

The Man Who Counts

by William Barton

She was born on the Fourth of July, coincidentally high summer in the northern hemisphere of Mars, though the wild slopes of Olympus Mons were still white with seasonless snow. Outside, I knew, the grounds of Blue Heaven were garden green, crystal palaces in the shade of terragenic trees, oak and pine, poplar and quaking aspen promiscuously mingled, walkways winding among lakes, crossing streams, there for the guests, just as we who came to serve.

High summer in the year 3398, down in the dank sub-basements of Blue Heaven, somewhere on Mars, where she was born while I stood and watched.

I'd come to the birthing room, with its musty smells of mildew and damp concrete, to do my job, one of my many jobs, here ahead of the others, as usual, pulling the pile of body bags into a long row by the far wall, lining them up neatly, then idly looking at the tags.

All the usual. A twinkie here, a twee there, the occasional snatch or stud. Mostly ordinaries, though. Too many ordinaries. Ordinaries the worst, piling up in numbers as the secret courts grow meaner and more conservative, day by day.

Bastards were easier on me than they knew.

A little smirk.

Too late now.

You could hear them just before they came through the door; hard plastic boot heels echoing on the carpetless floor, voices arguing, arguing about something—hers sharp, nasal, bitchy, his deep and gravelly, a froggy voice, something from a cheap, imitative kiddie drama.

The sort of crap my kids used to watch, back in the Venusberg days.

Pale, hazy yellow skies. Suburban neighborhoods. Home and hearth. Job and kids. Housewives. Housewives everywhere. Home alone. Waiting and waiting.

Kermanshah was the taller of the two: angular, lean, short, scruffy, dirt-brown hair, carrying the antique riding crop she liked to use for a "starter" tucked under one arm, towering over Jethro, with his big, thick arms and not-quite-shaven, bowling-ball head.

She said, "Ah, there you are, Merry. Let's get this show on the road."

I moved, arbitrarily, to one end of the body-bag row, leaning down to reach for a zipper.

"Not that one."

Kermanshah snapped, "*Jethro...*"

They stood facing one another, pissed off about something. He said, "If you think I'm going to miss out on *this* one, you've got a fucking screw loose."

Brown eyes bleak, she whipped the riding crop through the air between them, once, twice, then stood staring. "Dammit, then." A gesture, at the row of bags.

Jethro squatted and duckwalked along the row, looking at the tags, one after another. "Here she is." He straightened up. "Merry."

I kicked off my shoes and tossed them in a corner, away from where the mess would spread toward the drains, slipped off my coverall and hung it on a hook, damp air cool on my skin. Then I leaned down and tugged the body bag out of the row, pulling it toward the middle of the floor, stuck my middle finger through the zipper's D-ring and gave it a hard yank.

Blood-warm amniotic fluid gushed out, rushed over my feet, started gurgling in the drains, while Jethro and Kermanshah took dainty steps back, keeping their boots dry. Her eyes were sharp, angry, his bright with joy.

I wrapped the woman's sopping, pale blonde hair around my hand and pulled her out of the bag, rolling her face-down on the floor, face down in flowing slime, put my hand in the middle of her back and gave one long, hard push, flattening her. There was another gush, fluid from her lungs, then, when I let go, a long, ragged, gagging gasp.

I kneeled in the wet beside her, hand still on her back, stroking bare wet flesh, and whispered in her ear, "Easy. Easy now. It's all right. You'll be all right. Just lie still for a minute."

Maybe so. I remembered exactly what this moment was like, and I'd been just fine. Considering.

"Roll her over, Merry."

When I looked up, Jethro had kicked off his own boots, grinning, grinning, and was unzipping the front of his coverall. Kermanshah stood back by the door, arms folded, eyes hard, but not looking away, not for a minute, and she said, "Look at her. She looks just like some goddam little sparrow. Cat's gotcha *now*, bitch."

The woman, whoever she was, coughed hard when I rolled her on her back, and whispered, "Sparrow?" Voice raspy from having been under water for so long.

Utterly bewildered look on her face, eyes deeply puzzled, as if she had no idea where she was, or why she was here. Knowing why and where made it easy for me. That and knowing I deserved every bit of it.

Jethro padded over, bare feet splashing in the residual muck, marriage tackle up and ready.

Kermanshah muttered, "Hurry the fuck up. I've got a lunch date."

She wasn't a beautiful woman, though her innocent face and confused eyes might have made her pretty. Still, she was female, tits and bush right where they belonged, and that's enough for most men.

Jethro said, "Hold her still for me, Merry." He started to kneel, then, "No, wait. Lay on your back and pull her on top of you. That's it. Legs apart."

I put my arms under hers, pulling her straight, locking her knees with mine, holding her spread eagled, tiny bird of a girl hardly any weight at all on top of me, but Jethro was heavy enough when he lay down on top of us both, squeezing the breath out of her.

I could see her out of the corner of my eye, face wan and drawn, eyes flooding with fear. In just a moment, I'll see that agony, familiar agony, the agony of all those housewives, back in midnight Venusberg, housewives seen one by one by ...

I felt him make his first thrust, and her eyes brightened with ... something, mouth dropping open, color rushing into her cheeks. She twisted slightly and looked at me, astonished.

Oh, kiddo. I didn't get a chance to look at your tag, but you've been snatched, haven't you? She looked away, face flooded with the realization of it, starting to shiver as that first quick, involuntary orgasm began to build.

So which punishment's worse, girlie, yours or mine? I could feel her coccyx punching rhythmically into my abdomen, just above where my genitals used to be, once upon a long-gone time ago.

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When I got her down to the barracks, Janet, my favorite ordinary, followed us into the bathroom, nosy about who the new girl might be, watching as I sat her up on the counter by the sink, got out towels, a facecloth, and soap.

She started to reach out a hand, suddenly recoiled, nose wrinkling. Not disgust. Recognition.

"Jesus! This one's going to bother the hell out of the poor studs!"

I leaned in, taking a deep breath. Nodded. Right. They'd have trouble sleeping when she was around, and this was the only refuge they had.

Janet said, "It bothers the hell out of me, come to think of it." She leaned in, sniffing delicately, grimacing. "You?"

I wet the washcloth and soaped it up. "They left my vomeronasal organ intact for a reason." No pain, no gain.

Janet looked away. "Well."

The woman on the countertop said, "Why are you people smelling me? It's not my fault that man ..." She suddenly blushed and squirmed, nipples popping erect, as if in a pornographic cartoon.

Janet said, "Gawd!"

I nodded, gently taking her by the wrist, starting her spongebath as far out as possible. "Yeah. She's about as snatched as anyone I've ever seen." Put a man this far into stud and he'd have a permanent hard-on, then soon gangrene.

She was staring at us, mouth open, almost panting, obviously getting more and more aroused as I washed her. When Janet, eyes bleak now, reached out to brush the hair from her eyes, the woman seemed to lean into the hand, as if trying to rub her face against it.

"Lord. What'd you *do* to get yourself sent here?"

That puzzled look again. "I don't ... What're you talking about?"

Janet looked at me.

I said, "What's your name, kiddo? You look familiar."

"I do?" She was distracted from the washrag now, which was a good thing, since I'd had to move on to her legs. She said, "I, um ... Didn't that woman call me Sparrow? The one with the stick."

Then she said, "Ah! Do that some more!"

Janet whispered, "God have mercy." My friend Janet was here because, one fine spring morning, just after breakfast, back on Earth in the merry month of May, she poisoned her husband and then drowned her children in a bid to keep her lover from leaving her for a less inconvenient woman.

I said, "Where were you before they put you in the rebirthing bag, Sparrow?"

Puzzled look. "What do you mean? I wasn't anywhere before you took me out. Just in the bag." Forever and ever.

Behind me, Janet made something like a hiss.

Then Sparrow said, "Could you put your hand right there, please? For just a minute."

Long pause. Then, eyes growing desperate, she said, "*Please?*"

"Mindwiped," I said. "Mindwiped and then snatched to within an inch of her life." Sparrow had me by the wrist and was trying to force me to do what she wanted.

Janet said, "Why the hell would they do that? I mean, what good does it do to send her here if she don't know why she's being punished?"

Sparrow leaned back against the mirror, and said, "Um. Yeah. Thanks."

Janet stood up, turning her back. "Oh, *man!*"

You get used to a lot here. You have to. Especially if you're an ordinary like Janet, just here to suffer. But still. I said, "It's kind of like stepping."

Janet said, "But it ain't stepping. Not like that. Not *that* far."

No, not that far. Stepping was a light mindwipe and very mild snatching, something a rich and powerful man will get done to an unsatisfactory wife. Afterward, she's very sweet and sexy. Though not as sweet as a rich woman's stepped-on husband, who will forever afterward be so very ... uncritical.

Turning to face us again, but looking at herself in the mirror, Janet said, "That was quick."

"She's going to be very popular with the guests."

Sparrow, aware of the world outside her body again for a little while, said, "Where am I? What ... punishment?"

Drying her with the towel, I said, "This is Blue Heaven on Mars. Where they send all the bad little boys and girls to pay for their sins. Where all the very rich little boys and girls come for a little harmless sport."

"Sins?" That bewildered look again. "I ..." Sparrow looked right at me with suddenly penetrating blue eyes, exactly like you'd imagine the eyes of a telepath would be, and asked, "So, why are *you* here, Merry?"

Guileless as a child. Straight question. Straight answer.

Beside us, Janet was suddenly looking away, face in shadow.

So I said, "I'm the Venusberg Strangler."

Her brows knit together, deepening the little furrow between them, and you could see it didn't mean a thing.

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An eye for an eye.

Let the punishment fit the crime.

Fine. I get that part.

But these other little bits ...

Sometimes, it's like I'm here as a decoration. Or maybe an object lesson, I don't know. Sometimes they'll dress me up in a fringed loincloth, turban round my head, scimitar strapped across my back, and make me stand by one of the cafe entrances like some kind of guard.

Guests get curious, ask around, finally someone tells them who I am, and the women's eyes get big and round. That's when they make me drop the loincloth, and the men's eyes get big and round.

Every now and again, you'll see a shadow of disappointment in some woman's eyes, one of her sick little fantasies spoiled.

The Venusberg Strangler.

Jesus.

I try to stand up straight and bland.

Mornings on Mars, especially these summer mornings, you get a fine view from the Rimshot Cafe, eastward from the lip of the caldera, fine white slopes of the old shield volcano tumbling gradually away, superimposed against the gray-green plains below, Jovis Tholis an isolated red pimple in the midst of all that, then the purple majesty of Asraeus Mons, trailing wings of backlit cloud, peeking over the horizon.

The sun was a dim blue disk on the edge of the world, rising out of a stripe of greenish sky, just a little bit of green under a dome of pink, shading quickly up to black.

I remember when I was a kid learning about the technology that made all this. Old technology, primitive compared to what made my home on Venus. Just a brief flash of that. Yellow sky. Pale brown clouds. The cityscape of Venusberg, skyscrapers seen from a distance, suburban vista of little houses, little multicolored houses, embedded in a dark green forest.

Today they had me stark naked, holding a spear, motionless by the door, female guests tittering as they saw what I was, elbowing the men they were with, "Hey, better mind your p's and q's, Johnnycakes!"

