sighing deeply, she tried to let go of the poisonous feelings welling up inside her. God, she hurt so much...

Fuck it, she decided. If he wasn't going to notice the clothes, there was no point in *not* wearing them. Let him be the only one who *didn't* notice her, dammit!

Let him *try* to tell her that they were "not appropriate." Let him tell her why. She was of legal age; if she wanted to wear "fuck-me" clothes it was her own goddamned business.

Not like he was gonna take her up on the offer, anyway.

The ship was powering up. He'd be launching soon. If she felt like being a good little apprentice spacer she should probably go out and sit in the copilot's seat. Maybe she would, if he came and asked her to, but she was too furious right now to face him without that invitation.

She sat up slowly and glanced around the room. She'd put away everything last night; there was nothing that actually needed to be locked down before takeoff. Besides, Riddick was one of the best pilots she'd ever seen. Nothing loose was going to fall anyway.

She lay back down and waited. Finally she felt the press of the planet's increasing gravity on her body. She closed her eyes, pretending that it was *him*. Imagining that it was the weight of him on top of her and nothing as mundane as escape velocity. If only... if only...

Well, she could still dream.

Finally the pressure abated and she felt a small thrill pass through her stomach as she experienced one fraction of a second of free-fall. Artificial gravity promptly kicked in, but she always loved that moment. It was the way Riddick made her feel.

Damn it, *everything* kept coming back to him!

She got out of her bed and walked over to the dresser, a mere two steps away, to examine herself in the mirror. She looked okay, no sign of her anguish. Good. She sure as hell didn't want him asking her what was wrong. She felt transparent enough as it was.

Practically in-fucking-visible.

She sighed, glaring into her own eyes. *You know that's not true, Jack. He sees you. Not the way you hoped he would. But he sees you. And you know he loves you.*

He'd loved her enough to kill people for her sake, after all. On their last day together, Imam had told her what he'd overheard of Riddick and Johns' final exchange before their fatal battle.

"Johns ordered Riddick to kill you, child," the gentle cleric had said. "He wanted to use your body to distract the planet's creatures from the rest of us. I know that Mr. Riddick wanted to kill him anyway, but I believe he did it as much for you as for himself."

She'd been shocked into silent stillness by the revelation. Imam had reached out and taken her hand. "That is why I know you will be safe with him, little one. He will never let you come to harm. Go in peace with him, and know that you both will always have a home with me if you need it."

Like a father giving away a bride, she'd thought at the time. Now the irony of that thought rose up to strangle her.

Yes, fourteen of the notches on Riddick's belt were dedicated at least partly to her. He would kill for her, sure, but he was killing for a little girl who had long since grown up into something else that he was blind to.

The soft rap on her door startled her. "Jack?"

"Yeah?" Thank god, her voice sounded normal.

"I'm turning in. Think you can watch the lanes to make sure they stay clear? I'll be back out in a few hours."

"Sure, no problem." She sighed, opening her door after she was sure he'd stepped away from it. Riddick's door was closing as she emerged.

Moving to the cockpit, she deliberately took the seat he'd only just vacated. She would get a little vicarious pleasure, at least, out of the warmth and scent he'd left behind. She paused for a minute to study the course he'd programmed in.

The ship was curving out away from the planet, in a long, elliptical swing. When they came back in, it would appear that they had approached from the Cygnus systems, a hardscrabble part of the frontier. Nobody would expect them to have cargo. They would be returning from a trip of delivering such things to the pioneers, with empty holds and full coffers, ready to stock up again. An excellent cover.

Riddick had already changed the ship's electronic profile. It was now the *Singing Swan*, an appropriate if somewhat morbid name for a ship doing business in the Cygnus systems.

There was nothing she needed to do except watch for stray space junk crossing their path. The next several hours were going to be dull as hell.

Except... well, here she was, surrounded by his presence, his warmth... and she *had* said she could still dream, hadn't she?

She didn't close her eyes. She was, after all, on the job. But her mind superimposed other images over the starfield that stretched before her...

She was down in the cargo hold once more, spinning around to confront the possible intruder entering her new Captain's ship, armed with a blackjack. She stumbled and almost fell, dropping the weapon to the floor, when she saw Riddick standing before her, silver eyes glowing in the dim light.

"Not bad reflexes, kid," he growled softly once more, lips twitching into a tiny smile.

She flung herself forward, embracing him tightly. *This time* he returned her embrace, lifting her off of the floor.

"My god, Riddick, it's so good to see you again. I've missed you so much," she whispered against his shoulder.

"Not as much as I missed you, Babe," he whispered back. "I thought they'd killed you." He held her tightly against him, their bodies pressed together. Off-balance, she wrapped her legs around his waist. He chuckled and lifted her chin up so that they were face to face once more. His lips quirked again slightly before they descended and covered hers.

His kiss was thorough and electrifying, loosing energy throughout her body in great waves as he devoured her mouth. His hand on the small of her back pressed her into him as if he was trying to join their bodies by sheer pressure and force of will.

When he finally released her she was dizzy and needed his support to stand. He lowered her to her feet and led her back until she was against one of the ship's bulkheads. He gently turned her around to face it.

"Don't take this the wrong way, Darlin'," he smiled against her ear. "I just need to make sure you really still are my friend." His hands began moving across her body, ostensibly checking for weapons. But Jack, who had been frisked on no few occasions in her own small-time outlaw days, knew that *no* cop ever lingered quite the way he did...

His hands stroked their way down her sides to her hips before rising along her belly to her breasts. He pushed gently on each one with the palms of his hands, fingers dancing across the peaks, and laughed softly when she was unable to contain a moan in response.

Dropping back to her waist, his hands slid over to her left leg and began working sensuously down her thigh. At her knee, he let his fingers circle around her leg completely and continue down her calf to her ankle. As his hands rose back upward he pressed them both against the inside of her thigh. For a moment, one palm rested against her mons, cupping it. She was unable to stop her trembling as he repeated the procedure with her right leg.

Rising from his crouch, he pressed his body up against her back and put his arms around her. One hand rested possessively on her stomach, the other on her throat.

"Well, you're definitely not packing, kid, are you? Not even a pocket-knife. Hmm. Gonna have to teach you better habits than that. There's no *telling* who you might run into in a dark cargo bay." His voice was a sensual purr in her ear. "Still... you could be *wired*, couldn't you?"

The purr had dropped to a growl, intensifying the shivers wracking her body. He began to pull her clothes off of her, nonchalantly examining each article and running his hands along every inch of skin he'd exposed. He made her face the wall until he'd stripped her completely. Then he turned her around. His eyes passed admiringly over her, lingering on her breasts and her flawless abdomen.

"You sure grew up pretty, Jack," he commented with a rakish grin.

She tilted her head up and fixed his gleaming eyes with hers. "So what's next, a cavity search?"

A look of delight and almost-animalistic hunger dawned on Riddick's face. "What a delicious suggestion, Jack!"

He grasped her thighs in his large hands and lifted her up, pulling her legs around his waist again. She grabbed onto his shoulders to steady herself. Laughing, he played his fingers through her hair before grasping

it and pulling her mouth against his once more. This time his tongue explored every recess and crevice within her mouth.

Finally he released her lips. “No contraband hidden in there. Let’s see where else you might keep some...”

He carried her over to the mats by the dojo. Dropping to his knees, he lowered her onto the pads, on her back. With his hands, he kept her thighs spread wide. She watched in eager anticipation as his head dropped down and his lips brushed against—

“Jack.”

Her eyes snapped open as a large finger prodded her shoulder. Riddick was standing over her, looking annoyed.

“You have a good nap, sleepy-head?” he asked sarcastically. He nodded toward the front viewscreen she was *supposed* to be watching.

Heat blossomed on her face. She *hoped* he thought she was embarrassed over her lapse. The dream had been so intense, so vivid...

“Sorry,” she muttered sheepishly, sitting up and scooting out of his chair. “I didn’t sleep very well last night.”

She saw the muscles of his face twitch subtly in what, for Riddick, passed for a wince. He’d misinterpreted her remark. “You know I had to take him out, Jack. Turns out what he was doing to you and the others at the clinic was only the tip of a very gruesome iceberg. You don’t even *want* to know what else he was doing.”

No, I don’t, she thought. But I’m glad you think that’s why I couldn’t sleep. It’s a reason you can respect, at least.

The truth, she reflected as she strapped herself into the copilot’s chair, was much more pathetic.

Staring out at the approaching planetary sphere in front of them, as they coasted into hailing range of Troubadour’s space traffic control, she let her eyes take quick glances at the beautiful, unattainable man working beside her.

I couldn’t sleep because I was alone. I couldn’t sleep because you weren’t holding me. She was careful not to release the grieving sigh lodged in her chest. Riddick would hear it if she did. He might even know what it meant. She couldn’t stand it if he discovered her oh-so-pathetic little secret.

I couldn’t sleep because I couldn’t stop thinking about you.

23.

Jarvis: Once is Happenstance, Twice Coincidence...

Lieutenant Jarvis slammed the door violently behind him as he entered his office, hard enough to make its window rattle. He flung the laboriously-prepared reports and analyses into the wastebasket with disgust.

The goddamned idiots on the Board just wouldn't listen. He'd saved their sorry asses thirty-five years ago and had salvaged the Project for them, and now they were going to fuck up the whole thing! They wouldn't even recall the Phase II Operatives, which he considered the very *least* they should be doing.

And none of them were at all sympathetic to him when he asked them to let him order the kill. They still wanted Riddick alive.

"He's a lost cause," Jarvis had argued. "We should just terminate him and move on to the next phase—"

"Richard Riddick tested higher in *every* category than any of the other successes," Baldwin had replied with that irritating calm. "Stronger, faster, smarter—"

"Crueler!" he'd been unable to keep from shouting. "Crazier! Have any of you even *looked* at the pictures of what he did to Miss Kowalczyk? And she was the closest thing to a friend he ever had!"

"It is irrelevant to the Project."

"***No it is not!*** That kind of instability indicates *massive* flaws! He's as bad as the Phase I subjects; in fact, he's much worse!" Jarvis remembered the Phase I subjects well. He'd been the one who orchestrated their termination, after all.

"Our decision is final in this matter, Lieutenant. The contract will continue in its current form: Capture Only." Baldwin's voice had gone steely.

What a fuckup, he thought tiredly now, sagging into his chair. His eyes came to rest, as they frequently had for the last week, on Jack Kowalczyk's picture. Her grave, sad green eyes seemed to bore into his. The icon of his conscience, that's what she'd become.

Why had Riddick killed her? How could he possibly have missed the fact that the girl loved him?

Stop thinking about it, he instructed himself. *Jack Kowalczyk is dead. You can't bring her back, but you can make Riddick pay for what he did to her.*

He glanced over at the wall of his office where twelve pictures were hanging, each one with a ceremonially-folded Tribunal flag in a display box beneath it. *And he'll pay for what he did to you, too*, he vowed.

Those boys had been the very best and brightest. They'd almost been the equals of the Project's Phase II Operatives; they might one day have worked in tandem with them. He'd had such great, shining plans for them...

When the news had come to him of their deaths, and the identity of their killer, he'd broken down and wept for the first time since Melanie had left him. Once again, he'd felt that he was to blame. It was like Ruth eight years ago; often he felt like he was personally responsible for Riddick's kills.

The psychiatrists had jumped all over the Barracks Incident, as they liked to call it. "He doesn't know Kowalczyk survived," they'd told him. "This is a vengeance killing."

He'd made sure the word got out throughout the Systems that the girl was alive and recovering, but it was too late to save his boys. Too late to save his own soul. He wondered if Riddick would have gone after Melanie if their divorce hadn't been long over by the time Jack was shot. Frightening thought.

A month ago he would never have even considered it. He'd thought that Ruth's killing was an anomaly, that Riddick had been responding to her own unique predatory nature, because as far as the Project could tell she was the only woman he'd ever killed. That was, of course, before Jack Kowalczyk's savaged remains turned up on Seti Station. All bets, as far as he was concerned, were off...

"Sir?" The hesitant voice jerked him back out of his reverie. He glanced up at the corporal standing nervously in his doorway.

The last week or so he'd been an absolute terror to his staff, he knew. Most of them dreaded having to approach him. They'd started drawing lots to see who had to go talk to him.

The loser of the latest draw was almost shaking as he stood there, waiting to be acknowledged.

*I must have **really** turned into an ogre*, Jarvis mused. He hoped the smile he gave the kid wasn't too scary. "Yes, Corporal?"

He must have gotten the smile right; the soldier relaxed a little and took a step into the room.

"An odd sequence of events that may be significant seems to have occurred on the planet Troubadour, sir."

Troubadour. Jarvis let his mind recall the planet's profile. Population 73 million, mostly descended from colonists originating from France, Belgium and Quebec. It was situated between the harshest parts of the frontier and the more established colonies, notorious smuggler territory. For all its urbane chic, the planet had one of the roughest, most vicious underbellies of any in the Known Systems.

"Tell me."

"Well, sir..." The corporal cleared his throat nervously. "The first item looks like nothing, really. Just another underworld hit. Drug lord called Benicio Godot, who trafficked in Morphine-6 and Adrenosynth. It was flagged because of the MO."

He held out the hard copy. Jarvis took it and glanced down.

"Knifed in the abdominal aorta. A precise hit, too." Jarvis nodded slightly. Yes, that was something of a trademark of Riddick's, although he wasn't the only one who could do it. He was still one of the best at it, though. As far as the Project could tell, he'd only ever missed his target once, and he'd been suffering from a bullet wound and a concussion at the time.

Godot's thumbs had been removed, however. That was a Syndicate trademark, not a Riddick one.

"And?"

"That happened about a day before the story of Miss Kowalczyk's death was released to the media. Four days later, someone on Troubadour... a doctor at a back-alley regen clinic, it says... inquired as to whether or not Miss Kowalczyk had a sister of approximately the same age, or perhaps a cousin."

"Any reason for his inquiry given?"

"Her. No... and it *could* just be morbid curiosity, but then *this* happened."

"This?" Jarvis waited patiently.

"A body was found about thirty-six hours ago, in a New Paris alleyway. It's been identified as Peter Malcolm. He was an orderly at the same clinic as the doctor who made the inquiry. And the MO of his killer... well, see for yourself."

He held out the picture, suddenly looking a little ill. Jarvis took it from him. The world around him seemed to freeze in place as he stared at the photo of the body. Oh yes, he knew this one very well...

His eyes moved, almost unwillingly, to the twelve faces on his wall. He knew this *modus operandi* *entirely* too well.

"Call General Baldwin. Set up an appointment for me with him. Tell his secretary that it's extremely urgent." His voice had gone soft, awe-struck. "Don't take 'no' for an answer, Corporal. Then call the space docks and tell them to start prepping the *Messina* for departure."

"Is the destination what I think it is, Sir?"

"Absolutely," he whispered. Slowly, deliberately, he arranged the three pieces of evidence in front of him. Three incidents. The magic number.

The axiom itself was centuries old. Jarvis had first learned it from his drill sergeant at the Special Forces training facility. He'd since repeated it to all of his own students, on countless occasions.

"Once is happenstance. Twice is coincidence. Three times is enemy action."

When on the hunt, one always had to search for a pattern. Even the wiliest of prey left spoor. One just had to be clever enough to see it, to spot the symmetries among the disarray of wild chance.

Here was a pattern. Some would call it extremely tenuous, but it was more than enough to start things moving.

A drug dealer dies in what looks, at first glance, to be a mob hit. The only anomaly is in the death wound itself, its precision, its history. *Once is happenstance...*

A doctor at a nearby regen clinic reads about the death of Audrey Jacqueline Kowalczyk and posts an inquiry about the existence and whereabouts of female relatives. Reasons for the inquiry are unknown. *Twice is coincidence...*

An orderly from the very same clinic is found in an alleyway, eviscerated in exactly the same manner that twelve of Jarvis' own students had been four years ago. Only one man in the galaxy is known to use that

particular MO. The chances of a copycat are almost nonexistent because the Tribunal never declassified the details of the original killings. *Three times...*

...Three times is Enemy Action.

These days, for Lieutenant Reginald Jarvis, “The Enemy” had a single face.
Riddick was somewhere on Troubadour.

24.

Riddick: The Path to Hell

Riddick circled Jack slowly, watching her. Her balance was good. Her concentration was excellent. He feinted toward her and watched her dart back. Very nice. She was staying focused.

They circled each other again, stepping carefully around the center of the dojo. Both of them were unarmed, but he'd made Jack wear padding and protection nonetheless. Neither one of them was supposed to hold back.

She took one wrong step and he came at her in a blur of motion. She dropped before he could reach her, rolling out of his path. Her leg flashed out, foot aimed at his knee. He danced out of her way and backed off.

"Very good," he told her. "But you almost overbalanced. Don't let that happen again."

She rose from her crouch warily. Her breathing was still even. She almost never said a word when they were sparring, no matter how caustic his remarks got. All for the best, of course; *he* was instructing *her*, not the reverse.

Another slow circle of the dojo commenced.

Compared with the punks he'd occasionally trained in Slam, Jack was an absolute pleasure to teach. She concentrated on her lessons, not on proving how tough she actually was. She took his criticism without umbrage and accepted his rare words of praise without getting cocky. She worked hard, both in her combat training and her piloting lessons.

It helped that she was also quick-witted and graceful. More than four years after their last lessons together, he'd only had to make minimal corrections to her form and posture in her stances. She was the fastest learner he'd ever worked with.

Time to see if her reflexes had improved any.

In another blur of motion he'd gotten behind her and had his arm locked around her throat. Her hands came up to pluck at his arm.

"That's not going to do you any good, Jack, you already know that," he murmured. "Now come on and do what you're supposed to do."

His grip on her throat was only just tight enough to trigger an automatic reaction, not to actually strangle her. He heard her bite out a whispered curse as she let go of his arm and fisted her hands, driving her elbows back into his abdomen. He'd tightened his muscles in anticipation of the blow, so it didn't hurt much at all. He released her anyway.

"Next time I do that you'd better be ready, kid."

They circled each other once more.

She was ready for his next attack, responding with a flurry of kicks and punches before he got back out of range. Excellent. Her breathing was starting to get a little uneven, though.

It was almost time for this session to end, anyway.

He got behind her again and went for her throat. This time she was prepared. Her elbow in his gut – only one? – was fast and sharp, making him exhale abruptly. She whirled around, still right by him, and her other fist backhanded him across the jaw.

He staggered back from her.

"Yeah!" he laughed, his hand going to the small trickle of blood in the corner of his mouth. "Way to go Jack!"

Her eyes had gone wide. "Oh shit, Riddick, are you okay?"

She hurried forward.

Idiot.

He had her on the ground before she realized he'd moved. It took less than a second to pin her.

"Never *ever* hesitate like that, Jack," he told her. "You should be trying to finish me off, not help me. It's too bad, you were close to winning that round. But now you've lost." He smiled down at her calmly. "Now you're dead."

She sighed beneath him. "Fuck."

He released her and stood, then gave her a hand up. “Still, not too bad. You’re starting to give as good as you get, and you’re gaining control over your reflexes.”

“Not enough,” she muttered, pulling off the protective padding.

“No, not yet. But at the rate you’re improving, pretty soon I’m gonna feel sorry for any punk who tries to mess with you.”

The smile she gave him as she pulled off the helmet was very sweet. “I’m never gonna be a match for you, though.”

You’re a perfect match for me, he thought wistfully.

Five days had passed since he’d killed Pete, and things still weren’t right between them. Riddick wasn’t sure, exactly, what the problem was. A kernel of silence had come between them. The only thing he could figure was that Jack was having a very hard time dealing with the side of him that remained, now and forever, a killer.

He didn’t blame her. It wasn’t easy for him to deal with any more, either. Especially with her around, the embodiment of his conscience and his soul. He wondered what would happen if she ever had to actually witness him taking a life. He was a bit afraid of what he might see in her eyes afterward.

Of course, she wasn’t the only one needing space. Her presence, over the last few days, had been a terrible temptation for him. He found himself constantly wanting to grab her, to give in and take her. His fantasies were full of explorations of her body, visions of how her face would look in the throes of orgasm...

Better not to think about it. He had himself under control, for now. He had outlets for his pent-up urges, ones that would keep Jack safe from the voracious hunger he’d developed for her.

Together they straightened the dojo and put away Jack’s protective equipment. He followed her up the ladder into the living quarters, admiring the view above him as he climbed. He had to admit he loved the clothes she wore now, even if they did leave the beast within him howling constantly.

She seemed to have no idea how provocative they were. How provocative *she* was in them. He certainly couldn’t think of any way to tell her that wouldn’t make her rabbit away from him.

Another good reason for her to wear the padding; if he’d been sparring with her in the outfit she was wearing now alone, he’d probably have ended up fucking her after he pinned her. She was an almost-irresistible temptation.

She’s also your best friend, you asshole, he reminded himself.

“I’m showering first,” she announced as she headed for the bathroom. He nodded. He preferred it that way; then he got to take his own shower with her scent lingering in the room. The joys of vicarious pleasures, he reflected, were dubious but at least they were safe ones.

He checked the local news reports while she was showering. There had been a brief mention of the discovery of Pete’s body a few days ago. He was surprised that there had been nothing further since then. Surely by now the local law enforcement had figured out what Pete had been doing in his spare time. That aspect of the story should have been explosive.

No boom yet, though. Strange.

Jack emerged from the bathroom, wrapped in her robe and toweling her hair. “All yours,” she called, heading for her room.

Don’t I wish.

He showered quickly and dressed. He needed to cut loose soon. His imagination was moving into overdrive again whenever he was around her.

She was reading one of his books when he exited the bathroom. Her smile, when she glanced up, was sardonic. “So what’s with all these ‘Judge Dee’ books you have?”

He shrugged. “Why not? Imperial China is interesting. And they’re damned good detective stories, anyway. You planning on reading them?”

“I might.” She shrugged, glancing at the cover.

“Do it right and start with *The Chinese Gold Murders*. They’re best in chronological order. That was Dee’s first big case.”

“Funny thing for an escaped convict to like to read about, isn’t it?”

“Not really. The Sherlock Holmes is over there.” He gestured to another set of shelves. Books were his one vice in terms of material possessions. “I’m going out for a—”

“Yeah, yeah.” She sighed, and returned the book to its place on the shelf, pulling out the one he’d recommended she begin with. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

Her eyes met his. There was a question in them, but he didn’t understand what it was. After a few seconds, her eyes dropped. She sighed again, sitting back down and opening up the book.

He left the ship feeling oddly like he’d forgotten to do something. Some act or gesture had been left out and was preying on him, but he couldn’t figure out what it was.

He’d puzzle it out later. First, he needed to take care of some fairly pressing concerns.

As always, he removed his goggles upon entering the brothel. Heading for the bar, he smiled at Tonia and took a seat. Tonight things were going to go differently, but his drink would be the same.

One drink. That was his iron-clad rule. His tolerance for alcohol was extremely high, but he’d learned his lesson after his encounter with that psycho hellbitch Ruth. His guard would never go down like that again. So one drink only.

Barbour sat down beside him after a moment. “Mr. Fry, we have a problem. ‘Carolyn’ —”

“Doesn’t want to see me. I know.” He took a sip from his glass. “She told me the other night.”

She’d been fairly irate at the time. He’d taken her hard and fast, without any preamble, bypassing all of the poses and dialogues. Afterward, as he was dressing, she’d watched him with no small amount of anger showing on her face.

“I’m *not* some quickie fuck, Mr. Fry,” she’d told him. “If that’s what you’re after these days, there are a *lot* of girls who can do that for you. I’m not one of them. Don’t come back.”

It was okay with him. He no longer needed what he’d once sought from her. Jack had laid the real Carolyn’s spirit to rest. Now it was his own restless spirit that needed soothing, and no Carolyn surrogate held the key to that.

What he *really* wanted was off-limits, but he might be able to purchase a credible illusion of it. That’s what he was here to find out.

Barbour had relaxed slightly beside him. The man was probably relieved that Riddick wasn’t going to make a scene. “Ah. So how can I help you, Mr. Fry?”

“I need something – *someone* – else,” he said slowly. After a moment he began to describe the criteria. He felt an odd, burning shame within him as he did so.

Barbour listened, a faint smile on his face. He’d probably heard it all on numerous occasions, seen a thousand men come in looking for a stand-in for a woman they dared not touch and were ashamed of wanting.

“Yes,” he said slowly when Riddick was done. “I can help you. The price will be much more reasonable, actually, than ‘Carolyn’s’ price was. But there is a slight catch.”

“Oh?”

“This one cannot be kissed on the mouth. Ever. At any price. It is not negotiable with her.”

Riddick took another long sip of his drink, contemplating.

“I think I can live with that.”

Barbour stood. “In that case, I will begin the arrangements. You understand that you and the lady in question will need to conduct the final negotiations between you, yes?”

He nodded.

“How often do you intend to visit her?”

“Probably every night for a while. I’m gonna want to stay ’til about three in the morning.” He’d need time to shower and change before his breakfasts with Jack, after all.

“What shall she call you?”

“Riddick.”

Barbour nodded, unsurprised. It was, after all, the same thing he’d had “Carolyn” call him. Aliases, even ones in poor taste, were common coin in establishments like this.

“And what shall you be calling her?”

Riddick sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. *Here I go*, he thought, wondering which step, exactly, this one was on his path to Hell. “Jack.”

25.

Jack: Inquiry

The exploits of the young magistrate Judge Dee held her attention for a few hours, but Riddick's absence – and its meaning – kept tugging at her. Finally she slid a bookmark into the novel and set it down. The ship was empty and lonely without him. He'd gone out every night since they checked out of the clinic, staying out until well after she gave up waiting and went to sleep. And every night, as he left, he acted like he needed to make excuses for it.

*It's like he thinks I still haven't caught on, she groused to herself. I caught on the **first** time we lived together, for God's sake.*

She paced the ship for a few minutes, restless energy filling her. Even as it hummed through her, she could feel her underlying sleepiness taking hold. She wasn't sure what it *was* she wanted to do...

No, she knew. She wanted to hit something.

She climbed down the ladder to the cargo bay and headed for the area that Riddick had converted into a dojo and exercise space. A large punching bag was suspended from the ceiling, hanging so that it was positioned off the ground at approximately the distance of a large, Riddick-sized man's trunk. He'd made her practice her punches and kicks on it so that he could observe and correct her form. Now she did it again for her own sake.

Whenever she'd been angry at the shelter, whenever what little control she had over her life had been taken away, she'd made a point of sneaking down into the exercise room and doing much the same thing. It had helped her survive the grinding emotional desolation of that time. She had pretended that Riddick was standing beside her, commenting and making suggestions.

No games of pretend flashed through her mind now. She struck at the bag simply for the feel of it, to pour her frustrations out of herself in blasts of kinetic release. She imagined no one in front of her; it was just a bag. A vessel for the emotions she was dumping off. She worked it over for almost an hour before she was spent. Then she returned to the upper level of the ship and went to bed, knowing nothing had been solved but that she could at least live with the current situation for another night. As always, she was fast asleep when Riddick returned from his night of god-only-knew-what debauchery.

He was relaxed and happy in the morning at breakfast. As usual, despite the late hours he kept, he was awake before she was and had breakfast on the table when she came out of her room.

She'd picked yet another "fuck-me" outfit; no harm in it, she figured. Looked like he was so completely sated that he wouldn't even notice it, though. She sat down at the table, hiding her disappointment.

"So..." she said after a time, getting the tones just right. "What are you planning on doing to me today?"

It was a deliberate bit of provocation, carefully disguised. She'd worked on the nuances when he wasn't around, so that it would come off sounding like a completely innocent, unintentional double-entendre. Hot damn, it had worked. He'd blinked, looking a little surprised before he hid it behind his trademark deadpan.

God only knows what you're thinking, but I gotcha.

Point to Jack. *Finally.* She kept her own face carefully schooled in a look of innocent curiosity. She hated this game, at times, but at least she wouldn't come away humiliated. And *maybe* she'd get him to notice that there was something more than a little girl in here.

He shrugged after a moment. "No plans for today. Thought you might like some time off. You've been working nonstop."

About damned time. She hadn't seen anything but the inside of this ship for days. "Great. You have a new card for me? I might hit the stores again or something."

He shook his head in amusement. "Don't you have enough stuff yet? Where are you going to put anything else?"

Another painstakingly-rehearsed look of innocent invitation. "Oh, I thought I might expand into *your* room."

She got him again! *Something* flickered through his eyes, at least. Two points to Jack! He looked oddly uncomfortable suddenly. She gave it a moment before she laughed, releasing him from having to consider the

possibility that she was serious.

He joined her in her laughter, looking strangely relieved. She decided not to throw any more at him for now. Any more and he might catch onto the fact that she was deliberately baiting him. If he managed to figure it out... a lecture on how she was still a child and just his friend would be beyond toleration.

The rest of the meal was fairly pleasant. As they cleared away their dishes, she got up the nerve to be a little bit forward. "You want to come with me?"

She figured she could work in a few fairly suggestive stores if he joined her. But what, really, were the chances that he would?

He shook his head after a minute. "Think I'd just slow you down. I need to do a few things, anyway."

She raised an eyebrow at him, wondering if he'd actually tell her what those *things* were. He didn't. That meant that they were either of a criminal or sexual nature, the things he still tried to hide from her as if she'd never been on her own in the big, bad galaxy. She knew what was what, but you'd never convince him of it.

She sighed, not bothering to hide her annoyance over his secretive behavior. "Oh well. Can I have my card? What's my name, anyway, these days?"

"Angelica Porter." He pulled a card out of his pocket. "Here. Figured you'd want this today."

She took the card, turning it over in her hands. "Angelica Porter. Huh." She glanced up at him. "You get off on the whole role-playing thing, don't you?"

Huh? Looked like she'd somehow scored another point off him. Did it count if she didn't know what she'd said to cause it? He certainly *looked* like she'd said something disturbing.

After a few seconds he shrugged and gave her one of his sardonic grins. "Yeah, what can I say? Go new places, be new people."

She laughed, shaking her head and heading for the ladder.

"You going out like that?"

She paused and glanced back at him, another look of innocence on her face. *Here we go. Lecture time.*

"Like what?"

Riddick looked extremely uncomfortable again. "In that outfit."

She glanced down at the small, tight top and shrugged. "Sure. Why?"

I can't wait to hear this.

"Just... you might want to rethink it. This is a kinda rough part of New Paris... and clothes like that might be taken as... well..."

"Yes?"

"Clothes like that might be taken as an *invitation*. Guys might think you're encouraging them to do things... you don't want them to."

Now how many points did I get for this one? I think he's genuinely flustered. Wish it was because he felt invited, not just because his kid sister's wearing "fuck-me" clothes...

She made a point of looking her outfit over again. Another shrug. "Okay. I'll change."

Let him think he'd scored a point, here. She headed for her room and emerged wearing a loose top and slightly-less-tight pants.

She gave him an ironic smile and turned around. "Better?"

"Yeah, I think you'll make it back home in one piece in that," he answered with a composed grin.

"See ya later," she called out flippantly and headed down the ladder.

Once she left the ship, though, she couldn't figure out where she wanted to go. She headed for the map station near the spaceport entrance and examined the area.

Riddick wasn't kidding. This was rougher territory than their previous port. She was glad her combat lessons had progressed as far as they had. She'd just better make sure she was back before dark. So where did she feel like going?

There were two shopping complexes within walking distance, along with a movie house and one of the main branches of the New Paris Public Library.

Hot damn, it had been *years* since she'd been to the library. What a silly way to spend her day off... but she already knew where she was headed.

The library was enormous, filled with Old Old World grandeur. Inside its stone edifice it was a realm of towering dark wood posts and panels, carved crenelations, and vivid stained glass windows. Amazing what

people would spend to create a particular mood, she thought with awe. She'd never been in a place like this before. She wandered through it staring at everything like a bumpkin tourist from the frontier.

The place was filled with a vast hush, as well, a whispering silence that caressed her ears. *I could spend my whole life in a place like this*, she thought wistfully, wandering among the looming book cases. She ran her hand along the spines of the genuine, honest-to-god books on the shelves.

Damn, Riddick would love it here, too... she realized, the wistfulness deepening into longing. He'd told her once, back during their first time together, about discovering the small prison library when he was nineteen and how he had begun devouring the books contained within it. He'd read everything he could get his hands on, she recalled. He'd said that his mind escaped the prison long before he liberated his body.

Wandering from floor to floor, Jack tried to picture being able to read everything on the shelves. How many lifetimes would she need? Where did she want to start?

Nestled amongst the bookshelves, in small, out-of-the-way niches, were computer stations. They had been carefully designed to blend with the antique richness around them. The viewscreens were mounted on elegant panels. Small green glass bankers' lamps dotted the tables, illuminating the keypads. Most of the library's visitors were seated at the stations.

Jack spotted a free station and headed for it. As much as she loved being surrounded by the millions of books, she had to admit that she was lost among them. She had no idea whether she was in Fiction or Non-Fiction at the moment, even. She'd let the ambiance continue to soothe her, though, while she used the terminal.

Sitting down, she paused in confusion. What did she intend to look up, anyway?

After a moment she sighed, annoyed with herself. *I have **got** to get a new preoccupation*, she thought, as she entered her search:

RIDDICK, RICHARD B.

She was astounded by the sheer volume of news articles the search generated. She sorted them into chronological order and went back to the very first one, thirty-five years ago.

It was a small article from the Albany, New York news service. **BABY FOUND ABANDONED IN DUMPSTER**, it read. Riddick had been making news from the moment of his birth, practically. The article was full of sensationalism, covering the discovery of the infant and the search for his mother. Oddly, for all the furor the articles about his discovery seemed to have generated, they were never front page news.

A cross-check revealed why. The entire planet Earth was still enthralled by the Scylla Project scandal. Everything on the front pages was devoted to that military debacle and what should be done with the thirty subjects of the most atrocious, unethical experiment ever conducted on human beings.

The arrival of the most dangerous man in the galaxy was completely upstaged by that mess. Ironical, she thought. Riddick was probably more lethal than all thirty of the "Scylla Children" combined.

She didn't expect to find any articles covering the years between his discovery and his first crimes, but she was mistaken. Seven years later, his name appeared in an article about a foster home that had been shut down. He was one of eleven children removed from the home and taken to the hospital. The foster parents were ultimately sentenced to serve prison terms for their abuse of all of the children in their care, including Riddick. The nature of the abuse was never fully specified.

He was featured again in a small local color article four years later, as one of four finalists going to the national levels of some mathematics scholarship program. His teacher, who had sponsored his entry in the program, was quoted as saying that she believed he might genuinely be a genius.

Oddly, nothing further seemed to come of it. When the final rounds occurred in Chicago, no mention of a participant named Richard B. Riddick was made.

Three more years passed before Riddick made headlines again, and he made them in grand, gory style.

ATROCITY AT ALBANY TECH SCHOOL, the headlines screamed. The bodies of nine students in the prestigious academy had been discovered when the school opened one morning. All nine had been brutally murdered. Lurid descriptions of their deaths followed in some of the tabloid papers – every one of them had been stabbed and slashed repeatedly. The victim with the fewest wounds had more than thirty.

Within a day the identity of their murderer had been determined. Riddick, an inner-city kid attending the school on a scholarship, was arrested for the crimes. This time, there was nothing to upstage him and the front

pages were devoted to him for weeks. Behaviorists argued over whether or not the savagery of his crime stemmed from his abandonment, his history of being abused, or whether he was, as one paper called him, “the purest psychopath America has seen since Dahmer and McVeigh.”

None of the news articles cast any doubt on the assertion that Riddick was insane.

Albany’s district attorney fought hard to keep the trial from being moved out of town, but it was ultimately moved because no impartial jury could be selected. Riddick himself proved frustratingly uncooperative for his defense attorneys. In the rare moments of lucidity he displayed, he continued to insist that he should be put to death. He injured one of his own attorneys very severely when the security around him became a little too lax.

Ultimately, however, he was sent to a maximum-security correctional facility in Texas for the criminally insane. His story would die down only to flare up several times over the next seven years whenever he killed a fellow inmate. One guard, fired from his post for an undisclosed reason, was on record as claiming that, for every inmate Riddick was *known* to have murdered, there were four others whose deaths had been hushed up.

When he was twenty-one, the decision was made to transfer him off of Earth. He had been classified as Terminally Dangerous by then, and a break-out by another inmate at the prison had the locals up in arms. They wanted all of the Terminally Dangerous inmates out. Lobbying groups from all over the globe joined forces, and the end result was that every convict bearing that particular label was shipped to a new facility on Nereid, one of Neptune’s moons. A world of absolute darkness for the darkest souls humanity had ever produced.

Nothing more was reported for almost four years, until the news erupted about his spectacular escape from Nereid. Unconfirmed Riddick sightings plagued the news for months before confirmation came that he’d headed out into the “Colonies.” The Known Systems were Riddick’s new playground.

Now she was coming up on the part of the tale she already knew very well. She’d followed his exploits as they were reported in the System newscasts, fascinated by this man whose mere name terrified everyone. She could skip over these stories, she decided. There was a link to the law enforcement dossiers, and that should be much more interesting...

She yawned. She suddenly realized that she was very, very hungry, and more than a little tired. A glance at her chrono brought her to her feet.

Shit! It was three-thirty in the morning! Around her, the library was virtually deserted. That same whispering hush still prevailed. She’d gotten completely lost in it as she spent more than half a day enthralled by Riddick’s tale...

Riddick was going to strangle her if she didn’t beat him home. She hoped he was still getting it on with somebody. God, that was a switch.

She ran all the way back to the spaceport.

The ship was dark and locked tightly when she entered. Thank God, she’d beaten him home. She’d leave the usual dim lights on for him and get in bed fast, and he’d never have to know that she’d been spending her day reading about his past. Not that she thought he’d particularly mind, but she didn’t want him to see into her deeply enough to spot the reasons, the continued infatuation she felt for him. She’d tell him about the library, of course; he *had* to see it. But he’d never have to know —

“Lights.”

She froze as the lights came on in the main room. Riddick was sitting quietly in his chair, absolutely still. She hadn’t seen him; she hadn’t even felt his presence. The cold anger on his face was frightening.

They stared at each other for a long moment. After a day of reading about his exploits, it was difficult for her to see her beloved friend within the glacial mask of fury before her.

“You wanna tell me where the fuck you’ve been?” he growled.

Buried within the law enforcement dossiers, hidden under layers of security, was a level that few human beings could access. It was well protected, well-guarded. A small trap waited for the unwary inquiring mind that ventured in. It had snapped its jaws on Riddick on four occasions, including the one that had left Jack kneeling in a pool of her own blood. Now it waited with the implacable patience of all inanimate things for her to return, and to wander into its maw. It was only a matter of time.

26.

Riddick: Inquisition

Almost nothing was capable of scaring the most feared escaped convict in the galaxy. Almost nothing could make him tremble. But coming home to the ship at three in the morning and finding Jack gone without a trace was one of the rare things that could, and did.

He hadn't realized right away. He'd boarded the ship in a very pleasant mood. His second session with his new friend had gone very well indeed, calming the raging beast within until it was almost purring. All the fantasies he'd had about Jack were being enacted, in a safe place far away from her to keep her out of danger.

Or so he'd thought until he looked in on her and found her bed empty, still neat from when she'd made it that morning. The outfit he'd asked her to change out of was still tossed carelessly across the foot of it. She hadn't come back once since she'd left after breakfast.

He was arming himself with every useful weapon he could conceal on his person, preparing to begin searching for her, when he saw her sprinting toward the ship through the front windows. Relief at the sight of her flooded through him, followed by fury at her for putting him through such anguish.

He was even more furious when he heard her board the ship, sneaking in and trying not to make any noise. He silently retreated to his chair and became completely still. Just what the fuck had she been up to, anyway?

She was getting good at navigating in almost-absolute darkness but she was still no match for him. She didn't sense him in the room as she crept up the ladder. Her face had an odd, furtive expression. Memory surged back for him, recalling the look on Christina's face whenever she'd sneaked out of the foster home to go partying.

He'd been six at the time and she'd been ten years older than him, but several times she'd sneaked back in through his window to avoid detection by their foster parents. The look on her face had been identical whenever she crawled in through the window of his room, the look of someone who had been out sinning and now was almost home-free.

Just what the *fuck* had Jack been doing? His imagination suggested too many soul-searing possibilities.

She glanced around, still not seeing him, and sighed in relief as she decided she'd accomplished her little sneak.

"Lights," he ordered, and watched her jump.

Jack froze in front of him, startled. The expression on her face looked oddly like that of a child who had been caught looking at dirty magazines. Or like his old foster sister Christina after a night of shenanigans, when confronted with evidence of her activities. *No. Oh God, no.*

"You wanna tell me where the fuck you've been?" he growled.

Those huge green eyes of hers were wide. She took a deep breath and gave him a shaky smile. "Riddick. You startled me."

Nice try, kid, but I'm not buyin'.

"Well?" He growled again. It took all his control not to leap out of the chair, grab her, and shake answers out of her.

She took a deep breath, straightening slightly. Tough girl, facing him head-on, full of bravado. "You're home early."

"The fuck I am. It's almost four a. m. Just where the fuck have you been?"

She shrugged with studied nonchalance. "Out. Just like you. Why?"

"Out *where*?" He felt his fists clenching.

Not just like me. Oh god, not just like me, he thought desperately. The idea that she might have been off with a strange man...

Her eyes narrowed. "It's not important." She started toward the door of her room.

"Don't you *move*." At his words, she froze again. For a moment he stared at her back, his imagination running riot. Who had she been with? Who had been touching her?

She turned around, insolent defiance on her face. "What, are you going to ground me now? I'm eighteen, Riddick. I can do whatever the hell I want. Don't try to tell me I have a curfew."

"I want to know what you've been doing," he growled. He rose from the chair, trusting himself only enough to stand. If he moved towards her now, in this state, things could go out of control very quickly...

"It's none of your business, Riddick. You're not my father; he's been dead for eight years!"

"Don't start keeping secrets from me, Jack."

She laughed, but he could hear the hollowness of it. She was every bit as upset, suddenly, as he was. What the fuck did she have to be upset about? She didn't have to worry about what kind of trouble he was getting into with strangers...

...Well, maybe she did. But he'd been taking care of himself since before she was born.

She stared at him with her lips slightly pursed, frowning. For a moment she looked almost hurt by his words. Suddenly she shook her head, rolling her eyes. Her laughter was dry and angry. "You *first*, Riddick! Why don't you tell me what *you* did tonight, huh?"

Never. He glared at her. She matched him stare for stare, looking increasingly furious.

"I mean, if I can't keep secrets from *you*—"

"You never want to know about my nights, Jack." How many times had she asked him *not* to tell her, anyway? Suddenly the rules changed?

"Oh, yeah!" she scoffed. "Sweet, *innocent* little Jack can't *handle* it, right?"

She turned to face him completely, her body tense. Her jaw was clenched, as were her fists. She'd balanced herself on both feet. For a moment he really thought she was about to come at him with her fists swinging.

"Come on, Riddick," she snarled. "You want to hear about my night? Tell me about the slut you were fucking." Was that contempt on her face? It had to be. The only other possible emotion was unthinkable, the product of his own wishful thinking. She couldn't possibly be *jealous*...

"How many times did you fuck her?" she continued. A sneer appeared on her pretty lips, distorting her face into that of a stranger. "Was she good? Did you *come*? Did *she*?"

Cold rage speared through him. He took three fast steps forward and grabbed her upper arms, towering over her. He was breathing hard, his head full of chaos. All he could see in his mind was her body writhing, her face reflecting enraptured ecstasy, *as some other man had her*...

He wanted to tear her to pieces. He wanted to throw her down on the floor and fuck her senseless. More than anything else, he wanted to make her feel the pain he was feeling right now, the pain her scorn filled him with...

"Fine," he whispered furiously down into her face. He couldn't have spoken above a whisper at the moment. His bitter anger was throttling him. "You want to hear? Yes, Jack, I fucked a woman tonight. Three times, and she was very, *very* good. I came every time. I'm pretty sure she didn't, but she *did* do an excellent job of faking it... because that's what I *paid* her to do."

No frills. No lies. Just the brutal, honest truth. The only thing he left out was *who*, exactly, the whore was pretending to be at the time.

"Your turn," he growled. "Where the *fuck* were you?"

Jack looked like she had swallowed poison. Her face was filled with disgust, hurt, rage, betrayal. She stared at him for a long moment as her face contorted. Suddenly her arms came up, breaking his hold on her and shoving him back.

"*I was at the goddamn library!*" she shouted, turning and storming into her room. The door slammed behind her with the crack of a shotgun.

Cold agony speared through Riddick as he stared after her. *Oh god*...

The full significance of the things he'd just said to her, the way he'd just treated her, came crashing down on him. He'd just stabbed her in the heart with his words, with his lack of *trust* in her.

She hadn't done a damned thing wrong except give him a scare. What he'd given her back was unforgivable.

From behind her door he heard a strangled sob.

He entered her room without knocking. She was lying on top of her bed covers, curled on her side. Her lights were off but he could clearly see the pain on her face, the tears.

"Jack."

“Get. Out.” Her voice was so full of pain and rage that it was barely recognizable.

He walked over to the bed and sat down next to her instead. “I... didn’t know the library was open at all hours,” he said awkwardly.

“Fuck you, Riddick.”

He swallowed the dozen or so smart-ass responses that popped into his head. He’d already hurt her badly enough for one night.

“Jack, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“Bite me.” She rolled over so that her back was to him.

He shook his head sadly as he watched the way her body shook. She was trying so hard to contain her anger and pain, not to let it loose. She didn’t want to let it loose in front of him. She didn’t want him to see how badly he’d hurt her. He already knew. Oh god, did he ever know.

“Think I already did that, Jack. ’Bout bit your head off. You’re right. It wasn’t my business. I just... you scared me, kid. I came home and I didn’t know where you were, if you were okay...”

“Yeah, well, welcome to my life, Riddick.” He was reaching her. She was still angry and hurt, but she was actually answering him now.

Point taken, he thought. Hesitantly, he reached out and put his hand on her shoulder. “Jack, I thought I lost you once and I barely survived it. I know I wouldn’t if it happened again.”

He didn’t expect what happened next. He suddenly found her in his arms, sobbing against his chest. It confounded him. *Did I hurt her this badly?* he wondered. He held onto her tightly, at a complete loss as to what to say or do, until she was finally able to speak.

“Do you know,” she finally managed, her voice catching repeatedly on her tears, “that this is the first time you’ve so much as *touched* me since... since the night—”

“Since the night I killed Pete.” Oh, god. *You fucking idiot*, he thought. He hadn’t even realized that he’d cut her off like that. And he knew *exactly* how much she needed those gestures of affection, too.

That was what he’d been forgetting to do. That was the secret behind the expectant look that had periodically popped into her eyes, that he hadn’t understood. She was waiting for a hug, a kiss, a bit of roughhousing. Some gesture of his caring. And he’d been starving her.

“I guess...” He swallowed slightly. He could tell her *half* of the truth, anyway. “I guess I didn’t think I had any right to touch you after I did that. Like I still had his blood on my hands and didn’t want to get it on you or something.”

The other reason, the fact that he was always afraid a simple hug would lead to something more, something inevitable, went unsaid. How do you tell the girl you love “*I’m afraid that if I touch you I might end up raping you?*”

She sat up so she could look him in the eyes. Her own were reddened from her spate of crying. They looked bruised and vulnerable. It was the look he’d promised himself he’d never make her wear.

“I want you to, Riddick. I need it. Don’t ever stop again, please.”

Oh god, if only you meant so much more than you’re saying, Jack. It would solve all our problems... He nodded. “I promise.”

I just wish you meant more than hugging, kid.

There was something more she wanted to say. He could see it in her face, but he couldn’t tell what it was. Whatever it was, she was struggling with it, caught between the urge to speak and not to speak. He waited, not sure how to help her with it, or even if he could.

The moment passed and she swallowed whatever it was she’d almost said. He couldn’t help feeling the pang that lanced through him. *You can tell me **anything**, Jack*, he thought despairingly. Apparently she didn’t agree.

Her sigh was filled with an odd, unidentifiable sadness. She rested her head against his shoulder again and he held her close. Wishing.

Wishing he knew what the look she’d given him meant. Wishing she’d been willing to tell him. Wishing he had a better understanding of the intricacies of the human mind and didn’t *need* to be told.

All of the psychology he’d paid attention to, in the past, had been centered around the predator-prey relationships of his dark world. He knew how to think like the hunter and the hunted, so he would know where his pursuers would set their traps and where his own quarry was likely to go to ground.

He knew how to push people's buttons, manipulate them to make them see what wasn't there and miss what was right in front of them. He could play on their fears, their prejudices, their most shameful impulses.

But the eyes and mind of the girl he loved more than anything or anyone in the universe were unfathomable to him suddenly. Some of it he understood, but some of it was as alien to him as the creatures on the desolate rock they'd fled from almost five years ago.

What would happen, he wondered with something akin to dread, if the connection between them severed? If they stopped understanding each other at all? What would happen if they could no longer talk to each other about anything? He'd spent four years sustained by the knowledge that they would be together again soon. It had been the only thing that had staved off the gnawing ache of loneliness within him.

He hadn't even known there was such a vast, hollow space within him until she'd filled it. He didn't think he'd be able to survive having it empty once more.

What are you hiding from me, Jack? he wondered sadly. *What won't you tell me? Is it something I did?*

Had she seen him in her room at night?

It was a bad, dangerous habit he'd developed, stealing into her room to watch her sleep. He missed sharing a bed with her; her absence left his body aching but he knew how much more dangerous her presence would be. Nonetheless, he hadn't been able to stay away.

Often he would crouch close to her, watching the movements of her eyelids as she dreamed, listening to her soft, deep breathing. He'd *thought* he'd been careful, that she'd never wakened while he was there, but maybe he was wrong. Maybe she'd seen him.

Maybe it had frightened her.

"All you people are so scared of me," he'd told Carolyn in another life. "Most days I'd take that as a compliment." He still did, for the most part. But if he ever saw fear in Jack's eyes when she looked at him, he knew it would kill him on the spot.

What an enormous breach in his armor she was, he reflected.

Still... had she stayed at the library because she was afraid to sleep in her own room? No. She'd come home... and she'd asked him to hold her. What had that look *meant*?

Her breathing slowly changed and he realized she'd fallen asleep in his arms. No, she definitely wasn't afraid of him. She trusted him implicitly; here was the ultimate proof. Why hadn't he been able to trust her equally?

Because, you stupid fuck, the wiser, saner part of himself answered, *you want her all to yourself. You don't want to share her with anybody, and the idea that she might share **herself** with someone other than you is more than you can stand.*

He sighed bitterly.

I don't deserve you, Jack. Not at all. I wish to god I did.

He should leave her room now. He knew it, but he couldn't bring himself to do so. He didn't want this moment to end. He leaned back against the wall at the head of her bed, his arms still tightly wrapped around her. She was so small. Fragile body; fragile soul. He was desperately afraid that he'd harm or destroy both.

Worse yet, he was afraid that they'd go away and leave him behind, alone again.

He sighed, realizing that he would *not* be leaving the room. *Oh well, I've slept in less comfortable positions than this, lots of times.* He stroked her hair for a few more minutes before he went still and closed his eyes. The soft rhythm of her pulse lulled him to sleep.

His last thought before his fractured dreams claimed him followed him down. *How long before the monster inside me scares her away forever? What the hell am I going to do when she's gone?*

27.

Jarvis: Disclosure

“For those of you who received your clearance before this mission, a great deal of this information will not be new and may not be interesting. Please bear with us while we go over it for the newcomers in our ranks.”

Lieutenant Reginald Jarvis stopped and surveyed his audience. Everyone *looked* interested. Tactful bunch, or maybe just ambitious. Entrée into the Charybdis Project was a coveted achievement. It signaled the likelihood of a stellar rise through the military ranks and into the innermost circles of the Tribunal. Provided, of course, that one lived long enough.

“There were twenty-four subjects in Phase II. You have files on all of them. As you know, during the Crisis Year eleven of them committed suicide. We were able to stabilize twelve of the survivors and incorporate them into our ranks as Operatives. The final subject, Richard B. Riddick, is the one we are tracking now.”

He had been pacing as he spoke. Even thinking about Riddick filled him with angry, restless energy. He turned and faced his audience once more.

“You have had ample opportunity to review the dossiers on the Operatives. You know what they are like, what they have done, *what they can do*. Riddick tops every single one of them. He is the one who killed Ruth Baker, the most proficient and deadly of the Phase II Operatives. Remember that.”

For a moment, Ruth appeared in his mind’s eye, her cold beauty and brilliance still vivid to him. She’d been both a frightening and delightful presence. Almost every man involved in the Project had been a little in love with her. Her loss was still felt, almost a decade later. Funny, though, how he hated Riddick more for Jack’s death than Ruth’s. For most people on the staff, the reverse was true.

He shook his head sadly and glanced over at the calm, heavyset woman in the lab coat standing in the wings. She nodded and smiled slightly, walking onto the stage.

“Dr. Aspen will go over the psychological profile with you now,” he informed his listeners. “Please listen to her with utmost care. The man you may find yourself face-to-face with takes great joy in murder and mayhem. What you learn here today could be the only thing that prevents him from taking joy in *yours*.”

Now he had them. Everyone’s attention was locked on Dr. Aspen as she stepped up to the podium.

“As near as we can determine, Riddick’s current biological age is thirty-three years old. He has spent only two years of his existence, since nativity, in cryo-sleep, a particular oddity when one considers that he has been loose in the Known Systems for eleven years now. This seems to indicate to us that his brain functions are probably very much like those of the other Phase II subjects. None of them succumb to cryo-sleep in terms of brain activity. They continue to experience the cycle of consciousness and dream-states that normal human beings only experience outside of the cryo-chamber.

“In all likelihood, Riddick has avoided, and will continue to avoid, going into cryo-stasis whenever possible. Should he manage to slip past us off-planet, this is something to bear in mind when checking the passenger rosters of outbound ships. If he *is* forced to go into cryo-sleep and you catch up with him in that state, please be warned: *he will be aware of you*. Do not assume that he is helpless.”

Dr. Aspen opened one of her files, glancing down at it. “Riddick’s weapon of choice is a knife. He is extremely skilled with knives, both in their use and their construction. He has been known to fashion deadly weapons out of the most improbable items.”

She took out a long, thin blade with a slight curve to it and held it up.

“This, for example, was fashioned out of the metal arch-support in a lady’s high-heeled shoe. The shoe was stolen from a fellow inmate at the Texas facility, a man with a fetish for transvestism. It is one of more than three hundred such weapons Riddick fashioned during his incarceration.”

She glanced around at her audience. “Riddick likes to cut. He prefers it to all other forms of violence and murder. It’s a personal act for him, almost a sexual one. He has been known to drink the blood of his victims.”

A shudder, a tiny one, ran through the assembled group.

“Don’t be fooled into thinking that the knife is his only weapon. ‘Sir Shiv-a-Lot,’ as many of his hunters call him, is equally proficient with virtually every weapon in existence. He just *prefers* to use a knife. Don’t let him get close enough to do so, and don’t assume that you’re safe just because he’s *not* close enough.”

Dr. Aspen set the weapons dossier aside, her point made, and turned to the next folder.

“Riddick is heterosexual. He is very active sexually. Reports indicate that he is very skilled and has an extremely voracious appetite. I want all of you to understand, however – especially the female operatives here – that this is not to be viewed as an exploitable weakness. Agent Ruth Baker attempted to use his sexuality against him eight years ago in her bid to capture him. He had no qualms about killing her. Getting him into bed won’t protect you from him if he realizes who you work for. He doesn’t feel that kind of sentiment.”

He doesn’t feel any sentiment at all, Jarvis added silently.

Sighing, Aspen turned to the next folder in the pile. The one they both hated to look at. Like Jarvis, Aspen blamed herself personally for what had happened.

“For a while it *appeared* that he had developed an emotional attachment to a teenage girl, Audrey Jacqueline Kowalczyk, alias ‘Jack Kowalczyk’ or ‘Jack B. Badd.’ Kowalczyk ran away from home at the age of eleven and spent the next two years – three if you count cryo-sleep time – passing herself off as a boy. She dropped the masquerade once Riddick became her protector. We *believed*, until recently, that he felt a genuine connection with her. Unfortunately, we were mistaken. We attempted to use her to track him down, without her knowledge. This is what he did to her.”

She keyed the coroner’s photos and let them appear, one by one, on the screen behind her, listening to the murmurs of shock and horror that filled the room.

Jarvis closed his eyes, refusing to look at the images. They were burned into his brain already anyway, but they weren’t how he wanted to remember her. He wanted to remember the composed beauty who had raised her eyebrow at him and then dumped the Tribunal’s offer all over the carpet of Parker’s office. The little spitfire who’d told him to shove his dick up his *own* ass for a change, when he’d visited her in the Special Forces hospital. The grave, sad woman who had watched the caged jaguar for three hours with empathy and longing in her eyes...

“The most disturbing new development, from a tactical perspective, is that Riddick may now be killing for money as well as pleasure,” Aspen continued. Jarvis opened his eyes. “This could complicate matters because it means that he may have the protection and/or assistance of the local crime syndicates. It means that our tactic of spreading the word among such organizations about his presence and the reward for his capture is no longer one we can use. Any of them could be his friend. Or at least, as close to a friend as he is capable of having.”

Jarvis nodded to himself. One of their most effective means of smoking Riddick out had been taken away. He wondered how long it had been since it really was effective.

“Finally, I want there to be no mistake about this. Richard B. Riddick is a certified genius. His adjusted IQ is 240. He was discovered, by one of his grammar-school teachers, to be solving math problems using *calculus* when he was eleven. As far as we can tell, he is fluent in at least fifteen languages and *taught himself* how to pilot. He is, in his lucid periods, every bit as organized and meticulous as he is savage during his bouts of psychosis. He will kill in either mental state. His dream patterns are highly abnormal. The closest equivalents the analysts have come up with, in comparison, are the dreams of people suffering from high fevers, or the visions of those using LSD or experiencing epileptic seizures. This is particularly disturbing as none of the other Phase II Operatives have reported anything of the kind. The full meaning of this anomaly, and its relationship to his psychosis, is undetermined.”

She glanced over at Jarvis, her eyes questioning. He nodded.

“Until recently,” she continued, “we believed that his psychotic episodes had disappeared completely. The discovery of Miss Kowalczyk’s body changed that. You may note that none of the other Phase II subjects have been assigned to this mission. There are two very simple reasons for this. First, it was decided after Ruth Baker’s death that none of them would be sent against Riddick any more. He outclasses all of them. Ruth was the best of the lot and he killed her *entirely* too easily. Secondly, and much more importantly, if Riddick has somehow destabilized, and it appears he has, there is the possibility that they may do so as well. All eleven of them have been put under observation.”

Aspen stepped back from the podium. Jarvis sighed and stepped back up.

“The Phase II Operatives will be out of action until we’ve caught Riddick and determined what the hell happened to him. We need these people back in business, kids. Phase III, which was scheduled to begin in four months, has also been suspended pending the outcome of this matter. So we need a good, clean capture. You’ve been given your assignments. When we reach Troubadour, most of you will be infiltrating New Paris, since that’s where his activity seems to be centered. We reach the planet in four days, and you’d better be ready. This is the acid test for all of you. I’m opening the floor to questions now.”

He surveyed the room and selected one of his veterans to begin with. It would let the newcomers better understand the protocols involved.

“Lieutenant Jarvis, the official tally of Riddick’s murders, according to public record, is sixty-three people. How many additional kills has he actually made that are still classified?”

“We believe that Riddick has personally killed one hundred and forty-seven individuals, Corporal. Our information is sketchy in places. We know that he was one of only three survivors of the *Hunter-Gratzner* crash, but we’re not sure how many of the other survivors he may have killed. There is also a two-year period immediately following the Barracks Incident where we completely lost track of him. God only knows how many people he murdered in that time.”

He nodded to another of the soldiers. This one, a woman, was new to the group.

“Isn’t he just doing what he was programmed to do? The Charybdis Project, from what I have read so far, was intended to create an Ultimate Killer. Isn’t that what he is? What *all* of the Phase II Operatives are?”

“Yes, Private,” Jarvis answered after a moment, his smile bleak. “Riddick is the Ultimate Killer. The problem is, he was *supposed* to be under our control. He never has been.”

He nodded to another of his veterans.

“How much risk is the civilian population in if we encounter Riddick in a public place?”

Excellent question.

“As strange as it may sound, very little. Most of the risk will come from *you*. Try not to shoot the civvies by accident, people. Riddick has no history of taking hostages or using human shields, surprisingly enough. Most ordinary civilians who encounter him pass by unscathed. The mouse just isn’t big enough to interest the tiger, most of the time. The bulk of his kills have been among four groups: military, law enforcement, mercenaries, and fellow convicts. *This* predator likes the taste of other predators best. His remaining kills all seem to have occurred during the worst of his psychotic periods when his bloodlust was completely out of control.”

He closed his eyes for a moment. “Unfortunately, that includes his murder of Jack Kowalczyk last month. The full details of the man Riddick tortured to death in a New Paris alleyway last week have not been made public, but the crime was meticulously executed, and the victim, we have learned, falls into the ‘fellow predators’ category. He seems to have regained his lucidity. For how long, we can’t speculate.”

He nodded to another of the newcomers.

“What do we do if we find ourselves in a kill-or-be-killed situation with him, Sir?”

This one hurt. He hated the answer he had to give. “The Tribunal insists on a live capture. They want to find out what’s gone wrong with his *mind*, not just examine his brain in an autopsy. The short answer is, if you find yourself in that situation, *you die*.”

He swept his gaze over everyone. The room was deathly still.

“*Don’t find yourself in that situation.*”

No one else raised their hands. He waited a moment, until the silence began to grow painful.

“Dismissed.”

He hated telling them that. It was the worst part of the restrictions the Board had saddled him with. There wasn’t one of them that he didn’t value more than the waste of humanity that was Richard B. Riddick. He watched them as they left the briefing room, subdued and disturbed by what they’d learned. Most of them would spend the next four days studying every detail they could find about their quarry.

He’d keep them safe, he promised himself. Orders or not, Riddick would die on Troubadour. He would see to it.

Accidents, after all, do happen...

28.

Jack: Morning After

“Don’t go.”

She’d been lying still for half an hour, enjoying his simple presence, when she heard his breathing change. She spoke as she felt his body tense, knowing what was coming.

Riddick froze, then relaxed. “I really should, Jack,” he replied softly.

“Why?” She hoped he wasn’t going to drag out his *not appropriate* remark again. He owed her. Yes, she had screwed up in a huge way last night herself, but he still owed her.

“Well, for one thing,” he sighed, “my neck has a crick in it now.” One of his hands left her back and he reached behind his head, rubbing at the back of his neck. He chuckled after a few seconds. “I’m gettin’ soft, kid. Used to be I could sleep in any position and wake up feelin’ just fine. Too many cushy beds.”

Greatly daring, Jack reached up and slid her hand around to the back of his neck. She couldn’t actually see his reaction in the darkness as her fingers began massaging the vertebrae, but she could feel how still he had gone. His fingers brushed hers for a moment and fled, leaving her hand in charge.

Careful, Jack reminded herself. *You can’t see his face, but he can see yours. Careful, “kid.”*

She let a wry smile cross her face. “You’ll never get soft, Riddick.”

He sighed in response and his neck arched back a little against her fingers. “You’d be surprised. How’d you get so talented?”

“There was a girl with a bad back at the shelter. She was one of the few people who didn’t treat me like a mutant. She was constantly throwing her back out, or at least she *said* she was.” Jack chuckled slightly at the memory. “I think she may have actually been a lesbian and was hitting on me. That was before the rumors started going around that I was *your* sex toy. She lost interest fast after that.”

Riddick tensed beside her again. “My what?”

Jack frowned slightly. “Well, Jeez, Riddick, what do you *think* people thought? First of all, your average human being has a *very* dirty mind.”

“Yeah, but—”

“And secondly, nobody thought ‘Big Evil’ was lugging around some kid because he *liked* her as a *person*, you know. They all figured I was paying you with *something*.”

Riddick sighed in exasperation. “Shit.”

“Why do you think they called me ‘Riddick’s Bitch’ anyway?”

“They called you *what*?” He reached back and pulled her hand off of his neck. At least he hadn’t stopped holding her yet. He sounded angry, but not at her. He kept hold of her hand.

“Well, it’s what they figured I was.”

“Christ, kid, you were only fourteen.” He sounded disgusted.

She wanted to laugh, but she didn’t. It would have been a bitter sound anyway. She’d been eleven when her innocence had been stolen from her, after all. Fourteen, in comparison, felt ancient. It was, she realized, part of the reason that Riddick’s continued insistence on treating her like a child grated so much.

“Oh come *on*, Riddick, you *lived* in foster homes, yourself. How innocent were the kids in them?”

He sighed. “Point taken. Shit, kid, I knew you had it rough in that place, but I didn’t realize—”

“How’d you know?” She figured he’d kept track of her somehow, but she was curious.

“I had a private detective checking in on you. She’d send me pictures of you and information about what you were doing. I got copies of every one of your report cards, you know.” He chuckled. “We need to discuss that ‘B’ you got in Physics sometime.”

She laughed back, swatting his chest. He caught her hand. Now he had both in his.

“She never sent me any picture as pretty as the one they had of you in the paper, though,” he added softly.

“I don’t know when that was taken,” she answered, feeling a pang. “I was so careful to keep people from seeing me like that.”

“Hiding your feelings behind a lack of expression, huh, kid? Guess I rubbed off on you a little *too* much.”

"I needed it. Those fuckers would have used any weakness I showed against me. Against you." She closed her eyes, resting her head against his shoulder. It had taken a supreme act of will to keep her emotions controlled for those four years, every moment. That picture must have been snapped during one of the times her guard dropped.

"Promise me you'll never hide your feelings from me," he asked her softly after a moment.

I wish I could tell you what I feel, Riddick, she thought with another pang.

"I won't if you won't," she finally answered.

He let go of her hands and tilted her face up. She could only barely make out the outline of his own face in the darkness of her windowless room. "Fair enough," he whispered, and kissed her forehead.

She had no idea what time it was. She still felt pretty wiped out, but that might just be because she hadn't eaten in about twenty-four hours. They should probably get up and do something about that, but she didn't want to move. She didn't want to let go of this moment; there had been too few like it recently.

"So how'd you know I lived in a foster home?" Riddick suddenly asked.

She considered lying for a minute, but she'd already gotten enough shit for that last night. Guess it was confession time.

"I was reading about you at the library. Your old press clippings, you know, that kind of stuff." She shrugged, still feeling a need to downplay her interest as much as she could. "You haven't told me any stories lately, you know."

"Hmm." As usual, his thoughtful noise sounded almost like an animal's growl. It had taken her a while, the first time they were together, to realize that there was no aggression in the sound. "And you lost track of time."

"Well, you're very interesting."

"Only in the tabloids, hon. The truth is some pretty bleak shit." He sighed slightly. "Don't remember all of it too good, myself."

There was a long pause. Finally Riddick spoke again.

"So, you got any questions?"

Jack frowned, thinking. "Yeah. How come you didn't get to the math finals?"

"What, back when I was eleven?"

"Yeah."

