

FREEWORLD

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CHAPTER 1

“The answer remains no, Major. And you’re treading perilously close to insubordination.”

Major Megan Duchain bit her lip. Every professional instinct told her it was time to salute and withdraw, but that persistent inner need pushed her onward. “Colonel, the experimental tracking device needs to be tested anyway. What better test could there be?”

Colonel Sandrine Foster’s glare foreshadowed the eruption of a supernova of anger which Megan knew would leave her in shreds. “There is no possibility we would risk a pilot, senior scientist, vehicle, and the prototype of the device on a mission from which all were unlikely to return. Space travel is dangerous enough anyway without throwing away good women on a likely suicide mission.”

“But my sister could still be alive...”

“Major Duchain,” snapped Colonel Foster, “Aurora disappeared thirty years ago, with your sister and the rest of the crew, in a wormhole accident. No signal has been received since then.” She seemed to loosen up the tiniest bit. “Major, I know this is personal with you. I admired your sister and her abilities. I’m sure you knew her better than I...” The colonel winced slightly as if slightly embarrassed by the degree of understatement in her last remark. “But you have to let go and move on. You know she is surely dead.” She fixed Megan with a look that the major could not possibly misinterpret. “Dismissed.”

Megan suppressed a growl of frustration. Saluting, she turned and left the colonel’s office, raking her fingers through her short light blonde hair in the corridor to keep from banging her fist against the wall.

She looked again, as she looked so often, at the plaque honoring the crew of Aurora:

*We honor the women of Aurora who served bravely
and are tragically lost to us:*

*Maj. Tanisha Ologwu, Mission Commander
Maj. Sabrina Marion, First Officer
Capt. Polina Grishova, Mission Pilot
Lt. Janica Duchain, Science Officer
Lt. Heather Lopez, Astrogation Officer
2Lt. Gretel Schweiz, Communications Officer
Spec. Aoife O’Lonigan, Technician*

Megan put her fingers lightly on the plaque, brushing her fingers across Janica’s name as though her spirit might be there. *I will find you, Janny*, she thought. Despite all buttheads trying to prevent me.

Lost in angry thought on the way back to her quarters, she nearly steered her hoverbike into a trench being dug by a squad of enlisted men. Only her almost supernatural balance managed to keep the bike on an even keel, though it did stall out. She glared at one of the men, a private, who was smirking at her embarrassment. She snapped at him, “Attention, soldier!”

The man straightened instantly and stood uncomfortably, his eyes unable to meet hers. It wasn't that she was physically intimidating to him -- while she was as tall as he was, his well-muscled body probably weighed at least a Megan and a half. But her eyes, at this moment, gave off such light and heat that it was natural to avoid meeting them, in the way one avoids looking directly at the sun. He found that his eyes were now fixed on the bulge of her breasts under her uniform blouse, and he flicked them quickly to the side, his face reddening. Megan was familiar enough with that, both the look and the look-away. She said through gritted teeth, "Maybe you'd like a permanent assignment to latrine duty, soldier?"

He gulped and stood rigidly. "No ma'am!"

She looked away dismissively, restarting the bike smoothly. "As you were." She didn't look back as she sailed away. She smiled at the thought of the man's flushed face. It always braced her to put a man in his place.

As Megan continued towards her quarters, she speculated, as she occasionally did, on why she hated men so much. Most of the other officers were casually tolerant of males, as long as they served well. A few of them had even married, and extolled the merits of having a man to come home to, someone who kept their quarters clean, had dinner ready for their wives after a long day, and kept their beds warm at night. Megan couldn't imagine the attraction, especially the bed part. Her sexual needs were low-key, and were satisfied on the rare occasions when they flared up by her female friends. She wasn't even really sure why men were needed at all -- machines could probably handle a lot of the work they did, and the fact that centuries ago they were indispensable for reproduction certainly wasn't relevant in the modern day. Megan knew that men had actually run the world as recently as five hundred years ago. She shuddered at the stories of the mess they'd made of the task.