Rich men smirking. As if. As fucking if.

They had the ordinaries waiting table, breakfasting the guests who cared for it, and only a little later, parties began splitting up, heading out into the park, taking what they wanted, doing what they wanted.

It was around that time I saw Sparrow, done up in a short, gauzy black cocktail dress, barefoot, being led along by a serious-looking little man who held her by the hand and whispered in her ear, as if in earnest, some fine fellow trying to talk a reluctant girlfriend into something a little out of the ordinary.

Come on. You'll like it. I promise. Be a sport. Just this once.

She looked at me over one shoulder, so utterly bewildered, like some little girl being led away by a child molester.

Except for that high flush of arousal, of course.

I wanted to go with her then, help out any way I could, make it as easy as possible for her, but I got picked up by a group setting up for a little rough sport. Not with me, no. You hardly ever meet somebody that's got a thing for twinkies or twees, but they do need someone big and strong to hold the ordinaries down.

The ordinaries know they're not supposed to struggle and scream, or maybe just not struggle, anyway, but sometimes they can't help it.

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I woke up some time in the middle of the night from another dream I didn't want to have. Not a repetitive dream. My subconscious has too much raw material to work with for that, but still.

Some kind of dream about my kids, hovering over me as I struggled awake, heart pounding, Jenny and Davy, when they were around seven and three, I think. Tow-headed blond kids, with their mother's enormous, damp-looking blue eyes, looking at me, always looking at me, so serious. As if puzzled by what they saw.

The dream had somehow mixed them up with a dark Venusberg alley. Not a city alley, but one of those suburban back streets where the robots came at night to do what had to be done. Almost as if they'd been there, and watched.

Never.

I remembered the woman's eyes, huge, full of terror. And puzzled. So terribly puzzled.

There was a picture of a man on the nightstand by the bed, warm and soft in the glow of the lamp, a smiling man whose motionless eyes watched us out of the picture. There, there, he seemed to be saying. Everything will be all right. It'll be over soon.

He had nice clothes hanging in the closet.

And he was away for the whole week, gone to Luna on business.

Sitting up on the edge of my bunk, damp with warm, dirty-feeling sweat, I heard rustling in the dormitory, a cough here, a sigh there. Once, briefly, a head came up over in the corner where the studs bunked together, outlined against the wall-reflected glow of a baseboard nightlight.

Someone was sniffing softly in the middle of the room, the part usually filled with ordinaries. A man, I think. Not quite crying.

Self-pity? Or maybe sorry, now that it was too damned late.

I sat up straight and stretched.

Sorry.

Jesus.

I used to think I'd be sorry if I ever got caught.

I was wrong about that.

On the cot next to mine, a few feet away, Sparrow was sleeping, but restless, moving a little, going still, then moving a little more. Bad dreams? Or just sore? When she'd come back, late into the evening, after a long first day as a working girl, she'd had a yellow bruise on one cheekbone and a bit of a scrape high up on the inside of one thigh. Not much damage. More like a whisker burn.

I stood up then and stood over her, looking down, dark-adapted eyes just about able to make out her features in the nightlight. Peaceful in repose, as if all this wasn't happening, baffled astonishment and involuntary arousal washed away by sleep.

It made her face even more familiar.

Hard to say. People's faces are made what they are by the animation of their soul, more than anything else. It's why posed and candid photographs look so different. Beneath that animation, there's a tribal similarity that can make one man or woman look eerily like another.

Still.

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Sleep came and went, followed by yet another Martian sol, blue sun yellowing to a sharp white spark as it passed overhead, Phobos and Deimos quartering the sky to the south, washed away to all but nothing. I'd been here for months before I started to notice them. Day came and went, bleeding the sky blood red with dusk, and I was with a party of bejeweled matrons, serving them at table, and God knows what they wanted that for.

Ours not to reason why.

Yes, ma'am. Shall I pour the tea now, ma'am?

They all got little smiles, dimples in their fat cheeks when I did that.

There were four men sitting at the next table. Three Earthmen, doughy with fat, handsome in a saggy-faced sort of way, looking rather a lot like my four women, men rich enough to smoke cigars under a transparent hood once they'd finished their meals and the brandy had been brought.

The fourth man I recognized right off—Mr. Gortex, presiding officer of the Venusian Senate, tall, muscular enough to make his colorless dark suit look odd, face smooth, hair a burnished brown helmet, young looking—though I knew he had to be as old as the others.

The hood muffled their voices, but the man opposite Gortex—the one with the neat white hair—lifted his glass, beckoning to his two old sideboys, who lifted their glasses also. To you, Mr. Gortex. He seemed to stare back at them, face displaying its famously impassive scowl, then lifted his glass as well. The smile, when it came, was a brief rictus.

They drank.

More tea ma'am? Yes, ma'am, I'll send to the kitchen for the dessert tray now. Thank you, ma'am.

I could see some of the other diners were looking at them as well, covertly watching. Three men with big, successful grins, the fourth dour, but nodding. Right. I'm not sure who the leering fat guy is, or the blackhaired devil with all the wrinkles, but the jolly man making the toast, that would be the Speaker of the Solar Parliament, the famously erudite Mr. Newton Summerbird.

Well. Wonder what the voters would say?

Probably nothing.

Punishment is punishment, and fun is fun.

Me, I never heard of Blue Heaven 'til they caught my ass one dark night in Venusberg a few hours after number thirty-seven.

What if I'd gotten away?

I remember Mr. Gortex was running for office then and had given a nice speech a few weeks earlier, lambasting the police for being unable to catch me.

A couple of twees, sweet little sexless sad-faced boy-girls, led Sparrow in, stark naked, chained up like a slave, collar round her neck, manacled at wrists and ankles, all of it yoked together with silver chains 'til she could hardly stumble across the floor. Led her right up to the hooded table where Mr. Gortex and Mr. Summerbird sat in a haze of cigar smoke, smirking and scowling and drinking their toasts.

The hood slid up, smoke puffing out, quickly dispersing in the air-conditioned room, and the boys slid back their chairs, all turning to look at her. Gortex and Summerbird looked at her face, the one expressionless, the other with a cute little smile. The other two seemed interested mainly in her bush.

"Well," said Mr. Summerbird, breathing out the last of his smoke, high voice so soft it was hardly even a whisper. "Well, now."

Mr. Gortex was staring at her face, staring so hard she turned and looked at him. Their eyes met for just a second, then he turned away. Nothing, not even a flicker of feeling.

Summerbird said, "Boys ..."

Gortex stood suddenly, dabbing a napkin at his lips, and said, "I have some business to conduct. If you

gentlemen will excuse me?"

Summerbird leered. "You're a sissy, Daneel."

Gortex stared down at him, "I dare say, Newt." Then he turned and walked away, not looking back. Sparrow watched him go, watching his back, face puzzled as usual, but ... as if trying to remember ... She glanced at me, and I felt a hard stab of recognition in my chest.

Summerbird stood up, rattling the chain, smiling at her, and said, "Time to go, my dear."

Belatedly, I remembered the other two men, not quite so well known as Summerbird, but known nonetheless. One was Majority Leader Salzburger, the other Mr. Jekyll, the Solar ethics committee chair. They followed their master from the room, unable to be quite at his heels because Sparrow was in the way, more or less licking their lips as they went.

And I thought, So these are the men who count?

The fat lady beside me sniffed, "Men!"

Yes, ma'am. Boys will be boys.

She craned over the dessert tray and said, "You know, I believe I'll have the tiramisu next."

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Returning alone, sans chains but still naked and too late for dinner, Sparrow came over to our corner and sat on her cot. There was a blood blister at the corner of her mouth, not quite lined up with her lower lip, and a spotty crust of dark scab around the rim of her left nostril, bits she hadn't been able to scrape off with a fingernail.

She looked at me and whispered, "Merry?"

There were little blue bruises everywhere, like fingerprints, her hair standing up this way and that, in tufts, as if it'd been pulled and pulled, until it stood up on its own.

By then I was kneeling beside her, trying to see what damage might need real attention.

Not too bad. Considering.

There was a hard shine in her eyes. The shine of a child who's just been whipped for nothing.

Nothing.

No matter what happens to me, no matter what they do, I've got those hard, warm memories. And the dreams. Always the dreams.

Janet came over, stood looking down at her, shaking her head. "Jesus. Here, lie on your back. Knees up, okay? Lemme check to make sure ..."

Even then, you could see her start to respond.

Sparrow looked up at me and said, "Merry, those men seemed to hate me so much. What do you suppose I could possibly have done to them?"

I shrugged, wondering if I knew anything worth repeating. I said, "Let's see if we can get the autodoc to give you a sedative. You'll be all right, Sparrow."

Sun come up tomorrow?

Janet helped her to stand, shaky but still whole.

For now.

After we got her bedded down, eyes shut, breathing softly, maybe asleep, maybe not, Janet and I went into the break room and poured ourselves coffee, sat down at one of the little cafe tables and sipped. Not bad as prison coffee goes, I guess. Over in the corner, one of the studs was asleep, head down on a tabletop, cradled on his crossed arms, breathing in whispers. It was the one everybody called Jock. I forget why he's here. Not everyone will say. Not everyone is famous for what he did, like me and Janet. He'd only been here a little while, anyway.

She said, "I wonder if they did this to her by mistake. Maybe she was somebody's pet wife and the docs accidentally stepped on her too hard?"

"So why's she here, instead of in the hospital?"

A quick shrug. "CYA?"

Everything's a lie until proven the truth. Humanity in a nutshell. I said, "Janet, do you remember Mrs. Valentine?"

Empty look. "Who?"

"Politician."

"Uh ... " Confused look at the change of subject. "Oh, right. That Senator from Titan who was in the news a while back. Um ... " Searching her memory. "I forget. Something to do with an ethics investigation. Why?"

"Nothing. Just ... thinking back."

She nodded. We all do that, whether we want to or not. Sometimes, when we had a little extra time off, Janet liked to sit and talk about kids, mine mostly, sometimes hers. You miss 'em, Merry?

Not really, but you miss yours, don't you, kiddo?

Someday, in twenty years or forty, whenever they decide she's had enough, Janet will get out of here, but her kids will still be gone. Somewhere, mine are still alive, hating my memory, but it doesn't matter. I'm here for good.

She got up, thinking back now, just because I'd said the word, dark shadows forming around her eyes. "Good night, Merry."

I sat for a long time, looking at nothing, sipping coffee that slowly grew cold. When I stood at last, Jock the stud's muffled voice said, "Mrs. Valentine is dead, Merry."

When I turned and looked, he lifted his head from his arms and stared at me out of red-rimmed eyes.

"There was a transport accident here on Mars a few weeks back. Hundreds of people killed. I guess she was on her way to chair those hearings. It was in all the news."

I just looked at him.

All the news. Right.

He smiled, "I guess you've been here a while, huh, Merry?"

"One thousand, six-hundred and eighty-two days."

That made him flinch. "Sorry."

I walked out into the dark dorm, heading for my bunk. How long, my dear Mr. Jock? Twinkies, they say, can live a long, long time. I lay down then, hands behind my head, staring up at the shadows on the ceiling. After a while, I heard Jock come out of the break room, go over to his own corner and lie down among all the other studs, as far from the snatches as they could get.

