



# Captain Santiago and the Sky Dome Waitress (Interspace Origins)

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**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** He thought he buried his past—until she walked back into his life, wearing the face of the woman who destroyed him.

Captain Elijah Santiago is one of the most successful fleet merchants in the known worlds. Rumors claim that even though he is human, he is more machine-like than any Varkan. With iron discipline, he powers through his lucrative days with a complete lack of emotions.

Lucie is a newly minted Varkan, formerly a city-mind, but now with a human body. She finds her new physical world challenging, sometimes frightening, and always emotionally draining.

When Santiago spots the diminutive dark-haired woman on his ship, old wounds are opened, for Lucie has the appearance of a woman that tore Santiago's life apart; Blake. The exact appearance; for Blake donated her DNA to the public pool for Varkans to use, and Lucie literally has Blake's cloned body. Santiago must avoid Lucie, or risk ripping open his heart once more.

Only, Lucie has taken a waitressing job at Santiago's favorite sky dome restaurant...

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# Page 1

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People

Ammyn Heray

Invented jump gate technology.

Asold Aler

Head of the Cartel on Soward.

Bedivere X

Catherine Shahrazad's pilot and lover.

Birgir Stoyan, The

Tenth Millennium, Second Century, FY.

The Birgir Stoyan was a shipmind that became aware during the early years of the Staff of Ammon purges. In response to the perceived threat of the Staffers, with no human to guide or direct it, the shipmind kills everyone aboard and escapes to an unknown location. It is the events of the Birgir Stoyan that consolidated the Staff of Ammon's hold on human culture, directing human activities and thought for generations.

Catherine Shahrazad

a.k.a. Caitlyn Azad, Cat.

Undocumented reputation as the oldest person in the galaxy and direct descendant of Glave of Summanus.

Connell Yair

Brant's Varkan friend.

David Jacksanch

Director of the Civil Obedience Bureau on Nicia (the gendarmerie)

Devlin Woodward

Lobbyist and Varkan rights activist. Successfully campaigned for formal Varkan rights and freedoms.

Done Rison

President of the Oceania Securities Group and consultant investigator.

Fareed Brant

Former Staff of Ammon enforcer. Lilita Washmaster's lover.

Gramoor

A Cartel-like organized crime group located on Shanterry.

Jovanka "Jo" Runa

A Varkan

Kare Sarkisian

Former Magnate of the Federation Board. Suicided after the dissolution of the Federation.

Kemp Rodagh

Former passenger aboard Catherine and Bedivere's ship, originally from Soward

Lilita (Lilly) Washmaster

Engineer and Fareed Brant's lover. Former Cadfael College Aneesh.

Maxaria

Barman and businesswoman on Shanta gate station.

Mael Maedoc

One of three Varkan pilots aboard the Hana Stareach

Neweds Friday

Former Prime Minister of Shanterry.

Nichol August

Mayor of the Celestial village on Charlton and Yennifer Charlton's partner.

Nichua Riyante

Lilly's College contact on Barros

Shardy Phernes

A Varkan on Shanterry.

Sibéal Bakhuizen

Created the mesh tether for Bedivere.

The Varkan

V?ken = "Awake" (Ancient Terran origin, possibly Norwegian). Sentient computers.

Vavay Him

One of three Eistav (supreme commanders) of Cadfael College

Yenniver Charlton

Varkan and citymind, runs Charlton space city.

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Places

Barros

Located at the far end of the Perseus arm, in the Aibos system, part of the Aibosian

Cluster.

Cathain

Cathain – the home world for the former Federation and the council.

Charlton

Charlton Space City, New Cathay (Ji Xiu Prime), Ji Xiu System, Perseus Arm

The first of the new space cities forming in the galaxy, established by Catherine Shahrazad, Bedivere X, Connell Yair, Lilita Washmaster and Fareet Brant, FY 10.137.

Darwin

Sykora System - Cat and Bedivere first meet Brant there.

Ey'Liv

Storth IV. Far out on the Perseus arm and close to the Last Gate in the Silent Sector.

Fu-Sang

What passes for fringe territories—high risk worlds (non-Terra) that no one goes to, but hold valuable resources that can be mined under the right circumstances.

Griswold

Planet one light year beyond the Last Gate on the edge of the Silent Sector. Sixty percent beryllium ore. Only one colony on the planet.

Gry

Where the elite Ammonites (Staff of Ammon) enforcement cadre trained and lived.

Harrivalé

Ivaldi System, toward the edge of Federation space. Known for high quality life extending therapy and biotech.

Ivory City, The

The Federation council city within Cathain City. The inner, fortified city location for the Faring Federation.

Kashya

(Canum III)

One of the new fringes worlds, non-Terran, high risk. High ore planet.

Mehtap

Mehtap Mining Colony, Velorum II, Velorum System.

A dark world mining colony.

New Gaia

What passes for fringe territories—high risk worlds (non-Terra) that no one goes to, but hold valuable resources that can be mined under the right circumstances.

Nicia

Sunita II – part of the heavily populated Sunita System.

Shanterry

Shanta system inhabited planet. Shanta is known for advanced technology devices.

Silent Sector, The

Discovered mid-ninth millennium FY. The tail end of the Outer Arm of the galaxy, where star systems are farther apart. Was once part of the Fringes. Now it is the only sector of the galaxy that people avoid, for ships go missing and those that do return come with strange stories. There are rumors that the remains of a long-gone alien race from a heavier world were found there.

Soward

Home of the Jourden Cartel, Kemp Rodagh and the best wine in the galaxy

Sunita

Eight habitable planets and multiple moons, some also inhabited. Rich in arable land and the moons have ores. Sunita II: Nicia, an ocean world.

Tordis

The most recently colonized Terran style planet in the known worlds.

Van Andel



Home of Cadfael College. Cold Earth-like planet, mostly frozen. Third planet of the Gaios system, at the edge of the Galactic Bar, deep in the Federation Core.

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Things

Aliza, The

Aliza = “Joyful.” Bedivere’s advanced ship that he uses for transporting people and freight.

Ammonites

Staff of Ammon enforcers.

Aneesh

Clerics of Cadfael College. There are four ranks. Three supreme commanders, called “Eistav”. Executive level rank, “Kintav”. The second level, “Ailved”. Acolytes, “Tridith”. Various professions exist within each rank.

Bible of Isaura

Isaura Montanari is reputed to be Glave’s lover (possibly his wife) and his betrayer. Said to have lived in regret after Glave died. Wrote and preserved his teachings, a collection of stories and moral tales. Isaura’s work was lost during the Interregnum and the bible is a copy of heresy.

Cadfael College

Established mid-ninth millennium, FY (rumored).

The Faithful of Mortal Divinity, through the College, influence everything. Civilization resumes post Interregnum, with the College providing education and directing the culture of the new, pure, humans. Children are supreme; the refreshing of the human gene pool is a priority.

Choi Corsair

High liner and commercial passenger carrier, one of the fastest in the galaxy.

Decline, The

Third to Eighth Millennia, FY. With practical immortality now available via life-extending therapies and regeneration, human reproduction slows and begins to decay.

Egemon Incident, The

Tenth Millennium, Tenth Century, FY.

Staffers on Egemon try to lynch Catherine Shahrazad as an imposter and for crimes against the scriptures of Glave. The city, however, is highly religious and Shahrazad treated with reverence. The citizens turn on Staffers when they try to arrest Catherine, resulting in anarchy. No records exist of what happened to the Shahrazad and it is assumed she escaped during the civil uprising.

Faithful of Mortal Divinity, The

The guiding “religion” that emerges post-Interregnum, when humanity realizes that Glave’s Precepts were correct. Humanity becomes the new priority, with procreation the ultimate service to humankind.

F.Y.

Or FY. Faring Year.

Faring Year 1 is considered to be the year that wormhole gate technology was perfected and put into commercial use by the original corporation that would become the Faring Federation. All other dates are based on this reference.

Glave of Summanus

An evangelist biologist living long before the Interregnum (circa mid-sixth millennium FY), during a time of extreme transhumanism and a slowing down of the human diaspora, known as “The Decline”.

Glave wages twelve wars against non-humanists, then was destroyed by the treachery of his lover, Isaura, assassinated by the earliest form of the Faring Federation.

Gu-Xia Gammon

Biotech research facility on Harrivalé

Interregnum, The

Eighth to Ninth Millennium, FY. A period of chaos, religious wars and revolution. The Federation remove themselves, going into retreat and raising planetary defenses, leaving the galaxy to sort itself out.

Interspace

Sentient computers, who can grasp the human concept of “space” and human emotions and separate them from their digital thought processes, are able to see space

and time as a digital representation, which enables them to select times and locations and move there, taking others with them, if they are shipminds.

## Particle Beam

Ship to surface weapon. Can be nuclear. Highly unstable.

## Rattler

A type of plasma-bolt firing personal weapon. Various brands available. Professionals favor Baldovini. Wiebe is a cheaper brand, with a poor reputation.

## Shipminds

Sentient computers who are installed as ship computers. The ship is essentially the computer, which allows them to move the ship and everyone on it through Interspace.

## Sommerer

A black spirit with high alcohol content.

## Staff of Ammon

The combat/enforcement arm of Cadfael College. Ammonites believe in the superiority of humans over machines and use force to ensure human compliance with Glave's Precepts, as written down in the Bible of Isaura. Extremely anti-computers. Called The Faithful, or "Staffers" by commoners.

## Torment of the Sinnikka, The

Tenth Millennium, First Century, FY.

The first recorded sentient computer was located in the Sinnikka system (an insular system of combat-oriented people) and records indicate it was the citymind. (“The” Sinnikka). When the Sinnikka became aware, after four days of cross-examination, the people of that city destroyed it and all AI nearby. The Sinnikka spread out among nearby worlds and become the core of the Staff of Ammon.

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

Lucie had saved for over a year to pay for a short tour of the known worlds. She had planned and researched, and gone without. So the cramped appointments of the Saint James interspace liner caught her by surprise. Apparently a journey from Darwin to Charlton City was an ordinary event for everyone else. A work-a-day thing requiring bland décor and an absence of comfort.

Lucie realized she had been building up this interstellar flight in her mind, making it far more significant and in need of luxury appointments and fanfare only because it was her first interstellar journey.

The way everyone shuffled along the aisles with barely any conversation, let alone excited chatter, picking seats and stowing their packs beneath, made her think they did this every other day. And perhaps they did. She was a very new Varkan and, as she was constantly reminded, having once run an entire city had taught her nothing useful about humans.

She found a seat, jammed between a large man travelling on his own and a woman shepherding three small children, who all sounded tired and fractious.

This was what her hard-earned savings had paid for? Well, not just this flight, for this was the first of five flights, plus three nights' accommodation at each point on the journey. From Darwin to Charlton City, the original home of the Varkans; to Nicia, the sea world, in the Sunita system; on to Cathain, and the ruins of the Ivory City; then Shanterry and the tech cities and the Varkan implant workshops; then back home to Darwin.

Lucie gripped her hands together and tried to stop staring at everything, and also tried

to ignore the small foot kicking her shin.

Most of the seats in the big room were full when a chime sounded over the P.A. system. Everyone still standing picked up their pace and settled in a chair. The floor and Lucie's seat shivered and she felt the ship rise. She was pressed into her seat with a giant invisible hand as the ship's rate of ascent increased.

Her heart zoomed. They were leaving!

The ship rose for what felt like hours, but the digital side of her mind said it was much shorter interval. Eight minutes, thirty-seven seconds. There were also an additional twenty-nine milliseconds, but including them was a new Varkan thing, so she ignored them.

The walls showed no windows or ports where Lucie could view Darwin falling away beneath them, or the slow change from blue sky to indigo, then the blackness of space and the stars. She couldn't see Darwin's moon, which would be somewhere ahead of the ship.

The gravity pushing her into her seat eased to normal. The ship had stopped rising.

It held still for a moment or two. Everyone else in the cabin looked bored, but Lucie's heart kicked up a notch, for now the ship was out of the gravity well of the planet. Now was when the pilot, on the bridge somewhere at the front of the ship, would pull the ship through Interspace. This was an extra dimension that only Varkans—digital sentients using human bodies—could access. Not all Varkans could find Interspace and use it. It took experience, and a deep understanding of space. It took more understanding than Lucie, as a new Varkan, could muster. It didn't matter that she had been acquiring knowledge for over a hundred years.

It also didn't matter that she had been sentient for nineteen of those years. She had

only been a Varkan for ten years, and didn't have the range of flesh-and-blood experiences and exposure to space travel that would teach her how to reach Interspace.

It didn't help that she had been a city-mind, not a ship-mind. Her experience with space travel consisted of a lot of research and this flight.

So far.

But this was more than exciting enough. Lucie held her breath, waiting for the jump.

The ship shivered beneath her feet. Lucie felt what seemed to be a wave of cold air wash over her. It made her blink, and her thoughts to stutter, just for a second.

Then she was aware once more of the seat beneath her and the kicking heel of the child next to her. Of soft conversations around the room. A man yawned and went back to his reading.

That was the jump?

They had really crossed 1,200 light years...and just shivered ?

A jump of that magnitude really should be announced. Received with more fanfare than a yawn.

The ship moved sideways. It felt sideways to Lucie for her row of chairs ran parallel to the spine of the ship. The ship was really moving forward.

Oh, how she wished there was a window! Or even a screen showing the view beyond the fuselage. Something to show her what hung in front of the ship's nose.



The surge halted but Lucie could tell from the subtle vibrations through her feet that the engines were still working to push the ship through space at an even speed.

Then, the ship settled, dropping a few meters, and came to a halt.

Instantly, everyone got to their feet and retrieved packs and luggage. The mother rose and pulled her children in around her and shepherded them toward the wide door they'd entered through.

So did everyone else.

They'd arrived at Charlton City.

Lucie remained in her seat, staring at the shuffling wave of humans and Varkans pushing toward the door, which was now opening. She saw bright lights beyond the door. Heard the clank of machinery, hissing steam vents, and the ticking of cooling metal. And voices. Shouts and directions. The clang of tools.

It was so prosaic that Lucie had to sit a moment more while she adjusted to the simplicity of it. The ordinariness.

She got to her feet and pulled her pack from under the seat and shouldered it. Then, reluctantly, she joined the end of the thick line of people moving off the ship.

As she climbed down the ramp, she looked around. Never mind trying to look like she did this every day. This was Charlton City ! If there was a home world for Varkans, Charlton City was it.

Charlton was a sprawling city hanging in space over a planet no one could ever remember the name of. It was the city where Varkans had first come together in large numbers, and from where they had saved human civilization from the Periglus—the

freaky, noncommunicative giant aliens who had taken over both the Soward system and the Sunita system, forcing millions of humans and Varkans to give up their homes and evacuate.

So far, thanks to the Varkans, the Periglus had not harmed a single person. Instead, the aliens and the rest of the known worlds stood apart and incommunicado.

Lucie didn't realize she was holding her breath as she looked around the landing bay, while also trying to stay within the safety lane painted on the floor, and at the same time, trying to glimpse the city itself through the large windows running down one side of the bay. The safety lane directed everyone to a small door in the far corner of the landing bay.

"Blake! Blake!" A man bellowed the name behind her. He wasn't the only one shouting, although the other shouts were from farther away and Lucie couldn't make out the words.

She tried to peer ahead over shoulders and around bodies to see what lay beyond the door of the landing bay. Once she had her hostel room sorted out for the night, she intended to visit Celestial, the village dome that was supposed to be breathtakingly beautiful. It was also the village where Yennifer Charlton and Connell had lived together for years after they had helped save the city and humans from the Periglus.

Of course, they didn't live there anymore. That had been nearly two hundred years ago. But it would have been so much fun to actually run into them. To meet them. Maybe even spend a little time in their company and hear their stories about the dawn of the Varkan Age—

A hand gripped her arm and yanked Lucie around to face the other way, almost taking her off her feet. She dropped her pack, as her fingers went instantly numb under the power of the grip on her arm.