She shook her head, unconsciously, recalling her history lessons in school, the pictures of female "homemakers," the swollen bellies of women actually bearing children like animals! She couldn't imagine how they stood for it.

She was glad to be alive in the twenty-sixth century. Pity her poor ancestors who had had to live through the Dark Ages.

Anger welled up in her, as it always did, as her thoughts led her to the Hercules cult. Megan avoided imagining their twisted "experiments," the lives they had ruined. Her only thought about them, on which all her anger focused, was that if it hadn't been for them, her sister Janica would still be here.

Those men, those evil men...

A century ago, a small band of men had withdrawn from the world, migrating to a small, fertile island in the Pacific. There had been hints that the departed men had wanted to establish a world in which they could be in charge of their lives. Their flight, though illegal, since a number of them had been under servitude contracts, was regarded with shrugs by the authorities, who felt that as long as they "did no damage," they could have their little world. There was certainly no shortage of men to replace them. No one noticed, through the years, the occasional disappearance of a young woman here and there, or at least no one connected it with the male cult.

It wasn't until seventy years later that an oceanic island survey had stumbled upon the cult, the members of which now called themselves "Hercules" after the mythical symbol of male strength. And the women, those poor women...

Megan remembered the news reports, the tri-D images showing what those men had done. All the world was electrified and outraged, many women demanding the reinstatement of capital punishment, centuries after it had been abolished -- how could these men be allowed to live? Cooler heads, or perhaps just softer ones, had prevailed. The President herself had announced the sentence of banishment that would be applied to the cult members. In recognition of their "humanity," though many disputed whether the term should apply, they would be allowed to live -- but not on Earth. An uninhabited planet would be found for them, on which they could live, taking with them everything they would need to tame the wilderness, even, to the consternation of many, computer records of their work in the Pacific -- what did it matter, the President pointed out, if they had records of all of their studies, as long as there were no women on whom they could perform their evil experiments? Imagine, the President had said, how frustrating it would be for them to have the know-how to repeat the horrors they had inflicted on those poor women, and now to have no one on whom they could use their knowledge? She asserted that that might well be more painful to them than any more terminal punishment.

Brave explorers, traveling the mysterious wormholes of underspace, had soon located a suitable planet. The Hercules cult, its members safely ensconced in sleeper pods, all the equipment they had chosen to take stowed in the cargo hold, had embarked on a trip to their new home in the starship Aurora, guided by a female crew of seven, including Lieutenant Janica Duchain, Megan's sister, as science officer, an expert in the physics of wormholes.

It wasn't in any sense a suicide mission, of course. Janica and the rest of the crew had every intention of returning within a few weeks -- wormholes, those surprising kinks in space that connected far distant stars and made it possible to travel light years in a few hours, had reduced the galaxy to a very compact "world" indeed.

But Aurora had disappeared, its underspace-borne signal vanishing a few days after entering the wormhole. Expert opinion was divided on interpreting the length of time the signal had lasted after wormhole entry -- some said that the ship must have cleared the wormhole *before* the signal disappeared, so that the cause of the disappearance was something other than wormhole collapse, but others insisted that the ship might well have stayed in the wormhole longer than one would normally expect: wormholes themselves caused unpredictable time distortions, and there were still major gaps in the scientific theories of the whole phenomenon. In any case, Aurora's disappearance was taken as sufficient evidence of wormhole instability, implying that it would be suicidal to try to track the ship and stage a rescue mission. By the time a number of months had gone by, it was impossible anyway: wormholes shift to such an extent that it was no longer possible even to determine exactly which one the ship had used. If Aurora had still been broadcasting a signal, that could have been followed, but as it was, no rescue was possible.

Megan had been sixteen years old when her big sister had vanished. Cube videos of Janica were all Megan had left, that and the memories of the sister she had worshipped.