Nice, ain't it, Jock? Here you are, living every boy's dream, with a hard-on that's there whenever it's called on, having it called on all day, all night when necessary, and ...

Sarah MacKay Valentine? Just a politician. Nobody important in the scheme of things.

I remember number thirty-five quite clearly, a pretty blonde girl, hardly out of her teens, a working girl of sorts, living small. I had her pinned to the bed in her own dark bedroom, in her own little apartment, strip of heavy tape over her mouth, working on the raping part that usually came before the strangling part. Enjoying myself, savoring every sweet little moment.

The vid was on in the corner, three-dee images dancing in air, tracking one of the public information nets, and, as I worked on her, I became aware the blonde girl had her head cocked to one side, eyes rolled hard over, trying to watch whatever was on.

Some politician, giving an interview.

When it was over, I sat on the edge of the bed beside the dead girl and watched Sarah MacKay Valentine make fools of her opponents, make the interviewer look like some kind of an idiot. When they brought on Newton Summerbird to argue the counter-case, he argued so very forcefully, citing chapter and verse, right down to the footnotes, and only managed to make himself look like some cheap, fat little bully, the sort of boy who picks on girls because he knows they'll never fuck him.

All Mrs. Valentine had to do was smile.

Everything she had was right there in her face. She'd look into the vid pickup, look out of the magic air and right into your eyes, and you'd just *know* she was telling the truth.

I waited 'til she finished, then turned off the dead girl's vidset and went on home to my wife and kids.

Beside me in the darkness, Sparrow started to whisper, things like words, but garbled, nothing I could make out. When I sat up to listen, I realized she was trying to cry.

I got up, silent as a ghost, went and stood over her, looking down, watching her, seeing a shine of tears in the wan glow of the nearest nightlight. The skin on the palms of my hands started to crawl. That familiar shortness of breath, just before ...

Suddenly, her eyes opened, looking right into mine, that blaze of awareness, those all-knowing eyes. For

just a second.

"Oh, Merry . . .," she whispered. "Those men . . . That Mr. Summerbird said they'd be back from time to time, just to see how I was enjoying life." Her eyes seemed huge in the darkness, glistening and infinitely deep. "He said all my old friends would be glad to see me. Maybe come to visit." Another long look, though her bewilderment was mercifully hidden in darkness. "What did he mean?"

I got onto the cot with her, wrapped her in my arms, and waited until she was asleep. Morning will come, but the dreams will continue. As I dozed, I remembered seeing Mrs. Valentine's husband, a colorless, smiling little fat man in a gray flannel suit, standing behind her and off to one side, smiling while she gave some speech or another, seen on vid at home, ignored by my wife, ignored by the kiddies.

I remember thinking it must not be much of a life for a man.

Now I remembered the strength in her face, remembered from the night I sat and watched her from a dead girl's bed.

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The next day was sunny and warm, as bright a day as you can have on Mars with that patch of black sky always directly overhead, horizon bright green, like a granny smith apple, pastel pink everywhere else. Sparrow looked better, cleaned up in the shower, and seemed all right, nothing left over from yesterday, smiling at the rest of us over the barracks' usual continental breakfast.

Don't want us to be too full for the morning to come. It's a rare client likes puke as a part of his fun.

Time for work.

Sparrow was picked up from the green room by a compact, oily little man with a square black mustache under his nose, whose name seemed to be Klu Barr. He made her get out of her silky work pajamas, lips twitching in something that was half smile and half sneer as he looked her up and down.

Knew who she was, all right. Knew me, too, though I didn't know him from Adam.

"What's the matter, girlie? Don't you know your old friend, Klu?"

Sparrow looked at his face, not wanting to be slapped, but kept her features still. Learning the ropes fast.

"Ah, well. You'll know me again soon enough." Dots of color suddenly appeared on her cheeks. He leered then, and said, "That's more like it, girlie. Hey, what they call you here?"

"Sparrow."

A small frown, as if thinking about it, some inner doubt immediately put aside. "Put your clothes back on. Let's get our gear and be on our way." He looked at me. "You too, Strangler. This'll be fun."

Sparrow said, "They call him Merry."

Barr said, "Yeah? Who gives a fuck?"

They used me for a beast of burden, three pairs of cross-country skis and big backpack with a blanket and the makings for a picnic. From the end of the lift, where the Alpine and Nordic trail systems separated, we skied west along the caldera rim, above a long slope heading down toward the gray-green plains below.

The scarp, I knew, was hundreds of kilometers from where we were now. Klu Barr could ski well, obviously something he did for its own sake, though Sparrow didn't do so well. I wound up rigging a towline and pulling her along. She had reflexes for that, interestingly enough. Maybe Mrs. Valentine had liked to water ski? There's water on Titan nowadays.

That seemed to interest the man as we skied along, following a trail that gradually descended toward a saddle in the crater wall, one that eventually went out onto a long glacier rounding the old volcanic slope. "Where'd you learn that, Strangler?"

"Solar Guard."

Long, level look. "I hadn't heard that about you." Then he said, "Me, too."

I said, "I was in from '59 to '73. Mercury Insurrection. 61 Cygni Police Action. California Riot Control."

He said, "I graduated from the Academy in '75."

We skied on a ways. Then I said, "I was enlisted."

A fine little sneer. "Figures." More silence, in which you could hear him breathing more heavily than I was, though I carried the backpack and was towing Sparrow. Then he said, "Why'd you get out? Enlisted Guard's a pretty good life for some men."

I shrugged. "My enlistment was up. Seemed like it was time to move on."

"Why'd you settle on Venus? Most ex-Guardsmen head out for the star colonies." Every Guardsman who fulfills at least one six-year tour of duty and gets an honorable discharge is entitled to the property of his choice outside the solar system. Mainly they pick sites with high mineral wealth and go into trade.

I said, "Seemed like there was plenty of pussy there, at the time."

That made him laugh, mean glint in his eye. "Hope you got enough, Strangler!"

Around local noon, he picked a spot out on some far tongue of the glacier, up on an ice cliff rimmed with snowbanks, looking out over a long, smooth slope. To our west, a few kilometers off, I could see a dark, shadowy crevasse, probably sitting over one of those long, intermittent cracks, rilles I think they're called, associated with old lava tubes.

Sparrow helped him eat his lunch, though there was nothing for me. Just as well. I can't imagine what would make a man want to eat pickled pigs feet. He made Sparrow take a little bit of just about everything, from the tongue sandwiches to hard-boiled eggs that'd been overcooked to the point the whites had a greenish cast.

Made me wonder what he had in mind.

He'd eaten enough, I thought he'd need a nap after lunch, but he didn't. He stood, smiling, eyes shining with joy, and said, "Sparrow, my sweet love, it's time we had a little fun."

Conflict in her face, fear and snatch tumbling over one another to take control. Klu Barr palpated the front of her pajama bottoms, face flattening out, sneer making his lips broad under the little mustache. "Ah, nice and anxious, I see."

She looked at me, just once, hopeless, knowing there was nothing either of us could do.

He got her out of her clothes and led her barefoot across the snow and ice to a little hillock, one he seemed to judge just right, made her sit down in a little hollow, something just the right size for her, then undid the front of his trousers. "You'll pardon me if I leave the rest on, Sparrow, dear? It's a little *cool* for my taste!"

I could see the skin of her legs and backside was already bright pink.

When he tried to climb on, though, the warmth of her bottom had melted a little of the ice, and she slid down, hitting her head with a small, hollow bonk.

"Christ ..."

He tried bracing her with his knees under her thighs, and that worked long enough for one half-thrust. Then his feet went out from under him, and they both went down in a cold, wet heap.

You have to wonder exactly what he may have had in mind.

"Dammit, Merry, help me hold her in position." He put her back in the saddle.

I got behind him, reaching around to hang onto her thighs, bracing them up. When he tried to settle onto her, he continued to slip, sliding down her belly, so I let go of one side and put my hand in the middle of his back, helping him get into position. "That's it. Almost ..."

I let go the other hand and brought it up to the back of his neck, thumb under one ear, fingers under the other. Sparrow, released, started to slide out from under him again.

He said, "Hey!"

I squeezed hard, feeling a pulse of orgasmic energy knife right through me. There was a wet, muffled pop as his spine pulled free of the formamen magnum. He seemed to stiffen and clench, then relaxed on top of her.

There was a quiet moment in which I felt my heart beating stiffly in my chest, then Sparrow, still under him, whispered, "Oh, Merry. What did you do?"

I lifted him off her and laid him on his back in the snow. You could see he was still alive, eyes livid with terror, lips twitching, but ... Right. Nothing else. You'll lay there, paralyzed from the face down. Not even feel the building sense of suffocation. The world will turn blue, then gray, then gone.

It took less than a minute for his eyes to grow empty and still, fixed on my face 'til the very end.

I turned to Sparrow and said, "We've got eight, maybe ten hours, before they start to look for us." Down the bottom of the great cliffs, the desert floor was still three hundred kilometers away. "It'll be dark by the time they find him."

She knelt, looking into his empty eyes, and said, "What will they do when they find us?"

I shrugged, "Nothing worse than they've already done."

No death penalty in the Solar Alliance, dear Sparrow. Not for over a thousand years. Cruel and unusual punishment, you see. I said, "Maybe they'll send me to the Procyon mines for a change of scenery. You? Just back here for more of Mr. Summerbird and his friends. If they catch us."

"If?"

I started digging into a snowbank with my hands, knowing if I hid Mr. Barr far enough down in the snow, that'd confuse the sensors for a little while longer. "Start packing up the picnic, Sparrow. Let's see how far we can get before they do."

This was the first man I'd ever done with my bare hands. I found that I liked it equally well.

.

We skied down the long, gentle slope, following a sinuous hollow a few kilometers north of the rille, for all the rest of that long, cold day, while the blue sun of Mars arced away from zenith, slowly down through the bright pink sky, falling through the horizon's band of green, then gone. For a while longer, we skied on in darkness, tied together by the towrope so I wouldn't lose Sparrow down some hole, skied on until I saw the running lights of helicopters rise from Blue Heaven and begin skimming along the rim, looking for the lost picnickers.

Line of sight. Might see us by accident.

We got inside the rille and followed it along to the beginnings of a lava tube segment, crawled across the rubble and went inside, forging on in absolute darkness, stumbling, falling, rising, going on until we were too tired to continue. Slept until we awoke, in darkness still.

Finding me awake, Sparrow whispered, "How long ..."

I laughed, raising echoes in the tube. "Until the food is gone, kiddo." I got up and led her on downslope, knowing we'd either come out into the next rille segment someday or run into a rubble wall.

It took us six days to get down the long slope of Olympus Mons, yet another to climb down the face of the scarp, living on snow and meltwater, once the picnic was gone, until we walked free in the warm wind of the gray-green grassland humanity'd made of the old red planitia.

There were things to eat there, prickly fruit on scrubby bushes, tubers similar to stuff I'd been taught were edible during those thirty-years-gone Solar Guard basic training days. Some bugs and small animals we didn't touch. Remembering the stories my children had loved, I wished, however briefly, for Ghek and Tara and all the rest.

