

Teen Angel

by R. Garcia y Robertson

Tor has just released the author's latest "Lady Robyn" novel, *White Rose*, in paperback, and he is at work on a new book in the series entitled *King's Lady*. A fantasy hardcover novel, *Firebird*, will be out from Tor in the spring. Rod's latest tale for us is set in the same universe as his February 2005 cover story, "Oxygen Rising."

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Deirdre of the Sorrows

"Here comes the Angel of Death." Deirdre heard some thug say it in slaver slang as she stepped out of the lock onto *Fafnir's* E-deck. She fixed a smile on her face. Nice greeting, shipmate, let us hope it does not come true for you. The slaver's horrified look turned instantly into a stare as blank as the armored bulkhead.

Hardly the effect she hoped for. Having just shuttled up from Hades, she wore thigh-length leather boots beneath a shimmering cloth-of-silver kimono, cut short to show off her hips. With her came two SuperCat bodyguards, two-meter tall bioconstructs, Homo smilodon--half human, half feline--with tawny fur, curved dagger-like canines, human hands and forebrains, and tiny bobbed tails. This particular pair wore battle armor, riot pistols, and stun grenades, but the *Fafnir's* crew did not give the gene-spliced killers a second glance. *She* was what scared them.

Having hardened Eridani slavers blanch at the sight of her was something new to Deirdre. Since birth she had been outrageously beautiful, a gorgeous baby that only grew more lovely. So lovely, that for much of her short life, she had been treated more like a gaudy objet d'art than a real person--witness her current black-leather geisha outfit. Even as an infant, men oohed and cooed over Deirdre, telling her how cute and lovely she was, happily predicting she would become a "real heart breaker."

That had yet to happen. Until she was twelve, Deirdre took this adulation as just another adult extravagance. Attention was nice, but hardly turned her head. Who wanted to be "a heart breaker" anyway? Not her. Growing up on New Harmony, she had been far more concerned with sleepovers and sky sailing. Her home world lived the way the King would, with tolerance and mercy to all. Looks were not everything--or so her parents said.

At age twelve Deirdre found out looks could indeed be everything, literally life and death, teaching her just how unusually beautiful she was. Huddled in a public blast shelter during the tail end of a slaver raid on Goodwill City, she prayed for Priscilla's protection, listened in horror as a slaver went through the shelter eliminating witnesses.

Whatever weapon the slaver used was noiseless. Eyes shut tight, Deirdre

heard terrified pleas and cries of terror, cut off one by one, sobs and begging replaced by silence. She recognized her friends' voices, fellow members of the Lisa-Marie middle school's Humanities Club, who had left school early for a field trip, to cheer up terminal patients at a local hospice. Now they were dying horribly.

Finally the killer's footsteps came to her. She looked up into the black muzzle of a silenced machine pistol.

Too terrified to cry, she watched the man's eyes widen, his finger frozen on the firing stud. For a long moment they stared at each other, killer and victim. Then she saw that familiar reassuring smile. He liked how she looked.

Holstering his pistol, the man helped Deirdre up, and led her out of the shelter, stepping over the bodies of strangers and schoolmates, finding her a seat on a shuttle bound for orbit--bumping off a huge, heavily armed felon with hideous tattoos and a horrendous price on his head. Justice was closing in, and slavers were in a mad scramble to board, facing automatic death sentences if they failed. Slaving was the only capital offense left on New Harmony--since the King taught mercy and tolerance, not total suicide. Yet the fleeing raiders cheerfully made room for her, talking softly and trying not to scare her. All the way into orbit, a tattooed killer held Deirdre's hand, telling her not to be afraid as they left home far behind.

That was when she was twelve. Slavers saw that she grew even more beautiful, blossoming into a radiant young woman under strict diet and constant exercise, with biosculpt ridding her of any incipient blemish. At eighteen she was stunning, which made the hateful looks from the *Fafnir*'s crew all the more appalling.

Worse yet, Deirdre knew it was true. She was the Angel of Death, for them and for her. Konar would not have brought her aboard unless he meant to die. If Konar thought he could win the upcoming fight, he would have left her on Hades, which was honeycombed with blast shelters and secret bunkers dug by slavers over the centuries. Bringing her aboard was as good as saying there were no safe refuges, and this was the last fight. Konar would never leave his flagship alive, and had brought his sex toy aboard to die with him.

Her stomach heaved as she entered the starboard lift, and slavers hurriedly got out, leaving it to her and the SuperCats. Recycled air reeked of sweat, fear, and synthetic sealants. She ignored the hostile looks, knowing it was not her they hated, just what she represented--the ghastly fate hanging over them all. Nuclear annihilation was about the nicest future they could anticipate. Or explosive decompression.

Doors dilated for her. Tubes and ducts snaked overhead. *Fafnir* began life as the high-g survey ship *Endurance*, but slavers had taken her on her maiden voyage, turning her into a warship, with blast shields and armored bulkheads, stripping and reinforcing the hull, making *Fafnir* stronger, faster, more focused to a task, ruthlessly discarding whatever they did not want. Not unlike what they did to

Deirdre.

Commander Hess of the *Hiryu* greeted her on A-deck; dark eyed, black-haired, and alert, he wore his dress uniform thrown open to show the flying dragon tattoo curled round his left nipple. Too professional to display fear, Hess bowed neatly, with a flick of his black curls, and a curt click of his heels. "If my lady will follow me." He showed the way with his palm.

"How goes the *Hiryu*?" This was a silly stab at making conversation, since all of Konar's ships were surely doomed.

"Could not be better," Hess lied casually. Things could hardly be worse, with Navy cruisers headed insystem, slowing from near light speed. *Hiryu* faced a losing battle along with the rest of Konar's little fleet, but the one nice thing about Hess was that he never deigned to show his feelings. Deirdre appreciated this reticence, since Commander Hess's inner workings sickened her. Physically. Being this close to Hess made her want to barf up her gourmet lunch.

Her quarters had a hemispherical pressure hatch, a sad indication that someone thought the main pressure would fail. The slaver on duty gulped at seeing her, asking Hess, "Is she wired?"

Hess nodded curtly. By now Deirdre was used to being discussed in third person. "Where's her remote?" the guard demanded. Hess gave him a "where-do-you-think" look, and the slaver shut up. Dismissing the SuperCats, Hess led her through the hatch, into the cabin.

Immense vistas opened up before her. Picture windows looked out over forest and sea, as if the cabin sat on a pine-clad pinnacle above a river valley filled with woods and farmland. In the foreground she saw a fishing village, and, farther down river, a port city stood at the mouth of a fjord. Storm clouds hung over the distant ocean, but an orange-red sun shone down on the cabin, framed by a small pair of moons. All extremely unreal, since the cabin was buried deep in a starship, behind layers of armored bulkheads. Living quarters on *Fafnir* were still those of a deep space survey ship, using 3V and sensurround to keep claustrophobia at bay.

Deirdre could smell the pines, and hear birds singing above the drone of insects. Rock climbers waved to her from a nearby pinnacle, a fun group of healthy young people, close enough to call to from the "balcony" beyond the windows--if you wanted to talk to holos. She asked Hess, "Is this world real?"

"Elysium, Delta Eridani II, we raided it once." Hess grinned at the virtual landscape. "Not a full out landing--Delta E is too far in for that--just a picked team with pre-set targets." Hess meant a kidnapping. Not all slaver crimes were on the horrific scale of the New Harmony Raid; sometimes they slipped into civilized systems, snatching up valuable individuals for ransom, or resale. "But a rousing success nonetheless." Hess preened, as if she should congratulate him.

He already had her missing the SuperCats. "Can I change it?" Deirdre asked. Delta E meant nothing to her.

"Your bunkmates might object." Hess nodded at the balcony, where two children had come out to call to the climbers--a boy about eight or nine with impossibly purple hair, spiked on top, and a girl a couple of years older, whose squared-off blonde hair ended in a shoulder-level blue stripe.

"Bunkmates?" She thought they were holos. The purple-haired boy scrambled up onto the balcony rail, leaning over the virtual gap, waving vigorously at the climbers, while the blonde girl with the blue fringe looked bored. Alike enough to be brother and sister, they wore expensive Home System outfits, cut down versions of adult fashions. Appalled to find these were real kids, Deirdre hissed, "Who are they?"

"Insurance," Hess replied airily.

"What does that mean?" It was bad enough that she was going to die--did she have to watch kids die as well?