"Got sick. Really sick. Day before I was supposed to go to Chicago I started puking my guts out. Didn't stop until after the contest was over. Only time I've ever been sick in my life, too." He laughed wryly. "I was really disappointed. Haven't thought about that in years."

"What happened to you when you were seven?"

Riddick stiffened again slightly. "You mean with the foster home that got closed." His voice had suddenly become guarded.

Jack nodded. She could feel how serious Riddick had suddenly gotten.

"That's a pretty ugly story, Jack. Guess it has a lot to do with why it pisses me off that people thought I molested you the first time we were together."

"You were molested?"

"Nah. Nothing bad happened to *me* until the day the cops were called. That was the last time I stuck my neck out for *anybody* until you came along. You and Carolyn." His voice was pensive.

"What happened?" she asked after a long moment.

"I had this foster-sister named Christina. She was kinda wild, nobody could control her too well. Party girl. It wasn't really a foster home as much as a group home. The kids stayed the same, and new sets of parents rotated through every few years. We got this pair of holy rollers about three months before the shit came down."

She heard him swallow and suddenly wished she could see his face.

"They talked God and Jesus at every opportunity. They had this *big* thing about repentance. Fuck, they oughtta know, I guess. Mr. Holy Roller just couldn't keep his hands off of Christina. I don't blame him for thinking she was gorgeous. She was. But he had no business touching her."

Jack shivered, silently agreeing with Riddick.

"She was only a year younger than you, Jack. Just seventeen. Still figuring out what she wanted to do with the rest of her life and who she wanted to be. Then this fucker came along and started trying to mold her into

something *he* wanted. Tried to make her his toy. And when she couldn't be what he wanted... he got mean."

"How mean?" Jack had a bad feeling that she knew the answer.

"Well, *sometimes* he was real nice to her, or at least she thought he was. He'd call her his angel and tell her that if she was 'pure' and good for him he'd take her away with him. Sometimes he told her she was a sinner and a whore and he had to 'cleanse' her. Came down to the same thing, however he said it. He wanted her to fuck him, and only him. Guess he could be really charming about it too, 'cuz he sure had her tied in knots over the whole thing. She talked to me about it sometimes. 'Bout how she didn't understand what he wanted her to be but she was trying to be it, and she didn't know what she was doing wrong."

Riddick let out a heavy sigh.

"I think what was really goin' on was he didn't want her to *like* sex. He wanted this little fallen woman he could *redeem* from her *sinful* ways. She'd be pure of heart but still know how to fuck him six ways from Sunday. He wanted to *transform* her or some shit, so she'd never want any man again 'cept him. Sick stuff. He had no business touching her, and he sure had no business fucking with her mind like that."

His fingers were idly moving through her hair, almost of their own accord, as he spoke. Although his voice was calm, she could feel the emotion beneath his words, buried down deep.

"A person can get fucked up for *years* by those kinda games, Jack. That's the kind of thing that can knock somebody's mind way off-course until they crash-land somewhere filled with monsters that wanna eat 'em up. If they're lucky – if they're strong – maybe they can get themselves back where they're supposed to be. Christina was strong."

He swallowed again and drew her a little closer to him. Jack had the feeling that he'd done so without even knowing.

"She tried to break things off, but how do you get away from your legal guardian? He caught her one night, sneakin' in through my bedroom window. She'd just been out with some friends, maybe having a few beers, but he started yellin' all this shit about how she was goin' to hell and God hated her. He raped her on the floor of my room, right in front of me. That was the first time I ever wanted to kill somebody.

"I got out of bed and grabbed my baseball bat and hit him with it. Didn't hurt him much, of course – I was only seven. He turned around and smacked me across the room. Next thing I knew I was back on him, biting him anywhere I could reach. All three of us were yellin' by now and the window she'd sneaked in through was still wide open. Mrs. Holy Roller came running in. And you can guess who she blamed the whole mess on. She started beating Christina and screaming some of the craziest shit I've *ever* heard, even in Slam, and that's saying something. And *he* started hitting me with my own bat."

Jack closed her eyes, feeling tears leaking through their corners. Riddick paused in his tale to brush them away with his fingers.

"I woke up a week and a half later in the hospital with a fractured skull, a broken arm, and four busted ribs. I guess the neighbors called the cops. I never saw any of them again. Not even Christina. Don't know what happened to her. And that, Darlin', is what happened to me when I was seven."

It took Jack a moment to be able to speak. "I'm so sorry, Riddick."

"No point in that, kid. It's long over. I like to think that Christina made it through just fine. I think she realized that Mr. Holy Roller was the one whose head was full of sick shit, not her. Yeah, she was wild, but she wasn't mean. Nothing wrong with liking to have fun."

He sat up. "Lights to dim."

She watched as he stretched, slowly rolling his head to work the kinks out of his neck.

"And that brings me to the fact that I owe you a *huge* apology. It's none of my business what you do in your free time, Jack. Doesn't matter if it's losing track of time at the library or out partying harder than Christina ever did. It's still your life."

"Yeah, but I should have paid more attention. I'm sorry, too. Sorry I scared you."

He turned around and smiled gently at her, looking touched. "Thank you, Jack," he whispered.

For a long moment they sat still. Jack was mesmerized by the tenderness in his gleaming eyes. Then his lids dropped and his lips quirked in a sly smile, and the moment was gone.

"Still, I was definitely an asshole to you last night."

She gave him an answering grin. "Yeah, well, Johns *said* you belonged in the Asshole Hall of Fame."

Riddick let out a gust of silent laughter, shaking his head. "*Johns*."

It had taken a while for Jack to understand how trivial an opponent Riddick had considered the bounty hunter, despite the fact that Johns was the only one who had successfully captured him since he broke out of the Slam on Nereid. In her own mind, the man loomed almost as menacingly as Riddick did for most people. The first lawman she'd been willing to trust in years, and he'd turned out to be a jackal in a human body.

Johns, the drug addict posing as a cop, who had tried to get Riddick to cut her throat and use her as bait for the *things* that had been hunting them. Johns, who still haunted her nightmares now and then. Johns, the reason she trusted no one but Riddick himself.

"You okay in there?" Riddick's soft voice pulled her back to reality. She shivered slightly.

"Yeah. Just remembering."

"You give him a lot more credit than he's earned, kid. He never was much of anything. Only reason he caught up with me is I'd just gotten the living shit kicked out of me by a Special Forces platoon, all of whom, incidentally, were now dead. Normally I'd have ghosted his ass the second he got anywhere near me."

He tilted his head, frowning. His neck was still bothering him. He rubbed at it again.

"Let me do that." She crawled over to sit behind him.

"Wha—?" He started to turn around, following her movements.

"Face forward and sit still, Riddick." This time she was in the right position. She reached out and put both hands on the back of his neck. Beneath her fingers she felt him tense up for a few seconds. He relaxed as she began manipulating the vertebrae in his neck once more.

After a moment he sighed. "There is *no way* you learned how to do that from a lesbian with a bad back, kid."

She grinned. "Shoot, you caught me. My mom taught me how."

"Your *mom*?"

"Sure. She was a professional masseuse before she met my dad."

"Oh *was* she?" His voice dropped to a suggestive purr for a second. She let go of his neck and swatted him on the arm.

"Hey! Mind outta the gutter, that's my *mom* you're talking about. She worked for a *health club*, not a fuckin' massage parlor."

He caught her hand and moved it back to his neck. "Okay. Sorry. Just don't stop."

"Haven't done this in years," she commented after a moment.

"Well, you're doing wonderfully," he answered. "How come you never told me you could do this?"

"Well, Mister 'I-Can-Dislocate-Any-Joint-In-My-Body,' you never needed any help before."

"Well, now that I know, I'm gonna take advantage of it," he chuckled. But she knew he wouldn't.

That was the problem. He was being so careful about not taking advantage of her. Maybe he was right that she was still just starting out in life, and maybe she *was* vulnerable to manipulation, like Christina, but she was pretty sure she knew her own mind, knew what she wanted. Him.

No more teases or manipulations, though, she decided. She wasn't sure if he really *was* impervious to them, or just restraining himself out of principle, but if it *was* the latter then her behavior was unkind, unfair, and wouldn't help either one of them anyway. She had to admire the irony of it: a felon with a higher sense of honor than most "upstanding citizens."

The whole thing, she realized, only made her want him even more. She'd just have to figure out a way to make him want her, and let him know that it was okay to take what he wanted.

*Why the hell is he **paying** someone to have sex with him, anyway?* she suddenly wondered.

Finally he sighed once more and pulled away from her hands. "You hungry, kid?"

"Starved. I haven't eaten in twenty-four hours."

"You forgot to eat? Damn, Jack, I'm not *that* interesting."

"Sure you are. All the psychology stuff was fascinating." She let him help her up and they headed out into the main room.

"Bunch of psychobabble, in my opinion. They never had a *clue* what was wrong with me." Riddick went straight to the food prep unit and began punching buttons.

"Really? They didn't? How did they manage to cure it?"

He glanced up, a strange frown on his face. "They didn't."

"It just went away?"

He sighed and sat down at the table. “No, Jack, that didn’t happen either. It’s all still inside me. I just learned how to control it.” For a moment, inexpressible sadness crossed his features and then was gone. “Most of the time. Sometimes it still gets out.”

The food prep unit chimed, breaking the silence that had fallen after his words. He gathered their plates and put them on the table. His eyes had not left hers once.

“I’m sorry, Jack. They never cured me. I don’t think there *is* a cure.”

29.

Riddick: Crumbling Façades

Riddick didn't leave Jack's side until well after sunset, when the growl of the beast within finally pulled him away. They'd watched the dusk fall together, Jack commenting in hushed, awestruck tones on the fiery beauty of the colors filling the sky. He wished he could have seen them properly himself, although her words had given him a vivid impression of what she was seeing.

In the end, though, he'd been forced to turn to her with a regretful sigh. "I need to go now, Jack."

He'd been stunned by the understanding that had appeared on her face. Whatever he'd expected to see, it wasn't the gentle, patient maturity that had been in her eyes. "I know," was all she said.

She'd kissed his cheek softly and gone back into the ship without another word, leaving him staring after her in bemusement. Now, as he walked toward his rendezvous with her surrogate, he wondered to himself how much longer the artifice would hold up.

The sex itself was spectacular; with one exception, any act he'd dreamed of doing with Jack could be performed. The woman felt a great deal like Jack when he held her, with the same soft, lean curves and high breasts, the same wavy mane of hair. The face was different, of course. The nose was a little too short and the eyes were the wrong color. He tried not to look her in the face very much. And her voice was wrong, much too high. The artifice crumbled for him whenever she spoke, even when she forced her voice into the deepest part of its range. Finally he'd been forced to ask her not to speak at all.

And that, he realized, made her more unlike Jack than anything else.

Carolyn had been different. He'd known her only briefly, and had been able to fill in the volumes of what he *didn't* know about her with his own imagination and the attributes her surrogate possessed. It had been less Carolyn he'd been fucking than the *idea* of Carolyn. He hadn't known it at the time, of course. It was only now, with a basis for comparison, that he realized the truth.

Jack's surrogate had given him a massage during their first night together and it had been fun, but she'd never be able to do it again for him now. Not since he'd felt the strength and competence of the *real* Jack's hands when she'd unknotted his neck. Another door into fantasy had closed on him. He knew what the reality was and the surrogate Jack couldn't match it.

He had the sneaking suspicion that, as time wore on, that would happen more and more.

He made a quick detour into one of the shopping centers as an idea occurred to him, a way to increase the authenticity of his experiences, at least for a time. He emerged with a small bag and a rueful smile. Some things were sure expensive...

He arrived at the brothel and took his seat at the bar, surprised when Tonia set his room key down along with his drink. Either he was late or they'd *really* anticipated him. Either one was a possibility, but the latter one worried him more than a little. He had to get a handle on this obsession soon; he was becoming a creature of habit and *that* was an exploitable weakness.

He downed his drink quickly and headed upstairs.

As of yet, he and "Jack" hadn't come up with any sort of standing arrangement on how she was to greet him. She was sitting at the dressing table of her room, brushing her hair when he entered. Catching sight of him in her mirror, she turned around with a smile.

"Riddick," she said with a smile. "I was starting to wonder if you were coming." She kept her voice pitched as low and huskily as she could manage, but she still sounded nothing like the real Jack's deep, dulcet tones.

"Got delayed a little." He walked over to her and held out the bag. "Here. Something I want you to wear from now on, when we're together."

She reached in and pulled out the tiny bottle. "Wow," she exclaimed, forgetting herself and speaking in her own naturally high tones. "*Charmante*. That's one of the most expensive perfumes on the market..."

"Tell me about it," Riddick grimaced. He'd bought the smallest bottle available once he knew the price. If she actually got all the way through the bottle before he left he'd be in serious trouble in entirely too many ways. Jack must have spent a fortune in the perfume store, he realized.

The woman smiled and opened the bottle, touching the stopper to her pulse points. “Does *she* wear it?” He frowned. “She?”

“Your friend. The one I’m standing in for.” She stoppered the bottle and set it on her dressing table. She was very matter-of-fact about the whole sordid thing, he thought. He wondered how many untouchable women she’d impersonated since she’d joined her profession.

“Yeah,” he sighed after a moment. “It’s her favorite.”

Mine, too, he thought. He hoped it would heighten the experience for him, make it feel more real.

“Jack” rose and moved to stand in front of him. The smile she gave him now was falsely demure and annoyed him a little. “What do you want to try tonight, Riddick?”

He studied her body carefully while he thought about it. As he’d requested, she was dressed much the way Jack had when he’d first seen her again. Her outfit was almost exactly like the one Jack had been wearing when they’d finally been reunited...

...and that gave him an interesting idea.

“Turn around,” he instructed her. She complied. He bent down and whispered his instructions in her ear. She nodded when he was done.

“Remember,” he repeated. “Don’t say anything.” He would conjure Jack’s voice out of his own memory and imagination.

She nodded again. Time to begin.

“And you remember what to say if I get too rough, right?” One final nod. Yes, she’d remember the safe-word. He turned her around and backed her against the wall, pushing her up against it. He whirled her around to face the wall.

As his hands began to move across her body, he closed his eyes and imagined Jack’s voice.

“Jeez, I’m not armed or anything! What the fuck is your problem?”

This time his hands lingered on her breasts, feeling them through the fabric of her shirt. There was nothing impersonal about *this* little frisking session. He ran his palms across her entire body, familiarizing himself with her curves. Then his hands slid under her top and cupped her breasts again.

“Goddamn it, you sick psycho-fuck bastard,” the remembered Jack shouted at him. *“What the hell do you think you’re doing?”*

He sighed, stepping closer to her, one hand traveling up to her throat while the other toyed with one pert nipple. *“Checking you for wires,”* he’d answered her. Not this time.

His hands slid back down and pushed below the waistband of her leggings, just as they had before. This time, however, their destination was different, sliding between her legs to stroke her most sensitive flesh. She shivered against him as he explored her slick folds, sliding one finger deep inside her. He pressed his mouth against the join of her throat and shoulder, grazing the skin with his teeth.

In his mind, he could hear her outraged protest. *“Jesus, do you think I’d have let somebody wire me? Dammit, watch where you’re putting your hands!”*

Oh yes, he answered, sliding a second finger inside her. *This time I’m watching closely, Sweetheart.*

He pressed closer to her, pulling her against his body. There had been one moment, back in the cargo bay, when he’d almost done this to the real Jack, when he’d almost lost control. She’d saved him then, pulled him back from the brink with her angry words, but nothing could save him now...

His decision made, he began stripping off her clothes. She writhed against him, seeming to struggle but somehow becoming all the more accessible for it. Finally she was naked. He turned her around and lifted her up, spreading her legs and wrapping them around his waist. When her throat was level with his mouth he grasped the soft skin between his lips and teeth. She gasped and began to pant as he licked and nipped at her skin.

He lifted her up higher, his lips and tongue leaving a wet trail on her skin as he turned his attention to her breasts. He was not gentle but she didn’t protest. Instead, she writhed and moaned, thrusting her chest forward to meet his hungry mouth. The scent of her perfume engulfed him.

He carried her over to the bed and tossed her onto it, on her back. He climbed on, keeping her legs spread wide as he lifted her towards his mouth. In the back of his mind, he heard Jack’s final, infuriated suggestion... *“If you even **think** of doing a cavity-search...”*

He parted her labia with his fingers and gazed down at her for a long moment before lowering his mouth to cover her. She gasped as his tongue snaked between the folds of soft, wet flesh between her legs, dipping

into her opening for a moment before continuing its journey. She tasted wonderful. He closed his eyes and gave into his hunger, tonguing and nipping at the flesh until she cried out and ground herself against his mouth.

He traced a long, wet path back up her body with his tongue, climbing onto her as he did. His hands found the sides of her face and he pulled her towards him, covering her mouth with his. She gasped beneath him and her hands came up, pushing at his chest. He kissed her harder, forcing her mouth open and darting his tongue inside. He released her after a moment and sat up, undoing the buckle of his belt.

“You son of a bitch!”

The blow came out of nowhere, striking his jaw and actually making his head rock back. He blinked in astonishment at the enraged face below his. So unexpected... so *perfect*.

Moments in time swirled, crossed and mingled before his eyes, assembling themselves into an incoherent progression. Jack rounding on him, furious at his intrusive behavior, slapping him hard across the face when he finished checking her for wires... Jack in the dojo, pulling her little surprise move and whirling around in his grasp to backhand him and cut his lip...

Jack, just the night before, her face contorted with her own rage as she spat out her denunciation of him, making him want to wrestle her to the ground and take her hard...

I can, he thought. *This time, I can*.

The shout of exultant laughter surprised even him. “Now *that’s* my girl!”

He caught her fist as it swung at him again and pinned her hands down on the bed. Below him, “Jack” snarled something incoherent as she bucked and twisted. Not the safe-word, though. She was just getting into the spirit of things. He wondered how she’d figured out that he’d like this. *He* hadn’t known...

It had never occurred to him to have her try to kick his ass. It had never occurred to him that such a thing would turn him on so much.

He brought her wrists together and pinned them under one hand. With his free hand he fumbled at the fastenings of his pants. His own breathing had quickened. Finally he freed his erection from its restraints.

“You crazy fuckin’ bastard, don’t you even think—”

He had her legs apart already. Sliding his free hand under her, he lifted her hips up and centered himself against her hot, slick flesh before plunging into her with one rough thrust.

“Get the fuck out of me, you psycho!”

He laughed in a combination of exultation and agony. The voice was wrong and the words made no sense to him, but the aggression was *perfect*. He released her hands for a moment and felt her small fists begin pounding against his chest. He sped up his own rhythm to match the pulse of her blows, teetering on the brink of delirium. In this moment, for this instant of time, the woman beneath him had captured *his* Jack’s fire, the ferocity and strength that lay below her skin, that surpassed his own and had long since conquered him.

He gathered her face in his hands again and he covered her mouth with his once more, probing its recesses deeply. Her struggles became even more fierce and he felt the nails of one hand rake his back just before his world exploded into pure sensation.

Oh Jack, he thought as oblivion swallowed him whole, *Oh god, I love you, Jack...*

He was still coming down from his release when she shoved him off of her. He rolled over onto his back and lay still for a long moment, catching his breath. More than either of their previous nights, this one act had brought him so close to complete satiety.

“Get the fuck out,” the woman’s quiet voice snarled.

He opened his eyes and looked over at her. She’d left the bed and was standing by her dressing table, her robe around her. The look on her face was one of pure, poisonous hatred.

He sat up, frowning slightly. “What’s wrong?”

“I *told* you to *stop*, you son of a bitch, and you kept going—”

“You didn’t use the safe-word,” he answered reasonably.

Her face contorted. “Fine! *Hunter-Gratzner!* Now get the *fuck* out of my room!”

Riddick sighed and rose, drawing his pants up and refastening them. Apparently the fun was over for the night. Well, he’d definitely gotten his money’s worth; it had been incredible. Disturbing, but incredible. It must have disturbed her, too, somehow, he guessed. He couldn’t figure out why she was so angry, though. He’d have stopped any time she said the word. That was the point of *having* a safe-word, after all.

He paused at the door and looked back at her, smiling slightly. “Night, Babe. See you tomorrow.”

She grabbed the perfume bottle off of the table and threw it at him. He ducked behind the door and pulled it closed, hearing the bottle smash against the other side.

Shit, he thought. *There goes five hundred New Francs. What the hell got her in a twist?*

He shook his head, chuckling slightly, and headed downstairs. He felt wonderful. He'd figure out later what he'd done wrong, if anything.

Tonia was surprised to see him back so quickly, raising an eyebrow at him. "Done so soon?"

"Apparently so," he replied with a grin. "Think I annoyed her a little or somethin'."

"Did you want the night pro-rated?" She looked doubtful about that. They probably hardly ever offered it, and only if the "John" was tossed out of the room the way he had been.

"Nah, I got what I came for," he grinned. "See you tomorrow."

"Good night, Mr. Fry," she answered, returning to the bar.

He spent the walk home mulling what had happened, the exact moment when things had gone from good to amazing. What *was* it that had made it so incredible?

Passion, he decided after a moment. There had been real anger behind her punch, the first genuine emotion she'd shown him. In it he'd felt a hint of the unbridled honesty Jack almost always shared with him, the raw emotion she only poured out to him and hid away from the rest of the world.

Even stranger, the idea of Jack taking him on, getting into his face and standing up to him... the idea of someone being so completely unafraid of him, no matter how much larger and stronger he actually was...

It wasn't so much that she'd hit him as that she hadn't been *afraid* to. What an amazing turn-on. How purely *Jack*.

He entered the ship and headed straight for the shower. Jack, apparently, had already gone to bed. She'd left the lights set on dims for him, although he could navigate in utter darkness and they both knew it. It was a touching gesture nonetheless.

He showered quickly and pulled on the sweats he habitually wore to bed now, before quietly opening Jack's door and creeping into her room. She was lying on her side, breathing softly. Beautiful, so beautiful. Faced with the truth about his madness, this morning, she'd been utterly fearless, startling him with her calm confidence in him.

"You don't have to be sorry," she'd said, coming over to him and taking his hand. "If it's still in you, then it's part of what I love. What I've always loved, since we first met."

Oh Jack, he thought as he gazed at her, *I wish I trusted myself as much as you trust me. The hunger is growing, Babe, and I'm not sure whether I can keep holding out against it. I don't want to hurt you. You've had enough pain in your life. And I don't want to lose you, either. I'm trapped here, kid. How did you get so far inside me without me noticing until it was too late?*

Suddenly he froze, his heart lurching. Jack's eyes were open, gazing into his.

30.

Jack: Moving Closer

She couldn't help feeling wistful as she watched Riddick saunter away along the tarmac. She knew where he was going and it *did* still bother her a little.

Let's be honest, "kid," it bothers you a lot. Just not as much as it would if he had a genuine girlfriend.

She sighed and sank down into Riddick's seat in the cockpit, leaning back. The day had been wonderful, actually, as the two of them spent hours just talking about anything and everything. Whatever agenda Riddick had originally planned for the day had been put aside in favor of their re-acquaintance.

The two of them had promised each other some important things over the course of the day. They would always answer each other's questions with complete honesty, and they would never *ask* each other questions that they didn't want honest answers to. Jack, who had already resolved that she'd never ask Riddick about his nights out again, had been touched nonetheless.

She wondered if she'd ever get up the nerve to ask him the question that still burned inside her. She was still a little afraid of what his answer might be, though. She wondered when the day would come – and she knew it would – that her need for the truth outweighed her need for hope.

She'd been a little shocked by one of his own revelations, that he was afraid the madness that still lurked within him would one day drive her away. She'd done her best to reassure him that it would never happen. That if it was an integral part of him, it was a part of what she loved.

There had been a moment, right after that, when her stomach had suddenly felt like it had dropped down to the cargo level. *Oh my god*, she'd thought in a panic, *I just said "love..."*

But Riddick had taken her hand and brought it up to his cheek, closing his eyes and leaning against it. "I hope you're right, Jack," was his only response. She'd come very close to blurting out the fact that she was in love with him then.

Now he was gone for the evening, off to have sex with some woman. Some woman he *paid* to spend time with him. She had to stop thinking about it.

For a moment she considered heading out herself, back to the library, but she quashed the idea quickly.

First of all, you twit, she told herself, *Riddick's right. This is a bad part of town and you have no business out in it after dark. Not until Riddick says you've progressed further in your combat lessons. You're really lucky nobody messed with you last night while you were running home.*

Secondly, she could just see herself losing track of time again, until a pissed-off Riddick stormed into the place and dragged her out. And *that* would be embarrassing beyond belief.

Wonder how much I can access from here? she asked herself after a moment. They had an excellent comm system, after all, complete with a terminal that rivaled the one she'd been using in the library.

A quick examination of the terminal yielded unexpected results. Riddick had some of the most advanced hack-and-slice hardware she'd ever seen in one place. She wouldn't have to content herself with just his press kit this time; she could probably get all the way into the Law Enforcement systems and see anything she wanted.

During the ten years he was incarcerated, Riddick claimed that no one had ever successfully diagnosed or treated his mental illness. Jack had to wonder what sort of conclusions the authorities had drawn in that regard.

It was too tempting. Her hands were already moving over the keys, bypassing the Public Domain records for the dossiers that ordinarily only law enforcement officers would have access to. With his equipment, it was a breeze to get past the safeguards. She wondered how Riddick was described in the system. "Armed and Dangerous?" "Approach With Caution?" "Shoot on Sight?"

Oh, of course, she thought as the images came up on the screen. *"Terminally Dangerous."* *How did I forget **that** designation?*

This material was a *lot* more interesting than the news digests. It was segmented into different sections: psychological profiles, physiological profile, criminal history, weapon proficiencies... She entered the

weapons area and was dazzled by the array of data listed. When and where had he learned how to *use* all of this stuff?

She looked under the “Unarmed Combat” category and noted that Riddick had no actual black belts, but had been given the *equivalent* of black belts – highest dan every time – in every listed discipline. Once more, there was no mention of who had taught him these skills or when.

Fourteen years old when he went crazy, she thought. Crazy for the first five years of his imprisonment. Sane for the next five, but still locked in maximum security. On the run for the next eleven years. When did he train to do all of this?

The math made no sense at all.

If she asked him, she was sure he would tell her. That was, of course, assuming it wasn’t one of the things missing from his memory. His recollections of his five years of psychosis were spotty and strange.

No matter how she searched the file, there was no mention of teachers or training in *any* of the various arts of war he’d mastered. Only the fact that he’d mastered them, and was considered equal or superior to any Elite Special Forces soldier.

She moved on to the file that *really* interested her – the psychological profiles.

The earliest ones were written shortly after the Tech School killings. Pure speculation, a lot of them, as various psychologists and psychiatrists contemplated *why* he’d murdered his nine closest friends.

Riddick, they noted, had displayed none of the characteristic warning signs that portended violent behavior to come. He had no history of tormenting playmates or abusing animals. He *was* standoffish with people for several years after the foster home incident, but that was attributed to post-traumatic stress. He’d displayed no violent or homicidal ideation in the months leading up to the killings. Most of his peers had described him as “calm” and “likeable.”

Despite the fact that he repeatedly “advised” people that he should be put to death for his crimes, he made no suicide attempts.

One doctor noted that the killings did seem to occur while he was in the height of puberty and his body was changing more rapidly than ever. He’d grown almost a foot in height in the six months leading up to the murders, and gained almost one hundred pounds in muscle mass. The doctor theorized that his physical instability had led to corresponding emotional instability. Few of his peers accepted the theory, preferring instead to look for an external cause, some incident in his distant or recent past which had driven him over the edge.

They never found one.

Various doctors attempted to analyze him during his term in the Texas Slam. Once again, his behavior was far too enigmatic for them and they were reduced to speculation and grasping theories. One doctor made an odd, resonant comment along the way, shortly before Riddick turned nineteen:

“I feel like a man on safari, confronted with the Jungle’s deadliest predator. I watch him, but he is watching me. And for every thing I manage to learn about him, he learns much more about me. We study each other, and he already knows what makes me tick, while I can only guess with him. Worse, he knows how to make my ticking *stop*.”

A notation six months later indicated that Riddick seemed to have taken up meditation. As his behavior began to stabilize, the reports got odder and odder. One doctor commented in disgust that Riddick was now *manipulating* the people who tried to study him. He was shipped to Nereid soon after, and no further mention of testing was made.

The last reports in the file were all written by a Dr. Martina Aspen. They were “profiles” commissioned three years ago. Pieces of them seemed to be missing, but what was left was interesting.

The most interesting one of all was the profile of Riddick’s sexual tastes. Jack couldn’t help lingering on that one. As she read it, she began to feel a little hot...

“Richard B. Riddick,” Aspen had written, “appears to have an insatiable appetite for sexual intercourse. Interviews with women who have had sex with him all indicate that he has an unusually quick refractory period and very high stamina...”

Yes, Jack was definitely feeling a bit hot.

“Almost all of the women interviewed confirmed that Riddick prefers to be the dominant partner. However, several of them also mentioned that, when they suggested the use of mechanical restraints of any kind in their sex play, he responded with extreme distaste. I believe that this is a residual effect of his incarceration. He associates restraints of any kind with his imprisonment and finds them disgusting. They inspire no sexual arousal within him at all and may even turn him off...”

I could have told you that, Jack thought, remembering how Riddick had responded when the orderlies had brought in her restraints before the regen procedure. Riddick hated few things as much as chains or bonds of any kind.

“Although Riddick appears to have no homophobia, he *did* respond violently and savagely in prison to any attempts by other inmates to forcibly initiate a sexual relationship. It is confirmed that he was completely celibate for the entire period of his incarceration...”

That was interesting. Had he actually been a virgin when he broke out of prison? Because if not, he had a lot of explaining to do about his “you were only fourteen” remark.

Unless, of course, there were horrors in his youth to rival the one in hers. Wouldn’t be all that unlikely.

Jack finished the article and began scanning the others. This Dr. Aspen seemed to have a much better grasp of Riddick’s true nature than any of the other “experts” who had written about him. Had Riddick ever read any of these articles?

But these were digests, not the full articles. She ran a query to see if she could track down the complete texts. She frowned at the result.

ACCESS TO FULL TEXTS REQUIRES CLASS 7 OR
HIGHER “CHARYBDIS PROJECT” CLEARANCE.

What the hell was that?

There was a link. She could try to slice into it, see if Riddick’s equipment was good enough to open it up...

She was about to try the link when she noticed a shadow moving through the night outside of the ship.

Oh shit, that’s Riddick!

A glance at the chrono told her she *hadn’t* lost track of time this time, at least not as badly as before. He was home early. She shut down the terminal as fast as she could and began switching off most of the lights. He might have already seen the soft light of the cockpit, so she left a few on. She ducked into her room and shut the door.

Why am I hiding what I did? she wondered. *He told me I could ask him anything. Why the hell am I sneaking around now?*

After a moment she heard the shower in the bathroom turn on. She switched on her light and changed into her pajamas as silently as she could, still wondering what game she was playing at anyway. She extinguished her light and climbed into bed.

*What is **up** with me?* she wondered. She closed her eyes, trying to will herself to sleep. She didn’t know why she was hiding this from Riddick, but until she figured it out she might as well pretend she’d gone to bed before he got home...

She heard a tiny, almost inaudible click as the door to her room opened. Only the training Riddick had given her over the last few weeks let her hear the soft footfalls as he walked into her room. She could feel his approach.

She heard the whisper of fabric as Riddick knelt down beside her. His breathing was the barest trace of sound. So silent. Why was he here? Had he come in to make sure she wasn’t out playing truant again?

Would this wake me up? she thought. *If I were really asleep, would I wake up now?*

She pondered it as she listened to the slow, almost inaudible sound of his breathing. She breathed deeply herself, inhaling the amazing scent of him, clean from his shower but still so... so Riddick. At least there was no trace of the woman he’d been fucking. That was one smell she’d have loathed. Would she be awakened by the scent of him, so close to her? Would she react to that aspect of his presence, even if no other?

I'd have to, she decided. There's no way he could come into my room without my sensing something. I'd better react normally. Better open my eyes...

She could barely make his features out in the dim light spilling through her open doorway, but she saw him start after a moment. He'd looked lost in thought, but now his shining silver eyes focused on hers.

"Hey," she whispered.

He took a breath, which sounded oddly hitched. "Hi, Jack. I didn't mean to wake you."

He sounded embarrassed, as if he'd been caught doing something naughty. But he'd just gotten home from *that* part of his activities.

For a moment her mind wandered back to the things she'd read about him, about his appetites and tastes. She felt a small tingle spreading through her lower body. *Down, girl*, she thought, hoping he couldn't see her reaction.

"Sokay," she whispered, unable to keep from stretching a little. Did she imagine it or did his eyes move over her body? "I haven't been in bed for long."

That much, at least, was true.

He was silent for a long time.

"Did you just get home?" she asked after a moment. He'd finished up his fun in record time, she realized. He hadn't been home this early in ages.

"Yeah," he breathed. Slowly he rose from his crouch. "I just wanted to see if you were okay, before I went to bed."

Funny; she'd never heard him sound so *awkward* before. Could it possibly mean what she hoped it did?

He turned to go.

"Hey." This came out well above a whisper. He stopped moving and turned his head to look at her. "Don't I get a goodnight kiss?"

It took him a moment to turn back to face her. He stepped over to her side and leaned down. For a moment, she could have sworn his lips were approaching hers. She closed her eyes...

...and felt his lips press against her cheek.

"Goodnight, Jack," he murmured softly. He was closing her door as she opened her eyes.

She stared at the closed door for several minutes before she managed to lie back down.

Did that just happen? she thought to herself. *Could it **possibly** mean what I **hope** it does?*

She didn't fall asleep for several more hours. Her dreams, when she finally did, woke her up repeatedly throughout the night, panting and gasping. Riddick was in every one of them.

The Charybdis Trap had lain quiescent for almost two years now. In that time, no one had tried to access the data it protected except those genuinely cleared to do so. Nothing else had wandered into its maw. Tonight, someone almost had. It knew nothing about Riddick, nothing about Jack Kowalczyk. It was just a device, designed to close its jaws around anything that reached in without permission. It was ready. Sooner or later, it would bite again. Sooner or later, someone would come.

And someone was coming soon.

31.

Riddick: The View at the Edge

Mornings, Riddick discovered, were getting harder and harder to cope with.

Waking up had become a profound agony for him. He would turn over in bed, reaching for Jack as he woke, only to touch the cold, empty expanse of the mattress beside him. His body ached from her absence. What it had felt whenever she had actually *been* beside him, though, was even more dangerous.

I have to stay out of her room, he thought ruefully as he stretched. She'd caught him at it last night, after all. She hadn't been afraid, but the very fact that he couldn't tell her *why* he was in her room told him just how wrong his actions were.

He dragged himself out of bed, dressed, and started breakfast. Jack emerged from her room, yawning and looking extremely tired, as he was carrying plates from the food prep unit to the table. He watched her with growing concern. Her eyes were heavy-lidded and shadowed, as though she'd barely slept at all.

Was she afraid to go back to sleep? he thought with a stab of self-loathing. *Afraid I'd come back?*

But why, if that was the case, had she smiled at him and asked him for a goodnight kiss? Was there some *other* reason she'd slept poorly?

Get real, he ordered himself in disgust. *She did **not** spend the night dreaming about you romancing her, you stupid fuck.*

"You okay, kid?" he asked as he sat down across from her. The smile she gave him was sweet, if tired.

"Oh, yeah," she answered. "I just... had some very vivid dreams, last night." Her smile was embarrassed.

He almost asked her what they were, but he stopped himself. They weren't about him; they couldn't be. *Ask no question you don't want an honest answer to*, he reminded himself. And he did *not* want to know who she dreamed about; who made her blush like that.

He was glad to see that she was at ease with him, though. Her eyes were as calm and trusting as ever when they met his. Neither of them spoke much through the meal, but the strong connection still felt firmly in place between them.

"Got a load of ship maintenance to do today," he told her. Actually, it was only a few hours' worth, but he figured he'd spend as much time explaining to Jack what he was doing as actually doing it. "You get to hand me tools and take notes."

She chuckled at the last bit. "Is there gonna be a test?"

"There's always a test. Eventually," he answered with a grin. "But I wanna be sure you'll do well on it first."

"Isn't that cheating?" The impish gleam was back in her eyes.

"Nah. The 'test' is Real Life, Darlin'. So we're not gonna let you loose on it without a lot of preparation. Even *you* are not allowed to break my ship, kid. Don't worry, though. You're one of the fastest learners I've ever seen." He took a long drink out of his glass. "Still, I intend to keep the odds stacked in your favor whenever possible."

She smiled and tried to return the compliment. "They always are when I'm with you."

Not true, he thought sadly. *I'm eating away at your odds all the time, just like before*. The look in her eyes just before they'd been separated, as she clutched at the wound in her abdomen, still haunted him. He'd cost her her luck back then; he'd almost cost her her life.

Her hand was suddenly resting on his cheek. "What is it?" she asked softly.

"Not always," he sighed heavily. "I seem to remember almost getting your ticket canceled a few years ago."

"No, you didn't." Her voice was gentle and surprisingly firm. "I did. You told me to run away if anyone started shooting, but I ran after you instead. It wasn't your fault."

His hand came up to cover hers where it rested against his face. It was a long time before he let go.

The maintenance went extremely well. Jack listened carefully and watched everything he did, asking intelligent questions. Even with the interruptions they were done before dusk. The ship, which Riddick

privately called “Whatsername,” was in top shape. Once they refueled the deep space drive, they could leave as soon as they snagged a cargo.

And, of course, as soon as he could be sure Jack would be safe from his animal side during the journey. And *there* was the hitch.

Once again, she neither protested nor grumbled when he left the ship and headed for the brothel. He wished that the look in her eyes really *had* been the wistful longing he wanted to imagine it was.

Briefly he considered stopping at the store for another bottle of perfume, but he decided not to. He wanted an explanation of why the last one had been smashed, and assurances that it wouldn’t happen again, before he forked out more of that kind of money.

He felt the tension almost as soon as he entered the brothel. Tonia glanced at him and her eyes swiftly darted around the room in search of Barbour. She did not set a drink or key in front of him when he sat down at the bar.

Barbour was in the midst of a conversation with an elegantly-dressed client, but he broke off and headed toward the bar, a look of grim, nervous determination on his plump face. Riddick’s own eyes began to dart around the room, memorizing the layout, the locations of the exits, everything. *Something* was going down.

Finally the little man was standing in front of him, doing his best to look authoritative. “Mr. Fry, I’m terribly sorry. We have a problem.”

Leaning back against the bar in a deceptively relaxed pose, Riddick raised an eyebrow. “Oh?”

“I’m afraid that we can no longer accept your patronage at this establishment.” Barbour’s eyes flicked away from him. Following his gaze, Riddick spotted the large security guards standing around the room on alert. They were expecting him to make trouble, he realized.

And he might. “Care to let me in on why?” he growled. Around them, other regular members of the clientele began drifting away. Tension within the room was escalating. He could smell the nerves of the people around him as they started to fray.

“Mr. Fry, last night you broke the rules, badly. Neither ‘Carolyn’ nor ‘Jack’ wish to have anything further to do with you, and under the circumstances we are *not* willing to offer you the services of any of our other ladies in their place.”

“Broke *what* rules?” He was missing something here, but he couldn’t think what.

“Mr. Fry, in your negotiations with ‘Jack,’ you were informed that you could never *ever* kiss her on the mouth. You did so last night, twice, and ignored her protests.”

Realization struck him with the force of a sledgehammer. How fucking stupid could he be? He’d completely forgotten it. How the hell had *that* happened, usually he was so careful about things like that...

“We had a safe-word,” he protested after a moment, feeling adrift.

“She was too upset to remember what it was!”

Movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. At the top of the wide, curving stairs, two women were standing, arm in arm. “Carolyn” and “Jack.” They watched him intently, both wearing expressions that told him exactly how unwelcome he was. On “Carolyn’s” face scorn and disgust greeted him. “Jack’s” expression was one of pure hatred.

No, he was no longer welcome here. He never would be again.

He rose slowly to his feet. Around him the security guards tensed, shifting their positions slightly.

I could take them, an idle part of his mind commented. *All of them...*

But what the fuck for? He was the one who had screwed up here, not them. The illusion was already shattered. Why should he fight to keep its shards?

You’re going out of control, he told himself. *If you needed proof of it, this is definitely it. You stupid fuck. Cut your losses and go.*

“I understand,” he told Barbour after a moment. “Please give both ladies my apologies.”

He stepped around the small man and headed back out of the brothel. He walked for several blocks before he realized that he was heading back to the ship.

Just what the fuck happened? he wondered. *Am I losing my grip on reality that badly? How did I forget the “no kissing” rule?*

Perhaps, he reflected, it was the fact that he’d spent the last few weeks having to forcibly restrain himself from kissing the *real* Jack on the lips. Every moment he was near her it felt as if his mouth was being

inexorably drawn to hers. It had seemed, suddenly, like that was one of the things he needed to engage in when he was with her surrogate. Anything he couldn't do to the real Jack...

He'd fucked up royally.

I'm going to have to come clean, he realized. *She has to know what's going on in my head. She needs to be warned. **Especially** if I can't cut loose anymore...*

The ship, when he entered, was completely dark and silent. He was a little surprised, actually; he'd hoped that Jack wouldn't go out at night any more.

Why shouldn't she? he scolded himself. *She's a legal adult. Why the hell does **she** have to stay home while **you're** out tomcatting?*

Still, he couldn't help wishing she was there.

Maybe she just went to sleep early again, he consoled himself.

With that notion in mind, he made as little noise as possible as he moved through the ship. Upstairs, the only illumination in the living quarters came from the small telltales in the cockpit.

Funny how Jack hadn't come to fear the darkness after all that had happened. She'd had her share of nightmares, of course, after they'd left the planet, but when he'd questioned her about them he'd found that they were always about *others* in the group dying, about her helplessness to save them. The dreams that upset her most of all, he'd discovered, the ones that catapulted her screaming out of bed, were the ones in which *he* died.

But she never feared the darkness. In fact, she seemed to love it. "That's where you are," she'd told him the one time he'd asked.

But it was the darkness within him that posed a threat to her now.

As they had for several nights, his feet took him to her door. It was slightly ajar, and as he approached silently he could hear her soft, deep breathing within.

She's home, he thought, more pleased than he had any right to be. Gently, soundlessly, he pushed the door open and stepped into her room.

He froze, rooted to the spot, as he tried to comprehend what he was seeing before him.

Jack was lying on top of her bed, over the covers, on her back. Her eyes were closed and her legs were spread slightly. She had nothing on. As he watched in astonishment, her hands moved slowly, sensuously across her body, gliding over her thighs, abdomen and breasts...

The animal within him came awake in the instant.

She made a tiny sound in the back of her throat as she touched herself. One hand slid down between her legs and he watched, enrapt as she spread herself open with her fingers, stroking them over her most sensitive flesh. His own fingers twitched, and he could swear he *felt* the soft warmth of her flesh, the slick smoothness beneath his fingertips...

Oh god, he thought, aware that coherence was already fleeing him.

Take her, the beast within growled softly. *She's ready for you.*

Oh god, no. He was trapped where he stood, his urges to move forward and to flee at war with each other. Before him, Jack moaned softly, her free hand traveling up to her throat. Slowly, as he watched, she penetrated herself with two fingers. He could see exactly how wet she was, how open...

You can have her, the animal insisted. *She's **begging** for it.*

He wanted to cover her with his body, to run his hands over her the way her one hand was moving now. He wanted to taste her skin, every inch of it, to fondle those lovely breasts. He wanted to be responsible for every little moan and gasp she made. He wanted to drink from between her legs while she writhed. He wanted to plunge into her and come deep inside her body...

You can, the beast told him as he stared down at her. *You can do it all. Right now. Take her.*

He clenched his hands into fists, feeling the sweat prickling on his forehead. His erection was throbbing painfully, in time with her breathing. *No! She doesn't know I'm here...*

The darkness, he realized, was absolute for her, hiding him completely. Yes, this time, he really *was* within the darkness she trusted so much.

And she won't realize until it's too late. You can be inside her before she even knows you're in the room. Do it. Take her.

For a moment he saw himself doing it, falling upon her and grabbing her hand, pulling her fingers out of her and drawing them into his mouth even as he thrust into her—

Yes, the animal exulted. *Do it! Do it now!*

She moaned again. The scent of her body was overwhelming, making his mouth water and his breath quicken.

His mind was full of chaos.

TAKE HER!

When he moved he was swift and soundless. Out the door and down the ladder without a noise. He raced through the cargo bay and down the ramp before he collapsed, dropping to his hands and knees on the tarmac. He was shaking uncontrollably.

It should be raining, he thought disjointedly. The ground was dry beneath him and that felt wrong. He'd been soaked in blood and water the last time he felt such inner annihilation.

He gasped and shook for what felt like ages before his self control began to reassert itself. He turned and looked back at the ship, deceptively calm behind him. He knew how great a deception that quietude was.

This can't continue, he thought, feeling the first stirrings of real fear. *If that happens again, I won't be able to stop myself. I barely managed to tonight.*

He buried his face in his hands, despairing. *Oh god, Jack, I don't know what to do now. Will I ever see you again once you know what the beast in me **wants** from you?*

He didn't dare re-enter the ship until the first blushes of dawn appeared in the sky.

Moments after Riddick had fled into the night, a small sound drifted through the almost-deserted ship. Even with his preternaturally acute hearing, Riddick was too far away to hear it. He might not have believed it even if he had been in range, thinking that it was a trick, a ploy of the beast within. It was a woman's whispered voice, breathy with the throes of orgasm.

"Oh god... Riddick..."

32.

Jack: Over the Boundary

She woke to the sound of breakfast being prepared.

Jack stretched for a moment and then stopped in confusion. Realization dawned on her: she'd fallen asleep naked. On top of her covers, without a stitch on. What the...?

It had been years, she realized, since she had touched herself, since she had felt such an overwhelming need to do so. The last time had been before the shooting. All of her natural urges had been killed in the aftermath. Now they were alive again. And last night they'd demanded her attention. An entire day in close physical proximity with Riddick had left her *full* of explicit fantasies.

She must have fallen asleep right after she was finished, she realized. It had been amazing; she hadn't felt anything remotely like that in more than four years. She wondered if actual sex, with another person (*a person you want*, anyway, she qualified) was even more spectacular. She'd dropped into sleep on her way down from the high.

It's a good thing Riddick didn't check in on me, she thought suddenly. *He'd have been royally pissed.*

With that in mind she got up and dressed quickly. She could hear him putting plates on the table as she finished. After running her brush through her hair a few times she opened the door to her room.

The look Riddick gave her was odd, subdued and guarded. His voice was a bit off, too, when he spoke. "Good morning, Jack."

"Hey," she answered as lightly as she could, taking her seat. Something was wrong. Shit, maybe he *had* checked in on her last night...

He'd told her ages ago why he wanted her to wear pajamas. Back then there had been no ulterior motives for her not to, anyway, and she'd agreed to do so. If he'd caught her flaunting their agreement, he might be really pissed.

They ate in a strained silence.

No, Jack finally decided, taking another bite of the omelet Riddick had made her, *I don't think he's mad. He just seems... uncomfortable.*

He'd asked her the question yesterday; now it was her turn. "You okay?"

He blinked, glancing up at her. "Yeah," he finally replied. "Just... got a lot on my mind." He stared down at his plate as if his breakfast food was deeply fascinating.

Okay, he's not mad. That means he didn't walk in on me. That's something. I mean, he'd be reading me the riot act if he'd seen me like that, right?

Unless...

Unless he liked what he saw... The thought sent a fluttery jolt through her belly and between her legs.

That, she considered as she helped herself to another piece of sausage, would be wonderful beyond belief...

And don't you start believing it, either, "kid," she warned herself. *You really think Riddick's going to peek into your room, see that you have the standard equipment that comes with girls, and somehow suddenly shout "Yes! She's the ONE!" about you? Not fuckin' likely. Dream the hell on.*

She drowned her sorrows with a glass of grapefruit juice.

Well, something sure is bothering him, she reflected after a moment.

The awkward silence didn't dissipate at all during the meal. Afterward, Riddick stayed quiet until she finally turned to him and initiated things.

"What's today's agenda, Boss?" She never called him that and he blinked at the title.

"Time for me to find us a cargo, kid. This place is starting to wear thin. I'm gonna head out and do some provisioning for our trip. It'll be a pretty short hop. I'm thinking we could head to Daedalus Station or one of the mining colonies. Get you familiar with how the trading is done."

Discussing ship's business, he sounded more relaxed.

"That's only a five day hop, Riddick. When do we get to hit *deep deep* space?"

That odd, guarded look appeared on his face again. "Not long," he answered after a moment.

An uncomfortable silence fell for a minute. Jack changed the subject. "What do you want me to do while you're gone?"

He shrugged. "We did practically everything, yesterday. If you want you can look over the manuals, or you can just read something for fun. How far did you get with Judge Dee?"

"He just saw the ghost of the dead magistrate."

"End of chapter three?"

Jack nodded.

"Keep going. It gets better."

She grinned, walking over to the shelf. "Is that an order, Captain?"

His answering grin was almost completely normal. "Damn right. That's an order. Gonna quiz you when I get back."

Laughing, Jack carried the book over to her seat in the cockpit and lay back. That was more like it.

"Jack?" Riddick's voice came from behind her.

She put the book down on her lap and looked up. "Yeah?"

Riddick was standing by the ladder, his face oddly grave. "Don't go out anywhere, okay?"

"Sure," she answered. The *why?* went unspoken but he must have seen it in her eyes.

"Thanks. When I get back I need to talk to you about something."

The temperature inside Jack's body dropped sharply with those words. She hoped he couldn't see the dread filling her suddenly. "Okay," she managed to choke out, hoping it sounded as natural as possible.

He nodded, still looking serious, and began climbing down the ladder. Jack didn't move a muscle until she heard the ramp descend and rise again. Finally she let out a heavy, shaky breath.

It's coming, she thought miserably. *Oh God, it's coming.*

Years ago, in their late night space station bull sessions, her friend Ben had clued her in on this, too: After "Let's Just Be Friends," the worst four-word phrase in the galaxy was "We Have To Talk." It *always* meant the end of *something*.

He must have come into my room last night, she decided morosely, feeling a hollow ache settle in her chest. *He saw me and now he's upset with me.*

She could almost hear the lecture in store for her. He'd start with how she'd promised him she wouldn't do that, how irresponsible she'd been over the last few days, how young she was...

Even if he *had* been turned on by what he saw, she realized, it wouldn't help. He saw her as a child in a woman's body, assuming he even saw the woman's body at all.

What if he *had* figured out how she felt about him?

God, then it'll be even worse, she agonized. *"You're so young, you don't know what you want out of life yet, and anyway I just love you like a sister..."*

She rubbed a cold, shaky hand against the flushed skin of her face.

Please, God, strike me down now. If my world's about to end, let's just get it over with, okay?

If she ached this much already, how much worse was she going to feel once he actually *said* his piece?

I have to do something, she thought suddenly. *I need a distraction. God knows how long he's going to be gone; I can't just sit here and wait for the axe to fall.*

She picked the book back up and tried to turn her mind to the tribulations of ancient Imperial China and the deductive acumen of young Magistrate Dee, but the words on the page wouldn't stay in focus. Her fears kept intruding, more strident each time they barged in. Finally she returned the book to the shelf and shut the cover to the bookcase.

All of Riddick's bookcases were "barrister" style, a sensible precaution in a ship that might depressurize or lose gravity in a crisis. She wondered if he'd done that of his own initiative, or if someone who had learned through bitter experience had suggested it to him. Probably the former; Riddick almost never seemed to need the advice of others to find his way.

She spent the next two hours straightening the ship, putting the few odds and ends that were actually loose back in their places. When she finally ran out of things to do, the interior of the ship was fully flight-ready. Everything was locked down and able to withstand takeoffs, landings, hull-breaches, and gravitational anomalies.

Riddick was still not back.

She'd gone into his room to tidy up there as well, but there had been nothing to do. It was every bit as flight-ready today as it always was. She could almost swear he hadn't slept in his bed at all the night before.

The idea that he might have spent *the whole night* with someone didn't help her emotional state at all. What if *that* was what he wanted to talk about? What if he'd fallen in love?

The scenarios were just getting worse and worse, more and more painful.

Come on, Riddick. Come home and give me the bad news already, she thought, trying to somehow will her mind's words directly into his brain. She couldn't stand this much longer.

She needed to find another distraction.

She considered another round of "try to kill the punching bag," but everything in the exercise area was locked down now. What else was there to do?

Research. She could use the terminal and do some exploring while she waited.

*Oh yeah, that'll **really** distract you from thoughts of Riddick*, she told herself sarcastically. She knew, after all, exactly what subject she'd end up researching. But she was already sitting down in his seat, switching on the terminal and slicing into the Law Enforcement system once more.

For fun, she read the physiological profile on Riddick, noting that his blood type was AB-positive, making him a "Universal Receiver" and totally useless to blood banks. She pored over his body measurements with a little *too* much relish and blushed when she realized how intimate some of the measurements actually were.

No cavities, she thought with bemusement. *No history of illness. Not even strep or chicken pox, for god's sake. Just that one bout with the stomach flu when he was eleven, and maybe that was food poisoning...*

Nobody had medical records that spotless.

There it was again, she suddenly noticed. Under "tissue type" there was a notation that Class Seven or higher clearance for the "Charybdis Project" was needed.

Why would his tissue type information be classified? she wondered. *What is this Charybdis Project, anyway?*

She was tempted to try the link, but what did she care about his tissue type, anyway? Wasn't like anybody actually did transplants anymore; even backwater planets relied on regen technology these days.

She left the physiology file and began exploring the "Criminal History" file, which recorded his exploits across eleven systems and enumerated his sixty-three known victims. She was interested to note that she was the official sixty-third notch on his belt.

That's me, the Dead Girl, she thought with a grin. She wondered, suddenly, why Riddick had never faked his own death.

She spotted another Charybdis Project link, under "Additional suspected killings."

Weird, she thought. *The people he's **suspected** of killing, but not yet proved to have killed, are **classified**?*

This time she was unable to resist. Whatever this Charybdis thing was, it seemed to have a lot of information of interest. Yeah, she *did* want to read the rest of Dr. Aspen's profile—

Yes, she admitted to herself, ***especially** the sex stuff...*

But there was something else going on here, something that seemed wrong. Why would an escaped con, even a "Terminally Dangerous" one, have half the pertinent details about him hidden away from the people who had to try and catch him?

She switched on the remainder of Riddick's hack-and-slice hardware and keyed the link. After a moment the screen cleared and an odd, stylized icon appeared in the center.

A whirlpool, she realized after a moment.

Below it, a menu had appeared, with places for input.

WELCOME TO CHARYBDIS.
PLEASE ENTER YOUR FULL NAME AND PASSWORD.

Crap, she needed a name. The hardware might be able to come up with the password pretty quickly, but she'd still need a name...

She grinned and keyed one in. ASPEN, MARTINA C.

Surely Dr. Aspen would have Level 7 Clearance. She'd have to be able to read and update her own profiles, wouldn't she?

She activated the Password Slicer and sat back, interested to see how long it would take to get in, or if she would be kicked out after a moment.

The image on the screen suddenly came to life. The whirlpool began to rotate and expand, until its center had moved out to the edges of the screen. Now a new message came up in the blackness.

CLEARANCE GRANTED.
WELCOME, DR. ASPEN.

She glanced over at the Slicer. It had gotten the password on the fifteenth try. Unbelievable. Some people had no sense...

She examined the menu that had appeared. What a *letdown*, everything looked very mundane. She keyed in a request for a site map.

The map took forever to load. The whole terminal seemed to be cycling much more slowly than before. She felt like she was plodding through electronic mud.

"Come on, you piece of shit, load already..."

The map appeared at last, simpler than she'd have expected given the amount of time it had taken. Dr. Aspen had personalized it, she noticed. And there was the section on Riddick...

She hit the link to Riddick's files. Now she was getting somewhere!

Once again, the loading took forever. She could hear the terminal working busily, but what appeared slowly on the screen didn't justify the amount of effort it was expending. It was just another freakin' menu, for god's sake.

"Any time this century would be nice, computer. I could go into cryo-sleep while you're working if you'd like..."

"Jack."

She jumped and turned at the sound of Riddick's voice. She'd been so busy concentrating on the terminal that she hadn't heard him re-enter the ship, hadn't so much as felt his approach. Now he stared, not at her but past her, at the terminal.

"Hey! I didn't hear you come—"

"What the fuck are you doing, Jack?" His voice was hushed and intense.

"Nothing, just a little light reading." She nonchalantly moved her hand over to the terminal, to switch off the monitor. He moved forward in a flash, faster than anything human could be, catching her wrist in a tight grip.

"*Are you in the Charybdis System?*" The expression on his face was suddenly almost frightening. His hold on her wrist was painfully tight. If he squeezed any harder, he might snap her bones.

"Riddick, please, you're hurting my arm—"

"**FUCK**, Jack!" he shouted, releasing her. He turned to the terminal and broke the connection. She stared at his face in awe, not able to believe the emotion that had appeared.

Terror. Riddick looked scared to death.

"**WHAT THE FUCK DID YOU DO!?!?**" he roared.

Artificial Intelligence was still in its infancy. Computers still did not feel emotions, did not feel such things as loneliness or anticipation, hatred or joy. Wakened after its sleep of two years, the Charybdis Trap did not exult in its rebirth or rejoice in the arrival of a stranger in its maw. It simply did what it was programmed to do.

The jaws of the Charybdis Trap snapped shut.

33.

Jarvis: Charybdis

The *Messina* slid quietly into orbit above the planet Troubadour.

Lieutenant Jarvis gazed down at the world through the bridge viewscreen, watching as its rotation seemed to slow, until it finally stilled completely.

"We are locked in geostationary orbit above New Paris, Sir," the pilot informed him.

"Very good. Inform the troops that they have thirteen hours to make their final preparations for planetary infiltration. We descend an hour before dawn, local time."

Thirteen hours, he thought with something almost like glee. *Thirteen hours until the hunt begins in earnest.*

There was no point in ordering his troops to sleep. None of them would be able to. He'd have Dr. Markowski distribute stim pills to them shortly before they debarked. Those would keep them alert and steady until they calmed into the rhythm of the hunt enough to sleep again.

They'd be much more relaxed if they thought they were allowed to kill their quarry. The fact that they couldn't – but that he would very likely try to kill them and was so much better at killing anyway – was what had their nerves taut and screaming. Every one of his soldiers had logged unprecedented amounts of time in the combat training simulators and the ship's dojo. Riddick's shadow loomed over everyone.

"Sir." A voice at his side broke into his reverie. He turned to look at the petite Corporal who had appeared at his elbow as if by magic.

"Yes, Corporal?"

"Sir, someone is attempting to break into the Charybdis mainframe."

"Someone?"

"A hacker, Sir."

The world seemed to still for him. Two years since the last time Riddick had tried... "Show me."

They moved quickly to the bridge terminal and the Corporal called up the relevant data with brisk efficiency. "It started two minutes ago. Whoever it is, they attempted to log on as Dr. Aspen."

Dr. Aspen? That was a new one. Riddick had always tried to go in using *Jarvis's* clearance.

"Has the system begun running the false network?" he asked, leaning in to look.

"Yes. The trap is active. It's attempting to break into the profile of the originating terminal... Sir, it's just identified the location of the terminal. Our hacker is on Troubadour."

"It's him. It's Riddick." Savage joy filled Jarvis's body as he watched the screen. Riddick had just requested a site map. "Why is it cycling so slowly, Corporal?"

"Sir, most of the computing time is being used in our attempt to gain control of the originating terminal. It's fighting us. He's got some impressive safeguards in place. Every time we query the terminal it claims it's a different merchant vessel."

"That's bizarre. He must have dreamed up that program himself." He chuckled to himself. Riddick always was brilliant with computers. *Just not brilliant enough to escape us...*

"The location has been narrowed, Sir. He's in New Paris. Local troops have been placed on standby."

"Have them stand down. We're here; we'll take care of it ourselves. Let him think he's gotten in without our knowledge, this time."

"Yes, Sir." The Corporal nodded to the comms officer, who began speaking in hushed tones into his microphone.

"How close are we to pinpointing his location in New Paris?" Once more, Jarvis could feel his blood humming.

"Almost there. He appears to be in the Orleans district, possibly near the spaceport– Sir, his signal just disconnected. He was trying to access his files, but he abruptly broke contact."

"Try to lock back onto his terminal."

"It's either offline or he's changed its electronic profile."

"*Fuck!* How close were we?"

"We know his general area. He's within a two-mile radius of the Orleans spaceport in the southern end of New Paris."

"Damn it, why did he *stop*?" They'd had an excellent set of false records for him to peruse, this time. They could have been right on top of him before he finished reading them...

"Unknown, Sir. Perhaps his terminal informed him that we were attempting to profile it. Maybe he became suspicious about the slowness of the link. I honestly don't know."

"Inform New Paris space traffic control that no ship is to leave the planet without our express clearance." Jarvis slammed his fist down on the top of the console. So fucking close and that crazy motherfucker was slipping away again—

"Sir, New Paris Control just contacted *us*," the comms officer shouted. "A ship just blasted off from the Orleans spaceport without clearance!"

Now the adrenaline surge through Jarvis's body was unbridled. "What ship?"

"They say it's a merchant vessel called the *Singing Swan*. It has a two-man crew—"

"The *Singing Swan* is one of the profiles Riddick's terminal gave when our mainframe queried it, sir," the Corporal broke in.

He owns a ship! Everything fell into place, making perfect sense suddenly. His unpredictable movements and abrupt disappearances over the last few years... *Where did the bastard get the funds for a goddamned ship?*

"Scramble our fighters immediately. I want them ready to intercept the *Swan* when it reaches us. What's its ETA?"

"Three minutes."

"Get them moving!" Jarvis ran forward to the viewscreen, staring down at the planet. Willing Riddick's vessel to appear, to come into view. *Where are you, you psychotic son of a bitch?*

"Inform the Tribunal Command Board that we are preparing to engage Richard B. Riddick, Ensign," he snapped, glancing at the comms officer.

He'll shoot them all down, he suddenly realized. Every one of the pilots had been instructed to shoot only to disable Riddick's vessel. That fucking live capture clause... Riddick would be the only one out there shooting to kill.

I'm going to get cashiered if I survive this, he thought suddenly. He turned and began to stalk off of the bridge. "Have my fighter readied!"

"Yes, Sir!" the Corporal called after him as he stepped into the lift.

The elevator plummeted almost as fast as his stomach had.

What the fuck do you think you're doing? he asked himself as he dropped toward the flight deck. *You think you really have a chance in Hell of taking on a Phase II Charybdis heads-up? Let alone **The Phase II Charybdis**? He'll fry you in a heartbeat.*

He rested his head against the wall of the lift, listening to his own hammering pulse.

I have to go, he answered himself. *I'm the only one who'll be out there shooting to kill **except him**.*

The elevator door opened and he hurried onto the flight deck.

If he doesn't kill you, General Baldwin will.

He wished that fucking little voice would just *shut up*! Riddick had to die. This whole mess had to end, and fast. If the Project was going to move on – and frankly, he didn't care if it was scrubbed at this point, it had cost far too many lives for his tastes – Riddick had to be destroyed.

Riddick had to die for all of the lives he'd taken, and the ones he'd annihilated through his actions. For Ruth. For Jarvis's cadets. *For Jack.*

Above all, he had to die for what he'd done to Jack.

Pulling on his helmet, he climbed into his fighter and began running the switches. "Lieutenant Jarvis. Control, status of Riddick?"

"First squad has engaged the *Swan*, Sir," Control replied. It was the petite Corporal. She appeared to have taken control of the Bridge in his absence. She was going to *go* places, he reflected.

"And?"

"He's disabled two fighters and... Sir, he just destroyed a third."

"Have the second squad join the skirmish immediately. Has Riddick taken any damage?"

"No, Sir."

FUCK!

“Control, I’m ready to launch. Am I green?”

“Yes, Sir, you are cleared to launch.”

He hit the throttle and burst into the night. The battle was above him and to his left, a silent, furious ballet. Riddick’s ship, although small, was ten times as large as any of the fighter craft engaging it, making the grace and precision with which it outmaneuvered the smaller vessels stunning to behold.

The Charybdis himself was loose among his kids. How many of them would die before he was contained or destroyed? He moved to intercept the battle, listening to the comm chatter of the other pilots. No words from Riddick. Not a sound.

“Richard B. Riddick,” the comm ensign was repeating over one of the non-combat frequencies. “You are under arrest. Power down your vessel and prepare to be brought on board the *Messina*. You will not be harmed if you surrender. Richard B. Riddick...”

He turned off that channel. Riddick probably already had that one switched off, himself.

Brilliant light flared as he approached the swirling knot of ships. Another of his fighters had exploded. Suddenly the fighters on the port side of the skirmish abruptly scattered like a flock of startled pigeons. Riddick’s ship burst through the opening created, leaving the fleet behind for a moment. Jarvis banked his own fighter in pursuit.

He targeted one of Riddick’s engines as he approached and snapped off a shot. He almost made the shot; Riddick’s craft banked sharply at the last possible second and the plasma bolt glanced off of the hull. A dead-on hit would have blown the engine to pieces.

The other fighters were catching up with him now. He fell into the formation as they streaked in pursuit of the *Singing Swan*. For a moment he let himself watch in awe as Riddick manipulated his vessel, twisting it through an impossible maneuver to avoid the shots of his opponents while simultaneously snapping off dead-accurate blasts of his own. The fighter directly off Jarvis’s port wing suddenly fragmented into fiery nothingness.

*Reflexes ten times faster than an ordinary human, Jarvis thought to himself. An IQ of 240 on the Adjusted Scale. Pure predatory instincts and a deep love of the kill. And even when he’s at his sanest, he loves the taste of blood. What in God’s name were they **thinking**?*

It wasn’t actually his doing, he consoled himself. They’d already started Phase II when he was placed in charge of Damage Control. If he’d gotten there sooner, he might have been able to have Riddick terminated long ago, before the mess ever began... But he wasn’t brought in until it was too late. For all of them.

Another of the fighters exploded. Riddick’s craft was heading straight toward the tattered remnants of the armada, guns blazing.

It ends now, he thought. He aimed his fighter directly at Riddick’s cockpit and hit the throttle.

As the fighters around him scattered, he and Riddick bore down on each other in a deadly game of chicken that was no game at all.

Takin’ you with me, boy, he thought as he sped toward the collision. *This time you’re going to die. For Jack. For what you did to Jack.*

He braced for impact, knowing that he’d never survive.

34.

Jack: Looking Into the Abyss

Riddick grabbed her by the arms and lifted her bodily out of the pilot's seat, standing her up roughly to the side. She staggered and almost fell against the controls. He was already sitting down as she gained her footing, and was switching on the ship's flight system.

"What is it? What's happened?" The fear on his face had disappeared now, replaced by grim determination as he powered up the drive. He didn't answer her right away.

"Lock that shit down," he finally growled, gesturing at the bags he had carried in. "We're getting the fuck out of here."

Whatever it was, it was serious. She grabbed the bags and carried them over to one of the lockers, stuffing them inside it. With a pang, she saw that he'd brought home a whole, fresh pineapple. For her. She finished locking everything down and ran over to the copilot's seat.