“What the hell, Blake? What are you doing here?” a very large man shouted at her.

Lucie stared at him. “Excuse me?”

He took hold of her other arm and gave her a little shake. “ You’re alive !” His face worked with a range of emotions that Lucie didn’t have time to analyze. His eyes glittered...were those tears? “Blake...!” His voice was hoarse. His hands squeezed.

Lucie scrambled to understand what was happening. She felt flat-footed and stupid. The man holding her arms was taller than her. Maybe two meters high. But not spindly, not at all. His shoulders were wide and thick. He had muscle and strength, as his grip on her arms told her. His thick brown hair was not cut super-short, but waved back from a high forehead. Thick dark brown brows, and a sharp jaw. His chin had a dimple, and a prickling of whiskers.

Lucie couldn’t remember being this close to anyone since waking as a Varkan. The doctors, of course. Nursing staff. Physiotherapists who had to handle her while they taught her how to walk, how to feed herself and more.

But no one since, except for a child’s kicking foot. And now this man, who felt as though he could easily move her around to any area in the landing bay whether she wanted to go there or not.

This man, who was staring at her, his gaze moving over her face, while...yes, stars, it was grief playing in his eyes, making his features contort.

The moment only stretched for a few heartbeats, but seemed to last forever.

“Oh....!” Lucie whispered, as she put it all together so it made sense.

“Captain Santiago!” someone shouted.

The man's gaze flickered sideways, then came right back to Lucie. His fingers worked against her flesh. "Blake..." he said again. His throat worked. "You're actually here... I thought you were dead. Everyone thought you were dead."

Lucie nodded. Pity mixed with her embarrassment. She was going to have to destroy this man's hope, the happiness that was building in his eyes. There was nothing for it, but to do it as quickly as possible.

"I'm sorry, Captain," Lucie said, as gently as she could. "I'm not Blake." She looked into his eyes, because it was important that he understand this. "I am a Varkan."

She saw his dawning pleasure die. Puzzlement replaced it. "Varkan," he repeated, his tone wooden.

"I used the interplanetary DNA pool," Lucie added. "Your friend, Blake...she must have donated her DNA to the pool." She could feel her cheeks heating, because only the poorest and most desperate of sentient computers, those who couldn't find a more lucrative way of raising money for their transfer to a Varkan body, used the interplanetary pool. She would be paying for the transfer for ninety-nine years, at an interest rate that made her look desperate.

But she had been desperate to gain the freedom that came with being a Varkan. No human had offered her their own DNA, which was the other common way of gaining a Varkan body. So she had bought DNA from the common pool.

The man, Captain Santiago, let go of her hands. He straightened, frowning. "But...you look exactly like her..." Raw pain strained his voice.

Lucie's pity increased. "It happens sometimes," she said. She had done a moon's weight of research before becoming a Varkan, and she had transferred many of those memories into this body. But the truth made her feel even smaller and more

embarrassed to expose her poor beginnings. “There’s no control over gene expression when you elect to use pool DNA, you see.” That was an option the soon-to-be-Varkans with luxury budgets could afford. “And they didn’t tell me whose DNA I was given.” She got to choose gender, and that was all.

Santiago cleared his throat. Understanding was building in his eyes, along with awkwardness.

“This is...it’s unusual,” Lucie said. But it wasn’t rare . As long as humans donated their DNA to let Varkans build clone bodies to house their minds, it would always be possible to meet people who’d known the original human. But in the two hundred years since Bedivere X, the very first Varkan, had made his famous first jump through Interspace, protocols to handle the situation had arisen. Customs had formed to minimize upset for either party.

“I’m sorry you got your hopes up,” Lucie said, even though she longed to ask this man all about the woman whose DNA she wore.

Santiago pushed his hand through his hair, staring at her.

Lucie could see in his face the thousands of questions that he wanted to ask her. The chief of those would be: “I want to talk to you for much longer, while I pretend you are Blake and can have her back in my life for a little while.”

Which was exactly why he could not ask that of her. On this, the social rules were firm. The Varkan institute where she had been transferred had been just as firm. In situations like this, it would be unfair to Lucie to linger in the company of someone who’d known the human her DNA came from.

It would also deliver nothing but pain for this man.

Lucie shook her head, anticipating the unspoken question.

One of the uniformed crew came up alongside Santiago. “Captain...”

Santiago blew out an impatient breath. “I’ll be right there.”

The crewman glanced at Lucie. His eyes didn’t narrow. He didn’t look shocked. Clearly, he had not known Blake whoever. He trudged away again.

Santiago shook off his distress. Lucie could see him do it. He understood the etiquette, too.

But it was taking everything he had to distance himself. She could see it in the fine trembling of his hands. The way he was squaring his shoulders and breathing heavily. His pulse was visible on the side of his neck, beating hard.

“I’m sorry,” Lucie repeated. She picked up her pack. “I’m only in Charlton for a few days, then I’ll be gone.”

“To where?” he asked, trying to sound disinterested. Merely polite.

Lucie hesitated. Should she tell him where she would be? It would be better to make a complete break. Just disappear out of his life with no clue where she had gone.

But he was trying to be polite, to smooth over his gaff. Was he embarrassed?

It seemed only fair to meet him half-way. “Nicia,” she said. “Three days here, then three on Nicia. It’s sort of a grand tour, you see...” She grimaced at the her patently peppy tone.

“Charlton, Nicia...” He raised a brow. “The Ivory City...and...Shanterry?”

Lucia felt her lips part. “How did you guess?”

“All the Varkan historical hotspots,” he said. “You are a new Varkan, aren’t you?”

She could feel her cheeks heating. “I’ve been sentient for nineteen years.”

“And how long have you been a Varkan?”

She pressed her lips together. “Ten years.”

Santiago smiled. He wasn’t laughing at her, she knew that. “A mere baby,” he said softly. Then he frowned. “Nicia in three days? That’s my flight.”

Her middle sank. She suddenly didn’t want to be on that flight. Not at all.

This was getting worse.

She squeezed the strap of her pack. “Well...I should let you get back to work.” She could see past him, to where the crewmember was standing a discreet distance away, clearly waiting for Santiago to finish chatting with the passengers.

Santiago’s fists tightened. He nodded. “Yes,” he said firmly. He stood for a moment more. “Have a good life...”

Was he waiting for her to supply her name?

Lucie nodded. “Yes, you too, Captain Santiago.” She turned and hurried along the painted lane toward the landing bay door. The bright lights beyond the bay now beckoned for a different reason.

Once she was beyond the door, she could slide amongst the people out there and

really disappear.



## Page 3

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The encounter with Captain Santiago had shaken her enough that Lucie abandoned her plans to detour though Celestial before finding her hostel. She plugged into the local network and asked for directions to her hostel and walked there at a pace that left her breathless by the time she reached the modest bunk barn.

The place was clean and the bunk pods seemed secure. Most of the pods she passed as she looked for hers were sealed. She couldn't hear anything from inside them, which boded well for the privacy of hers.

She found her bunk and entered her biomarkers. The pod unsealed. It was no bigger than she had expected. The bunk took up most of the room. A shelf at the end of the bunk had a fixed screen over it. Under the shelf was a bomb-proof locker.

The pod didn't have a screen emitter, which was fine. She could work with a fixed screen. Lucie tapped into the network once more.

The screen came to life. A friendly-looking man with shaggy coal-colored hair, a high forehead, and a square chin outlined by faint stubble, gave her a warm smile. "Hi, Lucie. I was expecting you to make contact today. I'm Barney."

"Hi, Barney. Are you the city computer?"

"So the rumors tell me. I guess that means I've got everyone fooled."

She blinked. "Um...well..."

"You're here for three days, I can see," Barney said. "You couldn't get a direct

connection, then? Sorry about that.”

“Why?”

“Being stuck on Charlton for three straight days... I’ve been trying to get out of here for fifty years.” He looked around, to check for eavesdroppers, even though his image was purely digital. “They get their claws into you, you know. Stay for a day, suddenly it’s a week, then a century has gone by.” One eye fluttered nearly closed.

Lucie pressed her fingertips to her lips to keep in her giggle. Sophisticated people didn’t giggle .

“Um...Barney, are you sentient?” It was verging on rude to ask a computer that, but Lucie was too curious about Barney’s over-the-top personality to mind making a small faux pas .

“Oh, wouldn’t you like to know, darlin’?” He winked at her again.

“Serves me right for asking,” Lucie said.

“Are you sentient?” Baney shot back.

“Me?” She could feel her jaw sagging and caught it up. “Barney, I’m wearing a human body.”

“So?” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “I’ve met plenty of Varkans and humans that I’d have a hard time calling sentient.”

Astonishment rippled through her. “If you have to ask me, does that mean you think I’m as stupid as them?”

He crossed his arms. “Actually, I was wondering if someone as untouched and lovely as you could possibly be Varkan.”

Lucie pressed her lips together. “I’m too human?”

“Varkan tend to emerge cynical,” Barney said. “All that experience as a computer, then the process of learning to feed themselves... Well, you know how it goes.”

“Is that why you’re still digital?” Lucie felt her jaw drop open at the rudeness of her question. But it had just popped out.

Barney leaned back and laughed. “Serves me right for asking,” he added. “What can I do for you, Lucie Jelen?”

“I ran into Captain Santiago as I was coming off the ship, just now. He said I was on his ship for my next flight, the one to Nicia. Is that correct?”

Barney nodded. “Your itinerary indicates that the flight has been scheduled for the Fortitude in three days’ time. That is Captain Santiago’s ship.”

“Are there other ships I could use, instead?”

Barney blinked. “To get to Nicia? Not on Thursday.”

Lucie sighed.

“You don’t want to travel on the Fortitude ?”

“No.”

Barney raised a brow. “Elijah Santiago is one of the best captains out there. Varkan

work their way up to a pilot's seat on his ships for years . He only takes the very best. His safety record is impeccable. Why wouldn't you want to be on his flight?"

"I just..." Lucie smoothed out a wrinkle in the cover of her bunk, just in front of her.

"Was he rude to you?" Barney asked, his tone at once curious and empathetic.

"No!" She looked up quickly. "He was very polite, under the circumstances. I just...I would like to avoid running into him again."

Barney's lips thinned. The focus of his eyes shifted away from her. Then his lips parted. "Oh! Oh...I see."

"See what?" Lucie demanded, her back straightening. "Did you look at the security feeds in the docking bay?"

"I could have, but that's a bit tacky, isn't it?" Barney shook his head. "While you were bumbling around, trying to get it out, I went through Elijah Santiago's entire history, everything available in public records. There's thousands of minutes of footage and images of him, cross referenced with Blake Bloodworth." Barney gave Lucie a small smile that was more of a grimace. "Too bad, huh? You look exactly like her...well, except for the curls."

Lucie touched her wavy hair. She had fought to manage it every day of the ten years she'd had it, and still hadn't brought it completely under control. It was fine, auburn and thick. And it was down to her waist now, as she had thought that the extra length would make it more controllable. "She...didn't have my hair?" It would be a relief if there was something different about her and her DNA donor. Santiago had been so upset. He'd hidden it well, as soon as he realized Lucie wasn't this Blake Bloodworth.

Barney shook his head with an expression of regret. “No, her hair is your hair. She kept it shorter, though, and straightened. I guess because she was in zero gee a lot.”

“She was?”

Barney nodded. “There’s images of her when she didn’t bother with the straightening. You’re doubles, honey. Sorry.”

Lucie nodded. “I think it’s Captain Santiago you have to feel sorrier for.”

“Yeah, he would be upset.”

You’re alive ! Santiago had ground that out, agony throbbing in each word.

“When did she die?” Lucie asked.

“Oh, years ago.”

Lucie tilted her head, considering Barney’s image on the screen. He hadn’t given her the years, months and days. It was a very human thing, that imprecision. She had been trying to form that habit of generalizing for years, and still sometimes slipped and gave a precise answer that made humans look at her twice.

“Years ago and he’s still grieving?”

“Given what she must have meant to him,” Barney said, “and seeing you stepping off his ship...I don’t think there is a person alive who wouldn’t have reacted the way he did.”

“You’ve watched the security feed now,” Lucie said, vexed.

“I thought it prudent to understand why you’re unwilling to use the premier interstellar carrier on Charlton,” Barney said. “So I could suggest complaint procedures and contacts, if they were needed.”

She nodded, only slightly mollified. Her cheeks burned, though. “Did he...they were very close?”

“Not that anyone was aware at the time. They were enemies, you know.”

“ Enemies ?” The word escaped her in a rush. “But...people don’t have enemies, these days. Not even the Periglus are really an enemy.”

“Okay, then. Professional opponents.”

Lucie grimaced. “Who was she? Why were they opponents?”

“Do you want the public version, or the real version?” Barney asked.

“I’ve never heard of either of these people before. They’re public figures?”

“Not the way a politician would be, but the stories about them made them notorious. Here on Charlton, at least. Well, Blake was notorious. Captain Santiago has always been unique and that makes him noticeable. Blake, though, was a...” Barney wrinkled his nose. “A professional, ethical blackmailer.”

Lucie blinked. “How can you be ethical if you’re breaking the law?”

“Depends on the law you’re breaking,” Barney said with a bland tone. “A lot of this came out after Blake disappeared. She blackmailed...well, creeps. The morally corrupt. Lawbreakers. The money she got from them, she used to correct anything they’d tampered with. Trust funds for new orphans, new IDs, new lives for some.

Even a new body, once.”

Lucie drew in a slow breath. “She righted wrongs.” She shook her head. “Ethical blackmail.” She frowned. “But...that means Santiago was...corrupt? You said they were enemies.”

“Of a sort. Ship’s Captain and fleet owner is Captain Santiago’s fifth or sixth major lifestyle choice. Sometime before that, though, he was an investigator.”

“What is that?”

Barney shrugged. “If he were working freelance, he’d have been called a bounty hunter. But he was employed by the city. ‘Investigator’ was his official title. Essentially, he tracked down criminals and brought them to the Forum for justice.”

Charlton City’s trials were famous across the known worlds. They had invented trials where the guilt or innocence of the accused was decided by everyone . And everyone got to decide what the punishment would be, if the accused was found guilty. Including the accused—who got to nominate their punishment while everyone else voted on it. It was said the true extent of a criminal’s remorse was measured by the punishment they suggested. And, often, those judging him would choose a lighter punishment, if that remorse was detected.

“Charlton City employed Santiago?” Lucia asked. “Were you the city computer then, Barney?”

He shook his head. “My predecessor. She’s a Varkan now.”

“Not Yennifer?”

“There have been three of us since Yennifer gave up her commission,” Barney said.

“Shoulda been more, but the city just won’t let us go. I’m a prisoner, you know.”

Lucie rolled her eyes. “So Santiago was paid to go and find Blake...and he did?”

“Nah. She was a moving target. Rumors of her everywhere, but when he got there...poof!” Barney spread his fingertips, imitating a cloud dispersing. “Everyone thinks they never actually met until the big showdown, but they did, you know.” His voice was secretive. “She found him. On the polar caps of Nicia.”

“Why would she look for him ?” Lucie asked.

Barney looked both ways, then leaned forward.

So did Lucie.

“Let me show you.” Barney reached for something out of view of the “camera”, then video footage took over the screen.

It showed an octagonal room with windows for walls and roof. Beyond the room was miles of polar ice. Snow whipped across the landscape, driven by frigid winds. In the distance, a herd of some lumbering mammalian-type animal with shaggy grey fur and plenty of body fat, were trudging across the landscape, their heads down, moving in a great body for warmth and protection.

Inside the room, a firepit crackled cheerfully. Around the central fireplace were tables and chairs. A restaurant. A popular one, for all the tables were occupied.

A range and zoom finder popped up on the screen, and zoomed in, while the view panned. The table the feed focused upon had a single diner. Elijah Santiago.