As she entered her quarters, Megan lost herself in those memories of Janica. Her sister Janny. Megan sighed and brushed away a tear. She felt positive, as an article of faith, that Janica *was* still alive out there somewhere, on the planet that had been their destination, surviving on fresh fruits and whatever else it was that people ate out in the wilds. Janica would look, Megan knew, exactly the way she had thirty years ago, so there was no trouble maintaining a believable mental image of her. Aging had been conquered centuries ago, and people today looked with disbelief at the ancient “photographs” of historical figures, many of them gray, wrinkled, wizened. Children always asked why people would let themselves look like that. In the modern world, there was no telling the age of any adult, whether twenty years old, eighty like Megan’s and Janica’s mother, or even a hundred-eighty. About two hundred years from now, Megan knew, her central nervous system would suddenly give out. But until it did, she would believe with all her heart that Janica was still alive.

CHAPTER 2

This is crazy, Megan told herself. I'm not just risking my life, I'm shredding my career.

Well, she decided, it was still worth it. From the day of her commission in the Space Force, Megan had vowed that someday, when the opportunity arose, she would try to find her sister. If the Force refused to stage a rescue, Megan would damned well do it herself. She needed the Space Force to give her access to the necessary equipment.

Little had she realized, that early, the extent to which an essential piece of the equipment would be a product of her own efforts. A specialist in particle physics, Megan had jumped on the discovery of iota particles, those unimaginably tiny points of matter scattered by the interaction of ordinary matter with the twisted space of a wormhole. In principle, every ship that transited a wormhole left a permanent, slowly-decaying trail of iota particles in its wake. In practice, it took state-of-the-art detectors and the fastest computers in existence just to distinguish iota particles from all the other flotsam generated by particle collisions. The idea that an iota detector could be installed in a space as small as a single ship had been regarded as impossible just five years ago. Megan's own research had been driven by the conviction that it was possible, that it must be possible. Her team had caught her infectious enthusiasm, in spite of disapproval at the administrative level, where the beancounters wanted some evidence that such a detector would have some practical use that would justify its cost. Ships that had passed through wormholes didn't need to be "tracked" -- either they were still sending signals, or else they were presumed lost and unrecoverable due to wormhole collapse. To the higher authorities in the Space Force, Megan's "gadget" had seemed a dubious project that probably could never justify its expense. Without Megan's stubborn insistence on continuing the project, and the grudging admission by her supervisor that some increased scientific understanding of wormholes might well result and turn out to be useful someday, the project would have been terminated long ago. And now the prototype iota detector was in this very ship, the small one requiring only a single person to operate, that Megan had... well, "stolen" was a harsh word. She preferred to call it "requisitioned."

Megan rubbed her eyes -- she'd been staring at the computer screen for hours, as her computer examined all wormholes within range, analyzing their iota output. It was possible, by weighing the ratio of iota particles to the more standard bits of matter among which the iotas hid, to make an estimate of how long it had been since a ship had transited the wormhole. Megan terminated analysis of any hole whose iota signature was less than twenty years old or more than forty, and ignored any from which communication signals were emerging that implied an active ship had used it and would soon return through it, as well as the ones with no iota signature, which presumably had never yet been used by any ship.

It was possible that the wormhole Megan wanted had drifted out of this region of space altogether. But most likely it was here somewhere.

There! That one looked promising. Megan spoke a command into the computer that refined its analysis, bringing it into better focus. Yes! Thirty-year-old iota signature. No current ship communicating from the other side. Her heart pounding, Megan steered her ship into the wormhole.

* * * * *

The passage through the wormhole was rough. The sensation was usually equivalent to a monster roller-coaster ride, and despite motion sickness medication, many rock-hard women had lost their lunches in transit, bits of which often hung in the zero-G cabin afterward as if to remind the poor woman of her moment of weakness. This trip seemed unusually out-of-control, as if the roller-coaster was nearly losing contact with the rails...

And she was through! Wormhole collapse, Megan thought with elation, has already been disproved now. The wormhole Aurora had used was a still-functioning portal to another star system.

Megan scanned the star and its entourage of planets with the ship's sensors. There, that planet! That has to be it! I am looking, Megan told herself, at the planet Janny has been stranded on all these years!