"Don't we need to call the tower?" she asked, strapping herself in. His bark of laughter was entirely empty of humor.

"Yeah, let them know exactly who we are. This is our only shot, kid; I hope we still have time to *use* it."

"Our only shot at *what*?"

"Getting the fuck out of here before Jarvis's boys show up, Jack! You alerted them to where we are!"

The comm system crackled to life. "*Singing Swan*, please power your engines down, you are currently not cleared for takeoff."

"Fuck me," Riddick growled, strapping himself in. He hit the throttle.

Jack was slammed back against her seat as Riddick accelerated well beyond normal safety limits.

"Tower to *Singing Swan*!" the voice on the comm shouted. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

Riddick didn't bother to answer. Jack had never seen someone look calm and furious at the same time before.

The g-forces were increasing painfully as they hit escape velocity faster than was legal. Jack could only guess how many laws they'd broken with this takeoff. The sky through the front windows began to darken as they approached the edge of the atmosphere. They shot through and the vast expanse of stars greeted them, along with—

"*What the fuck is that?*" Jack gasped, staring at the enormous craft above them. Riddick banked the *Swan* away from it.

"That," he growled, "is the *Messina*." He began running his hands over switches, reconfiguring the outer hull for combat. The controls for the *Swan*'s armaments began popping up on panels all around him.

Jack gasped again as the artificial gravity system shut off.

"What are you doing?"

"Can't have false grav dragging against me while I'm maneuvering. Now listen to me very carefully, Jack." Riddick fixed her with an intense glare. "Don't you say *anything* to me unless I ask you a question. If I ask you something, you answer me *immediately* but otherwise you need to *shut the fuck up*. I don't care what you see on the screen or on the instrument panels. If I need to know, I'll ask you. But I'm gonna have to concentrate on keeping us alive, and if you break my concentration we're both fuckin' dead. You got me?"

Profound hurt speared through her. She nodded, unable to speak past the sudden knot in her throat.

"*You got me?*"

"Y-yes," she managed after a second. Tears started in her eyes.

"Good." He turned back to the panels. "Oh yeah, here they come."

Tiny spacecraft were shooting out of the *Messina*, arrowing toward them. More than two dozen... Jack gasped but managed to keep from saying anything.

"Let the games begin," Riddick murmured softly. His face was calm now. He almost looked happy. She gasped again as he aimed the *Swan* straight for the nearer squadron. His hands were moving across the controls as he activated the ship's weapons.

A beam of light shot toward them from one of the fighters. Riddick dodged it and fired back, his hands moving in a blur across the controls. No human being should be able to move that fast, Jack thought in stunned amazement. His shot hit the fighter, sending it into an uncontrolled spin. It careened into one of its mates; that craft began to drift away from the formation, its hull throwing sparks.

“Richard B. Riddick,” the comm unit suddenly blared. “You are under arrest—”

“Turn that the fuck off!” Riddick snapped. Jack hit the control with a shaking, clammy hand.

They banked again, hard, and Riddick began firing again. He charged at the fighters, forcing them to scatter, and wheeled around, still shooting. One of his shots struck a fighter head-on and Jack’s eyes were momentarily dazzled by the explosion.

The second squadron had caught up now and was attempting to encircle them. Brilliant streams of light lanced out, forcing Riddick to twist the ship in intricate patterns to avoid them. Jack began to feel a little nauseated.

“What the fuck is wrong with you people?” he suddenly muttered. “You’re not even trying. What are you trying to do, take me *alive*?”

He blew up another fighter.

“Idiots.”

He charged the largest knot of fighters and forced them to scatter again. Shooting out past all of them, he began to accelerate.

“Been fun and all, guys, but if you’re not going to try—”

He gasped and banked sharply. A millisecond later the ship shuddered under the impact of *something*.

“Jack, are we holed?”

“What?”

“Has our fucking hull been compromised?”

“No,” she managed after a moment. Interior air pressure was steady.

Riddick banked the craft around. A new fighter, of a slightly different configuration, had entered the fray.

“Now that’s more like it. Somebody out there is playing the game for keeps. That you, Reg?” The other craft had caught up with their new leader and were reforming around it. Jack glanced from the viewscreen to Riddick’s face, surprising a look of fierce joy.

What the hell was going on here?

“Okay, Reggie, let’s see what you got,” he growled, and accelerated toward the fighters. Deliberately, he snapped off shots that destroyed the fighters on either side of the leader’s craft. He took the *Swan* into an intricate spin to avoid the return fire. Jack clapped her hand over her mouth, retching.

“You puke on the controls and I’ll snap your skinny neck,” Riddick growled. Jack’s nausea abruptly receded, replaced by a much worse sensation: heartache.

The rest of the fighters began to scatter as he bore down on them, but the lead fighter began to accelerate itself, arrowing straight for them.

“Well *well*, Reggie, I think this has gotten *personal* for you,” Riddick breathed. “Still mad about your boys?”

The two ships raced toward each other. Riddick began to laugh.

“You know, Reg, I think you’d actually *do* it, too. Sorry, buddy, but I’m not into kamikaze shit...” His concentration absolute, Riddick carefully squeezed off a shot. The looming fighter’s wing abruptly disintegrated in a ball of fire that knocked the craft out of its trajectory. The *Swan* shot past it with inches to spare.

“That’ll keep you out of trouble, Reggie. Now watch while I finish the job, just for you.” He wheeled the ship around and began a run at the other fighters.

Jack watched in astonishment as the entire nature of the battle abruptly changed. Now Riddick was the pursuer and the other fighter craft were the pursued. He chased them down, every last one, until the only ships in the arena that hadn’t been reduced to debris were theirs... and “Reggie’s.”

Riddick swung around, ignoring the crippled fighter, and throttled past and away, leaving “Reggie” and the *Messina* behind. He began running star-jump calculations.

Jack closed her eyes as he hit the drive. Star-jumps always made her queasy, and she was already nauseated from the wild ride Riddick had taken them through. She felt the jump begin...

...and end abruptly, far too soon. She opened her eyes back up in confusion. Riddick was banking the craft back around, toward a vast field of ice chunks and frozen debris. He'd taken them out past the system's Oort cloud, and no farther.

Impossible, she thought in confusion. *Nobody can make a three-second star-jump with any accuracy.*

Nobody, she reminded herself, should have been able to do *any* of the things she'd seen Riddick doing over the course of the battle. However he had managed it, he had wiped out two full squadrons of Special Forces fighters while she watched.

Artificial gravity abruptly kicked back in. Riddick moved the ship into the gap between two large ice-chunks, an area that would be shielded from meandering debris. She watched him in awe as he began shutting down the weapons systems. His face still wore that expression of glacial calm.

"Wow..." she managed after a moment. "How did you do—"

"Jack." The growl from his throat was barely human. "Go to your room."

"What?"

"Now, Jack." The calm was gone from his face, and what she saw in its place was truly frightening. She unstrapped herself and backed away.

He didn't move. She headed for her room. Looking back, she saw that he was still in his chair, his head bowed and his fists clenched.

"Riddick—"

"Lock your door." The menace in his voice was overwhelming. She shut herself into her room and flipped the door's lock.

Backing away from the door, she sat down heavily on the foot of her bed. She didn't understand any of what she'd just seen. It was almost as if the Riddick she knew had been ripped away and replaced with a stranger.

What did I do? she thought in horror. Somehow she'd brought disaster upon them.

She closed her eyes, trying to concentrate on her memories. Trying to see where things had gone wrong.

He'd panicked when he'd seen that she was inside the "Charybdis" network. She'd thought her break-in had been clean, but apparently she must have been wrong. But there was no way that a whole battle-cruiser could just appear in the sky the *minute* she broke into some classified files. If they were here for Riddick—

"Richard B. Riddick," the voice over the comm had said. Yes, they knew who was in the ship.

How had they known where he was? How had they known to come?

Had she set something in motion two days ago when she broke into the law enforcement files? Oh god, they could have made their escape with plenty of time to spare if she'd fessed up to Riddick...

She could hear him, down below in the cargo level. He was in the exercise area. She listened to him as he pounded violently on the equipment. His grunts, as he worked, began to give way to roars of aggression.

Something abruptly shattered below.

She sat still in her room, her hands shaking, listening to Riddick take apart the equipment. The noises he was making didn't even sound human anymore. They were more like the fierce roars of a deadly predator.

Is this how he feels about me now? she thought, tears spilling down her face. *Oh god, he must really hate me for what I did.*

The sound of tortured metal being ripped apart made her jump.

What was he *doing*?

Cautiously, she went to her door and flipped the lock, peering out. The sounds were even louder now. Something else smashed. She crept out of her room and over to the ladder. She had to know, to see what was happening.

As carefully as she could, she braced her hands on the sides of the opening between levels and lowered her head into the gap. The room below slowly came into view. It had been destroyed. Its destroyer was still at work. The exercise equipment had been reduced to a tangled mass of broken metal. The dojo had been ripped apart. The large punching bag that she'd contemplated working over earlier was now in shreds. She was unable to contain her gasp of horror.

Riddick's head came up and turned toward her. His face was the most frightening thing she'd ever seen in her life.

No recognition. No humanity. No sign at all of the man she loved. In his place stood a savage, monstrous beast. He stared at her for a long moment.

Something akin to recognition crossed his face. “Jack,” he growled. “Get back in your *fucking room* and **LOCK YOUR FUCKING DOOR!**”

She fled back to her room in complete panic, bolting the door behind her before collapsing onto her bed, sobbing.

He hates me, he hates me, he hates me... It was an endless, terrible refrain pounding through her head. Her world had just ended.

35.

Riddick: Consequence

Consciousness returned to him slowly. It was an almost painful awakening.

Who am I? he thought in confusion. The answer took a long moment to come to him.

Richard B. Riddick. Escaped Convict. Murderer. Psycho.

Psycho.

He'd had a psychotic attack. A bad one. He still didn't know how bad it had been. First he had to figure out if it was over. First he had to figure out where and when he was, as well.

He listened to the noises around him, sampling the scents in the air. The hum of a ship's drive, muted. A ship in space, but not moving. His ship? Yeah, he knew that hum intimately. His ship. The "Whatsername."

Scent of Jack's perfume in the air, faint but beautiful. *Charmante*, it was called. Appropriate name, given the wearer. Jack was on board. And an adult. All grown up. The object of his desire...

Okay, I know who, where and when I am. What now? Primes. Count out the primes.

He kept his eyes closed for the moment as he began counting.

One, two, three, five, seven, eleven, thirteen... He counted out the prime numbers slowly in his mind, not stopping until he'd passed the thousand mark. His cognitive skills were intact. Good. That was something, at least.

Now it's time to find out what the hell kind of mess I've made this time, he thought with a groan. He opened his eyes.

He was lying among the wreckage of the dojo. Around him, every piece of equipment was scattered, twisted and ruined. The stuffing from the punching bag lay in drifts throughout the room. Pieces clung to his skin where his sweat had dried them onto him.

He sat up with another groan. He hadn't had a bout of psychosis this bad in almost a decade. Not since...

Not since Ruth, he reminded himself. And *that* one, at least, could be blamed on the drugs that crazy bitch had slipped into his drink. He'd gone completely over the edge this time.

At least I felt it coming, he thought as he pulled himself to his feet. *At least I had time to get Jack out of harm's way.*

Had he, though? An odd image swam through his mind, of Jack's frightened face as she peered at him from the opening into the upper deck. A memory of shouting at her to get back into her room before it was too late...

Well, I guess she's seen the monster, he thought with a stab of exquisite pain. He glanced around at the extraordinary mess the beast within him had made. Nothing appeared to be salvageable.

Picking bits of stuffing off of his skin, he headed for the ladder. There were some strong garbage bags upstairs. He'd just load everything in and jettison it. At least the expensive personal equipment and all of Jack's things had been locked away. At least he hadn't had an actual load of cargo on hand to destroy.

He checked on Jack briefly while upstairs and was pleased to find that she *had* locked her door. That meant she'd stayed safe from him while the beast was loose. Behind her door, he could hear the rhythmic breathing of sleep. He decided not to wake her yet. The mess was his to clean up first.

He spent the next hour filling bags with the wreckage and loading them into the waste unit. He'd have to jettison this crap later, once he'd figured out where they were going. If he did it now, it would just bounce off of the Oort debris surrounding them and come right back at the ship.

Climbing back up to the living quarters level, he went over to the cockpit and keyed in a systems diagnostic. He showered while it ran. Then he changed into a fresh set of clothes and returned for the results.

Fuck, he thought after a moment. *Hull's fine, but fuel is extremely low. We'll have to return to Troubadour to refuel before we can go anywhere.*

Just what he wanted to do, play tag with Jarvis again. Good old Reggie would now have another twenty-four or so deaths to hate him for.

*Well, he thinks I took off for the Terran Sector. With luck, he won't even **think** of looking for us in New Paris after all that. Maybe we can sneak back in. Shit, I'll have to find out if any of our electronic profiles*

weren't discovered by that fucking tracer program...

He glanced over at the door to Jack's room. Poor kid had no idea what she'd unleashed. And that, he reflected, was his fault. He'd had no clue she was into hacking; it had never even occurred to him to ask. He had no idea what had possessed her to try breaking into the Charybdis mainframe, but he couldn't really blame her. He'd better see how she was holding up.

He knocked gently on her door. "Jack? It's safe to come out now, kid."

Silence.

"Jack? You okay in there?" He waited, growing anxious. "Come on, I need to know you're alright. Say *something*, Darlin'."

After another moment he heard the soft creak of her mattress and then the sound of her feet padding toward the door. The lock clicked and the door swung inwards, framing Jack's face.

What he saw in her tear-stained face stabbed him to the core. He had never seen such despair on any human being's face before. She was still in her clothes from yesterday, now a little wrinkled from being slept in. Her hair was disheveled and messy. But the desolation in her eyes...

"Oh god, Jack. Are you okay?" He moved forward to put his arms around her and felt pain lance through him yet again when she shrank back. He forced himself not to pull her into his arms. If he'd harmed her and she was afraid of him, doing so would only make things worse.

I thought I stayed away from her. I thought she was safe from me... what did I do to her? I don't remember anything...

A lack of memory, though, meant very little. Several of his most vicious murders in Slam, back when he'd first been committed, were things he had no recollection of. And he *knew* what the darkest side of him wanted from her. If he'd raped her...

"What did I do, Jack? What did I do to you? Please tell me." He wasn't used to hearing such desperation in his own voice.

She stared at him for a long moment. When she finally spoke it was in a pained, husky whisper. "You scared me... I've never seen you look like that before."

"But did I do anything to you? Did I hurt you?" In another moment he was going to fall on his knees before her or something.

She shook her head. "Just yelled at me to get in my room."

Profound relief washed over him. He leaned against the door jamb and sighed, closing his eyes for a moment. "God, Jack, I'm so sorry. I'm sorry you had to see me like that. It's been years since that happened—"

"And it's *my fault!*" she squeaked tearfully. He opened his eyes in time to see her face before she turned away. She threw herself down on her bed and curled her body into a tiny ball, arms wrapped around her knees. "Me and my *stupid* curiosity! It's my fault they came and almost caught us..."

"No!" He hurried over to the side of her bed. "You didn't know what would happen. I should have told you. I *would* have, too, except it never occurred to me you were so good with computers."

He was a little shocked, now that he thought about it. Computer classes had been one area, according to Jack's records, that she did not do well in at all. Protective coloration? Had she been posing as a computer illiterate even as she perfected her hacking skills? Clever girl. She'd fooled everyone, even him.

She must have been dying to take his hardware for a test-drive. Now she thought she'd crashed the family vehicle and had hell to pay. Poor kid...

"They never would've come to Troubadour if it wasn't for me," she insisted, sniffing. "I mean, if I'd told you sooner, we coulda gotten away clean..."

"Are you saying that you broke into the Charybdis files before yesterday, Jack?" He'd wondered how Jarvis had gotten on-site so fast, himself.

"No... just the law enforcement files. I wanted to, though. So I could read Dr. Aspen's stuff. I was going to, but you came home early that night and I—"

He sighed. However it was that Jarvis had figured out his whereabouts, it wasn't Jack's doing. "Hon, if yesterday was the first time you broke into the Charybdis files, it ain't your fault. I must've done something to attract Jarvis' attention before you started hacking."

Probably, now that he thought about it, Pete. He'd used an MO that was *bound* to make Jarvis stand up and take notice. At the time, it had seemed the only logical way to kill the man. A message to the worlds

about exactly what would happen to anyone who messed with the girl he loved.

Jarvis had gotten the message. No wonder Pete's exploits hadn't been reported. As soon as they realized the identity of his murderer, the whole story had been hushed up until Reggie could come to town.

He reached out to take Jack's hand and winced when he saw the dark bruise encircling her wrist. His fault. His doing. He'd vowed that he'd never, ever make her wear a look of such suffering, and yet this was the second time in *one fucking week*.

Admit it, you psycho-fuck bastard. You're poison to this girl. You've fucked up her life every time you two have been together. If you had any sense, you'd let her go.

He was going to lose her. There was no way she'd ever want to be anywhere near him again after this.

"Jack, I'm so sorry," he managed after a moment. The words felt completely inadequate. "I never meant to hurt you. None of this was your fault."

After a moment, she raised her eyes to his. "What happened? Why did you... do those things?" Her breath hitched. "It was like I was looking at a total stranger. I was so scared..."

The ache pierced him again. "Jack, what you saw... that's the thing that's still inside me. I had an attack of psychosis. Most of the time I can keep it under control, but..." He took a deep breath. "The concentration I had to maintain during the battle took everything out of me. I didn't have any strength left to fight it. Only thing I could do was try to get as far away from you as I could before it hit."

He bent his head, filled with shame for the first time in his life. "I told you there was nothing loveable about it."

She sat up slowly. "I thought..." She closed her eyes, shaking her head sadly.

"What, Jack?" He rose from his crouch and sat down next to her on the bed, putting his hand on her shoulder. This time she didn't pull away. She leaned against him.

"I thought you hated me," she whispered softly.

"Oh god, Jack, no!" How could she think such a thing? Didn't she know he loved her?

And how would she know that, asshole? he asked himself. *Have you ever **told** her? Even **once**?*

Had he? He forced himself to think back. No. He'd never actually said it. The word "love" had never passed his lips even one time. He'd thought she'd known; she'd indicated that she did several times, but he'd never said the words. He'd let his actions do the speaking for him...

And if that was the case, what had his actions of yesterday said to her? No wonder she'd cringed from him. Especially if she had thought she'd been personally responsible for his madness.

He lifted her chin with one hand, making her meet his eyes. "Jack, I don't hate you. I could never, ever hate you. I *love* you, kid."

She sniffled again, blinking away tears. They were rolling down her cheeks slowly. Tears he'd forced her to shed. He bent his head and brought his lips to her cheek, kissing one of them away. Turning her head slightly, he kissed the tear off of her other cheek as well.

He stroked her hair gently, smoothing it down. Her lips were still trembling a little. One tear had left a long track down her face and now shivered in the corner of her mouth. He bent down again without thinking.

His mouth touched hers just as she drew breath to speak. Her inhalation pulled his lips against hers more tightly and locked them together. For a moment Riddick felt like he was being electrocuted. The world around him abruptly ceased to exist. There was only the kiss, and the girl in his arms.

He pulled her closer, parting her lips with his and deepening the kiss, groaning even as he did so. He shouldn't be doing this... he needed to stop... this was *wrong*...

But he couldn't break free. His hands went to her waist and legs, lifting her onto his lap. He couldn't let go of her now. One hand stayed pressed against her lower back. The other moved to the back of her head, drawing her even closer. His tongue slid between her parted lips and began exploring the inside of her mouth.

A thrill of fear speared through him. *Oh god*, he thought, *I can't stop*...

Then he felt her arms come around his shoulders, her hands settling on the back of his head and neck. As her own tongue slid past his and into his mouth, the thrill became one of exultation.

She doesn't want me to!

36.

Jack: Consummation

I love you too, she'd been about to say, when Riddick's lips cut her off from the power of speech. It took her a ridiculously long time to figure out what was happening.

He'd lifted her into his lap and pulled her tightly against him by the time she realized that it wasn't her imagination, that her dreams really *were* coming true. She put her own arms around him and opened her mouth up to him completely. The rest of the universe could go to hell if it liked; she was exactly where she wanted to be.

In all of her dreams about kissing Riddick, she had never imagined the taste of his mouth. Now it overwhelmed her. She sank into it, reveling in it. It was the most wonderful taste in any world...

Finally they broke apart. Jack gasped, trying to remember when she'd last taken a breath. Her lungs felt like they were on fire, although at the moment a good deal of her body felt that way. Riddick was gasping, too. He buried his face in her hair and his lips pressed against her ear.

Jack began to pant harder as Riddick's tongue flicked against her earlobe and darted along the edge of her ear. It stirred ticklish sensations within her that ran down her back and between her legs, things she'd never felt before in her *life*. Her tiny mewl of pleasure was met with an answering groan from deep within Riddick's chest.

Please, God, she thought with what little sanity she had left, *don't let him change his mind...*

His teeth gently nipped at her earlobe, tugging on it. She moaned again as she felt his tongue trace down along her jaw to her throat. His hands came up to her head, tilting it back before his mouth clamped down hard on the skin of her throat. Jack couldn't stay still. Her body was writhing a little under the onslaught of so much unfamiliar sensation, such exquisite pleasure. Her hands clutched onto Riddick's massive shoulders for support.

She was so dizzy that she didn't realize he was lowering her onto the bed until she felt her mattress pressed against her back. His mouth was still locked on her throat, but his hands had left her back and were now running along her sides, stroking her hips and legs, sliding up to her abdomen. New nerves awakened everywhere his hands touched. She moaned yet again as his hands cupped her breasts through the fabric of her top.

His mouth slid down to the base of her throat and he ran his tongue along the fragile bones of her clavicle and into the hollow between them. His hands came up to push the straps of her top off of her shoulders as his mouth continued to explore, licking and nibbling at her skin.

Suddenly he released her and sat up. He was panting, staring down at her with a look of amazement on his face. She met his eyes, trying to will him to keep going, to not stop...

After a moment his breathing slowed. With great deliberation, he straddled her hips and reached for the waist of her top, pushing it upwards. She arched her back up and helped him pull the top over her head. His eyes were fixed on her exposed breasts, now.

"Beautiful..." he whispered, the barest thread of sound. His fingers lightly brushed against her skin, teasing her nipples into hard peaks. She heard herself make a sound almost like a purr as his hands became less gentle.

Just when she thought she was going to go crazy, he bent his head down and flicked his tongue against one nipple, sending jolts of pleasure through her body. She felt the tip of his tongue trace the circle of her areola, and then felt his teeth graze her flesh. Her back arched, pushing her breast up against his mouth and he drew her nipple in, sucking on it.

Her hands came around the back of his head, holding him against her. In response, he sucked harder, the fingers of one hand playing with the nipple of her other breast. She stroked the back of his head and neck, reveling in the feel of the short stubble under her fingers as much less familiar sensations pooled in her belly. She cried out as he nipped at her gently.

He released her and began running his tongue over her breast in a leisurely spiral. Traveling along the crease on its underside, his tongue moved to her other breast and began tracing the same spiral in reverse until

he locked onto her unplundered nipple. She began to writhe once more from the sensations spreading throughout her body. His hands pressed down on her hips, holding her still. He'd moved downward and was straddling her thighs now, bent intently over her breasts.

His mouth released her nipple again and for a moment he rested his head against her chest, gasping, his breath hot against her skin.

"I shouldn't be doing this," he panted after a moment. "I should stop..."

"Don't you *dare* stop," she managed.

His head came up and he stared into her eyes for a long moment. Then he crawled forward slightly and grasped her mouth with his once more, pressing his body down on hers.

Another fantasy was left in the dust; the sensation of extra gees against her body could never compare to *this* again. She could feel the muscles of his chest against her skin, through the fabric of his shirt—

Not fair! she thought, *I want to feel his skin too...*

She could feel his heart pounding against her. Her own heart skipped for a moment and fell into the rhythm of his. She reached down and grabbed at his shirt, trying to pull it up and off of him.

He released her mouth and sat up, chuckling, pulling his shirt off for her. "That better?"

She nodded, speechless as she stared up at him, tracing his contours with her eyes. His was the perfect human form, she thought distractedly. She reached out and ran her hands along his abdomen, feeling the muscles twitch beneath her touch. He growled contentedly as her hands slid up to his chest. She tugged at his shoulders, urging his body back down against hers.

He kissed her again, harder than ever, while her hands explored his broad back, familiarizing themselves with every muscle and vertebra. There were some scabbed scratches running along his back and she wondered if he'd gotten them during his bout of madness. He flinched slightly when she touched them and she moved away from them, tracing his spine.

He let go of her mouth but did not move away. "You... are... amazing..." he gasped out, pressing his forehead against hers.

"Just don't stop," she managed to whisper after a moment. Her mouth felt wonderfully bruised. "Just don't change your mind."

He groaned. "I can't, now. It's too late." He sat up for a moment, hovering above her in the dim light of her room. The expression on his face was odd. Open and vulnerable, nuances of emotion chased each other across his features. Tenderness mixed with ravenous lust... delight with fear... she'd never seen him look like this before. She suspected that no one had.

He crawled backward and lowered his face to her breasts again. His lips were gentle as he kissed first one nipple, then the other. He ran his tongue down along her sternum to her abdomen. Her abdominal muscles began to flinch as he played his lips and tongue across them.

Amazing sensations spread through her, an almost-ticklish feeling but much more intense. She couldn't suppress her cries and the way her body began to writhe under the onslaught. She'd had no idea these feelings even existed and now they were overwhelming her. Her hips began to roll in response.

She felt his hands grasp the waistband of her leggings and drag them down over her hips, pulling her panties off at the same time. His mouth left her stomach and he sat up for a moment as he drew her pants down her legs and pulled them off. He tossed them to the floor. For a long moment he stared down at her again, intent upon her as a hunting cat upon its prey.

His hands rested on her knees for a moment and he slowly opened her legs, moving to kneel between them. His fingers stroked along the insides of her thighs as he spread her legs wider.

"So beautiful..." he whispered again, gazing down at her.

She closed her eyes as he bent down over her. His lips touched down on her hipbone, surprising her. His tongue flicked against it for a moment and then his mouth lifted away. He settled on her other hipbone a moment later and repeated the process. Then he ran his tongue on a leisurely arc from there to her navel and back to the first hip while she shivered and tiny noises escaped her throat.

She gasped when she felt his breath ruffle her pubic hair, and gasped again when his fingers came down to rest lightly on her labia. He drew her open slowly and exhaled again, this time on her delicate, exposed flesh. She waited, panting, as she felt him spread her even wider. When the tip of his tongue came down to flick against her clitoris she was unable to prevent herself from crying out.

He flicked at her again, and once more, teasing her mercilessly before he relented and began to stroke her flesh with the length of his tongue. She'd given up trying to hold back any of her cries and each one seemed to spur him on, pushing him to use his mouth more forcefully. He began to nibble on her, drawing the folds of her inner labia into his mouth. She felt his tongue dart inside her and writhed with the beautiful sensations she was experiencing.

Her eyes flew open as he slid one finger inside her vagina.

"Oh God yes," she heard herself gasp. Her voice sounded like a stranger's.

She felt his finger curl slightly, pressing up against her pubic bone and a spasm of intense pleasure shuddered through her body. Her vision disintegrated and she didn't even hear her own cry of pleasure in response, although she knew she'd made it.

He began to stroke his finger in and out, pressing it up against the pubic bone with every pass while his tongue continued to flick at her. Jack could barely breathe now. Waves of pleasure were crashing over her, so intense they were almost painful. She felt her arms and legs twitching, out of her control. Her voice was rising, exploding out of her with each stroke. In a moment she felt like *she* would explode...

It struck her like a space crash, obliterating consciousness and sanity for a long moment. Distantly, she could hear her own voice screaming her pleasure, screaming his name while her body thrashed wildly under him. Where she was, however, there was nothing but sensation, not even self.

"You okay in there?" she heard Riddick murmur a while later. It took her a moment to remember how to speak.

She swallowed and nodded, letting her breathing catch up with itself. "Wow," she finally managed. "Was that what I think it was?"

He lay down next to her with a pleased grin on his face. "You'd know better than I would, Darlin'. But I sure hope you weren't fakin'."

"I think it was." She felt a huge smile spread across her face. "Shit, Riddick, I think I had an *orgasm!*"

He laughed softly and rested one large hand on her stomach. "What, was it your first?"

"With anybody else in the same room? *Definitely.*" He laughed even more when she said that. "And even alone... no, I've never felt anything like that before. Maybe I got *close* to it once or twice, but... yeah, Riddick, that was my first."

"I'm glad," he rumbled, pulling her up against him so that her head rested on his chest. "I wanted you to have one first, because the next part is kinda rough."

She blinked and lifted her head, confused. "Why would it be rough?"

Not that she'd necessarily mind, but...

"Oh come on, kid. You've had your health classes; you know that a girl's first time can be painf—"

"First time?" She couldn't help the little giggle that escaped. "Riddick, you *know* I'm not a virgin."

Now *he* blinked and looked confused. "What are you talking about, Jack? I didn't know that. When—?"

"I *told* you. Ages ago. I told you back when we were killing time in the skiff."

He frowned. It looked like he was searching his memory. "No, I'm pretty sure you didn't. Shit, kid, you were *thirteen* back then; I think I'd remember if you'd told me that."

"I *know* I told you. Riddick, why do you think I ran away from my uncle Boris in the *first* place?"

Comprehension dawned on his face. "That motherfucker *raped* you?"

"Niecefucker, actually. Yeah. I *know* I told you this stuff. I thought that's why you didn't mind telling me about what happened to Christina."

"Jack, if I'd known he did that, he'd be dead now. They'd have found him wearing his guts as fashion accessories *long* ago." He closed his eyes and sighed heavily. "What did he do to you, Darlin'? What happened?"

She sighed too. It was something she hated thinking about. Maybe that was the problem. Maybe, back when she thought she'd told him, she'd only actually *hinted* at it. Well, he had a right to know.

"It was maybe a month and a half after my parents' accident. I'd never liked my uncle Boris but he was the only relative we had nearby who wanted to take me in. I didn't like *any* of my dad's relatives, actually. They were all fuckin' creepy. My mom's whole family was back on New Belgium and I only ever saw them once, when I was eight."

"So you had to go live with your creepy uncle Boris." Riddick's hand began stroking her hair.

“Yeah. And he always wanted me to sit in his lap, which I hated. I mean, I *liked* that, when it was my mom, or my dad... or you... but I never liked it with him. And then, one night he came home and he was drunk and he just climbed into bed with me.” She stopped and swallowed hard. Oh yeah, the first time *was* painful. Especially when you were small and scared and begging the guy to *please, please stop*— She shuddered with the memory and felt Riddick’s arms come around her tightly.

“You know I’m going to kill him,” he growled.

“Next day I had to go to school. I felt awful. I could barely walk and I was bleeding and I kept having to run to the bathroom to throw up. I told the school nurse I was having my period. That was a total lie. I hadn’t even *started* menstruating yet. Thank God. Can you imagine if he’d gotten me *pregnant*?”

“Tryin’ not to,” Riddick muttered. His jaw was clenched and his eyes were smoldering.

“That whole day... all I could think about was what he’d probably do to me when he got home that night. And then I’d have to throw up again.”

“Don’t blame you, kid. I hope you didn’t blame *yourself*.”

Jack felt tears start in her eyes. “I did, a little. I kept trying to figure out what I’d done to encourage him—”

“*Nothing*. He was just a sick fuck.” He gave her waist a squeeze to punctuate his declaration. “Did he hurt you again that night?”

Jack nodded and swallowed again. “As soon as he got home. I think he raped me five times before he finally fell asleep.”

“Oh, Jack.” Riddick let out a harsh breath. “I’m going to spend *days* killing him for that.”

“I didn’t go to school the next day. I pretended to catch the bus and then I sneaked back into the house after he went to work. I took anything I could find that looked like it was worth some money, and all the cash he had, and I just took off. Tried to get to New Belgium, but I only got as far as Seti Station. I almost got picked up by this sicko with a thing for little girls, but I got away, and that’s when I decided I’d be better off pretending to be a boy. So I cut off my hair and joined this little gang of kids and learned how to steal wallets so I could put together the rest of my fare. After a while, though, I decided I didn’t want to go to New Belgium. I wanted to see the galaxy.”

And, of course, she’d wanted to see her outlaw idol, the man she’d aspired to be like so nobody would mess with her ever again: Richard B. Riddick.

She lay in Riddick’s arms, naked, their bare skin pressed together, and wondered how it was that she could tell this story and still be eager for Riddick to make love to her.

Maybe it was the odd distance that seemed to exist between her and the memories, like someone had erected a thick glass wall. She could look through it and see what lay on the other side, but she couldn’t touch it or be touched by it. Had time done that, she wondered, or something else?

Maybe it was the profound distance between the two men. Uncle Boris had been sandy-haired and hazel-eyed. Large like her father, his bulk had run to fat. He’d smelled like cheap cigars and cheaper vodka, and his hands had been fidgety and grabby. Riddick was none of those things. He was a panther in human form, and the only thing he had in common with her dissolute uncle was general maleness.

And, of course, now she had her first orgasm as a shield between her and that dark time.

Riddick’s touch was erasing the marks of her Uncle upon her, at last and forever. She wanted him to fill her and eradicate the last stains altogether.

“So he’s the only one you’ve ever been with,” Riddick finally mused.

“‘Til now.” She turned her face up and smiled at him.

“‘Til now...” he sighed. “Jack, I shouldn’t be doing this either. I’m supposed to be taking care of you, not taking advantage of—”

“God *damn* it, Riddick! Don’t even *start* going there!” She shoved him onto his back and climbed on top of him, glaring down at his surprised face. Later she would laugh when she thought about this moment: Richard B. Riddick, Big Evil himself, pinned under a pissed-off naked girl.

“It’s true, Jack,” he insisted softly. He didn’t move, however.

“The fuck it is! I’m a legal adult now! And I’m in *love* with you, dammit! I have been for a *very long* time and I’ve *dreamed* about this. You’re not making me do anything I don’t want to do.”

He looked so confused. So lost. She sighed, feeling the anger drain away. She’d never been able to stay angry with him for long, no matter how badly he pissed her off.

“Riddick,” she said after a moment. His eyes snapped to hers. “Do you love me?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

“Do you want me?”

“Yes.”

“And I love you and I want you and the *only* thing that’s wrong here is you trying to talk yourself out of this. Now what are you going to do?”

He pulled her down onto him and kissed her hard.

37.

Riddick: Epiphany

It struck him, suddenly, how absurd his situation had become. He'd been *conquered*. Jack had thrown down on him and *won*. That had never happened before, with anyone, and certainly not with the stakes as high as this. Even Carolyn's victory over him hadn't gone this deep.

There had been a few women, over the years, who'd tried to take him on, but *they'd* all had ulterior motives. It had been a disturbing revelation to him when he'd realized what they'd really wanted. They'd picked him for his size and reputation, assuming that he would be a brute to *them* as well, both in and out of bed.

Riddick didn't hold with that crap; hitting a woman, especially a lover, had no appeal to him. Some of them had tried to provoke him into it, prompting him to sever the relationships on the spot. He still didn't get why anyone would want that kind of thing. Those women needed *some* kind of help, but he was no therapist to solve their problems for them; he could barely maintain an armistice with his own fractured psyche.

Jack had nothing in common with them, anyway. Her anger, when she leveled it at him, always had a point. She trusted him to respond like a human being when they argued. She trusted him, but she'd never expected him to be a saint. The way she was pressed against him now was all the evidence he needed of that.

Their mouths were welded together and had been for several minutes now. This moment, he realized, truly *had* been inevitable. He'd been locked in orbit around her for weeks, drawn in by the gravitational pull of her lips. He could have had this moment long before now if he'd been nearly as smart as people said he was.

Not lettin' go now, he thought with fierce joy. He dragged his fingers up her spine, listening to the soft moan – almost a purr – she made in response. *This time I don't have to hold back—*

Except that he did, he realized. At least for a little while. There were a few things that needed to be done first. For her. Releasing her mouth, he drew away from her for a moment.

He lifted her up and moved her to the side for a minute so that he could stand. Jack watched him intently and he could feel her preparing to fight him if he started to balk again. He wouldn't. She'd already won the battle decisively. But he was going to do this right. He drew her to her feet as well.

He stared down at her for a long moment, unable to help himself. Wonderment coursed through him as he contemplated the woman before him. So much fire and power in such a slight frame. So much bravery.

When he'd first met her, he'd seen how fearless she was and he'd thought it was the bravado born of a sheltered life. Now he knew better. It was her inherent generosity that had prompted her to try to run back for Shazza, not a child's sense of invulnerability. She'd known how cruel the universe could be, and she'd wanted to help Shazza fight off that cruelty, as futile a battle as it would have been. Silently, he blessed Paris for holding her back.

If she had died on that desolate world, a large part of him would never have been born.

He put his hands on her ribs, almost afraid to press against them, as if he might break her. Finally he dared to lift her up and pull her against him. She put her arms around his shoulders and he felt her legs hitch around his waist. He took her mouth again, trying to drown in it. He didn't think he'd ever tire of kissing her.

He felt her lips curve into a smile as he released her. "You know," she murmured, "this would work even better if your pants were off."

He laughed softly into her mouth. "We'll have to try that sometime. But this time I want things to be just right." He reached out and pulled the door open and carried her, still locked around him, over to his bedroom.

"You know you don't have to be so careful, Riddick." She bent her head slightly and began nibbling at his jawline.

Yes I do, he thought. *I do*. He carried her to his bed and gently lowered her onto it. She lay down immediately, stretching out sensuously on her back. He took her hand and kissed the palm.

"Jack," he whispered. "I know you're not a virgin, but that's only in the physical sense. You've never been with someone willingly before, and that's very different. I..."

She waited while he searched for the words. It took him a very long moment to find the ones that made some sense.

"I want to give you something that'll eradicate the past. I want it to be what you remember, from now on, when you think about your 'first time.'" He hoped that made sense to her. It barely made sense to him, but very little did at this moment.

Her mouth opened slightly but no sound came out. She looked stunned. After a moment she sat up and reached for him, pulling him down onto her and kissing him. Her embrace was fierce and tight.

He lingered on the kiss for a while, delighting in the taste of her mouth. She was completely without artifice; all passion and no calculation, and he loved it.

Finally he pulled back and began dropping small kisses down her throat and along her shoulders. He kissed every mark he'd left on her from his last journey.

"Riddick," she whispered suddenly. "God, I want you, please..."

He lifted his head and stared into her eyes. They were dilated and heavy-lidded with desire. It was time...

He gently lowered her back down onto the bed, resting her head on his pillow. Her eyes never left his face as he drew her legs apart and moved to kneel between them once more. On his knees, he undid the fastenings of his pants and pulled them down, freeing his erection from its constraints.

"Oh... my... god..." he heard her gasp.

This was the part that worried him. The part that he needed to be careful about. She seemed to be over her past experiences, but there was no telling what trauma lingered within her. Faced with the act itself, her lust might abruptly give way to panic. He had to do this slowly.

He took a moment to pull his pants off the rest of the way. Then he carefully moved forward, lifting her legs just a little so that her knees were bent and she was open to him. He stroked her warm flesh gently with one finger. Yes, she was ready. She was almost soaking-wet.

He moved closer to her.

He had his cock in his hand now, and he began gently sliding its head over the slick folds of skin between her legs. Her breathing quickened as he stroked her with himself. He pressed the head against her tiny nub and heard her answering gasp. Her pelvis arched up to meet him. He drew the head downward until it was positioned against her opening. Now.

She caught her breath as he began to slowly push inside her and for a second he felt her muscles tense around him. He stopped moving and waited until he felt her relax and saw a tiny smile appear on her lips. She *had* been afraid for a moment. He'd been right to go slowly.

He continued to press forward, just a little bit at a time, and felt her open up to him completely. He heard his own voice betray him, releasing a shuddering groan as he slid into her warm, silky depths.

Smooth... oh god, so smooth...

He filled her completely and stilled himself for a moment, enjoying the feel of their groins pressed against each other. Slowly, he began to pull back, listening to her sigh in response.

"Don't close your eyes, Jack," he said when he saw her eyelids flutter down. "I want to see what you're thinking."

She opened her eyes again and met his. He drew himself almost all of the way back out and then stroked inward again at a leisurely pace. The tiny noise she made in response thrilled him more than he'd thought anything could.

He'd learned long ago how to seduce and pleasure a woman, but suddenly his experience seemed oddly inadequate. He wanted this to be more than just a good fuck; he wanted this to be something that she would always remember, always treasure. So far he seemed to be managing alright, but could he make it happen? Really?

Oddly enough, he suddenly almost felt like *he* was losing his virginity, too. Bizarre thought given the vast and varied range of his experience. But there it was.

He felt the head of his cock nudge against her cervix as their bodies pressed together again. She moaned beneath him once more.

"Mmmmmmm..." she purred softly. "Harder."

He went still for a moment, the corners of his mouth pulling almost against his will into a smirk. "Harder?"

She swallowed and let out a sigh that he couldn't help enjoying. Her breasts moved so beautifully when she did that... "Faster?"

"Oh *I* see..." He drew himself almost all of the way out of her in one rapid stroke. "Like that?"

“Yessss...”

His smile widened as he watched her face closely. “Or how about like this?” He thrust into her almost violently and watched in astonishment as her back arched and she cried out in response.

Shit, did I hurt her?

“Oh God, yes!” she gasped. She swallowed again while he stayed deep inside her, perfectly still. “Do that again...”

“You sure, Darlin’?”

She nodded. “Please. Keep going... like that...”

He leaned closer to her and put his arms around her, one hand on the back of her neck and one cradling the back of her head. He needed to keep watching her while he did this. “You ready?”

“More than.”

He began thrusting into her, stroking almost all of the way out and then impaling her over and over. With each thrust she cried out, louder and louder. Her eyes were wide with astonishment. He wondered if this was how she’d looked right before she came the first time. The thought almost sent him over the edge—

No, he reminded himself. She goes first.

He picked up the speed of his thrusts and felt her body start to tremble. She was almost there... So close... His own release was rising up. But she had to have hers first. He wanted to see her come...

“Riddick...” *Tears* began to pour down her cheeks. “Oh god, I love y—” Her ability to say anything abruptly ended as her orgasm rolled over her. He could feel her whole body spasming beneath and around him. She screamed out with each thrust he made into her, wrapping her legs around his and bucking upwards to meet him. The look on her face was one of pure, enraptured delirium.

I never knew... he thought suddenly in confusion. *I never knew it could feel so good...*

The world didn’t exist anymore. *He* didn’t exist. The only reality in his world was Jack. She was his universe. Her pleasure was the only motivation within him.

Is this love? he asked, wondering if god was listening. *Where has it been all this time? I never knew!*

His world exploded around him. He gasped out the only word that made any sense, the word that explained and justified his entire existence.

“Jack...”

38.

Jack: Ownership

Jack Kowalczyk had seen some truly amazing things in her life. She'd seen the inner heart of a nebula as she passed through it on a small merchant vessel. A new star had been born off of the starboard bow while she'd watched in awe along with the rest of the crew and passengers. Its birth sent rippling waves of energy pulsing out through the nebula, shredding it to ribbons and reforming it. The ship had been far enough away from the event to sustain only minor damage, and the experience had joined her small collection of deeply treasured memories.

She'd seen a blue star flare over the horizon of an arid, empty world, while a red and yellow binary pair sank toward the opposite horizon. She'd watched as an enormous ringed planet swallowed the sky of that same world, and a living maelstrom of chittering, malevolent creatures poured out of natural chimneys to flow through the darkening sky like sentient smoke.

But no sight had ever moved her to greater awe than this one: Tears glittered on the cheeks of Richard B. Riddick.

He was staring down at her, a look of bewildered amazement on his face and in his eyes. She drew him down and pressed her lips to his face, kissing each tear away as he had done with hers. She ended, as he had, with their mouths joined. This time their lips clasped tenderly, their hunger for each other momentarily sated.

He let out a heavy sigh as their mouths parted and lowered his head, burying his face against her neck. His body lay heavily upon hers, pressing her into his mattress. The weight of him felt delicious. She closed her eyes and reveled in the moment, the feeling of his hot breath against her shoulder and his skin against hers.

They might have fallen asleep for a while; she didn't know. Time spooled out unchecked while they lay together. Soon they would have to deal with the world around them once more, but not yet... not yet...

"You have no idea," he finally murmured, "how long I've wanted to do this."

"Ha," she answered. "I got you beat, easy. I've been in love with you for years, Riddick."

He raised his head, frowning slightly. "Really? I coulda sworn..."

"Sworn what?" She nudged his shoulder. "Come on, out with it."

"You just didn't seem to be *aware* like that when we got back together. There were a few times... shit, I've been lusting after you ever since you walked into my ship. But you didn't seem to notice."

"Oh." She thought about it, going back over her memories. The abrupt end to the tickle-battle. The arguments over what she would wear on her way to and from the bathroom, and how much she had to wear to bed... Of course. "Well, no, I didn't. I was still kind of sexually dead inside back then. It wasn't until the regen turned my drive back on that I started noticing things..."

He groaned in disgusted comprehension. "And by then I had you pegged as a total innocent. Shit. And they *told* me about the effect that hysterectomies sometimes had on sex drives, and how that would reverse itself. Jack, I can be a real idiot sometimes."

"No argument here. Do you know how much I spent on outfits to get *you* to notice *me*?"

"Ohhhhhh." He chuckled wickedly. "So that *was* deliberate. You little vixen... A few of those almost got you banged on the spot, you know. But how come you never seemed to know what kind of effect they were supposed to have? You always looked so—"

"Innocent? Hey, I may not have spent eleven years running from the law, but I got a little bit of practice." She fixed him with her best look of befuddled "who-me?" innocence. His eyes widened.

"Shit, Jack, don't *ever* make that look when we're in bed together, okay? That's too damned freaky. I'm gonna have to watch you closely from now on, girl."

"You'd *better*," she retorted, making him laugh. He reached out and traced her lips with one finger.

"Kid, you've blown the top off of my head. Keep thinkin' I'm gonna wake up except I never have dreams this concrete. You have no idea how tempting you've been to me for the last few weeks."

"You're right, I had no idea, and I was pretty upset about that, too, because I thought I'd *never* get through that thick skin of yours." Jack grinned up at him, rubbing her hands along his back and over the skin in question.

"Skin's not thick, just the skull," he muttered. "Sorry I was so slow to catch on. But you know, yesterday that was what I wanted to talk to you about. I'd been having a harder and harder time controlling my impulses around you. Kept wanting to throw you down and fuck your brains out, and I was starting to worry I might actually *do* it."

"Oh God!" Jack groaned, remembering. "And I was sitting there *dreading* what you were going to say. I thought you'd figured out that I was in love with you, and you were going to give me this big speech about how *young* and *immature* I was."

Riddick laughed softly and kissed the base of her throat. A shiver shot through her. "*Unusually quick refractory period,*" she thought to herself. *I hope that's still true. We have a lot of catching up to do.*

"Too bad it took a space battle with Reggie's best and brightest to set things straight. We coulda been fucking like crazed rabbits all last night, you know." He chuckled. "Not that I blame you. You didn't know the trap was there, and Reggie was almost on top of us anyway. It'll all work out. Most of it already has."

"Who's Reggie?"

Riddick sighed. His voice, when he spoke, sounded almost amused. "Lieutenant Reginald Jarvis. Good old Uncle Reg."

"He's your *uncle*?"

"Nah, not really. He ain't really a lieutenant, either. I don't know what his real rank is, but he wields a lot more power than any normal lieutenant ever has. He practically owns the Charybdis Project, from what I can tell."

"He's the guy who shot me," Jack whispered. "He visited me in the hospital afterward and tried to recruit me to help catch you. Fucker couldn't even apologize for shooting me and he wanted me to hand you over on a plate."

"So what did you say?" Riddick's hand stroked her cheek as he spoke.

"I told him he should stop trying to shove his dick up other people's asses and stick it up his own." She was gratified by the dry burst of almost silent laughter that shook Riddick's body for a moment.

"That's my girl," he said when he caught his breath.

"So he runs the Charybdis Project? What *is* the Charybdis Project?"

"I wish I knew, Babe. Whatever it is, it's been fucking with my life for years and I'd purely love to know why."

"You talked like you knew him, back during the battle."

"Oh yeah," he replied airily. "We go way back. First time I met him was when he visited *me* in the hospital."

"What, when you were seven?"

"When I was seven. He even told me to call him 'Uncle Reg' back then. I was excited for a while, thinkin' I'd finally found my family, but it was just bullshit, of course. Shoulda known. We looked nothing alike. He taught me how to play chess while I was healing up, though."

"Jeez, how long were you *in* the hospital?"

"Once I woke up? Another week."

"That's *all*? I was in the hospital for more than three *times* as long."

"Well, I just had broken bones and bruises. Nobody splattered *my* guts down a hallway."

She swatted his shoulder, pretending to retch.

"Anyway, I've always healed up fast."

"And you learned chess in a week." She could hear the skepticism in her voice and knew he would.

"Shit, kid, by the end of the week I was *beating* him at it." She glanced up at his face and saw his proud smirk. He *meant* it.

"What are you, a genius?"

He shrugged. "Don't know. All of my aptitude and IQ test results are 'Classified.' Never seen 'em."

"Jeez, Riddick! What the hell are they *hiding* in there?"

"Well, I figure it's like this: I'm actually this ravenous man-eating plant from outer space and I landed on Earth thirty-five years ago. In Chinatown. And this pimply florist named Seymour Mushnik found me and decided to grow me, but the only thing I'd drink was blood, so—"

He stopped when she swatted his bare chest.

"What in creation are you talking about?" she laughed.

“Darlin’, you have some serious *holes* in your education. Remind me to rent you some classic cinematics next time we’re somewhere civilized.”

“If you make me sit through *Casablanca* again—”

“Hey. That’s a great movie. You were just too immature for it last time—”

“*Immature?*” She pushed him down onto his back again and straddled his waist, laughing. “I’m going to hurt you for that.”

“I didn’t say you were immature *now*— hey! Quit that!” He grabbed her hands before she could poke him in the ribs again. Now he was laughing as he overpowered her and wrestled her down onto her back.

Jack laughed below him and raised her body up to meet his, undulating suggestively against him. “Let me show you exactly how mature I can be.”

“Ooh.” Riddick’s smile was almost predatory. “You’re *on*, Babe. This mean you wanna be on top?”

She shivered a little at the idea. *Oh hell yeah...*

He saw her response and chuckled. Suddenly she was no longer pinned beneath him. He’d rolled over onto his back and she was straddling him once more. She stared down at him, at the slight grin on his lips.

“Uh... so... how do I do this?”

He burst out laughing. “Trust me,” he managed after a moment, “It’s not that difficult. Here, move back a bit...”

His hands grasped her hips and lifted her up slightly, pushing her backward until she was poised above his own hips. She could feel something hard pressing against the inside of her thigh. His right hand moved off of her hip and traveled down to that point of contact. He shifted the position of his erection until she could feel the head of his cock pressing against her vaginal opening.

“Now all you have to do is push down,” he whispered, smiling wickedly.

She slid down onto him and they both groaned in unison.

He helped her find the rhythm, rising up to meet her as she rode him. She was amazed, though, at how much control he let her take. She explored his body with her hands and mouth after a while, amazed by the reactions she could coax out of him. They played for a long time before she felt herself beginning to climax. Then his hands gripped her hips hard and he began to drive up into her, thrusting hard until her orgasm overtook her and she collapsed against him, shuddering. He groaned and thrust up into her once more and she could feel his organ pulsing inside of her.

They lay still for a long moment before he drew her mouth to his and kissed her.

“Oh Jack...” he whispered as he released her. “I could do this all day for the rest of my life. But we have to get this crate moving soon.”

Jack sighed and nodded. They had to get underway. Not like they couldn’t do this again later, anyway... and again and again...

“So where are we headed?”

“Well, we’ve gotta go back. To Troubadour. The deep-space drive wasn’t fueled up yet so it’s the only planet in range. I’m *hoping* that Jarvis won’t think of looking for us to come back. We may have to hitch onto one of the system’s relay satellites first, if all of the ship’s codes were compromised. Get a new set of identities.”

Jack nodded, feeling embarrassed. “You still gonna say none of this is my fault? I know for a fact that if our codes were compromised, it was my doing.”

Riddick shrugged. “Well, you wanna take the blame for that, you can, but it’s not like it hasn’t happened to me before. It can be fixed. Just to be safe, though, I’m gonna list *you* as the ship’s Captain when we head back in. Don’t think it’d ever occur to *any* of them for me to be hiding behind a woman.”

She laughed, an image of Riddick hunkered down, tip-toeing along in her shadow, popping into her mind. “They’d never believe it. Does that mean you have to do what I say?”

She leaned in close to him, smiling into his eyes with hers. “Does that mean I own you?”

“Darlin’,” he said, flipping her onto her back, “you may not believe this...”

She gasped as he spread her legs and she realized that he was ready to go *again!*

“...but...”

He thrust into her, making her cry out in astonished pleasure. His hands came around her back and he lifted her up until they were both sitting, facing each other, locked together.

“You’ve *always* owned me,” he finished, and crushed her lips with his.

39.

Jarvis: Damage Control

The Board took almost a full day to contact him after the disaster.

During that time, Jarvis kept to himself for the most part. He wasn't alone in doing so. Shock and demoralization had spread throughout the *Messina* in the aftermath. The deaths of two dozen of the best fighter pilots in the Known Systems, gunned down by a single man, had still not been made public, although rumors about the space battle were spreading throughout the civilian media. Ordered to maintain an almost complete comms blackout, the *Messina* and its crew floated above Troubadour in contemplative silence while the planet below clamored for an explanation. Within the *Messina*, few words were spoken.

People wandered around with reddened eyes and puzzled expressions. Certain seats in the lounge and cafeteria were conspicuously empty and carefully avoided. Everyone took elaborate detours to avoid having to pass through the echoing vacant halls that had housed the pilots' quarters.

And Jarvis sat in his quarters, his arm in a sling, patiently awaiting the sword to fall.

Thirty-five years ago, real-time, he had stepped in to save this Project, after disaster had struck the first time. They hadn't stopped striking since, of course, but none of them had ever been as visible – as *public* – as the first one.

Until now.

Only twenty years had actually passed for him. Like all members of the military, he spent a great deal of his life in cryo-sleep. Right now he wished he could freeze his emotions and sock them away.

Fucking bastard killed more of my kids! he thought now and again. He knew the truth, too; Riddick had been running when he'd taken his shot. If it hadn't been for his shot, his attempt to take over the battle and kill the boy once and for all, Riddick would have left the arena with only two new notches on his belt. He'd slaughtered the fighters as a message, a personal message to Jarvis.

The worst part had been the helplessness. Floating in space in a crippled ship, forced to watch and unable to act as Riddick ran down each of his students and blew them to pieces. Finally he'd thought it would be his turn, but Riddick passed by his wreck, guns silent, in a mocking swoop before leaving the fray. That was when the message had struck him.

I'm not gonna kill you, Riddick had told him with that act. *I'm just going to wipe out everything you care about.*

More than ever, he knew there was no redeeming the boy. He should never have let him live in the first place. He should have terminated the project and everything in it after the failure of Phase I. He should have burned it to the ground.

More and more, Jarvis felt like a damned soul. Every life Riddick took seemed to hang around his own neck. His fault, his doing. He could have ended it at any time. A simple accident in the prison could have done it. Nobody would have cared; the world would have breathed a sigh of relief. If only that *other* Riddick didn't still live in his memory, the smiling boy triumphantly shouting "checkmate!" at him from across a hospital bed...

A boy who hasn't existed for almost two decades, he insisted to himself. *That boy was Riddick's first victim. That boy is dead and the thing that walks in his place doesn't have the least bit of humanity left. Any time you want proof of that, look in Jack Kowalczyk's file. Then find him, look him in the eye, and pull the fucking trigger this time.*

A smart rap sounded against the door of his quarters. "Lieutenant Jarvis?"

Game time, he told himself, and rose. He opened the door and found the petite Corporal from the day before standing in the hallway. She saluted formally.

"Corporal Mizuguchi, Sir. General Baldwin has requested your presence in the briefing room."

He nodded. "Lead the way."

"Sir." She turned smoothly and led him, although he knew the way even better than she did. After a moment he fell into step beside her.

"You did an excellent job yesterday, Corporal."

“Not good enough, Sir,” she answered gravely.

“None of us were ready to face him,” he said gently. She nodded beside him and drew a breath as if she was about to speak, but then released it with a heavy sigh. “Something on your mind, Corporal?”

He could see her carefully weighing what she wanted to say. Finally she came up with it. “Is there anybody who’s actually ready to face him?”

He sighed and shook his head. “I don’t know. Maybe the Fleet, if they were allowed to shoot to kill... he just seems to be stronger every time we encounter him.”

It pierced his heart for a moment as the image of a bright-eyed seven year old boy, swathed with bandages but smiling joyfully, floated through his mind once more. Once there had been a genuine human being behind those eyes. Eventually even the eyes had gone, and all that had been left was a soulless monster. Damn, he’d really liked that boy...

That boy has been dead for a very long time, he told himself again. All that’s left is the Charybdis. That’s all he is, a monster that needs killing.

But there were times when he’d almost thought he’d seen the boy again. The moment after Jack Kowalczyk had been shot, he could have sworn he saw little Bryan Riddick again, just for a moment, staring back with a wounded expression as if *he’d* been the one shot... For a time he’d hoped that the boy could be saved. He’d hoped that Jack would be the one to save him. Instead, the creature once known as “Bry” had decided she’d betrayed him and he’d tortured her to death. The boy was dead along with Jack.

He stopped before the conference room door as Corporal Mizuguchi fell behind him. “Corporal, I would like you to attend this meeting.”

A nervous frown creased her face. He knew what she was thinking: was he about to offer her up as a sacrificial lamb? Hardly. That wasn’t how he repaid people. “Yes, Sir.”

They entered the conference room and he gestured her to a seat.

Everyone was assembled. Drs. Aspen and Markowski were on hand, along with all four of his surviving Sergeants. Now they were eight. Nine if you counted the grave-looking General whose face filled the viewscreen.

“Thank you for coming, Lieutenant Jarvis. Who is your companion?”

Jarvis nodded to her. “This is Corporal Mizuguchi, sir. She took over the bridge when I left to pursue Riddick. I felt that her observations might be helpful.”

Unsaid, but heard by everyone in the room along with the General: *This is someone who has earned her place here. Someone on the move upward.*

General Baldwin nodded. “First, I want to extend my condolences to all of you. This must be a very difficult time for everyone on board the *Messina*.”

“Thank you, Sir,” he said quietly. Why did that phrase feel so rehearsed to him? Oh yes. Jack had used exactly the same inflections every time she’d said that phrase in Parker’s office, months ago.

“Under the circumstances, it has been decided by the Tribunal that the *Messina* will *not* pursue Riddick to Earth. We feel that your crew, even if they were deemed combat-ready so soon after this tragedy, would no longer be capable of maintaining enough of a level of detachment to facilitate a live capture. The *Messina* will remain in orbit above Troubadour for the time being.”

Jarvis nodded. He hadn’t expected anything else, really.

“I am very disturbed by the fact that you, Lieutenant Jarvis, appear to have disobeyed direct orders. Our analysis of your fighter craft’s logs indicate that you deliberately targeted the reactor core of one of Riddick’s engines. Had your shot actually hit on target, his entire ship would have been vaporized. That is *not* a disabling shot. You were attempting to kill him.”

“Yes, Sir, I was,” Jarvis answered softly.

“This is a very disturbing action, Lieutenant. Your impartiality seems to be compromised in this matter. Now, all of us are in agreement that your work for the Project has been superb, and we don’t want to have to remove you from your position. But we will have to review these events carefully. You are to remain on or above Troubadour while we do so. You are officially assigned to Administrative Leave for the duration of the review.”

These were actually much less stringent measures than Jarvis had expected. He realized that he was disappointed; secretly he’d been hoping that he and the Project were about to part ways.

And then what? he reminded himself. *A bullet in the back of the head some quiet night? An accident? Nobody leaves the Project alive.*

With one very large, very dangerous exception, of course.

“Yes, Sir,” he said after a moment.

“I expect you to use your time to discover exactly what Riddick was doing on Troubadour. Start with the man he killed, Peter Malcolm. If we can find out what motivated him to kill this man, perhaps we can get a handle on his mental state. You are to coordinate with Dr. Aspen and report your findings directly to me.”

“Yes, Sir,” he said again. He felt like a skipping disc... or a young woman mouthing formal “thank-yous” at the two men she knew were planning on ruining her life. Jack. Always on his mind now, never far from the surface. He hadn’t begun to *hate* Riddick until she’d died.

Dr. Aspen looked up at the viewscreen. “I already have a few ideas about what motivated that killing, General. If I may?”

“Certainly, Doctor.”

“Most of us already know what Peter Malcolm had been doing for the last several years. After his body was discovered, he was found to possess an extensive collection of—” her face twisted for a moment in loathing. “—female body parts. Trophies he’d taken from women he’d raped and murdered. He’d preserved them carefully and the forensics unit assigned to the case were able to identify most of his victims through DNA testing. He killed more than one hundred women on six different planets.”

Corporal Mizuguchi had never been privy to this information before. Now she retched beside Jarvis, her sudden pallor showing through her beautiful Asian complexion.

Aspen shot the Corporal a sympathetic glance. They’d all been horrified when they’d learned of Peter Malcolm’s hobbies.

“Malcolm, as we know, was murdered in a very specific way. His abdominal cavity was opened and his small intestine was drawn out very carefully and wrapped repeatedly around his throat. Riddick did this particular act on only one other occasion, after Miss Kowalczyk was shot, when he believed her to be dead. When he did it to the Special Forces cadets, he killed them first. Malcolm, however, survived for approximately six hours after the evisceration before Riddick finally stabbed him to death.”

Aspen took a deep breath. “I believe that this, too, was a revenge killing. I think we should research Malcolm’s female victims carefully, as well as any women who died similarly but have not yet been connected with Malcolm. It’s very possible that one of them had some kind of relationship with Riddick. We believe he murdered the cadets as a ‘punishment’ aimed at Lieutenant Jarvis. I believe that he was similarly ‘punishing’ Malcolm.”

“It’s an interesting theory, Doctor,” the General replied after a moment. “But that would suggest that Riddick has once more established a connection with another human being. I was under the impression that you no longer believed him to be capable of such connections.”

“Sir, it’s just a theory. It’s possible that Riddick attacked Malcolm for some altogether different reason. I’m only suggesting it because of the MO connection between the two incidents. There is, however, an indication that he may have a female companion with him.”

“Oh?”

“His ship was registered as the *Singing Swan*, owned by Roger and Angelica Porter. Someone using the name Angelica Porter purchased toiletries at a store near the Orleans spaceport two days ago. I haven’t been able to acquire any additional information yet, but this would indicate that Riddick does have a female companion.”

Jarvis found that he’d clenched his fists tightly. Riddick had a hostage. Maybe this “Angelica” thought she was with a safe person. Maybe she even knew who she was with and thought she could trust him. But sooner or later she would end up exactly like Jack Kowalczyk unless they managed to get her away from him.

And he’d been cut out of the loop.

“Very well,” Baldwin finally said. “It’s a plausible theory and one that needs to be explored. You are to inform the public of Troubadour that Riddick was on their world. You may tell them about the dogfight and its outcome. Do not release the pilots’ names, yet. We haven’t begun notifying their families. Do your best to get the cooperation of the local government and law enforcement officials. Find out everything you can about Riddick’s activities and movements while he was on Troubadour. Find out about this ‘Angelica Porter,’ if you can. We expect Riddick to reach Earth in another two weeks. I want to know what he plans to do by then.”

“Yes, Sir.” This time everyone at the table said it.

“One last thing, Lieutenant Jarvis. You will be on administrative leave for the duration of this inquiry. Your Sergeants will be managing the investigation on the planet along with you. I need you to name someone to take command of the *Messina* until you – or your successor – are restored to duty.”

Jarvis nodded his head at the woman beside him. “Corporal Mizuguchi displayed commendable skill and resourcefulness yesterday, Sir. She took control of the bridge when I abandoned my post to join the battle. I intended to recommend her for promotion to the rank of Sergeant when I returned from combat, and I still recommend it. I can think of no one better to put in charge for the interim.”

“Very well. Corporal Mizuguchi, you are hereby raised to the rank of Sergeant and put in charge of the *Messina* until further notice. Lieutenant Jarvis’s appraisal of your skills is noted in your record. Please be assured that, no matter what the result of our inquiry into his conduct should be, it will have no detrimental effect on your own record.”

“Thank you, Sir,” Mizuguchi stammered. She’d been taken completely by surprise.

Thought I was going to throw you to the wolves, huh, kid? he thought wryly. *I don’t do that kind of thing. Maybe Riddick would have, in my place, but I don’t. I still have a conscience.*

He stared at the darkened viewscreen for a long time after the meeting ended. He was the last one to leave. *God help me, I still have a conscience. And right now it’s trying to flog me to death.*

Finally he rose and headed for the shuttle bay. It was time to go down to Troubadour and begin cleaning up his boy’s latest mess.

40.

Riddick: Honeymooning

Jack watched him silently as he maneuvered the ship close to the comm satellite.

They were still three planets out from Troubadour itself, near the gas giant Harlequin. This particular comm relay should suit their needs perfectly, and should be far enough out of the *Messina's* scanning range to be safe.

The maneuvers were extremely delicate and Riddick was glad to see that Jack was paying close attention. He'd run her through an obstacle course out in the Oort cloud a few hours ago and her reflexes were excellent. Once he finished teaching her, she would be one of the best pilots in any System. He was thrilled that she would be staying with him well past that day.

He was in position. He locked the ship's controls so that it would stay with the satellite, the two moving in tandem. Finally he turned his attention to their comm equipment.

A quick check proved that all was not completely lost. "They didn't get all of the IDs," he told Jack. "The best news is that they didn't get the *Total Eclipse* or *Tarsin's Chance* IDs. That woulda told them all our movements for the last few weeks. But I don't want to reuse either one. Guess we're stuck with..."

Suddenly he began to chuckle. How appropriate! How *beautifully* appropriate.

"Hey kid, our ship is the *Audrey II*."

"The *what?*" She frowned at him. Long ago she'd told him how much she hated her legal first name. She'd been saddled with it in honor of a grandmother who'd disapproved of her son's marriage and hated her daughter-in-law fiercely. Riddick, who had only the vaguest notions of what normal family life was supposed to be like, figured she'd been cheated. Grandmothers, from his understanding, were supposed to be indulgent, fun creatures who were their grandchildren's favorite relatives.

He chuckled. "Hey, it's from a movie. But you're lucky I didn't make the owners Seymour and Audrey Mushnik. It's owned by Matthew and Jennifer Owens."

"Jennifer Owens." She smiled over at him, dazzling him anew. "I like that. So how come your ship profiles all have two owners?"

He raised an eyebrow at her, grinning. "I added in identities for you when I knew you were on your way to Seti Station, kid. Most of 'em were kinda shallow... not meant to stand up to too much scrutiny, but they should get us by as long as nobody is looking too hard at us. Hmmm... let's see how much attention we're likely to get when we land."