"They are the grandchildren of Albrecht Van Ho, Director General of River Lines," Hess explained. "That pair of AMCs headed insystem belong to River Lines. They might be a shade less eager to vaporize us with these two aboard."

Maybe. Personally, she hated staking her existence on corporate pity. River Lines had not operated for centuries in the worst stretches of the Eridani by pulling punches. Having no mercy themselves, slavers misjudged kindness in others--taking it for weakness, or stupidity. Did anyone really think the Navy would give up and go home rather than fry some CEO's grandkids? For Priscilla's sake, why not just load *Fafnir* up with baby puppies?

Deirdre had long ago stopped trying to explain compassion to Commander Hess. New Harmony had taught her to do good for others. "Love thy neighbor," is what the King said, and what he practiced, moving Priscilla in next door to Graceland. It worked for Elvis, and it worked for her. Compassion came easy, when a kind word or a simple favor from a girl so lovely as her brightened anyone's day. Deirdre liked people thinking her a darling angel--not knowing how little effort it took. Like giving away Cadillacs, when you owned a zillion of them.

When she first arrived on Hades, Deirdre tried diligently to live by the laws of New Harmony, treating everyone with kindness, sympathy, and understanding, hoping for fairness in return--vastly amusing her captors. Slavers raised the price of compassion, teaching Deirdre to keep such feelings to herself. They cared not a whit how others felt, which was their biggest failing, the one most likely to get them all killed. But try telling that to an Eridani slaver. Otherwise they were orderly and efficient, and extremely good at what they did, which was kidnapping people for sale, ransom, or personal use. Deirdre complained, "Do I have to bunk with them?"

Her best chance of getting away was to convince some man that she was well worth saving. Hauling two kids about easily halved her slim chances.

Hess shrugged, “No room. Ship-of-war, and all that. Besides, this is not so bad,” he looked happily about, running a keen reaver’s gaze over the cabin’s real ivory inlay, and pre-atomic cut crystal. Commander Hess was mysteriously immune to the pall her arrival cast over the flagship. Did Hess know something that she did not? Probably. His smile broadened, the first real smile she had seen since coming aboard. Hess asked, “We have come a long way, haven’t we?”

Deirdre did not answer. Hess had saved her life, forming a weird bond between them, though it hardly made them close. She had been living with slavers since she was twelve, but Commander Hess was the one that gave her nightmares, scaring her more than any of them, more than Konar himself. Just being in the same room with him gave her the cold, screaming shivers.

Hess was the slaver who went through that Goodwill City blast shelter, killing everyone but her. Six years later, she could still hear her classmates’ pleas and screams in her head, echoing off steel reinforced walls. And she always feared Hess would one day kill her, just to finish the job. Some nights Deirdre dreamed she was back in the blast shelter, staring into the pistol muzzle, only this time Hess pulled the trigger, and she felt the silent bullets strike.

Commander Hess of the *Hiryu* did another little heel-clicking bow, then left. Thank Gladys. Deirdre sank down into a glove leather chair, mulling options. The two well-dressed kids were still out on the balcony, waving stupidly at the holos--at least the boy was. Deirdre had friends and contacts on Hades that she ached to talk to, but *Fafnir* was under communications lock down--leaving her on her own.

Shutting her eyes, Deirdre tried desperately to think. She could not die, not with rescue only light hours away. Somehow she would save herself. But how? Behind her blemishless, biosculpted features, lurked the hideous truth that beauty was only skin deep--it did not make her better, smarter, or more noble. It did not even make her nicer, though people liked to think so. So far it just made for incredibly weird relations with men.

“Cool boots.”

She opened her eyes. Both kids had come in from the balcony, and the boy with spiked purple hair stood in front of her, staring at her black leather boots. He looked up at her, saying, “So, what are you doing in my Grand-dad’s cabin?”

Her inquisitor wore a natty man’s jacket, cut just for him, and neatly tailored pants. His own shoes were a pricy pair of snake-skin slippers over silk stockings. He asked again, “What are you doing in Grand-dad’s cabin?”

“He still thinks we are on Elysium,” the girl explained. She was older than her brother, but not by much. Up close they were clearly brother and sister, even though

his hair was purple, and hers blue-blonde.

“Prove we are not,” the boy insisted. His sister rolled her blue eyes--like she really had to “prove” they were abducted by slavers, and light years from anywhere.

Deirdre sighed. “Chuck him over the balcony rail, that will show him.” Despite the yawning virtual cliff, there was no drop “outside.” A swan dive off the balcony would end in a belly flop on the cabin deck, masked by holographic display. But it was not Deirdre’s job to disillusion him. If the boy wanted to believe he was safe at home--instead of on a slaver starship about to be obliterated--what was the harm?

“Who are you?” the girl asked, wearing the junior miss version of her brother’s outfit, right down to the snake-skin slippers, except she had on a pleated skirt in place of pants, and cuffs trimmed with lace. There was no need to ask their names--”Heather” and “Jason” were on their jacket collars.

“Deirdre.” She made an effort to smile, sitting up in her seat. Just because they were all going to die was no reason not to be cheerful.

“Where are you from?” Jason demanded. “We’re from Elysium.” He pointed to the panorama outside the picture windows.

Right. She glanced at the supposed scene outside. Skycycles circled over the village below, riding thermals off steep pine-clad cliffs, red-gold afternoon sun glinting on their control surfaces--too bad it was not true. “I’m from New Harmony,” she admitted, sinking back in the chair, knowing what children raised in a place like this would think.

“New Hicksville,” scoffed the boy. “Hippie planet.”

Heather told him, “It’s not nice to say that,” though you could tell by her tone the blonde girl thought it was true.

Deirdre widened her smile to include Jason, thinking, “At least New Harmony is a real planet, you little preppy-suited marmoset. I’m not making do with a holo, and pretending it’s home.” But she did not say it, meeting rudeness with a smile. Her “hippie planet” had taught her not to taunt helpless doomed children, no matter how richly they deserved it.

“Where do you think we are?” Heather asked, stepping closer, ignoring her brother’s pretense of being safe at home.

“You’re off planet,” Deidre told them, trying to break it to them slowly. Way off planet.

Heather nodded soberly, “I guessed that. We have been gone for so long without anyone finding us.” She was smart, belying what folks said about dyed blondes. Smart enough to be far more scared than her brother.

“But if they could take us off planet, they could have taken us to Grandfather’s lodge,” the boy insisted. Kept alone like this, brother-sister bickering must be the main entertainment.

“Where off planet?” Heather asked, not bothering to contradict her brother.

“Tartarus system.” She saw their blank stares. “Way the heck into the Outback. Triple system in the Far Eridani, a small red dwarf primary, Tartarus A, and a distant pair of white dwarf binaries--too far away to much affect Hades. That is the planet we are orbiting.”

“Orbiting?” They both looked askance--the cabin seemed solidly rooted atop its mountain ridge.

“We are aboard a starship.”

Jason scoffed, but Heather asked, “What starship?” Above hiding behind fantasy, Heather wanted to hear the whole truth.

Not that the girl would get that from Deirdre, who did not mean to tell these kids they would soon be blown to photons. “She’s the *Fafnir*, used to be the survey ship *Endurance*. Slavers have her now.” She must let the kids know that these were evil men, never to be trusted; though, needless to say, slavers had no sense of privacy, routinely recording everything important prisoners did and said, preventing escapes and providing amusement.

“Slavers?” Heather looked less horrified than she should have--but the girl could not possibly imagine how bad things were. So far they had treated the kids royally. “Is that who that man with the dragon tattoo was, the one you talked to?” Heather had been watching her and Hess.

“One of the worst.” Deirdre nodded solemnly, knowing Hess would relish the compliment. “But their leader’s name is Konar.”

“Why have they brought us here?” Heather’s hand took hold of the silver hem of Deirdre’s kimono, silently twisting the fabric where it rested on the chair, the only sign of how much the question scared her.

“For ransom from your grandfather.” Sort of. No harm in letting them hope to get home alive.

“What about you?” Jason asked, resenting her taking his sister’s side. “Why are you here?” He stubbornly refused to admit that “here” was not his home.

Why indeed? “I was kidnapped too, from New Harmony.”

“He means, why did they kidnap you?” Heather guessed that no hick from New Harmony had a trillionaire grandfather.