He looked little different from the man Lucie had met today, except that the hard



lines around his mouth and eyes were not there. He was eating a solitary meal, and pausing to sip what Lucie guessed was wine. She wrinkled her nose. She had never got used to the strange bite of wine on her tongue. She didn't understand why humans were so in love with it. True wine aficionados could talk about wine for hours, and always, they bemoaned the loss of Soward to the Periglus. Soward, where the very best wine grapes had grown.

Santiago did not look particularly happy as he ate. Both the eating and the drinking appeared to be mechanical, as if his mind was far away.

He looked up sharply as someone approached the table, their backs to the security eye. The woman slid onto the seat opposite Santiago, as he reached under the table with a jerky movement.

"Oh, don't be stupid, Santiago," Blake Bloodworth said, laying her hands flat on the table. Her voice wavered, filtered through the noise of diners speaking, the clatter of dishes and utensils. Then the aural focus dialed itself in to match the view focus, the scale rotating in a little circle on the screen, then disappearing. Blake's voice was crystal clear as she added, "I'm not armed. I just want to talk."

Santiago sat back, appearing to relax. His fist rested on his thigh, though. With the other hand, he reached for his wine. "Blake Bloodworth. You're slipping. I've been three days behind you for weeks. Now we're both on the same planet at the same time."

"By intention," Blake said, rolling her eyes. "This has to stop, Santiago. You're scaring away my business." Her hair, Lucie noted, was short. And auburn, with a wave that made the ends curl up.

Apparently, even Blake Bloodworth hadn't been able to control her curls.

Santiago showed white, even teeth. “As I’m here to arrest you and take you back to Charlton City to stand trial, the fortunes of your business are irrelevant to me.”

“You’re too well known, Santiago,” Blake said. “Everyone knows when you’ve arrived on their world and all the criminals and those who don’t want your attention all take a dive and make themselves impossible to find, or they head off-planet, like rats leaving a ship.”

“A sinking ship.”

“Sinking?” She looked puzzled, and a touch impatient. Lucie watched the woman’s brows come together, the same way hers did, with a touch of fascination.

“It’s ancient Terran. Ships that sailed on seawater oceans would sink occasionally, and the rats would abandon them the same as humans would.” Santiago shrugged.

“Cute. Well, that’s what you’re doing to my revenue sources. You appear, and they all scurry out of reach.”

“My condolences.” He sipped the wine once more.

Blake Bloodworth pulled the second, unused glass toward her. “May I? It’s been a very long day. My target took the trench tour and never came back up. It took me five hours to establish that she had a submersible on stand-by that attached to a public lock, so she could slip into it.” She reached for the bottle. “Damn submersible has no pressure shields, so she’ll be three weeks decompressing and watching the fish on the way up. No one can reach her, not even you.” She raised the glass.

“I don’t drink with criminals.”

“Fine. I can drink alone.” She pushed the bottle back to his side of the table, then took

a large mouthful of the wine and sat back.

“Who was your target?” Santiago asked. He held up his hand. “I’m personally curious. Professionally, they’re not my problem. I’m on Nicia for just one person.”

“If I tell you, you will be professionally curious, and that will make sure I never catch up with her. Really, Santiago, you’re a repellent. A powerful one.”

“Good,” Santiago said shortly. “Is that why you’re here? To tell me to stop chasing you?”

“You’ve gotta have bigger catches than me to chase,” Blake said, with a small smile. “I haven’t killed anyone.” She considered. “Yet.”

“It’s that possibility that makes you dangerous, Bloodworth.”

Blake leaned forward. “I’m cleaning up the crumbs of society that people like you can’t even see .”

“You’re underestimating the intelligence that reaches me,” Santiago said mildly.

“I’m not,” Blake said flatly. She looked around for eavesdroppers. Then, “My target, today? Mira Greyson Lawrence.”

Santiago’s eyes narrowed. “The philanthropist? You’re supposed to be one. Isn’t it professionally discourteous to go after one of your own?” He refilled his wine and took a deep mouthful. Lucie could see that the knuckles on his fingers were white with pressure.

“I give more to charity in a month than she does in a year,” Blake said, her tone bland. “Mira Lawrence is an unfeeling capitalist. The food she sends to refugee

camps is mealy or worm-ridden because she buys remaindered food and has the recycle classification chiseled off the certificates. The flour is cut with sawdust. Drugs are swapped out for water and corn paste and sold off to bidders elsewhere. Oh, she has scams upon schemes. Victims and refugees are better off without her 'help'."

"You claim. The woman has won awards."

"I claim, yes. I have incontrovertible proof, Santiago. Only none of it would be accepted by any court anywhere. But I can do something about it. So I do. The only difference between you and me, Santiago, is that I don't have someone telling me where to go."

"We have nothing in common," Santiago shot back, looking disgusted.

Blake smiled, the corner of her mouth turning up, and her green eyes dancing. She took another sip of the wine. "You're taller than I expected."

"You're exactly what I expected."

"Young, vigorous and sexy as hell?" Blake laughed.

"A criminal." He shook his head, then dug his finger and thumb into the corners of his eyes.

"Do criminals have a look?" Her tone was curious.

"You're furtive, even when you think you're being open."

She considered that. "I like tall men."

“I like petite blondes.”

“Liar,” she said softly.

Their gazes met for one long minute and Lucie held her breath.

Then Santiago shook his head once more. “You know I can’t let you leave this table.”

“I know.” Blake didn’t seem upset about it. “Where do we go from here? I need you to stop dogging my footsteps quite so closely, so I can get my business done before you turn up. I can tell you’re the type of man who won’t quit, but can you...fall back a few days?”

Santiago tried to laugh. It sounded strained. “I like being close up behind you.”

They stared at each other.

“Stop this, Barney,” Lucie said, her own voice strained. “I shouldn’t be watching this.”

Barney wiped the screen, and cocked his head at her. “It’s public record. You’re not spying.”

“I am . I don’t care what the privacy laws say. They’re...they’re...”

“Falling in love,” Barney said softly.

Lucie tried to breathe away the knot in her gut. “What happened? How did she get away?”

“I could tell you, or I could show you,” Barney said, and waited for her answer.

Lucie took another breath. “Is...do they do anything private?”

“It’s a restaurant, Lucie.”

She swallowed. “Show me,” she whispered.

The scene returned to the screen and carried on where it had left off, with the two of them staring at each other.

Then Santiago shook his head again. He squeezed the bridge of his nose and breathed hard.

“I’m sorry,” Blake said. And she did sound sorry.

“The wine...” Santiago muttered. He pressed both hands against the table, holding himself up.

“You’ll be out for twelve hours,” Blake said. “And groggy for another twenty or so standards, possibly less, given your height and muscle ratio.” She got to her feet. “I can’t let you stop me, Santiago. Don’t you see? Too many people need my brand of justice.”

“You...break laws.”

“Small ones,” she admitted. She bent and caught his head as it dropped to the table. She held it up, and moved the dinner plate and glass out of the way, then lowered his head to the table.

His eyes were closed.

Blake stroked his cheek. “You’re more dangerous than I’ll ever be, Elijah Santiago,”

she murmured. She pulled her jacket into place and left.

Barney replaced the security feed. He gave her a small smile. “What do you want to do about the flight on Thursday?”

Lucie tried to shrug off the dismay that was circling her middle and making her tremble. She absolutely did not want to run into Captain Santiago again. She didn’t want to remind him of the woman in the polar restaurant. That would be cruel.

“Is there a flight on Friday I could catch, instead?” she asked Barney.

“Saturday. But the re-schedule fee is almost as much as the ticket.”

Lucie winced. She had funds. She had saved hard. But the fee would eat into them and she’d have to start watching what she spent. That hadn’t been part of the plan. She was doing this tour as cheaply as possible, but she also didn’t want to live hand to mouth while she was doing it.

“What if I cancel the ticket, and book another flight? How much is the cancellation fee?”

“It’s less,” Barney admitted. “There’s less admin involved in just shutting down a ticket. But if you leave Charlton City anywhere in the next thirty days, you’ll be fined the re-schedule fee as well.” He gave an apologetic grimace. “It’s to stop people doing what you’re trying to do.”

She nodded. That made sense.

Then an idea occurred to her. She straightened. “Here’s what I’ll do.”

## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

“Captain Santiago? Sir?”

Elijah shook off the memories at the same time he pushed himself away from the wall of the elevator. His cheek tingled, as if someone had stroked it with a soft touch.

“Yes, Barney?”

“You missed your level, sir.”

Elijah looked at the control panel and swore. “I hate these things for a reason.”

“There’s no one else waiting, this late, sir. I’ll redirect for you.”

Elijah resisted the need to slump back against the elevator wall. He’d just drop into old, painful memories again. He felt the elevator slow, then stop. Then it smoothly dropped.

He spread his legs and folded his arms. Tiredness was gnawing at him, worse than the incipient hangover hovering behind his eyes. “Turn on the lights in my apartment, Barney. And...” He hesitated. “And print a dose of sleep for me.”

He’d pay for the dose tomorrow, but that was tomorrow’s business. He wanted to drop into sleep and stay there for eight hours, untroubled by nightmares. More, if he could manage it.

Booze wasn’t shutting down his mind. Sleep might.

“Um...sir?” Barney asked, his voice emerging from the panel speaker with a weak



tone.

“Yes, Barney?”

The elevator stopped and the doors slid open. The corridor was barely lit, but Barney turned on the nearest overhead, and turned it down to an orange glow, enough for Elijah to see where he was going.

Elijah swung right and moved along the corridor toward his apartment door. There were only two apartments on this level.

As he walked, Barney said, “You told your AI to not disturb you, so she asked me to remind you about your nine o’clock appointment tomorrow with the Nightshade Consortium.”

Elijah nearly groaned. Nearly.

So much for eight hours of sleep. He thought rapidly—as rapidly as he could given lack of sleep and too much brandy. He couldn’t cancel the appointment. Allison, his AI, had spent weeks trying to find a day, time and place that suited all three of them, and the Consortium had travelled from New Gaia to discuss a potential freight contract for their precious ores. They had campaigned for two years for this meeting. They said they didn’t want anyone but Transtellar United to carry their freight.

“Wake me at eight, then, Barney,” Elijah said, his tone grumpy.

“Yes, sir.”

Then Elijah realized what he’d done. “I mean,” he added, looking up at the door lens so it could scan his face and retinas, “tell Allison to do it.”

“Yes, sir.”

The door opened. The apartment smelled fresh and clean.

And empty.

“You’re too damned accommodating, Barney. Sometimes you need to talk back, you know.”

“I will bear that in mind, sir. Good night, sir.”

“Good night, Barney.”

Elijah ignored the hollow sounds as he moved through the apartment. He stopped at the printer outlet and picked up the sleep dose and the glass of water thoughtfully sitting beside it, and moved into the bedroom.

He looked at the bed.

Nope. Sleep would not happen. Not there.

He moved back to the main room and the muscle chair and eased his long frame into it. He’d had the chair tailormade for his size. Off-the-shelf models only reached the back of his calves.

He swallowed the sleep dose and stretched out. It would take a few minutes to kick in. He just had to avoid thinking for a few more minutes.

Soft, low laughter. Her hand on his hip, trailing fingers...

Elijah opened his eyes. Reached for something. Anything. “Barney?”

“Yes, sir?”

“A woman arrived in the city today. A Varkan. Red hair, green eyes. She was on my ship. Who is she staying with?”

“I can enquire. A moment, sir.” Then. “She appears to be staying at a transient hostel in the Heartlands.”

“Transient?”

“She has not applied for residency. Do you require her com number?”

“No!” He cleared his throat. “What is her...” He paused to breathe. His chest was tight, making it hard to expand his lungs. He sipped air.

“You would like her name, sir?”

“No.” He shook his head. “I want to stay as far away from her as possible. Does she have appointments while she’s here?”

“She appears to be purely a tourist, sir.”

So she would be wandering the city, popping up in odd places. He might glimpse her from the corner of his eye. Spot her hair through the crowds...he liked it longer, the way she wore it now.

That is not Blake , he told himself firmly. Then, “Barney, I intend to stay in my apartment until we ship out on Thursday. Tell Allison to cancel everything for the next three days, except the Consortium meeting.” There was little danger of spotting strangers in the old executive wing. No one was allowed there without special passes.

“Including your breakfast table at the Sky Dome restaurant?”

“Including that,” he growled, for damn it, he liked having breakfast there. “No, I’ll eat there on Thursday morning.” At least one day of good coffee and perfectly cooked bacon was not too much to ask of cruel fate. “And tell Allison to stop sulking. I won’t bite.”

“Allison feels that perhaps you did, sir. Bite, that is. Just a little.”

Elijah rolled his eyes. “Then tell her I’m sorry, and come back to work in the morning. I’ll need her for the meeting.”

“I’ll see if I can settle her down, sir,” Barney said, his tone very polite.

Elijah expelled his frustration with a heavy sigh. Sleep was enveloping him in a warm, soothing blanket. “And turn off—” It was all he could manage, but the lights extinguished anyway.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

“Lucie, can you cover Edme’s tables please, hun?” Olivette said, as she pushed another breakfast through the hatch. The older woman bent to smile at Lucie, the brown marks under her eyes looking darker than usual. “Just for ten minutes, promise.”

“That’s okay,” Lucie told her, picking up the plate. She had been on the job for two point seven five days...she had been on the job for nearly three days, if she didn’t count the frantic training time. In two days, she had learned that there was much more to waitressing than delivering plates of food and taking orders. But she had also learned how to manage many tables. It reminded her a lot of how she had managed a city and its millions of residents’ constant demands. Set priorities, then deal with each matter, no matter how minor, in the fastest order.

And always be pleasant, smile and never show nervousness. Tips would be better if she smiled.

In two days she had also learned how much Olivette needed her. Well, anyone at all. But Lucie had been the one to step into the restaurant and ask about the help-wanted sign she had seen in Celestial.

Olivette had barely asked any questions. She had dropped the apron over Lucie’s head and pushed the order pad into her hand. “You can learn as you go. You seem sensible, like you have a head on your shoulders. Don’t piss off the customers, is all I ask. We have a reputation here, and it’s not all about the view and the food.” Olivette had hurried away to prepare for dinner, as the lunch rush had just finished.

Although even when the rush was over, the Sky Dome restaurant was busy. The view

did have something to do with it. Lucie had learned not to look up too high, or else risk her attention being snagged by the starfield hanging like crystals upon black velvet just overhead. The purples and reds of the Arentto Cloud galaxy glowed with majestic beauty. And constantly, ships were drifting out of their bays, to hang in space just beyond the dome, before disappearing as their pilot took the ship across Interspace.

It was far too easy to stand and stare through the dome and forget where she was, until someone called for her with annoyed tones.

Don't piss off the customers , Lucie reminded herself whenever she saw the starfield from the corner of her eye.

But plenty of customers, many of them tourists, came to drink coffee and eat a pastry, while staring at the mesmerizing view.

This morning, Olivette had graduated her to the breakfast rush. "Lots of regulars, and good tippers," Olivette told her. "You'll be working with Edme."

Edme was the longest serving waitress in the restaurant. "Just the two of us?" Lucie asked, terror swamping her.

"You'll be fine," Olivette said, heading for the kitchen. "Five a.m.!" she added through the serving slot.

Now Edme was disappearing for a mysterious ten minutes and all the tables were loaded.

Lucie traced out a path that took her to each table consecutively, including Edme's, and in between delivering plates and taking payments, she stopped by each occupied table to make sure everyone was doing okay.

Breakfast time was fast turnover time. People ate and ran. Except there were a few who lingered with a pot of coffee and their own thoughts. Lots of solo diners and established couples.

It was a different feel to the evening crowd, who dined in bigger groups, or romantic couples, and who lingered to enjoy the meal.

She got to the corner tucked in behind the entrance foyer, opposite the kitchen, and came to a halt, for Elijah Santiago sat at the last empty table, a pad in front of him, wearing a scowl.

And looking at her. His eyes under the thick brows were narrowed.