He locked the *Audrey II* electronic profile into the system and keyed in a query, accessing the newsfeeds.

"So are Matthew and Jennifer Owens married?"

"Nah," he chuckled. "Back when I created them, I figured we were gonna be a brother-sister team. Most of the identities got coded in that way as a result. The next batch won't be, though."

The news article he'd been hoping to see appeared on the terminal screen.

RIDDICK SPOTTED ON TROUBADOUR, HEADED TOWARD EARTH!

"Excellent! They bought it, Jack; they think we're on our way to the Terran System." He grinned over at her. She climbed out of the copilot seat and moved around to his side of the cockpit. The moment she was within reach he pulled her into his lap.

"Damn," Jack suddenly muttered. "Looks like I lost all my money."

"Hmm?"

She pointed at a small paragraph far down in the story, one he hadn't read yet.

"Riddick may have an accomplice or hostage with him. A woman going by the name of Angelica Porter appears to be traveling aboard his ship. Whether or not she is his prisoner is currently unknown."

Jack sighed. "Bet you my card is no good anymore."

"Hmm... probably not. Don't worry about it. I got plenty more." He kissed the back of her neck and felt her shiver. Things were going to degenerate into another mindless fucking session soon if he wasn't careful.

They'd ended up spending the entire day in his bed. He'd literally lost count of how many times they'd taken each other. After each time, one of them would comment on how they really needed to get to work now... but it kept on not happening. Only the sudden comical rumbling of both of their stomachs, reminding them that there were *other* bodily functions that needed attending to, had finally driven them out of bed.

He turned his attention back to the article. Jack in his lap was an enormous distraction. Two paragraphs in, the article mentioned the space battle.

Names hadn't been released yet, but the fact that Riddick had gunned down twenty-four fighter aces had been reported. The official count of his murders had risen from sixty-three to eighty-eight, when Peter Malcolm was figured in. No mention of Malcolm's own grisly activities was made.

Fuck. I did the worlds a favor by taking him out and they're making him sound like a goddamn Boy Scout, he thought angrily. A low growl escaped his throat.

"I love it when you do that," Jack sighed. She tilted her head back onto his shoulder.

"Motherfuckers are starting to piss me off," he muttered angrily. "Seems like anybody I kill is suddenly a candidate for fuckin' sainthood."

She laughed softly in his arms, turning her face toward his. "I didn't much care for it when they beatified me, either, remember? Ooh, look, Earth is on high alert." She leaned up and pressed her lips close to his ear. "You're a scary man," she whispered.

Yeah, things were definitely getting out of hand again. Amazingly enough, though, the animal within him seemed to be blissfully happy for the first time in its entire existence. Not tamed, just sated. But he could feel its hunger for her stirring again.

"Do I scare *you*, Jack?" he chuckled softly as he slid his hand into her shirt. She wriggled against him as he gently fondled her breast.

"Mmmm... no," she sighed contentedly. She'd closed her eyes. He could smell her arousal growing. His other hand slid into her pants and she moaned.

"You scare *me* a little," he murmured after a time. "Especially because all I can think about is fucking you. And—"

"And we have work to do," she finished with resignation. "Damn. We can't take a little break?"

"We just finished one fifteen minutes ago. Come on, let's wrap this up and we can take a *long* break before we hit the planet." He slid his hands back out of her clothing with regret.

He was amazed by how different it was with her than with any of his previous lovers. There were moments when he felt like a whole new world had opened up and he wasn't sure what to make of it. It was, he realized, the first time that he'd put his partner's pleasure ahead of his own.

Not that he'd been inattentive before now, but it *had* been different. Everything he'd done had been geared toward making his partners receptive to what *he* wanted, servicing their needs so they would service his. With Jack, however, it had all changed. Nothing seemed to get him off as strongly as watching her have an orgasm. He was astounded by how many different kinds she could have.

Some were explosive and some were subtle; he loved them all. Sometimes she thrashed beneath him, screaming his name. Other times she burst into tears as it hit her. Once she'd gone completely still, her face taking on a look of joyous comprehension as if the secrets of the universe had just been revealed to her.

"Hey you," she said abruptly, nudging his shoulder. "If you're not gonna do that work you were harping on about, I'm dragging you back into the bedroom."

He laughed and kissed her gently. "Just got distracted, thinking about you."

She snorted. "So you got distracted from me *by* me? Never heard of that happening to anybody before. Wonder what the psychoanalysts would say about *that*."

"You know they already have me pegged as a total psycho, Jack. They'd just say 'it figures.'"

She laughed and climbed out of his lap. "Get to work, dammit! I wanna *fuck*!"

He laughed back at her, loving how crude she could be at times. "You want something to do while I finish up here?"

"Sure."

"Okay, move your stuff into my room. We're sharing a bed from now on and yours is just too damned small."

“Finally!” she crowed, her eyes alight. She bounced off toward her room joyfully as he watched.

He chuckled and turned back to the console, forcing himself to concentrate on the programming he needed to do. He moved the ownership title of the *Audrey II* into Jennifer Owens’ name, listing her as the ship’s Captain. Hacking into the interstellar banking mainframes, he transferred funds from his hidden accounts into the Owens’ coffers. Behind him, he could hear Jack moving things from one room to the other, humming to herself.

He began the tedious process of creating a few backup identities in case they ran into trouble. Jack had finished her work long before he finished his, and he heard her programming the food prep machine. He’d established three sets of backup credentials when the food was ready, and he shut down the console.

“You decide it was dinner time?” he asked, turning around.

She smiled at him wickedly. “I think we’re going to need our nourishment...” Promise of a *very* exhausting night sparkled in her eyes.

“Let me just put in our course, and I’ll be right there,” he chuckled. He turned back to the navigation panel and began programming. After a few moments, he had it finished. They would appear to come in from Seti Station. The flight back to Troubadour would take sixteen hours.

As he went to sit down across from Jack, he found himself wondering how much of him would be left by then.

41.

Jarvis: Dissociative States

"I appreciate your cooperation in this matter, Captain. Thank you for calling us."

The captain in question gave Jarvis a sour look. "Meaning no disrespect, *Sir*, I wish *you* had notified *us* back when you first learned Riddick was on the planet."

Jarvis sighed and glanced at Aspen. *She* looked slightly amused. He turned his attention back to the police chief. "If we had let you know and you had attempted to arrest him, Captain, how high do you think his body count would have been?"

Another sour look, but no retort. They proceeded to the station's conference room in silence.

He heard Aspen's quick indrawn breath as they entered and got a look at the three people inside. He managed to contain his own surprised response.

Oh good God...

A man and two women were seated together at the conference table. The man was small and overweight, with a face that seemed to spend all of its time in obsequious expressions and was perpetually ingratiating. But the women...

One was a petite thing, sweet-faced with blue eyes and short, dirty-blond hair. She looked extremely familiar to him. The other looked very much like Jack Kowalczyk, physically. The nose and eyes were different, and the mouth was a little fuller, but he knew that if he'd passed her on the street he would have turned around for another, closer look, his heart racing.

He already knew that the two women were prostitutes. He already knew that Riddick, apparently, had spent time recently with both. Nausea rose in his throat. Now he remembered who the first woman resembled: Carolyn Fry, pilot to the *Hunter-Gratzner*, who died in the aftermath of the crash. Adroit questioning of the Muslim cleric had revealed that she'd been alone with Riddick when she died, although the holy man insisted that the planet's indigenous predators had killed her.

But had they?

This was horrifying. Riddick appeared to be acting out some bizarre sort of *necrophilia* with these women...

Both women were pale and looked deeply frightened. Jarvis glanced at Aspen and nodded. They were on *her* turf here. She nodded back and stepped forward.

"I am Dr. Aspen, and this is Lieutenant Jarvis. We are heading the task force investigating Riddick's activities in New Paris and on Troubadour. I understand that you may be able to help us?"

"Help *you*?" The counterfeit Jack exploded, her voice charged with fear. "We came here because we want you to—"

"It's okay, Brielle," the rotund man interrupted soothingly. "They're going to help us. Don't worry. You're safe now. They just need to ask us some questions."

"We'll never be safe again," Brielle replied, her voice almost a sob. The false Carolyn was staring at her hands, which trembled slightly.

Aspen moved to sit down at the table across from the trio. Jarvis followed her and took a seat beside her.

"Perhaps you would like to begin, Mr...?" She prompted, looking at the man.

"François Barbour," he replied, bowing his head her way. "I am manager of the Moulin Rouge."

*Of course. What **else** would you call a brothel?* Jarvis thought with concealed disgust. *Bryan, you've fallen far and hard, haven't you? Is there anything left of the boy you were?*

He already knew the answer to that. The last vestiges of Richard Bryan Riddick were long dead. The thing that remained in their place was a monster. He forced his attention back to the trio before him.

"The man we believe to be your Riddick began coming to our establishment more than four years ago. We would not see him for months at a time, of course, but it was clearly the man pictured in the paper. He told us his name was William Fry."

Jarvis made a quick note on his electronic pad. *Used first name of mercenary who had custody of him on HG; used last name of HG pilot.*

“Go on,” Aspen prompted.

“He described the physical characteristics of the woman he was seeking. They were almost a precise match with Marnie, here. She can tell you more about what he wanted.” He nodded to the blonde who so closely resembled Carolyn Fry.

She took a deep breath and began speaking. “The name he wanted to call me by was ‘Carolyn.’ He told me to call him ‘Riddick.’ We’d all heard of Riddick, of course, but we never thought he really *was* him...”

She swallowed hard, twisting her fingers around each other, knuckles white.

“He... liked to dominate. A lot of the things we did involved me being... caught alone with him in some small place. I was supposed to be afraid of him, but after we had sex I was supposed to tell him I loved him and that this time I wouldn’t leave him. One time...”

She swallowed again.

“One time, when he was climaxing... he said to me ‘Don’t die, Carolyn. Not for me.’ I asked him about it afterward, and he told me that the *real* Carolyn had died saving his life and that he missed her.”

“So you knew that you were playing the role of a dead woman,” Aspen said quietly.

Marnie nodded. Her eyes were glittering with suppressed tears. “It never occurred to me that maybe he’d killed her or something. I didn’t know he really *was* Riddick...” She looked up at them, face full of vulnerability. Her voice, when she spoke again, was full of a desperate need for reassurance. “Did he kill her? Would he have killed me, too, eventually?”

“We don’t know,” Aspen told her gently.

“Because, when he showed up this last time, he was *different*,” Marnie continued, her voice ragged. “He didn’t want to do the usual things anymore. He just wanted to... to fuck me and leave. He wouldn’t even *look* at me half the time. First night he was back, it was mostly normal, initially...”

She took a cigarette out of a small case and tried to light it. Her hands were shaking far too much and she handed it over to Barbour with a pleading expression. He lit it for her and gave it back to her. She took several long drags on the cigarette before she was able to continue.

“But about halfway through our first... encounter – usually we’d have sex three or four times before he was done – I heard him say ‘go away, Jack.’ I had no idea what it meant, but suddenly he was having *trouble*, which was a first for him. Usually he was so...”

“Virile?” Aspen prompted. All the Phase II Operatives were well-known for their intense sexual appetites.

Marnie laughed shakily. “Good word. Yeah, he’d never had trouble before. When he finally came... afterwards he wouldn’t say anything to me. He just got dressed and left. Paid for the full night, but he wasn’t even there for an hour. And after that he just got more and more... perfunctory. I finally told him I didn’t want to see him anymore.”

Jarvis blinked in surprise. Marnie noticed and glared at him.

“Look, mister, I know what you think you see here,” she snarled. “A cheap whore, right? Spreads her legs for anybody with the cash? That’s not what I do. We’re licensed professionals at the Moulin Rouge. My clients pay two thousand New Francs a night for time with me and in return I make their fantasies – whatever they are – come true. Some of them don’t even want to fuck. They just want someone they can talk to who doesn’t judge them. I’m probably almost as good a psychologist as your lady friend there. And I have the right to tell any of my clients if I don’t want to see them anymore.”

Aspen gave him a look of irritation. He nodded apologetically at Marnie. “I’m sorry. Please continue.”

She sighed in annoyance. “That’s pretty much it. I told him I didn’t want to see him anymore and I figured I’d never see him again. But a few nights later he showed up and negotiated to spend his nights with Brielle. When I heard that he called her ‘Jack,’ I figured that he’d just grown attracted to an actual, living woman, and I just didn’t *do* it for him anymore. Brielle can tell you the rest.”

An actual, living woman, Jarvis thought with horror. *Oh God. I wish to God that’s what it had been...*

Dr. Aspen made some notes in her book before she turned her attention to Brielle. It took the younger prostitute a moment to find her voice.

“He was really nice at first,” she said quietly. “He didn’t even seem to know what he wanted to do. We tried all kinds of things, nothing too weird, the first two nights. He had this one idea where we took a shower together and afterwards he had sex with me in the stall... twice, actually. He was very... gentle, most of the time. But, like Marnie said, he did like to dominate. He asked me to wear these clothes, the kinds of things a

teenage girl would wear, one who didn't have a lot of money, and he said that *she* dressed like that when he first saw her again."

A nauseating shiver passed through Jarvis. Just how sick had his boy gotten?

My boy is dead, he reminded himself. *Bryan has been dead for years.*

"The third night..." Now it was Brielle's turn to swallow hard. "When he showed up I thought it was going to be really nice. He even gave me a gift, a bottle of perfume... *Charmante*, which costs a fortune. He said it was *her* favorite."

"Excuse me for just a moment, Brielle," Dr. Aspen said. She leaned over to Jarvis so that he would be the only one who heard what she said next. "According to our investigation, *Charmante*-scented toiletries are what Angelica Porter purchased the day before the space battle. She spent about six hundred New Francs on a complete set of them."

He turned to her and murmured back. "Jack never wore *Charmante*, as far as we know. She couldn't afford it."

"Maybe she was wearing a knock-off version of it when they were reunited. Who knows?"

Jarvis nodded. None of this made the matter any less disturbing. He and Aspen turned their attention back to the pale girl across from them.

"I'm sorry about that, Brielle. Please continue," Aspen said gently.

"Well, he had a new fantasy he wanted to try. He was going to frisk and strip-search me..."

Oh, God, Jarvis thought, his stomach sinking hard. Riddick had probably done exactly that to the real Jack when they were reunited. Somehow, during his search, he must have detected the implanted tracer. Jack had thought it was a hormonal regulator; she would have objected if he tried to remove it. Was that how it began? Did he decide she'd betrayed him when she tried to stop him?

He buried his face in his hands for a moment, pain overwhelming him. *My fault*, he thought yet again. He could actually see it in his mind, an already-humiliated Jack struggling against her captor, trying to reason with him, only to awaken the latent beast within...

"So we started playing it out, and I figured he might get a little rough because he told me I might need to use the safe-word. Usually I pick the word, but he insisted on choosing it and it was a weird one, too—"

"What was it?"

"*Hunter-Gratzner*," Marnie answered softly. "He had me use it, too."

Brielle nodded. "Everything was going okay, and we were about to have sex, when the son of a bitch kissed me on the mouth! I don't let anybody do that except my girlfriend. That's *her* personal territory. And I'd told him he could never do that, and he'd *agreed* to it. I got so mad I hit him!"

She wiped at her eyes and sniffed. "I was so upset I couldn't even remember his stupid safe-word. He got *excited* after I hit him... he pinned me to the bed and fucked me really hard, even though I was yelling at him to stop, and he was *loving* it!" She wiped at her eyes again. "It was awful..."

Her breath hitched and she stared down at the table. Marnie's arm went around her gently.

Jarvis almost felt like throwing up. He could suddenly imagine that Riddick had done exactly that to the real Jack at the beginning of her ordeal. Brielle had no idea how lucky she'd actually gotten in comparison. If Riddick had decided to relive the entire experience, she'd have had to be identified through dental records and tissue type *too*...

Next to him, Dr. Aspen looked extremely pale.

Brielle finally got control of her voice enough to continue. "I threw him out when he was done, and Monsieur Barbour told him, when he came in the next night, that he wasn't welcome anymore." Her eyes fixed on Jarvis and Aspen, full of desperate pleading. "Is he going to come back and get us now? He told François to give us his apologies, but I'm so scared—"

"We won't let him get either one of you," Jarvis said firmly. "He's on his way to Earth right now. And I promise you that we'll make sure he can never come near either one of you again."

He'd make all the necessary arrangements. As much as he hated the insights they'd given him into Riddick's condition, those alone were worth the outlay for a state-of-the-art security system to keep the women safe. And if, somehow, Riddick ever did find himself drawn back to them, Jarvis would be sure to catch him before either woman was so much as touched.

"We appreciate the help you've given us," Aspen was saying. "As gruesome as it sounds, knowing that he has been sexually obsessing over dead women may well give us the key to his—"

“**DEAD?**” Brielle gasped. “What do you *mean*? She’s *dead*? But... *he told me she was alive!* He said he just couldn’t have her! Oh my god, are you telling me he *killed* her?”

It took both Barbour and Marnie to calm her hysterics. Jarvis excused himself quickly, running for the station’s men’s room. He barely made it in time, vomiting his breakfast into one of the toilets. He continued to dry-heave for several minutes thereafter, his head spinning. When he finally emerged, Aspen was exiting the ladies’ room, wiping at her own mouth.

“Tell me this is just a horrible nightmare,” she begged him.

He groaned and leaned against the wall. “I wish it were. Oh God, I wish it were. You know what this means, don’t you?”

Aspen nodded grimly. “He’s gone dissociative. His mind is fracturing completely.”

“He doesn’t remember killing her. He tortured her to death and he has no memory of it. Oh God.”

“We knew this could happen,” Aspen said raggedly, leaning against the wall next to him.

“We knew there was a *very slim chance* it could happen. That’s different,” Jarvis insisted. “We have to let Baldwin know right away. The other operatives—”

“They may never have that problem; you *know* that! Don’t forget that Riddick’s brain underwent a very unique transformation that none of them experienced!”

He glanced over at her. “Do you still think that’s the root cause of his problems?”

“I think it’s very likely,” she answered. “You know he was different afterward. His IQ jumped sixty points after he recovered. You tested him yourself.”

“Yes, I did,” Jarvis admitted with a groan. “But you know that IQ tests are often inaccurate... and he’d practically been off the scale even before the incident occurred. I just figured we were tracking some statistics that had been missed the first time—”

“Jarvis, you were expecting him to come out of the ordeal a vegetable, or at the very *least* with impaired cognitive function. Instead, his IQ jumped sixty points!”

“He was only seven years old! You *know* the tests are only partially reliable at that age!”

Aspen rolled her eyes at him and stalked away to the conference room. It was empty of the others when they reached it. She closed the door behind him and locked it before she turned around and glared angrily at him.

“Goddamn it, Jarvis, you need to stop this double-talk! I read the files! His foster father beat him nearly to death! When you were contacted and ordered to Earth, all of the EEGs showed that *Riddick was brain-dead!* You had to come to Earth because *none* of the subjects could be terminated unless you were physically present! And by the time you arrived—”

“When I arrived, the scans showed that his brain cells were spontaneously regenerating. He didn’t even *need* life support by then. He woke up two days after that and knew who he was.” Jarvis sighed. “I remember. You don’t know how *happy* we all were...”

It was impossible to describe the sheer joy and hope everyone had felt at that time, nor the way it had been dashed to pieces seven years later.

“None of the other subjects went through anything remotely like that. And none of them went anywhere near as crazy during puberty as he did,” Aspen whispered. “Whatever your beloved ‘Charybdis Factor’ did to his brain cells, *that’s* what’s responsible for his madness. I’ve been telling you that for three years now.”

“I know that, Aspen. We were researching whether or not a treatment for ordinary humans could be made using the technology, to heal brain damage. We shut that inquiry down after Riddick went crazy. File FP74E. Look it up; you’re cleared for it.” Jarvis buried his head in his hands. “You know I agree with you, Martina. The whole Project should be scrapped. It should have been scrapped after Phase I went bad.”

“What’s the official death count these days, Jarvis? How many people have died thanks to this Project?” Martina Aspen sat down next to him, looking miserable. She was his fault as well. He’d brought her in three and a half years ago, to help profile Riddick and his involvement with Jack Kowalczyk. Now she was trapped. There was no way out of the Charybdis Project once it sucked you in. Like the whirlpool in the Messina Straits on Earth; once it grabbed hold of you, it had you until you died.

“Seven hundred forty three. That includes the subjects themselves, all forty-two of them who died.”

Aspen laughed humorlessly. “How much higher does it have to get before the goddamned thing is shut down for good?”

“Minimum of nine hundred,” he replied sourly.

“Where do you get that number from?” She glanced at him in surprise.

“Well, there are one hundred fifty seven of us with full clearance to the Charybdis Project. I figure that if it actually *is* ever shut down, every last one of us will meet with an untimely demise. Anybody lower down than the Board itself will be viewed as an unnecessary risk to Interplanetary Security.”

They were silent for a long time, contemplating.

“So has any of this shit been worth it to you, Reg?” she asked a few minutes later, her voice sad.

“Oh yeah, sure. My wife and kids got sick of the way I was gallivanting all over the galaxy and stopped using the Conjugal Cryo-Chambers. Six years ago, Melanie finally got around to divorcing me so she could marry some guy *her own age*. She was three years younger than me when we met, and now she’s fifteen years older than me. I’m a grandfather and I’ve never seen my grandchildren, and my daughters don’t *want* me to show up. And the closest thing I’ve ever had to a son is on his way to Earth right now, and he’s turned into a rabid animal. This Project kills everything it touches, Martina. I’m sorry I let it touch you.”

“So what do we do now?”

“We go, and we report to General Baldwin what we’ve learned. And then, I don’t know about you but I plan to get very, very drunk.”

“You want company for that?”

“You’re on, lady.”

The two of them rose and left the conference room. Jarvis almost imagined he could see the swords floating above the both of them, waiting to fall.

42.

Jack: Soft Landing

“You should know that it looks completely fake.”

Riddick glanced over at Jack where she was curled on their bed and gave her an amused grin. “Hang on, kid, I’m only just getting started.”

He was building a curly-headed wig for himself, using a special custom head-form. Jack was fascinated by the process. The most impressive part, to her, was how dexterous Riddick’s large hands actually were, capable of feats of great delicacy that by rights should have been beyond them. She watched him manipulate the locks of hair down onto the soft vinyl “scalp” and fix them in place, marveling at the precision of his minute movements.

“So is that the reason you shave your head?” she asked. “So you can wear all kinds of disguises?”

“One of the reasons,” he replied, concentrating on his work.

“Why else?”

“So I can rub my own head for luck,” he muttered.

Jack rolled her eyes and made a rude noise. “C’mon. Why do you do it?”

He glanced over at her again, eyebrow raised. “Don’t you like it?”

“I *love* it.” Frankly, Jack had a hard time imagining him with hair. Whenever he was in disguise, he always looked odd to her. Hair on Riddick’s head just seemed wrong, somehow. “But you didn’t start doing it for me. When *did* you start doing it?”

“In Slam, back in Texas. Place was infested with whole *ecosystems* of parasites. You had hair, you *always* had head lice and shit. Easier just to shave it off, if you could get hold of a knife. I always had a few. They’d confiscate ’em and I’d make more. And you could shave with *any* of ’em,” he finished proudly.

Jack laughed. Riddick’s predilection with blade-making was one of his most interesting quirks. Anything that could hold an edge he could make into a shiv. But it went beyond that; his shivs were often works of art. They curved into the user’s hand as if they had grown there. He talked about some of them as if they had personalities of their own, and she believed him a little. He imbued them with something unique when he made them; a piece of his own craftsmanship, his own soul.

“Why didn’t you grow it out after you broke out of Nereid?” she asked, returning to the topic of his hair.

He chuckled. “Tried a few times. It just felt *wrong*. So I figured, hell, if I need hair I can wear a wig. Glue it right onto my scalp and who’ll know? Bought a few, learned how to make ’em. It’s kinda fun.” His mouth pulled into an ironic grin. “*Zen and the Art of Wig-Making*.”

Jack sighed, and turned her attention to the miraculous work his hands were doing. Under them, the wig was slowly shaping itself. She knew that, when he was finished, it would be flawless, utterly convincing on his head. Nobody, seeing him in it, would believe for a moment that it hadn’t grown there. He was a gifted builder of all sorts of things. Ironical that the rest of the galaxy saw him only as a destroyer.

“Maybe I should shave my head and wear wigs, too,” she joked.

“Don’t you dare.” He fixed her with a mock-glare and she pretended to cower from him. He grinned, his eyes traveling across her body. “I like your hair. Anyway, only one cue-ball per ship, Babe, and that’s me.” His silvery eyes twinkled in response to her snort of laughter.

“So what *is* your natural hair color?” She was pretty sure his hair would be jet-black, but he’d never actually let his stubble get long enough to confirm it. The other hair on his body seemed to back that up—

“Pink. Bright, shocking, Barbie Doll pink.”

“Thought so,” she chuckled. *Ask a silly question...*

The fun part was that Riddick’s silly answers were *always* worth hearing. He smiled over at her with mischief in his eyes and kept the madness going. “With one lime-green stripe down the back of my head, like a skunk. A *preppie* skunk.”

“What’s a preppie?” She’d heard the word in passing somewhere, but she couldn’t place it or its meaning.

“Indigenous species to Earth. Passes as human but *no human being* could have such tragically bad taste. Been around since the Twentieth Century at least.” He turned back to the wig and continued working. “They

play a lot of tennis and golf, for some reason. I think the golf proves conclusively that they're not human. Earth was invaded by aliens long ago."

Okay. Apparently, the translation of *this* particular bit of Riddick-speak was that "preppies" were the idle, tacky rich. She wondered if they really existed, or if he was just pulling her chain again.

"You know, if Dr. Aspen heard that, she'd rip up all of her profiles and do new ones."

"Richard B. Riddick, Paranoid Schizophrenic?" he laughed.

"Could be."

"Remind me to write her a letter about preppies. Been too long since I messed with anybody's head."

"Really?" Jack pushed at her own extremely-tousled mane. "I could've sworn you were doing just that less than an hour ago."

He smirked. "Gonna do it again as soon as I finish up this wig, little girl."

Sometimes it seemed like neither one of them could stop. They'd managed to get a little sleep, but neither one of them seemed to need more than a few hours. Jack knew that *she* was far too... well, too damned *horny* to hold still. Just looking at him filled her with wild thoughts and impulses. Their attempts to prep the ship for their return to Troubadour had been full of constant interruptions as one or both of them would suddenly be unable to wait *another second*. They'd christened practically every substantial surface of the ship – walls, floors, tables, chairs, the food-prep counter – with their frenzied coupling.

Jack had given up her attempts to keep track of how many times they'd made love, let alone how many times Riddick had made her come.

Deliberately she stretched her body, pleased when she heard the way his breath caught for a moment.

"How much longer?"

He chuckled and glanced down at the bulge in his pants. "Me or the wig?"

"How soon is it gonna be done so you can start doing *me*?"

"Do you ever think of anything else, Jack?"

"Not recently," she smirked. He shook his head, chuckling, and turned back to the wig.

"Well, the sooner you stop distracting me, the sooner I'll be done." He returned his focus to the wig, laughing softly. She watched him in silence for another fifteen minutes. Finally he stood back, looking pleased.

"You done?"

"Almost. Just gotta let the cap cure and it'll be ready to use." He switched on the heating element in the form and began cleaning and putting away his tools.

That was another of his little quirks. Riddick wasn't precisely a neat-freak, but he liked to have everything put away whenever possible. She'd begun picking up the habit a little. His only explanation, when she asked, was that nothing would break if nothing was loose. Ship rules. At least he'd told her she didn't have to wear anything to bed anymore.

Actually, what he'd said had been: "Anything you wear in bed with me is gonna end up shredded."

Riddick glanced down at his chrono and smiled. "Figure we have about half an hour before we reach Troubadour's space traffic control radius. So..." He began stalking towards her. She crawled backwards toward the head of the bed, pretending to flee. Suddenly he leapt, landing on the bed astride her body.

He lay down on top of her, pressing himself against her, and put his lips to her ear. "Just how hard do you think you can come between now and then?"

The answer, under his expert handling, left them both astounded.

"You ready for this, kid?" he asked her with a grin.

They'd managed to get themselves put together before they were hailed. Now Jack strapped into the pilot's seat, nerves tingling.

"I don't know, Riddick."

He reached over and squeezed her hand gently. "You'll be fine."

She took a deep breath and opened the channel. "Control, this is the *Audrey II* out of Seti Station requesting permission to land."

"*Audrey II*, this is Control. Please transmit your permits now."

Jack glanced over at Riddick. He nodded; the terminal was ready. She hit SEND and sped a small prayer of her own on its way at the same time.

The data they were sending would identify the *Audrey II* as a light merchant vessel primarily involved in agricultural product shipping. It listed their ultimate destination for this trip as the Rosette Nebula, to deliver supplies to the frontier planets there and ferry back the exotic vegetables that region of space had become famous for. Riddick had picked that latter cargo because it might explain away the plasma burn on their hull; pricey merchandise like that would attract pirates.

“*Audrey II*, this is Control. Please verify your crew complement data.”

“Two of us, Control. Jennifer Owens, Captain. My brother Matthew is my First Mate.” She smirked at Riddick and was rewarded with a leer.

“Do you have any cargo on board at this time?”

“Negative. We just came off of a maintenance break on Seti Station. We want to resupply for the trip to the Rosette.” She glanced at Riddick again. He looked pleased and gave her a slight nod.

“Very well. The Orleans spaceport is currently full, but we can set you down in the Montmartre port. It’s kinda far away from the markets, but it’s the best we can do right now.”

“That’s fine,” Jack told him, and managed a laugh. “So what’s going on down there, a convention?”

“No, we had some *big* trouble a few days ago. Public Enemy Number One was in New Paris. Richard Riddick himself. Now the planet is *crawling* with military people.”

Jack glanced over at Riddick once more and spotted a smug look on his face. She covered the microphone for a second. “You just love your own press, don’t you?”

“Gotta admit, it’s a bit of a thrill,” he chuckled.

“Wow,” she gasped for the Controller’s benefit. “Is he still here?” She let a little quaver enter her voice.

“No, ma’am, he’s headed to Earth now. But these uniforms are all over us, trying to figure out what he was doing here. You’ll see what I mean when you land. They’re sniffing into *everything*.”

Jack threw a worried glance Riddick’s way but he seemed unperturbed.

“That’ll be quite a sight. I imagine there are a lot of people who aren’t too thrilled to have them around, though.”

The controller chuckled through the speaker. “Yeah, well, they’re not trying to mess with our customs too much. I’m sending you the coordinates of your landing grid. Have a pleasant stay in New Paris.”

“Thank you, Control. *Audrey II* out.” She turned off the transmitter and checked to see if the coordinates had loaded. Once again, she glanced over at Riddick. “You sure about this?”

He nodded serenely. “You’re ready.”

Jack sped another prayer out into the firmament and began the descent. Beside her, Riddick sat calmly, not even touching the backup controls. She couldn’t believe he was letting her – making her – do this...

This is what I’ve wanted to do for years, she reminded herself. I’m going to be a pilot. I’m going to be a fucking good pilot!

She felt the exact moment that they hit the outer edge of the atmosphere. She had the ship angled a little too steeply and corrected it, managing to exhale after she was done. Riddick was calm and silent beside her, his hands still nowhere near the backup controls.

If something went wrong, he could probably take over in a split second, anyway. The fact that he wasn’t bothering to touch the controls was just intended as an added vote of confidence in her. She knew it, and she loved him all the more for it.

With grim concentration, she kept the ship in their descent window, nudging it slightly every now and then to center it better in its path. Her fear peaked out and began to recede. She could do this. She *would* do this.

Something buffeted at the ship and she flinched.

“Just a thermal,” Riddick purred from beside her. “You’re handling it fine.”

She adjusted the descent angle a little and took another deep breath.

The heat envelope around them began to dissipate and she could finally see out the window. The view was perfect, a dead-on match with the instrumentation. New Paris sprawled below and ahead of them as they descended. Jack altered their course slightly, homing in on their landing grid’s beacon. The fear was gone now, replaced with bubbling joy. A huge smile spread across her face as she began their final descent.

The last part was the trickiest, as she switched to repulsors for the final vertical drop to their landing grid. The craft shook for a moment as she made the switch, wobbling slightly, but Riddick's hands in the corner of her eye made no movement toward his controls. Slowly, breathlessly, she set the *Audrey II* down on the grid.

She began powering the craft down, feeling an amazing burst of coruscating delight pass through her body. *She had done it!* Without the slightest bit of physical assistance, she had landed the ship! Landings were the most dangerous part of any spaceflight, and she had done her very first almost without a hitch!

She took a deep breath and released her straps. Gravity seemed to have no hold over her at all as she bounded out of the chair and let loose a scream of victory. The next thing she knew, Riddick had lifted her up and was whirling her around him, their bodies pressed tightly together as they laughed into each other's faces.

"I did it! Riddick, I *did* it!"

"Yeah, Jack, you were brilliant!" He whirled her around again and crushed her lips against his.

A long moment later they released one another's mouths. Riddick pressed his forehead against hers.

"Jack, you just graduated to full partner." He pulled his face back and gave her a tender smile.

"Congratulations."

Neither one of them bothered to actually see the planet for another few hours.

43.

Riddick: The End of Summer

The sun had risen for a third time over New Paris following the space battle when Riddick left the ship, now known as the *Audrey II*, in search of fuel and supplies.

In theory Jack would be handling those transactions, in her capacity as the ship's official Captain, but the military presence really did have the locals on the run. Riddick figured he'd have an easier time of it than she would, especially since she found the troops much more intimidating than he did.

With curly hair, a mustache and beard, and spectrum contacts making his eyes look blue, Riddick looked enough unlike himself that he wasn't worried about being identified, even in the current climate of hysteria. And the hysteria was definitely there. Rumors abounded everywhere he went. Every recent death was now being rehashed by the gossip-mongers, who could find *some* piece of evidence that let them claim "Richard B. Riddick did it." To hear them talk, he'd killed more than one thousand people during his stay on the planet.

Sorry, folks, I only killed two. He had to admit it was amusing. Aside from his earliest killings, when he was completely out of his mind, he had *never* gone after "just plain folks." The only other attack on an innocent they could pin on him was Jack's own carefully-staged death. Nonetheless, the rumors had him slaughtering women and raping babies.

As if there weren't enough *real* things for them to be afraid of.

For any woman in New Paris, for instance, Pete the late and unlamented Perv had been a much greater threat. They'd never believe it, though.

'Specially with Jarvis and his cronies hiding away Pete's crimes, he thought sourly. He'd thought better of Reggie. Not *much* better, but still...

Fuel was easy enough to arrange for; he just had to sit through half an hour of Riddick gossip and speculation along the way. Decades of hiding his emotions behind a bland, noncommittal façade gave him the advantage, although occasionally he had to struggle to contain his laughter. Jack was going to *love* some of the rumors he'd heard.

Jack.

He indulged himself for a moment and let her come to him, filling his mind. The amazing part was that she really could *do* it. Riddick had spent almost his entire life in a state of mental multitasking; there was almost never just *one* thought going through his brain. But sometimes, when he was with Jack, his perceptions narrowed down until she was their sole focus, until every part of his unruly psyche was centered on her alone. She would become his universe. It was the most exhilarating – and also the most frightening – thing he'd ever experienced.

He realized that he'd been standing at the side of the avenue, lost in thought. That had never happened to him before. It was incredibly odd to him. It was also incredibly dangerous, even if the locals *did* think he'd left their planet and was light-years away already. Jarvis, after all, was somewhere in New Paris, playing at being a bloodhound.

Riddick gave himself a little shake and continued toward the Shipping Markets.

Montmartre was a much nicer part of town than the Orleans district, but it had the disadvantage of being a lot further away from the action. That made it a long walk for him. He grimaced as the fake beard itched him a little.

Jack hadn't wanted to kiss him after he'd donned his disguise, which had been both gratifying and disappointing. She'd claimed it felt like she was kissing a stranger, telling him that the mouth tasted right but the beard kept throwing her off. She'd absolutely refused to have sex with him while he was in his costume. She'd even threatened to freeze her face in its most innocent expression if he tried to take her anyway.

Point to Jack, he thought with amusement as he turned into the first of the markets. *I can't handle that look on **her** face any better than she can handle the beard. At least, not while we're fucking...*

Nobody should be able to look that pure and sweet and still do the things she managed to do to him.

The space traffic controller hadn't exaggerated. Military personnel were everywhere, prying into everything. They weren't interfering, but the locals were unnerved anyway. Two thirds of the planet's

merchants had dealings with the galaxy's underworlds; ordinarily the markets hummed with intrigue. Not today. As a result, it took him several hours to find a cargo worth taking on, and even longer to acquire the electronic devices he badly needed.

He was concluding his business when he spotted a pair of faces he'd been trying not to see, but secretly hoping for.

Well, well. Uncle Reg. And Martina.

They were exiting one of the shipping consignment houses, talking quietly. It was the house he'd been making arrangements with right before he was forced to abandon the "Porter" alias and blast off-planet. They'd traced him there.

Good thing I didn't wear a disguise as Porter, he thought with amusement. He didn't think Jarvis had any idea about the disguises, or how close Riddick had come to him on numerous occasions.

Now, once again, he found himself following his "Uncle."

Am I seeing things or seeing things? he asked himself after a few moments. Jarvis and Dr. Aspen, he decided, were more than just colleagues, and rapidly becoming more than mere friends. *Huh. Got a little bit of a heart left in there, Uncle Reg? And now she's grabbing onto it? Motherfucker.*

He knew that "Aunt Mel" had left Jarvis, and not the reverse, but it still struck him as a betrayal. The lack of logic behind his anger didn't make it go away.

Jarvis and Aspen took seats at an outdoor cafe and began discussing something, intently going over their notes. Riddick took a seat across the road from them, facing away from them and watching them in the reflection of a building. He ordered a coffee for himself and sipped it, frowning. He hadn't thought about Aunt Mel in years.

'Course I haven't. I'm no fucking self-flagellator.

Now, however, he couldn't help the memories that surged up to meet him...

Melanie Jarvis had acorn-brown hair and matching eyes in a kind, calming, pixie-ish face. Her skin was cream-colored except for the dusting of freckles across her cheeks and nose. Riddick would always remember the way she smiled and took both his hands in hers.

"Welcome, Bryan," she greeted him, kneeling down to be at eye-level with him. "We're glad you're here." Her smile went all the way into her eyes, crinkling their corners, and that was what told him he really *was* welcome. Behind her, the two Jarvis daughters watched him with undisguised curiosity.

It was a friendly kind of curiosity and Bryan found he didn't mind at all. He was every bit as interested in them. On the flight down, "Uncle Reg" had bragged about them at length. He knew that these girls were the two prettiest, smartest girls on the planet... after Christina, of course. He felt a small pang, wishing he knew where she was now, wishing she could have come to see him in the hospital.

Melanie – she would later ask him to call her "Aunt Mel" and it was still how he thought of her – kept hold of his hand as they left the terminal and walked out to the Jarvis' vehicle. Uncle Reg held his daughters' hands and listened to them as they interrupted each other with their stories of the things they'd been doing. Bryan Riddick felt absorbed, engulfed suddenly. He'd been drawn into something alive and marvelous and completely alien to him – a family, a *real family*.

It was the first genuine, normal family he'd ever seen from so close and now he felt like he was observing it from within. He sat between the girls, Patricia and Valerie, on the drive home, not having a clue what to say to them. That was alright, though; they had lots of questions for him and within minutes he was talking freely. Uncle Reg was right about them.

Patricia – "Patty" – was three years older than Bryan and almost intimidatingly pretty. Valerie, he soon learned, was a month younger than him. More or less. Cryo-sleep time, they soon told him, had a way of making the years shifty and protean.

"It's like that 'Rip Van Winkle' story in the books," Patty confided. "You go to sleep, and when you wake up the next day, a year's passed for everybody you know. Your best friend is too old and too cool to talk to you anymore, your clothes are out of style, the shows you liked to watch have been canceled and your favorite rock band split up. Now you have to make friends all over again with kids you barely noticed before, and you *know* sometime *they're* suddenly going to be too old and too cool for you, too. It sucks."

Bryan nodded silently. He couldn't imagine what it was like, even with the explanation, but it sounded very lonely. He was glad he was part of the family now and would never be too old and too cool for them. Other than Christina, Patty and Val were the two most amazing girls he'd ever met. They dazzled him and he was thrilled by their easy acceptance of him into their lives.

Enlightenment quickly came to him as he realized how cut off they truly were from the kids around him. They were the only "military brats" in their small town, and they lived there only because it was close to Aunt Mel's parents. On a base, they might have been with other children who spent a lot of time in Cryo-Sleep, but they were the only ones who did it there.

The other kids considered them odd, these girls and their mother who stopped aging now and again, boarding up their house and vanishing for a year or two at a time only to re-emerge exactly as they'd been. Strangers in a strange land, which superficially resembled the one they had left, they were forced to re-establish connections with people whose lives had moved on in their absence, while their own had been frozen. And even when they were in the world, their father was very rarely present, to the point where some of their friends accused them of making his existence up.

They couldn't even tell their friends where their father was or what he did, half the time. Those were frequently big secrets, and often they didn't even know. Val told him, late one night when they were supposed to be sleeping, that Aunt Mel had actually aged eight years without Uncle Reg since their marriage, in those times when he was on incredibly secret assignments. Aunt Mel and the girls wouldn't even know, on those occasions, that Uncle Reg was in Cryo-Sleep, on his way to some planet that needed his mysterious expertise. They'd only know when he came home and was surprised to see how much they'd grown.

"Mama was three years younger than Daddy when they got married," Val told him as they huddled under the tent they'd made out of his covers. "Now she's five years older! I'd just die if that happened to me..."

The summer had sped by, the best of his short life. For two wonderful months, he knew what it was like to have a family. He wasn't sure whether Val and Patty were his sisters or his cousins. Sometimes he didn't want them to be either; he wanted to marry them both when he grew up. But he knew that he belonged to them, and to Aunt Mel and Uncle Reg, and that they belonged just as much to him.

He knew it with all of the certainty a seven year old boy could possess. But truth has only a passing acquaintance with the knowledge of the heart, as he soon learned.

Patty had taken him out to the lake to meet Marky the Turtle. He'd been astounded at the size of the great reptile, who had lived there for as long as the girls had, and always seemed to remember them no matter how much time had passed since they last saw him. He'd deigned to let Bryan pat him on the top of his head, not even retracting it into his shell when Bryan, greatly daring, touched him under the chin. Patty said that Marky had been around for decades, and that he'd let children play with him for as long as anybody could remember.

They'd returned to the house in a state of deep wonderment and bliss, only to find Val crying in the backyard. Uncle Reg was going to be going away soon. He was going on a long trip, and the family had to start packing up the house. They were "going to the freezers" again. Val had only just acquired a new best friend, Pauline. Now she would lose yet another one again.

Patty tried to comfort her, although she was clearly stricken by the news herself. "It's going to be okay, Val. We can do this again, we'll be alright. You and me and Bry'll always have each other."

Bryan had nodded, holding one of Val's hands and one of Patty's. The three had spent the rest of the evening together, comforting each other and promising an eternal solidarity.

Bryan, of course, felt he had nothing to lose, himself. The other kids had looked at him oddly, not liking his city accent. They'd asked him if he was black or white, a question he found offensive. When he said he didn't know, they asked him what his parents were. They became smug and condescending when he said he didn't know *who* his parents were. He hadn't bothered to chase after their approval or friendship after that, concentrating his attentions instead on the two marvelous, beautiful Jarvis girls who didn't care about such things and liked him just as he was.

A few nights later the house was packed. They would be leaving it the next day. Bryan couldn't sleep. The idea of going into Cryo-Sleep excited him; it would be a new adventure. Patty and Val had told him that it passed in a flash; you didn't even have dreams. Still... it was a new experience, another wonderful adventure he would take with his new family, another game like the ones Uncle Reg liked to play with him in the evenings, asking him to invert this shape and graph that equation, and pick out the word that was wrong in a sentence.

He left his room after a while and crept out into the hallway. Maybe Val or Patty would be awake and they could talk. But he could hear the steady breathing of both girls behind their doors. He sighed and started back to his room when he heard something else.

Low voices. *Angry* voices. Uncle Reg and Aunt Mel were fighting. He crept down the stairs and paused at the landing, just out of their line of sight, and listened as they whispered angrily at each other.

"Dammit, Reg, this is *wrong*. You know it."

"It's not my decision, Mel. And you know *that*."

Aunt Mel sighed angrily. "It's cruel. It's cruel to us, and it's cruel to *him*. Can't you talk to the Board? Can't they make an exception? He's been through so much already, Reg, he *needs* a stable home—"

"I did talk to the Board. There's a lot more at stake here than our convenience, Mel, and you know—"

"Our *convenience*? He's *just a little boy*, Reg! I don't *care* about the rest of it, and I *know* there's a lot more than you're telling me; I'm used to that. But you can't *treat* people like that!"

"You know that if there was anything I could do about it—"

"No, Reg, I *don't* know. I don't know anything about what you do, or who you are half the time. You called me up two months ago and said you were bringing a little boy home with you, and when you told me about the things that had happened to him I said yes. You know I always wanted a boy. So did Patty and Val, they always wanted a baby brother. So I thought, okay, we can *adopt* this poor little boy. And he's so sweet—"

"But he's not for us, Mel."

"No, he's for your goddamned fucking *Project*! I can't *believe* you didn't tell me about that part! You just left that whole aspect out. Why, were you ashamed of it? Because you damned well *should* be."

"I didn't know how to tell you, sweetheart. I wanted this to work, too—"

"You know, I can't believe I didn't figure it out sooner. All those games? All those tests? Practically every night with your little Rorschach blobs and your lists of questions. I know how smart he is, I just can't believe how stupid I was."

Now it was Uncle Reg's turn to sigh. "Look, I don't want this to happen either. If there was any way to stop it—"

"Have you tried? *Really* tried? Did you talk to Baldwin about it?" There was a long pause now. Finally, Aunt Mel's voice broke the silence. It sounded different than he'd ever heard it before. "Don't do this, Reg. *Please* don't do this..."

Uncle Reg sounded like a stranger too, when he spoke. "I have no choice, Melanie. I'm sorry."

"Fuck sorry!" Aunt Mel spat. "You do this to us and this is the *last* time we'll put our lives on hold for you! I'm tired of this shit, Reg, all of it. Every last bit of it. Now you *call* General Baldwin and you let him know what's at stake *here*. In your own *home*."

He heard Aunt Mel's footsteps approaching and sped up the stairs in silence. He made it back inside his room and back into bed before he heard her reach the top of the steps. He pretended to be asleep when she came into his room.

She stood beside his bed for a long time. He slowly let his eyes crack open just the tiniest bit, looking up at her through his lashes. The moonlight from his window caught on the tears tracking down her face, making them gleam. It was the first time he'd seen someone look so anguished. He didn't understand why. He didn't understand half of what they'd been saying.

He was pretty sure that they'd learned they couldn't adopt him. But that was okay, as long as he could stay with them. Maybe it was better if he wasn't Val and Patty's brother anyway; he might want to marry one of them someday, after all. Poor Aunt Mel, wanting to have a little boy so much... of course, he wasn't really a *little* boy, was he? He was almost grown up, after all, one of the Big Kids...

Aunt Mel sniffled and slowly left the room, wiping at her face. She closed the door behind her gently, making almost no sound at all. Bryan Riddick was awake a long time after she left, contemplating the fact that he would never be Bryan Jarvis... but maybe one day Valerie or Patricia might have *his* last name, and that was kind of a neat thought...

The next morning there was a deep, painful silence between Mel and Reg. The girls sensed it as well and were anxious. They took their time when it was, at last, time to give their father good-bye kisses. When Uncle Reg reached for Aunt Mel to kiss her good-bye, however, she turned her mouth away and made him kiss her

cheek. Both girls looked puzzled by this; their parents had always been demonstratively affectionate with each other, until now.

Until now.

He began to have his suspicions when Aunt Mel came over to him and wrapped her arms around him, kissing his cheeks and forehead. He saw the dawning horror of matching suspicions in Patty and Val's eyes and they raced over to him, hugging him tightly and crying.

No, he thought, pain spearing through him. *No...*

He held them tightly, too, but didn't cry. If he didn't cry it wouldn't be true. It couldn't be true.

Two cars had pulled up to the house and Bryan noticed, with a pang, that his little suitcase was being loaded into one of them. The girls hadn't bothered to pack their belongings. They would be back in their house the very next day, as far as they were concerned, and didn't need anything. But his suitcase was being loaded in the car... and Aunt Mel and the girls were getting into *the other car*...

All three of them stared back at him, their faces full of pain. He started forward, wanting to run to them, and felt Uncle Reg's hand on his shoulder, firm and unyielding. He watched, stricken, as the car pulled away. When he glanced up at Uncle Reg, he startled a bleak, broken expression in the man's face.

They walked to the remaining vehicle and got inside it. Their driver wore a military uniform and had saluted Uncle Reg. Now they pulled away from the house. Bryan stared back at it, pain running riot through him. He knew he would never see it again.

He didn't say a word to Uncle Reg as they drove back into Albany. He kept his face empty and still as the stones Marky the Turtle sunned himself on. He would never see Marky again either, he realized.

Finally the car pulled up to a small brownstone house. Uncle Reg – never again to be truly thought of as anything so familial – took his suitcase out of the trunk and walked him up to the door. An elderly Black woman was waiting eagerly behind the screen door and opened it as they approached.

"You made excellent time, Lieutenant Jarvis! Is this our boy?"

Uncle Reg (*Not my uncle, never my uncle again*) nodded and gave the woman a tight smile. "Mrs. Skinner, this is Bryan Riddick. Bry, this is Mrs. Velma Skinner. She's your new foster mother."

He knew he had to say something. He managed a quiet "hello."

Mrs. Skinner led them inside and straight to his new room. He began to unpack immediately, doing his best to ignore his former Uncle.

"I have to go now, Bry," Reg finally said, his voice soft.

He paused for a moment, but did not turn around. "Good bye, Lieutenant Jarvis."

There was a long moment of silence.

Just go. Just go, god damn you, he thought.

Finally Lieutenant Jarvis left the room. After a moment he heard the car pull away.

"So," Mrs. Velma Skinner began after a moment. "I'm sure glad to have you with us, Bryan. In a little while you can meet the other kids and—"

"My name's not Bryan," he said quietly.

"Sorry? But Mr. Jarvis said—"

"He was wrong." Richard B. Riddick turned around and fixed Mrs. Skinner with a keen expression that many had seen since, and few had not trembled in front of. "My name is Richard Bryan Riddick. You can call me Richard. *Nobody* calls me Bryan anymore."

He lived with Mrs. Skinner for three years, but he never let her get close to him. And he never, ever let anyone call him "Bryan" again.

More than two decades had passed since that last day. Now Riddick watched the reflection of the man who had once almost been his father, but who had ultimately betrayed him worse than anyone else in his life ever had, ever could.

"Uncle Reg," he murmured softly, and sipped his coffee.

44.

Cartwright: An Unsatisfactory Debriefing

Teresa Cartwright was starting her shift when the first military attachés arrived and began interviewing the staff. She tried not to feel the unease bubbling through her and continue with her schedule.

It's just routine procedure, she told herself. They're here because of Malcolm. That's all.

Peter Malcolm, in her opinion, was no loss to anyone. His behavior to the patients had always disturbed her and she'd hated having to work with him. Not that she'd wish that kind of death on *anyone*...

She shook her head, dismissing her vagrant thoughts, and got back to work. She had two primary regens to do and a whole slew of checkups. No time for idle speculations. She hoped they wouldn't try to interview her until she was done with her patients.

They waited for her to finish her shift before they took her aside. She was led to the staff break room, which had been taken over by the officers. She looked her interviewers over with a little curiosity.

The man was tall and gaunt, with thick, silvery hair and icy blue eyes. He looked like he was in his late forties. Given how much time military personnel spent in Cryo, though, he could be a great deal older than that. His insignia identified him as a Special Forces Lieutenant.

The woman beside him was large and big-boned, with a strong, handsome face. Her dark brown hair was pulled back in an elaborate French braid that dropped halfway down her back. She seemed to be about the same age as the Lieutenant. Something about her said that she wasn't actually military herself, but a civilian consultant of some kind.

Writing stories about people in your head again? she asked herself as she sat down.

Both of her interviewers looked extremely tired.

The Lieutenant picked up a folder and consulted it, glancing up at her briefly. There was no sign of interest in his eyes. "Dr. Teresa Cartwright?"

"Yes."

He nodded perfunctorily. "I'm Lieutenant Reginald Jarvis and this is my associate, Dr. Martina Aspen. We're interviewing everyone on your staff in an attempt to determine why your former associate, Peter Malcolm, was murdered by Riddick. We have some very simple questions to ask you. It shouldn't take too long."

Yes, she'd been right. They were just interested in Pete. She didn't know why she'd ever thought they were coming for any other reason—

"Dr. Cartwright, did you associate with Mr. Malcolm outside of work at all? Did you know him well?"

"No, Lieutenant," she answered. "I maintain a strictly professional relationship with all of my colleagues. However, I think you should know that I wouldn't have, even if I didn't have that rule."

The ice-blue eyes that met hers were shrewd. "And why is that, Dr. Cartwright?"

She sighed. If there was any truth to her suspicions, they probably already knew it. She might as well tell them. "Lieutenant, I believe that Peter Malcolm was a very dangerous man to women. I think he was a misogynist and a sadist. From time to time we would have complaints about his behavior towards our female patients. He liked to see them scared. He enjoyed participating in procedures where they would be in pain."

Now it was Dr. Aspen who spoke. "Did you ever report this?"

"Several times. But if you know anything about this place you'll know how hard it is to get qualified help. Peter Malcolm, for all his faults, was an extremely competent technician. Most of the time we couldn't get the women he bothered to follow through on their complaints, so the owners didn't listen." She felt bitter anger lodge inside her chest. They should know all of this. If they'd done their homework, they'd know why every last member of the staff was stuck in this semi-legal hellhole, cut off from the world of legitimate medicine—

"Had there been any complaints about Mr. Malcolm recently, Doctor?" the Lieutenant asked.

She shook her head. "No, nothing like that. He'd been behaving himself lately, for the most part. Nobody accused him of anything."

"Were you aware of any changes in his behavior?" Dr. Aspen asked.

“He acted a little nervous for a day or two, a few days before he died. I thought, at the time, that maybe one of our clients finally gave him some hell for messing with his wife. But then he calmed back down and seemed fine.”

“Is there a specific client you’re thinking of, Dr. Cartwright?” Back to Lieutenant Jarvis. These two tossed questions back and forth like they’d worked together for years.

She shrugged. “No. Like I said, he’d been behaving himself lately.”

“Had the clinic received any threats that you were aware of?”

Now *that* was a generic question. It sounded like they were almost done with her. “No. Not that I’d been told about.”

Jarvis nodded, and glanced back down at her file. “You made a data query a few days before Peter Malcolm died. You wanted to know if Audrey J. Kowalczyk had any sisters or cousins her own age. Would you tell us why you were interested in this?”

For a moment she froze. She’d wondered if someone would come and ask her about that, after it became common knowledge that Riddick had been in New Paris. But surely such inquiries were beneath the notice of the military...?

Not, she realized, when someone from the very same clinic was one of Riddick’s victims.

She sighed and grinned. *Paranoia. Still gets me every time.* They already knew who she was and how she’d screwed up her medical career. They were just tying up loose ends here, loose ends that had nothing to do with her.

“It was kind of silly, actually. One of our patients had a newspaper in her room with an article about Audrey Kowalczyk’s death. I noticed it and read it. She’d thrown it away so I figured she wouldn’t mind. It was just that she resembled the girl in the picture a good deal, and I wondered if they were related.”

Now Jarvis’ stare had become intent. “What was her name?”

“Rebecca Tarsin. I can pull her records if you’d like.”

Both Jarvis and Aspen, however, looked abruptly disappointed. Somehow, what she’d said had answered their questions completely, and in a way that told them they were looking at a dead end.

“That won’t be necessary, Dr. Cartwright. Thank you for your time.”

She stood up and started out of the break room, but she stopped at the door for a moment. “There *is* one thing, though.”

“Yes?” The perfunctory disinterest was back in both interviewers’ eyes.

“Well, it’s the man she was with. He was pretty big, similar in build to Mr. Riddick, I’d say, and there was one time, when he got angry with me, when I almost felt like that’s who I was looking at...”

Interest sparked back in their eyes. “Describe him,” Jarvis prompted.

“Straight, dark brown hair. He kept it cropped and had a goatee. His eyes were brown and—”

Jarvis cut her off, shaking his head. “It doesn’t sound like Riddick, especially given what we’ve learned of his appearance the last few times he was definitively sighted. Your Mr...” He glanced back at his notes.

“Tarsin? Is that it?”

She nodded.

“Your Mr. Tarsin sounds like just another prospector. Had you read the article shortly before you two argued?”

She nodded again, feeling stupid.

“That’s why he reminded you of Riddick, I’m sure. Thank you for your time, Doctor. We won’t keep you any longer.”

Unspoken: *And don’t take up any more of our time on worthless false leads.*

Cartwright exited the room, a little miffed, and headed for her office. They could have heard her out...

What the hell? Did I want Colin Tarsin to be Riddick? she asked herself.

She should, she reflected, be relieved. If Riddick had never been near her, she would never be in any danger from him. She knew almost nothing about why the military was involved or what Riddick had been doing on Troubadour in the first place. All she knew was what she’d read in the papers, along with the crazy rumors floating through the coffee houses and bars. Jarvis and Aspen, with their Special Forces affiliations, had to have a lot more information at their disposal than that. They’d know if she was saying something interesting. She hadn’t been.

Sitting down at her chair, though, she saw him again in front of her, slamming his hands down on her desk with animalistic rage in his eyes. Saw him again, in Rebecca's bedroom, throwing the mouth-bit across the room in fury. Remembered the look of hatred she'd seen on his face, halfway through the regen procedure, as he stared at Peter Malcolm, who was enjoying Rebecca's pain a little too much.

And she remembered his words to her the next day, after he punched her desk...

"That girl has gone through more traumatic shit in her life than *anyone* should have to experience. I don't want her to feel *any* more pain..."

At the time she'd thought she'd looked into the eyes of a killer for a moment. A man who would annihilate anyone who hurt Rebecca.

If he *had* been Riddick, and Pete had tried something on Rebecca...

Pete would have ended up exactly as they found him, she thought.

But he wasn't Riddick, she reminded herself. *He was just another prospector.*

Another part of her mind seemed to snort in droll amusement. *The way Rebecca Tarsin was just another ex-hooker?*

She stood up and headed back for the break room.

It was empty when she arrived. She'd been one of the last people they'd interviewed. By the time she got back to her office, she'd come up with a half dozen reasons for why she was acting like an idiot.

Despite the fact that Lieutenant Jarvis had left a number behind with the staff, in case anyone remembered something important, Teresa Cartwright decided not to call it. Her active imagination wasn't important, she told herself. And that was all it was, an active imagination.

Colin Tarsin couldn't possibly have been Richard B. Riddick.

45.

Jack / Jarvis: Naviguessaion

Astrogation charts, Jack decided, were a stone bitch.

She'd spent the entire day on them and she still wasn't sure of her results. Of course, it didn't help that she was constantly being distracted by thoughts of Riddick, of the amazing things he'd done to her body for the past two days. She was also still soaring, inside, from her first landing. What a magnificent experience that had been, terrifying and exhilarating at once...

*And I am **not** getting any work done*, she reminded herself.

It should be simple. *Should be*, of course, had so little to do with reality, especially when one factored in the wicked sparkle that had danced through Riddick's eyes as he'd given her the instructions.

All she had to do was plot a course from the Corsair System to the Achilles Mining Station that would take less than a month to travel. Well, he wanted at least two alternate courses, too.

Problem was, the space between the two points was thick with stars and nebulae, which had to be dodged. After seven hours of plotting, Jack was relatively confident that she'd found four workable routes, but she wasn't sure. The look in Riddick's eyes, the little twist to his smile, had told her it couldn't possibly be easy, not even a little.

She was looking over the calculations yet again, trying to figure out what she might have missed that he'd catch her on, when she finally heard him returning. The fact that she could hear him amused her a little. He could walk as silently as a cat when he wanted to; he only clunked his feet like that when he wanted his presence to be conspicuous.

She watched the opening between the upper and lower level and blew Riddick a kiss as his head appeared. He smiled and climbed the rest of the way through, heading straight for her.

"There'd better be more where that came from," he chuckled, bending over her. She lifted her head up and pressed her mouth against his. There was always more, she thought to herself. There always would be.

She sighed happily into his lips as his hands moved over her body, her own hands stroking his upper arms. It didn't surprise her at all when he lifted her out of the seat, scattering her charts everywhere as he carried her into their room. It was the first thing either one of them thought about, lately, when they saw each other.

"Mind if we skip the preliminaries?" he asked as he dropped down onto the bed, pulling her down on top of him.

She caught his lower lip with her teeth for a moment even as she shrugged out of her top. "As long as you don't plan on skipping the fucking, fine with me."

He chuckled. "You know I never skip that."

They didn't bother undressing completely; they just pushed their clothes out of the way, removing anything that was inconvenient but not bothering with the rest. In a moment Jack was flat on her back, her calves resting on Riddick's shoulders as he thrust into her and she gasped. Their eyes were locked as he rode her; he insisted on her keeping her eyes open at all times whenever they made love.

"Shouldn't've been gone so long," Riddick murmured as he drove into her repeatedly. "Got a bad case of withdrawal going."

"Me too," she gasped. "I didn't know you'd be gone all day."

"Didn't plan to be, Darlin'. Won't happen again, either." He moved her legs down onto his arms so he could bend forward and cover her mouth with his. She slid her arms around his back and held on tightly. She could feel her climax approaching.

He could sense it as well, apparently. He stilled for a moment and released her mouth, cupping her face in his hands. When he began moving again their eyes were locked once more. Her orgasm hit a moment later, striking like a blitz. "Oh *God*..." she moaned.

"Shhhh..." He rested two of his fingers on her lips, thrusting into her even faster. Pleasure crashed over her with each impact and she could hear her own cries as if from a distance. Above her, Riddick's mouth suddenly twisted and a look of almost-agony appeared on his face as his own climax struck. They shuddered together for a long moment.

Afterward, they were quiet for several minutes. Finally Riddick sat up. "Gonna have to do that several more times before we're through tonight, Jack. Been saving up all day."

She chuckled. "No argument here. You don't know how hard it was for me to concentrate on that course-plotting you gave me. I kept thinking about the things I wanted to do with you."

He smiled wickedly in response. "That mean you didn't finish your charts?"

"No, they're done. I did four."

"Four, hmmm?" He looked skeptical. "Guess it's time to take a look at them." He rose and headed for the outer living quarters, not bothering to reassemble his clothes. Glancing back at her in the doorway, he smirked. "You'd better get all the way undressed while I'm gone, Babe."

She was completely bare by the time he returned, carrying her charts and the source materials.

"Very good. Now, let's see what you've got here." He piled them on the foot of the bed and crawled up to sit beside her.

"What, am I gonna be the only naked person here?"

"Fine," he muttered, shucking out of his clothes. "Better?"

Jack grinned. "Much." She could never get enough of looking at his body. She loved his size, his proportions, the way his muscles played under his beautiful golden-brown skin... such perfect skin, too, smooth and flawless. She'd heard that he'd been shot once, at *least* once, but she hadn't found a scar on him and she'd been memorizing every inch of his skin.

He chuckled and looked over the first chart. "Hate to tell you this, Babe, but this one takes five weeks to travel."

"What?" Jack moved next to him. "No. No way."

"Sorry... big old yeah. Five weeks minimum."

"But..." She gestured to the shape of the route, tracing it with her finger. "There's no way that would take longer than four weeks, Riddick, I'm sure of it!"

He laughed and caught her finger, drawing it back to one spot on the route. "What about this?"

"What? That's empty space." There was a notation some kind, but the area wasn't marked as hazardous for travel...

"That, Jack, is the Quagmire."

"The Quagmire? What's that?"

"It's marked right on there, kid. It's a space-time anomaly. Didn't you figure those in when you were plotting?" He glanced at her, seeming to already know the answer. She blushed. "Come on, Jack, just because it ain't twinkling doesn't mean it ain't there. Lots more than stars in space."

She nodded, embarrassed. "So, what is it?"

"Space-time anomaly, I told you. It's almost like there's a gravity well there, or something. Really weird curvature to the space in the region. They call it the Quagmire because, when you enter it, it's like everything slows down. Adds a week, minimum, to the trip-time of anyone passing through it. There are rumors that some ships disappear completely, but I think that's just a Stellar Legend."

He smiled. "Now, that was pretty deliberate, by the way. Everybody plots a course through the Quagmire when they're first learning navigation. Did it myself, for *real*. Spent two weeks slogging through the Quagmire about a year into my escape."

She giggled. "Really? How come it took you *two* weeks?"

"'Cause 'Dummy' here figured he should turn around and back out of the damned thing. Brilliant move. That's the second lesson... if you ever *do* get stuck in an anomaly like the Quagmire, plow on through, *don't* turn around." He rolled up the chart and reached for her next effort. "Now... let's see how you did with this one."

She really liked this route; it was almost as good as she'd thought the Quagmire route would be. She hoped there wasn't anything wrong with it...

The look on his face told her there was, before he even spoke.

"Wrong again," Riddick told her with a chuckle. "You'll need to add a year to the trip time if you follow *that* route."

"A whole *year*? What could possibly do that? I don't see any anomalies on that route."

"It's not an anomaly," he replied, leaning close and pointing his finger at one area of space near a G-type star. "It's an Interdiction Zone, right in here. You go anywhere within a parsec of the Scylla System and you

violate the Zone. They have three Fleet ships stationed nearby where they can respond quickly, and the second you *emerge* from the Zone, they're all over you. You're arrested and you spend the next full year in Level Five Quarantine."

"You have *got* to be kidding me."

"Nope. Your course would take us within half a parsec of Scylla. And if we attempted to *resist* arrest, those Fleet ships are authorized to blast us back to our component atoms. And they would."

"Why? What's *in* there?"

He chuckled. "That, my love, is the home of the legendary Scylla Spore. A life-form so virulent and so deadly that even minute exposure will result in infection, and there's no cure. Death takes months to years, and it's an *extremely* painful way to go. The spore progressively alters your DNA, causing a whole shitload of possible disorders. It also makes you go completely insane. Wanna go there for our honeymoon?"

"God, that's *awful*!"

Riddick feigned a hurt expression. "What, won't you marry me? After everything we've done I coulda *sworn* we were engaged... don't you respect me anymore?"

Jack burst out laughing and pounced at him. He fell onto his back, pretending she'd pinned him. The two of them laughed together for a moment. Jack rested her head against his chest and closed her eyes. "Honestly? Feels to me like we already *are* married."

He chuckled. "Well, if you ever want to make it official, I'll bet Imam would be delighted to do the honors."

Her heart seemed to stop for a moment.

"*Imam!*" she gasped. "Riddick, he thinks I'm *dead*!"