Deirdre heaved a sigh, not wanting to go into this too deeply. “Because I am

pretty. And I am now Konar's girlfriend." Sort of. His property more precisely, but who needed to hear that? She had spent her teen years working her way up the slaver hierarchy, and at eighteen had hit the top. "He is the head slaver who commands this ship. The whole system, really."

"Why?" Jason looked disbelieving. "Isn't that gross?"

"Do you love him?" asked Heather.

Like she had a choice. Deirdre was saved from having to answer by a chime going off in her head--one only she could hear. She sat up in her chair, saying, "Have to go."

"Go where?" Heather was appalled to find her leaving.

Deirdre gently untwined Heather's fingers from the kimono, solemnly taking the girl's hand in hers. "I'll be back," she promised, hoping it was the truth. In less than an hour, she had gone from not wanting to see these kids, to not wanting to leave them. Even the condemned craved human contact.

Deirdre called out to the door, and it dilated. The slaver on duty stuck his head in, and she told him, "He wants to see me." By "he" she meant Konar. Konar had a garish title--Grand Dragon of the Free Brotherhood--but no one ever used it, least of all Deirdre. Konar was "he" or "him"--or in rare moments of affection, "the Old Man" or "Old Snake Nick." Otherwise, he was just Konar. Like Hitler, or Satan. Everyone knew who you meant.

Except for these two little rich kids. "Where are you going?" Heather asked plaintively. Jason looked truculent, but if he meant to throw a tantrum he was out of luck. *Fafnir* ran on raw testosterone, and when Konar called for her services, even a grandson of General Director Albrecht Van Ho had to wait.

"So let's not keep him," the slaver suggested. He casually aimed a remote at the kids, his finger on SLEEP.

Standing up, she bid the kids good-bye, following the slaver down to C-deck. Konar did not need holographic vistas to stay sane, and his command cabin seemed incredibly spare compared to the sumptuous quarters of his hostages--just four bulkheads and a float-a-bed. Slavers cared little for status, valuing people for their own sake. That was the sole way they resembled folks on New Harmony.

As she entered, Konar was meeting with his captains around a virtual conference table. Hess was there in the flesh, but the captains of the *Fukuryu* and the *Hydra*, and their first lieutenants, were holograms beamed from the ships.

Speed-of-light lag delayed their reactions to her entrance, but several looked shocked. None showed fear, though they knew best how thin the odds were. These were old-time slavers, who had lived with their death sentences for so long they almost seemed born with them. All of them had survived botched raids, grueling life

and death chases, hairbreadth escapes from hopeless situations, ghastly torture sessions, and gruesome prisoner eliminations. Incoming government cruisers did not frighten them much, and pretty teenagers did not scare them a whit. She was just one of the perks that made such horrendous risks worthwhile.

Her own remote lay on the float-a-bed, so she sat down beside it. Konar treated her like a piece of disappearing furniture--she came when he called, then left when he dismissed her. Other than that, she was an integral part of his life. On Hades she sat in on his conferences and private suppers, listened to his troubles, rubbed his temples while he thought, and told him stories about her childhood on New Harmony, attending to Konar's every need while they were together.

Watching him give orders, she tried to tell if Konar meant to die. He looked as vital as ever, his compact bull-like body stripped to the waist, with tattooed dragons, crawling over his naked torso, his most fascinating feature by far. Sometimes Deirdre lost herself in those dragons, following them across his body for hours, forgetting everything else. Each dragon had a story, a successful raid, a ship he captured or commanded; occasionally he told her the stories, the closest he ever came to boasting. Otherwise he was nothing special to look at, with a blunt bald head, alert eyes, ferocious strength, and a genial smile. Except that this nondescript face was infamous, known and feared throughout the Eridani.

Floating above the table top was a 3V display, showing different parts of Tartarus system. Tartarus and Hades hung near the center of the display, along with Hades' two moons, Minos and Charon. Farther out came the gas giants Cerberus and Persephone. Still farther out, at the extreme edge of the display were Tartarus' twin companions, two white dwarfs spinning around each other. Seen as tiny sparks of light, the slavers' situation did not look so bad. Three government cruisers were headed insystem, accompanied by a pair of smaller corvettes. Four slaver ships stood ready to face them--*Fafnir*, *Hiryu*, *Fukuryu*, and *Hydra*.

Five to four did not seem overwhelming, but the numbers were horribly deceiving. *Hydra* was the converted colony ship *Liberia*, helpless in battle. And leading the incoming ships was the Navy light cruiser *Atalanta*, which outgunned the entire slaver fleet. For once the vastness of space worked against the slavers, giving them nowhere to hide. Abandon Tartarus system, and their ships would be run down in the emptiness of interstellar space. It was win or die. Typically Konar tackled the task head on, telling his captains that he and *Fafnir* would face *Atalanta*. "You gentlemen must make do with what is left."

They laughed. Konar wanted *Hiryu*, *Fukuryu*, and *Hydra* to face down two merchant cruisers and the corvettes--a stiff fight, but not half what Konar faced. Konar was using his fabled reputation to finesse the most alarming problem--the *Atalanta*. If anyone could defeat a Navy cruiser with a converted survey ship, it was Old Snake Nick.

On that light note Konar closed the conference. Hologram captains winked

out with their lieutenants, leaving Konar and Hess--the only ones physically aboard the *Fafnir*. Neither bothered to look at her. Leaning across the virtual table, Hess whispered conspiratorially, "You know there are other ways to do it than diving down their throats."

Konar settled back in his seat, eyeing Hess. Konar was the only person Hess was honest with. Deirdre did not think anyone could lie to Konar. Certainly not her, and probably not Hess. Konar did not bother with galvanic sensors or reading heart rates--having seen so many people saying anything to save themselves, he knew all the "tells" that gave liars away. Smiling grimly, he asked Hess, "How goes the escape pod?"

Hess nodded. "Totally operational. Waiting to be used."

"The pod only carries six," Konar pointed out.

Hess shrugged. "Whoever thought the hounds would get this far? There was no time to increase capacity. The others would just have to be convinced to carry on without us."

Konar laughed at that. Both of them acted she was not there, casually discussing escapes and betrayals as if Deirdre were part of the float-a-bed. But neither did anything by accident. Hess had his own way of dealing with truth, and probably counted her as dead already. While Konar might want her to know all about the escape plan, to get her hopes up for some purpose known only to him.

And her hopes were up. Way up. Suddenly she might actually live through this nightmare. Six seats in this "escape pod" meant two for them, and four to be filled. Why bring her up from Hades, unless Konar wanted her in one of those seats? He must have known she would scare the heck out of his crew.

"Escape to where?" Konar sounded doubtful. "Six of us in a tiny boat, alone in an awfully big cosmos." Right now Konar was king of his world, with a whole system-cum-slave-emporium at his command. Hades was not just his hide-out, but a hub for slaving throughout the Far Eridani, where ships and cargoes were fenced, where deals were struck and prisoners resold--all in a fleshy carnival mood catering to crews on leave. Why trade his personal pleasure planet for a tiny escape pod headed into the void?

"Where there is life, there is hope," Hess suggested. "The pod is on the hangar deck, in berth L, programmed to go--code word 'Medea.' Use it, or not." With that Hess got up, his chair vanishing into the deck, along with the table, leaving the 3V display hanging in space. Hess grinned at her, doing a swift nodding bow, then left, tickled to see the girl he saved, all grown up and sitting on his boss' float-a-bed. Yet another coup for the *Hiryu*'s able commander.

Konar studied the hanging 3V display, not acknowledging her arrival. Deirdre waited. Without looking at her, Konar ordered, "Take off the kimono."

She got up and obeyed. Konar liked seeing her in just the leather boots, never letting her wear underwear. Other than that, his tastes were pretty plain. Sex was not that important to Konar. He did not need it all the time, or to twist it into anything kinky--not much at least. By now she was the galaxy's foremost authority on the Grand Dragon's sex preferences, and while Konar might be an insane mass murderer, he was thankfully not much of a sadist. So long as he had the most beautiful woman available at his complete command, Konar seemed fairly content with extreme mental cruelty.

He turned and grinned, liking what he saw. She smiled back, determined to win a seat in that escape pod, set to give Konar a reason to live, and to save her as well.

Picking up her remote, Konar stroked her cheek with his free hand. He was hardly taller than her. Konar always said size did not matter--"Napoleon was shorter than you." When she had to ask who Napoleon was, he laughed, telling her a story of Old Earth, from the days before Elvis. His fingers came to rest on her bare shoulder. "Are you nervous?"