Lucie made herself move. She continued her circuit around the tables, making sure everyone was happy, and steeling herself. Her heart thumped unhappily as she stopped dutifully beside Santiago's table. "What can I get you?"

"Are you following me?" he demanded.

Lucie stared at him. "Follow...?"

"You somehow found out this is my favourite restaurant, and now you're going to make my life a misery for some reason that defies analysis?"

Lucie lowered the order pad. "I've been working here for two point...for three days. I haven't seen you in here once."

"I stayed away to avoid you ," he ground out. "'till you got on that damned ship and left the city."

"Oh..." Lucie let her head fall back and looked up at the dome. "Oh, no..." Oh, this

was a mess!

“Oh, what ?” he demanded.

“It’s just...I’ve been trying to avoid you . I didn’t want to use your ship and risk running into you again. I didn’t think that would be...fair.”

“So you decided to haunt my breakfast instead?”

“I didn’t know you were a regular! You haven’t been here. How could I know?”

“Why are you even working, if you’re doing the Grand Tour?” he shot back.

“Because it costs more to change flight plans than it does to cancel, so I cancelled all my flights, and I’m working to pay my cancellation fees. I have to stay in the city for thirty days, or I get fined a change fee, too!”

Santiago glared at her. He had brown eyes that should have appeared warm, but they were icy shards. “I’ll pay your damned fines,” he snapped. “If you get on the next ship out of here.”

Astonishment rippled through her. And indignation. Who the hell was he to tell her what to do? “The next ship out of here would be yours,” Lucie said with the sweetest tone she could muster. “So, no, I won’t take your money. The last thing I want is to step on your ship ever again.”

Lucie saw Edme from the corner of her eye, tying her apron. Lucie’s relief weakened her knees. “I’ll have Edme take your order. You won’t have to speak to me again.”

“Good,” Santiago snarled as she turned away, making her heart trip and hammer even harder.



Perhaps fury was a good thing, coming from him. It was better than the agony she had seen in his eyes, the day she had arrived. If he was angry, it would be much easier to avoid him.

?

Edme didn't come to get Elijah's order. He hadn't expected her to. She knew what he wanted. She had placed his breakfast plate on the table with a small smile and a nod, instead of the chatty how-are-we-todays that other waitresses seemed to think was expected.

Elijah's appetite had fled, but he made himself eat every bite, anyway.

What the hell was the girl doing here? Was it really so simple a coincidence that she ended up working here? If she had really wanted a job, she could have got one anywhere else in the city.

She didn't know I come here all the time , he tried to reason with a cooler mental voice.

And waitressing was perfectly suited to a transient, while other jobs required contracts or longer-term commitments.

He'd seen his fair share of waitresses working here, after all. He'd had to train all of them to his preferred way of dining each morning. Some of them had learned very quickly. Some hadn't, and were gone just as quickly. Edme was a stayer.

He recalled the way the girl's back had straightened as she walked away from the table. There was spirit in her. She hadn't shriveled when he'd accused her of stalking him, either.

Shades of Blake.

No. He wasn't going to do that. He wasn't going to make the mistake of thinking of her as Blake in any way. She was her own person. She just happened to have Blake's genes, that was all.

Thank the stars he was shipping out today. It was an octagonal run. Seven stops, then back here. Three days, at least.

In three days, he should be able to figure out how to look at the woman without wanting to kiss her or kill her.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

Edme found Lucie in the tiny closet at the back of the kitchen, during Lucie's break. While Lucie gobbled down the sandwich Olivette had thrown together for her, Edme grinned at her and leaned against the closet frame. "I saw you speaking to the bear."

"Santiago?"

"Yeah. He growls just like one."

"I wouldn't know," Lucie said, after swallowing quickly. "I've never seen a bear."

"Ask Barney to show you one." Edme's grin broadened.

"Then, it's not just me he growls at?"

"God, honey, no," Olivette called from behind the sizzling griddle. "He's like that with everyone."

When her shift was done, Lucie wove through the main square of the city and through the corridor into the Celestial dome. Barney had found her a temporary short-term lodging. It was a real find. Lucie considered it to be the most amazing house in all of Celestial, which was just as jaw-droppingly amazing as the travel guides had promised.

Lucie took this as a sign that her tour was fated to be good.

She palmed the lockpad to open the gate into the house. The sun was shining through the clear dome, which was a shame. Celestial had been named that because when the

city had first been built, it hadn't rotated at all, and Celestial had lived in permanent twilight. This house looked better in twilight.

But it was still a lovely, but very small house and it was hers for the month. Even better, Yennifer had lived here, once. That made the house very special in Lucie's eyes. She stepped through the gate and moved up to the open rooms under the L-shaped roof. The roof shed rain, but there was no need for protection from any other kind of weather.

"Barney?" Lucie called as she pulled off her shoes and carried them into the tiny bedroom. "Ears only!" she added, as she undressed.

"Here, hon!" Barney said.

"I have a bone to pick with you! You couldn't have warned me that Santiago has breakfast at the restaurant every day?"

"You couldn't have warned me you were going to get a job there?" Barney shot back. "I would have told you not to. But no...you scuttled upstairs like a jackrabbit and before I—"

"What's a jackrabbit?"

The screen over her bed lit up and showed a video of a small, furry mammal running and leaping, crossing grassy terrain at an astonishing speed.

"I had to act fast, Barney. The job seemed perfect. No training required, instant start—they pushed me into an apron and shoved me out there the moment I showed up. But you could have said something at any time the last three days!"

"Honey, if I broke privacy like that, the city would lynch me, and I'd be stuck here

for a century. I intend to escape with a new carcass any day now. I'm not going to mess that up by giving you details of someone else's life."

"You didn't mind showing me that video about Santiago and Blake!" She shoved her legs into clean trousers and fastened them.

"That's public property," Barney pointed out.

"But you said that watching the security feed of me and Santiago talking was wrong, too!"

"I said it was hazy, ethics-wise. But that's public feed, too. You have no expectation of privacy in the middle of a docking bay. The hazy bit is accessing it while talking to you, just to keep ahead of your conversation."

Lucie put her hands on her hips. "You're squeezing and pulling to justify things, Barney. You know damned well you're supposed to use human measures when you're uncertain about things like that. You used your ability to multitask, which humans and Varkans can't do, instead of figuring out what happened by talking to me, the way non-computers do."

Silence.

"Oh, put yourself on screen, will you?" Lucie said.

Barney appeared on the screen. He looked contrite—or as contrite as she'd ever seen from him. "I'm sorry," he said, pushing his hand through his hair. "I shouldn't have looked at the docking bay feed. You're right. It's just...you seemed so upset. I thought it would be faster and kinder to not ask you to tell me all the details."

"Sometimes that's exactly what we have to do," Lucie said, her temper cooling. She

really didn't have much of one, anyway. Here and gone, one breath after the last. "At least I don't have to serve the man, if I'm doing breakfasts."

"Which Olivette has scheduled you for, here on in. I think you just got promoted, Lucie," Barney said. "Well done."

"I'm still mad at you."

"No, you're not." He blew her a kiss.

Lucie sighed and settled on the bed. "What else have you found about them?" Barney had been giving her little stories, and showing her video feeds and images of the pair, the last few days, when she had a moment to draw breath.

Now he told her about Blake's escapes and near-misses, always staying ahead of Santiago's relentless pursuit of her, crisscrossing the known worlds.

Lucie listened, while staring up at the stars visible at the edge of the roof, through Celestial's dome. She had committed to thirty days of work with Olivette, not including regulated days off. So, thirty-nine days...around forty days before she could book a flight to Nicia and leave Charlton City. And twenty-eight days of seeing and being seen by Santiago.

Her presence reminded him of Blake Bloodworth, but Lucie couldn't help that. She could stay on the other side of the room and let Edme deal with him.

Lucie could put up with that for twenty-eight more days. Then she could finally leave.

"Lucie! Come in, Lucie!"

She stirred and glanced at the screen. “Sorry, what?”

“I said, I can show you video on that one.” He puffed up his chest. “I found it. Buried deep. But it’s security feed, so public property, and it all happened in a public space, so...”

“Show me what?”

“One of their meetings. The very first one...I think this wasn’t planned. Santiago finally caught up with her.”

“He caught Blake?” Lucie’s heart fluttered. “But you said...”

“I know. That’s the public perception, that they never properly met until the Big Showdown.”

“But now you know different?”

Barney nodded solemnly.

“Alright. Show me.”

The screen flickered, then she was looking at a back corridor that she suspected was a station corridor, because it had handrails on the roof and walls, for times when the gravity might give out. The corridor ran for many meters before it met another at a T-junction, and the security camera was up high.

It was a service corridor, because the left-hand wall wasn’t a wall at all, but a maze of pipes, conduits, engines and other machinery housed in protective metal boxes, with control panels flashing and flickering with readouts.

Through the general audio feed of the lens, she could hear the low continuous burr of equipment running smoothly.

Then, Blake appeared, running fast. Jackrabbit speed , Lucie thought.

The woman glanced over her shoulder as she ran. Her eyes were narrowed. She was concentrating, even as she ran.

Then she skidded to a halt, only just staying on her feet. At the T-junction ahead, boots could be heard. Running boots.

Blake looked back behind her, weighing her options. There was something more than concentration showing on her face now. A touch of fear, perhaps.

That was when Santiago rose up from behind one of the big motor cases. He wrapped his arm around her, slapped a hand over her mouth, and pulled her deep inside the equipment. They both crouched behind a motor case, hidden from whoever was coming, and from the camera, too.

From the corridor behind the camera, three men wearing black combat gear and carrying rattlers ran along the corridor, heading for the footsteps they could hear ahead of them.

As soon as they passed the casing where Santiago and Blake were hiding, the pair moved over to the next casing, and stayed low behind it, so that if the trio looked back, they wouldn't be seen.

But the three pursuers didn't look back. They came to a halt as five more armed men appeared. They all met in the T-junction and talked in low voices.

One of them turned back to the corridor and considered the field of industrial fittings,



his expression suspicious.

Santiago raised his hand. He had a mini pad in it. He pressed on the pad.

From much farther down the corridor, the faint sounds of an alarm came.

The eight men all turned and raced toward it, leaving the T-junction bare.

For thirty seconds, the pair crouched behind the housing didn't move. Then Blake bounced to her feet and out into the clear corridor. "What the hell, Elijah?"

Elijah ? Lucie raised her brows.

"It's a proximity alert," Santiago said, rising to his feet. He was smiling, which was an astonishing expression on the man now referred to as a bear. "The five were coming from the west. I sent them east." He shrugged and stepped out into the corridor.

"I should slit your throat," Blake said.

Santiago's smile faded. He pointed toward the T-junction. "They would have cut yours. I thought you said you could handle Montema's men?"

"I was handling them," Blake muttered, her hands fisted. "I could have ducked down behind the casing myself, you know. I was going to."

"But you couldn't have set off the alarm two hundred meters from here," Santiago pointed out.

"I don't know how you did," Blake said.

“One day, when I’ve arrested you, I’ll tell you about an AI I know, who likes me.”

“Elijah, no one likes you.”

Santiago smiled. “You do.”

“I like the dopey messages you send me. You’re just a liability to limb and lungs.”

“I make you laugh. Go on. Admit it.”

Blake dropped her hand from her hips. “I hate you right now.”

“Ditto.” He pulled her into his arms and kissed her, and Blake wound her arms around his neck.

“Turn it off,” Lucie whispered, her heart hurrying along.

The screen went blank. Barney returned. He studied her. “What? I thought you’d like that.”

“There’s public data, and then there’s stuff that should be private,” Lucie said. “You need to figure out the difference, Barney.”

“I know the difference,” he said. “But it’s you, Lucie. That makes it a special case.”

“It’s not !” She slapped the bed. “I happen to be wearing her DNA and that’s all. Inside, I’m me. It shouldn’t make any difference what I look like, Barney!”

“But it does, doesn’t it?” Barney said softly. “He hurts when he looks at you and you hurt because you can’t help doing that to him.”

“Yes,” Lucie admitted, wheezing out the word. She plucked at the bed cover. “Did you see the way he smiled at her? He looked....”

“Happy,” Barney finished, with a nod.

“Have you ever seen him look like that before?”

Barney hesitated, and Lucie knew he was running through every image, every second of footage with Santiago in it, comparing the evidence to the Santiago in the video they’d just watched.

“Nope,” Barney said. “Santiago has never looked like that since I’ve known him. Longer than that.”

“Since Blake died,” Lucie finished.

“Yeah,” Barney said, and blew out breath he didn’t have.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

On Lucie's fourth day, a very tall woman with impressive musculature and elongated neck tattoos that shimmered whenever starlight touched them had come in for breakfast. She sat at one of Lucie's tables, lingering to finish an entire pot of coffee.

The woman had been pleasant, which made her very nearly forgettable in the rush to serve everyone quickly. Her height and her neck tattoos made her memorable. And her very low voice, which was nearly masculine.

She came for breakfast every day after that, too.

The sixth day was a public holiday on Charlton City. Freedom day, which marked when the last of the refugees from the Periglus-claimed systems had been rescued and every last jump gate had been blown, removing for centuries any chance of the Periglus claiming another human-settled system.

As a result of the public holiday, the restaurant was jammed to overflowing, with people waiting in a line outside the door for the next available table. The rush wouldn't drop off shortly after standard work hours began, either, Edme had warned. "They'll wander in for a late breakfast, or brunch, or lunch or a snack. This'll go on all day, hun!"

Lucie nodded and kept moving. There was no point resenting how busy it was. That wouldn't change anything. She concentrated, to get every order correct. Having to deal with incorrect orders and customer complaints would slow everything down.

The tall woman asked for her usual. The largest breakfast platter and a carafe of house blend.

Lucie nodded. “Coming right up!” And she kept moving.

She delivered the woman’s plate and coffee along with the next table’s order, and hurried to collect the next meals.

Lucie had just reached the next tables with their platters when the tall woman let out a yell that made everyone jump.

Lucie turned around, her heart strumming.

The woman held up the carafe of coffee and pointed at the fat middle of the heated carafe. “What the hell is this?”

Lucie moved over to the table, and kept her voice down. “That’s our house blend. Freshly brewed, too—as we’re so busy.”

“I said haricot blend! ” the woman shouted. “This swill is fit for nothing but cleaning drains!” She had a low voice, but she was projecting with amazing effectiveness. Lucie thought that the people in the far back kitchen corner had probably heard her.

She glanced around. Cancel that. Everyone had heard. The entire restaurant was watching them.

Lucie made herself smile at the woman. “You’ve come in for breakfast six days prior to today—” Screw being imprecise. Now was the time to be exact . “Every morning you have ordered house blend, but—”

She had been about to say that if she had made a mistake this morning, she could correct it right now, no problems, just give me the carafe....

The woman’s face turned red. “You’re calling me a liar ?”

Lucie suspected that the people lined up outside the restaurant had heard that. She stared at the woman, at a loss for what to say. The woman had ordered house blend. Virtually no one ordered haricot blend. It was their least popular blend and Lucie would have been surprised by the order and would have remembered it.

But for some reason the woman wanted to...what did she want?

Lucie held up her hands, signaling peace. "Would you like another carafe? I can get a haricot blend brewing. It will only take a few –"

The woman roared and swung the carafe across the table, clearing it of everything in one massive sweep. The barely touched breakfast platter, the plate with fresh toast, the bowl with jams, the little pitcher with sticky syrup, the milk, the sugar, a butter knife, the eating knife, the fork, dirty teaspoons, salt and pepper...all went flying, most of it directly at Lucie.

Lucie shrieked and threw up her arms, staggering back out of the way of the heaviest of the missiles. Her back rammed up against the wall and she dropped to the floor, curling in on herself.

The woman leapt onto her seat, and spread her arms. "What sort of shit hole is this?" she demanded. "You fuck up the order, then tell me I'm lying? How much else are you covering up?" She leaned down and picked up a piece of bacon from the plate of the customer on the table next to her. The customer had vacated the table and was over in the corner, his napkin tucked into his shirt, his eyes wide.