A sudden blinding shock that rattled the ship astonished Megan -- she'd never had *that* happen before, following wormhole emergence. The computer screens went blank, and the cabin lights went off for at least five seconds, returning dimly afterwards. As the computer went through a reboot, Megan looked quickly around the cabin to see if she spotted any damage. It looked okay. There was no whistle of escaping air. Her attention returned to the computer screen. She'd have to do an immediate system diagnostic.

Life support -- okay. Navigation... there were a few glitches now, but only in the fully automated pilot area. If she could see a destination, she could still direct the nav system to it. Return beacon... there we go. She was still receiving the signal from Earth, and would be able to follow the signal home. They won't have to come after me...

Megan frowned. Her ship seemed no longer to be generating its own signal. She hurriedly punched in commands, her heart pounding. The computer had lost access to portions of its software, and that was one of them: the beacon signal that told Earth where her ship was. It's okay, she told herself, it's okay, it's okay. I didn't want them following me anyway.

She was aware that any ships following her would probably be military police vehicles, sent with instructions to arrest her.

It was disconcerting to realize that Earth authorities could no longer determine her current whereabouts and no doubt thought she was dead. But she could still return home when she was ready. With Janica.

Megan wondered whether this same thing had happened to Janica's ship: Aurora might have passed through that same unknown energy burst, and been partially crippled in ways similar to Megan's ship. Her excitement grew. It strengthened the possibility Janica was alive: Aurora's signaler had been fried, perhaps, with the ship herself okay. Okay enough to land, at least. Damage to navigation may have prevented her return to Earth, leaving Janica and the crew stranded but alive.

Megan's long range scanner was still working. She made a more complete survey of the planet she had identified. It was, by sensor measurements, fully capable of supporting human life. Sighing at the difficulty of getting there with a partially disabled computer, Megan took down the planet's coordinates and spoke them into the nav system -- the scanner and navigation system were no longer communicating with each other, but she could work around it.

* * * * *

After entering orbit, Megan flew halfway around the planet before discovering signs of animal life. That seemed odd. The vegetation was unbelievably lush, but there was a definite shortage in the animal kingdom. At least that made it easier to locate any human settlement, which was presumably what Megan was detecting now.

She descended from orbit and floated slowly for a time at treetop level. Any new planet was likely to hide unsuspected dangers, and Megan knew enough about planetary exploration to understand that the first rule is to take nothing for granted. That the planet looked benign was fine, but she wanted to familiarize herself with it a little more before making ground contact.

After an hour of surveillance she let the ship settle softly to the ground. She was a few kilometers from the settlement her scanner had picked up. On landing she made a last systems check, and secured the ship for future liftoff.

From ground level, her systems could make a more accurate assay of the local atmosphere than they could from orbit. It was mostly nitrogen, with slightly higher oxygen content than Earth's, and no dangerous gases in any greater concentration than a few parts per billion. The temperature was only slightly higher than that of a pleasant summer day. Megan decided to remain in the silvery flight suit, without a helmet. The suit reflected light and absorbed very little heat, and it should protect her if any of the vegetation through which she passed turned out to be poisonous or allergenic.

Slipping her arms through the shoulder straps of a provision pack, with a portable scanner in one hand, a blaster in the other, Megan climbed down from the ship to stand on the soil of an alien planet, something she knew she would never tire of. And this one has Janny on it! she told herself. Her heart thundered with excitement. I've been light-years away from Janica for thirty years, she thought. And now I'm within walking distance! Shrugging her shoulders to stabilize the pack, Megan started walking where the scanner led her.

She found, to her dismay, that the hand-held scanner was indicating that the settlement was still some twenty kilometers distant. She rolled her eyes as she realized the onboard scanner had been more messed up than she'd known. But at least the damaged ship had got her here, in one piece. Rather than take the ship up again, she decided to walk it. She wasn't eager to discover anything else wrong with the ship.