Riddick grinned smugly at her. "Nope."

"But—"

"Oh come *on*, Jack, you don't think I'd let him believe that, do you? He knows you're with me. If I *hadn't* managed to get to you through the placement agency, I woulda come for you when you were en route to New Mecca. We had it all worked out." He gave her ribs a gentle squeeze. "He's been a very good friend to both of us. Family, really. I wouldn't let him mourn you."

Jack sighed and closed her eyes again. She felt both relieved and ashamed. The shame was two-fold; first, that she could think Riddick would be so callous, and second, that she hadn't thought *at all* about what Imam might be going through until now.

"Let's do it," she said after a while.

"Again? You never think about anything else, do you?" he teased her.

"I don't mean sex this time, you perv! I mean, let's have Imam marry us." She looked up at him shyly. "That is... if you want to?"

The smile he gave her was amazingly tender. "I want to. I definitely want to. But you know what else I want?" The smile was suddenly wicked. "I *do* want to do it... I want to fuck you right now."

"What about my other two charts?"

"We'll look at them after we're done, Darlin'. I'm looking forward to seeing Chart Number Four, you know. Supposedly, there's only one solution to that little puzzle I gave you. Should be interesting to see what you found."

He lowered himself down onto the bed and drew her on top of him.

"You mean I got another one wrong?" she asked in annoyance.

"Not necessarily," he chuckled. "Maybe you found a way nobody else discovered. It happens from time to time. We'll find out later."

He lowered her down onto him and for a while star-charts were the very last thing in her mind.

"This time line makes no sense," Dr. Aspen muttered, shuffling through her papers.

Jarvis, who was making yet another pot of coffee, glanced over at her with a frown. "What's wrong with it?"

"Short answer?" Aspen looked up and grimaced. "Everything. It's *all* wrong."

Jarvis hit the switch and the coffee-maker began to mutter to itself. He rejoined Aspen at the table. "Explain?"

It was four in the morning. The two of them had been going over their notes together for several hours, trying to piece together Riddick's activities on the planet. They'd had little luck and less sleep. They were on their fourth pot of coffee... possibly their fifth. He couldn't exactly remember.

"Okay," she began. "Supposing Riddick *did* come directly to Troubadour after he murdered Jack Kowalczyk... according to the time-of-death data, he would have left Seti Station three days after she disappeared, at the earliest."

Jarvis nodded, swallowing. As always, a painful shudder passed through his stomach. Three days. Riddick had kept Jack alive for three days before he finally let her die. He couldn't even begin to imagine what that hellish ordeal would have been like for her.

My fault, the tiny voice within him whispered once more. It had been whispering to him for decades now. He wondered when it would begin screaming, and how much longer after that he would manage to stay alive.

No, he told himself. *This one doesn't rest with me. It rests with him.*

He tried not to think the name "Bryan." Bryan Riddick was long dead. He had all the proof he needed. The monster that had taken Bry's place had even told him so, more than a decade ago real-time.

He looked up at Aspen after a moment and nodded again. "And?"

"Given that schedule, his earliest possible ETA on Troubadour would have been *more than a day* after Benicio Godot was murdered."

He nodded once more, chewing on his lip. "And yet Latent Prints pulled up a partial fingerprint on Godot's cufflink that matches Riddick point-for-point," Jarvis reminded her.

"I *know*," Aspen muttered. "And then there's the whole thing with the *Singing Swan* itself. *It* didn't arrive on Troubadour until half a day after Peter Malcolm was murdered, and it didn't even come *out* of Seti Station – they tracked it in from the Cygnus Systems."

Jarvis could see her point, and he hated it. *How does he do that?* he wondered idly. Nothing was ever simple with Riddick. "So somehow Riddick killed two people on Troubadour before he could even arrive here."

"That's what the math keeps saying, yes. Not to mention the fact that he made a little side-trip to the Cygnus Systems on his way here, which is a four-month trip minimum. Did he invent a *time machine* in his spare time?"

Jarvis snorted. "If anybody *could*, it'd be him. But no, I don't think so."

"So how do you account for it?" Aspen challenged him.

He shrugged. "Figure if he managed to shave a day or so off of his trip here from Seti Station, he could have gotten here in time to kill Godot."

Aspen started to object and he held up his hand. He was already aware of how ridiculous his suggestion was, thank you.

"I know, I *know*... the laws of physics say he couldn't do that; the trip here from Seti Station is a minimum of a week by star-jump. But that's the only thing I can think of, Martina. Maybe he found a way. An uncharted gravity well or a string, something like that... If anybody could —"

"It'd be Riddick. Yeah." She stood up and went to the coffee maker for a fresh cup. "That's getting to be a refrain around here, you know."

"*Getting?* Every time we catch up with him he does something that's supposed to be impossible. He's been doing it ever since he was *seven years old*." Jarvis shook his head.

"But not before then?"

"Well, aside from scoring a perfect one-eighty on his IQ test at the age of five, no, he seemed completely ordinary," he muttered snidely. "They all did. And none of the others did *anything* unusual until we hit the Crisis Year."

They sat together for several moments, the only sound the slurping of coffee.

"Fine," Aspen finally sighed. "So... he shaves a day off of his trip *somehow* and gets here in time to murder Godot. Then what?"

"A week later he kills Peter Malcolm. He leaves Troubadour and goes past the sentry systems, and arcs around. He comes back in from a new direction, changing his electronic profile. We know he had more than a dozen to choose from."

She nodded across from him. "Makes sense."

It was about the only part that did.

She met his eyes. "It's a good theory, but there's just one problem. We ran a check on the electronic profiles the Charybdis Trap pulled off of his terminal. None of them correspond with any vessels that have been on Troubadour recently."

Both of them stood and headed for the coffee machine in tandem. Jarvis stepped back and let Aspen refill her cup first. Only a matter of time until one of them had to make a trip to the head, he thought with some small amount of dry humor.

"I know," he grouched. "*Obviously* we didn't get all of them. Space Traffic Control is generating a list for us of all ships that landed before Godot's estimated time of death and left after Malcolm's. Once we have it, Navigation will begin plotting arcs using their departure times and the *Swan's* re-entry time. Gonna take a while, but we'll know who he was posing as."

Assuming, of course, that Riddick hadn't switched his electronic profile between killings. There was always that possibility. He made a mental note to have *every* ship that left between Malcolm's death and the *Swan's* arrival checked. More work for everyone.

"Any progress on Angelica Porter?" Aspen inquired, returning to the table.

"That turned out to be a very literal dead end." He filled his cup again and rejoined her. "Roger and Angelica Porter both died as children in a car crash on Tangier 6 twenty years ago. Whoever 'Angelica' really is, it looks like she's in deep with our man."

Funny, he thought to himself as he sipped his coffee. *Why in God's name would Riddick have a woman with him... posing as his sister?*

46.

Riddick: Full Fathom Five

Riddick traced the curve of Jack's jawline with one finger, watching her sleep. It was almost dawn on New Paris; he'd relented and let her go to sleep three hours ago when she became so tired that her sentences were no longer very coherent. Some of the things she'd been saying had become humorously surreal as her inner dream world clamored for attention. He wished she talked in her sleep; he'd have loved to listen in.

His own dreams were made of shadow and fire, burning mathematical constructs and impossible vistas in which the laws of physics were flagrantly violated. Nothing concrete existed there. No human beings populated the landscape of his dreaming mind. Freud and Jung, he often thought, would have turned pale and fled if he'd described his dreams to them. A great many of their followers had done so over the years.

He knew it wasn't the norm. Friends of his, and others he'd known, had described the types of dreams *they* had, and he knew they were very different. He'd had dreams like theirs himself, until he was seven. After he'd woken up in the hospital, everything had begun to change for him.

"These are the pearls that were his eyes," he thought to himself with amusement. *Yeah, got that right.*

Funny... four and a half years ago, halfway into his first sojourn with Jack, there had been one hilarious night that had seen the two of them sitting up late, concocting ridiculously extravagant compliments to bestow on each other. It had been a kind of competition, with unofficial points for originality, humor and sweetness. He was pretty sure it had been Jack's idea, another of her concepts to help him become more socialized so he could rejoin the human race.

In the midst of it all, still doubled up with laughter from his lengthy paean about her ears, she'd told him that his eyes were black pearls.

These are the pearls that were his eyes, he thought again, staring down at the beautiful girl in his arms. She was one of the few people who had never feared his eyes. She'd liked them from the first time she saw them.

He hadn't gotten the shine job until shortly before he was to be shipped out to Nereid, of course, but at times it seemed like he'd always had it... or at least, since he was seven. That was when his personal sea-change, still ongoing, seemed to have begun. In retrospect, that was when he'd begun seeing into the dark.

That was when he began lying awake at night, studying the world from his bed. The only times he ever needed more than an hour or two of sleep a night, from then on, were when he was under abnormal stress.

He'd slept through the nights with Jack at the clinic, his mind retreating from the waking world and the almost-irresistible temptation sharing the bed with him. He'd slept heavily after their fight. On those occasions she'd actually awakened first. He'd spent huge quantities of his time sleeping for several weeks after Jack had been shot, until he'd learned she was still alive. His time on the skiff with Imam and Jack – and Carolyn's very palpable absence – had been much the same, as he recovered from his physical and non-physical wounds.

And, of course, there had been the nights after Jarvis's betrayal.

Most of the time, however, an hour or two was all he needed. The rest of his time was spent awake, studying the world. That had been the first of the changes that had overtaken him.

Often it seemed to him the he had always seen in the dark, that his eyes had always been the way they were now. He remembered colors, of course; that was one of the few things he actually missed. When he had his spectrum goggles or contacts on they compensated almost completely, leaving him at no greater disadvantage than someone who was red-green color-blind. Of course, when he'd gotten the shine job he'd thought he was never going to see color again anyway. Nereid had been locked in endless night.

"Mmmmm..." Jack sighed in his arms, turning her face to press it against his fingers. "Riddick..."

He smiled quietly to himself. It felt, at times, like that had always been his name, too. And from her it was actually a name worth hearing...

Names.

He'd been "Richie" until he was five, when Christina moved into the foster home and took him over. *She* had insisted on calling him "Bryan." It had been his name for the next two years, until everyone who had said

that name with affection was torn away from him and he could no longer stand hearing it.

Whenever anyone asked him, from then on, what his middle initial stood for, he always told them: “Betrayed.” Few people expected to hear such a thing from a seven-year-old boy and it shut them up fast.

Velma Skinner had briefly tried to call him “Richie,” but it didn’t stick. They’d finally settled on “Richard,” “Rich” for short. That had been his name for the next three years. Jarvis had returned at the end of that time and had seemed dismayed by the discovery that “Bryan” Riddick no longer existed. A week later he’d found himself in a new foster home.

It had amused him at the time. *Which one of us is having an identity crisis?* he’d been tempted to ask. He’d been glad that he’d refused to get attached to Velma or any of his foster siblings, though.

Of course he hadn’t gotten attached to them. He’d learned his lesson well. Lieutenant Jarvis had taught him that, if nothing else. No one would ever be let inside him as much as Christina had been, as much as Patty and Val, and Aunt Mel... and the stranger he’d once called Uncle Reg and had hoped would be his father.

He’d kept that vow until he’d discovered that Jack had taken up residence inside him. He hadn’t even noticed her moving in; she’d just suddenly been there. He’d found “property of Jack Kowalczyk” signs all over his psyche, all over his soul. That had been four and a half years ago and had been one of the most startling moments in his life.

He gazed down at her now, remembering their conversation from a few hours ago.

“So what’s with the ‘kid’ thing, anyway?” she’d asked him, mock-annoyance on her face. “I can understand you calling me that the first time we were together, but now? I mean, would you do this—”

And she’d pressed her body suggestively against the length of his, undulating.

—with a *kid*?” Her smile had been wicked. He’d laughed and pulled her even more tightly against him, maneuvering so he could enter her body once more. He loved being inside her.

“Nah,” he’d told her, stroking her hair in time with his thrusts as he drank in the look of exquisite pleasure on her face. “It’s the *Casablanca* kind of ‘kid.’ You know... ‘here’s looking at you’ and all that.”

“Rick and Ilsa?” she’d asked, her hands moving over his back.

“Yeah, them. ‘Cept I’m never gonna put you on any flight away from me.”

“I’d never let you,” she’d answered softly. He’d leaned down and buried his face in her hair. After a moment she’d spoken again. “You know, the ‘Rick’ kind of works. A lot of men named Richard go by that. Did you ever?”

“Yeah...” That had been the last coherent thing either of them had been able to say for a while, though.

His new foster home, back when he was ten, already had a “Rich.” They’d insisted on calling him “Rickie,” despite his brief protests. He loathed diminutives, one of the reasons he’d never tried to call Jack “Jackie.” Mostly he tolerated it, insisting that his school friends just call him “Rick” unless they had to talk to his foster parents.

That home had been easier to live in, in its way. He felt no draw to either Diane or Jim, his foster parents. Unlike with Velma, who had genuinely cared about him, tempting him to drop his guard, they were harried and uninterested in the emotional states of the dozen children they looked after. The school had been mostly the same.

His class had forty-seven children, including him. The teachers were even more harried than his foster parents, struggling to move the kids forward to the next unsatisfactory grade, hoping that violence wouldn’t erupt. They were too busy dealing with the boys who brought knives and guns into the school to nurture any of the minds in their care. They hadn’t noticed anything more than that he always did his homework; none of them spotted the uncanny fact that his papers were always flawless.

Until Miss Spenson, anyway.

She was an anomaly herself, actually. She’d just finished putting herself through college and had taken a position as a teacher in an inner city school because it would immediately clear off her obligation to her student loans. Four years of service to a deprived community and she’d be debt-free and able to move onto something better. That wasn’t the anomalous part, of course. The clearing of debts in that way was one of the few inducements that kept teachers in the inner-city systems.

The anomaly was that she did more than just keep the kids in her classroom, more than just struggle with the ones who had behavioral problems. She’d noticed Riddick’s adeptness at his work and she’d recruited him, asking him to tutor some of the other kids who needed help. In return, she accelerated his own studies, looking for ways to challenge him intellectually.

She'd been the first real friend he'd let himself have since he was seven, the first one he'd been willing to share his ambitions with. She'd entered him in the mathematics contest and had commiserated with him after his violent illness prevented him from going. She'd campaigned to get him into the Albany Technical Academy.

"You have what it takes, Rick," she'd told him as she'd filled out the forms. "You're like one of those legendary test-pilots from back at the start of space travel. The ones who had to be mechanics and physicists as well as pilots. Men like Armstrong and Lovell and Glenn, who barely even flinched even when their ships tried to go to pieces under them. Geniuses with nerves of steel."

That had happened to be a week after he'd disarmed one of his classmates who'd brought a gun into school. Such incidents were so common that nobody bothered reporting it, of course. But Lydia Spenson had made her approval abundantly clear.

Under her guidance, he'd become infatuated with the idea of one day being a pilot, sailing through the oceans of night and the myriad worlds that humankind had claimed. He hadn't actually believed that anyone would let him into the academy until the day his letter of acceptance came.

He'd been "Rick" at the Academy, too. He'd been "Rick" until the day everything fell apart within his mind.

After that, he'd been "Richard B. Riddick, psycho murderer."

Lydia Spenson had come every day to the trial, along with Velma Skinner and Melanie Jarvis and her daughters. He was older than both girls now. All of them had cried throughout the proceedings. In his lucid moments he'd tried to get his attorneys to have them removed.

"They're your only hope for clemency, Rickie," one of the lawyers had told him.

"I don't *want* clemency. If you had any fuckin' sense you wouldn't even ask for it." The *Rickie* bit infuriated him. It was a calculated avuncular ploy, and he already knew how treacherous uncles were.

And of course, "Uncle Reg" had showed up again, trying to call him "Bryan" and telling him that some kind of deal had been struck with the judge, releasing him into Jarvis's custody.

Fuck that, he'd thought, and promptly attacked one of his attorneys, the one who insisted on calling him Rickie, putting the man into the hospital for a month and guaranteeing that nobody would release *him* into *anyone's* custody.

Finally he'd just been "Riddick." Just another felon inside the prison system, feared by his fellow inmates and guards alike. All of the other names had fallen away. And until Jack had come into his life, nobody had spoken that name with affection, much less love. He didn't need any other names. Not now. The first time Jack had gasped "Riddick" while she came, he'd known he never wanted to be called anything else.

He stroked her cheek again, leaning down to kiss her forehead. She'd changed him more than anyone else.

Sitting up, he reached for the two remaining star charts at the foot of the bed. She was the first person he'd taught anything other than combat to since his days in Miss Spenson's classroom, and he was happy to discover it was still just as much fun as it had been then. Of course, she was much sharper than any of those students had been.

So what do you have for me, Babe? he thought as he unfolded one chart and began to examine it.

He smiled to himself as he traced out the route. This was the textbook route, perfect in every detail. It was the route everybody took when they passed through that section of space, so commonly used that it was just called Shipping Lane V-315. Punch those numbers into your nav-comm and your ship would fly the course while you slept. *Very good*, he thought. He'd known Jack would find it.

But what had she come up with for the fourth chart? He unfolded it with interest.

Interest quickly became fascination. If he wasn't mistaken, this route worked... He began poring over the calculations she'd used, the resource maps.

Holy shit, Jack, he thought. *Not only does this one work, it's a whole day **faster** than V-315.*

He began to laugh. Beside him, Jack stirred and smiled a little in her sleep. After a moment he folded up the charts and put them away, lying down beside her once more and drawing her back into his arms.

No wonder you're such a pleasure to teach, he thought as he closed his eyes and joined her in sleep. *I can't wait to try the route you discovered.*

47.

Jack: Itinerary

Riddick was singing.

Jack was aware of it as she awoke, hearing the deep, velvety sound of his voice over the steady patter of water in the shower. She hadn't heard this sound in years. God, she'd missed it so much, too...

He'd been humming; now he added in words.

"Deep down in Seti Station, close to Troubadour
Between the Cygnus Systems and New Ecuador
Fleecin' all the tourists, posin' as a lad—"

Oh god, she thought, knowing what was coming. She couldn't help the soft laugh that escaped her as she listened in.

"—Lived a crazy little chick called Jackie B. Badd
Whose luck was always jumpin' 'til one day she fell
On board the *Hunter-Gratzner* when it landed in Hell!
Go, go! Go, Jackie, go! Go..."

At least she knew he was in a good mood. She threw off the blanket covering her and padded out of the bedroom, over to the bathroom. She could see Riddick through the pebbled glass of the shower stall, scrubbing his body to the rhythm of the chorus.

"...Jackie B. Badd!"

She giggled again. Yeah, he'd cured her of using that name with his little song parody. Funny how it no longer embarrassed the heck out of her.

"She used to carry her pajamas in a little bag,
She'd written on the side of it 'Serial Hag...'"

Damn, she'd forgotten about that bag. She hadn't seen it since the night she'd been shot. The thing had probably gotten all gory and the Special Forces docs had thrown it out or something, while she was still recovering. These were new lines, she suddenly realized. Riddick was rewriting his lyrics.

She'd better call a halt to the thing before he got pornographic about it...

Jack knocked on the shower stall. "Hang on while I get my recorder and my blackmail kit, huh?"

"Hah!" Riddick shouted back. The door to the stall abruptly opened. "How about you just get your pretty little ass in here?" The grin on his face was as lascivious as ever.

Laughing, Jack stepped into the stall and joined him. He drew her under the spray, turning up the hot water a little just for her. She relaxed and let him soap her down, enjoying the way his hands moved over her body. He washed her hair, too, and rinsed her down thoroughly before he finally lifted her up into his arms and pressed her against the wall. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he slid inside her.

Those profiles weren't kidding, she thought, gasping.

"Been wanting to do this for a while, now," he whispered. "Since that first shower we took together."

"Really?" Of course, she'd been in no condition for any of that back then. She could barely remember parts of the shower; she'd been so tired and weak and pain-ridden at the time. Not to mention the fact that her sex drive hadn't begun to wake up yet.

"Oh yeah," he sighed. "It took practically *all* of my self-control to behave myself. 'Specially when you turned around and hugged me."

“Oh God!” she laughed a little, feeling a bit of appalled guilt. “I’m *so* sorry, Riddick, I never even *thought* of what that would do to you.”

“‘Sokay. It was kinda nice, you know, knowing how much you trusted me, and knowing that I really *could* be trusted that much. And it’s not like we haven’t made it up to each other since.” He chuckled and lowered his mouth to hers.

They didn’t leave the shower until the hot water ran out.

Jack pulled on a simple pair of sweats while Riddick started the food-prep unit. He ducked into the bedroom and emerged, similarly dressed and carrying her star charts. She grimaced.

“So, which one of those is completely wrong?”

He smirked. “Neither one. This—” He shook one of the charts. “—happens to be the textbook course plotting. You got it perfectly. And this...” He shook the other chart. “This one is the real prize. I checked every single calculation, and it really *is* a viable route that’s a full day faster than the textbook route. You discovered a new shipping lane, Darlin’.”

Jack gaped at him in astonishment. “You’re shitting me.”

“Nope. Once we get you a good set of identities, you can register it and collect the finder’s fee. We’ll have time to give it a test run while I’m getting those set up for you.”

“So we’re going to the Corsair System?”

“Yeah. I’ve arranged for our cargo. We’ll be loading up and taking off in a few days. I definitely want to be out of here before anyone realizes we’re *not* on our way to Earth. And that’s where your Uncle Boris lives these days, on Corsair 3.”

She felt a chill pass through her. “You’re planning on killing him.”

“Damn right.” The food prep machine chimed and Riddick began ferrying plates to the table. Jack collected a pitcher of juice and two glasses. They set the table together; Riddick didn’t speak again until they had sat down. “I told you I was gonna kill him... eventually.”

“Eventually?” Jack could barely taste the food she was eating.

“How many times did you say he raped you? Six?” His voice was calm, as if he’d asked her how many loads of laundry she’d done.

“Seven. Twice the first night and five times the second.” Fuck. She *really* didn’t want to think about this now.

“Well, that’s how many days I plan to keep him alive. One day for each time he hurt you.”

She shivered. “I don’t think he’ll learn anything from that. He’ll just be dead.”

“That’s the point.” Riddick watched her calmly. “I’m not punishing him. I’m destroying him. Don’t get the two confused.”

“Then why...?”

“Why keep him alive that long? You wondering why I don’t just stick a knife in him and be done with it? We both know it’s not that simple. *I* need him to die slowly.” He was talking about the other side of him, she realized. The side they both had trouble, at times, facing. It was the side that reveled in the kill, and would especially delight in the destruction of someone who had harmed *her*.

She swallowed. “I don’t know...”

His eyes bored into hers. “Sure you do. If you found yourself face to face with him, Babe, what would you do? Be honest.”

She thought about it, hard. Suddenly she could feel the buried, poisonous emotions welling up within her. She gritted her teeth, struggling against the blind rage she abruptly felt.

Riddick’s hand on her wrist drew her back to reality. Looking down, she saw that she was holding her butter knife like a shiv, her knuckles white from clutching it.

“Still don’t want me to kill him?” His voice was gentle.

She sighed. “No. You’re right. If he *was* here, I’d probably gut him myself.”

He nodded, looking a bit regretful. “I know you hate having to think about that side of me. I’m sorry I brought it up.”

She shrugged and took a deep breath. “It’s okay. So... I guess that means we’ll be on Corsair 3 for more than a week?”

“Yeah. A day to drop off cargo, probably eight days to deal with your Uncle, and then we’ll test out your new course by flying over to the Achilles Mining Station. After that we can start doing some serious

traveling.”

“Out to the frontiers?” Jack perked up at that. Years ago, before she had died, Shazza had offered to take Jack with her to the frontiers. She’d wanted so much to go, too. Shazza had been the only one of the crash survivors that she’d actually *told* her secret to...

“Yeah, those can be fun... what?” Riddick gave her a quizzical look.

She grinned. “I was just wondering... how was it that you figured out I was a girl in the first place? I never told you, and I know Shazza didn’t.”

Riddick chuckled softly. “No, she didn’t. I didn’t realize she knew.”

“Oh yeah. I told her. But how did *you* know?”

He reached across the table and touched her throat. “Sign number one: no Adam’s apple. You ever want to spot female impersonators, take a good look at their necks. Sign number two: it was boiling out and you were wearing two shirts. The second I saw that I knew you were hiding something. And finally, I could smell you menstruating.”

“Really? ’Cause I didn’t even start until a few hours before the eclipse.”

He chuckled again. “A woman’s scent changes before her flow even begins, Babe. And I know those scents well. Especially when you consider how much easier it is to catch people’s odors in that kind of heat.”

“So you knew right away?” She was impressed in spite of herself.

“Yeah. Remember when you stopped near me, back when Owens was still dying? I could smell the fact that *someone* female was close by. And when you showed up while Fry was questioning me, that’s when I figured out for sure.”

Jack grinned and went back to eating, her appetite strong again. It was neat to realize that Riddick had always known, and had been keeping her secret for her the entire time, until he had no choice but to reveal it. No wonder he’d made a point of saying “check your cuts” near her. He’d been warning her that her secret wasn’t going to keep for much longer.

“Okay... so... our agenda is what?” She looked over at him, surprising his admiring stare.

He shrugged, not embarrassed in the least about being caught. “Well, gonna do some more combat training later today. Teach you some little tricks that’ll come in handy. We’re fueled and all the maintenance is done, so there’s not much to do besides that. Maybe a little bit of sightseeing before we head out; that’s always fun. Then we’ll take off and head for the Corsair System, but I want to make a quick stop in the Belt before we hit the planet, so we can do some more maneuvering training. Get you up to snuff on the ship’s guns. Then we’ll stay on Corsair 3 for about ten days before we head over to Achilles, using your new route. After that, who knows? Sound good?”

“Excellent. And we’ll definitely avoid going through the Quagmire or past Scylla,” she added.

Riddick chuckled. “Definitely.”

“Why does that name sound so familiar, anyway? Scylla, I mean.”

“You’re probably thinking of the Scylla Project. They’re connected, anyway, y’know.” Riddick chuckled again and rose, clearing their plates from the table.

It took Jack a moment but then she remembered. “Hey, yeah. The whole scandal over it broke about half a year before you were born, didn’t it?”

He looked over at her, surprised and impressed. “How’d you know that?”

“When I was looking you up in the press clippings, back at the library, I noticed you didn’t make the front page. Usually an abandoned baby is front page news, especially on Earth. So I looked to see what was. They were still going on and on about what to do with the Scylla Children.”

He snorted, sitting back down. “Like they ever had any effect on the outcome of that.”

“How do you mean?”

“Oh come on. You think the transport craft they were in crashed by *accident*? The military decided to terminate them. What would *you* do with a bunch of kids who killed two hundred soldiers?”

“Me, personally? Run like hell.” She smiled at his snort of laughter. “What was their connection to the Scylla System, though?”

He shook his head. “These schools today... didn’t they teach you anything?”

“Hey, I’ll have you know I’m a graduate of the best correctional facility for wayward girls in eight Known Systems,” she retorted, laughing.

“And you’re more wayward than ever, Darlin’. Not that I don’t love every minute of it...” He chuckled for a moment, his eyes roaming over her body. “Anyway, you remember I told you about the Scylla Spore, right?”

“It was just last night, asshole, of course I remember. I’m not *that* dumb.”

“Hush now.” He pointed a finger at her sternly. “*Anyway*, the first settlers on Scylla 4 were a whole bunch of pioneer types, of course, and they were there for about a year before they suddenly lost contact with the outside worlds. As I recall, the scientists think it took the Spore several months to infiltrate their bodies at first. It’s an adaptive little fucker. So, anyway, suddenly there was radio silence where there *had* been a thriving colony. A relief ship was sent to see what had happened. When they arrived onsite, they discovered everybody was dead. Looked like they’d slaughtered each other.”

“Eeeew. But how did a *spore* do that?”

“Well, nobody realized it was anything except craziness for a while, of course. Didn’t I tell you that dementia is one of the symptoms of the illness?”

“Yeah.”

“The spore didn’t show up at first in the autopsies, either. It’s virus-sized and it’s a wily little shit. The relief crew had no idea it was involved until *they* started to get sick. The Tribunal put them in quarantine while they tried to determine what was wrong. Within a year, the whole relief crew was dead... *but* one of them had been pregnant at the time, and she carried her baby to term before she died. That baby not only *lived*, she was perfectly healthy.”

“How the hell did *that* happen?”

He laughed. “Beats the shit out of me, kid. They spent five years trying to figure it out, themselves. Whatever they learned never *was* made public, but at the end of that time they’d determined she didn’t need to be kept in quarantine. Some of the rumors say that the Spore was still in her, though. Dunno. The sensible thing would be to leave it alone, right? That’s not what they did. Fuckin’ idiots. You’d think that nobody had ever read *Frankenstein*, the way they acted.”

“What did they do?”

“They started the Scylla Project. The end result was a body count of two hundred and sixty people. And all of *those* were on Earth itself. Two hundred soldiers who had the misfortune to be stationed at the Homestead Barracks when the shit came down, the thirty Scylla Children themselves, and thirty young women, although you can’t technically blame the military for *them* since they were already brain-dead.”

“Wait... they brought the Scylla Spore to *Earth*? What the fuck were they *thinking*?”

“They weren’t; that’s the point. Coulda been two hundred and sixty *million* deaths, at least, if that thing had gotten loose. Instead, the kids they’d infected with it did. They went crazy and slaughtered every human being in the Homestead Barracks. Took the military eight months to dig them out, put ’em on a transport plane, and crash it into the Blue Ridge mountains.”

“What about the first one? What happened to her?”

“She killed herself when she was fourteen. They never figured out why. She didn’t leave a suicide note or anything but it was pretty obvious that her death was no accident. That was about five years before the Scylla Children went ballistic.”

Jack chuckled and shook her head. And after all that, bringing the Spore to *Earth*, for God’s sake, the military had the nerve to quarantine people who flew too close to the Scylla System? Shit, who’d *want* to land on Scylla 4 anyway? And who could stomach ordering the deaths of *children*?

“God, are they all like that?” Jack asked. “I mean, would Jarvis do something like that? Just... order a killing?”

An odd look crossed Riddick’s face for a moment. “Good old Uncle Reggie? Sure he would. He cut the orders for my death, y’know. That’s why I broke out of Nereid when I did.”

Jack stared at Riddick for a long moment, studying the subtle nuances of his face. She didn’t know much of the story between Riddick and Jarvis, but she knew that there was a lot of hidden, buried pain involved for him.

“He ordered your death?” she asked softly. He nodded curtly, his eyes focused on something outside of the moment. “Why?” When he shrugged a little, she pressed on. “How did you find out?”

He let out a soft gust of humorless laughter. “By that time I practically *owned* Nereid, kid. I’d gotten into every computer system and could do practically anything I wanted. I had this whole elaborate escape planned,

too. Another few months and it woulda been complete. Nobody woulda died; they wouldn't even have been sure I was *gone* for a few weeks. I'd set up identities and bank accounts to use once I was loose. Almost everything was ready, until I found out I didn't have nearly as long as I'd counted on."

He frowned, still looking into that far-away time. "Found a file in the computer, a draft for a press release. Talked about a prison riot that hadn't even happened yet... according to the release, it was a month off. And guess who was scheduled to die in the riot?" He glanced over at Jack.

"You?"

"Give the lady a prize. They'd started up the psych evaluations again a month or two earlier, and Jarvis himself had come and interviewed me just a week before I found that file. Guess they decided it was time to X me out. I was off that rock on the next transport that pulled in. Had to kill several guards to do it, too. None of 'em were bad guys, either. I felt bad about doin' 'em, but better them than me."

Jack left her seat and climbed onto Riddick's lap, putting her arms around his shoulders. After a moment his arms came around her as well.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered quietly.

He stroked her hair with one hand, as if *he* was comforting *her*. "Eventually I'm gonna find out what his precious Charybdis Project is," he murmured after a moment. "I don't care how good his security is. I'll find out. And then I'm gonna burn it down around his head."

His eyes looked like the hardest, coldest steel on any world. Jack found herself almost pitying Jarvis for a moment.

Funny how there was no pity within her for her *own* treacherous uncle.

48.

Jarvis: Boy Scouts

Corporal – no, Sergeant – Mizuguchi was waiting for Jarvis and Aspen as they reentered the *Messina*. He exchanged salutes with her and then watched, impressed and amused, as she turned and offered the appropriate greeting for a civilian consultant to Dr. Aspen. Mizuguchi was going to go *very* far, he reflected.

He just hoped she wouldn't get pulled down into the Charybdis whirlpool the way he had. It seemed like he'd spent his whole life, lately, just trying not to drown.

She led them directly to the conference room and the three sat down together.

"General Baldwin has sent word that he wants us to proceed to Earth in two days' time," she informed them. "The intent is that we should arrive after the local forces have taken Riddick into custody, and he will be turned over to us at that time. Given what you two have learned on Troubadour, the General wants both of you, especially Dr. Aspen, available to begin studying and treating him as quickly as possible."

Jarvis nodded, looking at Aspen bleakly. They'd already discussed their prognosis for Riddick at great length. If he really had begun experiencing dissociative episodes, there wasn't going to be much that they could do.

He hoped that they were wrong. The idea that little Bryan might still be alive somewhere within that monster, trapped and unable to prevent the horrors he committed, was unbearable to contemplate. He didn't want to come face to face with proof that it was true.

Aspen had circles under her eyes and her pale face was beginning to look haggard. The last four days had been hell on everyone as they scrambled to learn as much as they could before all the evidence could vanish. Mizuguchi, he noted, looked equally exhausted, although her youth and darker complexion were more generous to her about it.

The Sergeant opened a file. "We still haven't been able to determine any kind of connection between 'Angelica Porter' and Peter Malcolm, if there is one. Nor do any of Malcolm's victims seem to have had any kind of contact or connection with Riddick. So far, that line inquiry is a dead end. Do you still believe that Riddick killed Malcolm as an act of revenge?"

Jarvis shrugged. "It seemed consistent with the M.O. But we've been coming up with a lot of inconsistencies in our investigation. Riddick appears to be losing touch with reality to a greater degree than we'd expected, despite the fact that he seems to continue to have a great deal of precision to his actions. None of it makes sense. We can't even get his travel itinerary to work unless he managed to find a way to flagrantly violate the laws of physics."

Once again, a small voice in his head began to chant: *If anyone could do it...*

Dr. Aspen looked up. "Did you get our data on the *real* Angelica Porter?"

Mizuguchi responded with an exhausted chuckle. "Yes, we did. She died when she was four, right? Along with her brother Roger, the supposed Captain of the *Singing Swan*. We're running searches to see when their identities became active again. Maybe that will give us a lead on who she *really* is."

"I doubt it," Jarvis muttered sourly. "Riddick's much too thorough, even when he *is* in meltdown. If he created those identities, they'll be virtually perfect. He probably established them months – or years – before he intended to use them."

That was, after all, what he'd done on Nereid. Even now, what they'd discovered in the wake of Riddick's abrupt, bloody escape had him in awe. If only the boy hadn't panicked...

If only he hadn't found the press release. In retrospect, it was easy to see why Riddick had jumped to the conclusion that he was about to be quietly terminated. He had no idea, after all, of the Tribunal's real plans for him.

Even ten years after the Tech School killings, nobody on Earth had been willing to consider clemency. Riddick's only way out, his only avenue to freedom, was to officially "die." "Die," and awaken in the Project's training facilities, ready to begin a new life as a Phase II Operative...

Of course, the fact that the most notorious prisoner in a maximum security prison had successfully hacked into the most classified files on-site had left everyone *else* in a bit of a panic. The Charybdis Trap had been

created soon after, on the off-chance that Riddick should ever come looking for some answers. Now he'd sprung it five times, and they'd never caught him. The closest they'd ever come was when a drug-addled mercenary found and overpowered him in the wake of his battle with the platoon of Special Forces soldiers dispatched to arrest him. Of course, the merc in question had an extremely old grudge against Riddick, thanks to the debacle with Ruth Baker...

Another way that the Charybdis Project is like a Greek tragedy, he thought to himself with wry amusement. *Everything is so damned incestuous.*

"Sir," Mizuguchi said after a moment, interrupting his thoughts. "That would imply that Ms. 'Porter' has been with him for quite some time."

"Not necessarily," Aspen replied on his behalf as he shook himself out of his reverie. "He may have created those IDs for Jack Kowalczyk."

Jarvis felt a cold wind pass through his body. By Mizuguchi's reaction, she felt it too.

"Explain?" he asked.

"He was waiting for her at Seti Station. Somehow he was able to intercept her when she was on her way to her new employer. That says he'd been tracking her moves. Maybe, initially, he thought that they would become a team again. Until he decided she'd jumped the fence and was working for us." Aspen sighed, shaking her head. "If I'd had any idea their connection was so tenuous, I'd *never* have agreed to the tracer."

Jarvis swallowed, his eyes and nose abruptly stinging a little. Inside him, Jack was still alive, along with Bryan Riddick. Outside, in the real world, both had been annihilated by a monster who still roamed free.

"So then the question is, who is using those identities now? And why?" Mizuguchi continued. "Because if he has found someone to act as his 'Charybdis Mate,' he might even now be stabilizing again."

Jarvis winced. That was the role he'd hoped Jack would take. He'd thought she was better-suited for it than anyone, after all. She and Riddick had been through so much together, and had *seemed* to bond so closely. He and Aspen had both been in agreement that the girl was in love with Riddick, as well. Who better for that role in his life?

"It's possible, but unlikely," Aspen sighed. "You read the transcripts of our interview with Marnie and Brielle, the women at the Moulin Rouge Brothel, didn't you?"

Mizuguchi nodded.

"He wouldn't have needed them if he'd found a 'Charybdis Mate.' He probably wouldn't have been interested in them at all."

"I'm still not at all clear on what that is, anyway. The data I've been studying doesn't make much sense to me." Mizuguchi glanced at both of them. "Could I get a little clarification on it?"

Jarvis nodded. "Four of our Phase II Operatives have taken 'Charybdis Mates.' These are essentially life-partners. They're ordinary human beings, although they all tested highly in terms of IQ. They play a number of roles in the Operative's life. They're sexual partners, they assist in the Operative's missions, everything."

He stood up and moved to the water cooler, still talking. "People who can do that are hard to find. Extreme intelligence is a requirement, as is a great deal of bravery. They have to be able to forge an emotional bond with the Operative, and they have to be able to keep up with him – or, in Ruth Baker's case, her – sexually.

"They tend to have a strong balancing effect on the Operative's emotional states. Nathan Sorenson, for instance, used to be very volatile until he took up with Corporal Logres. She's now on permanent assignment to the Charybdis Project as his partner. Two of the other Operatives bonded similarly with women; Garth Torrance surprised us all by bonding with a man."

"And nine years ago, before she died, Ruth Baker took up with a man named Anthony Johns," Aspen said quietly. "Now that ended in disaster for everyone."

"How?" Mizuguchi looked puzzled. Of course, he thought. Ruth Baker had been dead for eight years; even though she was on the list of Riddick's "classified" victims, Mizuguchi probably hadn't had time to review the information about her.

"Tony Johns tried to poison Riddick," Jarvis explained, amused by Mizuguchi's look of shock. "He slipped Adrenosynth 17 into one of Riddick's drinks. It was jealousy. Ruth was trying to get behind Riddick's defenses by seducing him. Tony couldn't handle it. Adrenosynth 17 is seriously dangerous stuff. Most of the coma victims they used in Phase I had taken it; it was extremely popular fifty years ago. An ordinary person

would have gone into severe shock at the kind of dosage he put into Riddick's drink. Might have even gone brain-dead on the spot. Riddick, however... he exploded into violence."

Poisons never worked on Riddick for long. They'd found that out when he was eleven and they'd tried to keep him out of the math contest. They'd had to reinfect him with the stomach flu virus every four hours because his body kept successfully shaking it off...

"When the smoke cleared, Ruth and Tony were both dead, torn to pieces. Tony's brother, William, was critically injured and only just managed to survive," Aspen finished.

"That's not the same William Johns who captured Riddick five years ago, is it?" Mizuguchi asked. She swore quietly when both Jarvis and Aspen nodded.

"And that was how we lost the last surviving female Charybdis Subject, you see. She was the only one of the Phase II females who didn't commit suicide." Jarvis needed more water. No, what he really needed was a stiff drink. Or maybe just a vacation.

What he *really* needed, he realized, was the knowledge that Riddick was dead. That his personal nightmare was over. He'd never get his family back, of course. It had been a decade since Mel had accepted one of his calls. He'd only heard from her through lawyers, once she decided to divorce him. His daughters, at least, would accept his calls, but they were distant, reserved. They'd all become that way after he'd taken Bryan Riddick to Velma Skinner's foster home. It had killed him to do it at the time. He'd had no choice, but his family had refused to forgive him nonetheless.

Bryan had refused to forgive him, too.

Four months had passed for him when he saw the boy again. For Bry it had been three years. And there was no Bry anymore, he'd found to his shock.

He'd arrived at Mrs. Skinner's house, eager to see Bryan, only to find himself confronted by a stranger. The boy had grown, of course. That much he'd expected. But the aloofness in his eyes struck him like a blow.

"Lieutenant Jarvis," he'd said, inclining his head with precise politeness... if he'd been talking to a stranger.

"Bryan," Jarvis had answered. He'd been hoping the boy would greet him as "Uncle Reg." He'd tried, on the car ride to Mrs. Skinner's house, to explain to Bryan why he couldn't stay with Mel and the girls, why he *couldn't* go into cryo-sleep with them. Now he realized that the boy had tuned him out completely, refusing to hear a word he'd said at the time.

At the mention of his name, Bryan Riddick cocked his head quizzically. "Who? My name is Rich."

Jarvis had glanced at Mrs. Skinner. The look she'd given him had been both sad and stern.

"Bryan, I—"

"Bryan is dead." The boy took the chair farthest from Jarvis and sat down. "You should know." He glanced at Mrs. Skinner himself, and something in his expression made it clear that he wanted her to leave the room. She did.

His dark brown eyes turned back to Jarvis once she was gone, filled with irony. "You're the one who killed him, after all."

"Bryan, that's not fair."

"There is **NO FUCKING BRYAN!**" the boy hissed, his whisper thousands of times worse than a shout ever could be. After a moment, his body relaxed again and he sat back in his chair. "Life ain't fair, anyway, Lieutenant. Don't you know that yet? Hell, you should. You taught me all about that, didn't you?"

The eyes dared him to deny it. What had happened to the sweet, carefree boy he remembered, Jarvis found himself wondering. Maybe if he got him back to Mel and the girls, he'd recover...

"I'm here to take you back home, Br— Rich."

Sarcasm sparked in the boy's eyes again. "Home? Where's that? Jamestown? Not likely. Only real home I ever had was a dumpster behind a liquor store. Shoulda stayed in it."

Jarvis winced. "The girls miss you. Mel misses you."

Bryan — *Rich* — shook his head. "They've been sleeping. Anyway, they'd still miss me even if I went, because I'm not the person they're expecting to see, am I? You given any thought to how hard it'll be on Val? We were the same age. Now I'm three years older. I'm Patty's age now... until the next time you stick them in the freezers. Go away, Lieutenant. I don't want to be part of your family again."

And just like that, the conversation had ended. Rich Riddick, no longer a boy called Bryan, got out of the chair and left the room. It was the last time they came face to face until Jarvis got word that "Rick" Riddick

had murdered the nine other members of his chess club one night, four years later.

He'd killed them, gone home, taken a shower, done his homework... and when the police arrived to ask if he'd seen anyone or anything suspicious at the school, he'd calmly told them that he'd been the one who stabbed all nine of his friends. Jarvis had wondered if his killing rage had ever seemed to reach above a whisper for them. He'd wondered if there had been any rage at all. Possibly there'd just been that glacial calm, that odd, ironic gaze...

Mizuguchi jarred him back out of his thoughts. "I've been wondering about that. Why is it that the female subjects turned their violent tendencies inward, and not outward like the male subjects?"

Jarvis blinked and shook his head, pushing away his thoughts of the boy he'd once known. "That would be a better question for Dr. Aspen, I think. And it only applies to the Phase II subjects, anyway. None of the Phase I subjects committed suicide, aside from Evelyn, and she doesn't actually count."

"Evelyn was the first?" Mizuguchi flipped through her notes and nodded. "Oh, yeah. I see that. But she was female as well. Maybe a more important question is why none of the female Phase I subjects did, and why Ruth Baker didn't."

"My theory," Dr. Aspen said after a moment, "Is that the Phase I subjects formed a collective bond. None of the Phase II subjects had contact with each other until after the Crisis Year. We didn't want a repeat of the Phase I debacle, after all."

We, Jarvis thought sadly to himself. *You hadn't been dragged into this yet, Martina. I'd only just been dragged into it.*

"So you think that the female Phase I subjects were part of a... collective mind or something?" Mizuguchi frowned.

"No, although they'd developed something of their own culture. They knew they were different from ordinary humans. They felt isolated from humanity, but not from each other. It probably seemed perfectly natural to them to turn on us the way they did." Aspen leaned back and rubbed at the spot between her eyebrows for a moment. "I think that the Phase II subjects felt that same sense of isolation from humanity. They just didn't have any contact with people like themselves, to fill the gap. The girls, for the most part, seemed to become listless, experiencing flashes of temper but nothing violent, until they suddenly took their own lives."

"So what made Ruth Baker different? She was just as cut off as they were." Mizuguchi glanced between them.

"She had a much more aggressive personality," Jarvis answered. "Her anger turned outward instead of inward. We almost didn't get to her in time. She was the first to display instability. She killed her foster parents... practically cut her foster mother's head off. We managed to hush the whole thing up before the story could break. As a result, when the other Phase II boys began to display aggressive patterns, we were ready and we got them locked down before they could act on their new volatility."

"And Riddick?"

"We'd been watching him, too, of course. And we were bored silly. Up until he killed those kids, he was perfectly calm. Icy calm. Well-liked at his school, never gave anyone any trouble... we just weren't ready for what he did. It happened, and the story broke, before we could prevent it." Jarvis shook his head. "Up until then, he'd been a goddamned Boy Scout. We *just weren't ready*."

Once more, Jarvis's memories devoured him. The day Patty had shown up at the house, repeating "everything's okay" over and over again... Valerie, it had turned out, had drowned. She'd gotten caught out farther than she should go, and had panicked when some idiot kid on a motorboat came too close to the shore. Bryan Riddick had pulled her out of the lake and administered CPR before any adult could respond intelligently. A seven-year-old boy had saved a girl's life using CPR... it had taken all of the Project's resources to shut up *that* little Human Interest story.

While Jarvis had been in Cryo-sleep, on his way back to Earth, nine-year-old Rich (no longer Bryan) Riddick had been playing in a municipal parking lot when one of his friends had tried to jump down from a nearby wall, landing wrong and snapping his leg. By the time paramedics could be coaxed into that rough neighborhood, Rich Riddick had already set the bone and splinted the leg. Fortunately, nobody would believe he'd done it; nobody *ever* believed anything the kids from that neighborhood had to say.

He'd disarmed fellow students at school on numerous occasions. He'd tutored his classmates, at Miss Spenson's request. He'd been everything they'd ever hoped the Phase II subjects might become... until the

day he became a rabid killer.

“A Boy Scout,” Jarvis muttered sadly to himself.

He felt Dr. Aspen’s hand cover his, gently. After a moment, Mizuguchi tactfully got up and left.

You don’t understand yet what it’s like, Sergeant, he thought. You haven’t watched enough people you care about die or get turned into something awful. You don’t understand yet. But you will.

God help us all, you will.

The Charybdis Project, after all, was a soul-killer. Anyone who needed proof of that only had to look in the soulless eyes of Richard Bryan Riddick, who’d murdered the one person who might have been able to save him, who might have been able to *help* him – “Jack” Kowalczyk.

49.

Jack: A Sneaking Suspicion

It came to her in a dream, which wasn't uncommon. She woke with her heart pounding.

Riddick was, as usual, already up. She could hear him keying something into the ship's terminal. A glance at the chrono told her that dawn was still an hour away.

She lay still, frowning, going over the images of her dream. She'd been flying their small ship through a dangerous canyon and it had suddenly been a sailboat, still moving through the gap or one much like it. On one side had crouched a terrible creature sitting on a rock, glaring at her with Carolyn Fry's face. Her body, below the face, was comprised of a dozen of the creatures from the planet, all of them reaching out to skewer the vessel. She'd changed course, edging the boat towards the other side of the strait, only to see Shazza rise up, whirling, to pull the boat down below the water...

Twins, Fry had murmured.

Twins, Shazza had replied. *We're one and the same.*

She'd stared from side to side, into their mirror-like eyes, both sets identical to a pair she knew better than her own.

You understand, Fry had smiled at her, predatory fangs showing.

Across, Shazza had nodded. *He's one of us too.*

Then they'd dragged her down into the waves, struggling...

Now Jack lay quietly in the bed, trying to fathom what she'd seen, what it meant. The answer, when it came to her, frightened her badly.

Please let me be wrong. Oh god, please let me be wrong... If she was right, the consequences could be horrible beyond imagining.

She knew exactly where the images came from, now. And the more she thought of it the colder her blood seemed to run. It had only been a year since she'd had to read the *Odyssey* for her English class, after all. Most of the girls in the shelter had concentrated on Circe, of course, a little *too* taken with the idea of transforming men into pigs. Jack had found the novel especially difficult, emotionally... Ulysses' trickery reminded her entirely too much of Johns. If Circe had gotten her hands on *him*, she'd told herself, her island would have had a jackal wandering around and the other animals would have begun dying of rabies.

But *she* remembered the monsters well. Too well. And she remembered their names.

Please let me be wrong, she thought again, all too aware that she probably wasn't. She buried her face in her pillow and closed her eyes, willing herself back to sleep.

She woke, two hours later, to the sounds of Riddick programming the food prep unit. She rose sluggishly, still bogged down by the images of her dream and their likely meaning. She'd have to do a little research later to see if she was right.

Once again she hoped to God she wasn't.

Maybe it's just a sick joke, she told herself as she dressed. *After all, both projects were run by Special Forces. Maybe they have a whole mess of projects named after monsters from the Odyssey, or Greek mythology in general.*

She pulled her hair back into a ponytail and grimaced into the mirror. *Of course, that's not the kind of luck we have, is it?* She was going to have to find out, and fast. As soon as they were done with breakfast—

"Oh my god, what did you *do*?" She stopped in the doorway of their bedroom, staring at the chaos in the cockpit. Riddick had disassembled the comm system. Parts were carefully arranged across the console and both chairs.

Riddick glanced over as he ferried plates from the food prep unit to the table. He grinned. "I'm installing some new hardware. Should make it *impossible* for anyone to ever download our ship profiles again."

Jack joined him at the table. "Uh... how long is that going to take?"

"Three or four hours," he replied, digging into his eggs. "Why, you need the unit?"

"Well, I wanted to look something up, yeah, but I guess it can wait."

He grinned again. “Doesn’t need to if you don’t want to. The soldiers from the *Messina* have been bugging out in droves since midnight. Town’s probably clear by now. You want, you can go to the library.”

“You don’t need me here?”

He chuckled. “Programming is grouchy work, at least the way I do it. It’s not as bad as the backlash I had after the battle, but I *do* turn into an asshole for a while. I was going to suggest you go have some fun in town anyway. Besides...” His gaze traveled over her body for a moment and his lips quirked into a lascivious smile. “You’re bound to be a distraction for me.”

Jack smiled, remembering the events of the day and night before. In between training sessions – combat, meditation, and yet more combat – Riddick had been positively insatiable. She’d completely lost track of how many times and how many ways they’d made love.

“Okay,” she said after a long, reminiscent moment. “Anything you need from town while I’m there?”

“Nah. I got everything I could think of the other day.” That, of course, was the day they’d both gone into something like withdrawal from being separated for several hours. They smirked at each other, remembering the outcome of *that*.

Jack stood up, picking up her plate. Before she could carry it over to the prep unit, though, Riddick had moved around the table. He gently lowered the plate back down as he drew her into his arms and kissed her thoroughly. She relaxed in his arms, returning the kiss with matching ardor.

“Now don’t *you* stay away too long,” he admonished her as he released her. “Got some *plans* for you when you get back.”

“I’ll try not to take too long,” she promised, grinning up at him. He gave her one last, gentle squeeze around her waist before letting go altogether.

She cleared her plates, still smiling, and headed back into the bedroom to grab her card and jacket. When she emerged, Riddick was kneeling down in front of the comm unit, an odd device balanced in one hand. She watched him for a second, not wanting to break his concentration, before she quietly spoke.

“I’m heading out now.”

“Have fun, Jack. I love you.”

Oh wow. She felt a little part of herself go weak at that. “I love you too, Riddick.”

She smiled as she left their ship, and the smile stuck with her all the way into town. He’d actually said it now, of his own accord. Sure, he’d answered “yes” when she’d asked him, before, and he’d said it when he was comforting her, but it was the first time it had just popped out on its own like that.

It was getting hard for her to remember what it had been like to be on the *outside* of his emotional armor, what it had been like, in those first days on the skiff almost five years ago, when she’d spent almost all of her time trying to figure out what he was thinking, with very little success.

She stopped in a small general store for a few things, still caught in her memories. She could still recall the disbelief and burgeoning excitement she’d felt when he’d told her he was taking her with him. His reasons, when expressed – “How long you really think you’d stay with Imam if I left you here, kid? If we’re gonna risk our asses wandering the galaxy, might as well risk ’em together” – had made sense, if they had disappointed her a little. It had been another month before she’d figured out he genuinely cared about her.

She hadn’t figured out how much he’d come to *love* her until the day she was shot.

The lines in the front of the store were extremely long when she carried her purchases up. She got in the shortest one she could and waited, watching with impatience as the current customer at the head of the line fumbled for her money, adding to the delay.

Might as well be nice and have my card ready, she thought in annoyance. She pulled it out of her pocket and turned it over. Suddenly she stopped, glancing at the name on the card. *Shit*.

She’d brought the wrong one. This was the Angelica Porter card. Her alias, these days, was Jennifer Owens. “Angelica” was supposedly on her way to Earth with Riddick.

Jack sighed, pocketing the card. She was still several places back from the front of the line. As nonchalantly as she could, she examined her purchases again. After a few seconds she pretended to be searching among them, as if something was missing. Grinning sheepishly, she exited the line.

Moments later she had returned all of the items to their respective shelves and exited the store through a different door. Not that she actually believed anyone had been paying attention, but you never knew, after all. None of the stuff was urgent; she’d get it later when she had the right card.

In the meantime, she still had research to do. She turned and headed for the library.

Four hours later, Jack still wasn't sure what she was looking for.

She'd found a *lot* of information about the Scylla Project; seven months of public fascination had generated mountains of data, a lot of it redundant. But while much of it was absorbing, not to mention horrific, her question had gone unanswered.

She *had* found and viewed the footage of the Homestead Massacre. *That* was chilling. A tourist had captured the opening moments of the slaughter on video. Within an hour it was on every Earth channel's emergency newscast; the military hadn't had a chance to hush it up or deny it.

It had been spooky, *really* spooky, watching as these *children*, some of them barely pubescent, took grown soldiers apart, calmly butchering them. She suspected the images would haunt her dreams.

But she still hadn't found her answer.

Maybe I'm going about this wrong, she thought. *I'm looking at the things the **general** public saw. What about...*

She programmed in her new search, narrowing the field down to medical journals.

One title grabbed her almost immediately and she hit the link. *ILLEGAL USE OF ALTERED EMBRYOS AND THE SCYLLA PROJECT*. She began to read.

It gave her a bit of a headache, wading through some of the technical jargon, but she got the gist of it, and it did answer a few *other* questions she had. The embryos had been genetically altered even before being infected with the Scylla Spore. Then they'd been implanted into the wombs of thirty women, all of them brain-dead from overdoses of Adrenosynth 17, a trendy drug at the time. And yes, all thirty women had eventually died from the Spore, even though the babies survived unharmed.

But there was another link at the bottom of the text, connecting to a follow-up article published two months later. Checking the dates, she determined that the article had been published five months into the Scylla Scandal, a month before Riddick was born.

COULD THE SCYLLA PROJECT HAPPEN AGAIN? the title asked.

It opened with the basic ethical and medical questions. Was it possible to do such a thing? Of course. It had been done; it could be done again. Therefore, what safeguards had been and were being put into place to prevent it, the article asked.

Jack's blood froze when she read the name of the person who was answering that question.

Lieutenant Reginald Jarvis, appointed head of the task force that has taken over the Scylla Project in the wake of the Homestead Massacre, finally agreed to give some brief answers to this important question.

"At this time," he told the *J. A. M. A.* in a special interview, "all of the biological matter brought from the Scylla System has been destroyed and new Interdiction laws are in place regarding the system itself. No further biological material will ever be collected."

But what of the rumors of other embryos?

"It's true that the Scylla Project doctors were working on a next generation," he confirmed. "They had made modifications that they believed would prevent the deaths of the host mothers. However, we will never know whether or not it would have worked. Those embryos were all destroyed a month ago; I oversaw their destruction personally."

Jack stared at the monitor for a long time, her mind racing. The worst part of all, she realized, was that he hadn't even lied. *You just failed to mention that some of them were no longer embryos, you son of a bitch. They'd gone past that stage, way past it. And the ones that weren't embryos any more didn't **get** destroyed, did they?*

She wondered where they'd kept the host mothers while the scandal was in full swing. She wondered how many there had been that time.

Oh Reg, you fucking bastard, she thought. She put her head down on the desk and sobbed quietly. She'd found her answer.

Eventually she composed herself and rose, switching off the terminal. She had her answer. Now she needed to tell Riddick what she knew.

She wished she knew how he'd react. She couldn't even begin to imagine what it would be like to learn such a thing about *herself*. Yeah, Riddick knew that Special Forces had been fucking with his life since he was a child, but from what he'd said, he had no idea when, how or why it had begun.

He is not going to like this, she thought as she headed down the stairs. *Hell, I don't like it. I can't believe they could do something like that...*

But they could; they had. These were people who could deliberately take a plane with thirty children on board – albeit crazed, homicidal children – and crash it into the side of one of the Appalachian mountains. These were people who could take a bunch of young, brain-dead women and infect them with a deadly virus, letting their bodies die slowly and horribly in service to someone's twisted idea of scientific progress.

These were people who, apparently, were willing to do it all *again* after it failed spectacularly the first time.

She left the library and headed back towards the spaceport, her distress growing. She could actually imagine *one* possible response that Riddick might have. He might take off from their landing grid and launch an attack on the *Messina*. That would be suicide, of course, even with its fighter squadrons already destroyed. Unlikely, though. Riddick just wasn't the suicidal type.

Suddenly Jack came to an abrupt halt, staring ahead in shocked disbelief.

Jarvis was twenty yards in front of her.

He was seated at an outdoor table in one of the small cafes, eating quietly. He hadn't looked her way. She ducked her head and crossed the street as soon as traffic was clear enough.

Okay, she told herself. *No reason to panic.*

But she wasn't panicking, she realized. Not in the least. What she *felt* was more along the lines of righteous fury. She wanted to walk up to him and slap him across the face, to demand an explanation of how and why he played with human lives the way he did. And she *really* wanted to throttle the remaining secrets of the Charybdis Project out of him...

I can, she suddenly realized, a plan blossoming in her mind. *Oh my god, I know exactly how I can do this.*

She squared her shoulders and glanced about. She was only two blocks from the library, still. Very good. And the shop next to her sold data disks. Perfect.

I can do this, she told herself. Without further hesitation, she entered the shop.

The Angelica Porter card had approximately seven hundred New Francs left on it. Jack moved through the store, searching until she found what she wanted, a multi-pack of high-volume data disks. There should be enough space on them to do what she needed. She carried them to the front of the store.

Game time, she thought, as she handed the cashier the card that identified her as Angelica Porter.

There was a slight pause as the transaction went through, a bit longer than normal.

Shit, don't let them have closed down the card altogether...

Finally the purchase cleared. Jack signed the receipt quickly and took her bag, thanking the cashier and heading for the door. She paused and looked out.

Yes. Jarvis was on the move, crossing the street, his eyes fixed on the shop. They'd notified him of the card's use, exactly as she'd suspected. She undid her ponytail and let her hair fall around her face, obscuring her countenance as much as she could, and then pushed the door open. She was careful to keep her face partially turned away.

*Let him get a look. But not a **good** look. Just enough to pique his curiosity*, she reminded herself. *Come on, Uncle Reg, fall in line like a good soldier.*

She kept her pace brisk but relaxed. She didn't want to lose him, but she didn't want him to be able to catch up with her without drawing attention to himself. And above all, she didn't want him realizing she knew he was there. He'd leaned into the shop she'd exited, she noted, using a window as a mirror to see behind her. After a moment he was following her.

Very good, Uncle Reg. Come on home. She headed for the library.

She was careful not to let him get a good look at her as she retraced the two blocks, but she let him catch small glimpses of her profile from time to time. She wanted him to think he was looking at a double for the Late And Lamented Jack Kowalczyk, but she didn't want him figuring out the truth. She'd need the full shock value of *that* very soon, now.

Entering the library, she headed for the stairs. She'd gotten very familiar with the place's layout and knew exactly where she needed to go. Back to Russian Literature, fourth floor, east wing, where she'd found her answer in the first place. Always empty. The perfect spot for what she intended.

Jarvis was still following. Alone. Riddick was right; the troops had been sent back up to the *Messina*. He had no backup. It probably didn't even occur to him that he might need any.

Too bad for you, Reg, but great for me. Thanks. She headed for Russian Literature. She wondered what he made of that; after all, the Late And Lamented Jack Kowalczyk was of Russo-Polish descent on her father's side, wasn't she?

She made sure she didn't turn the corner until Jarvis reached the top of the steps, letting him catch a tantalizing glimpse of her profile. *Who you following, Uncle? You even know? Wanna take a guess yet?*

Moving to one of the terminals, she set her purchase beside it and booted up. Now she was ready. Just for fun, she sat down in front of the terminal and listened to his quiet footfalls as he approached her.

"Excuse me, miss," he said behind her, so politely. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

She smiled to herself and rose back out of her seat, stepping away from it with her back still turned. Adrenaline was coursing through her veins, she realized, but everything felt focused and clear. This was what Riddick had been talking about, she realized. The pre-combat high. Now she knew.

She turned around in a single, abrupt movement. Four feet away from her, Lieutenant Reginald Jarvis's eyes went wide.

"Hello, Uncle Reg," she replied with a smirk.

Stunned by the sudden revelation before him, Jarvis was completely unprepared for her sudden attack.

50.

Jarvis: A Disastrous Reunion

The last of the troops were leaving the surface of Troubadour when the report came in.

Despite the fact that it was close to noon on the planet, it was only early morning on the ship. The *Messina* was set to Earth GMT, like most military vessels. Jarvis had risen for an early breakfast and was reviewing the manifest at the time. Sergeant Mizuguchi brought the report by herself, sitting down across from him.

“We have three names, Sir.”

He glanced up, puzzled. “Names?”

She nodded. “Possible ship profiles that Riddick might have been using. We did it both ways, searching based on who arrived before Godot’s death and left after Malcolm’s, and another search using trajectories for arcs. Based on liftoff time and outgoing direction, which ships could have looped around and appeared to be coming back in from the Cygnus Systems in time to land when the *Swan* did. We got three ships that fit all of the particulars.”

Jarvis nodded back, understanding her meaning now. Very thorough. Once again, he was glad he’d spotted her as quickly as he had. She was going to go far in the Project. So far she didn’t seem to be plagued by any of the moral dilemmas he wrestled with.

“So... tell me the names, Sergeant,” he prompted gently, sipping his coffee.

“Okay. We have the *Never Again IV*—” She stopped and they both chuckled over the name for a moment. “Owned by Gina and Brooks Yarbrough. Husband and wife and three kids, probably not our *Swan*.”

“Probably not. What else?”

“There’s the *Glittering Ganesh*, owned by Bhupalam Kishoravati. This one appears to be owned and operated by a single man. He’s been in business for fifteen years.”

“Doesn’t sound like something Riddick could use too easily. What’s behind Door Number Three?”

“Most likely to be Riddick, probably. This ship’s called the *Tarsin’s Chance*—”

“The *what*?” He knew that name. Where did he know that name from?

“The *Tarsin’s Chance*, Sir. Owned and operated by Colin and Rebecca Tarsin—”

“*Shit!* That’s it, that’s the one!” Jarvis jumped out of his chair and headed for the intraship comm. He punched in the code for the shuttle bay. “This is Lieutenant Jarvis. I need to speak to Flight Control.”

Behind him, Mizuguchi rose, watching him with a slight frown. “Sir?”

He glanced back at her. “Rebecca Tarsin was a patient at the clinic where Peter Malcolm worked. The doctor there kept insisting that *Colin* Tarsin reminded her of Riddick! I thought she was just imagining things, but maybe not.”

“*Yes Sir?*” came a voice over the speaker.

“I need to get down to New Paris immediately. I’ll be in the bay in five minutes. Do whatever you need to do to be ready.”

“*Yes, Sir.*”

Jarvis headed down to the shuttle bay at a run, stopping at his quarters long enough to grab his electronic notepad and his personal comm unit. Finally, things were beginning to break. Thank God the answer had come *before* they’d left orbit.

There was no doubt in his mind that Rebecca Tarsin and Angelica Porter were the same person. Who that person was, and why she’d hooked up with Riddick, were still mysteries to him. The answers, however, would soon be in his hands. He strapped himself into the shuttle’s empty passenger cabin, comforted by these thoughts. Soon he would know who Riddick had with him. Maybe then things would make more sense.

“Well, when will she be out?”

The nurse behind the glass window gave him a sour look. "The procedure takes another two and a half hours."

"And there's no way to interrupt her."

Now the woman's look was frankly scornful. "It's a *delicate operation* ...sir. There's no way to stop it once it starts without major complications for the patient, and we don't have anyone who can take over for her. We're short-staffed today. You're just going to have to wait."

Jarvis glanced around the waiting area. The room was filled with clientele, the roughest of the rough. There wasn't a woman in the room who didn't look like she'd been used hard, nor a man in the place who didn't look like he would be guilty of putting someone to such use.

Oh Bry, he thought again helplessly. *How the hell did you fall so damned far?*

There was no way he was waiting here.

He turned back to the nurse, who had already closed the window again, and rapped impatiently on the glass. By her look he could see that she wanted to tell him to fuck off. He flashed his ID again, reminding her obliquely that he could get their whole operation shut down in a heartbeat if she pissed him off.

"I will be back in two and a half hours. I expect Dr. Cartwright to be available for debriefing at that time. If she has any additional scheduled surgeries, I suggest you reschedule them. This is official Tribunal business. Do you understand me?"

The nurse paled a little and nodded.

Turning, Jarvis stalked out of the clinic. He hit the street and shouldered his way through the crowd. His stomach growled angrily at him as he walked. Most of his breakfast, he abruptly realized, was still cooling on the *Messina* conference table. No wonder he was so grouchy.

Should have called down to the planet to check first, he thought ruefully as he headed for a cafe.

He had to improvise a breakfast for himself off of the cafe's menu. The French idea of "breakfast" was far too insubstantial for him, but fortunately it was lunchtime on the local clocks. Sipping a cup of very good coffee – much better than the *Messina's* stock – he reviewed what little he'd come to know.