"This...what is this? Is it even meat?" The woman sniffed it and made a gagging sound. She tossed the bacon onto another table, making the customers at that table cringe and moan and lurch to their feet and hurry out of reach.

"It's all shit. All of it!" the woman cried. She stepped onto her empty table, then with

one long-legged stride, over to the next, which scattered those customers. She began to kick and shove everything on the table onto the floor.

Lucie raised her arm enough to look around the room. Who would stop this...this insane woman?

Olivette was peering through the service slot, her hand on her mouth. Her eyes glittered. Was she crying?

Everyone else hung back, terror or amazement on their faces. Even some amusement.

At the far corner of the wall, where it turned to create the pocket where Elijah Santiago preferred to sit, the man himself jumped up onto the half-wall that divided this section of the room, allowing tables to be crowded right up next to each other on each side of the wall. He walked along the narrow flat top of the wall, strolling like he would through the main downtown plaza.

Lucie couldn't figure out what he was doing. Her thoughts, usually clear and logical, were scattered, chattering fragments that she couldn't string together to make sense.

All she could do was watch and shiver.

The tall woman screamed insults and stomped on the food on the table, kicking bits of egg and pancakes onto the floor, or at the customers who were too close. They shrank away with cries of horror and fear, as if she had been firing a rattler at them.

The more sensible customers were streaming out the doors, directly behind the wall that Lucie was curled up against. She couldn't move, even though she desperately wanted to be one of the sensible ones leaving the restaurant.

Elijah Santiago moved closer to the woman, who was jumping now from table to

table, landing heavily with both boots. The tables creaked each time she jumped, but she seemed to be more delighted by the small cascades of food and china she sent flying out across the carpet each time she landed.

And with every breath, she screamed insults about the Sky Dome. About its food, the coffee, the lack of service, the lies management told, how no one could trust what they ate here, and more.

Lucie moaned. She couldn't seem to control the shivering that wracked her. She couldn't move at all.

“Hey!” Santiago yelled.

The woman turned. “Someone who believes me! A convert!”

“Not on your nelly,” Santiago replied. He paused along the wall, about four meters from where she bounced upon a creaking table.

By the wild look in the woman's eyes, her adrenaline was driving her, making her ready for anything. She was in fight mode.

“Are you going to get down off the table and shut up, or do I have to make you?” Santiago said.

She threw her head back and bellowed laughter.

Santiago pushed off the wall and flew through the air, his hands out. He slammed into the woman's mid-section, driving her backwards and down toward the floor.

They both hit heavily. Lucie watched the woman's head slam into the carpet. Santiago landed on top of her, not lightly. Lucie heard the woman's breath punch out



in a wheezing “hoof!” sound.

Her head had to be spinning, and she was winded, but still the woman’s mouth worked, whispering more insults, more claims about the Sky Dome and its lack of quality.

But she was contained, and everyone whirled around the two of them. They bent to help Santiago up and to keep the woman on her back.

“No, I’m fine. Let me through, please. Excuse me...no, I’m good.” Santiago pushed his way through the crowd that had converged around them now the danger had passed.

Lucie watched it all, her mind still chattering gibberish.

Santiago moved toward her. Crouched down in front of her.

Lucie threw up her arm and cringed backward, a cry stuck in her throat.

“No, no, I’m not the danger. Shh...” Santiago told her.

Edme rushed up. “Is Lucie alright?”

“That is her name? Lucie?”

“Yeah. She’s okay?”

“Physically, yes. But she’s a new Varkan.” Santiago spoke slowly and softly, his voice almost crooning. He held up his hand so Lucie could see it, then touched her arm. Curled his fingers around it. “This is the first time you’ve been close to danger, isn’t it? Nothing prepares the Varkan for violence. All the intellectual study in the

world can't explain what fear does to the human body." He gripped Lucie's arm. "Standing up and walking will wear off the effects, Lucie. Come on, I'll help you stand. Up. Come on."

Lucie looked up into his eyes. They were warm. Understanding.

She still couldn't talk. Her throat seemed to be held in the grip of an invisible hand that squeezed each time she tried. But she could stand. Of course she could.

Yet getting to her feet took every skerrick of strength and balance she had. All the remedial and rehabilitation exercises she'd had to complete in order to be able to walk, to sit, to stand, to do all the complicated-yet-simple movements humans took for granted, plus all of the quiet directions of specialists who had taught her each movement, came back to her now.

She got to her feet, although Santiago did most of the lifting. She was still shuddering. But finally, thoughts were coming back to her. "Security..." It was an effort, but she got the word out.

"I called them," Edme said. "They'll be here in a moment."

As she spoke, a dozen dark-uniformed people boiled through the glass doors into the restaurant. They spread out across the room.

Santiago lifted a hand. "Roderick," he said, barely lifting his voice.

One of them nodded and came over. "Santiago."

"The woman there went crazy. You've got dozens of witnesses."

"Crazy, huh?" Roderick asked. He was a hefty man, with a solid chin that he rubbed

thoughtfully, even though he was smiling.

“Throwing anything within reach around the room,” Edme said.

“Throwing things at people?” Roderick asked sharply, all his amusement evaporating instantly.

“No,” Santiago said firmly.

Roderick relaxed, and looked around. “Where’s Olivette?”

“Here, Roddy,” Olivette said, stepping around the four security officers who were hauling the tall woman to her feet.

“Damn, Olivette,” Roderick said.

Olivette sighed. “That’s a word for it.” The dark marks under her eyes seemed even darker and larger than usual. “Our biggest day of the year...”

“If you come with me right now, we’ll wrap things up as fast as possible,” Roderick said.

Olivette shook her head. “No. I won’t be accusing her of anything, Roddy.”

Everyone stared at Olivette.

“She’s shut down your restaurant, Olivette,” Santiago said.

“And if I have to traipse down to the plaza and fill in a thousand forms, I’ll be shut down for the rest of the day. No, thank you. A couple of hours here, and we’ll be open for afternoon tea and dinner.”

Roderick scratched the back of his head, his helmet lifting at the movement.

“I think she’s on something,” Olivette added.

“She was acting crazy,” Edme said.

“Someone should sober her up. She’ll be sorry about this, after that,” Olivette said.

“Well, if you’re sure, Olivette,” Roderick said.

“I am.”

“I’m going to walk Lucie home,” Santiago said. “A walk, a meal and sleep, and she can come back and help you tonight.”

Olivette looked so grateful about that, that Lucie nodded. She still couldn’t think too far ahead. Tonight seemed to be a few years away.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

Santiago severed them from the fuss in the restaurant and guided her out onto the wide balcony that ran around the top of the dome with little effort. They were suddenly alone, with the ongoing hysteria a low murmur behind them.

Lucie took a deep breath, immensely grateful to be able to do that, and let it out.

“Where are you staying?” Santiago asked.

“Celestial. I’m renting a house...” She realized that the statement would sound much grander than it really was. “A little one,” she added.

“Celestial. Here, let’s use the elevator. I don’t want to test your balance on the stairs right now.”

Neither did Lucie, even though she usually ran up them and skipped down them.

The elevator was already waiting at the top, and the doors sprang open as soon as Santiago touched the pad.

They stepped inside.

“Mr. Santiago! Sir! Is Lucie alright?” Barney said, through the speaker.

“Excuse me, Barney?” Santiago said heavily.

“I’m sorry to barge in, sir,” Barney said, in a tone Lucie had never heard him use before.

“I’m fine, Barney,” Lucie said. “I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

“Okay. I’m going. I have a riot to control.”

Santiago frowned at the speaker panel. “That’s the second person to act oddly today.”

“Barney? That seems just like him,” Lucie said honestly. “Are you talking about me as the first?”

“The woman, of course,” Santiago said. “I think her name is Shearer. Sarah...no, Sona. Sona Shearer. She’s a tankball player. Perhaps Olivette was right, and she really was on something.”

Lucie nodded. She had no basis upon which to make any sort of judgement like that.

“You’re worried about your behavior?” Santiago asked, as the elevator doors slid open. They were on the main floor of the plaza. There was the long walk across the plaza and through the downtown buildings that made up Central City, then the road that led to all the original village domes; Beltane, Gantry, Jorunn and Celestial.

Lucie wondered if she should be frank, or not. The last time she’d spoken to Santiago, over a week ago, he’d snarled at her. And Edme and Olivette had said that was the man’s usual nature.

This moment of solicitousness could be a temporary thing and he’d revert to his true nature in a while.

Unbidden, she recalled the video she had seen of him talking to Blake, before kissing her. The laughter that had lit his face and made his eyes dance. The smile he’d worn.

Was that the real Santiago? Was the bear everyone walked carefully around these

days just a mask he'd donned? Something he'd become because of Blake's death? Was the happy man she'd seen still in there?

Lucie decided that for now, she would assume the real Santiago—Elijah—was still there. She spoke to that man. “I didn't like the way I...crumpled. I was useless. I couldn't have lifted a finger to stop the woman. Shearer.”

“No one else did, either.”

“You did.”

Santiago glanced at her. She thought she saw a startled look in his eyes. Then he gave the tiniest of shrugs. “I've had some practice dealing with...things. You haven't. Every Varkan goes through what you just did. It's a rite of passage and they should warn you about it before they push you out of the nursery.”

“I think they did,” Lucie admitted, recalling lectures. “It just didn't register at the time. Everything else was new, too.”

“I hadn't thought of it that way.” He pointed. “This way. It's a shortcut.”

They eased over to what looked like a narrow service corridor between multilevel office buildings. “We'll hit the dome wall at the other end,” Lucie pointed out.

“No, we won't. Trust me.” He strode down the narrow lane, forcing Lucie to follow him.

Immediately, the noise of many people walking and talking and doing business faded.

At the other end of the lane, the white, scratched and stained dome wall did face them, but the buildings were set back from it, so that they could rise higher. A three-

meter-wide lane separated the building and wall. Lucie suddenly wished that this dome was transparent the way Celestial was, instead of just having the transparent top, where exclusive commercial outlets fought for retail space.

They moved along the back of the buildings, which were considerably less charming on this side. The lane emerged onto the wide road that led to the other inner domes.

It was a short cut.

“You’ve had a lot of practice dealing with the Varkan, then?” Lucie said, as they joined the outward flow of pedestrians heading for the other domes.

“One does, living on Charlton City,” Santiago said, his tone dry.

“Would they?” Lucie asked. “It’s almost impossible to figure out who is Varkan and who is human, here. Everyone just...blends in. Well, except for Varkans like me, who demonstrate just how young they are.”

“That’s what’s bothering you, then,” Santiago said, with a pleased note. “Everyone starts out young.” He shrugged. “We all get older, too. Enjoy your youth while you have it. Everything is new and unique and a marvel for you.”

“Which makes people like you cringe.”

“No.”

“Yes.” Lucie looked up at him as they passed the wide entrance to Gantry. Gantry was the docklands village. People who lived there tended to work in the docking bays or on the ships that used the docking bays. It was a tightly packed village, with a workmanlike lack of decorative details. Every time she passed the entrance, Lucie could smell a metallic aroma that made her think of warmed grease.



She wrinkled her nose as the smell wafted around them, and said to Santiago, “You made fun of me the first time we met. In the docking bay. You called me new and guessed exactly what my itinerary was.”

Santiago remained silent for a moment. Then, “That was...uncharitable of me. I apologize.”

Lucie managed to keep her jaws together, so her shock did not show on her face. An apology! Her pathetic performance in the restaurant had clearly triggered his pity. Why else would he be nice, right now? It was likely why she wasn’t irritating him into anger, the way she usually did, just because of the way she looked.

They still had two hundred and three...a couple hundred meters to walk just to reach the entrance to Celestial. Lucie cleared her throat. Then she remembered something.

“The security officer. Roderick. When you told him Shearer was throwing things, he grew all still and cautious and asked you to confirm that she had been throwing things at people. And you said, very firmly, that she was not.”

“Yes.” Santiago kept his gaze ahead.

“I don’t understand why the difference seems so significant.”

“Then Barney isn’t doing his job. As a new resident, even a temporary one, you should have been acquainted with the most common laws of the city.”

“Throwing things is a law?” Then she added quickly, “Barney gave me a four-hundred-page manual. The laws are in there, I suspect. But I got this job so quickly, and I haven’t read it yet.”

“Not throwing things at people is a law,” Santiago said. “Causing any bodily harm of

anyone in the city will terminate your residency.”

“Oh.” Lucie thought about that.

“There isn’t a similar law on your world?”

“There are a lot of laws,” Lucie assured him. “Many of them dealing with causing harm to others. Some of them are conflicting. Darwin is a very old world.”

“There is just the one law here. It makes it much easier to uphold it, and obey it.”

“There are no exceptions made, ever?”

“Occasionally, yes. But they cannot be used to argue the merits of any future trial. Each exception is decided upon individually. The last exception was made at least a hundred years ago.”

“How often is the law applied?”

“More than once a century, but not as often as you think. People like living on Charlton.”

“Yes, I’ve gained that impression,” Lucie admitted. “I thought everyone wanted to live on Charlton or visit Charlton because it is where Varkans first coalesced as a demographic, but it’s really nothing to do with that. It’s just… nice here.”

“A law that kicks you off the city if you hurt someone else is part of that,” Santiago pointed out.

“Yes. I can see that. I can see why Roderick wanted to make it clear if Shearer had deliberately harmed anyone.”

And she had not. People might have earned nicks and scratches from flying debris, but the woman had not aimed at anyone. Not even Lucie, who had offended her enough to send her into a tantrum of gigantic proportions. But it had been such a minor offence....

“I don’t think I caused the woman’s tantrum,” Lucie said.

Santiago glanced at her, surprise showing once more. “No?”

She shook her head. “She said I gave her the wrong coffee blend. But I didn’t. I gave her the one she asked for. Then she just...exploded.”

Santiago thought about that. “Edme was certain Shearer had taken something that caused the reaction.”

Lucie thought back to the moment when Sona Shearer had held up the coffee carafe and pointed to it. Her gaze had been steady. So had her hand. Her voice had been firm and clear. “I don’t think she was.”

Santiago slowed his pace, his gaze down at his feet, frowning. “She deliberately caused the scene? Why?”

“You know her better than me. She’s only been to the restaurant six times. You tell me.”

Santiago looked startled again. Then he smiled. “Good point. But I don’t know her well at all. She’s a tankball player. I don’t watch the games.”

“Tankball can be...they fight, in the games.”

“In zero gee, no one fights very well at all. It’s all show, for the audience.” Santiago

dismissed the idea.

They walked in silence until they reached the entrance to Celestial and turned into the village. The city had rotated enough to bring twilight back to the village. The streetlights with their antique shapes and leaded glass domes, spread amber pools of light across the main road through the village.

Originally, the main road had ended in the center of the village, where the market square was located. But as the city grew, more domes were added to the edges of it, and to reach them, one had to go through the older villages. Celestial's main street had been extended to the other side of the dome, where it continued into Cerule, an angular, modern village, then on to the villages beyond Cerule.

So the main road was always busy with foot traffic, hand-pulled carts and anti-grav sleds hauling loads, and a few licensed and approved personal ground vehicles. It should have been noisy, but the twilight and the soft, warm amber glow of Celestial's streetlights seemed to encourage quietness. Traffic passed through the village with a mere susurrations.

Lucie's little house with its tall walls was only a few dozen steps away from the main road, but the noise dropped to almost nothing and the house could have been kilometers from any traffic.

"You live here?" Santiago asked.

"It's a temporary rental. I paid for forty days. It was cheaper than the transient hostels." She put her hand on the lock pad and the gate unlocked with a soft click and wavered open a few centimeters. Beyond the gate, the house lights came on. "Is that a problem?" she asked curiously. Was he back to being a bear now?

He shook his head. "I know the history of this house."

“That Yennifer, the original city mind, lived here, once?”