Her smile had not fooled him. She nodded earnestly, knowing she could not lie her way into that escape pod, not to Konar.

"Don't be frightened," he told her, thumbing her remote. "Be sexy."

Immediately she was not frightened, not in the least. Sharp urgent desire shot through her, going from groin to nipples. She wanted the slaver's strong, merciless tattooed body inside her--right now. Konar had skipped the setting for foreplay, and internal wiring allowed him to bring her to orgasm at the press of a button. She opened her mouth to say how much she wanted him, to beg Konar to take her with him--just her and him, so they could be together forever and ever. Konar pushed MUTE.

Sex with Konar was never boring. Sometimes he liked to play with the remote, forcing her through every physical-emotional state from abject terror to repeated multiple orgasm, merely for his private amusement. Or to entertain a guest. Twice he did it for Hess. But no one needed that now, least of all Deirdre. She had already gone through every emotion she could imagine, from abject horror at leaving Hades, to orgiastic hope that she might somehow survive this, if she just pleased Konar totally. She had been by turns scared, surprised, amused, maternal, wary, hopeful, and now sex crazed. And it was still the morning watch.

When he was fully inside her, Konar whispered, "Do not worry about being left behind."

His words cut through the haze of desire. Deirdre very much wanted to be left on Hades, but she could not say it, even if she had dared. All her being was fixed on pleasing Konar, and earning a seat on that escape pod. Konar could tell, and when he was done, he patted her butt, saying, "I will never give you up."

Just what every girl wants to hear. Even Konar had a human side, somewhere. Back in her shared cabin, Deirdre collapsed in the sauna, telling warm water to cascade over her. Too wrung out to think, she listened to the drops pound down on her, glad to have a moment to herself, with nothing to plan, or evaluate, or submit to--just pure, clean, clear, warm water, carrying her worries away.

Despite all the glowing predictions, Deirdre's luck with men had been ghastly. Fate had simply fallen on her out of orbit. Had she left school later, or ducked into a different shelter when the sirens sounded, her life would have been totally different. She might already be dead. Deirdre thanked Elvis for giving her life and hope, glad he had an undying love for teenage girls--who had first made him King.

Jason was there when she got out, saying his sister was asleep, wanting to know, "Where did you go? Was that guy you talked with really a slaver?" He was warming to the idea that they were on a warship full of space pirates.

"Let's not talk about it," she told him, settling into the soft pneumatic leather chair. With just four free seats on the escape pod, there was plainly no room for an opinionated little brat. If Konar wanted a hostage, he would take Heather. Most likely they would leave both kids to die. Horrible, but hardly her fault.

"Well, tell me about this planet we are supposed to be orbiting." Another male needing to be entertained.

She stared at the purple-haired punk, wondering if she was doing him any favors, coddling and protecting him with her lying smiles. It only made her look like a pretty push-over with a space pirate boyfriend. "Do you want to see Hades?"

"Sure." He practically dared her to show him.

You asked for it. She told the cabin to reconfigure, projecting an image of Hades' surface outside the picture windows. Water, people, homes, greenery, blue skies, and sail planes vanished--replaced by a fiery vision of hell. Red searing landscape stretched away toward scarlet wind-carved cliffs, topped with orange-brown storm clouds, rent by violet lightning. Their cabin appeared to rest on a tall pink sand dune, surrounded by red rubble crushed beneath dense carbon dioxide atmosphere, flat as a sea floor and hot as hell's basement. Sulfuric rain fell on the highlands from the brown clouds, forming boiling acid rivers that vaporized before reaching the sizzling valley floor. Deirdre could taste the ozone on her tongue.

"Too cool." Jason looked awestruck, and not the least frightened.

Her smile returned. There was hope for the boy after all, who had the plain good sense to compliment her boots. Konar's favorites as well. "That's just the surface," she told him, "the good stuff is all underground."

Jason ran out onto the balcony to get a better look. She closed her eyes, hoping that Hades' seething cauldron would give her some time to rest. She needed

sleep if Konar called again. Thank Elvis she was not trying to please Hess.

Konar did not call, and Hess left to command the *Hiryu*--both ominous signs, of which Konar not calling was the worst. She desperately needed to be with him, to know for sure she too would live. Not even her remote had ever made her want Konar so much.

Hess's leaving implied the escape plan was on hold, since she could hardly picture Hess giving up his seat to someone else. Deirdre doubted the slaver Hess bumped for her in New Harmony ever got out of Goodwill City. Desperate to save herself, she asked the ship's computer what was stored on H-deck, berth L, and the answer came back--"Berth L contains *Endurance*'s spare lifeboat, reconditioned for special use, coded access only." Originally, *Endurance* had two such lifeboats--each able to carry the entire survey crew. There was no record of what happened to the other one. Deirdre weighed using the code word "Medea" to get more information, but that might draw unwanted attention. She had to trust that Hess did his job right, and escape was waiting if Konar wanted to use it.

Time passed, terrifying her even more. Her hot sweaty visit with Konar began to look like one last boink for old times sake, because they were soon headed up-sun on a high-g boost, going headfirst into battle--making it even harder to keep up a cheery front for Heather and Jason. Deirdre wanted to shriek and scream in protest, but that would have done nothing for the children's morale.

Her worst fears were confirmed when Konar came on 3V to send a mocking challenge to the cruiser *Atalanta*, complete with holos of Heather and Jason, telling the Navy to vacate Tartarus system tout de suite. Or get set to die.

Atalanta's answer was a long range salvo of Toryu--"Dragon Killer"--torpedoes. *Fafnir* replied with anti-missile fire and the fight was on.

Konar left the 3V channel open so his crew could follow the action. Deirdre watched horrified, holding Heather's hand, as high-g torpedoes raced toward the *Fafnir*. "What's happening?" Jason asked, enthralled by the notion of being in a battle, but unable to make much out of the 3V display. Missiles and counter-missiles flashed between the fleets, but there were no explosions in space, since antimatter warheads released most of their energy as hard radiation, not visible light. Only ship movements showed clearly. As *Fafnir* engaged *Atalanta*, the rest of the slaver ships, led by *Fukuryu*, attacked the two merchant cruisers.

"Who's winning?" Jason demanded, as *Fukuryu*--the "Lucky Dragon"--took on the lead merchant cruiser, the converted River Lines packet *Niger*.

No one, you idiot, thought Deirdre. A lot of folks--good, bad, and in between--were going to die for nothing, and Deirdre did not want to be one of them. She squeezed Heather's hand. "How good an actress are you?"

Heather looked hopefully up at her. "I was Romeo in our class play. None of

the boys wanted to do the balcony scene.”

Sounds promising. “Can you pretend to be hurt?”

“How hurt?” Heather asked.

“Badly hurt. Can you do convulsive shock?”

Heather nodded; if she could play a boy she could play anything. “Show me,” Deirdre demanded.

Throwing herself on the cabin deck, Heather started shaking and rolling her eyes, tossing herself about, and gagging horribly.

“Great,” Deirdre whispered, “drool a little, too.” Arching her back, limbs twitching, Heather dribbled spittle on the deck. Perfect. “Keep it up,” Deirdre hissed, then she called for the slaver on duty.

Dilating the door, the slaver stuck his head in. Seeing Heather flopping about, he asked, “What is wrong with her?”

Grabbing the guard’s arm, Deirdre dragged him over to where Heather lay writhing, saying, “She’s having a fit, and needs to go to the infirmary.” The slaver looked unconvinced.

Jason cheered. Everyone but Heather looked at the display. Great plumes of gas shot out of the lead merchant cruiser, which immediately lost power and fell behind. *Fukuryu* had gotten a direct hit on the *Niger*, knocking out its fusion reactor and gravity drive. Only a fried warhead kept the missile from blowing the converted liner to pieces. The slaver cheered too, using the “Lucky Dragons” nickname--“Good Old Fuck-a-You. Hit her again you bastards.” He was shaking as hard as Heather.

“Look, if you won’t take her to sickbay, I will.” Deirdre seized the children’s remote from the slaver’s belt.

“Sure, sure,” he did not even look at her, still fixated on the display, where his life or death was being decided. The second merchant cruiser, *Jordan River*, was taking on the *Fukuryu*.