Rebecca Tarsin was undoubtedly the same woman as Angelica Porter. But who was she *really*?

The best guess he could hazard was that Riddick had bought her. Ex-prostitutes and the men who bought them were the sort of clientele the regen clinic catered to, after all. When things went wrong with Jack and he'd decided that she'd betrayed him, he'd killed her, yes, but then he must have begun obsessing over her. So he'd purchased a replacement, a woman who looked like Jack and would act the way Riddick felt Jack *should* act. He must have hired the other prostitute, Brielle, to tide him over until his acquisition had recovered from her treatment.

His suppositions made him more than a little queasy, of course. The implication of it all was that Riddick had slipped into some extreme dementia.

He sighed again, once more remembering the lively boy who had once existed. The boy who had vanished – died – years ago and been replaced by a monster. Bryan was gone. He had to be. There was no way the same boy who'd saved his daughter's life could have torn Jack Kowalczyk to pieces over the course of three whole, horrible days.

He had almost finished his breakfast when his personal comm chimed softly in his pocket. He opened it up. "Jarvis."

"Lieutenant," Mizuguchi's voice came to him. "*Angelica Porter's credit card is in use.*"

"What? Where?" That wasn't possible. Riddick and Porter should only be about halfway to Earth now...

"On Troubadour, Sir. In New Paris. 135 Rue Mercredi. A shop called L—"

Jarvis had already spotted it. *He* was on Rue Mercredi, after all, only twenty yards or so from the shop. "I got it."

"What are your orders, Sir?"

"I'm here. I'll handle it. Is the transaction going through?"

"It's processing. We wanted your instructions, but we'll need to either clear or reject it soon."

"Clear it."

"Yes, Sir."

He tossed a handful of New Francs down on the table and rose. Whoever was using the card was still in the shop. He wondered if it really was Angelica Porter. Possibly her card had been stolen, but what if she really was still on the planet? What would she still be doing here?

The door to the shop opened and he beheld a shocking sight. The slim woman exiting the shop looked even more like Jack Kowalczyk, at least in a quick glance, than the prostitute Brielle had. With her golden hair loose and obscuring her face, it was hard to be sure, but in profile she looked *extremely* similar.

He leaned into the shop quickly, hoping the man at the counter spoke English. Some of the citizens of New Paris staunchly refused to, he'd discovered, even though it was the official language of all Tribunal-registered worlds.

"Excuse me. The woman that just left here... I think she's a friend of mine. Was that Angelica Porter?"

The man frowned and glanced down at the receipt he'd been about to put away. "Yes, that's her name."

Oh god, it's her. What's she doing here, with Riddick on his way to Earth? He set out after her, keeping his distance. He didn't want her to know someone was following her, after all.

Maybe Angelica hadn't been on board when Riddick panicked and blasted out of the Orleans spaceport. Maybe she'd been abruptly left behind in the course of that disaster. She could have been hiding on Troubadour ever since, possibly using yet another identity Riddick had provided her with, while she waited for the heat to die down. She'd probably noticed that the soldiers had all left, and decided it was safe to come out now.

God, he thought, catching another glimpse of her face for a fraction of a second. She looks so much like Jack. No wonder he picked her up. This is sick...

Did she have any idea who she was substituting for? Did she have any clue what Riddick had done to the original woman? He would be sure to ask her about that. She was entering the New Paris Public Library. He followed her in at a discreet distance, pleased to note that she still wasn't aware of him.

She was still blithely oblivious that anyone was tailing her. He followed her up the stairs and into the fourth floor. She headed for the Russian Literature section, taking a seat by one of the terminals and unwrapping her purchase. Data disks. For a moment he wondered what she could possibly be researching. He'd be sure to ask.

He kept his voice low and polite. "Excuse me, miss. Can I talk to you for a minute?"

Odd. She didn't seem at all surprised by his presence. He frowned as she slowly rose from her seat, her back still turned to him, and stepped away from the chair.

In one single, fluid movement, she turned around to face him. His breath caught in his throat as he got a good look at her face for the first time.

Oh god.

He knew those features by heart. He saw them every day, every time he looked at the picture on his desk that had become his talisman, the embodiment of his conscience. Every detail was perfect. There was no possible way anyone could look so precisely like Jack Kowalczyk... His blood froze in his veins.

Her mouth quirked and the resemblance became unbearably uncanny. He'd looked into the same level gaze, the same ironic smile, only four months earlier. *It's her. Oh god, it's her. This isn't possible...*

"Hello, Uncle Reg," she said in a throaty voice he remembered all too well.

He couldn't move. He was rooted to the spot, staring at her in shock and disbelief. He was still staring when she came at him abruptly, her movements an astonishing blur. Everything went black.

When he began to come to, he was leaning forward. Red light stung his left eye for a moment, arcing across his field of vision, and then it was gone.

"Retinal scan confirmed," came a mechanical voice. He felt his body being pushed backward into a chair. Now the soft sound of keys clicking came to him. He let his eyes crack open.

Jack Kowalczyk was sitting next to him, frowning at the terminal screen as she typed. After a moment she smiled slightly. Her hand moved to a pile of data disks and she inserted one into the terminal.

Shit, she's using my clearance to get into Charybdis, he realized. He tried to move, but his hands were cuffed behind his back, with his own cuffs.

Jack glanced his way. The smile that quirked one side of her mouth wasn't precisely friendly. "Well. Awake at last, Uncle Reg?"

She glanced back at the screen for a moment, probably gauging how much longer her data would be copying to disk. After a second her gaze returned to him. "You miss me?"

"I thought you were dead," he managed through parched lips.

Her expression became scornful. "Yeah, I'll just *bet* you did. What, were you disappointed? Did I mess up your *plans*, Lieutenant?"

He winced and simply looked at her sadly. She'd never believe him if he tried to tell her how much he'd grieved over her, how much guilt he'd felt. Their gazes held for a long time, and he saw a look of puzzlement creep over her face before the moment was broken by a soft chime from the terminal.

She turned, taking a deep breath, and extracted her data disk, replacing it with another. He watched her key in a new data request. Part of him was screaming silently – "*She's inside Charybdis! She's copying the files; you have to **stop** her!*" – but he continued to stare at her in wonderment.

"Have you been..." Her head swung around and she stared at him as he spoke. "Have you been alright... Jack?"

She smiled slightly. "I'm fine. Never better. I'm all healed up from what your bullet did, finally. Look, he even paid to have the scars removed." She lifted up her shirt a little so he could see the flawless skin of her abdomen, no longer marked with coarse scar tissue.

"So it was *you* at the regen clinic," he murmured in wonder. Of course it had been.

"Who else would it be? Thought he bought himself a playmate? Reg, you really don't know him *nearly* as well as you like to tell yourself. Of course..." She switched out another data disk. "If you *did*, you probably would have known I couldn't *really* be dead."

A chill passed through him. "You sure you know him as well as *you* think you do?"

An odd, Riddick-like deadpan settled over her face. "Pretty sure."

"Jack..." He leaned forward as far as he could, not far at all, but he needed her to know how serious he was. "Riddick is... he's *obsessed* about you. Sexually. He's—"

"Oh don't worry, Reg, it's mutual." The girl smirked and stretched a little. "So far I've been able to keep up. He's *very* tireless. Did you *make* him that way, Uncle? Is there some point on his gene-map that's marked 'wants to fuck all the time?'"

"That's not what I mean—"

Suddenly her face was close to his. Her hand closed lightly around his throat. "So what *do* you mean, huh, Reg? Because so far I'm not too impressed by what you 'know' about him."

He sighed. "I know that while you were recovering from the regen, and right up until about a day before the battle, he was hiring a prostitute to pretend to be you. He told her she was impersonating someone he had 'no business touching.'"

Jack sat back abruptly, looking a little bit stunned. She hadn't known that; he could see that clearly.

"So that's why..." After a moment an odd smile appeared on her face and she shook her head. "Role-playing. No wonder he jumped." She chuckled for a moment. "Poor man, and the whole time I was trying to..."

She stopped, glancing over at him. A frown appeared on her face.

"You really should keep people's secrets better, Lieutenant. Oh well, fair's fair. I'm going to be sharing *yours* with *him*, after all."

The meaning of her statement took a moment to sink in. *Riddick's still on Troubadour?*

He watched as she swapped out another data disk, feeling odd. He should be trying to stop her...

But in his mind he was seeing everything anew. Riddick hadn't gone crazy, he suddenly realized. He'd done a masterful job of faking the girl's death and she'd been with him ever since! And now...

Now Riddick has a "Charybdis Mate," he realized with wonderment. That rare event had happened again.

*Bryan, you're still in there, aren't you? You're still alive. I **wasn't** wrong. That was **you** looking out at me from the airlock four years ago.*

"Why don't we just lay the rest of the cards on the table, Jarvis?" Jack suddenly asked. She put in another disk and moved over to face him, once more kneeling close to him. "Let's talk about what the Charybdis Project *really* is."

"It's classified." Even if she *was* a Charybdis Mate, she wasn't cleared yet. She could steal the information but he couldn't *volunteer* it.

She frowned. "Fine. Let *me* tell *you*, then."

She bent forward and whispered her next words in his ear. "There *is* no Charybdis Project, you bastard. You just renamed the Scylla Project after the scandal broke. The next generation of Scylla Children were

finishing up their first trimester at that point, weren't they? And you weren't *about* to give them up."

She sat back and watched his face. He tried to keep his expression blank.

"Poker face, Reg? It *really* doesn't suit you. I'll bet you lose at cards a *lot* with that face."

"Did he tell you this?"

She smiled at him. "No, he still doesn't know what was done to him. Maybe he doesn't *want* to believe. But it's true, isn't it? Guess you decided to split up the next batch, spread them out? Make sure they couldn't get together and gang up on any more of your soldiers?"

He kept his silence. Seconds later the side of his face was stinging from her slap.

"Wake up, Reg! I don't have time for this shit."

He gazed at her sadly. "He's changed you. Made you brutal—"

"Brutal?" She frowned at him. "*Brutal* is someone who knowingly implants embryos carrying a dangerous and potentially fatal virus into the bodies of a couple dozen women after the first bunch *died* from it—"

"They'd already *done* that when I was reassigned to the Project—"

"Gotcha." She smiled triumphantly. And she had. He'd just confirmed her accusations, he realized. He watched in helpless wonder as she turned and swapped out another data disk. "Lotta files here, Uncle Reg. I can't wait to read them. So why'd you pick such an obvious name, anyway? People still read the *Odyssey* in Lit classes, you know."

"The Scylla Scandal was almost thirty-six years ago, Jack. To most people it's ancient history."

"Like Greek Mythology? Come *on*, Reg. Why'd you take such a big chance?"

"I didn't choose the name. I agree with you. Someone in the top brass was feeling poetic."

"I'll remind Riddick to write a nice sonnet for his widow."

"Jack, you're not actually planning on attacking the *Tribunal*, are you? Because even Riddick can't manage that."

She took a breath as if she was about to speak, and then stopped, frowning. She cocked her head, listening intently. Suddenly she moved back to the terminal, ejecting the last data disk and shoving it into her shopping bag along with the others. "Sounds like it's time for me to go. Guess they got worried about you, huh?"

Now he heard it, distantly, on one of the lower levels of the building. Only the faintest sound drifted up. Just a hint of voices, calling out "Clear!" to one another as they quartered the building.

He was jerked back to his present condition as Jack bent down and kissed his cheek. "Be seeing you again soon, Uncle Reg. Promise. Anything you want me to say to Riddick?"

He glanced back at the stairwell, hearing the distant voices growing louder. "You'd better run now, Jack." He couldn't believe he'd said it.

The look she gave him was odd. Touched. She turned and hurried for the stairs. He listened to her steps and heard her as she encountered one of his men.

"Oh my god, there's a man with a gun up there—" Her voice was filled with realistic panic. He smiled to himself. She was going to get away clean.

He heard them let her pass, telling her that she should leave the building. He closed his eyes and rested his head against the back of the chair. He should be trying to stop her, he knew. If he yelled out, there was still time for them to catch her...

He stayed silent, listening as his troops spread out on the fourth floor. They found him a moment later.

"Sir! Lieutenant Jarvis! *Sir!*"

Someone undid the cuffs prisoning his arms. He groaned, acting more dazed than he actually was.

"Spread out!" a man barked. "Let's see if we can catch him before he gets off this level." Jarvis could hear his troops fanning out, searching for the illusory man with a gun that Jack had made up.

"Sir? Are you okay? Can you talk?"

He sighed. "I'm fine... I'll be fine."

"Who had you? We've been trying to reach your comm for an hour. Then you were online but you wouldn't answer any of the queries we sent you."

"Wasn't me."

"Sir, do you mean your *captor* was inside the Charybdis mainframe?"

"Yes, Corporal, unfortunately..."

A soldier at the terminal looked up. "Whoever it was appears to have downloaded files!"

“Shit!” The Corporal – Jarvis abruptly recognized the voice as the man who had told Jack to get clear of the building – turned away from him. “That girl! She was carrying a bag of data disks...”

Jarvis climbed slowly out of his chair, watching the Corporal as the man pulled out his comm unit. “Front desk sentry. Stop the woman with a bag of data disks from leaving the building, it’s urgent!”

“Too late, Sir, she passed me a minute ago,” came the reply.

“Fuck!” The Corporal unlimbered his rifle, heading for a window.

“Corporal, what are you doing?” Jarvis demanded. “Stand down!”

“Gotta catch her before she gets away,” the man muttered. He chambered a round. “I see her...”

“Stand down, Corporal!”

The soldier ignored him, intent upon his quarry.

“That’s an order!” Jarvis shouted. He lunged forward, reaching out to knock the gun from the man’s hands.

He wasn’t fast enough.

The window shattered as the bullet passed through. Seconds later, the sound of screams drifted up from the street below. Jarvis grabbed the gun and wrenched it out of the man’s hands, throwing it aside. His fist connected with the soldier’s jaw a second later, sending him reeling back.

Through the window he could see it all. The few vehicles on the road had come to a complete stop. Pedestrians were scattering. And worst of all, lying still on the pavement, limbs sprawled haphazardly, was a figure he knew on sight. After following her for two blocks, he couldn’t possibly *not* know her.

“Sir? What the—”

He turned, grabbing the Corporal by his jacket and slamming the man into the wall. He’d never wanted to kill someone so much. But he was consumed by it. A killing rage was all he could feel. The rest of him had been shocked into numbness.

Staring into the man’s wide, startled eyes, he screamed his rage at him, knowing that the idiot couldn’t possibly understand the full implications of what he was saying.

“You just shot Jack Kowalczyk!”

51.

Riddick: “Come Back, Shane...”

Five hours had passed since Jack had left the ship and Riddick was almost done preparing his surprise.

He was actually very glad she'd had some research she needed to do. It meant that he hadn't had to cook up an excuse to get her off of the ship for a few hours while he installed the entertainment system he'd bought her. Now almost everything was in place. The screens were up, one in the main room and one in the bedroom. A new storage case had been installed for the boxes of classic cinematics he'd purchased. Now he just had to put those away and run a final test on the equipment.

He glanced over the various titles as he loaded them in. Every movie he'd ever loved and every movie Jack had mentioned enjoying were here. These would be another thing to keep them entertained on long trips, when they weren't...

Oh yeah, he wanted her back at the ship. He was looking forward to her return. Tonight they'd watch one of the movies in between lovemaking sessions. Maybe even more than one. But the second she walked through the door... mmmm....

Okay, Jack, you can come home any time now, he thought, as he ran the final test. He put his loose equipment away as the test cycled, and smiled at the result. Perfect; ready to run any time.

What should they watch first?

He glanced over the titles again, considering. Should he foist *Casablanca* off on her again, see if she found it more interesting now? He thought she would. But maybe he'd better start off with something a little more subtle. Something she hadn't seen before...

His eye caught, for a moment, on *Shane* before he sighed and shook his head. Not that; not yet. He wasn't sure *he* was ready to see it again. He wasn't even sure why he'd bought it.

Well, no, he knew the answer to *that*. It was a very good movie and he'd liked most of it. Westerns were popular again now that the human race had begun to colonize distant worlds; although they rode starships instead of stagecoaches, the pioneers of *this* century had much in common with those of the nineteenth and early twentieth century and they knew it. They faced much the same perils and concerns, so the old movies resonated once again.

Funny how seeing a centuries-old movie had almost flayed him alive...

It had been only a week since the Barracks Incident when Riddick boarded the passenger ship *Roman Holiday* under the alias Michael Greene. Despite the name's hint at debauchery (or perhaps just old movies), the ship was very tame and touristy, the perfect place for him to “go to ground” for a time.

Although anyone could have ordered a movie piped directly into their cabin, most of the passengers gathered nightly in one of the communal rooms to watch one. Westerns were very popular; most of his fellow passengers were on their way to the Frontier Systems themselves. Despite his rapidly resurfacing antisocial tendencies, Riddick had joined them.

Shane had played the third night out.

The pain had begun when he'd watched how little Joey behaved toward Shane. The same watchful admiration filled the boy's eyes that had filled his Jack's, every time the kid looked at Shane. Every time he saw the boy he felt the emptiness again. Jack should have been next to him, leaning up against him with his arm over her shoulder and her head on his chest, watching the movie with him. Not dead. Not dead...

If the boy Joey reminded him of Jack, the hired gunslinger Wilson reminded him oddly of Johns. He had the same smile that Johns had worn, the same callous amorality. He'd smiled when Shane killed him, the pain of Jack's loss briefly lifting.

That pain had been bad, but it hadn't become unbearable until the end. Up until Shane rode out, with the little boy calling out to him. That scene had struck him like a high-velocity bullet.

Afterward he wasn't sure just *what* about that moment had upset him so. The desperate quaver in the boy's voice, most likely. In that moment, the kid had sounded like *Jack*.

Jack, the same wavery plea in her voice, calling after him to wait for her and the others, as he surged past them with the cells... Jack, seconds before she was attacked by one of the hideous creatures...

And I almost left her to die, he'd thought, his face buried in his hands as he sat on the edge of his bunk. He'd barely managed to make it out of the common room when the lights came up; only years of practiced stoicism had allowed it. *I almost left her to die twice*.

He'd lain back on the bed, his mind overwhelmed by a flood of memories and emotion. He remembered it all. For the last few weeks he'd *wished* it was possible for him to get drunk, because he desperately wanted to sink into oblivion. To exist, just for a little while, in a world in which Jack wasn't dead.

I should have stayed with her, he'd thought with a deep pang of regret, an emotion that had been a stranger to him for more than a decade. He knew he *would* have stayed, this time, if only it had been possible... if only the airlock door hadn't closed in his face at that moment. Jack had died alone, without him, and that was what hurt most of all.

Even his bloody act of vengeance against Jarvis's young cadets hadn't assuaged that powerful agony. And at that moment every wound, mental or physical, that he had ever suffered seemed to have been ripped open anew. It was a pain he didn't think his tenuous connection to humanity could survive.

Within him he could feel the beast, writhing and snarling, desperate to strike out at everyone and everything that had caused this pain. He'd let it loose a week and a half earlier, letting it savage Jarvis's trainees in direct retaliation for Jack's death. He'd come so close to becoming a genuine human being again, too... close enough that, if the airlock door hadn't closed, he would have gone back out and surrendered to Jarvis, if only so that he could stay with Jack until it was over, so she wouldn't die alone, surrounded by uncaring strangers...

Never again, the beast within him had growled. *Next time I see Jarvis he's going to die. There will never be any surrender now...*

His mind had turned again to the quaver in her voice as she'd called out to him, back in the dark canyon, pleading with him to wait for the others, to wait for *her*. He'd almost kept going. And when she'd been attacked, he'd almost let the thing take her. For a moment he'd wavered, turning back and then away. He hadn't wanted her to die and hadn't known what to make of that. But he hadn't believed that she could make it, either.

Even if he saved her from *that* attack, after all, there would soon be another.

For a moment, listening to her cry out in fear and desperation as she struggled to keep the bone between her and her attacker, the thought had come to him: *just let it end now*. He almost had.

Fry had changed his mind. He'd turned back and gone to their aid, but the thought had stayed with him. Now it cut at him, as if his wish for the ordeal to be over had somehow been responsible for Jarvis's bullet.

He'd turned his back on her yet again when the rains had started. Climbing up the canyon wall, he'd sought out the settlement and had been surprised by the anguish that settled in his chest when he realized it was *still too far away*. He couldn't get them there. Even as he realized it the boy Suleiman was taken.

Imam's vocal grief had torn at him, too. Looking at Carolyn and Jack, he'd wondered suddenly if soon it would be *him* on his knees, begging the night to give one or both of them back. It was more than he'd been capable of facing.

I can't watch them die, he'd thought. He'd spotted the cave a moment later and had ordered them into it. With them sealed inside, safe for a time, he had been able to continue his run for the skiff, trying hard to ignore the bitter debate within him over their fates.

He'd almost left them again. He'd almost left *her*. And once more it was Carolyn who dragged him back toward humanity. Jack, when he'd returned for her, had told him she'd never doubted him, but he could see the relief in her eyes. She'd been waiting to die. Because of him.

And now, he'd thought, his eyes screwed tightly shut as he lay on his bunk in the inaptly-named *Roman Holiday*, she really *was* dead. She'd died alone among callous strangers who cared nothing for her, who could only possibly see her as "collateral damage."

He should have gone back. Somehow.

At least Shane didn't run out until the battle was over, he thought to himself scathingly. *At least he knew the boy was safe when he left him*.

He'd slept for twelve hours, as he always did when the pain of being what he was grew too great.

It was only a few days later that he heard the gossip circulating. Rumors that Jack had survived. The condition, he overheard two settlers saying, of the girl injured in the gun battle on New Sacramento had just been downgraded from critical to stable. Sitting near them in the *Roman Holiday's* dining hall, Riddick had felt the guttering spark of his humanity catch hold and flare anew. Jack was alive. He abandoned his plans of a suicide mission against Tribunal Headquarters immediately, his attention turning to the more important matter of re-acquiring *his* girl.

He'd wondered if she would blame him. If she would hate him. That worry had quickly been put to rest. Judicious hacking into law enforcement mainframes had given him access to her psych evaluations and he'd quickly discovered that all of her hostility was reserved for the Special Forces officers who had her in their custody. They called her "sullen and uncooperative."

Richard B. Riddick had smiled and begun his plans for taking her back from them, plans that would take four years to come to fruition. He was calm and careful about it; he had to be. He'd learned that his entire humanity – his embryonic soul – was tied to the girl. Her loss would destroy it utterly. He could leave nothing to chance.

But he never could bring himself to watch *Shane* again.

Riddick sighed to himself. Maybe now that Jack was back in his life he'd be able to watch the movie again. He wasn't entirely sure. It was a good movie, and he had a feeling he would always enjoy watching the gunslinger Wilson – who reminded him so much of Johns – getting dropped by Shane.

But not tonight.

He chuckled quietly as he selected the movie they *would* start with. It was appropriate, given the current registry his beloved ship, the "Whatsername," was listed under – the *Audrey II*. He was going to introduce her to *Little Shop of Horrors*. He wondered what kind of response she would have to musical comedy.

He wondered if the carnivorous plant with the attitude would remind her of her grandmother.

Chuckling still, he loaded the disc into the machine and set everything on standby. Now all he needed was for her to come home.

While he waited, he straightened up the ship until it was flight ready. He wasn't going to wait much more than that, though. If necessary, he'd go collect her from the library.

Some things were getting harder and harder to wait for.

52.

Jarvis: Never Pull a Gun Unless You Mean It

Silence had fallen in the street outside and numbness had settled over Lieutenant Reginald Jarvis. Just like the first time.

The first time.

His mind rolled back to that awful night, almost four and a half years earlier, replaying the terrible events...

It had been a bizarre coincidence that he'd actually already been on New Sacramento when Riddick triggered the Charybdis Trap for the second time. He had, in fact, been just about to leave the planet. He coordinated the manhunt from the spaceport itself, helping his troops, augmented by Planetary forces, as they combed the streets around the information kiosk Riddick had attempted to use.

Half an hour later they found the apartment where he'd been living. Jarvis had listened in disbelief as one of his soldiers described it. Two bedrooms; two beds. Both had been occupied. Short, wavy golden-brown hairs had been found on one of the pillows.

Riddick had a roomie? Jarvis shook his head in bemusement. An hour passed as he waited for further word.

It wasn't until the commotion broke out in the spaceport itself that Jarvis realized Riddick had come to *him*. He watched his quarry's flight on the security monitors, frowning as he observed the slim child being pulled along by one elbow. Who did Riddick have with him?

"Give me a listing of all outgoing flights along Riddick's current trajectory," he'd ordered. "Make it by departure time, earliest first."

The technician beside him hadn't argued but had efficiently produced a list for him. He'd grabbed his kit and headed out with his soldiers to the most logical interception point. They still almost didn't make it in time.

Riddick had passed the security terminal and entered the embarkation hallway before Jarvis and his troops caught up with him. He still had the kid in tow.

"Riddick!" Jarvis shouted. "Don't move!"

The two kept running. He fired a warning shot over their heads.

He was a half-level above them, looking down at them from a platform normally used by people waiting for loved ones to disembark from a space shuttle. He had an excellent view of both of them.

What happened next surprised him and gave him the first inkling that little Bryan might still exist. Riddick unslung one of the bags he carried and thrust it into the kid's hands, shoving the youth toward an emergency exit. Jarvis could hear the one word he shouted.

"Go!"

The child staggered for a moment as Riddick increased his pace, zig-zagging his movements as he sprinted for the airlock at the end of the hallway.

He's lost his hostage, Jarvis thought, putting his eye to the gun's scope and tracking Riddick. *I can take him. Wing him in the leg...*

It would do no lasting damage, he knew. Riddick would heal from this bullet-wound every bit as well as he'd healed from the one Anthony Johns had given him one night more than four years earlier. That one had passed through Riddick's lung, according to the forensics team. A wound to one leg would be nothing compared to that...

He tracked his quarry, locking onto the outside of one thigh. Riddick jerked to the right and he followed with the gun, getting a feel for the asymmetrical rhythm of evasive maneuvers the man was using. Now he had him.

His finger squeezed the trigger.

Just as the gun went off his scope went dark as something moved between it and Riddick. Jarvis gasped, jerking his head up in time to watch the child, suddenly in the bullet's path, stumble forward and land on hands and knees. Blood sprayed everywhere.

Oh my god... The temperature around Jarvis had suddenly dropped to absolute zero. He watched in horror as the child attempted to rise, hands automatically reaching up to clutch at the gory, gaping wound his bullet had left in a small torso.

Reginald Jarvis's rifle dropped from his nerveless fingers.

As the child fell again, first to his knees and then toppling over the rest of the way, Jarvis saw Riddick's face. It was the last time he ever saw it, and the expression on it burned itself indelibly into him. Such pain and anguish. He watched as Riddick lunged forward, clawing at the airlock doors which were already two-thirds of the way closed. Was he trying to get back through? Reach the child?

As the doors slammed shut he thought he heard an animal howl of anguish and rage. It sounded like a name: "*Jaaaack!*"

Jarvis raced down to the lower level and into the tunnel, barely able to feel his legs, hurrying over to the boy Jack's side.

The unit's medic was already kneeling beside the child. Jarvis stared down at the still, pale face with its delicate features. This boy couldn't possibly be more than thirteen, fourteen at the oldest...

"We need to get him into ICU, sir," the medic said shakily as she continued running scans. "Shit... *her*, sir."

"Her?"

"Scans verify it. She's female. But she won't be *anything* much longer if we don't get her on a machine."

The station paramedics raced over, joining her, and Jarvis stepped back. Together, they worked on stabilizing the girl and preparing her for transport to a hospital. Jarvis sank back down against a wall, still numb. He'd shot a child. He'd *shot a child!*

His shaking hands reached over and picked up the bag she'd dropped, examining it. Inside were a few items of clothing and several small trinkets. A shiv, carved to fit a small hand, was among them.

Riddick made this for you, he thought distractedly, his mind going back over the tormented expression on Riddick's face, the anguished cry he'd heard as the airlock closed. *What were you to him?*

Other items in the bag made no sense to him. A small string of Muslim prayer beads. Carefully-trimmed pieces of old-style hull-patch cloth for a skiff, the names "Carolyn Fry," "Paris P. Ogilvie" and "Sharon Ezekiel" ornately written upon them. Finally, deep within the bag, a marshal badge with the name "William Johns" stamped on it.

As the girl was wheeled out of the hallway, Jarvis glanced at the bag one more time, noticing for the first time the words, written in a childish scrawl, on the side:

Serial Hag

This girl had known exactly who she was traveling with, he realized. That didn't make things any better, of course. She was still just a child.

Only the fact that the shooting had taken place at 3 a. m. local time enabled the Tribunal to keep it quiet. When word did begin to circulate, the story had been carefully shaped. Every phrase implied that there had been a gun battle, Riddick shooting back at the Special Forces troops, and that the downed girl had been caught in the crossfire. Although they never said it outright, so as not to perjure themselves, the Special Forces spokespeople were careful to *imply* that she'd been felled by one of Riddick's bullets.

And Jarvis spent the next month waking up in cold sweats as he dreamed over and over and over of shooting the poor girl. Just as the nightmares began to recede, new ones dawned. Riddick had infiltrated one of the most secure training facilities Special Forces had, and massacred twelve of Jarvis's hand-picked cadets in retaliation.

No matter how much he blamed himself, though, nobody on the Board blamed him. It might have been easier if they had. The Tribunal cleared him, not seeming to care that a teenaged girl had almost died by his hand. But Jarvis cared. He spent a month trying to reach the girl before he became resigned to the fact that she would forever consider him her enemy. He did everything in his power to make sure that she'd have a safe, secure future. Her suggestions regarding his efforts were astonishingly profane.

Dammit, he'd thought after one of their sessions, as he'd left the ward still scorched from her blistering invective, *I never meant to hurt you, Audrey! I was only trying to wing him!*

"Sir, I was just trying to wing her—"

"Shut the fuck up, Corporal." Jarvis raced down the library stairs two at a time, his troops following him.

"But Sir—"

"You're already facing a court-martial for disobeying a direct order and shooting an unarmed civilian. Don't add insubordination to the list of your crimes, you stupid *fuck!*"

"That unarmed civilian attacked you and broke into classified files!" The man's voice was filled with indignant protest.

"And in response, against my express orders, you *shot Jack Kowalczyk!*" Jarvis hit the third floor landing at a run and started down the next flight of stairs.

"Sir, Jack Kowalczyk is dead!" the corporal protested, still trying to catch up to him.

"If she is, Corporal, it's because you killed her."

"I was just trying to w—" He stopped abruptly as Jarvis whirled on him.

"Don't say it. Do *not* fucking say it. Let me tell you what the next twenty-four hours of your life are going to be like, Corporal. If she's dead, assuming Riddick doesn't kill every last one of us, of course, you're going to be thrown in the brig where you will remain until you are brought to trial. And I *promise* you right now that the result of that trial will be that you'll spend the rest of your natural life playing prison guard to the worst scum Nereid has to offer. *Do you understand me?*"

The corporal paled. He swallowed sharply, staring at his infuriated commanding officer as if Jarvis had sprouted horns, fangs and shined eyes.

"*Well?*" Jarvis thundered.

"I get you, Sir!" he shouted, snapping to abrupt attention.

"Good!" Jarvis turned and began racing down the stairs again, aware that the corporal was keeping pace with him, not daring to lag. "You'd better pray to any gods you happen to believe in that she's alive. You shot your career down the toilet today, Corporal, but if she survived that gunshot you *might* have a chance of seeing daylight again."

He hit the second floor landing and kept going.

He couldn't say what he really felt, of course. There was no way to express it, to explain it, not to any of this trigger-happy rescue unit. They seemed to have no inkling of the profound tragedy that might have just taken place. They certainly had no understanding at all of the fierce joy and admiration he'd felt for Jack, his delight at her wiliness, grace and courage, and the sheer fact that *she was alive...*

...And now might be no more.

He might just kill the Corporal himself if that was the case.

"I want a fucking medic here immediately," he ordered as he hit the first floor and raced for the main doors. "Somebody make a call to the *Messina* and alert our team of spin-doctors, too. It's going to take every bit of finesse to get us out of this fiasco. Order a full media blackout until further notice."

"Yes, Sir," came a lightly-accented woman's voice from behind him. Good, at least he had one person who could follow orders.

He stiff-armed his way through the doors and raced down the stone steps, hitting the pavement. An eerie hush had settled over the street. He approached Jack's still form at a run and dropped to his knees beside her.

Please don't be dead, oh god, please don't be dead...

She was lying on her stomach, her arms splayed haphazardly away from her body. The dropped bag of disks still lay by her right hand. He couldn't see any sign that she was breathing. Pain lanced through him at that, stabbing at his vitals.

Blood was pooled by her right side. How badly had she been hit? Was she dead?

Oh god, don't let her be dead...

Gently, carefully, he turned her over onto her back.

He had a momentary glimpse of the tear in her shirt, its edges soaked in blood, before a hand clamped vise-like onto his throat. Jack Kowalczyk's eyes opened up below him. She'd relieved him of his pistol before

he'd realized what was happening and had it pointed at his face.

Using her grip on his throat to pull herself upward, she grimaced in pain. She brandished the gun a little, waving it in his face. "Help me up."

He was shaking. He realized it as he gently gripped her upper arms and helped her rise. She was shaking, too.

"Jack, are you alright—"

"*Shut up!*" Her pain-maddened eyes flicked past him even as he heard the sound of safety catches disengaging. "Tell your people to drop their weapons or I'll use your corpse as a shield."

He gave her a sad look. The threat wasn't necessary. He was on her side here. Of course, after more than four years she still wouldn't believe that, would she? The Project's track record regarding her was a shameful list of fuckup after fuckup.

He pitched his voice for his soldiers. "Everyone stand down and drop your weapons. Immediately."

"But Sir—" That *fucking* corporal again! Despite Jack's grip on his throat, he wrenched his head around to look at them.

"Drop your fucking weapons or I'll shoot you myself!" he roared. "That's a direct order!"

Finally they were listening. They lowered their weapons.

"On the fucking ground, you idiots! Do I have to send the whole goddamned lot of you back to *boot camp*?" He'd once been a drill sergeant himself, and that was what they heard in his voice now. Any lingering ideas of disobedience fled and their weapons dropped to the ground.

The bag of disks was still on the ground. Jack glanced at it. "Pick that up."

They knelt together, Jack still gripping his throat and holding his gun on him. He lifted the bag and held it out to her, carefully.

He kept his voice soft. "Jack, you've been shot. At least let us get you some medical attention."

"I'll get it. Tell your flunkies to stay off my ass or *they'll* need it more than I will." Her soft green eyes, suddenly so hard, bored into his.

"He'll take care of you?"

"He always does unless you guys get in the way."

His voice dropped to a soft murmur. He spoke without moving his lips. "I'll keep them off of you. But you want to get off this planet fast, before someone with more authority countermands me. Tell him—"

Tell him what? he thought suddenly. What the hell did he want to say to Riddick? "Sorry about getting your woman shot... again?" That'd work really well...

Her face softened slightly and he wondered what she saw in *his* face that inspired it. "I'll tell him," she whispered. Her hand relaxed on his throat and she removed it, taking the bag of disks out of his grasp. Gun still trained on him, she took four steps back. She glanced over his shoulder, at the soldiers behind him, before she abruptly turned and began to run.

Jarvis watched her go. He could tell by the slight flaw in her gait that she *had* been struck by the bullet. He had no idea how badly.

Behind him, one of the soldiers bent down to retrieve his weapon.

"Belay that!" Jarvis barked. The soldier froze.

He reached into his jacket and pulled out his comm unit, opening it and activating it in one dexterous movement. Time to take out some insurance for the girl.

"Connect me to police dispatch. Official Tribunal business, code 17-C-145." He waited until the dispatcher came on. "You will probably be getting reports of an armed woman running down the streets of New Paris. Possibly carrying a gun, possibly injured. Inform all of your officers that they are not *under any circumstances* to interfere with her."

"Sir?" one of his soldiers queried from behind him, sounding bewildered.

"The only possible exception is if she becomes incapacitated by her injury. But even then they are not to approach her. Have them inform me directly of her location and I will deal with it personally."

He listened to the confirmation on the other end of the line and then broke the connection, punching in a new code.

"*Sergeant Mizuguchi.*"

"Sergeant, Lieutenant Jarvis. You may be getting a report soon of a ship blasting off without clearance from one of the New Paris spaceports. Do not attempt to intercept it. Let it leave without any interference."

Understood?”

He could hear the curiosity in her voice, but also her awareness that whatever this was about, it wasn't open to discussion or negotiation. “*Yes, Sir.*”

“Lieutenant Jarvis out.”

He folded up the comm unit and pocketed it, turning back to his troops.

“Well, that's one fuckup that's narrowly been averted.”

The corporal whose career had already ended this day looked ready to explode. “*But Sir! She has the disks!*”

“Yes, Corporal, she does.”

“But that means *she has full disclosure!*”

Jarvis finally got around to glancing at the name on the man's uniform. “Corporal Artkin, Audrey Jacqueline Kowalczyk already knows more about the Charybdis Project *than you ever will*. All she has now is confirmation of what she already knew.”

“But she—”

“*She is Riddick's Charybdis Mate. Your bullet almost permanently lost us any chance of ever recovering him for the Project. Surrender your weapons and clearances immediately, Corporal. Your days on the Project are over.*”

The man blanched, perhaps finally realizing exactly how much trouble he was in. His companions looked extremely uncomfortable as well.

Their sergeant stepped forward after a moment and saluted. “What now, Sir?”

“Now we wait.” He wouldn't let any of them move out of this area, or communicate with the *Messina*, until he knew that Jack and Riddick had gotten off-planet.

The screams from the Board would be audible across space, he thought. Let them scream. He'd just saved their goddamned fucking project for them, although they might not have the brains to realize it. If Jack had died, he might just have helped Riddick burn it to the ground.

A sudden thought occurred to him. He frowned and pulled out his comm unit again, punching a code in.

“*Sergeant Mizuguchi.*”

“Sergeant, Lieutenant Jarvis. I want our units on Seti Station to arrest the staff of the Station Coroner's Office, including any staff members who were on duty when Jack Kowalczyk's body was found, but no longer work there.”

“*On what charge, Sir?*”

“Falsely reporting a death with the intent to perpetrate fraud upon the Tribunal.”

“*Whose death, Sir?*”

“The death of Jack Kowalczyk. Order all records regarding her to be impounded, along with the body if it hasn't been destroyed. I will contact you shortly with more information.”

He broke contact with Mizuguchi again and stared down the length of the Rue Mercredi, in the direction Jack had run. He hoped she would make it to Riddick safely.

He wondered, suddenly, what message she was going to give Riddick from him.

A moment later, he realized. He knew what the look in her eyes had meant, what she had seen in his.

I still love you, Bry, he thought, knowing it was the message she would take him. *I miss you. Come home, soon.*

He wondered, suddenly, if he would still be in charge of the Project when Riddick returned. The odds were not in his favor any more. When Riddick finally came home, Jarvis might well have met with an “accident” of his own.

Come home soon, boy. I'm running out of time.

53.

Jack: The Getaway

The pain in her side was a consuming fire that stripped away her ability to think. Every time one of her feet hit the pavement it flashed through her again, reducing her world to a realm of strobing agony. What little awareness she had left was focused on the simple act of running.

Keep moving! she told herself whenever she began to falter. In one hand she clutched Jarvis's gun close to her chest, hoping that none of the people flashing past her would see it and panic. Her other hand held the bag of data disks in a deathgrip.

Nobody interfered with her as she ran.

There was a four mile distance between the library and the Montmartre spaceport. Her lungs were burning now and her legs were cramping up and she figured she still had about three miles to go.

I'm not going to make it.

For a moment her pace faltered as the thought hung about her.

Shut the fuck up and keep moving! She *had* to make it. She had to get the disks to Riddick. What was on them was too important, too worlds-shattering. Whatever happened, he had to have the disks. He needed to know how high the stakes really were.

High enough to maybe kill me. The thought came unbidden, dragging at her pace once more. She gritted her teeth and pressed on. She had *no* intention of dropping dead on Rue Mercredi while everyone else was taking mid-afternoon strolls, thank you *very* fucking much!

Out of the corner of her eye she saw the policeman and felt her heart flip over. His eyes were on her, following her as she ran past. But he didn't move.

A girl runs past a cop, carrying a gun and dripping blood, and he does nothing? Jarvis, I think I love you.

She'd known that Jarvis wasn't behind the bullet this time. She'd known it even as she was being hit. One of the hotheads in his rescue party must have done it. That had only been a small comfort, of course, as she'd sprawled to the ground, but it had been *something*.

The fact that he'd abetted her escape had been something even more important, too. That was the other thing Riddick had to know about. The vendetta needed to end.

How the hell did she think she was going to manage this? Any time, the adrenaline was bound to run out and leave her with nothing. She knew it was crazy; there was no way for her to run four miles nonstop after taking a hit in the side. She didn't even know how bad the hit was, this time. It hurt like hell; that much she knew.

Another block, one more block, she told herself yet again. Every time she crossed a side street she said it. *Just another block...*

Someone turned and called after her in alarm as she ran past. She ignored them, hoping they wouldn't follow her. She still had the gun in her hand, but she didn't think she could use it on some innocent tourist.

A large hand grasped her upper arm and wheeled her around. She gasped, raising the gun. *Nobody's going to stop me!*

"Jack? What the fuck? *Jack!*"

The man's hand flashed out in a blur of motion and the gun was taken from her. She stared up, uncomprehendingly, at the huge figure before her. Blue eyes, a mustache and beard, curly hair...

She knew that hair. She'd watched Riddick building it. Suddenly the face before her was clear to her. She'd threatened him over wearing this disguise in bed...

"Riddick... oh shit..."

Her legs buckled and he caught her.

"What happened, kid?" His voice would seem calm to most observers but she could hear the tension underneath it. Abruptly the tension leapt out into the open. "Fuck, Jack, you've been shot!"

"Riddick, we have to get out of here," she gasped out.

Her legs left the ground abruptly as he swung her up. She kept a tight hold on the bag of disks, wondering what he'd done with the gun. They might need it... they might... it was getting hard to think. She felt a harsh

sting as Riddick pressed her bleeding side against his belly, using the pressure of his body to staunch the flow of her blood. Then he began to run. She held on tightly, gritting her teeth.

We're doing it again, only this time it's all backwards, she thought disconnectedly. The last time, he'd carried her as they fled the soldiers, and *then* she'd been shot.

"What happened, Jack?" he asked as he ran. He wasn't even out of breath. Of course not... she'd seen the contents of some of the files as they'd spooled past.

Mitochondrial metabolic efficiency 135% normal rate... She had a vague understanding of what that meant and knew that he wouldn't have any trouble with this run.

He'd asked her a question, hadn't he? She frowned, trying to focus on it.

"Stupid..." she managed. "I was so stupid... couldn't see the whole board..."

"What happened?" he repeated a moment later.

"I saw... Jarvis... having lunch at a café..." Jack swallowed hard, trying to keep her focus. So much pain, so much exhaustion. She didn't know if she was going to make it. She had to tell him.

"I'm going to kill that motherfucker for this..."

"No! Riddick... no..." She grabbed at his collar with the hand holding the disks. "He... he helped me get away..."

"What?"

"I... had this stupid idea, Riddick. I thought maybe I could get into the Charybdis mainframe using his clearances, so I lured him to the library."

Riddick muttered something under his breath that she was sure was profane. He picked up the pace, gripping her a bit more tightly.

"It worked, Riddick. I got in. I got the files, too." Jack coughed. Her mouth and throat seemed to be full of copper. "But I forgot that they'd come looking for him... one of them shot at me."

"Who?"

"I don't know, I couldn't tell. Jarvis seemed furious with everybody. He told me—"

"Sir, do you have a permit—" a man asked as Riddick dashed past him. Jack opened her eyes and was amazed to realize they'd entered the spaceport itself. "Sir! You can't go there...!"

A moment later an alarm sounded.

"Fuck!" Riddick began running even faster. "I *really* hope, for their sakes, they keep their distance, because right now I'd fuckin' enjoy killing somebody..."

Jack rested her head against his shoulder. "I'm so sorry, Riddick... I'm sorry..."

She was jarred abruptly as her feet hit the pavement. Riddick held her against him as he keyed the codes into the *Audrey II's* ramp. As it descended, he turned and bellowed at the security guards approaching at a run.

*"I'm the owner of this ship! I have clearance but I didn't have time to show it to your fuckin' lackey because **THIS IS AN EMERGENCY!** Get off the pad if you don't want to get fried!"*

He lifted Jack back into his arms and raced up the ramp. His hand flashed out to hit the controls and made it back before she even began to slip. The ramp began to shut behind them. Jack closed her eyes, glad to hear the familiar sounds of the ship's systems. She'd been afraid she'd never hear them again.

He set her down on the cargo lift and hit the elevation button. Jack felt the platform begin to rise, and turned her head. Riddick was wrenching open the med locker, grabbing as many supplies as he could carry. He hurried over to the platform, now at waist-level with him, and dumped them by her feet. Then he turned and went for more. She saw him start to climb the ladder, laden down with triage equipment, as her view of the cargo level was cut off.

She lay still until the upper level door was opened. Riddick lifted her out and stood her against the wall, ripping her shirt away.

"Fuck, Jack, you've got more lives than a *cat*."

"Is it bad?" she asked, her eyes closed. Her own voice seemed to be coming from very far away. Riddick's sounded closer. "Am I going to—"

"No, you're not going to die. Look, I'm going to put a temporary bandage on it so we can get the fuck out of here."

"Jarvis said we should go... as fast as we could... because someone with more authority... might countermand..."

“Who the fuck has the authority to countermand Jarvis?” Riddick muttered as he wrapped a bandage around her waist and ribs. “He’s the fuckin’ Crown Prince of the whole Charybdis Project.”

“No... tr... Tribunal...”

She felt Riddick go still. “Say that again.”

Jack swallowed, trying to force a coherent sentence out. “The Tribunal owns the Charybdis Project. It’s their baby.”

“Shit.” Riddick tossed the empty package of bandaging aside and lifted Jack up, carrying her to the cockpit. “Okay, kid, we’re getting out of here. You sit tight...” He strapped her in, careful not to jar her wound.

She could hear him hitting switches. He hit the comm system. “Control, this is Matthew Owens of the *Audrey II* declaring a Level 5 emergency and requesting immediate clearance for liftoff. Clear the pads and the lanes, we’re going up in two minutes as soon as our engines are hot.”

“*Audrey II*, please state the nature of the emergency.”

“Goddamn fucking bureaucrats,” Riddick muttered. He turned and shouted into the microphone. “Just clear the lanes or you’re going to be dealing with fuckin’ midair collisions. A Level 5 has been declared, you know procedure! You wanna cite me, feel fuckin’ free to do so!”

The engines were cycling up. Riddick swore again after a moment.

“Gotta lock down the med supplies before we go up or I won’t have anything to treat you with...”

Jack listened, her eyes still closed, as he threw open a locker and began stuffing supplies inside it. Cold... so cold... she wondered suddenly where all the warmth had gone.

She must have lost consciousness for a moment because, the next thing she knew, Riddick was shaking her. “Stay with me, Jack!”

She opened her eyes. Riddick was above her, staring down at her, his normal composure completely ripped away.

“You in there, kid?” He continued to watch her until she managed a nod and a shaky thumbs-up. Then he turned and began strapping himself into the pilot’s seat. He hit the comm button again.

“This is the captain of the *Audrey II* advising all spaceport personnel to clear the launch pad. You have thirty seconds to get past minimum launch range or you’re going to get char-broiled. Anybody still out there, move your asses *now!*”

He began hitting the final switches, powering the ship up the rest of the way. The launch engines were almost done cycling up.

“Don’t know why I feel obligated to warn off a bunch of rent-a-cops,” he muttered angrily. But he waited the full thirty seconds nonetheless.

Jack gasped as he hit the throttle. The abrupt pressure on her body sent waves of pain through her. He was accelerating the ship illegally fast again, heading straight up.

“Good fuckin’ thing I wasn’t picking up our cargo until tomorrow,” he growled. “Gonna be a while before we can go near the Corsair system now. Your uncle Boris just got an unearned reprieve, Jack. Just for a little while.”

Riddick began running switches, reconfiguring the ship from launch mode to combat mode as they approached the edge of Troubadour’s atmosphere.

“Riddick, no...” Jack managed.

“No what?”

“Don’t attack the *Messina*. You don’t have to... unless Jarvis got outranked, he’ll have told them to leave us alone.”

“Jack, you’re talking about the man who ordered my death and *shot you*. I’m not gonna buy that he’s suddenly on our side.”

Jack almost laughed until the pain in her abdomen cut her short. “He is. Trust me, Riddick. I have proof.”

“Fine,” Riddick growled, his eyes locked on the cockpit windows. The sky had gone indigo and now, gradually, billions of stars were coming into view. The *Messina* appeared as well, a gargantuan battle cruiser hovering far above New Paris. Riddick flew toward it.

“Riddick, please, let’s just go.”

“We are.” His face, however, bore the same look of calm fury he’d worn in the skiff, almost five years ago, when he’d contemplated leaving the planet – and Carolyn – behind without some sort of retaliatory act.

Now he reached over and hit the comm button again.

"This is Richard B. Riddick calling the *Messina*."

There was a long moment of silence as the cruiser loomed larger.

"Mr. Riddick, this is Sergeant Mizuguchi of the *Messina*. Go ahead."

"I want you to give Jarvis a message for me."

"Recording."

"Tell Lieutenant Jarvis I'll see him soon." Riddick banked the craft away from the *Messina*, looping around sharply, as he cut the connection. Jack closed her eyes and clenched her jaw, knowing what was coming.

She felt the star-jump begin. This time it lasted a lot longer, five minutes of wooziness. She kept expecting them to smash into something. It was technically illegal to make a star-jump while still within a planetary system, and for good reason. There was so much space clutter that could come at you...

He does it visually, too, she realized. *He sees it all coming and dodges it. What did those files say the synapse fire rate was?* She couldn't remember, but she knew it had been impossibly high.

Finally he cut out the star-jump drive, switching over to the deep-space drive. The nauseating feeling of being turned inside out and drowned began to abate as the acceleration eased and the localized space-warping lifted.

"I really, really hate star-jumping," she managed.

Riddick smiled a little as he began punching in coordinates. "Okay, we're going to take a little detour now. One more star-jump, Babe... it'll last two minutes. Then we'll be okay."

"Where are we going?" Jack closed her eyes again. The nauseating sensation began once more.

"Well, I'm hoping they'll think we're headed for Corsair. We're gonna go to Daedalus Station instead."

"That's not far away."

"That's the idea. We'll be there in a few days and can get a doctor to look you over. In the meantime..." He stopped for a second as he cut the star-jump drive back out and switched over again to deep-space. "I've gotta get you stitched up."

He undid the straps confining him and knelt down by her, studying her with an astounding amount of concern in his face. After a moment he unstrapped her as well, carrying her over to her old room. She hadn't slept in here since the night after the space battle, when she'd felt like her world had ended forever. As he lay her down on the bed, she shivered.

"I'm so cold..."

"You're in shock, Jack. You've lost a lot of blood." There was something in his voice that belied the calm tones of his words.

"Riddick, am I going to die?"

"No. Now listen to me. You were *just grazed*. Most of the damage is to skin and subcutaneous tissue. A few arteries got nicked and a rib may have been chipped. *That's all*. Nothing vital got hit. Once I give you a transfusion and stitch you up, you're going to be just fine."

She looked up at him, amazed by the clashing vehemence and tenderness that filled his face. "Promise?"

"I promise, Jack. Now hold on..." He pulled something out from under her bed and unfolded it. An electric blanket. He switched it on and dropped it by her feet before he began to undress her. Then he carefully arranged it over her so that it covered everything except the wound itself. "This'll help you stay warm."

He left the room for a long moment and returned with an armload of medical supplies. He set them down on the bed and began working with them, assembling some kind of stand.

"Riddick..."

"Yeah, Jack?"

"I'm tired... is it safe for me to go to sleep?"

She felt his hand stroke her hair. "Yeah, Jack, it is."

"I'm gonna wake up, right?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

"I promise. Here... this will help. You won't feel any pain either..."

Just a small sting against her throat. He'd given her an injection. Her last thought, as the darkness took her, was that she didn't know where the disks had gone. If she didn't wake up, she hoped he'd find them.

54.

Cartwright: Finally!

Teresa Cartwright stopped in the doorway of her office and stared at the intruder within. The military lieutenant from the other day was back, pacing up and down the narrow space between her desk and her open case files as if he owned her room. He ignored her, his concentration intent upon his personal comm call.

She closed her door and leaned against it, glaring at him. Her assistant had been forced to reschedule three checkups to accommodate this bastard, who had apparently made it clear that the clinic would be shut down if she didn't, and now he couldn't even break off his conversation —

Despite her anger, she began to listen in, quickly fascinated. If her eavesdropping bothered him he could just screw himself; it was her office.

"No, do *not* use the medical files stored in the mainframes. I already told you, they're compromised..."

"That's right. Have someone at the Special Forces Hospital pull out the hard copies. It's been less than five years so it shouldn't take too long..."

"Yeah, that's a good point. Have them pull the mainframe backup from about a week before she arrived at Seti Station. See how the data compares with the information on file after her 'body' was found..."

"No, I already know exactly what you're going to find. It's her. She and I had a long conversation, of *course* I'm sure!"

The lieutenant — Jarvis, that was his name — glanced up at her and grimaced. In spite of herself, a wry smile tugged at Cartwright's lips. Yeah, she'd battled with bureaucracy a few times herself... the smile curdled as she remembered the circumstances and outcome of her last battle. She'd never fought back again.

Jarvis's attention had already turned back to his call. "Well, you *tell* Baldwin that we almost had a bloodbath on our hands today. If she'd died, or if I hadn't let her go when I did and *he'd* caught up to us, we'd have lost another dozen soldiers and god only knows how many innocent bystanders..."

"No, I'm getting some important evidence right now. I'll be back at the ship once I'm done, and the General can swear at me as much as he wants to then."

He looked over at Cartwright again, his expression more focused. The call was being drawn to a close.

"Look, if you want to give him a piece of good news, tell him that what I've found out means the Phase II Operatives can be restored to active duty and Phase III can move forward on schedule. I have to go, Sergeant. Yes. Good-bye."

As Lieutenant Jarvis closed and pocketed his personal comm unit, Dr. Cartwright deliberately stepped past him and took her seat at her desk. He raised an eyebrow and then took one of the chairs before it, letting himself be relegated to the role of patient or supplicant if only for a moment. She knew it wouldn't last long. He had too much power not to wield it without even thinking.

"How can I help you today, Lieutenant?" She kept her voice polite. She really wanted to ask him why he was wasting *her* time today.

"I need all of the information you can give me about the Tarsins. Both what's in the clinic's files, and what you remember from dealing with them."

Interesting. Fascinating, actually. A cold chill passed down her back abruptly as she realized what it probably meant. "May I ask why?"

"Because Colin Tarsin was, in fact, Richard B. Riddick. And the woman you knew as Rebecca Tarsin was Audrey Jacqueline Kowalczyk, the girl —"

"The girl he's supposed to have murdered?" Cartwright stared at Jarvis in shock. There was no possible way —

He smiled thinly. "Believe me, I know what you're feeling, Doctor. I wouldn't believe it either if I hadn't come face to face with her only a little over an hour ago. She's alive. Or at least, she was when I last saw her." He looked intensely uncomfortable suddenly.

"Then how...?"

"He faked her death. The bastard got into secure Interplanetary Data System files and replaced her physiological profile with some Jane Doe's. We still don't know all the details." He stared out into emptiness,

his expression frankly admiring. “We still don’t know everything he can do.”

His eyes focused back on her. “Tell me about his appearance. You said he had brown hair and brown eyes when you saw him?”

“That’s right,” she replied, wondering why he was interested in *that*. But then she remembered how quickly he and Aspen had lost interest when she’d described Tarsin’s – *Riddick’s* – physical appearance. A disguise? It couldn’t have been, could it? It had seemed far too natural...

“And the gate guards said he clearly had blue eyes...” Jarvis began to laugh. “I’m going to have to add ‘master of disguise’ to his resume.”

She watched in bemusement as he shook his head, recovering quickly from his bout of mirth.

“I can get you Rebecca’s – I mean Audrey’s –”

“Actually, she likes to go by ‘Jack,’” he corrected her.

“Okay. I can get you her files if you would like.”

“I would. I think there are some people in the Top Brass who might find them very enlightening. But I’m more interested in learning about *them*. Tell me what you saw, Doctor.”

Cartwright sighed, collecting her thoughts. Where to start? There had been so many things that had stuck in her mind about them. She could still see them vividly, the way she’d first seen them... She’d start there.

“Well, I knew they were unusual almost immediately, actually. When I went into their room to begin Rebec – Jack’s treatment, they were sitting next to each other on the edge of the bed, holding hands. He was always so... solicitous to her. I think we both know that’s something that hardly ever happens in a place like this.”

“I see. Please go on.” The expression in his eyes was odd. These weren’t just questions to him, she suddenly realized. It was important to him on a more visceral level.

“I think... after I spoke to you the other day, I almost called you back because I realized why Riddick would have killed Pete, assuming Mr. Tarsin was Riddick –”

“Which he was,” Jarvis affirmed again.

“During the primary Regen procedure, he stayed with her the whole time.” A tiny, sad laugh emerged from her mouth before she could stop it. “He did something I’d never *seen* before.” She described how he’d lain beneath the girl, holding her and comforting her as the procedure dragged on.

The lieutenant frowned. “Why was she in so much pain?”

Now the shame flooded back. Of course. If Riddick had been upset, knowing as he did how life in the underground worked, this man from the clean and sanitary world where legitimate doctors and nurses practiced would be horrified.

“You know how expensive the few painkillers that can be used with Regen work are, don’t you? None of the clients who come here ever want to pay for them, or at least, none did until he brought her here. He gave me hell when he found out they existed. He ended up buying her fifteen thousand New Francs worth of analgesics after that, to keep her from feeling any more pain.”

Jarvis sat back in his seat. A look of... *joy? Awe? What **was** that in his face?*... had appeared. She wasn’t sure she caught the next words he whispered correctly.

“You’re still in there, Bryan. God, it’s good to see you...”

“Sorry?”

“Er... nothing. Please continue, doctor. He held her through the procedure?”

“Yes. And I remember that, at one moment, when the pain got really bad for her, Pete was watching her writhe and enjoying it a little *too* much—”

Murderous fury appeared in Jarvis’s face.

“—and Riddick looked exactly the way you look now. He looked like he wanted to rip Pete apart.”

Cartwright sighed shakily. “If Pete tried anything else on her, I can see why Riddick would have gone after him.”

“Did they ever complain about him? Do anything to prevent him from going into her room?”

Oh god, yes— *the ring!*

“Yes he did,” she told Jarvis slowly. “About an hour after he cussed me out for not giving the girl painkillers, he reported that a valuable ring was missing – possibly stolen – from her room. He insisted that anyone who went into the room when he wasn’t there had to be accompanied by a supervisor from then on.”

“A ring?” A tiny smile had crept into Jarvis’s expression. He knew. She watched as the smile grew and he shook his head.

“It supposedly belonged originally to his great-grandmother —”

For whatever reason, *that* made Jarvis sputter with laughter. After a moment he recovered. The broad grin he gave her took twenty years off of his face and made her suddenly like him a great deal. “Oh man, you people were *set up*.”

She chuckled a little herself. “You want to know the worst part? The owners were so furious over it that they contacted every fence in town to demand the ring back. And one of them *had* one that matched the description —”

Jarvis burst out laughing again. She joined him.

“You guys *gave them the ring*?” He finally managed, pointing at her with an unsteady finger.

She was laughing too hard to manage anything but a nod. She had to wipe at her eyes and hold her stomach for a long moment.

“We had Shannon give it to them, because she’d felt like she’d been personally accused. She’d straightened up the room that day. We told her we’d found it in a vacuum bag, because she was so upset she’d almost quit over it —”

Jarvis sighed. “Bry must have been dying of laughter.”

“There never was a ring, was there?” she finally asked, serious once more. “It was a ploy to keep Pete out of her room for the remainder of her stay, so nobody would suspect Riddick when he killed Pete, right?”

Jarvis nodded gravely. “Whatever Malcolm did, he infuriated Riddick badly. The way Pete was killed... he’d done that to corpses before, but never to a live human being. He really loves —”

The lieutenant swallowed and Cartwright felt obligated to glance away from the excess of emotion that crossed his face.

“When did you find out she’s still alive?” she asked gently after a moment.

“Today,” he whispered. “I found out today. Until now, I thought he’d tortured her to death... I thought Bry didn’t exist anymore. Just some...”

He took a deep breath and glanced over at her. “I’m going to tell you something that I’ll deny later if you ever bring it up or try to take it public. Do you remember the New Ecuador Ripper? Or The Wolf of Daedalus Station?”

Cartwright nodded, no longer breathing. Both of those men were uncaught, serial rapists who had mutilated and murdered their victims...

“Both of them were the same man. Peter Malcolm. We’ve now determined that he murdered at least eleven women in New Paris as well, and more than fifty on other planets. That’s who this clinic was employing. That’s who Riddick killed.”

It suddenly felt freezing in the small office. “Why aren’t you making this public?”

“Two reasons. First, Pete eluded Interplanetary Law Enforcement and continued his games for ten years over seven planets and two space stations. You can imagine how little they want *that* made public. And second, they don’t want anyone starting to think of Riddick as a hero. The lawmakers in America and particularly New York State would *never* permit that.”

Cartwright nodded, seeing his point. It was a shame, though. From what he’d told her, dozens of families who’d lost a daughter, sister, mother, wife... they’d never know that the man who had tortured their loved one to death had finally been given his just reward.

And to think I thought nobody could possibly deserve what Riddick did to him...

“So now what happens?” she asked after a long moment of silence.

“Well, Riddick’s finally really gone. He left Troubadour an hour ago, for real this time, we think. He could be anywhere at this point. I’m not going to look for him now. When he’s ready, he’ll reappear.” An odd look, a mixture of dread and longing, crossed the lieutenant’s face. “He said he would. So... now I gather the files on the Tarsins, do a little research on the people he and Jack were masquerading as this time, and then I go back to Earth. And wait for him to come to me.”

Cartwright frowned slightly. There was both an ominous tone to his words, and a great longing. “Will he?”

Ineffable sadness was in the man’s eyes as he nodded. “He will. When he’s ready. I only hope he realizes that I’m —”

He silenced himself and his composure returned. His gaze, when it returned to her, was pure business. “None of this ever happened, doctor. Colin and Rebecca Tarsin are nobody for the clinic to concern itself over. Peter Malcolm was the victim of random foul play. Understood?”

She nodded.

He paused again, considering. Finally he seemed to come to a decision. “I know your past, Dr. Cartwright. I know why you’re here instead of practicing proper medicine the way you should be.”

A hot spike of anger flashed through her at those words. The son of a bitch —

“Don’t.”

He glanced up at her, looking genuinely confused. What a consummate con artist! “What?”

“Don’t threaten me, Lieutenant. I’m going to give you the records and forget they existed anyway. You don’t have to throw your weight around.” She stared down at her desk, bitterness throttling her. “And I really doubt you could ruin my reputation any more than it has been, anyway. So just... don’t.”

Genuine puzzlement filled his voice. “Doctor, I wasn’t threatening you. Believe me, if you *did* try to go public with this, that’s not what we’d try to do to you. You’d just disappear.”

She glanced up at him, still furious but also deeply chilled. His gaze upon her was frank. They’d really do it, she realized. “Then what do you want?”

The lieutenant took a deep breath. He held it for a moment as if he was debating the wisdom of what he was about to say. Finally he shook his head and exhaled. “You may not thank me for this. It’s not much of an improvement, but...”

“But what?”

“Doctor, sixteen years ago you performed an abortion on a young woman who you believed to be named Mallory Chase. The personal ID she showed you indicated that she was of age to abort without parental consent, and the procedure went flawlessly. Do you even remember anything about it?”

Cartwright stared at him in confusion. She’d thought he was about to bring up the sordid little scandal that had cost her her license, but this...? “No, I’m sorry. I don’t.”

“I can’t tell you her real name, but I will tell you that she was underage. That’s not your fault; the ID she showed you was first rate. You couldn’t possibly have known that you were performing the abortion on the daughter of one of the Tribunal Senators. And you certainly couldn’t have known that she was pregnant by her own father.”

Cold horror and disgust flooded through her. Understanding followed.

“Yes, Doctor. The scandal that ended your career was orchestrated by the Senator in question. You were entrapped. He was retaliating for something you didn’t even know you’d done, and doing so in a way that would prevent the world from knowing what he was doing to *his own daughters*. Sordid, isn’t it?”

She nodded, too appalled to speak. All that shame, years of self-recrimination... arranged?

Jarvis was watching her intently, a mixture of sympathy and some less definable emotion on his face. “The Senator died two years ago. Something he ate...”

Did he look smug? It wasn’t possible.

“Doctor, he was the only one with any interest in preventing you from returning to the world of legitimate medicine. He’s gone now, but a great deal of his influence remains. I can’t get you publicly cleared, but... there is a position that could be opened to you, if you are interested.”

She watched him for a long moment. “Tell me more.”

“You would be doing prenatal care, initially. There would be approximately three dozen patients for you to attend to. You would have to monitor them intensely; none of them are capable of caring for themselves. The slightest sign of infection – of any kind – would need to be reported. Every detail of their children’s health would need monitoring as well. Once the children are born... *they* would become your primary concern. At that point the job description becomes more like that of a GP so I’ll understand if you’re not interested. But I know you’re qualified for the position if you are.”

“And the downside to all of this?” She waited. Nothing he’d said explained how uneasy he looked, after all.

“You would be working under the strictest non-disclosure statutes in existence. No matter what you did or saw, you would never be able to publish your findings. You would never even be able to admit to working on the project. Once you go in, you’re part of it forever, or at least until your death. It means saying goodbye to the life you have.”

The life she had? What life? She'd been living from day to day for a decade and a half, turning ex-whores into breeders for the frontiers. She had half a dozen acquaintances, no close friends, and those few were the only people she'd found herself able to respect who were also able to respect her. Most of the people who *didn't* find her current line of work offensive were frankly too sleazy for her to enjoy being around...

She couldn't possibly miss this life. Especially not since she'd caught a glimpse of a new world through the *Tarsins*... through Richard Riddick and Jack Kowalczyk.

Riddick and Kowalczyk's passage through her life had marked her in some way that she couldn't explain or define. A longing that she hadn't felt in ages had been stirred awake. She'd seen something different from the sordid world she'd inhabited for a decade and a half, a glimpse into the world she'd been forced to leave behind or one very much like it, and she wanted in. Badly. She wanted the calluses and scar tissue that had formed over her soul *gone*.

Idly she wondered why a man who chased a serial killer across the galaxy and back would be involved with prenatal care. Then she realized it didn't matter. She'd be finding out soon enough. He was offering her a step toward the world she wanted, and it was one that would probably never come again.

"You've got yourself a doctor, Lieutenant." She smiled.