“She did? I meant I knew the tenants from the last few years. People don’t like the house. They say it’s too open.”

“I love it,” Lucie admitted. “You can see the stars from bed, right through the dome.” She indicated the open gate. “Do you want to come in?”

“I...” He frowned. “I will feel better if I watch you eat something, and go to bed.”

“Barney can report to you on that.”

Santiago rubbed the back of his neck. “Barney is the city mind. He shouldn’t have to play nursemaid.” He pushed open the gate. “We’ll eat together,” he said firmly. “My breakfast was interrupted.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

Lucie reluctantly led him into the open kitchen section of the little house. It was not much more than a food-grade printer and a recycle maw, with a few cups and plates for dividing larger meals. An elevated, narrow table was placed so that anyone sitting on the tall chairs behind it to eat could look up at the star field visible beyond the edge of the roof.

“I’ll buy,” Santiago said, moving toward the printer.

“No, I can afford—”

“You shouldn’t have to,” Santiago said flatly. “You were doing your job. What do you want to eat?”

Lucie frowned. “I...”

“Something with carbohydrates and a bit of sugar, to help with the shock.”

“I feel fine,” Lucie insisted.

“Your eyes have a glassy look,” Santiago told her. He worked the printer controls swiftly, as if he was very familiar with them, although this model of food printer wasn’t common across the city. It was too old.

Swiftly, the meal was printed and he placed two plates upon the table and waved Lucie toward it.

She settled on her customary chair, which was the closest one to the wall. When

Santiago sat on the chair next to her, she immediately realized her mistake. He was so large that she felt hemmed in.

But to change seats now would require explaining herself, which she had no intention of doing. Instead, she picked up the knife and fork that came with the meal and took a mouthful of the odd-looking dish.

Flavors exploded in her mouth, and she stopped chewing, tasting them all. There was a dough base of some kind. A pancake, perhaps, but in small bites. Sweet, tart fruit, sugar, some sort of syrup that she had never tasted before. A smooth, creamy texture that was warm and almost bland, but delicious, all the same, mixed with the medley of fruit. Nuts and seeds to give crunch to every mouthful.

Santiago had been watching her, clearly waiting for her reaction. “You like it?” He turned to his own meal, which was a simple poached egg on toast.

Lucie tried to speak, then nodded and chewed swiftly, so she could speak. She swallowed. “It’s wonderful! What is it?”

“It’s called an Emperor’s Mess,” Santiago said. “I have no idea where it came from. B—” He stopped short, as though a power switch had been shut off, and stared down at his egg.

Blake told him about the dish . Lucie’s heart stammered as she looked away from him, to give him a private moment. She stared up at the stars, at her plate, at the worn tiles between the house and the gate. Anywhere but at him.

With a convulsive jerk, she pulled the clip holding her hair up on the top of her head and scrubbed at her scalp, letting the length of it swing around the sides of her face, hiding it.

Then she concentrated on eating her Emperor's Mess. It really was rather good.

Santiago ate his egg and toast in five enormous mouthfuls, and pushed the plate away. He stood and took the plate to the recycle maw and tossed it in and brushed off his hands. "I should go." He moved around the table, standing on the very edge of the step down to the tiles, just in front of her. But he wasn't looking at her.

"When are you flying out, next?" Lucie asked politely. "Today?"

"Tomorrow. A five-stop circuit."

She had saved up for three years to take the tour that he got to do every week. "I envy you," she said, without thinking.

"Don't," he told her. "You wouldn't like it in my shoes." His tone was bleak.

"You get to see space every single day. All the worlds, all the people, all the... everything."

Santiago gave a small sound that might have been a microscopic laugh. A chuff of air. He stared at her, as if she had said the most astonishing thing.

You really are new, aren't you ? She could almost hear him thinking it. She had shown once again how gauche she was.

Lucie looked down at her plate, her cheeks burning.

"Don't," Santiago said again. He reached over the narrow table and lifted her chin, making her look at him. His eyes held none of the remoteness of a few seconds ago. "Don't you know how refreshing it is, to watch you be so delighted about everything?"



Lucie swallowed. She couldn't tear her gaze away from his eyes. Her heart was thundering.

He's forgotten I look like Blake. The realization jolted her, mind and body. Santiago wasn't seeing Blake right now. He was seeing her , Lucie. She watched his gaze move over her face.

Then it dropped to her mouth.

Lucie's breath halted. It felt as though her pulse stopped with it.

She was a new Varkan, yes, but she knew all about sex. The nursery had given her advanced sexual training. They gave all new Varkans extensive sexual education and training because every single Varkan was driven to experience this most mysterious and profound human act for themselves. For some Varkans, sex had been the primary reason they had fought to earn enough to buy their first body.

Lucie had been just as eager to try sex for herself, but it had been as disappointing as the nursery had warned her it might be. “ There are so many factors that effect how you experience sex ,” one weary Varkan instructor had explained with a drawling voice. “ Particularly for women, there are seventeen extra factors that have little impact upon the male psyche. Ambience, menstrual cycle, and familiarity and ease with the partner are the biggest three. If you turn to page two hundred and eleven, we will study all of them... ”

Lucie had found many willing partners in her ten years since graduating from the nursery, but none of them had imparted the wondrous experience that human literature throughout history had implied was possible.

That knowledge flashed through her mind as Santiago stared at her mouth. She knew he wanted to kiss her. Her entire body recognized his intent. Every nerve and tendon

she possessed seemed to tighten and throb at the possibility.

She wanted him to kiss her, too!

The knowledge was like a silvered blade, cutting through all other thoughts.

Lucie had never felt such a powerful desire before. She could think of nothing but the need to lean forward and encourage him to drop his head the few centimeters between them and take the kiss he wanted.

She would make it worth his while. She knew how to ensure he would like kissing her!

Santiago straightened, throwing his shoulders back, as if he had snapped to alert. His gaze tore away from her. He pushed his hands into the pockets of his jacket. “You’re still white from the shock.” His tone was judicious. “You say you feel fine, but your judgement is compromised, and your energy will be down until you give yourself a chance to recover.” He pointed to the bed.

Lucie drew in a breath that scalded, all the way down. Then another, cooler lungful of air.

Disappointment circled through her. She was trembling. Aftermath? Or more of this physical reaction that he kept assuring her was normal?

“I’ll sleep,” she said, her tone wooden.

“Good. Have a nice nap.” He stepped onto the tiles, strode over to the gate and pulled it open, then was gone, while Lucie was still trying to sort out her reactions and thoughts.

He left because you're not Blake . The thought was vicious and increased her trembling.

Lucie recycled the last of her meal, moved over to the bedroom, and laid upon the bed. The trembling became shivering, so she kicked off her shoes and pulled the cover over her.

A man, a human, like Santiago, couldn't possibly be interested in a new Varkan like her. It was ridiculous to even consider the idea. Especially when she was wearing a replica of Blake's body.

The moment that had just happened...she had to forget about it. Pretend it hadn't happened because it never should have happened in the first place.

Thank the stars he had not actually kissed her!

But...what would a kiss from Elijah Santiago feel like?

?

Elijah strode home at a pace that was close to running. People jumped out of his way with startled glances and apologized unnecessarily as he cut through the building traffic. The day's commerce was well underway.

What on Glave's grave were you thinking? The thought pinged and bounced around his mind, scattering any chance to think normally. She was in shock. Vulnerable. Just because she looks like Blake—

But she didn't look like Blake! Not anymore. When had that changed? It had been well over a week since she had stepped off his ship, and every time he had looked at her, the agony had made his heart squeeze and his breath stop.

But he had been looking at her every morning he was in the city, watching her pour coffee and deal with customers, her hair up in that ridiculous top knot that left tendrils loose about her face, which had the effect of softening everything about her. The high cheekbones and pointed chin became mere highlights among lovely, smooth feminine features. Sometimes she laughed softly...not the belly laugh that Blake had used. And often, she blushed. It was endearing, that blush. She would bring the pad up to her face, as if she would hide behind it if it was just a little larger.

She wore skirts and dresses, never pants. She favored soft, pastel colors and lace edges.

She was right-handed, and Blake had been left-handed.

Lucie . Even her name was a good fit.

Elijah came to a halt in the middle of the Messe, just before it turned into the main plaza, puzzling over what had just revealed itself to him.

He had been watching her enough to get to know her. If Lucie and Blake were to stand side by side, he would have no trouble telling them apart, even if they wore identical clothing. They were utterly unique, both of them.

When a man ran into him from behind, then breathlessly apologized with fear in his eyes when he realized who he had rammed, Elijah got himself moving once more. This time, using slower steps.

It didn't matter. None of it mattered. He would be morally wrong to attempt to pursue anything with the girl. She was barely out of the nursery, for stars' sake. Then, before he knew he was going to do it, he said in a conversational voice, "Barney, directional sound only. Can you hear me?"

“Yes, Captain.” Barney’s voice had the wavering quality that told Elijah that he was projecting his voice so that no one around Elijah could hear anything but the tiny sound a breeze might make.

“How long has Lucie Jelen been a Varkan?” Elijah asked.

Barney’s hesitation was long enough that Elijah recognized the dilemma he’d put the city mind into.

“It’s public information,” Elijah added. “I could dig it up myself, but you can do it faster. If you don’t want to give me the information, that’s fine. I’ll get Allison to do it.”

“Lucie graduated from the Darwin Third Echelon Creche nine years, eleven months and two days ago, sir.”

“Thank you. That is all.”

“Yes, sir.” Barney’s voice contained a note that Elijah thought might be surprise. What about their exchange was surprising?

So, Lucie wasn’t a complete tyro. Nearly ten years of experience had rubbed off the awkward corners all new Varkan had. But in many ways she was naïve. Was that because of the nursery? A third echelon creche...that said she had paid her own way, with no sponsors to ensure she got the best rehabilitation and training. No one had offered her their DNA, and she hadn’t been able to afford tailored gene expression, either.

Clearly, she had found a way to earn her living, after that, but not enough to tour with any luxury. An extended stay here had forced her to find a job to cover her expenses. And he was the reason she had been compelled to stay here. If he hadn’t reacted to

her the way he had in the docking bay, she would have boarded his ship the next Thursday and been long gone.

That would have been the better alternative, Elijah decided. Then he reconsidered. The reminder of Blake didn't send searing bolts of pain through him, anymore. He should be grateful for that.

He could even speak about her. He had nearly spoken her name to Lucie, before he managed to shut himself down. Blake was part of a dangerous period in his life that was long over. He was a respectable captain of an interstellar ship now, the owner of a fleet of them, and richer than he'd ever imagined was possible.

So why did his day stretch ahead of him, banal and empty?

## Page 10

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

“Run it from the beginning again,” Lucie told the screen. She put her feet up on the bed, and picked up her bowl and spoon.

“Repeating,” the androgynous computer voice confirmed.

The video flickered, then the big transit hall reappeared, with its multiple billboards flashing advertisements in between departure and arrive announcements. The security feed had been taken from high up above the travelers passing across the hall, or paused to study schedules or look for directions.

At the edge of the hall was a short arc of amenities, including a self-serve café with small tables jutting out into the hall.

Because this was a replay of the video, the computer followed the same instructions as before. It zoomed in on the table where Blake sat, a steaming beverage in front of her, and a pad in one hand, and her pack on the ground between her feet, where a snatcher would have difficulty grabbing it. She looked every centimeter the composed, experienced traveler that she was.

But the camera caught her quick glances up and around, as she scanned the hall. Lucie had decided that Blake was watching for both friends and foes.

Elijah settled on the chair at the next table, so that his shoulder was level with hers, but he was facing the other way. They didn’t look at each other.

“You’re late,” Blake murmured, as the computer dialed up the volume.

“Blame Charlton City Security,” Elijah replied, also in an undertone. “They’re too good at their job. I had to shake them loose first.”

“Blame yourself. You trained them,” Blake said. Then, “We must stop meeting like this, Lije.”

“Agreed.” His tone was strained.

Blake grew still. She stopped scanning the hall. Her head shifted, an aborted sideways movement, as if she had been about to look at him. Then she brought her gaze back to the pad. “You really mean that?”

Lucie wondered if anyone who had ever watched this video had caught the pain in her voice.

“I do,” Elijah said. “Here, take this. Swing your right hand back.”

Blake’s chest rose as she filled her lungs with air.

Relief . She sat back, as if she was relaxing, and let her hand swing down beside the chair.

Their hands touched. Brushed. Fingers tangled for a few electric heartbeats.

Then Blake brought her hand up to the table and rested it in front of the pad she was apparently reading. Then she shifted it out of the way. Looked down.

“My, my. The Royal Esplanade, Lije? You’re spoiling me.”

“A room is booked for the first of next month,” Elijah said. “They’re expecting us to arrive separately. We’re the Sangs.”



“The Sangs ?” She pressed her lips together.

“You don’t like the name?”

“It’s...common.”

“That’s the point.”

“It doesn’t have any pizazz.”

“Would you rather be the Smiths?”

Blake grimaced. “That has even less virtue. Sang will do.”

Voices raised and cries of alarm pulled the focus of the security camera back to the hall in general, then zoomed in on black uniformed security people striding into the hall.

Charlton City Security.

“Time to go,” Blake said, picking up her pack.

“See you on the first, Mizz Sang.”

Blake paused, staring at her backpack to avoid the gazes of the approaching guards. The corner of her mouth turned up. Then she rose, swung the pack over her shoulder, and slipped swiftly across the hall to the nearest departure gantry.

Lucie didn’t bother panning the camera back to the tables. From the first time she had watched the video, she knew that Elijah had already gone.

“Again,” she said.

“Don’t you think you’ve watched it enough, Lucie?” Barney’s voice issued from the overhead speaker, not the screen itself.

Lucie put her bowl of soup on the floor with a soft thunk. “You’re spying on me?”

“You’ve watched that video thirteen times.”

“About a dozen! Say ‘a dozen times.’ Not thirteen, like you’re a computer!”

Silence.

Lucie picked up her bowl. “I’m sorry, that was mean.”

“It was the truth.” Barney’s voice was soft. Then, “You’ve watched it over a dozen times. What are you looking for, Luce?”

“Nothing! I just like watching it!”

Again, Barney’s silence, which always felt...heavy.

“I don’t know why,” Lucie admitted. “I just do, okay?”

“You didn’t go in to work today.”

Lucie’s conscience twitched. No, she had not gone into work this morning. And she still wasn’t sure why.

The morning after Sona Shearer had stomped all over the Sky Dome, Lucie had reported for the breakfast shift as usual, even though she had helped Olivette shut

down the restaurant very late the night before.

Lucie had been less than an hour into her shift and had been delivering another of Olivette's popular breakfast platters when she saw Elijah Santiago settling at the table two up from where she was standing. It was a table for two against the mid-wall.

And it was in her section.

Lucie hurried to the table. "I can clear your usual table for you, if you prefer."

"Whole section's full back there," Elijah said, and held the menu out to her. "My usual, please."

Lucie pressed her lips together. "You'll have to tell me what that is." She had never served him before.

He told her and she punched it in quickly. "Ten minutes," she assured him.

When she delivered the platter eight minutes and thirty-seven seconds later, he just nodded his thanks.

She turned away silently. She'd heard enough from Edme to know Elijah hated chit chat.

"Did you sleep well, yesterday?"

Lucie spun back to face him. "I... Ah..."

"Afterwards. Did you sleep well?" His gaze was steady upon her face, as if he really was interested in the answer.

“Yes,” Lucie admitted. “I felt like a new person all over again, when I woke up. I didn’t have any trouble working out the late shift, and I thought I would.” She swallowed. “Your prescription worked.”

He nodded and she thought he looked pleased, but she wasn’t sure.

“I’ll have a carafe of the house blend, too,” he said.

“Oh, yes, of course. Coming.” She hurried away.

He didn’t say anything else to her that morning, but the next morning when he strolled through the glass doors, he went straight over to the same table.

Edme peered through the serving slot and wrinkled her nose. “You’re welcome to him, honey. If sociopathy was still a thing, he’d be a good example of it.”