Helping Heather up, she hustled the twitching girl toward the door, grabbing Jason with her free hand. He started to protest, saying there was nothing wrong with him, or his sister, but Deirdre stabbed MUTE on the remote. At the door, she heard a groan from the slaver. Looking back at the cabin display, she saw *Fukuryu* disintegrate under fire. The “Lucky Dragon”--Good Old Fuck-a-You--was gone, blasted to bits by the *Jordan River*.

The last words she heard from the slaver were, “Damn you Hess to hell.” *Hiryu* had turned away, leaving the slower *Hydra* to face *Jordan River*, and the

crippled *Niger*. *Hiryu* was a converted gravity yacht, the fastest ship Konar had, and Commander Hess was not the type to face death happily. Not when others could face it for him.

Telling Heather to stop shaking, she headed straight for the hangar deck with the two children in tow. Personal access codes got her past the hangar door, and “Medea” got her into berth L, where the *Endurance*’s reconditioned lifeboat sat waiting, covered in curved battle armor. Inside were six crash couches; all the rest of the crew space had been sacrificed to double the gravity drive. Too bad three of the couches were going to lift empty, but there was literally no one aboard she could trust to take with her, no one who would not happily rape her and sell the children to the highest bidder.

Deirdre baby-strapped the kids in the command couches, tilting them back to keep their hands away from the controls, then picked the crew-chief’s couch for herself--there she could run things while keeping watch on her charges. Hoping Hess knew what he was doing, she gave the command, and the escape pod flung itself away from *Fafnir*, headed outsystem at better than 20-gs.

And not a minute too soon. Fifty-three point two seconds after they separated, an antimatter warhead penetrated *Fafnir*’s defenses, burying itself in Konar’s flagship. Matter and antimatter came together, and *Fafnir* disappeared in a flash of hard radiation that blanked the escape pod’s screens. Built to withstand the particle storm at near light speed, the redesigned lifeboat easily bucked the blast that obliterated *Fafnir*.

Inferno

“Still think we’re on Elysium?” snorted Heather. Jason glared at her, but did not answer. Screens in front of him had flashed back on, showing Hades and the rest of the inner system receding at high speed.

Unfazed by the bickering, Deirdre was ecstatic, feeling gloriously alive and free. Not only would she live, but her every act was no longer monitored and recorded. She could shower or change without leaving a permanent record for slavers to enjoy, and she could do it whenever she wished. Her remote had been blown to atoms along with the *Fafnir*. She was still wired for control, but, without the coded remote, she was effectively free. No one could play with her emotions, or force her to do what she did not want.

Not even Konar. Her lord and master was gone too. How strange to think that Konar was dead, his tattooed body vaporized. He had been such a force of nature, controlling her life and the lives of everyone around her. Konar certainly deserved to die, no doubt about it. Slaving was the only capital offense left in most systems, a distinction that slavers had worked hard to earn, overcoming every human impulse for forgiveness. By the time Deirdre became Konar’s property, she had given up hating every slaver she met, instead responding to how they treated her. And Konar

had treated her well--up until the end. The worst thing he ever did was to call her up from Hades to die, and that resulted in setting her free.

“Where are we anyway?” Heather asked, staring at an enhanced view of local space. “This does not look at all like home.”

Jason did not rise to the bait, still baby-strapped to the command couch, giving his sister an intensely dirty look.

Deirdre studied the screens to get her bearings. Hades was still the closest planet, though shrinking visibly. *Hydra* was the nearest ship, loudly broadcasting her surrender. *Hiryu* was hurrying away at high acceleration, pursued by *Atalanta*, while the two accompanying corvettes, *Calais* and *Zetes*, were headed Deirdre’s way at flank speed. Any survivors from Konar’s flagship rated immediate naval attention. She told Heather, “We are headed outsystem, tailed by two high-g naval corvettes.”

Heather asked, “If we just turned around, would they take us home?”

“Probably,” Deirdre admitted, “but that would mean reprogramming this lifeboat without proper codes.” Not something she felt up to doing. “Medea” set the program in motion, but did not let Deirdre change direction.

“We could just shut off the gravity drive,” Heather suggested, “and let them catch up.”

“Maybe.” Deirdre was not so sure. Hess had designed this program, and would surely assume that anyone tampering with his system was better off dead. “But this drive could easily be set to blow if we try to shut it down.”

“We could at least call the Navy,” Heather protested, “and tell them who we are....”

“Even that might be suicide,” Deirdre pointed out. “We have to trust in the escape program.” And in Commander Hess.

“What?” Heather could not believe her. “That’s crazy.” Looking to her brother for support, Heather only got a disgusted glare, so she turned back to Deirdre, asking, “Why keep faith with these dead pirates?”

“Because if we do not, they will kill us, too.” That was Hess’ hallmark, the utter willingness to kill whoever became even the least threat, or merely a nuisance. Which made him way worse than Konar--who preferred control and manipulation to outright murder. Konar had been a charismatic megalomaniac, who Deirdre feared and respected. Hess gave her the galloping creeps.

Heather turned back to her brother, saying, “You tell her. This is so totally silly....”

Jason replied with a withering look, but did not deign to answer. Which was

odd, since the boy normally could not bear an unexpressed thought.

His sister asked, "What's the matter, still mad we are not at home?"

"Damn, left him on MUTE." Deirdre remembered the remote, fished it out and turned the boy's speech center back on.

"You silly blue-headed imbecile," Jason yelled at his sister, "I swear we are not related. Hello? Cosmos to Heather. I was muted, remember? That's why I was not answering!"

"Sorry," his big sister replied sarcastically. "I thought you were just listening for once, maybe even thinking ahead. Sadly I was wrong."

"Hallelujah," her brother rejoiced. "Tits-for-brains is wrong about something...."

Heather turned back to Deirdre, pleading, "Please, please turn him off."

While they fought, Deirdre looked about the escape pod, seeing a standard survey ship lifeboat, with increased shielding, expanded powerplant, and added antimatter tanks. No wonder it could hold only a fraction of the survey ship's original crew. *Endurance* originally had two such lifeboats, each intended to carry all twenty-four crew members--if necessary. Now it was none too roomy for the three of them, with no privacy except in the bath cubicle. Six would have been a stretch.

Turning back to the screens, she watched the corvettes slowly cut the gap between them. Despite that expanded powerplant, they still had a snail's chance of outrunning a real starship--much less two naval corvettes. *Calais* and *Zetes* would easily run down the escape pod before it reached a neighboring system. How could Hess or Konar have hoped to escape? Elvis knows, neither of them was stupid. All Deirdre could do was pray Hess had planned this to perfection, relying on his ruthless sense of self-preservation to work in her favor for once.

Heather wanted to at least signal their pursuers, accusing her of still being the pirates' prisoner. "You are so used to doing their bidding that you are obeying their orders, even though they are dead."

"With damned good reason," Deirdre retorted. "If you knew them half as well as I do, you would, too." Besides, Hess was not dead. Commander Hess and the *Hiryu* had a good head start, and half a chance of getting away--now that the two corvettes that could have caught him were coming after her. And she did not dare call them off. How horribly unfair.

Which pretty much summed up her life, from the moment slavers entered that public blast-shelter on New Harmony and began killing people. Heather was right, life among slavers had taught Deirdre obedient detachment, and she felt curiously unconcerned by the corvettes closing in on them. Hess had planned for this, and he knew every hiding place and bolt hole in this part of space. Slavers had hideouts the

Navy knew nothing about, accessed by secret gates in out of the way worlds. Deirdre had never heard of any such gates in Tartarus system--but Hess might have.

Hours into their flight, the drive fields suddenly reversed, and they were decelerating toward Cerberus, a three-ringed gas giant in the outer system, with a litter of frozen moons, the largest of which were Styx and Lethe. Heather wanted to know, "What's there?"

Deirdre shrugged. Knowing Hess, it could be anything: a secret slaver base, or a hidden missile battery set to blast the corvettes. To know for sure she had to think like Hess, which Deirdre hated to do.

Even Deirdre was disappointed when the capsule ducked behind Cerberus and set down on the frozen surface of Styx, the innermost major satellite. Screens showed a bleak cratered moonscape, half covered by heaps of frozen methane snow. Their pursuers were temporarily hidden by Cerberus, but the two corvettes were certainly decelerating to match orbits.