The exertion of walking brought out a layer of sweat that cooled between Megan's skin and the all-covering flight suit, before the air-conditioning kicked in. This world was not at all unfit for human habitation, but not terribly comfortable without the aid of the suit's cooling. The planet had very little axial tilt, and probably had no discernable seasons. The odds were that the weather was pretty much like this all the time.

The vegetation had some similarities to Earth, though Megan could tell she must be on another planet. Though trees were plentiful, the ground cover between them wasn't grass, or anything like it. It was more broadly leafed, a little like thick ivy, but more wrinkly. A bit like lettuce, she decided. She got into the habit of lifting her feet higher than usual as she walked, to avoid tripping in it.

Keeping an eye out for potential dangers, the blaster ready for defense if needed, Megan walked quickly. Aside from the sighing of the wind through the leaves of the densely-packed trees, it was almost supernaturally quiet. She probably wouldn't have noticed the singing of birds if it had been present, but its absence seemed almost to assault her senses with its strangeness. She did spot some insects, but they were anything but aggressive -- they seemed much more interested in the blooms on the trees than in her. As if they'd never seen an animal and had no internal tropism that urged them to make use of one.

Megan presumed the settlement up ahead could hardly have been established by indigenous creatures, since it seemed impossible that the entire planet's sentient population, its entire population of animals, in fact, could all be in one small place. It *must* be Aurora's crew. She felt sure of it. The men of the Hercules cult had been in sleepers during the interstellar trip. Under normal circumstances the crew would have let the men free after landing to fend for themselves, but given that the crew had apparently found themselves stranded, they had probably established the settlement themselves, with an enclosure to contain the cultists and keep them under control, until a more permanent prison could be built.

Luckily, Megan reminded herself, Janica and the other women would never have been in danger from the Hercules cultists. The crew had all the weapons.

CHAPTER 3

Megan had landed an eighth of the planet's circumference beyond the day/night boundary, and the rotation of the planet was now taking her further into the sunlight -- it had been mid-morning, in other words. After about six hours of walking, the sun, or the star, she should say, had reached and passed its zenith. It was approaching late afternoon. The day must be pretty close to twenty-four hours, Megan realized. Probably not exactly, and the settlers would probably have to make minor adjustments in their clocks, but a day here would be pretty much what the human race had accustomed itself to in the millions of years of its history. Megan saw she was, at last, reaching the outskirts of the settlement: she could see a light drift of smoke, seeming to be a few hundred meters in the distance. There appeared to be a clearing ahead, and Megan had an uncertain view of at least one building through the shifting gaps in the trees as she moved.

Megan trembled with excitement, seeing her first proof that the animal life was indeed human -- or certainly intelligent, at least, and humanity had as yet discovered no other intelligent species. Her legs sore from walking, Megan nevertheless broke into a jog. She saw a wooden fence now, marking the edge of the clearing near the last line of trees.

She broke out of the forest incautiously at a dead run, and stopped in her tracks, stumbling, unable to process what she was seeing.

As she stood still, her jaw hanging open, her mind spinning in "what's wrong with this picture?" mode, Megan slowly decided she had to accept the input from her senses, as nonsensical as it was.

In a cleared field enclosed by a fence on three sides, with a barn-like structure occupying much of the fourth side, there was a cluster of... well, if they had been cows, the sight would have looked perfectly normal. There were about three dozen of them, at a quick first estimate, standing on four legs, some of them gazing blankly into the distance, some lowering their heads to munch idly at the ubiquitous lettuce covering the ground, some taking a drink from a stream flowing diagonally across the pasture while a few others ambled in that direction. It was an idyllic pastoral scene. Except...

They weren't cows, however much they acted as if they were. They were women. Human women, down on all fours. All were naked, but seemed quite unconcerned about it. Most of their faces were blank, while one or two had benign half-smiles. Some sort of surgery had been performed on them: their arms had been cut off between wrist and elbow, the stump of the forearm ending in some sort of artificial hoof; their legs had been amputated a little above the knee, with similar hooves grafted at the end, the legs now about equal in length with the arms, so that standing on four legs looked comfortable, natural. Their hair was cut short, a little untidily, as if they had been sheared with hair clippers without much concern for esthetics. Each woman had oversized breasts hanging down from her chest, with prominent nipples and dark areolae. Given the context in which Megan was seeing them, she found it easy to make the guess that their breasts were quite functional, swollen with milk.