He didn't smile back. If anything, his face became more grave. "You do understand that if you take this position you'll be stuck. There's no way out once you go in."

"Lieutenant Jarvis, I've spent the last fifteen years of my life thinking there was no way out of *this* dive. I'm game."

An odd look flickered through his eyes. "I hope so, Doctor."

He stood. Strange. It suddenly came to her that the way he tilted his head, as he watched her, was almost exactly the same way Riddick had. How well did the two know each other, she wondered. Where'd they both pick up that particular mannerism? Had one learned it from the other?

"If you'll get those files for me and gather your personal effects, we'll be going, Dr. Cartwright. How long do you think it'll take you to pack?"

The thought about Jarvis and Riddick's mannerisms was swept away. In its place was her squalid but tidy apartment. Mentally she picked through her possessions, realizing anew how depressing her life had become. There was almost nothing she'd actually want to take with her.

"Not long at all, Lieutenant." She turned to her files and pulled out the one labeled "Tarsin." Normally she would have turned it over to Records long before now, but she hadn't. She hadn't wanted to let go of it. Every time she looked at it, just glimpsing the name, she'd seen the two of them again, the way they acted toward each other.

Every time she'd looked at it she'd been reminded that love still existed.

She wondered what she'd find in this new world she was about to enter.

The door to her office closed softly behind her as she left it, moments later, for the last time.

55.

Riddick: Cry For Her...

Still and pale, Jack lay on her side in the bed that had once been hers. She didn't move as Riddick began yet another stitch.

He'd set up an IV drip for her, mostly a transfusion of whole synthblood but with a touch of sedative mixed in. He glanced at it periodically. He knew it would be enough to replace the blood she'd lost, but he was still uneasy. It was the last. Until they got to Daedalus, there was no more blood in his med locker. He already knew she couldn't have a transfusion from him; that was one of the things he'd checked on right away when she'd first returned to his life.

Now he concentrated on stitching her wound shut, knotting the newest suture carefully.

She'd been amazingly lucky. The bullet had grazed her in passing and was probably buried in some lawn on the Rue Mercredi. It had sliced her like a knife, though, ripping through her flesh. Another centimeter or so over and...

No. He wouldn't think about that. She was alive and she would be well and that was all that mattered. In another week he'd see to it that her skin was flawless once more, too. This was the last bullet she'd *ever* take for him, he vowed.

Problem is you just run right at those things, kid, he thought wryly as he prepared the next stitch. *Been doing it since I first met you.*

She'd volunteered to go in after Zeke, or so he'd been told later. Carolyn had been forced to restrain her from rushing into the coring room after Ali. Paris had had to do much the same when she'd tried to run back for Shazza, and Imam himself had held her back from hurrying to *his* aid along with Carolyn.

"Gonna have to discuss this heroic impulse control problem of yours," he told her quietly. He couldn't feel anger about it, though. He suspected it was that sort of natural selflessness within her that had enabled him to rediscover his own humanity.

Jack's only response was a low sigh. She was still under, of course. He turned his attention back to her wound and began another stitch. At least he was familiar with treating battle wounds—

Battlefield doctors decide who lives and dies; it's called triage, a voice he knew all too well commented in his head.

Fuck off, Billy. A low growl escaped Riddick's throat. The memories, however, surged forward.

He'd never really despised William Johns until the end, when the man had tried to connive him into killing Jack. After all, he was a realist; he knew that he'd almost single-handedly destroyed the merc's life three years earlier; had very nearly killed him, in fact. But he'd been surprised and increasingly disgusted by the depths to which the former "William the Conqueror" had sunk.

The drugs had made a certain amount of sense, at least. He'd heard, through rumors, that it had taken Johns almost a year to learn how to walk again. At first he'd been grudgingly impressed by how far Billy had managed to come, but not for long.

Walking with him, ahead of the others, he'd understood and even somewhat approved of the plan; sacrifice one life to save five. From a coldly logical standpoint it made perfect sense. Until Johns tipped his hand completely.

"You do the girl, and I'll keep the others off your back."

That was when Riddick knew, for certain, how many games Johns was trying to run at once. He'd expected the man to nominate Carolyn. Those two had been locked in a power-struggle ever since the eclipse had begun, and she had seemed the logical target for Johns to pick. Or, perhaps, the holy man, who had sided with her in the latest round of that struggle. But Billy hadn't. He'd picked Jack.

Yeah, there was some logic to it. She was the one who was bleeding already, the one the creatures were smelling. But...

But.

But it would strike at all of the others like a mortal blow. Carolyn loved the girl, calling her “sweetheart” and promising never to leave her. Imam had taken her under his wing. Suleiman had shown signs, since her true gender had been revealed, of solicitous gallantry toward her. Her death would wound the group severely.

Did Johns even realize that? He had to. The man wasn’t stupid, after all. Was he trying to hurt the others because they hadn’t automatically turned to him for leadership?

And what of little Jack herself?

For a moment he could actually see it in his head: he’d lead the girl aside, just a little way from the others. Only far enough so they couldn’t reach him in time to stop him. She’d go with him willingly, that trusting look in her face – an ache lanced through his chest at that. He’d reach for his shiv and— no. He’d need it to be instant. The idea of her feeling a moment’s pain, even a split second’s awareness of his betrayal, nauseated him. The vision fell apart.

Billy, you sick fuck, he thought to himself. *Maybe I should thank you for showing me where my limits are.*

Could he stand by and let *Johns* do it, he wondered, before the final realizations fell into place. Billy *wouldn’t* do it. The motherfucker had a *plan* behind this.

Have big, evil convict Riddick kill an innocent member of the group and butcher her. Have everyone else hate Riddick for her death, but be unable to act against him. Get everyone to the skiff. Break the deal and put Riddick back in chains for transport back to Nereid. No one would stop him. No one would speak against him. His hands would be bloodless and he would be a hero.

And little Jack, the only one in the whole group who had really liked or trusted Riddick from the beginning, would be dead by his hands.

You insidious son of a bitch. That was why Johns had targeted her and not Fry. That and the fact that he would need a pilot, and the only other one available would soon be back in chains.

“It’s not too big a job for you, is it?” came the fucker’s voice from behind him. Suddenly Riddick realized that he *needed* to kill something... or someone.

There’s only one person in this group I can kill with impunity, he thought, before he slowly turned around. There was only one person in the group, he realized, that he *wanted* to kill. This time he would make no mistake.

“I’m just wondering if we don’t need a bigger piece of bait,” he replied, and watched as slow comprehension came to the other man’s eyes.

It was a very good kill.

In the end he let one of the creatures take Johns. But it was still his kill; Johns died by his design if not by his hand. He watched it happen, studying the way the creature moved, the way it attacked. He felt inordinate satisfaction as he watched it feed.

Time, he finally told himself, *to go after the others*.

Shouldering his lights once more and climbing a slight embankment, he was amused to see that the four remaining survivors had gotten turned in a circle and were running back *toward* him. He let them come to him.

The moment that burned him inside, however, was when *Jack* got upset over Johns’ death. The man had wanted to throw her to the flying, keening wolves that infested this planet, and she was mourning his loss! He stepped close to her, conflicting emotions passing through him. He wanted to shake her and tell her to open her eyes. He wanted to... what, hug her? Comfort her? What the hell was wrong with him suddenly, anyway?

“Don’t you cry for Johns,” he finally growled softly. “Don’t you dare.”

Out of the corner of his eye he saw the holy man stiffen, comprehension on his face. *So*, he thought. *Somebody else knows what almost happened here*.

He moved past the girl and headed into the bonefield, seeking out the sled with the precious fuel cells.

Never cry for him, Jack, he thought as he walked. *Not one tear*.

The last of the stitches was in place. Riddick sat back, surveying his work. They looked horrible.

Oh, there was nothing *wrong* with them, other than their mere presence. Each suture was precisely placed, carefully laid so that Jack's skin would heal with minimal scarring. Any that actually occurred would be regened away when they got to Daedalus station, but...

They still looked horrible. Obscene. Jack's body was not *meant* to be broken.

Riddick's understanding of human anatomy was absolute and had been for a long time. He knew the names and locations of every bone, every organ, every muscle group and nerve center, every blood vessel. He knew exactly where to strike an opponent to paralyze or even kill, but...

Looking at Jack now, he understood the wonder of it, the way that it all came together in grace and beauty, in a totality that went beyond miraculous. He'd been worshipping her body for *days*, yes, and memorizing every inch of her, but the full power of it only hit him now as he stared at her wound and was outraged by its presence.

Did other people feel this way? He imagined they did. He imagined they *must*. It came to him, suddenly, what the parents of his chess club friends must have felt as they looked at the broken, butchered remains of their sons. That outrage, and the devastating, soul-extinguishing loss he'd felt when he'd believed Jack to be dead.

He'd spent years trying not to imagine how they had felt. A shudder passed through him and he forced those feelings back once more. That was something that could never be undone, and could never be forgiven, no matter what he did or became now. It had to be left in the past, an ineradicable blot on his newly-rediscovered conscience.

When his psychosis had first come upon him, he hadn't been sure whether it was an exultant dream or a terrifying nightmare. Images and ideas had begun to haunt him; odd hungers and thirsts had plagued his mind and soul. He'd held out for almost five months before he was no longer able to resist the siren's call of the madness within. Pent up for so long, it had exploded out in a terrifying, devastating maelstrom.

He honestly had no recollection of killing his chess club friends, although he knew he'd done it. Sometimes hints of his memories of that evening would surface; he banished them as quickly as he could, not wanting to see the terrified, pleading faces in his mind's eye. They were mixed in with other fragmented memories from those five years of madness – the moment when he snapped his first cellmate's neck in a prison brawl, the feel of a guard's hot blood sluicing over his hands – but he tried not to recall any of them.

Because those memories were tainted... with unspeakable *pleasure*.

Yes, a part of him hungered after that violence, yearning for it still. The animal within was alive and well and knew exactly what it wanted – blood and death. It hungered for the kill always. With every waking moment, he could feel its restless pacing within him. It had taken him five years to cage it, to become its master.

And still, now and again, it escaped and went on a rampage.

He'd been wrong, he realized. In between the night when Ruth Baker and her toy-boys had tried to poison him and the day of the space battle, there had been one other time the beast had gotten loose. The consequence of that time had gone beyond horrific – it had been the first genuine tragedy of his adult life.

And it had happened the very same night he'd finally killed William Johns...

As one predator to another he'd understood those creatures all too well. He could feel the frenzied drives that motivated them as they completed their nocturnal revels. Fight. Mate. Hunt. Feed. The primal urges of all living things had been heightened to the screaming point as the creatures emerged for their one long, special night of freedom after twenty-two years of subterranean imprisonment.

Yes, he knew exactly what they were feeling.

On this one night the world above was as hospitable to them as the world below. Predators and prey alike had come out while they could. Riddick and his fellow survivors were really just targets of opportunity for the creatures during their planet-wide feeding frenzy.

And he could feel that hunger. His own growled in answer. Most of the beasts skirted him, rightly sensing that they'd come up against a deadlier predator than themselves. But a showdown was inevitable.

Riddick couldn't believe his stupidity in sending *all* of the light ahead with the others. Crabbing backwards up the hill as a particularly huge beast stalked toward him, he could feel its animal hunger clawing

at him. His own snarled back, raging at him for his idiocy, for the self-sacrificial behavior that had brought him to this low.

Move it, you stupid fuck!

He rolled over the crest of the hill and sprang to his feet, racing after the others. Around him the sounds of pursuing creatures dogged him. Only a few were really all that interested, he realized as he ran. Most hadn't gotten a taste of human flesh and blood and were only mildly intrigued by the strange beasts moving through their mating and feeding grounds. But a few were dogging him with a voracious hunger. They'd tasted the blood of his kind and wanted more.

Abruptly, he was cut off and had to duck into an alley. He kept moving, his shiv clutched tightly in his right hand. Any moment one of those fuckers would actually catch up to him and the game would end. Turning another corner, he skidded to a halt as one of the beasts glided down, landing just in front of him, its back to him. He made his decision as it began to turn.

Blind spot, he reminded himself. Get close up, step in.

In a second he was nose-to-nose with the great beast. With every bit of strength and grace he possessed he swayed along with the creature, staying in the one area where he was completely invisible to it. Its mouth opened and he could smell the familiar stench of human blood on its breath.

*I'm doing it. I'm really **doing** it!*

He could have killed it then. He *should* have killed it. He should have taken his shiv and opened it up on the spot. But he didn't, too enrapt with the deadly little dance they were swaying in.

Finally the creature moved away.

I did it, I fuckin' did—

Another one landed behind him, crying in triumph. The first whirled back, now spotting him. The dance, he realized, was at an end. He shouldn't have let it go on so long in the first place. Now he was very likely fucked.

As slowly as he could, trying not to draw attention to the movement, he raised his shiv.

Now.

Riddick lunged forward, darting beneath the first creature's arms, the shiv arcing out. Even as blue blood and gore spattered his hands he felt a sharp sting by his ear and knew he'd been clawed. The creature fell back, squealing in mortal agony and he turned to deal with the other—

—and screamed.

Fiery agony lanced through his thigh as the second predator sliced at his left leg. He could smell his *own* blood now, sharp and, yes, copperish. He'd been felled; he was surrounded. He was going to die...

The scream transmuted into a guttural roar as the animal burst its cage. A new dance began, the Dance of Death. As squeals and hoots echoed through the night, marking the approach of other predators, Riddick's blade flashed out and sliced through the clawed arm of his attacker. Now *it* screamed, falling back. He pursued, slicing open its belly and grasping at its innards with his free hand. Even as it fell, convulsing, he heard another landing behind him. He whirled, roaring his aggression.

Kill! the animal shouted, exulting. *Kill everything!* He would go down with the blood of as many of them on his hands and in his mouth as he could manage.

Distantly he thought he heard someone shouting his name. He ignored the call. It had no meaning to him now. Another beast fell before him, its head almost sliced off of its body, and he whirled to face yet another.

He lunged forward but *this* creature fell back, retreating from him. It fled into the night even as yet another sound came from behind him and he whirled, shiv arcing out toward the pale blur now before him—

*Oh fuck, **NO!***

Pulling the blade back cost him his balance and his momentum carried him crashing into some barrels, but he did *not* slice Carolyn's throat open. Later he would wonder if she'd even realized that the business end of his shiv had come within a half-inch of her jugular.

Within him, the bestial side raged. Blood was blood, it snarled, and hers would be every bit as good as any of the beasts he'd been killing. His body trembled as he fought the urge to continue his berserker rampage.

*Not her, he growled back at it. **Not her!***

She hurried to his side, oblivious to the war raging within him. He knew she was looking at his wounds and imagining him to be in terrible pain, believing him horribly weakened. True, he *was* hurting, but not that

badly. But all of his energy was going toward reining in the animalistic violence that had been unleashed, and now did not want to stop. It wanted her.

Run, he tried to tell her. *Get away from me now!* But all that emerged was an agonized, incoherent wheeze.

Her arms slid around him. “Okay, hold onto me,” she whispered in his ear as she tugged at him. “Hold onto me.”

He didn’t dare obey her. The shiv was still clutched deathgrip-tight in his hand. If he raised it the monster within him might turn it on her. He forced his arms to stay limp as she pulled at him.

The hunger stirred again as she tried to drag him to his feet. All of his energy was focused on battling it back; he couldn’t help her. He couldn’t even tell her how much danger she was in from him at that moment.

“We’re gonna get out of here,” she hissed, and tried to make him take a step forward.

Let me out, the beast demanded again. *Let me feed!* Images of what it wanted to do to her spooled out before his eyes and he recoiled in horror.

“Okay, I’ve got you, come on—”

He staggered and collapsed, too busy restraining the beast within to navigate the world without. It was roaring at him, filling his head with its fury. He could barely hear Carolyn shouting at him over it.

“Come on, Riddick! Get up! *Get up! GET UP!*” The fury in her voice finally penetrated the red haze swimming around his head and he managed to focus his eyes on her. An ironic smile quirked her lips as he stared.

“I said I’d die for them, not you, now let’s move.”

Her remark confused him. He managed to stagger almost upright, clinging to her. His shiv was still in his hand, dangerously close to her back. He tilted his wrist to keep it pointed away from her. She began to maneuver him through the alley, slowly turning the two of them around and around. Taking a deep breath, Riddick shoved the beast back further down and managed a few stronger steps of his own.

The end took them both by surprise. Even as his strength began to return and his self-control reasserted itself a shock jarred both of them. He heard Carolyn’s abrupt intake of breath and saw her eyes widen and dilate with sudden pain. A new blood-scent entered the air and he knew that *she* was bleeding now.

For one terrible, heart-stopping moment, he honestly thought his hand had slipped and he’d stabbed her. But no, his wrist was still turned, keeping the shiv away from her. He hadn’t done it. Something *else* had.

He could feel it as the life began to drain out of her, could see it in her face. He’d been here before, after all, many times; he knew very well what it was like to watch someone die. But he’d never, ever in his life felt such a powerful, overwhelming urge to stop it, to roll back the moment. Within him the animal had finally gone silent, stricken as well.

No... he thought in sickened denial. Not her...

But it was too late. Carolyn Fry was dying in his arms. He couldn’t do anything to stop it. Their eyes met, for one final moment, and an odd smile appeared on her lips. It would haunt him for years as he wondered what it meant, and what her final words had intended.

Abruptly the moment ended as she was jerked back. He lunged forward, grasping her hand, but it slid out of his grip. As he watched in powerless horror she was pulled back into the night and lost.

He really wasn’t injured that badly, but now his legs gave out, completely numb beneath him, and he fell back down to the mud. This wasn’t supposed to have happened... *she wasn’t supposed to die for me!*

“Not for me,” he rasped, shudders wracking his body. Gaining a little strength, he shouted it again into the pitch black night around him.

As if from a distance he observed himself with ironic detachment as, just as he’d feared he might, he begged the night to give her back. It was the animal itself that cried out in pain and remorse now, for the first time in its savage life.

“She didn’t have to die...” Jack’s words echoed mournfully through his mind. She’d been talking about Shazza, but it was even more true of Carolyn.

If he’d acted like a man before and gone back for the others without prodding, she would have lived.

If he’d had better control over his inner beast and had carried his own fucking weight, she would have lived.

If she’d had enough sense to cut her “losses” and leave him to the grim fate of his own making, she would have lived.

Carolyn Fry was dead, not by his hand but by his design, a design he'd scribbled in a moment of casual, brutal selfishness. Kneeling in the mud, he found himself wanting to follow her into the darkness —

"Fry? Riddick? Hello?!"

Jack.

He had to get the girl and the Holy Man off this rock.

Grimly, hating himself, he rose, picked up the dropped bottle of glowing larvae, and slowly made his way the final distance to the skiff. Imam and Jack were standing on the ramp, peering into the darkness. Their smiles at his limping approach faded as they realized he was alone.

"Where's Fry?" the girl begged. "Is she okay?"

He couldn't do more than shake his head silently. Imam stepped back as he climbed wearily up the ramp. Jack followed him in, a choked, suppressed sob escaping her throat.

Turning to look at the girl, he saw the odd, pained contortions of her face as she tried to hold in her tears, attempting to hide her grief away from him. He put his hand on her shoulder without even thinking.

"It's okay, Jack. You can cry for her."

She sank down onto one of the seats against the skiff's walls, tears now in her eyes.

Cry for her, he thought again as he pulled himself wearily into the pilot's chair. He closed his eyes for a long moment as he reached for his reserves. *His* eyes were dry, as always. As far as he knew he hadn't shed a single tear since he was seven years old. *Cry for her, Jack. Do it for both of us.*

Lying beside Jack now, his hand on her still cheek, he wondered if he would have found tears at last if she'd died. Would they have finally come? Or would everything human within him have died with her, and the chance of tears ever coming again along with it?

He wished he could see normal colors again. He *thought* her color was improving, but he couldn't be sure. Of course it *should* be, after all the synthblood he'd transfused into her. His thumb gently swept over her lips, caressing them.

Jack stirred, her lips parting. "He's gonna be so upset..." she murmured before going still once more.

Now what did *that* mean? He wondered if she was referring to her gunshot wound... or to those blasted disks.

He'd put away all of the medical supplies just a few minutes ago. Along the way he'd found the bag of disks she'd been so determined to bring home. He had no idea what was on them, but there was no way it could have been worth the risk to her life.

Still, they were important to her. He had resisted the impulse to throw them away in his anger over what they'd apparently cost her.

Gonna be a long week, he thought to himself. He'd have to be very careful with her. The stitches were in an awkward place, a part of the body that tended to bend and stretch and so even normal movements would likely pull at them. She'd be on the lightest duty he could come up with. Training would be suspended in most areas... and sex would be just plain out of the question for a while.

That would probably have been true even if the injury had been in a *less* delicate place, he reflected. Physical trauma was rough on the libido, leaving all of a body's nerves raw and on edge. A simple, gentle caress might be intensely uncomfortable to her while she healed. He knew that from experience; a few of his worst wounds had even managed to kill his *own* sex drive for a time, as he recalled.

But at least, this time, he wouldn't have to hide his thoughts from her. This time he could admit to his feelings, rather than concealing them. If he became too aroused in her presence and had to pull away, at least he could *admit* to it.

It amazed him, sometimes, how much closer to humanity she'd brought him. Carolyn had made him want to be a better man; Jack had showed him how to become it.

Who knows? he thought as he closed his eyes. *Maybe she'll even show me how to cry someday.*

At last he slept for a time, knowing Jack was safely in his care once more.

56.

Jack: I Will Remember

Strength gradually flowed back into Jack's veins with the synthblood, but the sedative held her firmly down. She was caught, enmeshed between sleep and wakefulness. For a long time she simply floated.

It was a place she'd inhabited before. Random hours had been spent in it over the course of a two-month period. At any other time she had no recollection of it – no idea, even, that this place existed – but from within it she could see back to those other days. Memories stirred and opened to her.

"Sir, there's no way of determining when or how her hymen was ruptured. Strenuous physical activity has been known to—"

"I need to know. Ask her."

"Why is this so important?"

*"I need to know whether **he** did it. Now ask her. That's an order. She can't lie to us in this state, can she?"*

"No, Sir."

"Ask. Now."

One of the voices was familiar to her, conjuring an image of a gaunt, grey-haired man with hawkish features and glacial blue eyes. Reg... Uncle Reg. That was the name that came to her. Once there had been poisonous hatred associated with his face and voice... but with a different name. Now only a sad longing remained.

"This changes everything," his voice came to her out of the past. It was later. *How* she knew that was unclear, but it was something she knew with certainty. *"Other arrangements will have to be made."*

"Are you sure, Sir?" A new voice. Not the same person he'd been talking to before. *"Surveillance has already been organized around Boris Kowalczyk's house—"*

*"I'm not putting her back in that environment. Not even if it **would** draw Br... Riddick out. We know what that... **kindermar** would do to her in the meantime."*

"The General isn't going to like this."

*"The General is welcome to have his **own** little girl accompany Audrey back there if he pleases. Otherwise, she doesn't go back."*

"Then where do we put her?"

"Somewhere secure, obviously. Put together a list of juvenile homes and shelters in and around New Sacramento. Ones for girls only."

"Girls only? Why?"

"It'll minimize Riddick's ability to reach her without our knowledge."

"Do you really think he'll try to?"

"Yes, Sergeant. Sooner or later he'll come for her."

"And we'll be ready."

*"**That** remains to be seen."*

I need to remember this, she thought to herself from the haze in which she floated. *This is important.* Time spun out for her and Lieutenant Reginald Jarvis's voice came to her again.

"Is the memory block in place?"

"Almost done. I just have to give the final commands. She won't remember any of the questions we asked her."

"Did you add what I asked you to?"

"Yes, Sir. She'll have partial memory of what Boris Kowalczyk did to her, but the emotional impact of it will be muted. She won't have any lingering trauma or neuroses."

I will remember, Jack insisted, latching onto the conversation. *I will remember, I will remember...*

"If I may ask, Sir, why is this so important to you?"

"I owe her, Private. That's all you need to know."

His voice faded out even as she struggled to hang onto it. The harder she concentrated upon it, the further away it went. Jack reached out, desperate to grasp it before it was gone—

She woke to darkness.

Of course she did. That was, after all, Riddick's preferred environment. He functioned best when he didn't need shielding for his eyes and could rely on their full sensory range. Jack waited, letting her eyes adjust to Riddick's world. It happened quickly; they were already dilated from the sedatives he'd given her.

He was lying next to her, deeply asleep, one arm outstretched to drape across her shoulder.

I will remember, she thought as the words echoed through her head. She snatched at them, wondering what they meant. Hospitals, something to do with hospitals... and Jarvis... and... and...

It was gone. Whatever it had meant, she'd lost it.

Remember what? She frowned and struggled to find it, but it slipped further away from her. Uncles. It had to do with uncles, but she couldn't think *how*. Uncle Reg? Uncle Boris? She had the vague idea that it somehow had to do with *both* of them.

Ridiculous. The two men had never met and couldn't possibly be less alike. The drugs had made her a little kooky, she decided.

She could feel, now, how stiff and painful her side had become. Part of her was tempted to wake Riddick up and ask him to give her more painkillers, but he looked exhausted. No, she wouldn't wake him. He shifted a little in his sleep, a low, purring growl stirring in his chest. She wondered, suddenly, how close to the surface his inner beast had been pushed by the mistake she'd made.

Once upon a time it had been a side of him she'd been unwilling to face, or even admit existed. She was better about it now, she realized. She could accept its presence within him; she could cope with its hungers and rages. It was part of who Riddick was and had to be accepted and loved along with everything else. She'd said so, before, when he'd confided in her about his own fear of it, but she hadn't fully *known* it until now. Why now?

Something in her memory had shaken loose, she realized. She closed her eyes, concentrating on it, grasping at it. *I will remember*, she told herself again, frowning. Finally it came.

Alouette.

She'd been eight years old when it had happened, during her visit to her mother's family on New Belgium. Unlike the semi-sterile world of the mining colonies, terraforming had long since been completed on this planet and the countryside of *this* world was teeming with life and brightness. Aunt Josette lived on a farm with Uncle Henri, cousins Renaud and Jeanne, and several cats. One was named Alouette.

She and Alouette became fast friends. Whenever she took a break from the fascinating but exhausting process of trying to interact with and understand the local children, Jacquí – she was Jacquí then, after all – would lie on her back in the guest room with Alouette resting comfortably on her stomach, watching her with half-lidded mint-green eyes and purring. She'd watched in rapt fascination, as well, as Alouette stalked mice and moles in the gardens and fields. A love had formed between them, and Jacquí had been tempted to ask her Aunt Josette if there was any way she might take the cat back with her when it was time to go home.

Those days had been full of discoveries. Jeanne, although five years older, was attentive and responsible and determined to show her *cousine* a good time. The nest of rabbits was found only a week before Jacquí's scheduled departure. She spent an hour or so marveling over their beauty, careful not to touch them or get her scent into their nest.

Alouette found them half an hour after that and killed them all.

She remembered screaming at the bewildered cat, her hand flashing out to strike at her flank and knock her away from the pitiful, bloodied little forms whose perfection she'd admired not long before. She remembered Alouette's reproachful hiss before the cat streaked away into the vineyards. Her aunt and mother had come running and, between her own semi-coherent sobs and Jeanne's oddly caustic comments, pieced together what had happened.

Explanations had slowly emerged. Alouette, she was told in gentle, patient tones, was a farm cat. Hunting was her duty and wild rabbits, lovely as they were to look at, bred excessively and did a lot of damage to the farm. Jacquí had sniffled and nodded, acknowledging but not really accepting the explanation. Her father had come to her later with another, simpler way of looking at it.

Pyotr Nikoliavich Kowalczyk had been a man caught between two worlds. In his own family he was the Black Sheep, disapproved of but still loved even though he'd discarded academia for a life of working with his hands. To his wife's family he was an odd, somewhat aloof man who read too much and talked too little. He only truly found his sense of belonging when he was alone with his wife and daughter, in the pocket world they'd made that was perfectly suited to him. Jacquí had always understood that about him; perhaps it was why *he'd* understood Alouette so well, and had been able to explain things to his daughter.

"You can't expect her to be something she's not," he'd told her, sitting on the foot of her bed and resting one large, work-calloused hand on her ankle. "She's a cat. Cats are predators. It's not just her duty to hunt, it's *what she is*. Don't punish her for being a cat. There's nothing else she can be."

It had sparked questions, and the two had talked for some hours about the nature of instincts and the ways people could tie themselves into knots when they went against them. Her mother brought up their dinners that night; father and daughter continued talking until it was time for bed.

Alouette crept into her room after the lights were out.

The cat was hesitant and skittish until Jacquí patted the bed. Then a thunderous purr erupted and she jumped up. Soon Alouette was in her usual place, nuzzling and licking at Jacquí's chin while the girl cried silently. Forgiven so easily, she was left face-to-face with her own intolerance toward a side of her friend she hadn't wanted to see. It left her irrevocably altered.

Girl and cat had remained close for the rest of the visit, closer than ever in many ways. But she didn't ask Josette to let her take Alouette back with her. The cat would never be happy in the barren, preyless world of the mining colonies. Her nature would be denied. She was a predator and needed to be where the prey was.

It was only years later that she'd realized Alouette had been careful, after that, never to hunt when she was around.

Jacquí had never seen the cat again. By this time, Jack realized – she was Jack now, after all – Alouette would have been dead for years. But the lesson lived on. She opened her eyes again and gazed across at Riddick.

My dad would've liked you, she thought. He'd probably have worried, of course, but I think he would've understood you just fine.

She examined Riddick as if with new eyes, seeing both the man and the predator, inextricably linked. They were one. She knew that now. What she'd skimmed of the Charybdis files before fleeing the library had made that abundantly clear. The hunt was in his blood, an essential part of his nature. Man and beast could not be separated out.

And she loved him anyway. She would always love him. Just as she would always love Alouette.

He is what he is, she thought to herself. He is what they made him.

Riddick's breathing changed and she heard him swallow. As she watched, his eyelids fluttered and lifted. Twin pools of silver gazed at her through the darkness.

"Hey," she rasped, and then coughed to clear her throat. His lips creased in a sardonic grin in response. "Shit, I think I died and came back as a frog."

His answering chuckle was more felt than heard. "You didn't die. I wouldn't have let you." His arm shifted until the palm of his hand was resting on her cheek. "How do you feel?"

Jack grimaced. "Pretty sore."

Riddick stroked her cheekbone with his thumb. "No big surprise there. You were really lucky. You're gonna be in a lot of pain for a few days."

I will remember, she thought again. Remember what? Something to do with Reg—

"He saved me, Riddick. He helped me get away."

Beside her, Riddick went still. "Jarvis?"

"Yeah. I mean, he could have stopped me without even trying. But he let me go. He made sure none of the other soldiers could come after me."

Riddick didn't speak for a while. When he did, there was a strange note in his voice. A hint of buried pain. "Why?"

I will remember. Jack closed her eyes and tried to force the memories to the surface, but they wouldn't come. Just that tantalizing aroma again, something buried, almost within reach.

"He... everything changed... when he realized I was alive. Riddick, he was *happy*. Happy to see me. He wanted me to tell you something, but whatever it was, he couldn't say it." She frowned harder, struggling to grab at the elusive memory. Love? Did Jarvis love Riddick? Was that what she'd sensed?

How was that possible?

"He cares about you. I don't know why or how. I think it's what he wanted me to tell you."

Another long silence greeted her. After a moment, Riddick sighed. "Oh."

One word. But she could hear the volumes of pain in it. He shifted on the bed and whispered something else. She frowned, catching the words but not understanding them.

"*There is no fucking Bryan?*" What does *that* mean? Maybe there would be something in the files that would tell her — *shit!*

"The disks..." She didn't know where they were. It'd be just her luck if she'd dropped them on the launch pad and they'd been incinerated. "Where are they?"

The annoyed distaste that suddenly entered Riddick's voice surprised her. "Those things." He nodded toward the dresser. In the darkness she could only just make out the amorphous outline of the plastic bag holding them.

The relief abruptly coursing through her was intense. "Thank God..."

"I hope they were worth it," Riddick grumbled.

She glanced back at him, confused by the sudden undercurrent of anger in his words. "Sorry?"

"Well, the damned things got you *shot*, Jack. They almost got you *killed*. There'd have to be something pretty fuckin' *special* on them to make it worth —"

"They're the Charybdis Project files," she interrupted. Beside her, Riddick went still. For a moment he even stopped breathing.

"Are you sure?" Was that awe in his voice?

"Yeah. I got them with Jarvis's clearances. Managed to download everything, I think."

"How?" Yes, that was awe.

"I used his retina pattern. The scanner didn't seem to care that he was unconscious when I did it." An odd pride welled up within her. It really *had* been a good plan. If she'd left a minute or two sooner, she'd have even managed to get away clean.

"And you got... everything?" Still that amazement in his tone. Of course. He'd been trying for almost five years to get to his records. Now she'd gotten them for him.

"Everything." She reached out and touched his arm, even though the motion stirred sharp pain in her side. "But I want to look at the files first, Riddick."

She couldn't see his frown in the darkness but she knew it was there. She could *feel* it. "Why?"

Jack sighed. *Here we go*, she thought. *Make it good.*

Riddick was waiting patiently for her answer.

"I already know... some of what's on there. I've read bits and pieces. And I know you're going to find it very upsetting." She swallowed and wished she could see his face better. She knew he could see hers perfectly, after all. "Painful. I want to look it over first so I can help you prepare yourself for the things you'll be reading. What they did to you, and to others like you —"

She felt his sudden flinch.

"Yeah, Riddick, there were others. And what was done to you — all of you — was really horrible. So... give me a while to look the files over? So I can help you deal with it?"

He was silent for several minutes. Finally: "That bad, huh?"

Jack nodded.

"Okay. You paid for them with your blood anyway; you call the shots."

She felt him take her hand and draw it to his face. As his lips brushed her palm, she closed her eyes once more.

So tired... so tired... She fell asleep with her hand still resting against Riddick's mouth.

It was another day before she felt strong enough to get up and walk around. Riddick's attentive care of her during that time was absolute and amazing. She snagged the set of data disks as he helped her out of her old room.

"Why'd you put me in there, anyway?"

He chuckled. "Didn't want blood all over our bed. Plus, I wasn't sure if I was gonna have to strap you down to keep you from hurting yourself, and the straps are sized for that bed."

"Oh. Makes sense. What are you gonna do with that room now, anyway? I mean, we sleep *together* now."

"I've got an idea."

She glanced over at him and caught a secretive little smile on his lips. "Really? What?"

"Something that should keep you out of trouble. I'll tell you all about it soon. In the meantime..." He grinned more broadly at her and steered her toward their bedroom. "...I got a surprise for you."

Jack gasped as they entered the room.

"You like it?" He waited for her to answer and then chuckled when she continued to stare, her mouth agape and speechless. "I'm gonna take that as a 'yes.'"

"How did you – when did you –?" she managed at last.

He chuckled again. "I did it while you were at the library. Remember how I was taking apart the cockpit comm system? I was getting ready to hook all of this in."

He gestured, grinning, at the huge screen dominating one wall. His hand moved again, drawing her eyes to the data ports and peripherals discreetly mounted on panels on either side of their bed.

"I can't believe it..."

"We *were* going to have a big Movie Night when you got back from the library, originally. But that'll wait until you're healed up again. Until then..." He steered her over to her side of the bed. "You still need to rest and heal. If you're gonna study those disks, better you do it here in our bed than sitting in the copilot's seat. Deal?"

Jack found herself laughing, glancing up at him as he sat her down on the bed and took off her shoes. She'd only just put them on, doing so despite Riddick's mysterious insistence that she wouldn't need them. Now she knew why he'd said that. "So I'm on bed rest?"

"That's right." He lifted her legs up and moved them onto the bed. Jack grinned and let him arrange her position.

I'm probably the only person in the galaxy who knows this side of him, she thought. The memory of Alouette, similarly tender, stirred again and made her eyes sting.

Riddick's eyes met hers and he frowned quizzically. "You okay?"

She nodded. She couldn't explain it to him yet. Soon, maybe, but not yet.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. Just... a lot of old memories got stirred up while I was under. Don't know why." She gave him a wry grin.

Understanding appeared on his face. "Ah. Yeah, I kind of had the same problem, myself." He leaned in and kissed her forehead before rising from his crouch. "I'm gonna be down in the engine room for a while. Gonna give the atmospheric thruster system an overhaul. That should keep me out of your way for a while so you can look at the disks. You need anything, you buzz me, okay?"

"Okay." He bent down and gave her another kiss, this one on her mouth. She watched as he headed for the door. "I love you, Riddick."

He paused. The face he turned to her was gentle. "I love you too, Jack."

They watched each other for a long moment, both of them unmasked and vulnerable, before a smile quirked his lips. He stepped out of the room and closed the door behind him, leaving her alone with the new comm system and the disks.

Jack took a deep breath and powered up the system. Taking a disk at random from the bag, she inserted it into her terminal. She had to take another deep breath as she opened the first file.

Everything, she quickly realized, was out of order. It was as if she'd opened a book she'd heard about but never read at a random page and was trying to deduce the story from that spot. Her first few hours were spent just shuffling through the disks, seeking something – anything – that would lead her to a good starting place. Tantalizing hints of what she suspected came to her along the way, but nothing that she could use to ground and orient herself.

Finally she found her way in. The story revealed itself to her at last.

I was right, she told herself with a deep, unhappy sigh. *Dammit, I was really hoping I'd been wrong about this.*

She began to read in earnest, following the records of Riddick's conception and birth and the links they led her to. The Project was larger and more pervasive than she'd ever realized—

There it was, the story of Evelyn Broward, the first Scylla Child. Riddick's kin? Maybe. *A little less than kin and more than kind*, she misquoted ruefully. She read the logs of the girl's care. For five years Evelyn had been kept at a medical lab on the edge of the Frontier Systems, until it was determined that she posed no biological threat to her caretakers. Then the Tribunal had ordered her brought to Earth for further study.

The first complication had come when she arrived on Earth and was brought out of cryo. The girl had gone into a catatonic state; it took three months to bring her out and another two before the cause was determined. The discovery that she'd spent the full eleven months of her inbound trip awake and aware in her cryo-tube led to pages of vehement debate. No one was at all sure how that was possible or what could be the cause. When Evelyn finally committed suicide at the age of fourteen, the debate flared up again; had her ordeal in cryo-sleep been the cause of her mental instability?

Tests with some of the first-generation Scylla Children showed that they *all* stayed awake in cryo.

A link from there took Jack back into Riddick's own personal information. Evelyn's ordeal was cited when the Tribunal refused to grant the Jarvis family permission to have Riddick join them in cryo-stasis while his "Uncle Reg" was on assignment.

He lived with Lieutenant Jarvis? Jack thought in surprised wonderment. *How come he never mentioned that?*

Was it part of the oddness between them? The hints of love, of longing, of bitter betrayal? When they'd squared off in the space battle it had been deeply personal. Enmity born of curdled love? Maybe.

She would have to ask him soon.

She began examining more of the links. One – file FP74E – caught her eye. It was about neurological regeneration, she noticed, a supposed medical impossibility. She hunted through the disks until she found it.

The first portion of the file was dull and difficult. Jack waded through the technical language slowly, managing to absorb most of it. The researchers were attempting to use the Scylla Spore's properties to promote brain cell regeneration, somehow. How they'd come up with that idea, she couldn't even begin to guess.

The clinical trials had started almost a year before Riddick went insane. Twelve Alzheimer's patients had been treated with inert Spore RNA. Although five had begun to show promising results, the tests had abruptly ended with Riddick's arrest. His volatility was cited, along with the fact that the events in file SCRBR27 – the very events that had initiated the clinical trials – might be responsible for that volatility.

It took Jack ten minutes to find file SCRBR27 on the disks. She realized what the "events" had to be almost immediately. It was the night Riddick's foster parents had beaten him, back when he was seven years old. She found herself staring in horror at the file's photos of his injuries.

Riddick had mentioned that his skull had been fractured, but he'd never even *hinted* at anything like *this*! She scanned the accompanying notes and began to understand why, very quickly. He'd never known.

Massive cerebral hemorrhaging, she read, and felt her stomach turn. Riddick hadn't merely been beaten; he hadn't merely cracked his skull. He'd been annihilated. What the hell had they *done* to repair that kind of damage?

Nothing. She studied the notes further. His fate had been sealed, as far as the doctors were concerned. All they were waiting for was the arrival of an authorized party to allow them to disconnect life support. They were waiting for the arrival of Lieutenant Reginald Jarvis.

Then the EEGs began registering activity. New CAT scans were run. Jack gasped as she viewed their results.

That's not possible, she thought. Her limbs felt oddly weightless. *Brain cells don't regenerate! And they don't get replaced! Even Regen clinics can't make that happen! How the hell...?*

Scylla. Of course. What *else* could it be? The Spore had made fundamental changes to every cellular – and even sub-cellular – structure in his body; why not his brain cells?

Jarvis arrived even as Riddick's brain-waves settled into normal, healthy patterns. The next pages were filled with details of the ensuing cover-up. Doctors and nurses were bribed, reassigned, or transferred to other

hospitals in other cities. New charts were written up for the public records, designed to indicate that Riddick had *never* been in any danger of death.

Riddick himself was spirited out of the hospital and placed in Lieutenant Jarvis's custody and care. He would spend his summer as a guest of the Jarvis family, undergoing a battery of aptitude tests, while the cover-up continued. Officially, he'd been moved to another facility. In fact, he was fully recovered and playing with other children – Reginald Jarvis's children.

I will remember. It stirred again. That was why. That was what she'd seen in Jarvis's eyes. He'd come to love seven-year-old Richard Bryan Riddick, while the boy had stayed with him. Everything that had followed – the psychosis, the imprisonment, the pursuit across the stars – had been personal for him. He'd been attempting to recover the little boy who'd climbed into his heart that summer, or to avenge his apparent spiritual death on the beast that had seemingly evicted and replaced him.

Jack exhaled a shaky breath and turned back to her reading. Amazing how much they'd had to do to hide Riddick's miraculous recovery.

The police had had to be handled with the greatest care, of course. They'd had to be given the impression that Riddick's recovery was due to a successful experimental treatment, which the military was only slightly involved in, and not in any way due to his own unique nature. The impression had been meticulously constructed for them. Finally, when they had come to accept it, they were told that Riddick was expected to make a full recovery. Only one charge of homicide could be filed against the Moffetts –

Oh fuck.

One charge of homicide. Jack shuddered, knowing what she was about to read. She linked over to the connected file and felt her gorge rise.

Christina Elaine Frost, age seventeen. Raped by Joshua Terence Moffett and stabbed to death by Claire Montgomery Moffett. Pronounced dead at the scene... pronounced dead in seven-year-old Richard Bryan Riddick's bedroom.

And they'd never told him. For twenty-five years, he'd believed that his foster sister was alive somewhere; he'd believed that she'd survived the abuse and cruelty "Mr. and Mrs. Holy Roller" had put her through. For twenty-five years he'd had no idea that Christina had been murdered that night.

Jack only realized she was crying when the tears began dripping off of her chin and onto her arms. Of everything she'd learned, this was what she dreaded telling him most of all.

57.

Jarvis: Tribunal

The conference had clearly been in session for a while when Reginald Jarvis entered the room. General Baldwin was on the main viewscreen, and several of the other Tribunal High Commanders were on smaller screens. Around the table were Jarvis's own senior officers and consultants. All eyes turned to him as he entered.

"Please be seated, Lieutenant-General Jarvis," Baldwin said by way of greeting.

Jarvis blinked. His *real* rank within the Tribunal hierarchy was almost never referred to and it came as a surprise. He moved to the remaining chair, at the end of the conference table and directly facing Baldwin's screen. *Show time*. He wondered if he would return to his quarters when this meeting concluded, or if he would be escorted to the brig.

"I'd like to start by bringing you up to date, Reg," the General began.

Reg? Interesting. He wondered what the sudden informal tone meant. His face remained calm and mildly inquisitive, though, not showing any of the rapid shuffling of thoughts and scenarios flashing through his mind.

"First, you were correct about Miss Kowalczyk. Cross-checking with older records indicates that the body found on Seti Station was *not* hers. The records were altered two days before Audrey 'Jack' Kowalczyk arrived on the Station. Riddick had access to a very high-level decryption system to do that; we're combing the black market to see if we can find out who sold it to him, although we probably won't have any more luck with that than we ever do."

Jarvis nodded and waited.

"The body from Seti Station has been reclassified as a Jane Doe. To date, no records of the woman's actual identity have been uncovered. Our forensic pathology team was dispatched to the site and has determined that her *real* time of death was five months ago. We believe Riddick purchased the body because of its physical resemblance to Miss Kowalczyk, and had it kept in stasis until she arrived on the station."

Baldwin shuffled through some papers before looking up into the camera again.

"Since you have demonstrated a distinct lack of impartiality regarding Riddick..."

Here it comes, Jarvis told himself, and waited for the sword to fall. What the General said next took him by surprise.

"...I thought you would want to know that there's no sign that Riddick himself inflicted any of the injuries on Jane Doe. The only wound our pathologist says occurred at the time of her death was a crushed windpipe. All of the other injuries were simulated post-mortem, a few days before the body was discovered. We have the coroner's assistant who falsified the autopsy and simulated the injuries in custody. He claims he was paid by a man fitting Riddick's description. The payment was deposited into his account less than twenty-four hours after Miss Kowalczyk arrived on the station."

He's still in there, Jarvis thought with relief. *Bry, my boy, you aren't dead. You're still in there...*

"Thank you, General."

Baldwin paused for a long moment. "I have discussed, at some great length, the nature of your... lack of objectivity... with Dr. Aspen. I've come to the conclusion that some of this was the error of the Tribunal. You became emotionally attached to Riddick twenty-eight years ago, real-time, when he stayed with your family, something we never should have recommended in the first place. I'm not sure I understand how you became emotionally attached to Miss Kowalczyk, but Dr. Aspen believes that all of your hostility toward Riddick came from your belief that he had murdered the girl."

Jarvis nodded. It was true, but the reasoning behind it was something he couldn't explain. He glanced over at Aspen... *Martina*. Maybe she could explain it to him sometime. Nobody'd ever known him as well as she did.

Her smile was gentle. Confident. Maybe he was actually going to survive this after all.

"We are, obviously, concerned over the theft – by Miss Kowalczyk – of data disks containing full details of the Scylla and Charybdis Projects. However, that damage is not irreparable. It will depend, largely, upon

what she and Riddick choose to do with that information. The Phase III labs have been relocated and new safeguards are being put into place. If they do choose to go public, we can contradict most of their evidence. The *Messina* is being ordered back to Earth for repairs and refitting. A new fighter squadron has been assembled and is waiting at Luna Station.”

That brought a knot to his throat. All those kids, dead at Riddick’s hands because *he’d* provoked him into a murderous rampage.

“If you others would please step out of the room, there are some matters the Tribunal needs to discuss privately with the Lieutenant-General,” Baldwin continued.

Around him, Jarvis heard people rise and file to the door. He stared down at the table, unwilling to see the expressions on their faces. He wondered if they’d already been told what his fate would be... but he didn’t want to see the answer in their eyes.

The door closed behind them and he was alone with the Tribunal.

“Reg?”

Jarvis raised his eyes at last, looking up at Baldwin’s face on the main viewscreen.

“You miss him, don’t you?”

It was only after he nodded that he suddenly wondered if Baldwin *had* meant Riddick.

“I’m sorry, Reg. That was a bad move on our part. I’ve spoken with Melanie since then... I hadn’t realized that the two of you had been trying for several years to have a son, or why it was impossible.”

That made him wince. He tried not to think of any of that, whenever possible. Mel and the girls were long lost to him. All he had, anymore, was the Project... and his fruitless quest to get *some* good to come out of it.

“You’ve been excellent in the field, Reg. You have a natural bond with your soldiers. They do things, for you, that they’d never do for any other leader. But you get too close to them. Too attached. You love them too much, sometimes. It cost you your objectivity here. It is the decision of the Tribunal to remove you from field work.”

He loved them too much? Jarvis sighed, closing his eyes and nodding. More truth. They weren’t just his soldiers... they were his children. When Riddick killed his twelve best students in the Barracks Incident, he’d never thought of them as “his students,” they’d been “his boys.” As Riddick once had been. As the members of the lost squadron had been “his kids.”

When, exactly, had he lost his detachment?

You know the answer to that, “Uncle Reg.” You lost it the day you walked into the hospital and a little seven-year-old boy opened his eyes and smiled at you through his bandages. You lost it to Richard B. Riddick in a chess game.

“You will return to Earth on the *Messina* to assume your new post,” Baldwin concluded.

Finally he managed to speak. “And what’s my new post?”

A new voice spoke up, Jun Velasquez, President of the Tribunal, in his most formal and authoritative tones, saying words he’d never anticipated at all: “Lieutenant-General Reginald Jarvis, you are hereby elevated to the rank of full General. Upon your return to Earth you will stand for formal confirmation to join the Tribunal Security Council as head of the Military Intelligence division. On behalf of the Tribunal, I extend our welcome to you.”

Jarvis stared at the screens, at the remarkably *approving* faces on them. How...? His eyes moved to General Baldwin’s screen.

“I know you haven’t been paying much attention to the other events we’ve been experiencing. Admiral Lieben had a mild stroke a week ago and is stepping down as Chief of the Tribunal Armed Forces. I will be taking his place... and you will be taking mine.” Baldwin’s voice became gentle. “Although your judgment may have at times been questionable recently, your loyalty never has been. And I think any of us would have made the same decisions in your place.”

Jarvis blinked and shook his head. His disbelief must have been written on his face, he supposed, given the chuckles that emanated from several speakers.

“I know you felt like the events on Troubadour were an unqualified disaster, Reg, but they really weren’t,” Baldwin added softly after a moment. “I agree with you. Jack Kowalczyk is essential to any recovery of Riddick. If anything had happened to her, we’d have lost him forever.”

Something *had* happened to her, though. She’d been *shot*. And while she’d gotten away under her own power, there was no guarantee that she’d survived. Riddick might return to them, yes, but that return might be

filled with fiery vengeance.

"We still might," he whispered.

"True. But we still have a chance. Now, it's possible that they *will* decide to go public in an attempt to sabotage your confirmation hearings, but Dr. Aspen believes that's unlikely. Based upon your conversation with Miss Kowalczyk, both prior to and after the shooting, she believes there's a very good chance that Riddick may no longer perceive you as his enemy."

I never was his enemy. Well, except for the few weeks when he had believed Jack had been murdered, anyway. *Not that I blame him for thinking it... God, what a fuckup.*

"I hope so, Sir. I'd like to salvage that if I can..."

Baldwin chuckled. "You mean you want him back. The closest thing you ever had to a son. No, we don't blame you, Reg. That was a very large mistake on *our* part, not yours."

Staring at his hands, Jarvis swallowed. "He said I'd see him again soon."

"Then he'll have to come to Earth to find you. And even Richard B. Riddick himself will have trouble getting to you through our security systems, unless we let him in."

Earth. Permanently stationed on Earth... years too late. Decades. If it had come before the divorce, things might have been perfect. If it had come before all of the pain built up, before he'd been forced into betraying a seven-year-old boy's dreams, before he'd lost his family to distance and ennui...

Earth. He was going home. He wondered if there was anything of "home" left there for him.

"Oh, Reg? In a side note, we've approved your nomination of Dr. Teresa Cartwright to head the Phase III medical team. You found an excellent replacement for Dr. Sovrin. He, by the way, is convalescing nicely, but will be unable to resume his duties. She's already made some interesting suggestions about the protocols... and Dr. Aspen agrees with her. That will actually help us... the women listed in the stolen files as host-mothers for Phase III will not be used after all. Well done, Reg."

That made him shake his head. If things had actually been improved, somehow, he didn't deserve the credit. It belonged to the two doctors.

Dr. Cartwright had surprised him. As with Dr. Aspen before her, there had been a few days of horror and fury once she discovered what the Project actually was and what her role within it would be. She'd flung some interesting epithets at him – "FrankenSergeant" being his favorite – before she'd calmed down and begun to get excited over the possibilities. Then the comments and suggestions had *really* begun to come in a flurry.

And now she was all the way in. He checked his terminal and pulled up her suggestions. They were excellent.

"These are very good ideas. She's right. Do we have volunteers yet?"

"So far eleven operatives have stepped forward. Sergeant Mizuguchi, incidentally, is one of them."

A moment of unease passed through him. One of his kids was going to participate? He didn't know if...

*Stop it. Baldwin's right, you're getting too attached to your soldiers. If it's what she wants, she has a right to do it. And you **know** she'll do it well.*

Still, it bothered him.

Do you believe in this project or not, Reg?

He believed.

"If that's what she wants, I'll approve it. It's a good idea. Possibly with that environment, the next group of children will be less volatile."

"That's the idea, yes." Baldwin chuckled. "Cartwright and Aspen are both very valuable to this project. In many ways they're more valuable than you or I, but you *are* responsible for their recruitment. With you in charge of the Project, and the two of them monitoring the new children, Phase III should proceed excellently."

"Assuming Riddick doesn't decide to sabotage it," Jarvis added.

"True."

"So we're back on schedule?"

"Yes. You will arrive on Earth a month before the inception date. Your confirmation will be completed within a week, barring interference from Riddick and Kowalczyk. That's plenty of time for you to assemble your staff... and make any other arrangements you need to."

Jarvis nodded, knowing what Baldwin meant. See his daughters? Perhaps, but he doubted it. He hadn't been welcome in their homes before now and he doubted returning to Earth to stay would change that. But...

there was something else he might want to do.

His old family was lost to him, but that didn't mean he had to be alone...

He'd talk to Martina.

"That will be all, General Jarvis. It's time for you to come home."

Jarvis rose from his chair and saluted the bank of monitors. One by one, the others saluted back and their screens went blank. Baldwin was the last to go.

"Your rank badge is in the box over by Dr. Aspen's seat, Reg. You'll want to put it on." With those final words, Admiral Baldwin disconnected.

Jarvis rose and moved to Aspen's seat. The small box was nondescript. Opening it, he withdrew the rank insignia and pinned it to his chest.

He looked at the now-empty box and smiled. He had a much prettier box tucked in his nightstand... for Martina.

He hoped she'd say yes.

Now that he knew he actually had a future, now that he knew he had some hope left...

...he knew exactly who he wanted to share it with.

58.

Riddick: Scylla

Riddick was afraid.

Twenty-four hours had passed since Jack had begun reviewing the Charybdis Project files, and his dread was building with every passing moment. He was afraid of what she might say, what she might do. He was afraid of the look he might see in her eyes.

She'd fallen asleep studying the files the night before, and he'd very carefully *not* looked at the screen while he shut the system down. Her face had been tear-stained, he'd noticed, as he gathered her into his arms for the night. That was when a part of him had truly begun to fear what she would tell him.

He began to wonder if he would lose her, if the horrors concealed in the files would break down her steadfast declarations of love. He wondered if she'd been looking at pictures of his many victims as she cried, finally realizing the true depravity of the monster that lurked within him. He wondered if, when she looked at him *now*, he would finally see fear in her eyes. Thus he was almost afraid to meet them when she came to the breakfast table.

But there was no fear at all within them. She looked tired and sad, but her wan smile was as loving as ever.

"Pineapple. Wow, you think of everything, don't you?"

"Try to," he replied. "You looked like you could use it."

He busied himself pouring juice for both of them, trying to think of things to say that would be innocuous, and so was taken by surprise when he looked up. She was watching him with a soft, musing, almost wistful expression.

"What?"

Another wan smile. "I was just thinking about how probably nobody else in the galaxy would peg you for understanding something like comfort food."

He couldn't stop himself. Rising, he moved around the table to sit beside her. It wasn't like he was hungry, anyway... He was almost afraid to touch her, though. Was the comfort she needed something he could even give her? Or was it his fault? He contented himself with sitting beside her and watching her eat, both surprised and gratified when she shifted her position to bring her hip and leg into contact with his.

The silence wasn't precisely uncomfortable, but he had no idea what to say, what to ask. He waited, watching as she quietly ate her omelet and the bowl of pineapple chunks. She glanced at him periodically, the wan smile flitting back across her features each time.

Finally she set her fork aside and turned to him.

"I'm ready to show you what's in the files, Riddick..." She stared down at her fingers, toying with them for a moment before looking back up at him. "If you're ready to see it."

Shit, here we go. He nodded, reaching for her fidgeting hands. When she stood he rose with her and followed.

They left the table and went back into the bedroom, sitting down on the bed. Jack didn't let go of his hand and he silently thanked God for that. Whatever was coming, whatever she had to tell him, was more than a little frightening already.

Jack stared down at her hands, the fingers laced with his, for a long moment before drawing a deep breath. Finally she spoke.

"There's no *good* place to begin, so I'm just going to tell you." She looked up, at last, and locked eyes with him. "Riddick, the Scylla Project and the Charybdis Project are the same thing."

Cold jetted through his veins even before he consciously understood what she was telling him. Across from him, Jack took another deep breath and continued, eyes still locked on his.

"They'd already started Phase II of the Scylla Project when the Homestead Massacre happened. I guess they felt they had too much invested in the Project to just stop... so they hid the subjects away and... just put a new name on their files." Yet another deep breath. "Riddick, you're a Scylla Child."

His body felt weightless, hollow. Numb. It all opened up to him with her words; it all made sense. The clues had been in his face for years but...

...but he hadn't wanted to see them.

Somewhere deep inside, he was screaming. It couldn't be true... he didn't want it to be true... *God, you fucking bastard, you never let up, do you?*

Maybe that was it. It flitted through his head in an instant, the uproar that had followed the births of the first cloned and genetically engineered children in the early twenty-first century... there had been a stormy legal battle when the Catholic church refused to baptize one, calling its conception *an abomination before the eyes of God*...

And that's me. That's what I am. An abomination—

"Riddick?" Jack's soft voice and the touch of her hand on his knee drew him back. He opened his eyes, only now aware that he'd closed them. The worry on her face, the empathy, closed his throat. He swallowed hard and finally managed to speak through the constriction.

"Jack."

"You okay?" He could hear her fear for him in her voice, see it in the liquid glitter of her eyes.

"I'm okay," he whispered. He covered her hand with his own. "You can keep going."

Jack sighed. "That whole thing about you being found in a dumpster? It never happened. Well, I mean, it *did*, but it was *staged*. You and the other Phase II subjects were scattered across America. There were only twenty-four of you, so they could make it look like you were just... random orphans. You all had cover stories, explanations of where you'd come from and stuff. Yours was one of the most sensational. Most of the others were passed off as unwanted babies voluntarily surrendered by unwed mothers, things like that."

He'd never been abandoned?

Since he'd been small, he'd believed that lie. He'd imagined that somewhere, out in the world, there was a woman who'd given birth to him and somehow *seen* the horror that lay dormant within him, and had tried to destroy it. As a small child he'd wept over her imagined hatred of him. Later, when that horror began to manifest itself, he'd found himself forgiving her and wishing she'd succeeded in her aim.

But it had never happened. The most drastic moment of his early childhood, one that had shaped his entire sense of self... had been nothing more than a *cover story*.

"Riddick?"

"I'm listening." His voice sounded – hell, it *felt* – hoarse and scratched to pieces.

"The Tribunal ordered it. They decided it had been a mistake to keep all the Phase I Scylla Children together, so they wanted to raise the next group – your group – isolated from each other. They thought maybe if you were raised only around ordinary humans—"

"I'm not human."

It came to him, then, with the intensity of a crippling blow, exactly what all of this meant. He wasn't even a human being...

"Of *course* you're human!" Jack protested.

"Jack. The Scylla Children weren't classified as *Homo sapiens*. They had another name altogether—"

"*Homo scylliensis*. Yes, I know. But you're still *human*, Riddick! Don't believe *them* – they're the ones who said your mother left you in a dumpster with your own umbilical cord wrapped around your neck!"

For a moment he could almost feel that phantom cord strangling him. "No, what *really* happened is I killed her, just like all the Scylla Children killed their 'host mothers—'"

"You didn't."

He glanced up, surprised by the sudden firmness in her voice.

"Only two of the Phase II surrogate mothers died, and so did the babies they were carrying. All of the other women survived, even the ones who miscarried. *Your* host mother didn't just live, she woke up from her coma a year after you were born."

His heart lurched at that. "You know who my mother is? Where she is?"

The sadness in Jack's eyes stopped him. "Riddick, she carried you but she's not your mother. You were engineered out of about a dozen genetic sources. All of you were. A lot of the genetic material comes from people who've been dead for decades, or even centuries. I think they listed Jim Lovell, the twentieth century astronaut, as one of your gene sources. There were some other names I recognized... Colin Powell and Jonas Salk. But your 'mother...' doesn't even know she carried you."

Another dream lost... crumbled to ashes in his hands. No family. He'd never had a family. He had no kin to speak of, anywhere in the galaxy... no kin except for a virulent spore that infested a distant planet and killed everything it touched.

"So I don't have a family." It was a statement, not a question.

"Well, not the traditional kind... but there are the other Phase II children. You never met any of them, well, except for Ruth Baker—"

"Ruth Baker was a Scylla Child?"

He could see her again in his eyes... the cool blonde entering the bar accompanied by her two toy-boys. Two nights of the most intense sexual passion he'd ever experienced until Jack, and then—

"Yeah. She was supposed to capture you." Jack shrugged at his questioning look. "It got fucked up because her, uh... partner... got jealous over the tactics she was using..." She blushed a little.

Fuck. The file probably says I had sex with Ruth... shit, I'm sorry Jack... wait a second...

"So she didn't poison me? It was her boyfriend?"

Jack nodded and gave him a sheepish grin as her blush faded.

"No wonder Jarvis wants me dead."

"He doesn't." Jack sat back and watched him with calm eyes. At his incredulous look, she slowly shook her head. "The only time he ever wanted you dead was when he thought you'd killed *me*."

"Jack, I told you about what I found in the Nereid system files. They were getting ready to stage a prison riot so they could take me out—"

"They were preparing another cover story. So they could make you disappear. You'd already have been spirited off of Nereid by the time that riot began. They knew you'd stabilized." She gave him a wry smile. "They were about to recruit you."

"Recruit me? Into what?"

"Special Forces, like the rest of the 'Charybdis Operatives.'"

He couldn't help it; he found himself shaking his head in confusion. Okay, the part about *what* he was made sense; entirely more sense than he liked. But...

"So what do the rest of the 'Charybdis Operatives' do, Jack?"

She shrugged. A slight look of distaste appeared in her expression. "A lot of things, really, but it comes down to infiltration and assassination. They do the Tribunal's dirtiest and most dangerous dirty work."

"A hired killer." He felt himself wanting to collapse. Slowly he lay down on the bed, face down, putting his head in Jack's lap. It was the only safe place left. "All this time..."

Jarvis had *wanted* him to be a killer? The pain and disappointment he'd assumed his "uncle" felt over him was as imaginary as the umbilical cord? He actually was exactly what Reg *wanted* him to be?

Impossible. Unfathomable.

What he heard himself saying surprised him. Both the words, and the lost helplessness that had infected his voice.

"I don't know what to do."

"I do," Jack told him calmly, her hand stroking his head, neck and back.

Of course she does, he thought to himself. He closed his eyes, contemplating how the balance of power between them had shifted. *No wonder I couldn't keep her as a child in my head. She didn't just grow up, she grew stronger than me.*

And he'd thought *she* needed *his* strength? He wondered, suddenly, exactly when the tables had turned. The image of her came to him, naked, straddling him, glaring down at him as she denounced his final attempts to control the nature of their relationship. That was the moment the balance of power had irrevocably shifted.

He waited for her to tell him what they would do.

"First we're gonna go to Daedalus Station, just like you said. We'll get rid of the scar and get ourselves some more supplies. Then we're going to New Mecca." She chuckled softly, her hands still caressing him. "It's time to see Imam, and I'm gonna hold you to your promise."

It took him a moment to realize what she meant. "You still *want* to marry me?"

"Of *course* I do!" She put as much reassurance as she could into those words, he noticed, but the next ones out of her mouth were in a surprisingly belligerent tone. "You'd damn well better not be backing out on me!"

The almost-normal laugh that escaped him was unexpected. He rolled over, keeping his head in her lap, and gazed up at her, struck anew by exactly how strong she was, and how giving. She'd have made a wonderful mother... pain lanced through him at that.

She frowned above him in response to his wince, uncertainty flickering over her features. "You're not, are you?"

"Never." Now *he* was hastening to reassure *her*. "I love you, Jack. But..."

"But?"

He sighed heavily. "I wanted to give you something like a normal life. You know, kids... that kind of thing. Remember how I was talking about having plans for your old room? I was thinking 'nursery.' But I'm not even *human*, I can't give you that, and I don't want you to miss out—"

"What makes you think we can't have kids?"

She didn't get it. Shit. How could she not know?

"Well, leaving aside the whole thing of you getting infected by the Scylla Spore and *dying*, we're probably not even genetically compatible—"

"We are. And I wouldn't die." She sounded staunch, certain.

"You're whistling in the dark there, Jack."

"No, I've read the files. Remember? They're getting ready to start Phase III of the Project. They already know you guys are genetically compatible with ordinary humans; they have a whole bunch of frozen embryos created using sperm from the other Phase II subjects."

A little flutter of exultation stirred within him and he quashed it. "Yeah, but that's embryo implantation, not genuine *conception*. It'd still probably kill you."

"I don't think so. I told you, your host mother's alive. Whatever they did, it looks like they got it right." Her smile was calm but it didn't allay the anxiety bubbling within him.

"Got it *right*? They took a bunch of genetically-engineered embryos, implanted them, and then *infected* them with the Scylla spore!"

"No," Jack contradicted him. "That's what they did in Phase I."

"So what'd they do in Phase II? What'd they do to *me*?"

"The infection occurred prior to implantation. After your embryo hit the 21-day mark they did something – I couldn't figure out exactly what but I'll show you in the file – they did something that rendered the Spore inert. *Then* they did the implantation. At that stage the genes in your cellular nuclei and organelles had already been altered and stabilized by the Spore, and it was going dormant anyway."

Damn, she studied the files hard. "So why kill it?"

"To prevent the infection from crossing the placental barrier and flaring up in the host mother." The words tripped off of her lips comfortably. She knew exactly what she was talking about. Mind like a steel trap...

Riddick nodded. "And Phase III?"

"It's about producing viable offspring." Jack shrugged a little. "They want to see the results of normal – well, okay, *relatively* normal – reproduction. Since all the subjects they have left are male, the idea is to cross their sperm with the ova of ordinary women and see what traits are passed on."

"But it's still implantation," he pointed out.

"Well, yeah." Jack shrugged again and tilted her head, watching him with a look that very clearly said *and your point is...?*

"So normal conception could still be dangerous, Jack. I still have the Spore in me." *I can't lose her. I can't...*

"Riddick, the Spore inside you is dead. I'm not gonna get sick no matter how many of your babies I carry."

"You sure about that? What if it isn't dead?"

"Your host mother is alive and well and healthier than she was before they implanted you. If it *is* alive, looks like it's doing *good* things."

"We can't take that kind of risk."

"It's probably already too late."

"What?"

"Well, hell, Riddick, I've been regened for close to three weeks, now, and I haven't bled *yet*. I'm probably already pregnant." Her smile was triumphant but the ice was back in his belly.