Suddenly a new craft burst onto the screens, lifting off the far side of Styx, headed outsystem at maximum acceleration, but keeping the bulk of Cerberus between it and the corvettes. Deirdre immediately recognized the vessel's profile; it was the *Endurance*'s other lifeboat, the exact twin of the craft they were in. This duplicate capsule had been stashed ahead of time on the backside of Styx, and it would now come streaking out from behind Cerberus, just as the corvettes were slowing to match orbits, mimicking the old slaver trick of using a star or gas giant to mask a tight maneuver. Only this time Hess had set up a fast shuffle, sending the corvettes tearing into interstellar space running down the wrong capsule. Yet another coup for the commander of the *Hiryu*.

Grasping what would happen, Heather announced, "We must tell the Navy they are after the wrong ship."

"How?" Deirdre was dead set against reprogramming the controls, or even flipping on the comlink.

"We could trigger an emergency beacon," Heather insisted, "then the corvettes could come get us."

"Maybe." Emergency beacons were self-contained, with their own power and programming--so it should be perfectly safe. And they could not just sit huddled in the lifeboat while the Navy went rocketing away into the unknown. But it was equally stupid to take chances with a stone cold killer like Hess. "Only if we suit up first, and take a beacon outside."

"Suit up?" Jason looked surprised, but intrigued.

"And go outside?" Heather was horrified. "It is ghastly cold out there."

"Then stay safe and snug in here," Deirdre suggested. "I am not going to

break programming while sitting in this capsule.”

“Go outside! Super cool.” Jason started pawing through the suit locker, producing an emergency kit and beacon. Deirdre helped him suit up, and Heather had to do the same, or be left alone in the lifeboat.

Supercool indeed. Styx was stuck in perpetual winter, with a bleak pitted surface where the only atmosphere was the sort that you could pick up off the ground, then watch as it vaporized in your glove. Deirdre knelt in frozen methane, setting out a beacon with a twenty minute delay, then led her charges through the methane snow to put a low crater ring-wall between them and whatever happened next. Heather dragged her feet, plainly thinking the whole trek was unnecessary, but since the suits had no comlinks, she could not complain.

Before they even got to the ring-wall, Jason spied a line of crisp bootprints heading off across the methane field. Touching helmets with Deirdre, he demanded, “Who the hell left those?”

Who indeed? They were on a frigid moon in an uninhabited part of a slaver system deep in the Far Eridani. People did not just stroll past. You had a better chance of seeing a Yeti, or some unknown xeno. Of course there was no telling when the tracks were made. With no atmosphere to speak of, tracks could last a long time before being covered up by methane geysers and outgasing.

Having no time to dally over new mysteries, Deirdre dragged the children behind the ring-wall, where they waited for the emergency beacon to trigger. She scanned the dark sky for some sign of the corvettes, which should look like small fast satellites. Precisely twenty minutes after setting the beacon, there was an intense flash, melting methane on the far side of the crater. Moments later Deirdre felt the bang in the insulated seat of her suit that was the escape pod blasting itself to bits. Clearly Hess planned for this possibility.

Without comlinks, Deirdre could not even say, “Told you so.” Standing up, she saw frozen methane slowly falling on a huge melted patch where the lifeboat and beacon had been. Touching helmets with the children, she told them curtly, “Follow me.”

Finding the line of prints, Deirdre followed them away from the falling methane, which is what Hess must have intended. Her sole attempt at deviating from the program had resulted in the complete obliteration of their only transport and shelter, leaving them stranded in vacuum suits on a lifeless world, without supplies or comlinks. If these boot prints did not lead somewhere, they could choose between freezing to death, or drowning in their own body wastes.

She followed the crisp prints across a field of frozen methane, with the children trudging behind her, turning the line of prints into a trail. Above them, bright young stars burned amid the strange constellations of the Far Eridani. At the end of the methane field, the prints descended into a yawning ice cave at the base of a

crater--something clearly artificial and encouraging. Suit-lights came on as they entered the cave, bathing gleaming crystalline walls in dazzling white light. But, after several clicks of shining tunnel, the trail ended in a smooth blank ice wall.

For once, Deirdre was grateful to have been owned by slavers, otherwise she might have despaired. This blank wall was typical of slaver gates, which opened into walls and floors, making them nearly invisible to the uninitiated. Touching helmets with the children, Deirdre told them to lean against the frozen wall, then she did the same. Gates were controlled by a simple knock code, so Deirdre tried Konar's personal knock, 3-1-1. Instantly the ice wall vanished, and they tumbled into a different world.

Dark woods surrounded Deirdre, tall scaly tree trunks that disappeared into hot inky night overhead. Without their suit lights, they would have been in total blackness. Picking herself up, Deirdre noted her suit heaters had cut out and cool air had begun to circulate. Her suit claimed outside temperature had risen hundreds of degrees, and that the air was breathable. She doffed her helmet to give it the sniff test. Hot but bearable.

Heather and Jason dutifully did the same, asking together, "Where are we?"

"Still on Styx," she hazarded, "but in a shielded and insulated underground cavity."

"It looks huge." Jason sounded dubious. "And what are woods doing clicks underground?"

"Just 3V," Deirdre explained. "This is an entrance maze, a safety check, or holding area to keep undesirables from using the gate. Trees give the illusion of space." They were surrounded by dark hologram woods that seemed to stretch into limitless night, filled with virtual twistings and turnings that would keep them going in circles. Twenty paces into the woods, and she would never find the entrance gate again, much less the exit.

"So which way should we go?" Heather somehow expected her to know.

Deirdre honestly did not know what to do next, wishing now she had not blown up the lifeboat trying to contact the Navy. She should have known Hess would not let go so easily.

"Hello, Deirdre, how truly delightful to see you." As if summoned up by her thoughts, a cheerful, dapper Commander Hess strolled out of the dark woods, saying, "I dearly hoped you escaped the *Fafnir*, but I could not be sure."

Deirdre stood frozen in shock, but Jason acted, reaching into the emergency kit and producing a recoilless pistol, pointing it at the slaver. Hess continued to grin, striding toward them, adding, "And you brought the kids too, bravo."

"Shoot!" shouted Heather, and Deirdre was jerked alert. Reaching out, she

snatched the pistol from Jason.

“He has to be a holo,” Deirdre told the protesting boy, who dearly wanted to bag his first slaver. Laws of physics did not allow Hess to be in two places at once. When they left the lifeboat, Hess and the *Hiryu* had been boosting outsystem at an incredible clip, so this had to be a holo.

To be sure, she aimed the pistol at Hess and pressed the firing stud, sending a volley of steel-jacketed rockets shooting through the slaver’s virtual chest and vanishing into the hologram night, trailing points of fire. Hess grimaced. “That was uncalled for.”

“Just proving a point.” Deirdre shrugged. “I knew you must be a holo.”

“Alas, it is true.” Hess stopped in front of her, and did a little bow, clicking virtual heels. “And what man would not rather be in the flesh with you?”

Gallant as always. This hologram was most likely a 3V guide, set up ahead of the time as part of the escape program. With a negligent wave, Hess indicated a dark path to the left, saying, “If m’lady will but follow me.”

“He’s a slaver,” Heather protested.

“No, he is a holo.” A real slaver would not be nearly so polite.

“Why trust him?” Jason sneered, still disappointed the pistol had not blown Hess apart.

So was Deirdre, but her only choice was to follow this hologram Hess. At worst he would lose her in the woods, but that might easily happen without him. Best to pretend cooperation, giving the program no reason to discard her.

“Give me the gun back,” Jason demanded, trying to be the man of the group.

“No way.” Deirdre was not giving in to attempts to run things from the bottom. Besides, the King believed that women ought to go armed, and had given Priscilla her first pistol.

“Great,” Jason scoffed, “guess we can have Heather throw another fit if we have to.”

“How about we throw you?” Heather suggested.

Deirdre pocketed the gun, threatening them with the remote instead. “Shut up, or I will put you both on MUTE.”

“Children can be a trial.” Hess smirked at her troubles, then led them down a dark crooked path that branched and twisted between low boles and thick protruding roots, while virtual bats twittered overhead, sounding like the souls of the damned. Eventually the hot hologram forest gave way to a grove of black poplars

bordering a boiling stream. Which was no hologram effect. Deirdre could not even go near the searing stream without first sealing her suit.

Hess waded casually into the boiling water, and they were forced to follow, suit refrigerators whining in protest as the scalding stream came up to the kids' waists. So far Deirdre's survey vessel suit had taken her through frozen methane and superheated steam, showing slavers stole the best.