It occurred to Megan that these women must have been born on the planet -- not that they were an indigenous species, though that remained a possibility, she supposed. But more likely they were offspring of the original crew. There had only been seven women, including Janica, so this entire planet should only have seven women on it. There were many more than that right in front of Megan's eyes.

Anger surged through her. They had taken over somehow, the Hercules cult. She didn't know how they'd done it, but this was their work. On Earth, on their private island, they had done a number of experiments at trying to turn women into animals. They hadn't been entirely successful -- not to *this* extent, anyway. Obviously they had improved the system.

Unconsciously Megan's grip tightened on her blaster. She would kill those men, the evil men. Every last one of them. The decision to spare their lives had been wrong, so wrong, and now look what had happened.

Periodically Megan heard one of the women make a groaning sound. No, she told herself, it wasn't that. She was forced to admit it had a resemblance to a moo, a little better imitation than a human would normally make. Did the men do surgery on the women's vocal cords too? she wondered. So they could make a more authentic sound? Concentrating on the sound, Megan focused more closely on a nearby woman who had just produced it.

Megan's eyes narrowed, and she suddenly gasped in shock and dropped to her knees, her hands flying to her face. Her knuckles pressed against her cheeks, tears started to flow from her eyes. She tried to speak. Her diaphragm was frozen in horror, so she couldn't put any wind behind her words, but her lips moved silently, as she mouthed, "Janny! Janny! Oh no, noooo..." It was Janica's face she recognized.

Megan finally managed to make her lungs function again, and she held out her arms to the woman she could still see between the boards of the pasture fence. "J-Janny! Janny! It's me, Mig! It's Megan! I'm going to get you home!"

Megan stopped, stunned by the utter absence of recognition on Janica's face. Janica had turned her head towards Megan at the sound of her voice, her gaze neutral, completely incurious, before ducking her head down to tear away another mouthful of lettuce.

A little louder, more insistently, Megan said, "Janny, you know me! It's Mig, remember? Janny..." her voice broke, "What have they done to you?"

In one motion Megan rose and vaulted over the short fence, aware of the startlement of nearby women, who scrambled away with frightened moos. She caught herself, not wanting to scare anyone, and in that moment her attention fixed on another woman, about ten meters ahead of her.

This one had Janica's face too. Megan looked back and forth between the two, this new Janica and the previous one. The two women were absolutely identical, and both were absolutely Janny, right down to the unique golden-blonde hair that Megan had always wished she could have.

Megan froze, her mind spinning. A vague fear floated through her mind, telling her this was a nightmare from which she was finding herself unable to awaken. She slowly walked through the herd, looking closely at faces. At least four of the women looked exactly like Janica, and several others looked like Lieutenant Heather Lopez, Janica's close friend, with Heather's smoky brown eyes and dark, almost black hair. The redheads all looked exactly like Aoife O'Lonigan. And the chocolate-skinned ones were all in the image of Aurora's commander, Tanisha Ologwu. Megan looked around carefully at the entire... herd. Every face she could see was that of one of the seven Aurora crew members.

Megan's jaw tightened. "They're *cloning* them! The bastards, they're making clones!" The practice had long been illegal on Earth, but of course that would be of no concern to the Hercules men. It was one of the least of their crimes.

Megan's spirits rose momentarily with the realization that this did prove Janica was alive somewhere. They were using her genes, and those of the others, to produce these animals.

Following on that was a thought that was very strange to contemplate: The women here, the ones who looked like Janica... all of them were Megan's sisters. Literally her sisters, not just in spirit. Each of them had all the same genes as Janica, the ones that had come to Janny through the same mother who had given an equal number of her genes to Megan. Suddenly Megan had a much larger family than she had ever imagined.