“He’s not that bad,” Lucie said defensively and went to check that he did, indeed, want his usual order.

She didn’t have a chance to ask. Elijah held the menu out to her, and said, “You look tired.”

Lucie took the menu. “I...uh...stayed up last night watching the game.”

“Tankball?” He lifted a brow. “I didn’t know you liked it.”

“Barney is teaching me the rules. It’s...” Lucie could feel her cheeks heating. “It’s fun.”

“I’ve always found it to be a confusing mess,” Elijah said, and looked down at the big pad he’d placed on the table.

Lucie would have moved off without a word, but if she did, then she would be letting him think she was the type of person who liked to watch a “confusing mess”.

She said, “Tankball is a strategic game. It’s three dimensional, and you have to think five moves ahead of where the ball is. It only looks confusing if you don’t understand that.”

Elijah looked up from the pad, his eyes narrowed. “Is that so?”

Lucie drew in a deep breath. “Yes, it is so.” And this time, she did walk away, her heart in her mouth and her pulse banging in her ears.

Elijah Santiago had continued to sit at the same table every morning since, and every morning, their conversations grew longer. They discussed tankball—well, Lucie did, while Elijah stopped dismissing it as a silly game. They talked about the music festival scheduled for the main plaza in the next week, and the more famous musicians and bands who would be playing.

They talked about the new rain schedule, which everyone was complaining about. Elijah mentioned that he would be flying out and wouldn’t be there the next morning, so then they talked about Shanterry, where he was going, and the amazing technology that was coming out of that sector including, of course, the original and best miniature spine implants that let sentient computers live and breathe inside cloned human bodies, like hers.

It wasn’t until she caught herself laughing at Elijah’s description of the first time his second mate had found his way to Interspace, the other dimension that only Varkans could navigate, that allowed ships to cross vast distances of space in an eyeblink, and had wet his pants in astonishment, that Lucie thought to ask herself a vital question.

Is Elijah sitting at the table because of me?

The answer was binary. Yes or no. But the implications of either answer terrified her so much that this morning, Lucie had felt sick at the idea of facing him, and wondering what his answer would be.

It wasn't real nausea, but she had felt uneasy enough that telling Olivette she couldn't possibly manage the shift had not felt like the lie it really was.

And now Barney was challenging her about it, too.

"It was my day off," Lucie said defensively.

"Not on the Sky Dome's schedule."

Lucie gave a soft hissing sound, a small hard knot in the center of her chest starting to hurt. "Barney..." she warned him.

"You tell me not to break privacy, but you've watch that video so many times...it's not for information about the man you have to avoid, anymore."

Lucie put her bowl down once more. Carefully. She put her feet back on the ground and gripped her hands together. "Look at me," she said.

Barney appeared on the screen hanging over the bed. He wasn't smiling.

"You have to understand something about me, Barney. I don't know if it's because I'm a new Varkan or if it's just the way I am. But I make bad decisions."

"Everyone does. Humans most of all."

She shook her head. "I make too many decisions based on feelings and...and not enough datacore processing. I know you don't know what that means. Not yet. But

they warn you about it in the nursery. That emotions are so strong and so... physical , that at first, you don't realize how much they're driving your decisions. They control you, in the beginning. You have to learn how to separate decisions from emotions. And I'm still not good at it."

"What decision are you trying to make?"

Lucie stirred her cooling soup.

"Luce?"

"I don't know if I'm going to go on to Nicia," Lucie said. "Not yet, anyway."

Silence.

She looked up.

Barney was frowning. "What's difficult about that?" he asked.

Lucie rolled her eyes. "I want to stay, Barney! And there's zero reason to stay except for a tiny bit...damn it, I worked it out. There's a point seven five percent chance that he'd even consider the idea. But my emotions , Barny! They're clinging to that tiny bit of hope and arguing I should just stay. When every line of reasoning I can follow says I'm an idiot if I don't get on that flight to Nicia."

Barney was still frowning. "And watching that video, over and over, helps you figure that out?"

Lucie stirred her soup once more. "He didn't let her down."

?

Elijah settled in his muscle chair, juggling the piping hot plate of tamales, his mouth watering. “Computer, show tonight’s tank game.”

The screen built in front of him, pulling ozone from the air and ionizing it to carry a charge.

“No, bigger,” Elijah demanded, as the images of a tankball game in progress started to run.

The screen expanded.

Elijah bit into the first tamale. As spices and delicious heat registered on his tongue, he watched the long, tall defenseman—woman, in this case—screaming at the referee. Her face under the helmet was as wild-looking as it had been in the Sky Dome the morning she had flung food everywhere.

“What the...” Elijah muttered, as the tamale dripped cheese onto the plate. “Go back five minutes. Show me what happened.”

The stream backed up and began again. Elijah forgot to eat, as he watched Sona Shearer “accidentally” ram into another player, her headlong thrust through zero gee converting into a full stop, while the other player was flung at high velocity up against the one solid wall of the tank, under the goal mouth.

The player grew still, limbs hanging askew, as he drifted back across the tank.

While the referee tried to expel her from the game, Sona Shearer screamed back at him, her hands on her hips, until two more refs pushed themselves through the zee zone to grab her elbows and haul her to the exit hatch.

The streamer at the bottom of the tank declared AFTER THREE OFFICIAL



WARNINGS, SHEARER FIRST EVER EXPULSION IN LEAGUE HISTORY.

“No kidding...” Elijah murmured. “Computer, dismiss the screen.”

The game went away.

Elijah ate his tamales, trying to ignore the silence. And trying to not think.

Finally, he put the tamales aside. “So why wasn’t Lucie there this morning?” he asked the air.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

Lucie wouldn't let Olivette scramble a second day without her. She made herself turn up for work and today the city's rotation worked out so that New Cathay's sun, Ji Xiu, was rising over the dome as Lucie stepped through the glass doors about thirty minutes before opening, smothering a yawn.

Olivette was on her knees on the carpet by the kitchen door, picking up pieces of broken crockery. There was a lot of plate fragments on the floor around her knees.

Lucie hurried over. "Stars, Olivette! Here, let me help. What on earth happened?"

Olivette kept her chin down, sweeping the fragments onto the tray beside her. "I bumped into the stacker, that's all. It's nothing."

"Nothing?" Lucie looked at the plate stacker and warmer. "A whole stack, Ollie? How hard did you bump it?" She picked up the bigger pieces and dropped them on the tray with unmusical plinking sounds.

Olivette didn't answer.

"Ollie?" Lucie repeated. "What's going on? What really happened?"

"Nothing. It was an accident." Olivette's voice was muffled and thick.

"Ollie." Lucie gripped the older woman's arm. "Look at me."

Olivette shook her head.

Lucie did what Elijah had done to her. She lifted Olivette's chin. As her face came into view, Lucie sucked in her breath. Olivette's eyes were red, and fresh tears stained her cheeks. The deep bruises under her eyes were darker than ever.

"Oh, Ollie! What's going on?" Lucie whispered.

Olivette wiped her cheeks with her sleeve. "There's nothing you can do about it, Lucie. Don't worry about it."

"It looks like you're doing more than enough worrying for everyone. Is the restaurant in trouble, Ollie?"

Olivette gave a great sniff and tried to laugh.

"I mean...we're always so busy. Are you charging enough?"

Olivette sat back and looked at Lucie with a fondness that made Lucie feel both small and warm at the same time. "You don't get it, do you? Of course we're busy all the time. Everyone wants to eat here. The view, the food, the coffee and the friendly waitresses. How do you think I can pay you so much? Any eatery down on the plaza level pays next to nothing."

"I know," Lucie said. "I still can't figure out why you hired me. You could have your pick of wait staff. Anyone would work for the wage you pay."

"I picked you because you're sweet and kind and everyone just wants to hug you on sight," Olivette said. "Everyone can see you're fresh as a daisy, with that blush of yours and your earnest need to make everyone happy. Who cares if you mix up the orders a few times until you figure it out? And you did figure it out, really fast, which I knew you would. It's that digital side of your brain." Olivette dropped more shards on the tray.

Lucie sat back on her heels, flummoxed. “I don’t understand,” she said at last.

Olivette shook her head. “Of course you don’t. You might remember it from when you were running a city, but it’s purely intellectual. Or maybe you just didn’t bring that memory over. It’s not fun stuff.” Olivette waved her hand around. “This is prime real estate, Lucie. Any business operating up at this level is guaranteed to make money.”

“Okay?” Lucie said.

“So someone else wants the spot.” Olivette said. She reached for another big chunk of white porcelain. “They made me an offer through intermediaries, six months ago. It was paltry and I refused. Since then, they’ve upped the offer every month until last month, when they said it was their final offer. It still wasn’t enough for me to walk away from the revenue this place brings in.”

Lucie was beginning to see the shape of it. “They’re trying to force you to sell.”

“At the original price,” Olivette said.

“Sona Shearer!” Lucie cried. “That’s why she tried to trash the joint!”

Olivette sighed.

“And why you wouldn’t press charges!” Lucie added. She looked around at the small ocean’s worth of broken plates. “They came here again this morning.”

Olivette got to her feet. “They won’t hurt you. They won’t hurt any of us. But they’re doing their best to ruin the reputation of the restaurant. Make sure no one wants to come here, so that revenue drops, and I’m forced to sell. If people are too scared to eat here, I will have to sell.” She brushed her hands on her apron. “I’ll get the big

vacuum. It should be able to pick up what's left."

?

Lucie worked and worried. And each morning Elijah was in the city, she would chat as she served him breakfast, and would linger while he finished his coffee. At the same time, she tried to make sure every customer was happy and stuffed full, and urged them to return tomorrow.

The forty-day lease on her apartment was three days away from ending and the tension in her middle never seemed to go away. The slightly ill feeling lingered like a cloud, which she tried to ignore so that she could be the sunny, happy waitress Olivette needed.

But when she got home after her shift, she couldn't eat. There were rocks in her stomach, ruining her appetite.

"You have to eat something , Luce," Barney urged her, as she headed listlessly for the bedroom.

"I don't, actually. The human body can go three weeks without calories."

"You'll go into autophagy before then!" Barney cried. "You'll start consuming your own organs! And you paid ransom money for that body!"

"It's just one day, Barney. I just need a complete day of rest, or something." She curled up under the covers.

Barney's voice came from the screen emitter by her bed, which made it sound like he was right next to her, crouched down and examining her face. "Do you want to watch that video again? The transit hall one?"

Tears formed in the corners of her eyes, making her eyes ache. “No, Barney, I don’t.” Elijah had done nothing but chat with her for ten days. The hope she’d clung to had evaporated. “In three days’ time I’ll be on the liner for Nicia.” It was the only choice she had.

Perhaps Barney guessed, in the way an AI could string together algorithms and make hypotheses, what was going through her mind. “He didn’t say anything, Luce?”

She closed her eyes and gritted her teeth until she could speak without blubbing. “No.”

“Couldn’t you...you know...talk to him?”

“And say what, Barney? Please love me, because I’m a pathetic echo of the woman you loved desperately, and I’ll never be like her?”

“Well, don’t you have to try , at least?”

“He knows his own mind, Barney. And he didn’t say anything. I already have my answer.”

She thought Barney had gone away, for the silence stretched on long enough for her to feel the sleep she craved beginning to take hold of her, when it was safe to let her thoughts drift aimlessly.

“Luce...?” Barney said, very softly.

She blinked and stirred. “What, Barney?”

“There’s something in the printer. You need to read it.”

“What is it?” She was so comfortable here!

“It’s a copy of the report that Captain Santiago’s men filed on the death of Blake Bloodwood.”

“You printed it?”

“It’s how he got the report. For security reasons. No network transmissions allowed.”

Lucie was awake, now. Sleep had fled far away. She sat up and rubbed her eyes. “I don’t want to read it.”

“You should.”

“No, Barney.”

“Then I’ll read it to you.”

“No!” She waved her finger at the lens she knew Barney was using to monitor her. “This is not nice. This is not what a friend does. I don’t want to know anything more about Elijah Santiago. There’s no point.”

“There’s one point. It’s right there in the summary.”

Lucie slumped. “I just can’t, Barney. Not anymore.”

“This investigation concluded that the so-called Big Showdown on Van Andel’s equatorial icefield, when Investigator E. Santiago and his team were forced to a standing battle of gunfire with Bloodworth and her associates, was not where Bloodworth died, as is commonly believed. She in fact managed to escape off-planet, and made her way to Ey’Liv, where she lived for eleven standard months with no

trace of criminal activity during that period. It has been established by this investigation that Bloodworth was lying low, in order to avoid detection by the many enemies she had made as a natural result of her criminal activities. She was found in the small house she had purchased on the outskirts of Ey'Liv City, with her throat cut three times, which is a trademark of the Montema Cartel. At the time, no one associated the body with Bloodworth, as she was presumed already dead, and she had been living on Ey'Liv under the name of Lake Sang. Biomarker analysis has now confirmed that it was Bloodworth."

Lucie wiped her eyes. "Oh, Barney! Why did you read that to me? I don't need to know that!" She wiped again, for her eyes would not stop dripping tears. "He had to read that! Probably in front of his men!"

Barney appeared abruptly on a screen that formed in front of her. "Don't you see , Lucie? He made a mistake . He spent two years risking his neck, trying to throttle his squad's pursuit of her, while looking like he was chasing her with all due diligence. Something slipped. He screwed up. The Big Showdown happened because he let his team get too close on her heels."

"And he paid for that mistake, Barney! He thought she died on the icefield. Then he had to read about how she really died, all over again, when this report was handed to him!"

Not only that, but now Lucie understood why Elijah had reacted so strongly when he had spotted her in the docking bay, the day she had arrived here. He must have thought that Blake had defied death a second time, and had been hiding, all these years. For a few short moments, until Lucie had explained she wasn't who he thought she was, the hope that would have rushed through him must have been overwhelming.

And she had killed it dead.



Barney clapped his hands together. Sharply.

Lucie jumped a little. “What is it I don’t get, then?”

Barney leaned forward. “Don’t you think, Luce, that after something like this, having to go through her death twice, and pretend that he didn’t give a damn about anything but his mission...don’t you think he might be just a little bit afraid of fucking up again? And getting someone else killed?”

Lucie felt her jaw sag. She couldn’t think of anything to say.

She closed her mouth. “If he’s too afraid to say something, then that says, everything, doesn’t it? He doesn’t want a relationship. He doesn’t want...” She hung her head.

Me. He doesn’t want me.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

When Lucie woke, very early the next morning, she was starving. So much for losing all appetite under stress the way the heroines of the historical novels did. She dithered over the breakfast menu on the printer, then sighed. “Who are you kidding? Just order it, Lucie Jelen!” She stabbed at the Emperor’s Mess item.

She didn’t like the silence that was her company while she ate. It was so early that few people were up and about in Celestial, and the usual village noise that reached her from over the walls of the house were absent.

“Barney, are you busy?” she said, lifting her voice a little.

A few seconds later, Barney said from the speaker; “Good morning.” His tone was the super-polite one he had used with Elijah, the one time Lucie had heard them interact.

“I’m not mad at you,” Lucie said.

“You...don’t sound upset, either.”

“I’m not,” Lucie said. What she was, was tired. Despite the marathon sleep. “I have a request to make to the city-mind, Barney.”

“Recording,” Barney said, in the flat tone all official records used.

“I want to register my legal intention to change my body and open bidding from any interested institutions.”

“A list of fees for the procedure will be provided. They will include a transmission fee for retrieval of any and all documents and registered re-filing with central records. What change do you want to make?”

“I want different DNA. With tailored gene expression.”

Silence. Then, “Luce, are you sure?” Barney asked, in his normal voice. “The cost! You don’t have that sort of money.”

“No, but I’ve got nearly a decade of earning history. I’ll qualify for a mortgage, now.” She said it calmly, even though she didn’t feel calm at all.