Beyond the billowing curtain of steam, they broke out into daylight, and the hot hellish woods vanished, replaced by a garden full of fruit trees. Pears, apples, oranges, plums, and tangerines hung from limbs twined with grape and berry vines, all miraculously bearing fruit together, filling the air with sweet scents. Music throbbed in the middle distance, and loud laughter came from the undergrowth.

Suddenly a naked woman burst from the brush, laughing and running, followed by a nude grinning slaver, covered with dragon tattoos, who was himself pursued by three more bare-naked women. Party time on Styx.

All five ran straight through the v-suited group, showing the slaver and his naked ladies were holos. More nudists broke cover, and Deirdre realized there was a virtual orgy in progress, with hologram revelers playing sex games, and mating to ethereal music. Jason, for one, was disgusted, demanding to know, "What in hell is going on?"

"This is Elysium," Heather declared, giggling at the cross-country orgy.

Jason took that as a dig. "Dry up, blue bangs."

"No, it's true," his sister insisted. "Not our planet but the orchards of Elysium in the underworld. Did you sleep through planet studies? This is what our world is named after."

Jason looked unconvinced, but Heather was right; someone had created a virtual underworld beneath the frozen surface of Styx. Deirdre recognized slavers she knew wearing *Fafnir*'s blood-red dragon heart tattoo. Holos of dead men were dallying with virtual playmates in a 3V gardenscape. Grotesque even for slavers. She asked Hess, "What is all this?"

"Konar ordered it," the hologram answered airily, as if that justified anything, no matter how obscene and absurd. "He felt there should be some permanent record of the men who died under his command--beyond the usual list of aliases and DNA samples. What better way to preserve them than at play? Endlessly enjoying themselves."

"So are you dead too?" Deirdre asked hopefully.

"Heavens, I hope not." Hess looked aghast at the notion. "Last I heard, the *Hiryu* was headed outsystem at high-g, with yours truly in command, showing the Navy a clean pair of heels. I am merely here as a helpful sub-program."

Probably true. Deirdre saw no slavers with the *Hiryu*'s flying dragon tattoo. She asked, "So where are you taking us?"

"To your new home." Hess nodded at the holo-orgy. "None of this is real, and you would not like it much anyway."

His easy manner made her more suspicious. "Where is my new home?"

"Right where I am taking you," Hess replied cheerfully, setting out again on the garden path. Clearly a program loop would not let the holo tell her where they were going. Probably just as well.

Music faded behind them, along with the cries of pleasure. Finally, fruit trees parted to reveal a sunny beach ending in a long sandpit, with a white marble mortuary temple at the tip, surrounded on three sides by a china blue hologram sea, flat and placid in a perpetual noontide. Heat poured down from a hologram sun, and Deirdre's suit cooler kicked in again. Jason started to complain, but Heather told him to stuff it. "What heat? It is all in your head, remember? There is no sun, and we're not here."

But the big bronze temple doors were real, blended perfectly into virtual walls and columns. Deirdre had spent enough time in 3V to tell that the temple interior was carved from the living rock of Styx. Gold-skinned girls greeted them at the gilded door, small and slim, with wide grins and long blond hair; each wore nothing but a bit of kohl to show off wide amber eyes. They too were real, or as real as bioconstructs can be. Golden lips parted and the foremost girl told her, "How happy to have you here at last. Come, Deirdre, we have been waiting for you."

"For me?" Deirdre eyed the beautiful nude girls who barely came up to her shoulder--more Heather's size than hers. They all laughed, as if her question were absurd. Small gold hands seized her v-suit, pulling Deirdre into the seaside tomb. She looked questioningly back at Hess.

"There, you see, right at home, just as I said." Hess happily turned his charges over to the gilded bioconstructs, giving Deirdre a little nodding bow, then vanishing. End of program.

Letting herself be hauled inside, Deirdre asked, "Have you really been waiting for me?"

"Yes indeed," the golden girls insisted. "You are Deirdre, are you not? We have been waiting years for you. Everything is ready."

"Years?" This made no sense. How could they have waited years, when she decided to come this way only hours ago? Her suit watch confirmed it--this time last week she was on Hades, hoping the Navy would soon rescue her. "What is ready?"

"Everything," they assured her. "We will show you."

Suddenly one of the golden girls shouted, "Look, this is a boy!"

Which produced shrill cries of amazement. "What? Are you sure? Which one?"

"With the purple hair," declared the girl, pointing at Jason.

Her companions crowded around, saying, "Are you really sure?"

"Of course," the first girl insisted, "just look at her."

"Him, you mean," her companion corrected her. "Just look at him."

Someone finally asked the fuming Jason, "Is it true, are you really a boy?"

"Yes, you gilded morons." Jason could barely believe such idiocy. "Are you blind as well as brainless?"

"He has a boy's temper." They giggled knowingly.

Proud of their discovery, the golden girls led them triumphantly down the great columned hall of the mortuary temple calling out, "Look, it is Deirdre, and a boy!"

Women and girls of various description emerged from side apartments. Human females. Greenies. Plus even weirder bioconstructs, like women with pointy goat horns or prehensile tails. The closest thing to men were a couple of hermaphrodites, fully erect, excited to get a look at her and the boy, saying, "Yes, and Deirdre is with him. Konar will be so pleased."

Konar was fried to photons, but Deirdre did not say it. Undoubtedly these girls did not get out much. This had to be some secret slaver brothel-cum-biolab--one even Deirdre had never heard about. From the way they talked, the golden girls were raised here, as were the wilder constructs, while the humans and Greenies were either taken as children, or bred in captivity.

But her biggest surprise was to be herded into "her" room--an exact duplicate of her old apartments on Hades, complete with her favorite works of art, her personal refresher, and her extended wardrobe, right down to the school T-shirt she was wearing when she was snatched from that bunker on New Harmony. A lot of it was stuff she had thrown away years ago. Spooky and then some.

Feeling silly standing in her own entryway wearing a v-suit, Deirdre asked for a chance to change and use the refresher. For a moment she was alone, aside from whatever spying eyes were in the walls, so while using the refresher, she managed to stick the plastic recoilless pistol in the back of her harem pants--fairly sure no one could have seen her, unless there was a camera trained up her ass. She covered it with her favorite embroidered jacket, glad to feel the familiar silk against her skin.

Stepping out of the refresher, she found Heather and Jason staring at her,

obviously waiting for her to reappear. Deirdre asked warily, “What’s the matter?”

Heather rolled her eyes toward the suite door. Standing in the doorway was a beautiful little girl of five or so, who looked exactly like Deirdre in miniature. This little Deirdre announced blandly, “You are in my room, but you may use it. It is your room too.”

Deirdre did not know what to say. It was an awful shock to see her own features on a small child, but there was no mistaking the lustrous eyes, the tilt of her nose and the shape of her chin, all done in miniature. Amazing. The girl seemed equally intrigued by her, asking, “You are truly Deirdre?”

“That’s me. Who are you?” Things were now officially too weird.

Her child-double smiled broadly. “I am Deirdre II. When I grow up we will be twins.”

Actually they already were. Deirdre guessed this girl had been cloned from her DNA when she first arrived. (Along with who knows how many others?) Slavers must have liked their catch and decided to make extra copies--just in case. Konar had been raising her replacement in an exact duplicate of her apartment on Hades. “When your grown-up clothes arrived, I knew you would be here soon.” Clearly Deirdre II had eagerly anticipated her advent. “Now you can teach me to be exactly like you.”

“Great,” Jason groaned, “then there will be two of them.”

Fat chance. She was not going to settle down and give Deirdre-lessons to a preschooler. With Konar dead, this place no longer had a purpose, and was running on automatic, unaware that the slavers had been annihilated or driven from the system. Yet as isolated as this was, there still had to be some kind of control station, where she could contact the Navy, or at least shut off the entry maze. Unless this was truly just a mausoleum, a monument to Konar’s dead crews, and a repository for his most prized playthings. She asked the women waiting outside the suite, “Is there a command deck or control area?”

“Naturally,” was the reply. “That is where we are taking you, now that you are refreshed and ready.”

“And I can contact the outside from there?” Deirdre asked.

“Of course.” They treated it like an incomprehensible request. Who could she possibly want to talk to? But whatever Deirdre wanted, Deirdre got.