Megan had not had a chance to focus her attention on the house that stood about a hundred meters to the right of the barn, and was startled when the door of the house banged open. She drew her blaster instinctively as two figures trotted towards the pasture, then her arm dropped to her side as her jaw sagged open again. These were women as well, and similarly on all fours, but not at all of the same demeanor as the "cows" in front of Megan. As the new women ran through an unnoticed small break in the fence near the barn and approached the herd, Megan tried to drop her disbelief and convince herself once more that she was really seeing what she was seeing: these two women seemed to be playing the role of dogs.

As naked as the cows, the two "dogs," though clearly human females, sported patches of dark and light skin, possibly tattoos intended to resemble patterns common in dogs' fur. They had the same four shortened limbs as the "cows," though each terminated in rubbery-looking "paws" more suitable for running. Their breasts, swaying underneath them as they ran, were of normal human female proportions, not at all on the same scale as the milkers. As the "dogs" came closer, Megan could see each had a tail, stiffly standing upright from their backsides. And as they circled the herd towards the side away from the barn, they began making sharp sounds that uncannily resembled barks. They paid almost no attention to Megan, clearly intent on their assigned task.

One of the "dogs" had Heather Lopez's face; the other looked like Sabrina Marion, Aurora's first officer.

The "cows," nearly all of whom had stood at the sound of the approach of the "dogs," now backed away in alarm in response to the barking, moving in the direction of the barn. They all turned in that direction and began walking slowly towards it, the "dogs" prancing around on either side to keep the "cows" in a tight formation. In minutes the "cows" had all entered the barn.

Megan walked quickly to the barn door, stopping at the entrance to let her eyes adjust to the relative darkness. Once she could see, she found that all the women were lined up against the far wall, facing away from Megan. Walking closer, she saw that each had inserted her breasts into rubbery-looking cups in an assembly built against the wall. The sides of the cups were rippling slightly -- obviously the women were being milked. For the most part they were silent. A few satisfied sighs were the only sounds other than the slight humming of the milking machinery.

Megan heard grunts to her right, beyond a smaller door through which the house was visible, and through which the “dogs” must have returned to the house. She went to that door and looked for the source of the sound, and found her capacity to be astonished challenged once more.

There were about a dozen naked women, each one huge -- Megan guessed they must weigh at least a hundred-fifty kilos each. Some were lying on their sides in the mud of their small enclosure, and a few were standing, on their no-longer-surprising four cropped legs, eating from a trough filled with some kind of grain. It was from these enormous four-legged women that the grunting sounds had been coming. Pigs, of course. Megan thought she should have expected it by now. One had Janica’s magical golden hair, though with her face swollen by fat the resemblance was muted.

Standing in the pigpen, Megan now had a view of the field behind the barn, and for the first time spotted a man, no doubt one of the Hercules. He was walking behind a plow, of a design probably not widely used on Earth for centuries but clearly useful here. Two women were harnessed to the plow, pulling it along behind them. Squinting to make out details across the distance, it appeared to Megan that the women had normal legs and feet -- normal other than the impressively well-developed muscles that clenched and flexed mightily with the effort of pulling the plow. They seemed to have no arms at all -- their shoulders ended in rounded nubs. Of course, she thought. For this job they only needed legs.

Megan pulled out her blaster, determined to shoot the bastard here and now and rescue these women - all of them, in all their animal forms, before a thought ran through her head that stopped her, and she holstered the blaster again. She simply couldn’t kill all the men and somehow save the women. She had no idea how many women were on the planet -- probably hundreds, if there were more farms like this one -- and Megan obviously couldn’t take them all back to Earth with her in her ship. In her small vehicle, she’d be lucky to squeeze in one extra person to share the ride with her. Two would be impossible. And she couldn’t leave all of the rest to fend for themselves over the weeks it would take to get back to Earth and then return with a rescue team. They would have no idea how to take care of themselves without the supervision of the evil, blasted, hated... Megan ran out of adjectives... men.