I grew thin and Sparrow thinner as we walked south, away from the wet northern lowlands, into the high rock desert of the deep south, toward what little was left of Old Mars.

There was never any sign of pursuit.

If it'd just been me, I guess there might've been a media uproar. The Venusberg Strangler Escapes! Women bolting their doors all over the solar system. But what would they say about the recently deceased Sarah MacKay Valentine? If I could recognize her, so would others.

But all over Mars, I knew, agents would be watching for me in secret. Don't want to raise a panic, you know. We'll get him, and the little snatch, too.

To her credit, it was three days before Sparrow began to beg.

.....

On toward evening, a hundred days later, we were standing on a bluff in the weathered foothills of the Nereid Montes, looking out over the ochre dunefields of Argyre Planitia, when I spotted a Torii camp, nestled in the shadows below, just where the erg spilled out into the jumbled rock remains of Crater Galle.

Sparrow had toughened, grown thinner, ever more silent on the long walk, even now no more than halfway to our destination, but she clutched my arm when she saw where I was looking, eyes narrow, half alarm, half hope.

We'd followed an old, old roadbed, one laid down in the early days, back when technically sophisticated people tried to live in the badly terraformed southern hemisphere of Mars, passing through towns given up to the rock and wind and sand a half millennium and more ago, their people returning to the modern cities of the north, clustered round the shores of the Boreal Sea, the lakes of Coprates, the riverbeds and canal systems that made Mars what it was to be.

Not many people here now, to my relief, to Sparrow's increasingly secret sorrow.

I'd done my best to be what I was not, and we'd stumbled over the occasional startled hermit, but ...

Eyes beseeching me now.

That agony of need, though she must surely have guessed what I'd done to each of the hermits, even the women, after I sent her outside in the morning. I'll be out in a minute, Sparrow. I want to thank him for his hospitality.

We walked into the Torii camp just as the sun went down, emerald light staining half the sky, reaching far up toward black zenith, patch of darkness merging now with darkness rising out of the east, nameless stars already freckling the heavens.

They watched us walk in, unbending from their tasks, standing silent, dressed all alike, men, women, children, in dark blue robes, a color close to indigo, robes proof, I think, against the light and heat of day, the stark, icy night, mimicking the desert nomads of all those stories I remember my children had loved.

Not bedouin, no. Tuaregs, perhaps.

It was a woman who came to stand squarely in front of me, blocking my path, making me stop. Her eyes were pale blue, staring hard out of weathered brown skin. Then she opened her veil, and the rest of her face was pale, almost white, as though the skin there never saw the light of day.

She said, "Are you lost?"

I shook my head, "Just walking."

She stole a quick look at Sparrow, eyes narrowing, lines around them deepening. "Where to?"

I don't know what made me tell her the truth, "Australia Cosmodrome."

"Coming from where? You've got a long way to go."

I stood silent. Other Torii were gathering now, standing to watch. Some of them were young men, their attention starting to fix on Sparrow now.

The woman said, "You're both rather badly sunburned. You'll need medical attention when you get there."

I nodded.

"You're welcome to stay for dinner then. My name is Cyndi."

Cyndi, I thought, like some child of wealth and comfort. Not the Ayesha of children's fables. I held out my hand to her. "My name is Merry. This is Sparrow."

.....

I don't know what made me wake up in the middle of the night, sleeping in the little tent I'd found among the effects of some dead hermit. I remember he was sprawled on the floor when I found it, eyes still open, full of astonishment. That unexpected, wonderful night, maybe making him regret his decision to live out here all alone with the sand and old red rocks. Wonderful night, full of Sparrow's joy. Then the monster comes.

I awoke from a dream of jumbled memories and could sense I was alone, no heat in the tent but my own.

Well.

I remembered dinner in a large Torii tent, Cyndi's home.

Remembered the magic carpets making a floor for the tent, covering up red hammadi stone. Remembered the silver and brass tea service, the pewter plates and bowls, the wooden spoons, so lovingly carved from scraps they'd carried along from wherever they'd been. No wood around here. Hardly anything for the goats to eat, down here around Argyre land.

Remembered the way they spoke with funny accents, though still in the common language of Mars, curious about who we were and where we'd been, though respectful of our silences, our little secrets.

Remembered the women's hospitality wearing thin as the men, young and old, right down to boys so young you'd think they wouldn't know, paid more and more attention to Sparrow, who flushed and squirmed and smiled.

Funny thing that there'd be such a people as the Torii wandering about the southern deserts of Mars, herding things that might once have been goats, harvesting tubers from genengineered plants that'd once been instrumental in bringing Mars back to life.

Eight hundred years humanity had been here.

A thousand since the first permanent engineering bases had been set up, since the decision had been made to create a New Earth. Time enough, I suppose, for these people to come into being.

I crawled out of my blankets and zipped open the tent's flap, looking out at the star-spangled night. Dull gray landscape, lit up, after a fashion, by the shifting light of those famously romantic Martian moons, Fear and Terror. All around us, the blank, lightless humps of the Torii tents. Beyond them, the swollen black shadow of the mountains. Softly, the murmur of the goats, the tinkling of little bells.

Sparrow was nearby, standing on a little rise in the sand, between two dark tents, dressed only in something like a little white slip, bare from the tops of her thighs down, lit up by the light of the silvery moons.

One long stretch, arms over her head, face turned up to the sky, made up entirely of light and shadow, impossibly serene, moonlight shining on damp skin, thin cloth clinging to her form.

I thought about all those men and boys gathered round her at dinner, and thought about the anger that would fill the Torii camp come morning. Anger at us? Or just the Torii women, angry with their men?

Maybe we should go now.

Outside, Sparrow continued looking at the sky.

I wonder what she thinks about?

What dreams does she have, mindwiped and snatched? Any trace of memory? Shadows from the past, inexplicably haunting? Or does she just dream of her need, of the things they made her want?

I tried so hard to know her, to see through those magic eyes to the woman who once had been. Nothing there but that familiar bemusement. This is the world, and I am in it, you could see her say. Familiar habits, familiar ways. No past. Nothing but the fact of her being and that frantic sexual core.

She walked over to the tent, face fully in shadow, stood looking down at me.

Soft whisper, "I'm sorry, Merry. I had to."

I nodded. "Come in and sleep now, Sparrow. We'll walk on in the morning."

At some moment, I must have felt a spark of anger begin to grow.

Mine.

Surely mine.

.....

I sat down in the cargo hold of the *Solar Queen* and watched Sparrow pay for our passage, leaning against a cargo container, feeling the soft vibration of the ship's inertial drive against my back, transmitted from hull to floor to cargo box, like a soft, soft massage. The captain was on her now, once again,

grunting and thrusting, burnished with sweat under the dim glow of red engineering lights.

I could see Sparrow's face, red light brightening the high, joyous color of her cheeks, eyes in shadow, merest glints of light, looking at me.

Smiling, always smiling.

In mid-journey, with so little to do in the void between the worlds, it seemed as though one or the other of them was on her, filling up the time. Sparrow whispering, whispering to them as they went on and on. Now, *now*, she'd say.

And her face would twist as the latest paroxysm took her.

Finally. Finally, she had as much as they'd made her want.

Beside me, a most expensive humanoid robot, a rich man's private toolkit, sitting in a posture that perfectly mimicked mine, said, "What an unnatural creature."

"Sparrow?"

The robot, who'd refused to give a name or even a model number, shook its head. "The captain. And his fellows."

I looked at it, trying to penetrate those impossible glass eyes. It was a thing of silver and gold, burnished steel and plastic, made to look like a man, but not so much of a man you'd mistake it for a living thing. "What would you know about it?"

Its face made something like a smile, conveying some exact emotion. "As much as they made me to know, of course."

"Just like her."

"Well, no. I never had anything more."

The captain, finished, kneeled up between her legs, gasping for breath, then leaned down and rubbed his face back and forth on her pubic hair, as if wiping away sweat. "Oh, God." I heard him say, not quite in a moan.

I remember I used to do that, sometimes before I killed them, sometimes after.

The captain got up, still naked, gathering up his uniform, and fled into the darkness. Sparrow lay back on her pallet, shining with commingled sweat, stretching, content. Soon there'd be another one, and another one after that. Eventually the captain's turn would come again.

The robot said, "Tell me again how it feels to kill a human being."

I said, "Do you think you'd like it yourself?"

It smiled again. "There's no way for me to know."

I thought, for just a moment, about the nature of heuristic machines. About the way the code could grow and grow, 'til it filled all the space allotted for it, then begin perfecting itself, new displacing old, accreting round a deep core of hard-coded rules, *ab initio*.

Another crewman appeared, the astrogator this time. Standing here, shirt buttons already undone,

looking down on her.

Sparrow, reaching for a towel, said, "Wait a second. I'll dry myself off for you."

The astrogator said, "Don't. I like it that way."

The robot said, "Why Venus?"

I said, "It's a world full of people. A place where I know what to do."

"Maybe so. If there were a world full of robots, just like me, I'd go there."

I looked at it, astonished, and listened to the astrogator groan, softly to himself, as he mounted the magic woman

Venusberg is the most beautiful city in the known universe, nestled in the saddle between lakes Collette and Sacajewa, out on the rolling green grasslands of Lakshmi Planum, Akna Montes far to the west, Maxwell yet farther to the east. She's a city of great white towers, mimicking the fairy cities of twenty-first century America. Fabled New York, Chicago, San Francisco, all rolled into one, downtown towers reaching up into a lemon-pale sky, creating a matrix of human canyons round the deep blue waters of Sinus Mulierum, with its magically arched bridges, the little white wakes of the boaters, as of lovers paddling the canal, silent under a bright, invisible sun.

Ishtar Terra they called this landscape.

I'd called it home, in the days after I quit the Solar Guard.

So ordinary. So terribly ordinary. Sparrow and I lived for some months under the pretense of being husband and wife, living in a little white house with a gray slate roof and pale yellow shutters, hiding in plain sight, purloined letters squirreled away in a bedroom community called Summerland, far enough out that Venusberg was a toy on the horizon, shrouded in a faint pink fog.

Lived and hid, working simple little jobs, a quiet ordinologist tucked away in a library basement and his quiet wife, the legal-office admin. No skills on her part, of course. Whatever she'd had were wiped away along with all the rest, but I'm sure the lawyer only had to take a deep breath during the interview to know he'd found the right girl. I remembered the little spat we'd had when I wanted her to stay home and play housewife, but ... right. There's an evolving replacement personality here that would do what it felt it had to, for whatever reason.

Evening came, a quiet dinner, very nearly a sullen dinner, restless Sparrow barely picking at her prefab meal. After a while, I retired to the den and sat in front of the node, not wanting yet another confrontation. Let it be, was all I could tell myself.

In the node, I watched Newton Summerbird give a speech, then spooled backward in time, watching him give other speeches, older speeches, noting how similar they all were. *Carthago delenda est*. This shall not stand. A man must be responsible for what a man has done. If, that is, he's not the man who counts. That's all.

In some of the older speeches, however similar, there were debates. Ah, there you are, Mrs. Valentine. Sometimes, in the debates, Summerbird would call her Sarah, looming over her, smiling his nice little smile. Dear little Sarah, he would say. In return, she'd only call him Mr. Summerbird. Then she'd make the audience laugh at something he'd said, some foolish point, some inconsistency his fine rhetoric had made them all miss, 'til it was pointed out.