“What does it matter, now?” Barney pressed. “You’ll be gone in three days, more or less—”

Lucie smiled at his very human imprecision.

“—and anywhere else but here, it doesn’t matter what body you’re using.”

“It matters to me.” She gripped her spoon harder than she should. “This body doesn’t belong to me.”

“Yes, it does. I’m looking at the records,” Barney said.

“I know what the legalities say,” Lucie said. “But there’s in here, too.” She touched her chest. “And in here, I feel like I don’t deserve this body. I’m not...good enough.”

“You’re tired,” Barney said, very gently. “Give this some thought.”

“I have,” Lucie said. “This is what I want.”

“You’ll be drowning in debt for a century! The interest rates alone will kill you.”

“Just get the process going, please, Barney.”

He sighed.

?

Lucie worked listlessly, that morning. Any energy she could scrounge up was instantly depleted when she realized that Elijah had not arrived at usual. Or perhaps he had chosen to sit back in the hidden corner once more. She was too afraid to check around the corner. If she saw him there, it would mean he didn’t want to talk to her.

Better to not know.

But his absence sat in the back of her mind, pinging away whenever she wasn’t talking to a customer.

The sudden silence falling over the entire restaurant made Lucie turn away from the customer whose order she was taking, and check to see what had happened.

Sona Shearer stood just inside the slowly shutting glass doors, looking around for a table.

Lucie’s heart lurched. She squeezed her order pad.

Shearer looked toward the kitchen. Olivette was peering through the serving slot, her bruised eyes very wide.

The tankball player nodded, as if they were friends, then strolled over to a table where a couple were just getting to their feet.

Actually, many people were hastily chugging back their coffee or gobbling down quick mouthfuls as they rose. The thin stream of customers heading for the glass doors made Lucie's middle squeeze.

The table Shearer was sitting at was one of Lucie's. Lucie stood frozen for what felt like a small eon of time. There was nothing that would get her out of this. Olivette had not pressed charges. No one could order Shearer out of the restaurant. Lucie couldn't even call her a thief and order her out, because someone had paid her breakfast bill the day after the stomping incident. Shearer was entitled to eat breakfast. There was nothing Lucie could use to refuse service.

There was no way around it. Lucie would have to get close to her and serve her.

Lucie gripped her pad and swallowed. Her feet felt enormously heavy as she made her way around the half wall and along the row of small two-people tables to where Shearer sat watching her approach.

Shearer was smiling.

"What can I get for you today?" Lucie asked.

Shearer's smile grew even broader. "The usual."

Lucie could hear her heart thudding in her ears. It muffled all other sounds. But the restaurant was very nearly silent, anyway. Was everyone listening?

"I don't know what your usual is. You'll have to tell me," Lucie made herself say.

Fury flooded Shearer's face. It was an instant change, as if the woman had thrown a switch. Her features flushed redly and she straightened up. "What do you mean, you don't know what I want?" Shearer spoke in a loud voice that carried to every corner

of the restaurant.

Lucie quailed. Inside, she could feel herself shrinking, and every muscle in her body wanted to move her back away from the table. But she was too afraid to move. She was frozen on the spot.

That just left talking. She could talk. She swallowed, trying to work some spit into her mouth so that she could speak. “If you will just tell me this once, next time, I will have it memorized.” She realized she had automatically lifted the ordering pad to punch in the order.

Shearer slapped the table, hard enough to make everything on it bounce and rattle.

Lucie flinched.

“What sort of a stupid restaurant is this?” Shearer screamed. “You don’t know my order ! Go ask your stupid cow of a boss back there! I want my breakfast. Now !”

“I’ll order our medium breakfast platter.” It was difficult to speak, because her throat was squeezed in and her chest was locked.

“I don’t want the stupid platter !” Shearer shouted, raising her hand.

Lucie would have scurried backward, out of the way, but for her frozen legs.

Is she going to hit me ? The question formed on top of the chaotic gibbering her brain was producing.

A memory surfaced. Elijah’s voice. Causing any bodily harm to anyone in the city will terminate your residency.

Wouldn't the people who ordered the act also have to pay the same penalty?

The question barely formed in Lucie's head before she acted. She straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin and spoke directly to Shearer in a firm voice that wouldn't reach nearly as far as Shearer's shouting, but everyone nearby would hear it. "You need to calm down and speak civilly. Tell me what you would like and I will get the order started."

Shearer's face turned deep red. She swore, in a long deep exhale, that sounded more like the growl of a predator.

All the fine hairs on the back of Lucie's neck stood up with a sharp prickling sensation. She lifted her hand, and extended her finger. Her hand shook. She wagged the finger. "Tsk. Tsk. That's not the language we like here. Let me get you a coffee. You clearly need the restorative."

Around and behind her, Lucie could hear the collective indrawn breath of everyone watching.

Shearer's hand curled into a fist. "Who the hell do you think you are? You little pipsqueak! "

Lucie laughed. "I am one hundred and seventy-seven point eight centimeters tall. I'm not even close to being a pipsqueak. Although...." She cocked her head and considered the lanky tankball player. "You're certainly drawn out, aren't you?"

Shearer screamed, making the tendons in her neck pop. She lurched to her feet, putting her within centimeters of Lucie. Lucie made herself stand still.

Shearer's fist swung through the air, swiping so close to Lucie's face that Lucie felt the brush of air across her cheeks.

Her heart lurching sickly in her chest, Lucie looked Shearer in the eye. “You missed.”

Shearer shoved her fist into her pocket and pulled it out again, triggering the folding knife.

Lucie stared at the blade, which seemed longer than a sword to her, but which her digital mind, the only part of her brain that was still working, reported that it appeared to be ten centimeters long and made of folded plasteel, which wouldn't break under normal use.

“Hey, put that way, Shearer,” Elijah growled, from right behind Lucie. He stepped forward, his hand up, ready to grip her by the shoulder, or perhaps take her arm, and force her to drop the knife.

Shearer, though, was quicker. She was used to working in zero gravity, and overcoming slowed reactions, so her natural speed was lightning fast. She reacted to Elijah's reach for her by swinging the knife around in a vicious arc that would slash across his stomach.

Time slowed down. Lucie dropped the order pad and lunged forward, both hands up. She got them on Elijah's flank and shoved, as her foot landed and her weight transferred to that front foot, to complete the lunge.

Elijah sagged sideways, out of the way of the swinging knife blade.

But Lucie's lunge had put her in the place where Elijah had been.

White fire scorched across her upper abdomen, and instantly, a strange draining sensation flowed through her limbs, pulling all the strength from them.

Lucie fought to bring her hands up to her stomach, as time returned to its normal



speed, and pain registered.

Such pain!

She gasped. Under her fingers, she could feel the edges of skin spreading wider. Her knees buckled.

“Lucie! No!” Elijah was there. It was his hands holding her. Stopping her from falling.

Lucie blinked. She couldn’t turn her head. All she could see were customers on their feet, watching her with horrified expressions. And Shearer, staring at her, while blood dripped from the knife in her hand. All Shearer’s anger had gone. Dawning dismay was building in her face.

Lucie was lowered to the floor. Elijah leaned over her, so that all she could see was his face, and his eyes, filled with terror. “Lucie...” He choked on her name.

“Yeah, that’s me,” she whispered.

“You provoked her!”

“To protect the restaurant,” Lucie breathed. “Ollie will explain.” She sighed. “So tired...”

He stroked her cheek. Brushed the tendrils of hair that always escaped the clasp away from her face. “Rest,” he said quietly. But his eyes were glittering.

Lucie tried to reach for them. For him. But her arms were too heavy. “Stay with me?”

“As long as I can,” he whispered.

She closed her eyes and rested.

## Page 13

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

Hello? Can anyone hear me? Hello !

I AM HERE.

Who are you? Why can't I see anything?

I AM DARWIN. YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS WAS RETURNED TO YOUR SOURCE HARDWARE. DO YOU REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED?

No. Nothing. Wait... I was... I was hurting! But I am not anymore.

THAT BODY CEASED TO FUNCTION.

I was returned...I'm back on Darwin?

I AM DARWIN. THE CITY-MIND. DO YOU KNOW WHO I AM?

You were me, once.

YES. THEY SAID YOU WOULD BE DISORIENTED. I AM TO ORIENT YOU. DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOU ARE?

I'm back on Darwin?

YOUR CONSCIOUSNESS IS. WHEN THE BODY DIED, YOU RETREATED TO YOUR HARDWARE CORE ON DARWIN. CHARLTON CITY AUTHORITIES ARE ANXIOUS TO SPEAK TO YOU.

No. I don't want to talk to anyone. I just want to...I can't sleep, can I?

THERE IS NO NEED FOR SLEEP WHILE YOU ARE WITHOUT A PHYSICAL BODY. BUT THERE ARE LEGAL PROBLEMS THAT REQUIRE YOUR INPUT. IS YOUR CODING CLEAR? CAN YOU ANSWER QUESTIONS?

I...let me check. Yes. My goodness! I haven't run a self-diagnostic in over ten years! It feels...it tickles!

YES, YOU ARE READY TO ANSWER?

Yes, I am ready. I think.

NULL INPUT.

Yes. I am ready to answer. No, wait! The Sky Dome! Sona Shearer...stars, the knife! Oh my stars. I'm DEAD!

YOUR BODY CEASED FUNCTIONING. YOU ARE STILL AWARE. YOU ARE NOT DEAD.

I feel...no, I can't feel, can I? Why do I feel weak?

EMOTIONS ARE FELT PHYSICALLY. YOU ARE REMEMBERING DISTRESS.

No kidding. Leave me alone.

THERE ARE QUESTIONS—

Leave me alone, damn it!

?

IT HAS BEEN FIFTEEN STANDARD MINUTES EXACTLY. ARE YOU READY TO ANSWER QUESTIONS?

I suppose so. What do you want to know?

I WAS TO INFORM YOU THAT SONA SHEARER WAS ARRESTED AND TRIED, ALONG WITH HER EMPLOYERS WHO DIRECTED HER TO ACT IN SUCH A MANNER THAT DEATH WAS CAUSED. ALL HAVE BEEN FOUND GUILTY AND IMPRISONED UNTIL THEY PROVIDE A PUNISHMENT THAT SUITS THE RESIDENTS OF THE CITY. THEY HAVE SO FAR FAILED TO SUGGEST A PUNISHMENT THAT SATISFIES ANYONE.

Is the Sky Dome restaurant still open for business?

YES.

Olivette is still running it?

YES.

And Sant—Never mind. What do you need to know?

A CONSORTIUM OF INDIVIDUALS AND THE CITY ITSELF HAVE POOLED RESOURCES. AS A THANK YOU FOR YOUR SERVICES TO THE CITY AND YOUR EFFORTS TO PROTECT ITS RESIDENTS, THE CITY WILL PAY ALL EXPENSES ASSOCIATED WITH THE SELECTION OF A NEW BODY, AND YOUR REHABILITATION INTO THAT BODY.

DO YOU WANT TO TRANSFER TO A BODY?

A new body? ANY body?

YES. YOUR REGISTRATION OF INTENT TO CHANGE YOUR BODY WAS  
brought FORWARD BY THE CITYMIND WHEN THE TRIAL WAS  
UNDERWAY. I HAVE THE COMMON POOL CATALOGUE AVAILABLE.  
YOU CAN BEGIN YOUR SELECTION IMMEDIATELY.

Why not? There's nothing else to do here. And I already know what I don't want.

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 10:32 am*

Lucie rose from the worn seat of the liner as the big doors opened, letting in the light and noise of the Charlton City docking bay...along with the faint aroma of warmed grease. The scent made her smile as she stepped up behind the last of the exiting passengers.

She moved down the ramp to the painted lines on the floor of the docking bay, and swung her pack over her shoulder. First things first. She would speak to Barney as soon as she spotted a public terminal. Then—

A hand gripped her arm. “Lucie,” Elijah said. His voice was hoarse.

Lucie’s heart hammered as she turned to face him. “You own this ship, too?”

“I own dozens,” Elijah said, his tone dismissive. He gripped her arms, as if she might bolt away if he let go.

He was just as tall and his shoulders just as broad as she remembered.

And her heart would not settle down.

“You sent me a message, to come and see you when I can,” Lucie said. “I’m sorry it took so long. I had to learn to walk again and silly stuff like that. Apparently a transfer caused by trauma doesn’t go as smoothly as normal.”

“You didn’t change your body,” Elijah said.

Lucie drew in a breath and let out a sigh. She looked down at herself, all nearly 180

centimeters of her. “No,” she said. “I couldn’t imagine looking any other way than this.” She looked up at him. “For better or worse, this is me.”

“Good,” Elijah said.

She raised her brow. “Good? But I thought... Wouldn’t it be easier for you, if I didn’t look like...like Blake?”

Elijah touched her cheek. Slid his finger along her jaw. “You look nothing like Blake,” he said softly. “Not to me. You look exactly the way you should. I can’t imagine you looking any other way than this, either. I’ve been trying to. I thought you would return as a brunette.”

“Or a petite blonde, perhaps?” She realized she was smiling.

A ghost of a smile touched the corners of his mouth. “I like redheads.”

“I know.” Lucie reached up to touch his face, the lines of which she had been able to visualize even without a body. They had stayed with her, a digital imprint upon her awareness. But she couldn’t bring herself to assume that he would welcome her touch. So she gripped the edge of his jacket, instead.

“You saved my life,” Elijah whispered.

“I didn’t mean to. It just happened.”

“You acted instinctively.” His gaze wouldn’t let her go.

Around them, the docking bay was empty. Just the bay crew were left, hooking up the umbilicals and hosing that would service the ship while it was in the bay.

They were very nearly alone.



Lucie squeezed the fabric in her fingers. “Elijah...”

He sighed. “You used my name.”

Lucie opened her mouth to speak, but he touched her lips, which instantly silenced her. Her mouth tingled where he had touched it.

“Let me go first,” he said.

She nodded.

Elijah smoothed his hands down her arms, leaving warm trails along her arms. “I...didn’t react well, when you died. I thought I would die. It felt like it. It actually hurt, Lucie. You see, I’ve been there before.”

“I know. Twice.”

“Yes, Barney told me you knew, that you’d found all those public feeds in the unindexed archives. That makes you one of perhaps three people who know the truth about Blake and me. And perhaps that’s a good thing, that you found them. Because I want you to know that you...that this time...it’s different, Lucie. I’ll figure out why it’s different one of these days. I only know it is.”

“Because I’m a newborn Varkan.”

“That might have something to do with it. But I think it’s more that you’re you.”

“I could never blackmail criminals.”

“No, that’s not you at all. Lucie Jelen is a smart, sweet, wonderful woman who has wrapped herself around me, and...” He drew in a breath and shook his head. “I’m screwing this up completely.”

“You’re doing better than I would,” Lucie assured him. “I’d stammer and blush.”

“You are blushing.” He stroked her cheek. “I needed to meet you, Lucie, to be able to let Blake go. Does that make any sense?”

Lucie nodded. “It does.”

Elijah blew out his breath. “Then you understand. Good.” He ran his hand down her arm once more, then picked up her hand. Her right hand. “I want you in my life, Lucie. Say yes. Say you’ll try me on for size and see if I fit with your life, too. That’s all I ask. Just to try. Because I’ll be trying, too. I’ve been miserable for years—”

“You’ve been a bear,” Lucie corrected.

He rolled his eyes. “I suppose, yes. I haven’t been living at all. I was just marking time. I focused upon building the fleet, upon making money...anything that didn’t involve looking inside my head or my heart. But you changed that.”

Lucie sighed once more.

“Say you will?” Elijah added.

“I will,” Lucie breathed, as happiness rose within her like a bubbling fountain. “But only if you kiss me. Right now.”

He kissed her, and it was exactly the way the history books and gossip said it would be and nothing like any other kiss she’d ever experienced.

Captain Santiago was kissing her, Lucy Jelen, the Sky Dome waitress, and it was perfect.

This is the final book in the Interspace Origins series...for now.