“Oh *shit*—”

“Would you *relax*? Riddick, I’m not afraid. I’m really not.” An odd light came into her eyes, along with a smile he hadn’t seen in *days*. She hadn’t given him *that* look since before she’d been shot. “Let me show you exactly how not-afraid I am.”

“Jack, we can’t, you haven’t finished healing up—”

She chuckled quietly, her voice full of mischief. “I’m healed up enough to do this...”

She rose, pulling her legs out from under his head so that he fell back onto the mattress. He began to sit up but stopped as her hand pressed down on his chest.

“What...?”

“Stay still.”

Bemused, he obeyed. “Yes, Ma’am.”

The low ripple of her laugh thrilled him. “And don’t you forget it.” She sat beside him, her fingers dancing over the fastenings of his pants.

Oh my God...

They’d never done this. He’d been hesitant to ask her to, mindful of how little experience she actually had... was she really going to do what he *thought* she was?

She was. Oh God, she was. Her slim hands moved over his cock, startling him into tumescence. He watched in astonished wonder as she bent her head and...

“Oh god, Jack...” The warmth of her breath over his skin sent shivers over his body. And the silky feel of her lips on the head of his member... He shuddered and closed his eyes.

That silk now pursed against his skin as she planted a delicate kiss on the tip of his cock. Riddick stayed silent, unsure if what would emerge would be a laugh or a groan.

Then the warm heat of her tongue touched down and the groan won out. Gooseflesh crawled across his arms and legs as his spine quaked and his breath caught.

Oh god, Jack... This time his oath was silent.

Her tongue moved, leaving cool in its wake as it traced along the edge of his head. Riddick gripped the covers as pleasure lanced through him, struggling not to move, not to intervene. He had to let her set the pace; this was her first time, after all, and her wondrous explorations of his body, maddening as they were, were the most beautiful tortures he’d endured.

Stay still, stay still...

She let out a low, hissing exhalation and he shuddered again as the heat of her breath spread over his moistened flesh and skimmed over the dry skin. Her fingertips were stroking his shaft now, light touches that only increased the growing hunger within him. He wanted to reach down and lace his fingers through her hair, drawing her onto him—

*No. Stay still. This is Jack. This is **her** game and you’re gonna play by **her** rules...*

He kept his eyes closed and his body still, waiting.

“Do you like this, Riddick?” Her voice was soft, an intoxicating mixture of innocent curiosity and adult sensuality, devoid of the jaded ploys he’d put up with for years before—

Before Jack.

“Oh god yes, I love it...” He swallowed, trying to restrain the impulse to take over, to accelerate the pace.

As her lips began to envelop the head of his cock he groaned again, amazed by the vivid intensity of the sensations. She drew him in, just a bit, concentrating on only the head for the moment. He shuddered as he felt the tips of her teeth graze his skin subtly, and then shuddered again as her warm tongue undulated against his flesh and she began to suckle in earnest.

“Oh... Jack...” His fists clenched the covers still, the knuckles white as he restrained his baser impulses and let her control the pace. When she drew him in even deeper all that emerged from his throat was a low, ecstatic rumble.

*Shit, I am **not** gonna last long...*

Shocks of intense pleasure were already moving through him in time with her ministrations, every time her lips clashed against the edge of his head, building upward toward a level of mindless carnality he rarely ever approached. It only ever happened when he surrendered control like this and *that* almost never happened at all, but—

I’m safe with Jack. She’s my... my...

What exactly she was escaped him for the moment as a sudden crest of pleasure washed over him.

“Oh shit, baby, you’d better stop, I’m gonna—”

Instead she drew him in *deeper* and began sucking even harder. Riddick opened his eyes in astonishment and managed to catch one brief look at her before—

His nervous system felt like it was exploding. Spears of pleasure lanced through his body while he shuddered and gasped against the sheets like a man holding a live wire. Reality fragmented around him and was gone.

Jack was nestling against him, resting her head on his shoulder, as his awareness returned. He chuckled, knowing without being told exactly what she’d done.

She’d swallowed.

Jack, his crazy-brave soulmate, a fellatio virgin, had swallowed to prove to him exactly how little she feared the virus that might lurk within his seed. And to prove to him how absolute her love and trust was.

*We **could** have a family...*

For a moment it was so close he could almost taste it – the drifting sweetness of a summer twilight, his hand in his foster sister’s as he and Christina raced to catch the ice cream truck. Fireflies in the night and Marky the Turtle in the pond near Uncle Reg’s house...

It was a world he’d almost forgotten, a world lost to him decades ago. It was a world that Jack was charting a course back to, now, for both of them.

Could she do it?

He had to let her *try*, at the very least.

“Okay. You win. Marriage, kids, the works. We’ll do it all.”

“Damn right we will.” He loved it when she used that pert tone of voice.

“Gonna be Ward Cleaver with a shine job,” he announced mock-grandly.

Beside him, Jack burst out laughing.

“What? You making fun of me, kid?”

“No, no... just remembering a *very* dirty *Leave it to Beaver* joke I heard once. Anyway, Ward Cleaver didn’t do hatchet jobs for the government.”

“You sure about that?” He chuckled at her, but within, enlightenment was striking. *Audacious little minx... Jarvis is in for one **hell** of a surprise...*

“Pretty sure.”

“Okay, fine. Ward Cleaver with a shine job and a license to kill.” Didn’t sound too bad, actually. He found himself grinning. “We play this right, we can even have an extended family. I’d love you to meet Christina—”

“Oh God...” Jack’s voice was suddenly filled with anguish. He stared over at her, worried, as she pulled herself up into a sitting position. “Riddick, there’s one more thing I have to tell you...”

Hours later, staring out into the darkness of deep space, Riddick shook his head in self-disgust.

*I still couldn’t cry. I couldn’t cry over **that**. God, if I ever needed proof of how human I’m **not**, there it is...*

Christina was dead. His beautiful sister, the sister of his heart, *dead*.

She’d been dead for twenty-eight years and he’d never guessed, never felt it.

Shouldn’t he have felt *something*? Shouldn’t there have been some kind of connection, some awareness that she was gone? There had been no *hint* of the hollow ache that filled him now.

And yet he still couldn’t cry.

Behind him he could hear Jack approaching. Her hand came to rest, feather-light, on his shoulder.

“Riddick?”

He closed his eyes and turned, resting his cheek on the top of her hand. She knelt down beside him and put her arm around his chest in an awkward hug.

“You coming to bed?”

He opened his eyes and met hers, soft, gentle and caring before him. No fear, no distrust... none of the barriers that existed between him and others. She lived inside his armor. And against all of the odds, she continued to survive it. He nodded and rose from the seat, putting his arm around her.

She's my humanity, he thought as he extinguished the lights. Her plan for their future was good enough for him; he'd go where she led him.

But there were still some people who would have to pay... for her pain, and for Christina's... if he couldn't shed tears he'd shed blood in their place.

59.

Jarvis: Détente

General Reginald Jarvis stared at the intruder in his office with unconcealed amazement.

Heads, he thought to himself as he regarded her, *are going to roll over this*. He wondered if one of them would be his, and if it would be literal.

He gazed at Jack for a long moment, taking in how much she'd changed in the year since he'd last seen her. Her hair was longer, he noticed. It cascaded around her shoulders now in a glorious golden mane. The level gaze was the same, but the smile teasing at the corners of her lips displayed a confidence well beyond anything she'd possessed when they'd last met.

She'd gained some weight, too, he noticed. She was still slender, but she seemed to have filled out a little. Sitting in his chair, clad in simple jeans, tennis shoes and a sweatshirt, she looked like one of a thousand college girls he might see around town.

No disguise. No stealth gear. How the *hell* had she gotten past the security system? He could almost feel Riddick's touch like a palpable weight upon him, and wondered where the boy was lurking.

Aside from a small pair of stud earrings, the only jewelry she wore was a gold band on her left ring finger. A wedding band, worked in the style of the New Marrakesh craftsmen on Tangier 6. So the intelligence reports had been true, he realized.

*I can be calm about this. No warning shots have been fired yet. Find out why she's here, what she wants... and where **he** is.*

He turned and closed his door. With a very deliberate glance at her hand, he smiled and spoke.

"Mrs. Riddick."

Her own smile widened in response. "General Jarvis."

Her poise was unnerving. He almost wished she still had the vaguely hostile look of their last meeting, when she'd sarcastically referred to him as "Uncle Reg." Here she was, after all, in the center of a high-security military establishment, the goddamn Pentagon itself, smiling like a conqueror. Part of him wanted to be very, very frightened.

Doing his best to stay calm, he moved to one of the chairs his lieutenants normally occupied. "I'm impressed. We had no idea either one of you were on Earth."

"You weren't expecting us?" Jack shook her head, a look of mock-sternness crossing her features. "Now that's just bad intelligence-gathering, General. I was sure the headlines from Albany two days ago would've alerted you."

Jarvis frowned. Had his operatives missed something? Something important? He rose and crossed to his terminal without another thought. Jack rose as well, graciously offering him his own chair.

Pulling up the newsfeeds for the Albany area, he spotted it almost immediately:

BODIES OF DIVORCED ALBANY COUPLE FOUND.

Riddick had killed again? On Earth? He began to read.

The bodies of Joshua Terence Moffett and his ex-wife, Claire Montgomery were found in an abandoned building by workers preparing the site for demolition. Both individuals had been tortured to death by an unknown assailant...

Moffett? Moffett? Why was that so familiar to him? A chill moved through him, suddenly, as he remembered. The foster parents. The ones who had put Riddick in his coma... He scanned down the article for confirmation of his suspicions.

Both Moffett and Montgomery were jailed for the abuse and subsequent death of Christina Elaine Frost, their foster daughter. Moffett was convicted of rape and Montgomery was convicted of Aggravated

Manslaughter. They divorced during their prison sentences...

Of course. There was no way Riddick would think either one of them had paid enough. He'd loved Christina; the Tribunal had never told him about her death because his psychological recovery had been too fragile. Obviously he'd learned about it at last, and had taken his revenge, just as he'd done so on...

"It looks like he used the same M.O. he used on your uncle, Jack." He frowned at her a little, but she just raised her chin in defiance, daring him to tell her that Boris Kowalczyk hadn't deserved every moment of pain Riddick had dealt out. "You're right. We should have spotted this. Thank God we erased the records of Riddick ever having been in that home, or the panic would already be planet-wide."

"Oh, so *that's* why it wasn't bigger news. Like the whole thing with Peter Malcolm, huh?" Jack pursed her lips as if she were tasting something especially sour. "Do his victims' kin even know the man who ruined their lives is dead?"

Jarvis didn't know why that made him feel guilty. It seemed like a hypocritical thing for her to say, given Riddick's own massive victims list. A moment later his stomach twisted as he realized that, in truth, all of those crimes lay at his own feet. It was his own negligence that had resulted in the Tech School Massacre, after all, his own conviction that "Bry" was still stable and didn't need to be brought in yet.

"The kin of *Riddick's* victims have a few things to say about him becoming some kind of Robin Hood, Jack. You must understand that."

Their gazes met and locked. The calm humor that remained in her eyes forced him to drop his.

"Oh I do," she drawled, running her finger over the surface of his desk. "That's why I'm here."

"Why *are* you here? I was expecting Riddick to come, not you."

"He isn't ready." Jack moved to the lieutenant's chair he'd vacated and sat down, her posture one of complete ease. "Don't worry, he doesn't hate you. And he's *not* planning to kill you. But there's still a lot of pain there. He needs some more time. Anyway, this was my idea."

Jarvis sank into his chair, watching her. "What was your idea?"

"We're going to negotiate. If you're a very good boy, General, you may get what you want."

"And what would that be?"

"Richard B. Riddick, Charybdis Operative Number Thirteen." Jack grinned widely at the stunned expression that had to be on his face. "Of course, he'll need a new name, won't he? Can't have the man who ruined so many lives gaining a Robin Hood reputation, like you said."

For a long moment Jarvis sat quietly, unbelieving. Across from him Jack waited, amusement still gracing her elegant features. She knew, he realized. She knew she was offering him the very thing he had yearned after for almost two decades...

"Tell me your terms."

"The first term is simple. Riddick is officially declared dead. It's some kind of public staging that leaves no doubt in *anyone's* mind about his death."

"Easily done."

Jack nodded, her expression indicating that she'd expected no trouble over that point. "The second term is a bit harder, maybe. He stays independent. He has the right to accept or refuse assignments as he chooses."

"*What?* Jack, the Tribunal will never accept that term. You're asking way too much there."

"You're getting more than you have now, Reg."

"It won't be enough after everything the Tribunal has invested—"

"So, what seems fair to you? You drag him back? Scrub his brain until he's a good little automaton? You're a father, General." She gave him an ironic smile and hitched herself onto the arm of the chair, that gentle challenge still in her eyes. "So tell me... *do you own your children?*"

"No." His response was automatic.

"Well, why not? You raised and taught them. You paid for their care. And those are your genes inside them."

"You can't *own* a person, Jack, no matter how much of an 'investment' you may make—"

"Exactly, General. So why does the Tribunal treat Riddick like property?"

Her level gaze was disconcerting and he found himself unable to answer her.

"You don't own him. You never owned him. You never *will* own him." A smug little grin flitted across her mouth then. "But that doesn't mean we can't come to a mutually beneficial arrangement."

“We can try, Jack, but the Tribunal might not accept—”

“Then you’ll never, ever see either one of us again, Uncle Reg.”

Oh, that was hitting below the belt. She knew exactly what he really wanted here, above and beyond what the Tribunal cared about. He wanted Bry back. He wanted the son he’d never had, but had always yearned after. That was the hidden term, more than anything else the Tribunal might get.

Could he strike this deal? Could he short-change the Tribunal in order to have his long-time dream come true? *Would* he?

Jack gave him another slight smile. “We know how to hide now, you see. We have the files; we can disappear and you’d never find us, even if you put every Operative in your Corps on it. In a few years we’d be able to do a convincing job of faking our deaths *without* being able to change the contents of your files. And you might *believe* we’re still alive, but you’ll never be able to *prove* it. That qualifies as a total loss of the Tribunal’s investment, there, doesn’t it?”

He sighed, conceding her point. “It does. But what’s to stop me from just keeping *you* here and making Riddick surrender himself to us?”

He knew there would be something. Anybody who had the ability to sashay, *undetected*, into the most secure parts of the *Pentagon*, had some kind of protection at her disposal.

“You know, there’s a thought.” The worried frown that crossed Jack was obviously and deliberately fake. Then her face cleared and her eyes lit up. “Oh! I guess that’s why Riddick gave me this.”

She walked over to a jacket he hadn’t even noticed, draped on the back of another chair, and reached into its pocket. She pulled out a picture and grinned at it before turning and bringing it over to him. He had seen that expression before in his own daughters’ faces when they’d brought him report cards with straight A’s on them. *You’re going to be so proud of how smart I am*, the look said.

He took the proffered picture and glanced down at it. For a moment he felt like his veins had filled with ice water.

Riddick was in the center of the image, a jocular grin on his face. He had his arms around two women, one on either side of him. Patty and Val. His daughters. They were smiling for the camera, too, but there was a hint of nervousness in their expressions. A hard copy of a newsfax lay in Riddick’s lap, positioned so that the date was readable.

That’s today’s date. He’s with them right now.

“I guess we’re even, huh, Reg?”

He won’t hurt them. It’s a bluff, it has to be. After Christina and Jack, he loves them more than anybody.

Bry loves them, a darker voice in his head answered. *Are you sure **Riddick** does?*

It was, he realized, the most important question of all. Could he, both personally and professionally, trust Richard Bryan Riddick to police himself? If his daughters were really hostages, then the answer was no. But if the answer was no, then his daughters were in real danger, and any attempt he made to rein Riddick in could result in their injury or death.

But are they hostages? If that’s Bry in there, he’s giving me an excuse to take to the Tribunal, but he’d never really hurt them.

Either way, he realized, the outcome of the round had been decided. He remembered getting the analysis back from the strategists, after Riddick won his first chess game. The boy had planned his assault carefully, they told him; Jarvis had been sucked into a trap he would be unable to escape, nineteen moves before seven-year-old Bry had triumphantly declared “Check Mate!”

This game, too, had been won by Riddick long before Jarvis had even known it had begun.

I have to trust him. I don’t have a choice.

He set the picture down and looked up at Jack. “Point taken. Riddick retains his independence. How will we contact you to give you assignments, in that case? And what do we do if he takes a job independently that sabotages our work?”

Jack smiled and sat back down in the chair. Jarvis was relieved; for a moment he’d worried that she’d bridle at his qualifications. But it looked like his questions had been expected, and that she already had answers.

She hitched her chair forward and the negotiations began in earnest.

He sat quietly for several minutes after she left his office. Three hours had passed, the clock told him, but it seemed like a much shorter period of time. Three hours and now, if all went well, the Tribunal was on the verge of having the most dangerous and powerful man in the galaxy as its ally.

The arrangement was extremely elegant, as most of Riddick's strategies tended to be. In a few days it would all begin, and then he'd know whether or not it would really work.

A tone sounded on his comm unit and he answered it. "Jarvis."

"General, this is Sergeant Moore at the security office. We're not picking her up on our screens. We saw her leave your office, but after she left the first camera's range she didn't reappear on any others. And Sir, she only appeared on the primary camera. The backup machines don't even register her leaving your office. If you don't mind my asking, Sir, what the hell is going on?"

How the hell did you manage that one, Bry? "Do a thorough check of all of the cameras. Check their links to your mainframe. Check the mainframe. Look for any new components attached to them. And run a diagnostic of the mainframe's operating system. We may have been hacked."

"Us, sir?" He could hear Moore's disbelief. It had been more than a hundred and fifty years since anyone had successfully infiltrated the Pentagon. Now a nineteen-year-old girl had done it.

Not just any nineteen-year-old girl. Richard B. Riddick's wife. His Charybdis Mate. Damn, I wish I'd managed to recruit her...

"Yes, Sergeant. Us. Don't worry about where she's gone. She'll have left the building by now. Concentrate on finding the mechanisms they used to slice into our security systems. And contact Drs. Aspen and Cartwright and ask them to come to my office. I need to speak with them."

He cut the connection and checked his own private cameras, which were outside of the security grid. Hopefully they had recorded everything, but Jack had been alone in his office for an indeterminate amount of time before he'd come in. Plenty of time, in all likelihood, to find and disable them.

She hadn't. She hadn't even bothered, although she'd walked up to one of them, smiled, and waved. He was watching her on the screen, marveling once again at her poise and confidence, when Dr. Cartwright and his wife arrived. The second both women saw who was on the monitor, they gasped and hurried to his side.

"That's Jack Kowalczyk!" both of them exclaimed. Martina Aspen-Jarvis's hand came to rest on his shoulder and he covered it with his own. Together the three replayed the entire meeting.

Jarvis found himself marveling at how little his own intense nervousness had shown. But Jack's poise and grace was even more pronounced on the vid. Her year with Riddick had matured her and she had begun to achieve some of the prescient stillness that *he* was known for.

Jarvis felt like he'd not only recovered a son, but gained a daughter. *I always knew you'd be the one to bring him back to us, Jack. Thank you.*

The hunt for Richard B. Riddick was ending at last.

"Interesting," Dr. Cartwright finally commented as Jack, on the screen, left his office. "She has a baby."

"What?" Jarvis turned and looked at the woman, who now had an almost-smug expression on her face.

"I'll show you." Cartwright punched some keys on the console and soon two images were displayed on the screen, side by side. One was an older picture of Jack, taken right before she'd left for Seti Station and her rendezvous with Riddick. The other was a security image taken moments before she finally left his office. "Look at her breasts."

For a moment outrage filled him, as if he'd been asked to look at a naked photograph of one of his own daughters. He quelled it and glanced at the two images. Then he stopped and took a closer look. *What the...?*

"She's grown two cup sizes since you last saw her. And do you see the stain on her shirt? She's wearing pads to prevent it, but that's breast-milk leakage," Cartwright explained. "She's breastfeeding."

"Good God," Martina breathed quietly.

"She has a Phase III," Jarvis managed after a long moment.

"Possibly more than one," Cartwright added.

Jarvis whirled to stare at her. "Explain."

The surgeon gave him a smile and a shrug. "I regened her myself. At the time, I thought she was just like all the other clients who came through the clinic. She got the standard treatment, and that assumes our client is intended to be a *breeder*. I did good work, too. Her womb is strong and her new ovary is *especially* hardy, and she'll be prone to multiple births."

"Is that *safe* for her?"

Cartwright nodded. “She’s undoubtedly in less danger than any of the Phase III host mothers were. She’s built to withstand the usual risks of a pregnancy... and she has Riddick looking after her.”

Yes. Jack Kowal— Jack *Riddick* had her husband looking after her. There was probably no safer place in the universe for her to be.

Jarvis sat down at his desk, a smile on his face. He picked up the photo Jack had given him and looked at it again. Patty and Val... and Bry. His daughters and the son he’d always wanted to have, captured together in a family portrait he’d never dared *hope* to see.

“I need a picture frame,” he announced as he felt Martina’s hand on his shoulder once more. She squeezed lightly to tell him that, yes, she’d pick one up for him tonight. Someday soon, he hoped, he’d have a picture of Bry, Jack, and their baby for his desk as well.

He hoped everything would go according to Jack’s plans.

Four hours later, as he prepared to leave the office, the security team arrived with Riddick’s equipment.

“We’d ordinarily have to spend months figuring out how it all worked, except he left this behind too,” Sergeant Moore grumbled, still clearly piqued at the ease of the intrusion. He handed over a large manila folder.

Jarvis opened it and found himself smiling and shaking his head in disbelief. Inside were the complete blueprints and specs for each piece of equipment, along with the programming codes and Riddick’s notations. He skimmed over the notes.

Amazing. A processor had been attached to each camera. As Jack had entered each camera’s sights, the attached processor had identified her and begun removing her from the image, substituting a background extrapolated from previous images. In some cases, when she’d walked in front of someone, it had literally reconstructed the person behind her. If she opened a door, the door stayed closed in the image. If another person followed her *through* a door, it constructed a simulation of *them* opening the door first.

There was nothing like this in use in the Intelligence game, anywhere. Jarvis was absolutely certain about that. Riddick had built this himself... and given it to them as a gift. He’d sweetened the deal without giving any indication in advance that he would.

Oh, Bry, that is you. I made the right choice.

At the back of the file, he found the note.

I’ll see you soon, Uncle Reg. B.

“It’s going to work,” he announced, and didn’t care when Moore gave him a funny look. “It’s all going to work.”

He glanced at the new identity papers he’d been working on, still sitting on his desk. He suddenly knew exactly what Riddick’s new, official identity would be.

General Reginald Jarvis had never loved the Project more in his life.

60.

The Apprentice

Seti Station was still a claustrophobic mass of unwashed humanity, but it was a lot less apparent on the Upper Decks. Jack remembered how she'd tried, repeatedly, to infiltrate those levels when she'd been a child—

Good God, that was more than ten years ago now...

She'd never actually succeeded. Security had been excellent, keeping the little spaceways urchin she'd once been out of the more refined milieus the Station had to offer its better-heeled residents and clients. Now here she was at last, learning what had been hidden from her all those years ago.

It wasn't bad. There was a hint of comfortable shabbiness to it, as with any working station, but the causeway was actually fairly elegant. She pushed the stroller down it, looking for the cosmetics shop she'd been directed to. Shazza and Christina remained fast asleep, oblivious to their surroundings, for once. They'd wake up as soon as she found Teresa; she imagined the doctor would be champing at the bit to examine and play with them.

There it was, at last: an elegant little makeup boutique. In front of it, sitting on one of the nearby benches, was her real quarry, Dr. Teresa Cartwright. Good. Jarvis was keeping with the program.

One of the arrangements Riddick had insisted upon was the Assignment Drop. It always had to occur in a neutral location and the person delivering the assignment had to be someone known to them, who wasn't actually a member of the military. With one notable exception in the last four years, Jarvis had stuck to the plan completely, and so Teresa and Martina were his usual couriers. Jack liked that; she felt genuine fondness for both women and enjoyed getting to talk to them.

The two women had been instrumental, after all, in preserving her sanity – and Riddick's – during their eldest child Carolyn's first year of life. They had stayed on Earth for that year, living near Melanie and her daughters, while they learned how to be parents. Teresa had become a regular visitor at their home, responding to every frantic call and soothing Jack's nerves. *Yes, it was just colic. Yes, Carolyn had a respiratory infection, but it was minor. No, the Scylla spore was not active in the little girl's body; she was just fine.*

Riddick had avoided contact with all Tribunal representatives during that time, of course. Especially Jarvis. But Jack had spent a great deal of time with both Teresa and Martina, learning what they could teach her about child development and child psychology. She knew they were learning from *her*, too; Carolyn had been born several months ahead of the Phase III babies and her every twitch was of extreme interest to them. Martina, in particular, had been fascinated by the evidence Carolyn had begun to display of accelerated cognitive development, and had taught Jack how to keep a detailed "baby diary" to chronicle it.

It was going to be fun to get to talk to a grown-up other than Riddick, she thought with a wry grin. She spent a great deal of her time, these days, deducing the wants and needs of the barely-verbal. Now that Shazza and Christina were a year old, Riddick's assignments were taking them further afield again, and Jack rarely had the opportunity to make friends with other mothers.

Teresa looked up and saw her at that moment, the doctor's eyes lighting up. Jack let her wry smile grow into one of warm welcome as she pushed the stroller over to the bench.

"Here's the assignment dossier," Cartwright said in a rush. She barely looked at the folder she was handing Jack, her eyes focused on the stroller and its occupants.

Jack grinned and took the folder. She knew what Teresa really wanted to do right now: play with the girls. "Have at 'em, Doctor."

That was all the encouragement Cartwright needed to kneel before the stroller and begin coaxing the girls awake, cooing like any doting auntie. Jack turned her attention to the file.

Subject: Maruchek, Timothy S.

Sex: Male

Real-time Age: 37 years

Time Since Nativity: 48 years

Citizenship: New Mississippi

Height: 5'10"

Weight: 175 lbs.

Hair: Brown

Eyes: Hazel

Timothy Maruchek is a member of the New Mississippi Consular Corps and has full Diplomatic Immunity. He is known to have committed seventeen counts of rape, sodomy and child molestation, but his Immunity has prevented charges from being filed. He is also suspected in twenty-three further unsolved crimes. These crimes have been perpetrated on fourteen worlds where Maruchek was stationed as Cultural Attaché. When charges could not be filed, he was ordered deported and declared *persona non grata* on each world, only to be reassigned to a new embassy on another planet.

Maruchek is cousin to the High Commander of the New Mississippi Armed Service and has been shielded and allowed to continue his criminal activities. No reparations, attempts at reparations, or apologies to any of the victims or their families have been forthcoming and several reports of intimidation are also on file.

To prevent Maruchek's actions or his fate from leading to an Interplanetary Incident, his death *must appear to be an accident*.

Jack nodded to herself, glancing through the heartbreaking pictures of the boys and girls Maruchek had victimized. Riddick would run his own intelligence check to confirm this, of course, and make sure they weren't being given false information, but if the data was correct, he would be very eager to kill the man.

And Riddick, she thought as she looked at one of the pictures, of a girl who reminded her all too much of herself at age eleven, *is going to add a few extra conditions of his own when he sees this picture*.

The death would appear to be an accident, yes. But it would be a painful death, and the body would be found in some deeply compromising position that would leave Maruchek's protectors scrambling to cover up where and how he'd died, destroying any possible evidence of Riddick's and the Tribunal's involvement in their desperate attempt to keep his name unsullied. That, to Jack, felt more like justice. Publicly, Maruchek was a devoutly religious man — he would be easy to humiliate in death.

"Words without thoughts never to Heaven go," Mr. Maruchek. Get ready for a ride straight to Hell. She knew Riddick's mind very well, these days, and could find no blame within herself for how he'd pursue the assignment.

Funny how Jarvis was particularly fond of sending Riddick after sexual predators. He must have understood what her Uncle Boris's death truly signified. Not that she or Riddick had really ever turned down a straight-up assassination, but it was much easier when they were given someone like this, instead. They'd only ever refused one assignment, to date, after all. Perhaps it was because that one *had* been a straight-up assassination, that Jarvis was now routing the predators their way instead.

Or, perhaps Jarvis understood that, beneath the veneer of social respectability, there was still a very large part of Riddick that *needed* to let loose in bloody acts of violence. Perhaps Jarvis was choosing to send him after people who would at least *deserve* the horrific deaths Riddick would want to give them.

*He is what he is. He's what they made him. At least Jarvis has enough sense to give his conscience **some** relief.*

"Jack?"

Jack turned her attention to Dr. Cartwright, who now had Shazza in her lap. The little girl was playing with Teresa's pen-light, happily shining it up her nostril and making her sister giggle.

"Yes, Teresa?"

"Are we *sure* these two are fraternal twins and not identical?"

Jack grinned. "Come on, Doctor, your own gene-mapping says they're fraternal. Don't tell me you're doubting your own word." *Everyone* asked her that.

The doctor nodded sheepishly and then shrugged. Jack chuckled wryly. The girls were going to be grumpy tomorrow when Cartwright took blood samples yet again to verify her tests.

“The scamp in your lap right now is Shazza. And *this* little bugaboo,” she said, lifting her other daughter out of the stroller, “is Christina. There are very subtle facial differences, but they *are* hard to spot.”

Putting Christina on her lap, Jack closed the dossier and tucked it into the baby bag. She wasn’t particularly concerned about someone noticing the transfer; no one was around at the moment except a few shoppers, and she already knew who had control of the video surveillance system. It was tempting, but she restrained the urge to wave at the nearest camera and call out “hi Uncle Reg!”

He was always near. Always hoping Riddick would appear. He’d even put the whole deal at risk one time, in his over-eagerness for a reunion.

“You look very well, by the way,” Teresa announced. “Most mothers of twins look much more harried, in my experience.”

Jack laughed. “That’s my husband’s doing, really. He’s the most attentive father in the galaxy.” She never said his name in public. He had a new, official, legal identity, of course, and other aliases he used in his various assignments... but at night, in bed, he was always Riddick to her, and always would be. And that most important name of all could never be said publicly.

Her words were true, too. Riddick was an amazing father... and husband. Of course, part of it was that, with the exception of a few *deep* cover assignments, he was with her and the girls throughout their days and nights. He was tireless, rising in the middle of the night to change diapers or bring the girls to her breasts so she could go on resting – “You know I only need a few hours a night anyway, kid, go back to sleep” – and attentive, spoiling her rotten and keeping their love life thoroughly alive.

Jack knew how much of her share of the responsibilities Riddick had taken on. At times it taxed even his amazing reserves of energy. If the twins had been born *first*, she knew, they’d never have had any more children. As it was, she had a birth control implant in her arm now, carefully designed so that its hormones wouldn’t enter her breast milk. Of course, Riddick was a lot more confident with the twins than he had been with Carolyn. At first he’d almost been afraid to *touch* her, as though he might inadvertently break her.

That brought a wry grin to Jack’s face once more. She suspected, these days, that Carolyn was positively unbreakable... and the twins were going to be the same way.

She knew what had inspired Riddick’s extraordinary devotion and tireless efforts. Two factors, the first of which filled her with delight and pride and the second with strange, achy regret. His absolute love for her, and for the girls, had awakened levels of selflessness within him that left her in awe... and his continued bitterness toward Jarvis, sadly, had made him determined to outdo his fallen father-figure.

“I’m not gonna be like Uncle Reg,” he’d told her initially. “Our kids are gonna *know* their daddy. And you’re never gonna be lonely at night.”

With the passage of time, though, that bitterness toward Jarvis had lifted. The knowledge of what had truly lain in the lonely General’s heart had mellowed Riddick until at last, today, he was ready. Ready to come face to face with one of the most painful aspects of his past.

Jack couldn’t help it; she glanced at the surveillance camera near her and smiled.

It was a beautiful smile, Jarvis thought. He sat back in his seat, watching with a kind of wistful sadness. Riddick had not appeared.

Of course, he hadn’t expected to see him. Not after the fiasco more than a year earlier. His own damn fault, of course. He’d known better, but he’d pushed things.

I may never get to see him.

Jack had been pregnant at the time, although he hadn’t known that until much later. Riddick had appeared at the data drop himself to spare her the exertion.

And I, like an idiot, had to hurry out to the drop to meet him...

He still remembered the look on Riddick’s face when he saw who was waiting for him. There was a split-second look of startled, hurt horror, before the impassive mask slammed down. A moment later Riddick was gone. Neither he nor Jack returned for the assignment. Contact was lost with them for several months and only resumed when they relented, wanting to legally register their twin daughters’ births.

He'd never tried to see Riddick since. Not that he was ever given another opportunity —

Jarvis abruptly stiffened, as the sudden awareness came to him that he was no longer alone. He turned, slowly.

A large, sandy-haired man was leaning against one of the consoles. He wore the suit of a station maintenance worker, but instead of the usual maintenance equipment he was carrying a little girl. She, too, had sandy blonde hair and dark green eyes, although in her case they were natural, inherited from her mother. Her skin was a lighter shade of caramel than her father's, and Jarvis would know her anywhere. Her picture sat on his desk, after all, no matter where his desk traveled.

A large grin, that had long ago burned its way into Jarvis's heart, split the convincing dark blonde beard of the "maintenance worker."

"You see, Carolyn? He heard you when you stopped being sneaky," Riddick rumbled with obvious amusement.

Carolyn gave her father an irritated frown. "*I* was being sneaky. He heard *you*."

"You think so, huh?" He chuckled and fixed Jarvis with an amused look for a moment. "Gonna say hi to your Grandpa Reg now that he's spotted you?"

"He spotted *you*," Carolyn insisted with a four-year-old's stubbornness, before her face lit with an irresistible smile. "Hi, Grandpa Reg!"

Jarvis felt his throat tighten at those words. *Grandpa Reg. That's me. My God...*

"Hi, Carolyn!" he managed. "You've gotten so big since I last saw you!"

Riddick, holding her, chuckled. "She's been growing like a weed."

"I'm not a weed," Carolyn began indignantly. "I— there's *Maman!*"

Jarvis turned to look where she was eagerly pointing, at the close-up of Jack on the monitors. Jack was laughing, one of her twin daughters tugging on the thick, long, golden braid she kept her hair in. Her face was a study in contradictions, a mixture of unfinished youth and ageless wisdom, and beautiful beyond reckoning.

"Which one is that with her?" he asked, glancing at Riddick.

"That'd be Christina," Riddick said with a grin.

"Can't you tell?" Carolyn piped up, apparently astonished that someone wouldn't know the difference between her two sisters.

"I haven't seen them in a while either, Carolyn," he said with a gentle smile. He turned his attention back to her father. "Jack looks well."

"She's doing great. You been keeping up on her activities?"

"The courses?" Jack had sent a request to the Tribunal only a few months earlier, asking to have her old academic records as "Audrey J. Kowlaczyk" forwarded to her new identity; she was enrolling in the Interspace University Program. He'd followed her progress and she was doing very well; she'd already declared her intent to major in Astrophysics. Her midterm test scores had been extraordinary, and he wondered how she managed to find the time to study for her courses with three children to care for.

"Yeah. More than halfway through her first semester now, and it looks like she's gonna *ace* it. We're all proud of her, right, Carolyn?"

The little girl made a face. "Homework sucks."

Riddick chuckled. "Oh come on, we have lots of fun when your *maman* is studying. Don't you like the games?"

Jarvis chuckled to himself, too. Now Riddick was the one running aptitude tests, in the form of logic puzzles and games, much as *he* had done three decades ago. No wonder Riddick had sent in a large set of scores on Carolyn only a few days after Jack's midterms.

The little girl's face was suddenly adorable, as she tried to hold onto her grumpy attitude even as a smile forced its way through. Yes, she liked the games.

"I was surprised Jack didn't choose to study political theory, given your activities," Jarvis commented, nodding at Jack on the screen. The young mother was now breastfeeding Christina, a look of serene joy that he remembered from his own former wife suffusing her face.

"Why would she need to study *that*? She's a natural. Anyway, she doesn't like it. You'd think someone as good at espionage as she is would enjoy it more," Riddick mused. "She doesn't. Hates it. Most of the time she doesn't come out in the field with me... unless my alias is supposed to have a wife, or a girlfriend."

"I like having aliases," Carolyn announced.

Riddick chuckled. “Yeah, you do, don’t you? So tell your Grandpa Reg what your name was last month.”

Carolyn smiled, saying the name with pride. “Natalie Morrison.”

Interesting. That wasn’t a Tribunal-issued identity. He wondered what Riddick had been up to, exactly. Meeting his gaze, Jarvis realized that he’d just been given tacit permission to run a check. He’d even been told where to begin.

“That’s right,” Riddick said indulgently. “And how about your secret name? The one you can’t tell anybody but me and your maman, and your Grandpas?”

“I can tell Grandpa Reg?”

“Yeah, baby, you can tell Grandpa Reg.”

Carolyn smiled more brightly than ever as she turned to him. “Carolyn Riddick.”

Funny how that hurt a little. Jarvis swallowed and tried not to show that brief flash of pain. Why *wouldn’t* they want her to know her father’s real name? Why wouldn’t she take pride in it? Just because he still hoped the new name he’d given Bry would grow on him...

“Shame Jack dislikes the whole spy game so much,” Riddick continued. “Because she’s got the knack. She’s better than your analysts, if you don’t mind me saying so. You really shoulda listened to her about Godwin.”

Jarvis cringed inside, remembering Ilion Godwin, elected President of the New Cuba colony on Talythus IV... the only assassination that Riddick had ever turned down. His advice accompanying his notice of refusal, that Godwin’s replacement would be even more hard-line and violence-prone, had gone unheeded... and had turned out to be absolutely correct.

Wait... listened to her?

“You mean that was Jack’s analysis? Not yours?”

Amusement appeared on Riddick’s face at that. “I wasn’t going to turn it down but she insisted. Said you guys were heading for a serious fuckup there and she didn’t want us to be part of it, except maybe as the people who made you see reason. So we turned it down and took Cair, here, to see her Grandpa Abu instead.” He mussed his daughter’s hair playfully, eliciting an amused squeal of protest.

Jarvis’s eyes were drawn back to the monitor once more, to the face of the 23-year-old woman – 21 at the time that situation had exploded in the Tribunal’s face – who had successfully outguessed the top minds in his Military Intelligence department, men and women who’d worked in the field for longer than she’d lived. In hindsight, they’d seen what she’d seen, of course, and had felt like idiots for not spotting it sooner. Wishful thinking, rather than common sense or compassion, had led them to that course of action, the conviction that Godwin’s replacement *had* to be a better option, not a worse one.

“She’s a hell of a lady, isn’t she?” Riddick asked. A tiny smile appeared as his gaze fixed on his wife’s image. In that small look, almost a facial tic, though, was an entire universe of love. “You never did figure out how special she is, did you? Still see just a kid? Twenty-three years old now, what could she possibly know about affairs of state, right? See, she may not have an IQ of 240 or some shit like that... but she knows a hell of a lot more about being human than I do... or *you*, for that matter.”

Riddick turned his gaze toward him, and even through the shine job and the colored contact lenses, Jarvis could see the irony in his eyes.

I tried to recruit her, he thought in protest.

No, answered another internal voice – Riddick’s voice in his own head. *You tried to dick her around. The Riddick Problem remained a Problem until she solved it for you. Until she solved it in spite of you.*

He nodded tightly, acknowledging the truth of Riddick’s words. He’d spent the last four years deeply grateful that Jack hadn’t died from either of the bullet wounds she’d taken. If she had, he no longer doubted that Riddick would have been able to infiltrate and annihilate the Tribunal itself, throwing the forty-seven colonized worlds and more than two hundred outposts and space stations into utter chaos.

At times, he wondered what might have happened if she hadn’t survived the planet where she and Riddick had found each other. He knew some of what would have happened. Riddick would have gone back to living like a hunted wolf. With nothing and no one to protect or recover, he would have moved uncaringly through the Known Systems, clashing with the law, evading capture, leaving a trail of bodies in his wake until finally, one day, someone got lucky and managed to kill him.

He knew it wasn’t Jack’s doing alone. Something extraordinary had happened to Riddick on that planet, something involving the docking pilot, Carolyn Fry. But neither Riddick nor Jack – nor the Muslim cleric

listed as Jack's legal father on her Tribunal identity papers, Abu al-Walid – would speak of that incident. He would never know, although he *did* know that Riddick had pined after Fry, in his own strange way, for several years before Jack returned to him and he fell in love.

Still, whatever change Riddick had undergone on that barren, hostile world, and whoever or whatever had changed him, Jack had been the one who had made it stick, made it grow... and had brought him back.

Jarvis was suddenly pulled back to reality by Riddick's next words.

"I did... want to thank you." A new emotion had entered his voice now. In his arms, Carolyn frowned thoughtfully as she watched them both. The girl was impressive.

"Thank me?" It was the *last* thing he'd expected. "What..."

"The whole thing with Jack's uncle. I, uh..." He glanced at Carolyn warily, and then set her down on one of the empty security desks where Jarvis's coat lay. "Stay here, baby, I'll be right back."

The little girl nodded and began examining the screens and readouts nearest to her.

Riddick walked back over to Jarvis until he was only an inch away. "I know all about the block."

I'd forgotten how large a man Bry is... The thought stalled and became irrelevant as he realized what Riddick had just said. *Oh dear God...*

"Jack doesn't know," Riddick murmured. "She still thinks he only abused her for two days. She has no idea it took her two *weeks* to escape him. And she has no idea what kinds of things he did to her during that time."

Jarvis swallowed. Oh yes. He remembered well, himself. The stories Jack had told under hypnosis had been gut-wrenching.

"How do you know all of this? I can't imagine Boris Kowalczyk confessed to you." Then again, after the gruesome things Riddick had done to the man—

"He didn't. The mental block you had your shrinks put in started to crumble when she was in labor with the twins. Don't worry, it's back in place and stronger than ever. I'm glad you did it, though. It's, uh... part of why we came back."

"You haven't told her, have you?"

"No. Hell no." Riddick glanced at Carolyn again, but the little girl was now engrossed in an examination of the insignia on Jarvis's discarded jacket. "I just... I appreciate that you did that for her. Took away the trauma. That was very human of you."

And that, Jarvis realized, was the point.

Riddick had come back, after almost being driven away permanently by his ham-handed eagerness, because he'd finally seen what lay beneath it. It was, he realized, his own love for Jack that had drawn his longed-after boy back, the fact that he, too, had been willing to gamble his life and his future for her. Jack would always be between them, he suddenly knew... as their *bridge*.

He reached up and put his hand on Riddick's shoulder.

Riddick flinched at the touch of his hand and for a moment Jarvis almost pulled back, but he decided to stand his ground. What irony it was, the most terrifying man in the galaxy, whose mere name still inspired shudders four years after his official death, was afraid of *him*. Because of the spurned and stricken love that still lay within both their hearts.

"I never meant to hurt you," he murmured softly.

If the green contacts had been brown, it would have been perfect; Bry would have been looking him in the eye.

"I know, Reg." Riddick took a deep breath. "I know... why you couldn't put me in Cryo with Mel and the girls. I'd have gone crazy in there, wouldn't I?"

Jarvis could only nod sadly. It had been sound policy at the time, something that had had to be done, but it had been heartbreaking for everyone. It had cost him more than he'd ever imagined; it had cost them all.

"And I know... now... that you were planning on recruiting me, when you were preparing to stage the riot on Nereid. It was all in the files. And I *do* understand." The softness in Riddick's gaze, though, firmed and hardened. "But you need to understand that it was still wrong, what you did. You *used* me. Over and over. And you didn't trust me enough to tell me what it was *for*. If you'd been straight with me—"

"You were just a child," Jarvis whispered in desperate protest.

"Carolyn there," Riddick observed, gesturing to his daughter, "can keep a secret better than most adults. She's four years old and she's never blown my cover once. Dunno why. Never blabbed a secret myself when I

was a kid, and I knew a bunch. Maybe it's a 'Charybdis thing.' Point is, if you and your cronies had paid better attention to what was going on, you'd have *known* you could tell me. Maybe then, when I started going crazy, I'd have known there was someone *I* could talk to."

Jarvis could only nod. But then, he had long ago decided that it was his fault Riddick had turned lethal. He had no defense against that accusation; he was guilty as charged.

"That's the other reason we came back. See, you still treat us... and I mean the other Scylla Children here... like we're property. Not people. You're still using us. And I don't like it. You people need a conscience. Maybe the Phase III mothers will be able to be that for you, maybe not. I mean, we're talking about *their children* here, but they're still soldiers who have to follow your orders. So *I'm* gonna have to fill that role."

"But you work —"

"No, Reg, that's where you're wrong. I don't work for the Tribunal, and I don't work for *you*. You need to keep that straight because I'm not on your side here."

He turned his head back towards the monitors and nodded at the close-up of Jack.

"I'm on *her* side. I work for *her*. You wanna remember that."

Jarvis stared at the monitor for a long moment, watching as Jack finished nursing Christina. An awkward ballet commenced as she and Dr. Cartwright traded children and she freed her other breast, putting baby Shazza to it.

Twenty-three years old. Mother of three. Wife and conscience to the most dangerous man in the galaxy. And now, if he was interpreting Riddick's statements correctly, hers was to be the moral compass for the entire Charybdis Project.

"We're not gonna tell you what to do or fuck up your program... as long as you remember to treat the Phase III children like human beings... and act like human beings yourself. You start power-tripping again, though, and we *will* step in."

"And do what?"

"That depends on what you're doing. Don't think we'd go public, not unless you start *really* exploiting them. But you're not gonna do that, are you, Reg? I got my conscience back and you've still got some of yours. You showed that when you paid to have a fourteen-year-old girl's memory erased, out of your own pocket and against the wishes of your commanding officers. You just keep listening to that conscience and you'll be fine."

Jarvis swallowed. "And if my conscience isn't strong enough?"

"Do what I do... ask your wife. Maybe if you'd told Mel the score, that night, instead of shutting her out, we could've skipped the whole mess that followed."

"You heard us talking that night." Awe and horrible guilt flooded Jarvis's stomach. That had been the night that had dealt the killing blow to his marriage, although it had taken another twenty years to fully die.

"That's right. You people have too many secrets and lies going. It's a good thing Martina has top security clearance or you'd be lying to her too, wouldn't you? That's why you keep fucking up. Jack keeps *me* honest. You'd better make sure you have something that does the same for you."

Riddick gave him a strange smile, half affection and half admonishment, before he moved back over to Carolyn's side and lifted her back into his arms. As Jarvis watched, they moved toward the door. Then Riddick stopped. He slowly turned around and took a deep breath. "Reg?"

"Yes?" He wondered what final warning Riddick was going to give him.

"Jack and I have reservations at the Ecliptic tonight. We've made arrangements for a sitter for the girls." In his arms, Carolyn made an annoyed face.

Riddick took another deep breath. "The reservation's for four people. We'd like it if you and Martina would join us."

For a long moment their eyes were locked. Jarvis could see that, buried under the surface calm that was his trademark, Riddick had become very nervous. Holding out this offer, this *olive branch*, was almost more than the man could handle, he could tell. He suddenly wanted to step forward and hug the boy whose face he could almost see through the mask —

Not yet. Something like that, as much as he longed after it, would make Riddick and his family disappear for months again. But this was a step toward it. He wondered if Riddick had spotted the hidden longing that lurked behind his *own* mask of calm.

Someday, Bry, I'll have you back. Someday I'll have the son I've always wanted. Funny how it's always been you, through everything.

"We'd love to come," he answered. "What time?"

"Eighteen hundred hours," Riddick said, reaching for the door handle. His voice had become oddly shy. "I'll tell Jack you're coming."

And with that, Richard B. Riddick – whose legal name was now Bryan Jarvis, son of Reginald and Melanie Jarvis, supposedly adopted by them at the age of seven – opened the door to the security room and exited.

Carolyn's voice came to Jarvis as the door was closing. "It's not fair. You get to have all the fun—"

Jarvis swallowed against the sudden, hard lump in his throat, his eyes stinging. Finally. After three decades of longing... the son of his heart was returning to him.

Carolyn was still grumbling as Riddick headed down the stairwell, leaving the security wing.

"You wouldn't like the Ecliptic, Cair. It's boring," he told her.

"No it's not. You're just *saying* that. If it's boring why are you going?"

"It's boring for little girls. You really wanna sit still for two hours while some waiter recites wine lists and stuff?" Riddick chuckled. "They don't have coloring books and they don't have French fries."

Carolyn made a face. Then she brightened. "I want French fries for lunch!"

Good move, he told himself in exasperation. *Jack is gonna kill you for putting that in her head.*

Jack, he thought, might strangle him anyway if she knew that he'd baited Jarvis. All he'd been supposed to do was invite the man to dinner. But all the things he'd always wanted to say... all the accusations he'd always wanted to make, and which he'd thought he was long over... had come flooding back. At least he hadn't fucked up too badly; Reg was coming to dinner.

And I, he reminded himself, *am going to be nice to him.*

"Well, we'll ask your *maman* and see what she says," he hedged.

In his arms, Carolyn rolled her eyes and sighed dramatically, but she knew better than to push. After a moment, she moved on... more or less. "Do you really work for *Maman*?"

Riddick found himself smiling. "Yes I do," he told her. "I work for all of you, your *maman*, Shazza and Christina, and you."

Carolyn shook her head, clearly annoyed by the qualifications in his answer. "So how come I have to do what *you* say?"

"Because you're my daughter, and good little girls do what their daddies tell them to do." That brought a grin to his face. *If the guys on Nereid could see me now...*

"Do you do what *Maman* tells you to do?"

"Yeah, kiddo, I do."

"How come I never see her bossing you around?"

"Well, your *maman* knows how to ask nice, Carolyn. And most of the time, I already *want* to do what she wants, anyway."

And that, to an ignorant man, is the definition of "pussywhipped." If those pathetic bastards back on Nereid could see me now, that's what they'd think I was.

Riddick realized, suddenly, that he pitied them. Every last sorry son of a bitch back in Slam. Not for where they were or how they lived, but because they didn't have the first clue that something so wonderful, so special, existed – or even *could* exist.

Ten years ago, I didn't know either.

Ten years earlier someone – and he still felt a wistful twinge when he thought of her – had challenged him to rejoin the human race. Her conviction had convinced *him*, even though the first things she'd taught him how to feel were guilt and grief. Then Jack had stepped in, continuing the lesson.

It had been subtle and sisterly at first, and would have stayed that way, he imagined, if they hadn't been separated. Even then, in those early days, she'd been remarkably strong, able to survive and even thrive in his world while she slowly drew him into *hers*. He'd had no idea, of course, that the little girl who had once sought to emulate him would become the woman who dictated the shape of his life. He'd had no idea, when

he lured her back to his ship, that *he'd* be the one serving the apprenticeship – in how to be a human being again.

She'd even taught him how to cry.

Those tears had come, finally, with Carolyn's birth. Even now, the sheer, heartshaking wonder of that moment, the birth of *his daughter*, could close his throat. He'd thought that they were his first tears, shed while he lay with his wife and their newborn child, his face buried in Jack's soft, fragrant hair. But Jack had smiled gently when he struggled to express his gratitude, telling him that he'd cried once before. He'd wept the first time they'd made love.

That brought things to a strangely poetic full circle, he thought; his calculations suggested that Carolyn had probably been conceived during the first few days of their frenzied courtship. He liked to imagine that it had happened that very night.

He still hadn't shed tears of pain or grief, and the thought of doing so filled him with a strange mixture of dread and longing. It would be a mark, after all, of his growing humanity, but an agonizing one.

He could wait. For as long as possible, he hoped. There were many other lessons to learn, between now and then, after all. Jack was no longer his only teacher; his daughters were instructing him as well.

But it wasn't a lie, at all, to say that he worked for Jack.

"There's *Maman!*" Carolyn squealed, pointing across the station's upscale food court as they entered.

Following his daughter's hand with his eyes, Riddick smiled. There she was indeed. She'd staked out a table and had commandeered two high-chairs and a booster seat with her usual take-no-prisoners efficiency. Parenthood had transformed her too, he reflected.

He knew exactly how she'd deal with the French Fries Problem. She'd order the smallest serving she could get, and she'd give Carolyn four or five of them. Shazza and Christina would each get one... and Riddick would have to eat the rest of them, a fitting punishment for his slip given how much he detested fried food.

My wife is beautiful. He no longer knew how he'd ever lived without her. Not like a man, anyway; he'd lived like a hunted animal. Across the room, she lifted her eyes and saw him, the light of her smile warming him.

An answering smile touching his lips and his daughter riding proudly on his shoulders, Riddick headed back to Jack's side.

FINIS.

Afterword

Apprentice was conceived in mid-January of 2001 and was one of my very first forays into fan-fiction. When I began writing it, it originally was a much smaller-scale story than it ultimately became. On January 31, 2001 the first chapter of *Apprentice* was posted to three Yahoo! Groups I belonged to: the Vin Diesel Estrogen Brigade, Vin Diesel Fan Fiction, and Pitch Black Fan Fiction. The response was immediate and positive.

For forty-four days I literally posted a chapter a day, until the strain of maintaining that pace became overwhelming. As my internet life grew more complex (I'm now co-owner of a website and heavily involved in moderating its message board and chat room) I had to slow down my output considerably. Sadly, I *do* still have – and need – a day-job. Maybe someday soon I'll be able to fulfill my dream and write full-time, for money. *Apprentice*, however, has been a labor of pure love.

There are a great many things that must be said, and people I need to thank, because *Apprentice* was *not* written within a vacuum.

Jack and Riddick

When I began writing *Apprentice*, only a very small handful of stories paired Jack and Riddick romantically. Since *Apprentice*'s debut, Riddick/Jack fiction has become extremely popular, and I suppose I have to take some credit/blame for that.

Healthy relationships with such a pronounced age difference are not easily achieved. Riddick's reservations about them in chapter 28, the concern that he might inadvertently dominate and manipulate Jack into becoming something she wasn't, are very important concerns that need to be considered in *any* relationship where such a large age difference exists, especially when one of the parties is only just on the verge of truly discovering who and what they are.

I chose to pair up Riddick and Jack in part because I was a little tired of reading Mary Sue pieces at the time. *Pitch Black* fan fiction involving a romantic encounter for Riddick (at least of the Het variety) is strongly limited: either the author changes the movie's ending to make Carolyn or Shazza survive, or the author introduces an original female character who may or may not be a Mary Sue, or the only one Riddick *can* be paired with is Jack. I didn't want to change the movie's ending, because I felt that Carolyn's death was far too intrinsic in Riddick's rediscovery of his own humanity.

I felt it was very important that Riddick and Jack, then, be separated for several years so that Jack could grow up without him around. That way, the conflict between the girl he remembered and the woman she'd become would be more pronounced; he wouldn't have observed and discounted each subtle change as it happened. I also felt it was very important that Riddick *fight* his longings for as long as possible, and only truly give in when he realized that Jack was strong enough to remain herself and not be warped by his needs and desires. In fact, he discovered that she was strong enough to change *him*. Since Riddick displayed and professed admiration for strong women in *Pitch Black*, this felt in-character to me.

I'm a little embarrassed to say that the popularity of this story has given rise to a great many tales in which the age difference between Riddick and Jack is glossed over or never addressed. It's a crucial, vital issue; in a number of stories it's not even clear whether Jack is *old enough* for Riddick's attentions, and in many others he shows her little or no respect. I hope that writers who are considering a Riddick/Jack pairing will keep these points in mind when they execute it; a great many people have told me, on numerous occasions: "It works in your story, but most Riddick/Jack stories creep me out."

It doesn't have to be creepy, but you and your characters have to work pretty hard to keep it from being that way.

That said, I have to admit to a *great* deal of fondness, myself, for Riddick/Jack fics... as long as they show respect for Jack and give her enough empowerment of her own.

No, this will never be the script for *Pitch Black II*.

Movies like “Blame It On Rio” aside, Hollywood is fairly morbidly nervous about pairing a teenage girl and an older man, and for good reason. Even classic works like Nabokov’s *Lolita* are difficult-to-impossible to bring to the screen because of the controversial nature of the subject matter. Rhiana Griffith herself has only just turned seventeen years old as I write this, and I sincerely hope that she will never be replaced as Jack by the Hollywood system.

If Jack appears in a *Pitch Black* sequel – and I desperately hope she will – she will probably have some kind of brother/sister relationship with Riddick, *not* a romantic one. Vin and Rhiana apparently had a big brother-little sister relationship on the set, themselves, and I doubt Vin would be able to stomach doing a sex scene with her, even if she’s eighteen or older and thoroughly legal when it’s filmed.

I imagine that, once the sequel or prequel comes out, *Apprentice* will move into the realm of “alternate universe fiction” because Riddick’s movie past will be very different indeed from the past I’ve given him.

Will *Apprentice* have a sequel?

I’m not sure. I have begun outlining a plotline for a sequel, but there are a number of other writing projects I need to work on first. Still, this tale is so close to my heart that I do expect to revisit it, and pick up with these characters. They’re like family to me. However, I would like to turn my attention, if possible, to writing professionally, and I’ve had the unfortunate experience, now, of being plagiarized several times by supposed “fans” of my work. Given time and a resurgence of trust, though, I may well write *Charybdis*. (That’s the sequel’s working title.)

No, Jarvis is not a villain.

It’s struck me as very bizarre when people have approached me and announced: “I hate Lieutenant Jarvis!” I’ve noticed that this often seems to occur among younger readers (most of them, technically *too* young to be reading *Apprentice*, sadly) who expect to have a clear-cut battle between white-hatted heroes and black-hatted villains.

Pitch Black was nothing like that, itself. The audience of that movie was first lured into believing, after all, that Johns was a “white hat” and Riddick a “black hat,” only to discover that nothing could be further from the truth. Similarly, in *Apprentice*, Jarvis’s motives sprung largely from his love of and respect for life and lawfulness, even as his actions were tainted by the questionable morality of the Charybdis Project.

Remember, folks, the “hero” of *Apprentice* is, if we want to get technical about it, a sometimes-psychotic multiple-murderer. And Jarvis’s overwhelming motive for wanting Riddick dead came from his firm belief that Riddick had tortured Jack to death. Moral ambiguity aside, Jarvis is trying to do right through the entire story.

The Charybdis Project and the Scylla Spore

Scylla and Charybdis are two monsters from Greek mythology, who appear both in Homer’s *Odyssey* and the tales of Jason and the Argonauts. These dread creatures (Scylla was originally a sea nymph who was transformed into a monster, and Charybdis was one of Poseidon’s daughters, struck down by Zeus... yes, I was one of *those* kids in Junior High!) guarded the Straits of Messina and in fact correspond with two dangerous landmarks in the actual Straits. Scylla corresponds with a deadly, jagged underwater rock formation that has ruptured many a ship’s hull; Charybdis corresponds with a natural whirlpool, also known as the Garofalo or Galofalo. “Caught between Scylla and Charybdis” is the literary version of being caught between “a rock and a hard place.”

I actually owe Orson Scott Card a large debt of gratitude, here, because I would say that the “Descolada” disease in his novels *Speaker For the Dead* and *Xenocide* was the inspiration for my Scylla Spore. Although my Spore didn’t actively deform its sufferers or mate their genes with those of other life forms, the way the Descolada did, it did alter its victims’ genetic codes, and then remain part of the genetic makeup of both them and their heirs. Thank you, Orson, for giving me such a fertile seed of an idea, and for your many useful instructional books on writing as well.

Jack’s Eyes

When I began writing *Apprentice*, I couldn't figure out what color Rhiana Griffith's eyes were. It was almost impossible to tell in *Pitch Black*, because she was lit strangely in virtually every scene. I made Jack's eyes brown and left it at that.

I only recently managed to find a picture that was good enough to show me her true eye color. They're a beautiful dark green. I liked them so much – and wanted that color in the story so much – that I went back and corrected the four chapters where Jack's eye color is mentioned, and re-posted them. The final chapter, 60, contains a reference to Carolyn having dark green eyes, and those eyes being the same color as her mother's eyes. If you got confused, and went back through copies of older chapters that you'd printed off, saying "no, Jack's eyes are *brown!*" that would be why. The relevant chapters which were changed are chapters 2, 23, 26 and 52. (Changes were also made recently to chapters 36 and 42, so if you *are* archiving it, you'll want to grab those too.)

I contacted every site that archived *Apprentice*, to have these chapters replaced. If any site still contains a brown-eyed Jack, I would appreciate the site owner contacting me to update it because only sites willing to update my story on demand are authorized to have it. I won't make you remove it... as long as you're 18 or older, post the proper ratings and content warnings, and are willing to update my story chapters as needed. If you're not willing to do this, I would strongly advise you take my story down from your site immediately. Any website owner who is interested in archiving *Apprentice* and willing to abide by the three rules above is welcome to contact me and I will send you the chapters.

Counting Primes

My father actually does this, as a way to test his mental acuity when he's not feeling well. I decided it would be a cool thing for Riddick to do, as he's coming out of his psychosis. Thanks, Daddy!

Works Mentioned in *Apprentice*

The following works appeared, or were mentioned, or quoted, in chapters of *Apprentice*:

The Addams Family from Paramount Pictures, released in 1990. (Characters created by cartoonist Charles Addams.) The quote in chapter 16: "I would die for her... I would kill for her... either way, what bliss!" came from the movie and was spoken by Gomez Addams, portrayed by the late Raul Julia. (We miss him still.)

The Chinese Gold Murders by Robert Van Gulik, originally published in 1959. This is one of the books in Van Gulik's "Judge Dee Mystery" series, based upon the Chinese legends and tales about one of their magistrates who lived in the seventh century, during the T'ang Dynasty. These are beautifully written stories that I feel everyone with an interest in mysteries or Chinese culture should read. Jack was reading this book in chapters 24, 25 and 32.

The Little Shop of Horrors, released in 1960 (distribution rights currently reside with Madacy Entertainment) and the musical remake *Little Shop of Horrors*, released in 1986 by Warner Brothers. Riddick makes teasing reference to this movie in chapter 38, and renames their ship the "Audrey II" in chapter 40. He (and I!) got one thing very wrong... Seymour's last name isn't Mushnik – that's the name of the *owner* of the flower shop! (Oops!)

Shane from Paramount Pictures, released in 1952 and re-released in 1980. And folks, it really is true – Jack Palance and Cole Hauser have identical smiles.

The Tempest by William Shakespeare, is the source of both the title ("Full Fathom Five") and the slightly-misquoted line "these are the pearls that were his eyes" in chapter 46. The full text is below:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made:
Those are the pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade,

But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell:
Ding-dong.
Hark! Now I hear them, —ding-dong, bell.

Hamlet, by William Shakespeare, is the source of Jack's line "Words without thoughts never to heaven go," in chapter 60.

Writers who have influenced me

In addition to Orson Scott Card, I absolutely *must* thank Glen Cook, Christopher Stasheff and Tad Williams for teaching me *so* much about how to write from the male point-of-view. Other writers who have influenced my own writing "voice" include Barbara Hambly, Piers Anthony, Sheri S. Tepper, Tanith Lee, Douglas Adams, J. K. Rowling, Tanya Huff, and so many others whose names won't come to mind until this is posted. ::Blush::

Joss Whedon and the writing staff of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Angel* have taught me so much about plotting and characterization that I can't even begin to thank them properly. But take this, please, as a very heartfelt "thank you" from me. I would say that there's a hint of Angelus within my Riddick, don't you think? I owe you guys.

I also owe a deep debt of gratitude to the writers of the *X-Men* comics, whose exquisitely-handled depiction of Wolverine's own battle between his animal instincts and his more civilized duties helped me write Riddick's battle.

The following fanfictions and their authors also inspired and influenced me greatly, as I was discovering the World of Fanfiction and preparing to take part in it, and definitely deserve a mention:

- *The Faithful* and *Three For the Money* by Jules.
- *Interim* by Susy Strom.
- *Renascence* by Susy Strom and Shazrolane.
- *The Road to New Mecca* by Shazrolane.
- *The Storm* by Tracy "Browneyes."
- *Jacqueline's Rebirth* by Cat Ponce.
- *Intoxicated* by Lilith.

To everyone who supported me

So many people contributed in ways large and small to *Apprentice's* Development. These are only a few of them:

CCName, who chatted with me when I was first developing the concept and whose enthusiasm helped it catch fire within me.

AuntiKrist, who greeted *Apprentice* the way she might greet the arrival of a new best friend, encouraging me to continue it and develop it, and who looked over my story outline at one point to give me both encouragement and advice. You were right about the dream sequence chapter. ;-)

KelClancy and **Arwen Luné**, whose thoughtful, critical responses on some of the chapters helped me pinpoint things that were wrong, some of which were corrected on the spot and some of which were corrected in later revision passes. You helped make scenes better and more realistic.

DarthGunn, who wrote beautiful missives to me after every chapter, and has ended up being a very, very dear friend.

Lilith, whose praise for the story is so much more significant given that I know how uncomfortable most Riddick/Jack pairings make her feel, and who has also become one of my dearest online friends.

AngelsDee, who followed the story enthusiastically from the very beginning, and is doing a "book cover" to go with the story. (I'm so excited to see it!)

Rich, Jan, and Calvin, three of my bosses at my day job, who were reading *Apprentice* along with all of you. In an odd way, it's thanks to them that the story was good; I was so nervous and embarrassed about

letting them read a gratuitous sex scene that I kept putting off Riddick and Jack's encounter, concentrating on plot and conflict instead. Without that impetus, *Apprentice* would have been much shorter, and not nearly as interesting.

LaMamacita, who advised me on birth and breastfeeding and delighted me by Snoopy-Dancing all over the chat room channel when she realized Riddick and Jack were going to have a baby.

Dallas, Jen, and **CCL**, who obliged me on several occasions by giving me a quick "is-this-okay?" read-through before I posted a new chapter, and whose enthusiasm for the story was always intense.

odvJen, my first "cheerleader" as I wrote *Apprentice*, and a very dear friend. I miss seeing you in the chat room, YenJen! Come back the *second* you get out of boot camp, sweetie!

Kriszta, who continues to tell me "Keep writing that *Pitch Black* sequel script!" I'm working on it, I promise. ;-)

Gynce, Tanya, Shan'ica, Ally Ranger, and **Ms. Mephisto**, enthusiastic archivists and promoters of my story on their websites. I love you ladies!

Annie (Shadowymoon), **Lucy Whyte**, **Andrew Eather**, and **Malisita** for writing such lovely recommendations of my story, and posting them on your sites. You have no idea how touched I was to read them.

Ken and Jim Wheat and **David Twohy**, for writing such an amazing movie with such riveting characters, and helping inspire me to new creative heights.

Vin Diesel and Rhiana **Griffith**, for taking these beautiful characters and breathing vibrant life into them. You two are my muses!

Everyone who has written to me (or talked to me in the AoVD chat room or on AIM) and told me how much they liked my story. I'm sorry I haven't managed to get back to all of you with replies. Rest assured that hearing from each of you was wonderful encouragement. If I haven't managed to say it to you personally, THANK YOU! (And sorry I haven't written.)

Finally, and most significantly, **Virtual Void**, my partner of ten years, who was INCREDIBLY patient while the Story That Ate My Life was consuming my every waking moment. You're the absolute best, my love.

It's been a wonderful journey; I almost hate to see it end.

Ardath Rekha, April 28, 2002