Mr. Summerbird's eyes would grow hard and flat.

In the background, there was her small, round, butter-soft, gray-suited husband, eyes only for her.

I wonder what they talked about, when they were alone?

Sparrow doesn't remember. Doesn't remember him at all.

He looks fat, she'd say. What did she see in him?

I wonder.

Did he ever have to beg her to stay home? Did he ever crouch at her feet and beg to be allowed to ... do whatever she wanted? Give her what she needed?

Sparrow's eyes would soften. I'm sorry Merry, but ... That word you taught me, philanderer? Those are supposed to be bad men, aren't they?

Everyone says so, yes, Sparrow.

She'd smile.

Well, I'm the philander, and I say they're good.

I heard the door slam. Heard the electric car whir to life, back out of the driveway, and slip away into the Venusberg night.

She'll be back. She always comes back.

I'll wake up in the darkness just as she slides into bed, warm, sweaty, happy, snuggling up against me, ready for sleep.

I let the node take hold of Mrs. Valentine and her little, fat husband, let it slide sideways into their event track, then forward in time. There were scenes of a great, smoking crater down by the south pole of Mars, where the liner went down, all souls lost, including Mrs. Sarah MacKay Valentine, on her way to chair the ethics committee hearings.

In a later interview, her bewildered husband mentioned he hadn't known she was dead for hours, because she wasn't supposed to be on that flight at all, but one that flew an hour later, leaving Titan City for Marsopolis, before going on to Atom City on Earth. That one had gotten where it was going, Mrs. Valentine ticketed but not aboard.

All the dead, who were little more than ash and bone, had closed-casket funerals.

I found myself wondering. If they could kill all those people, just to hide what they were about to do, then why not simply kill her?

The ethics hearings were chaired by the next-senior member, later that month. Nothing ever came of the hearings. Not enough evidence, they said.

So Mr. Gortex got his presidency, and Mr. Summerbird his speakership.

Maybe it was just an accident. Maybe as hirelings laid in wait for her, Mr. Summerbird watched the crash on his office node and thought, *Perfect*.

I blanked the node and went to bed and waited for Sparrow in the dark, wondering what I could do to save us. To save her.

.....

I named us Johnson as a joke. Kept those other names as an act of ... foolish bravado? Merry and Sparrow Johnson. Mr. and Mrs.

How's Mr. Johnson today? Said with a soft Venusberg lilt.

Not much, anymore. Said with a smile.

Mrs. Trenchard, one of the neighbors, diagonal down the way, who said her name, *Tronksharr*, as if married to some important historical figure, came over one night after dark, calling me from the node, where I was reading the minutes of the ethics committee hearings, reading Mr. Gortex's pronouncements and wondering, just wondering.

She was standing in the open doorway, a small woman with short black hair, thin, looking up at me, not smiling at all, hands half clasped, held before her, as if protecting her crotch. She said, "May I come in, Mr. Johnson?"

I stood aside, gesturing, and said, "Call me Merry."

Her lips twisted bitterly. "You don't look Merry."

Neither do you, my dear, I thought, walking her toward the parlor, gesturing for her to sit down in one of the big chairs, or maybe on the sofa, all part of the neovictoriana that'd come with the house rental. "Can I get you a drink, Mrs. Trenchard?"

Her mouth made a little pink vee, an attempt at a smile. "My name's Jeanine ..." Pronounced G-9, as if some antique spy, or a very expensive AI servomechanism. "Scotch?"

"Glenfiddich?"

"That'll do."

Tinkle of ice in a squat cut-crystal tumbler. "Water? Soda?"

"Just ice."

I made mine neat and crossed to where she sat on the couch, sitting beside her, handing her a glass, lifting mine to my lips. Looked in her eyes, and waited.

She said, "Your wife's not home, is she, Merry?"

I shook my head, knowing where she was (imagining Mrs. Trenchard knew, too, both of us perhaps picturing my wife out gleaning whatever men she could, where she could find them, but only me knowing the terrible why). "No." Took a real sip, trickle of burn down my throat. (What would you say, Mrs. Trenchard, if you knew about Blue Heaven, if you knew what they'd done to her there?)

Jeanine drank off half of hers, ice clinking as it slid up the glass and bounced against her upper lip. Then she said, "Well, my husband's not home, either."

Julian Trenchard wasn't much of a man, and I wondered if he'd been the very last to get a turn. I could see the building sparkle of anger in her eyes and wondered if that were the whole problem, the reason for the sudden visit. Just pissed off because her husband wasn't worth having?

I shrugged, imagining I'd have to come up with something to say at some point. Finally, "I'm sorry if ..."

She reached out and put her hand, fingers cold from holding a glass of ice, on my wrist. "Merry, you know all the men in this neighborhood are married. You can't live here otherwise. The wives ..."

I said, "I've tried to talk to her about it. She ..."

Her lips made a little pink curl of contempt. Then she finished off her scotch, banging the glass down on the coffee table so the ice rattled around, not quite jumping over the rim. She leaned forward and put her hand on my knee. "A big, good-looking man like you ... This isn't a fundamentalist neighborhood, you know. Some of us ... Well. If you can just cut a deal with those wives, and keep her away from the husbands of the rest, we ..."

Maybe, I thought, she's the spokeswoman for a delegation. Wives meeting over coffee, while the husbands were away at work, or at least gone to one indiscretion or another. I bet that big son of a bitch is twenty centimeters! Let's see a show of hands ...

She slid her hand up my thigh, smile this time a little pink leer. Me first! Me first!

I caught her hand, heart suddenly squeezed by memory. Number fourteen had looked very much like her, had come to me voluntarily, with just the same leer, hand running up my thigh in just this way, headed for a crotch that'd been ... oh, responsive, I guess, is word enough.

Number fourteen had blinked with slight surprise, maybe wonderment, when I reached for her throat, smiling a familiar smile of my own.

Sometimes, I would kill them first and fuck them later, just for variety's sake. Sometimes it was better that way.

I caught Mrs. Trenchard's hand before it got to its destination and discovered the interesting truth. Held her hand gently in my own and said, "I'm sorry, Jeanine. I can't. Sorry." Gave her hand a little squeeze. Let it go.

Her cheeks were flushed; she'd been that ready, I guess, so now the flush turned to one of anger, eyes flinty, dealing with rejection. She said, "I can see why she wanders, with a pathetic thing like you at home."

I gave her another scotch, apologized a little more, but there wasn't much to say. On her way out the door, she said, "You better think of some way to keep her home. Or else move away. Soon."

I went back to the node and resumed my reading of the minutes, wondering how they'd managed to get away with all those elisions in the evidentiary documentation. I was asleep by the time Sparrow got home, some time well after midnight, snuggling me awake, smelling of sweat and semen.

The perfect woman, I thought, as she murmured against my back, apologizing for waking me up.

"Dear Merry," she whispered, yawning hard, rubbing her damp face against the hard ridge of my spine,

"Dear, sweet Merry."

.....

A day, a week, a little more, and one night I sat on the foot of our big double bed, watching Sparrow get ready for a date. *Date*. That's what they called it in Venusberg, like these married men and women slinking to each other in the night were just crossing adulthood's rim, halfway between being playmates and lovers, halfway between innocent sandbox and carnal bed.

She was dressed in a short slip, white, with a bit of lace here and there, reaching from spaghetti straps barely to the tops of her thighs, long, slim legs bare, doing things to her face, to her hair, looking at herself in the mirror, not seeing me in the background.

Not smiling.

Looking into her own eyes.

Thinking what?

I said, "Don't go."

It froze her for a second. Then she turned to look at me, standing flat-footed, still silent.

"Stay home with me tonight."

You could see things change in her eyes, an agony of indecision, marked by a trace of anger, recalling the things I'd said each night as I begged her not to go out, told her about Mrs. Trenchard's visit, about the dangers she was making for us, the things that might happen.

So I'll go farther afield, all right? There are barrooms downtown. Places where no one will care about what I do, or who I do it with.

Please, Sparrow. We won't be here forever. Just until I ...

She said, "We've already talked about this. You know I have to. You know what's been done to me."

Sure. I said, "Sparrow, you know I'll help you any way I can."

A curl of real anger behind her eyes then. She pulled up the hem of her slip, lifting the lace to mid-abdomen, and said, "Look at me."

"Sparrow ..."

"Not at my face. Down here."

A swatch of curly hair. The shine of moisture up where her legs came together.

She said, "I *have* to go."

"If I ..."

Softly, she said, "I know you mean well, Merry. But it's not enough. They made me want more than you can give."

"Please, Sparrow."

A quick look into my eyes, then pity. "Oh, Merry." She came to the bed and sat beside me. Put her hand on my wrist, fingers cool, though not so cold as Mrs. Trenchard's icy hand had been. Momentary tableau, husband and wife together, then she crawled up onto the bed, pulling me with her, until we had our heads on the pillows, facing each other.

I could see there were tears in her eyes and could smell her sharp arousal, pheromones knifing in through the only sex organ the bastards had left me, the instrument of their torture.

I put my hand on her hip, pulling the soft, delicate cloth of the slip upward, and whispered, "Shall I ..."

She snuggled close to my chest. "No, Merry. Just hold me."

.....

In my dreams, sometimes bits of old stories are mixed in with the memories. In this one, I was Tyrone Power, smooth and emotionless, face blank as a dead man's, telling the little French whore, "I was hurt during the war."

I think she'd said, "What's the matter? Don't you like me?"

More dream. Then, later, Eddie Albert's wisecrack about the life of a steer, somehow mixed up with scenes from a farmscape, some woman with a peculiar accent running on about square eggs.

In most of the dream, I was with number six, who had no idea anything was wrong. May even have missed the actual moment when things went so terribly wrong for her.

When her life went out like a light.

I remember she was so hot for me, everyman's crude mannequin, like a sexy gyndroid on overdrive, so hot and wet a smaller man would have found no purchase within to do for himself. Six times, one right after another, like she was starving to death, so happy to have found a man like me she'd grunted, rather fervently, some time in the night. A *real* man.

In the middle of orgasm number six, just as her eyes rolled back, just as she started that little caw of joy, I grabbed the nape of her neck, grabbed her by the long, curly black hair, pulled and twisted as hard as I could, hearing her go snap, crackle, pop, and relax, boneless, beneath me.

Inside her, the orgasm continued to completion, followed by my own.

I awoke and opened my eyes on darkness, covered by a fine sheen of sweat, wondering if I'd thrashed and cried out in my sleep.

The bed was empty and cool beside me.

After a while, I got up and went to the node, where I resumed my search of documentary chains, knowing they couldn't possibly have destroyed much more than the superficial evidence required by the antiquated rules of the Solar Alliance's courts. Any deeper, and they'd start hurting the economy, would have to start digging into the private information stores of the big corporations, where accounting rules prevailed.

It was dawn before she came home, yellow light spreading through the sky.

.....

Something woke me in the middle of another night.

Dark, still, the sheets cool beside me as I lay there naked and alone.

Something.

Pressure waves in the air, as of a distant, rhythmical thudding, just on the edge of hearing but growing louder, more distinct with each passing moment.