At the C-deck door, Deirdre told everyone else to wait while she went in alone. They all obeyed, acting as if the place was now “hers”--in fact she found the door already keyed to her thumbprint, dilating at her touch. Deirdre stepped confidently onto the control deck, guessing that her arrival was the biggest thing that had ever happened hereabouts.

Make that the second biggest. Lounging relaxed and naked on the command couch, backed by the screens and control console, was her late unlamented master--Grand Dragon Konar. Unbelievable. Her first thought was this had to be 3V, like the holo Hess who guided her here, but then she saw her remote in his hand, the one that was blown up aboard *Fafnir*. Konar pressed a button, and Deirdre froze.

Shocked and appalled, unable to speak or move, she stood watching as Konar rose and walked over. His all-too-solid hand reached out, making her want to wince, but Deirdre could not even do that. All she could move were her eyes. Breath went in and out automatically. Konar stroked her cheek, saying, "Sorry, cute stuff, anything you could say would only spoil the moment. I told you I would never let you go."

Crushed at seeing Konar again, she damned herself for thinking she could just stroll in and take over. How was this even possible? Her mind groped for sane explanations. No one had gotten off the *Fafnir* alive, except for her, Heather, and Jason--Deirdre was sure of that.

Konar slid his fingers inside her silk jacket, running them down the front of her light blouse, enjoying the feel of her breasts through the thin fabric. Kissing her limp lips, he told her, "I am terribly proud of how you gave the Navy the slip. Hess and I had a bet on it. I feared they might catch you, but Hess was sure you would get through--so I have to pay up, when he comes for me."

With nothing to do but contemplate this latest disaster, Deirdre swiftly put the pieces together. Clearly Konar had not been aboard his flagship when *Fafnir* went on its death ride. He had been hiding out here on Styx, and his defiant "last battle" was an elaborate 3V ruse to make everyone think he was KIA. Bringing her aboard *Fafnir* for a "final" boink convinced both her and the crew that Konar was on the flagship--but once his captains had their orders, he secretly slipped away, leaving Hess and a holo-program in command. Project Medea and her own escape was an added diversion to decoy the corvettes, designed by Hess to get *Hiryu* safely away.

And it all worked as good as gravity. Even when outgunned and outnumbered, veteran slavers had centuries of experience at hoodwinking the Navy. Far from being finished with her, Konar was thrilled to have his property returned, running his hands over her hips, while fingering the remote. Soon it would be just like old times.

Sick with fear, Deirdre could feel the recoilless pistol digging into the small of her back, its cold muzzle pressed in her butt crack, centimeters from her limp hand. If Konar released her without a strip search, she would get one chance to shoot. Would she take it? Lisa-Marie middle school had not trained her for armed self-defense, much less premeditated homicide. She had shot Hess, knowing he was a holo. Could she shoot Konar for real? She prayed to Priscilla that she could--since that was what the King would do.

"And you brought the kids," Konar announced happily, "courageously saving

River Lines from incinerating its innocent heirs. What a living doll you are, always doing just what you should. How could I ever give you up?"

And if he did, there was a little genetic understudy waiting just outside. Konar gave her fanny a pat, missing the gun muzzle by a millimeter or two, then he told the door to open, saying, "Send in the two children."

Heather walked into Deirdre's line of sight, looking terrified, followed by a defiant Jason. Konar greeted them with a cheery, "Happy to see you, too."

Ignoring the naked tattooed slaver, Heather looked hopefully at Deirdre. Seeing only one chance for them, Deirdre rolled her eyes significantly.

Heather rolled her eyes in response, then flipped over and fell to the deck, tossing and jerking violently, making ghastly gagging sounds.

"Oh, fuck! Another fit." Jason groaned. "Give it up."

Konar knelt next to the flopping and flailing Heather, asking, "Where is her remote?"

Jason shrugged, saying, "She'll get over it. Only does it to get attention."

Turning to Deirdre, Konar pushed UNMUTE and demanded, "Where is her remote?"

"Inside jacket pocket." Deirdre dared not lie.

"I'll get it." Jason jumped up and reached inside her jacket, ignoring the remote, feeling about frantically. Looking up at her, he complained, "I cannot find it."

He was looking for the gun. Deirdre stared down at Jason, realizing that the nine-year-old had already made the choice she was struggling with. For better or worse, Jason was determined to save himself--and he deserved the chance, even if it killed him. "Behind my back," she whispered, "but make it good."

"Got it!" Jason declared proudly, his hand going around behind her. It came out holding the recoilless pistol, and Jason spun swiftly about, pretending to give it to Konar. In the split second it took to see it was not the remote in his hand, Jason pointed and fired.

Distracted by the convulsing Heather, Konar caught Jason's movement out of the corner of his eye. Leaping up, he spun like a cat, throwing himself out of the line of fire.

And catching a cluster of rocket darts full in the chest--since Jason had excitedly fired high and wide. Beginner's luck, but the results were impressive, spraying blood and bone all over the controls. And on Heather, who went into real hysterics.

Konar's body flipped backward, landing face up on the command couch. Deirdre stood impassively through it all, unable to move anything below her neck. When Jason looked questioningly over at her, she told him curtly, "Shoot him again."

Anything worth doing is worth doing right. Holding the gun steady with both hands, Jason shot Konar again in the chest, but the dead slaver did not even twitch. This time Konar was not coming back.

Then Deirdre told Jason to pick up the blood spattered remote and release her. Which he did, both elated and awed by having killed his first man.

She went to comfort Heather, calming the girl, then cleaning her up in the control deck refresher, which smelled heavily of Konar. Having soothed Heather's hysterics, Deirdre walked gingerly over to the bloody command console and opened an emergency channel, broadcasting their identity and position to the Navy. Armed merchant cruiser *Niger* returned the call, surprised to have a signal coming from a supposedly dead moon.

Informed that help was on the way, Deirdre opened the control room door. Women and girls stared in horror at the bloody mess. Greenies turned and fled. Only the golden girls knew what to do, bowing down to Jason, who was the new man in charge, and to Deirdre, the lovely angel who brought death into their secluded little world. With tears in her eyes, Deirdre II looked worshipfully up at her miraculous twin sister.

Atalanta was off hunting *Hiryu*, and *Calais* and *Zetes* were chasing down an empty lifeboat, but River Lines was elated to have unexpected custody of Konar's body, and the two lost River Lines heirs, who were now child heroes as well--turning the Battle of Tartarus into a triumphant victory, at least for River Lines. Only Hess and *Hiryu* got away. In a burst of corporate gratitude, River Lines gave Deirdre free first class tickets to New Harmony for her and Deirdre II, plus 1000 bonus light years to use or sell.

Heather begged Deirdre to stay with them, promising to make her rich forever. Deirdre said she would think about it, "But I must see my folks again." New Harmony might be hicksville, but it was home. Then Jason got his first real kiss from a grateful young woman, to go along with his first slaver kill and his immense inheritance. At this rate the boy would be running River Lines by the time he turned twelve.

Even going first class on a high-g ticket, it took Deirdre nearly a year to get home, and by then she was nineteen. To her, seven years had passed--but, thanks to relativity effects, it was thirty-something years later on New Harmony. Her parents were two divorced old people, who were nevertheless overjoyed to get back the daughter they'd given up for lost. Friends and siblings were in their forties and fifties, many with kids of their own, and they all made a great fuss over their teen

“angel”--brought miraculously back from the dead. Which made Deirdre feel even more out of place.

Despite this awkward transition, going from slaver’s head mistress to teen mom to her own twin, Deirdre was thrilled to be home, glad to see her parents and friends again, no matter how strange and aged they had become. Everyone doted on Deirdre II, telling the girl she would grow up to be a real heartbreaker, “just like her big sister.”

When the time was right, Deirdre took her little sister to put flowers in the public shelter she was kidnapped from. Long ago made into a shrine, the shelter was a grim, underground place, dedicated to people brought together by death, but there was bold new lettering above her memorial--RECOVERED ALIVE.

These two simple words radiated civic pride, celebrating Goodwill City’s tiny triumph over a remorseless enemy. Deirdre helped her six year-old twin lay daisies on the spots where Hess had shot her schoolmates, saying prayers to Saint Michael in Neverland, who watches over little children. Long dead members of the Lisa-Marie middle school’s Humanities Club looked up from their memorials, smiling in 3V. She told Deidre II each child’s name, and what each one was like, what hopes they had, and what made them happy. They were the only people on New Harmony who were just as Deirdre remembered.

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