The door slammed, and Sparrow's voice, flooded with alarm, cried out, "*Merry?*"

I think I was dreaming, not about the women I'd raped and killed back in that other life, but about our time at Blue Heaven. And not about the bad things there, but the good things.

I'd been dreaming about my friend Janet, about letting her crawl into my bunk and sleep, shivering, in my arms, on nights when she dreamed about her children.

"*Merry!*"

I rolled to my knees on the floor, reached under the bed and grabbed the things I kept there, a small backpack with a bush knife clipped to its chest strap, a jogging outfit. Shoved my feet in unlaced hiking boots, the ones I wore on Sunday, when I hiked alone in the Hellish Hills, down by the Southside Scarp.

On my feet, naked but for boots, listening to the thudding noise, listening to it grow loud, I met Sparrow on the dark stairs, unable to see much more than the shine of her eyes.

"My God, Merry! A helicopter. It followed me along the highway! Followed me home!"

I grabbed her by one upper arm, pulled her off her feet, and ran her down the stairs.

"Merry ..." You could hear now there was more than one copter in the sky, though the one was far closer than the others.

"We have to get out of here." I threw her over one shoulder. High heels. Shit. In the kitchen, by the back door, were her running shoes, where she always kept them. I got the door open, grabbed the sneakers, and was out in the dark, going over our 1.5 meter back fence like it wasn't there, Sparrow over my shoulder, her shoes in one hand, my backpack in the other.

In the alleyway, I craned around and took one look back. The chopper noise was loud now, lights

starting to go on in our neighbors' houses, but I could see nothing. The helicopters were painted black.

Run, you silly bastard. Run!

Naked, I knew my dick should bounce back and forth as I ran, flapping against my thighs, making me look very silly indeed. But I didn't have a dick, and I could run like the wind.

Behind us, the sky lit up, garish yellow white, spotlights picking out the house from several directions, and our neighbors were milling all over the place, outside in their pajamas and nighties, shouting astonished questions back and forth.

Good. That will confuse the infrared sensors for a minute or two.

Maybe long enough.

.....

I got dressed down in a culvert by the oily waters of Sinus Mulierum, in the shadows under a fairy tale bridge, kicking off my boots long enough to pull on soft cotton running pants and singlet, unrolling the socks I'd bundled with them, while Sparrow, sitting on a low retaining wall, laced up her sneakers, high heels perched on the ledge.

She said, "I'm sorry, Merry. I guess I didn't believe you."

I reached out and stroked her soft hair. Too late now. I said, "Best keep your voice down. We weren't followed, but ..."

She whispered, "What're we going to do now?" Misery in her voice. Lost our home? Or fretful worry about where her next fuck is coming from, like an addict anticipating her next dopesick night?

I stood erect (so to speak), shouldering the backpack, shrugging it into place, looking around at the dark, sluggish water, the black, featureless night sky. That was the one thing I missed, living on Venus. Stars.

I said, "Always have a Plan B."

She said, "Plan ..."

There was a little scuffling noise up in the shadows under the bridge ramp, from between the nearest two pylons. Rats? No. They'd managed to keep them off Venus, having been far more careful with the initial terraform build than on Mars. Practice makes perfect.

The shadows unfolded into the figure of a man, a man with long, shaggy hair and a scruffy beard, dirty clothes. Worn-out clothes. Mostly denim. If they'd been new, I might've taken them for Sparrow.

He yawned and stretched, walking toward us.

"Jesus," he said in a slurred voice. "You folks could pick someplace better to sneak off for a fuck. Woke me up, you know?" He was looking at us beady-eyed, especially at Sparrow, running shoes incongruous with her little black cocktail dress. "Been to a party, missy?"

Sparrow seemed to shrink back, maybe trying to slide behind me.

Well, you're freshly serviced, little Sparrow. By this time tomorrow, you'd be dragging him toward the bushes. I reached out a hand and cracked his neck, folding him up, back into the shadows. Sparrow, looking at me, silent, was all eyes, big and glistening bright in the darkness.

I remembered killing Klu Barr, remembered hiding him in the snows of Olympus. Not the same, this time. Harmless old bum. Wrong place, etc. Sorry, man, wish it could be different, I thought, speaking to his ghost, and said, "We need to get going. We need to make the trail system in Umstead Forest by morning."

.....

Rex Sinclair's Hatari Plantation lay just below the Hellish Hills, beyond Ishtar Terra's continental slope, deep in the outermost layer of lowland Thicket, where the land slopes away toward Mnemosyne Regio and the steamy Mesozoic swamplands the terraform builders had made.

You could look back from Sinclair's veranda, look back at the rising green landscape, and marvel that we'd walked all this way and lived, that we'd only met two hikers on the way, a pair of goofy, well-equipped fat men, out alone together on some kind of camping sabbatical, men who'd been surprised to meet us. And even more surprised to die.

Sinclair remembered me, from long ago and far away, staring at me with that proverbial wild surmise when his field supervisors led us in from the perimeter fence. He called me Sergeant, eyes squinted just so, craggy face full of suspicion, no small amount of unease. No doubt, I'd been a big figure in the news when I was caught and unmasked as the fabled Venusberg Strangler.

Maybe he would have turned away, told me, *Well, just a moment, I'll be right with you*, but then he turned to look at my companion, face suddenly going slack. Not recognition, no, she was too ... different for that. But you could see him get an erection, right then and there.

The flush on Sparrow's cheek, spreading down face and neck to suffuse what was visible of her chest, was very pretty indeed.

So. Clean clothes, dinner, then we were sitting out on the veranda, enjoying the subtle colors, ocher and tan and brown, of a lowland Venusian sunset. Sparrow and I sat on his antique swinging divan, facing out across the plantation lawn, looking out over the pond, where a little family of hesperornis sailed in stately formation, Sinclair catty-corner in a chair, closer to Sparrow than me.

"Cigar?"

I smiled. "Used to like them, didn't I?"

"Used to?" He was smiling, face craggy as a romantic, Out-of-Africa hero, some Great White Hunter or another. "These are real Havana lineage, Sarge. Descended from the Guatemalan strain of Carl Uppman."

"Somehow," I said, "I gave them up."

"Miss?" Holding the box out to Sparrow.

She shook her head and blushed, looking down at hands folded in her lap. He'd given me a set of khaki work clothes, even a new pair of boots, but Sparrow was in something like white silk pajamas, and barefoot.

Sinclair said, "I was surprised to see you, Sarge. I figured you for a permanent residency on some therapeutic asteroid or another, after what you did."

"Me, too."

He was looking at Sparrow now, and you could see the front of his chinos start to hump up again. He had to squirm around in his seat a little bit, trying to get more comfortable. "Sarge and I were in the Guard together. Best Command Master Sergeant there ever was, if you ask me. No one else ever got there as fast, either."

Sparrow glanced at me, but her face was suffused, shiny, not smiling, eyes only filled with what her body was doing to her. Suddenly, I could smell her arousal, sharp and metallic, filling the air on the veranda too fast to be swept away by the slow, sultry breeze. When I glanced down, I saw the crotch of her pajamas' were showing wet, clinging to her.

Sinclair said, "Christ!" He got to his feet. "I'm sorry, Sarge. I'll talk to you later. We'll ... see what we can figure out tomorrow." Then he held out his hand to Sparrow, helped her to her feet and led her away.

Watching them, I saw she could barely walk.

.....

I found Sinclair's office node pretty quickly, in a back room that was mainly a sitting room. There was a pelt on the floor, the skin of a smilodon from the Cenozoic hunting reserve on Aphrodite Terra. Lots of pictures on the wall, flats and solidi both, scenes from his early life, from the Academy, where'd he'd been a star forward on the mercuryball team, from his service, rising through the ranks 'til he'd retired as a full bird-colonel.

I was in some of the pictures. A younger me standing slightly behind Major Sinclair, who'd been in charge of suppressing the California Riots. In the background of the photo, you could see Los Angeles burning, solidus flames flickering like real life. In the picture, I was smiling.

A picture of a more recent me, Colonel Sinclair pinning on my Distinguished Service Award, on the day of my retirement. When he'd shaken my hand, I remembered, he'd told me he was getting out, too, in another few months, retiring to that little farm on Venus.

I could hear them in the background now, had been able to for more than an hour, Sparrow's cries echoing faintly, surrounded by the squeak of hand-hewn rustic wooden bedroom furniture.

On the node, I looked at a fat man's face, Mrs. Valentine's forlorn husband, giving his final interview, a couple of months after the fatal crash, a few days after the close of the abbreviated ethics hearings.

His name was Theodore, affectionately called Teddy by all who knew him, and he'd spent his adult life

looking after his wife's non-political financial interests. *Disconsolate* was the word the newsnode talking heads used to describe him, on his way back to Titan, alone.

After the election, there'd been another little uproar, a sad, bewildered Teddy Valentine threatening lawsuits, claiming conspiracy. Then nothing. For about a month after Gortex and Summerbird took their respective offices, Teddy Valentine was utterly missing from the public records.

Then, you could see where the Valentine business and residential properties of Titan were for sale, the beach property they owned on the coast of Earth's Brazil vacationland. Records of deeds changing hands. Then nothing.

Gone.

There was a slight rustle of movement behind me. Sparrow was standing in the open doorway, naked, what we'd called spooage when we were young drooling down the insides of her thighs.

"He wants me to spend the night," she said.

I tried to smile. "He always fancied himself a real he-man."

She said, "He's had something done to himself, Merry. Sort of a light studding, so he'll be more ... capable." She stood there in the doorway, dripping on the floor, staring at the sad fat man motionless in the node. Then she said, "I've got to pee. I'll see you in the morning."

.....

I awoke alone in the morning from the same infinitely varied dream, in some guest bedroom I'd managed to find, far enough away in the house I could no longer hear them, yellow light streaming through Rex Sinclair's expensive bamboo Venetian blinds.

There'd been a widow woman, I remembered, a woman well over a hundred years old, so old medical treatment wasn't doing her much good. There had been, I remembered, lines in her face. Who knows. Maybe she would have lived another twenty years or so?

I remember thinking exactly that as I pressed her down hard against my pubic bone, jamming myself as far in as I could go, making her eyes widen a bit, then widen more as I put my thumbs under the angle of her jaw.

I remember thinking later that after she met me, she'd lived another twenty minutes.

I got out of the bed and pulled on my new clothes, lacing up my comfortable new boots, thinking about it still. Hell, maybe I was just born under the shadow of evil. If such a thing is possible.

Probably not. Just a way of saying it was something I was made to do, rather than something I did. But we know better, don't we?

Sparrow and Sinclair were already at breakfast, Sparrow sipping coffee, with dark shadows under her eyes, Rex Sinclair stuffing himself with bacon and eggs, sausage, English muffins and grits, beaming like a man reborn.

"Merry!" He said, gesturing at me. "Try the gooseberry jam! Try the honey! I have my own terragenic bees!"

I sat, reaching for a mug, reaching for the coffee pot, looking at Sparrow. When she lifted her eyes to mine, I was startled to see misery, rather than the satiation I expected.

Sinclair suddenly laughed. "I'm sorry, Merry, I guess I fucked her half to death! I had no *idea* what her pheromones would do to me!"

I took a swallow of the coffee, scalding hot, acidic on my empty stomach, went to take another, stopped ... something. Something in the air. Some distant sound perhaps.

I put the cup down and started to rise. Suddenly Sinclair was holding a little gun on me, a needle-nosed paralo-ray pistol, hardly more than a police stunner.

He said, "Sit down, Merry."

Now I could hear that faraway thudding. I got to my feet anyway, ignoring the ray gun, Sinclair rising to match me, facing me across the table. "Don't try it, Sarge. You're a tough bastard, but this'll knock you down." He moved over behind Sparrow, taking her by one upper arm, forcing her to her feet. "We'll put you somewhere safe, honey. This'll be over in just a little while."

I started around the table, moving slowly.

Sinclair kept the gun on me, backing toward the door with Sparrow, but slowly, letting me get a bit closer. "I'm sorry, Sarge. I couldn't take the chance of helping you. I put in a call before breakfast."

I smiled. "They won't let you keep her, you know."

"They won't find out she's here."

"I'll tell them."

Flicker of anger. "I'm warning you, Sarge. You're not faster than a ray."

"Don't need to be, Colonel."

He smiled. "Maybe not. Just faster than a trigger finger, huh? But I've had Guard training, too, Sarge."

"Maybe so. But she's not just a toy. That's Senator Valentine you've been fucking." His eyes flickered toward her, and you could see it took him by surprise. You could also see the sudden recognition. "Anyway," I said, "you were just a fucking officer."

He tried to get the gun up, but I was already moving, forward and to the right. The ray sizzled across my left arm in a fire of pins and needles. I slapped it out of his hand, ray gun tinkling as it broke against the far wall. Then I got him by the hair, lifting hard, grabbing his shoulder as I turned his head to face around over his back.

He actually grunted "*Ow!*" in the middle of the noise his neck made breaking but didn't say anything else as I lowered him to the floor and caught Sparrow in my arms, rayed left one buzzing like mad. Outside, you could hear the first helicopter swooping in over the trees, could hear the shouts of the plantation hands.

I pulled her after me, heading for the office, heading for Rex Sinclair's gun cabinets with all their lovely hunting blasters, weapons intended to blow a diplodocus out of the water or stop a charging tyrannosaurus.

in its tracks. Certainly suitable for shooting down a black helicopter or two.

Sparrow stood by, shivering, while I broke the cabinet locks and picked out a couple of heavy weapons, handing her one, keeping one for myself, grabbing a couple of spare batteries while I was at it.

"Plan C," I said. "Always have a Plan C." Sparrow's eyes searched my face, full of wonder. Wonder and trust.

.....

I crouched in the cave, blaster cradled in my arms, facing the tyrannosaur, whose huge head filled the entrance, all but obscuring the yellow-misted Venusian swampland beyond. Sparrow crouched behind me, flat against the damp, dank, algae-slimed rear wall, and whispered in my ear, "If it kills us, Merry, all is lost, for us, for everyone, forever ..."

The tyrannosaur bared grayish-white half-meter fangs, hot breath washing over me, making a deep, purring snarl, like the throb of a diesel locomotive at idle. Half its face, only an arm's length away, was gone, nothing but melted, healed-over scar tissue, like white bone around a crusted, empty eye socket.

The same one, I thought. The one I hunted as a boy, the one I tried to kill. The one that got away.

It's remaining eye, red as blood, rolled in its socket, looking at me. Another throbbing snarl. Satisfied. Knowing.

It remembers me.

Remembers what I did to it.

Its jaws opened as far as they could in the structure of the cave mouth, tongue curling, red throat waiting as it tried to slip forward, ready for a delicate, fatal bite. I smiled, not even bothering to aim the blaster. Smiled and pulled the trigger.

Blue-white nuclear fire filled the cave like summer heat lightning, wiping us away, dinosaur and all.

I sat up, muscles clenched, looking out through green vegetation at more yellow Venusian sky. In the distance, a trombone howled, and, through the trees, kilometers away, I saw the snaky, yellow-green necks of three apatosaurs rising above the fern fronds by the margin of the river. One of them had a mouthful of reeds, reeds rising and falling, growing smaller as it chewed.

Sparrow sat on the rim of the sleeping nest, watching me.

I sat up, wiping the sweat from my face. "Jesus."

She said, "You seemed upset, Merry. What were you dreaming?"

I looked away, back out through the forest. We'd been moving slowly eastward around the southern rim of Ishtar, following the base of the scarp, trying to stay as far away from the dinosaur lowlands as we dared, another weeks-long journey, though different from the much longer one we'd had on Mars.

"Something ... different."

Her eyes were serious, more understanding than they had been. Something growing in her. A person. Someday she'll be a whole person again, despite what's been done. A new person. She said, "I wondered. For once, your hands weren't strangling anything."

Nice of you not to say, *anyone*. Sometimes, when I woke up, my forearms would be sore, knuckles swollen and distended, from strangling all night long.

I said, "It was something from a story I loved when I was a boy. About an orphan boy, an orphan on Venus who lived by his wits, hunting the jungles with a beat-up old blaster he'd managed to find. Hunting for tyrannosaur, selling it to restaurants, so the rich and beautiful tourists from Earth and Mars could go home and say they'd eaten honest-to-God dinosaur meat." I remembered then how I'd had to look up the meaning of the phrase "diesel locomotive." I smiled at her. "It's why I moved to Venus, when the time came."

"Not the plentiful pussy?"

A twinkle in her eye. A hint of a smile. Becoming a person at last. Someone you had to like, rather than pity. Then she said, "I always dream about men with big dicks. Men fucking me."

Jesus.

She smiled and said, "Do you suppose Mrs. Valentine's husband had a big dick?"

Hard to imagine the fiery, political intellectual Senator Valentine and gray, fat little Teddy ... I said, "Well, I hope so." From somewhere, I remembered, in the end, the orphan boy had gotten an appointment to the Solar Guard Academy on Earth, had passed the entrance examination, passed his courses, becoming an officer and a gentleman.

As I recalled, he'd already been a man, had brought that with him to the table, had taught that one thing to the boys who'd become his comrades.

There was a sudden rustle, above and to my left. I grabbed for the blaster, spinning, aiming, finger going through the trigger guard, tightening. Stopped myself in time.

Three men, dressed in some kind of rough, whitish homespun, long hair bound by strips of cloth, feet in soft moccasins. Crossbows, loaded and cocked but not aimed at us. The one in the lead lifted a hand, palm out, fingers flat, not unlike an Indian in some antique drama, and said, "Good day to you."

I lowered the blaster, taking my finger off the trigger, engaging the safety interlock. "Good morning."

He smiled. "Highlanders call us Bummers," he said.

"I know that. Vidnode dramas about the wild Venesian Bummers are popular all over the Solar Alliance." Popular because they are what we all wish to be, would be, but for what? Our lack of courage? Run away. Run away from it all. Turn your back on job and boss, home, hearth, wife, children, all those bills ...

He laughed, showing crooked yellow teeth, the first human I'd ever seen in need of dental work. In dramas, even Bummers have gleaming white ivory, just like the rest of us. "I hear they like us, even in the star colonies."

I shrugged. I hadn't had much time for entertainment when I was out there. "Maybe so."

He said, "Police are not on your trail anymore. After you knocked down that third helicopter, they fucked up and lost track." It'd gone down in a scream of fire, and we'd been able to see the column of black smoke for hours afterward as we fled deeper into the swamp country south of Sinclair's plantation, making me wonder if we hadn't somehow started a forest fire despite the dampness of the environment.

He said, "You're headed right into Red Devil territory. We don't want you here."

"We need to get through to the eastern slopes, down under Maxwell Montes."

A long, doubtful look, as his fingers slowly stroked the smooth, dark wood butt of his crossbow. "If the police should find you among us ..."

Sparrow stood suddenly, catching every eye, and started to get undressed.

.....

They were taking turns with Sparrow, the smugglers' crew, not even waiting 'til we were on our way, taking a down payment right here, right now, until the ship's computers let them know it was time to be leaving. Taking their turns, one after another, then seconds and thirds, the ones that could, Sparrow on a ratty old beach blanket under the blue shade of a spreading chestnut tree.

Funny that the crew of a tramp freighter turned to smuggling would have beach blankets on hand. Well. Plenty of beaches off-Earth, though most of them are situated on the worlds of other stars. I remembered one. It'd had white sand, powdery, like confectioner's sugar, and Procyon had been a painful silvery spark in a deep green sky, quiet ocean lapping nearby, ultramarine, with a little golden glitter marking each curl of wave.

Beside me, the chief of the Red Devil Bummers said, "I'm sorry we worked her over, too, Merry."

Looking up from the portanode I'd gotten from the smuggler captain as part of the deal, I could see he and his buddies were trying unsuccessfully not to watch. "I wouldn't worry about it, Don. Men were made for what she was made to be."

He said, "What about you?"

What was I made to be? I laughed. "I'm just being punished. Pheromones in my nose with nowhere to go."

"Punished," he said, looking at me, questioning. "The Venusberg Strangler. God, Merry. You seem like such a nice guy."

I snapped the portanode shut, blanking away Teddy's sad, fat face, then said, "Hey, you're not a woman, are you, Don?" and thought about what it would feel like to separate the hairy smuggler's skull from his spine. Getting to like that now, aren't we, Sarge? I wondered if the black helicopters had gotten to Sinclair in time. Once your neck's broke, you've got a few minutes to get on life support before your brain turns to soup.

Don said, "You think these guys can get you where you need to be next?"

Plan C? Watching hairy buttocks rise and fall, I shrugged, tapping the portanode softly. "Maybe so."

The naked smuggler, finished, stood up from her, sweaty face exhausted, fatigued mouth hanging open, staggering a little, maybe looking like he wanted to fall right down. Looking up at him, legs still spread, Sparrow laughed and shouted, "*Next!*"

The smuggler looked like he wanted to kick her then.

Careful what you wish for, boys.

.....

The shell ticketing agent had barely taken his last thrust when I grabbed him by his long, greasy black hair, wrapping my fingers around the base of his pony tail, pulling his head back far enough I could cup his chin in my other palm.

Pull. Twist. Crack-o.

He made a startled gurgle, spasmed, relaxed.

Under him, Sparrow stiffened and whispered, "Oooooohhh ..." Face suffusing with pleasure.

I lifted him gently off her, setting him to one side on the floor. Sparrow stayed where she was, shiny with sweat, eyes shut, slowly running her fingers up and down her abdomen, shivering lightly, then cupping her hands over her vulva.

"You okay?"

She nodded. "He got real stiff when you did that. Like he was having another orgasm." Her eyes opened, looking into mine. She said, "I'm glad you let me finish with him first, Merry."

I nodded, helping her to her feet, drying her off with the ticket agent's bedding. While she was getting dressed, I balled him up, listening to the soft whisper of his last breath as I squeezed it from his lungs, binding him up in a ball, wrapping him in the blanket. His eyes were still open and, somewhere inside, he was probably still alive, still conscious, growing woozy perhaps, flooded with horror.

I looked out through the ticket agent's apartment window and said, "It'll be darktime soon. We can take him outside and stash him somewhere." Not that it really mattered. Someone will notice he's missing, not doing his job anymore, but that will be the end of it. A new ticket agent will move in and do the job and not wonder what became of his predecessor.

Outside, the transit habitat's stemshine was beginning to dull into orange, would soon turn dull violet, letting the world within dim to a simulacrum of night. All around us, you could see shadows filling the vegetation, lights starting to come on in the low buildings, the pseudotown that made this imitation of a world.

Four kilometers long, by one in diameter. Barely enough space for its intended passenger compliment of ten thousand to get by on what had once been the long, long voyage between the stars. The relativistic cyclers had been obsolete for a hundred years, though they'd made do for another little while with the

installation of a first-generation hyperdrive.

Now, with the new advanced stardrives growing cheaper and cheaper, they'd become cargo hulls, and a way for the poor to make their way between far-apart worlds.

Another generation, and they'd be gone.

I dragged the ticket agent to the door, leaving him just inside 'til it got a little darker. Sparrow was standing by the window, looking up into the pseudosky, where you could pretend the lights of tiny, inverted apartment buildings were square yellow stars.

No windows to the universe beyond. Anyway, the one time I'd seen into hyperspace, it'd looked like an Edvard Munch painting.

I said, "While you were busy, I broke into the ticket agent's node. It's got better access rights than the one the smugglers sold us."

She kept her back toward me, seeming to hug herself, hands coming up over her arms.

Then she whispered, "Couldn't we just stay here forever?"

Right. Stay here forever, so you can fuck the men, and I can kill them, and we all live happily ever after. I put my arms around her, slowly turned her to face me, took her head between my palms and tipped it back, so she had to look into my eyes again.

She leaned into me, putting her arms around the barrel of my chest, straddling my thigh, grinding against me hard, and said, "I'm sorry, Merry."

I held her tight, wishing there was something meaningful I could say or do.

.....

They call the place 61 Cygni C-16, and I'd been here before. When I was in the Guard, we'd taken to calling it the Mauve Star's Planet, something from a book, I think. One of Sinclair's junior officers had apparently majored in late medieval literature while he was in ROTC and was always yammering about "therms" and "frigi-plasmic life forms." Stuff like that, but the place didn't really have a name. Stark realization: Sparrow'd been here before, too. Well, no. Senator Valentine had.

Sparrow and I were riding through the forested hills above Baidarka 6 Admin Center in a rented Volvo Planetokhod Jeepster, nothing in our ears but the click of our rebreather valves, the soft whisper of static in the headphones.

When I'd been here before, during the Police Action, I'd mostly been on the nighttime part of the farside, and there'd been a dark, starry sky overhead the whole time. Here and now, B was still up, rising wan and yellow over the southern horizon, rising into a deep violet sky lit by A's tiny disk, dominated by the vast, sullen coal of C, the Mauve Star, circling A once every five years or so.

Darker than a moonlit night. There were a few bright stars here and there, familiar negative-magnitude giants, familiar as the constellations of night had been, 3.42 parsecs from Earth. That same junior officer

had called the Earth's sun Sol 357, as if it had a real name, too. I'd been to Wolf 359 once and figured the storyteller who made up the name picked the number for its flavor of familiarity, so he could go ahead and just call all the other stars suns, when seen floating in a planetary sky.

I slowed up, going around a curve, and Sparrow suddenly put her hand on my thigh, high up, not quite reaching into my crotch. I looked over at her briefly, then put my eyes back on the road, which was barely more than a rutted track.

She said, "I'm scared, Merry."

"Me, too."

The forest around us was bare crystalline stalks, more like big dead glass bushes than trees. No undergrowth. No nothing. When we stopped the jeep, you could hear a tiny faraway tinkle, stalks of glass rustling in the gentle breeze.

She said, "You suppose Mrs. Valentine would've been scared?"

"I didn't know Mrs. Valentine."

Silence. Then, "Me, neither."

I wanted to pull the jeep over, get us out of our masks, hold her close, nuzzle her face, do something, anything, to comfort her. But the air here was 800 millibars of dry nitrogen mixed with a thin leavening of aromatic hydrocarbons.

The tiny seas here, big lakes really, were chemical salt water with a lot of dissolved ethanol. I'm told the seawater tastes like a vodka tonic, though if you take more than a sip you get deathly ill from the metal salts. I knew a few guys wound up in sick bay that way.

Down by the seas, you can still see some of the residual native life forms, things like black stromatolites, flatworms the size of your finger squirming in the sand. I'd seen pictures of life in the seas, mainly stuff like leathery jellyfish and sheets of black rubber "algae."

Life here had barely started its climb onto the land when we showed up. Useless. Until we got to Delta Pavonis II and discovered a similar sort of world with a much richer biosphere. I could picture some scientibureaucrat turning to his little buddies in a meeting, somewhere, sometime: "Hey, I got a *great* idea! Let's Pavoniform the place!"

So. Animal-like things, plant-like things, the Pavonian surrogates for fungi and bacteria. Whatever those wonderful "dry-land ecologists" thought was necessary. Sort of worked, I guess. Here's the forest primeval and...

We rounded a boulder, and there the rutted track was blocked by a pile of fallen glass vegetation, a couple of dozen "tree trunks" stretching from one side to the other, touching glass forest on either side. Sparrow's hand on my thigh squeezed tight as I slowed to a stop, put the jeep transmission in neutral and set the brake lock.

I patted her hand. "Nobody's after us, Sparrow."

She said, "What if those people you talked to lied to us? What if they turned us in?"

Big black spiders the size of Airedale terriers started creeping around the sides of the roadblock, surrounding the jeep as Sparrow's hand froze. I patted it again, unclipped my seat harness and got out,

stretching the kinks in my back. We'd been driving for hours.

Funny thing about the Pavoniforming of 61 Cygni C-16. Some of the animals they brought in had had crude tools of a sort, mainly sharpened bits of glass forest vegetation. Maybe better than the stalks of grass and chewed-leaf sponges the chimps had had when they still existed, not so impressive as *Homo habilis*' broken cobble choppers.

Funny thing. These Pavionians, involuntary colonists, all had little glass spears, except the one right in front of me, who had a paralo-ray pistol clipped to a D-ring on the little green plastic harness it wore, the only one of them not naked. It shifted the gun with the tips of its two front legs, handling it a little like a rifle, looping a third leg tip through the trigger guard.

Sparrow, frightened, softly said, "Merry?"

I searched the top of the fuzzy black body, looking for things like eyes, but couldn't find any, noticing the neat way that third leg bent as it pressed lightly against the trigger button. I guess having ten legs, each with a sliver of retractile claw on the end, is a pretty good substitute for fingers.

I said, "Get out of the jeep, Sparrow. Come over here."

When she'd done so, the gun-toting spider backed away, keeping the gun on us, and a lane opened among the others, directing us toward one side of the roadblock.

She whispered, "Can they talk?"

"I don't think so. Nobody officially knows how they communicate; when I was here, supposedly they didn't, but I guess the human rebels figured something out."

I don't know what I was expecting on the other side of that glassy rubbish pile. A little gray fat man, maybe, with eyes only for Sparrow? It was a tall skinny guy in worn-out old fatigues, straw-colored hair sticking out from under his cap, washed-out blue eyes staring through his rebreather mask goggles.

He held out a hand, "Long time no see, Sarge."

"Who ..."

"Dempsey."

I searched my memory. Maybe ...

"Just a recruit, Sarge. Squad Eight. Missing in action, Month Five."

Vaguely, I remembered a skinny kid with eyes like these, messy hair that kept getting him on report, though not by me. I took his hand, squeezed it gently.

He squeezed back, said, "This way, please." Looked at Sparrow and said, "Senator?"

Beyond the roadblock, we heard the jeep start up and begin driving away.

.....

I stood in the mouth of a cave, looking out over a broad valley, up through a light gasohol rain at the Mauve Star nailed to its place in the dim, vivid sky. Funny. I keep waiting for it to move, but it never does.

There was mist in the valley, white tendrils tinted faint pastel by the violet light curling among the silver glass trees, little turquoise pond down on the bottom land stained with a purple reflection of the Mauve Star.

I could feel my heart pounding in my chest, feel how terribly frightened I was. There was the scuff of a footfall behind me, and, when I turned, here was the little fat man at last.

He said, "Sergeant Atkins?"

I smiled. "They call me Merry now."

His eyes flinched slightly, jerking away from my face, coming back. "She calls you Merry."

She.

I tried to imagine that terrible reunion scene. Tried to imagine him knowing what had been done to her, what she'd become, knowing she didn't remember him at all.

He said, "After the surgery, won't you want your name back?"

I smiled. "The man who was Sergeant Atkins has been gone a long time." What's it to be, Tommy this an' Tommy that? I said, "He turned into the Venusberg Strangler, then into ... *this*." I spread my hands, palms toward him. "Maybe a new name. Some combination ..."

His smile warmed up, and suddenly I could see what Sarah MacKay Valentine might have wanted with a little gray fat man. "What, Merry Strangler?"

It made me grin, despite the terror strangling my guts. Then I said, "What's going to happen next?"

His smile faded. "To you?"

I shook my head. "I know what's going to happen to me. But ..." I gestured out at the red-lit landscape.

He said, "Maybe you don't realize what you've done, Sergeant." His eyes, not looking at me, grew far, far away. "By this time next year, President Gortex will be impeached and removed from office. By this time next year, perhaps, Speaker Summerbird and his little buddies will be sitting on a prison asteroid somewhere, starting their re-education program." He made a smilelike grimace, coming back from next year for a moment, glancing at me. "You took care of Mr. Barr for us, Merry. Guess we won't have to worry about him."

True.

Then he said, "When the word gets out, of what was done to her ... Maybe by this time next year, Mrs. Valentine will be taking the oath of office, and ..." His eyes misted up suddenly, making him turn away to look down into the little valley again. A soft whisper, "Maybe the common scum will be taking their government back at last from ..."

I put my strangler's hand on his shoulder and squeezed lightly. "She'll be all right. When the doctors restore her personality, they'll take away all memory of ..."

He twisted out from under my hand, looking up at me, eyes flooded with pain. "She told them to leave it intact."

"But . . ." The trauma that would result when they combined Senator Valentine with the woman Sparrow had become . . .

Teddy Valentine said, "She wants to remember you, Merry."

My turn to look away, landscape suddenly blurred. After a bit, I said, "What about the prisoners in Blue Heaven? What about that?"

"It'll be publicized, when the time comes."

When the time comes. "And until then?" Suddenly, the image of Janet, Janet and her dead children, drowned for the sake of love, rose up out of the inner darkness.

"Sparrow says they've been punished enough. Mrs. Valentine won't forget that, either."

There was another scuffing footfall in the cave mouth behind us. It was a little blue-eyed, blonde woman, dressed in green surgical scrubs. She said, "We're ready for you now, Sergeant Atkins." No fear in her eyes, only kindness, though she must know who I am, what they were bringing back into being.

I nodded, heart thundering, and took a step to follow her, wondering what I'd do with myself when it was all over.

"Merry."

I turned back to face the little gray fat man.

He said, "I want you to remember something. The man who counts isn't the one who wins. It's the one who does the right thing."

I nodded and turned away, wondering if the one right thing I'd done would ever be enough.

The End