Absorbed in these thoughts, Megan nearly jumped out of her skin when a piping voice behind her asked, “Who are you??” She whirled and drew her blaster in one motion, her training at the Academy making her defense instinctive. Then she gasped and tried hopelessly to hide the blaster from the eyes of the small boy who was looking at her wonderingly.

He couldn’t have been more than eight or nine years old, and his eyes were wide with fascination, not fear. He looked at the blaster. “What’s that?” Again no fear, only curiosity. He may not ever have seen any kind of weapon before, might not even possess the concept.

Megan struggled to reply. “Uhh, walking stick,” she said vaguely, and she put it away once more. “Do you, ahh... live here?”

The boy nodded vigorously. “With my dad,” he said, pointing towards the farmer guiding the plow in the distance.

Dad, thought Megan. A teacher of some sort? Then it came back to her, as a colloquialism out of history. It means father, she recalled. The boy lives with the man who fathered him. It seemed very odd.

The boy turned his attention back to Megan, looking over her flight suit. With the intuitive leap only children seem capable of, he asked in an awe-struck voice, "Are you from Earth?"

Megan blinked, marveling at whatever associative process had led the child to that question. "Yes, I'm from Earth. Do you know much about it?"

He nodded excitedly. "Oh, sure! We study about it in school. Earth is where the gods came from!"

The religious aspect puzzled Megan, and then she decided this was the name he had for the original Hercules cult members. Megan noticed his eyes hadn't flicked back towards his father when he'd used the word. She turned to take another look at the man, then back to the child. "Is your... dad one of the gods?"

The boy shook his head. "No, sir," and Megan blinked at the gender misidentification. "He was born here, like me. He was one of the first in the Native Generation." He pronounced the words carefully, showing obvious pride in the accomplishment of his father's birth.

That seems to work, thought Megan to herself. Thirty years is just enough time for a man to be born, grow up and father a child this age. Then the significance of the boy calling her "sir" sank in.

The boy could not possibly have any idea Megan might be a woman! There were no talking women in his life, no woman with an intelligence level remotely approaching his own. Women were simply farm animals.

Even his father might have the same perception. The man was older, fully mature, but the odds were he'd never seen a talking woman either. Wherever the original crew of Aurora was, there was probably no reason this man would ever come into direct contact with them. To explore the idea, she asked the boy, "Did the gods bring the..." she gestured at the "pigs," an arm wave that went further to suggest the herd in the barn and the pair pulling the plow, "...animals with them from Earth?"

The boy wrinkled his brows in momentary puzzlement, then matched up her word with a similar one he knew. "The girlimals? The gods brought seven with them, but they were untrained. They didn't know how to... do what they do now," he struggled to express the thought, "So the gods had to train them to be what they are."

That was probably as much history as she'd be able to get out of the boy, Megan decided. Maybe the father would know more. It should be safe, talking to the dad. The man wouldn't know Megan was a woman any more than the boy did. The bulky flight suit hid any obvious physical differences. Even her hair, cut very short as was required for members of the Space Force to accommodate helmets, headphones, and other assorted headgear, but styled in a way that anyone from Earth would recognize as feminine, wouldn't give her away. The style would mean nothing to him, given that he would expect some things to be different about anyone from Earth.

It was a lucky thing Megan had learned the farmer wasn't an original cult member, since she saw now she'd be talking with him in just minutes: the boy had streaked excitedly past her, waving his arms and shouting, "Dad!! Dad!! There's a man from Earth here!!"

After the boy reached his father the two of them spoke inaudibly for a moment. Then the man looked towards Megan and waved. "Let me just finish this row," he shouted, "And I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Megan shouted in return, "Take your time," nearly biting back the words at the end in sudden fear he'd recognize by her voice she was female. Quit worrying about that, she insisted to herself. She would have to rely on the man's inability to imagine she could be a woman. He doesn't even know what a normal female's voice sounds like, Megan realized, and obviously lots of men have high-pitched voices anyway. She was confident she could pass.

In about twenty minutes, the man reached the end of the row and adjusted the plow for free-wheeling. In a few minutes more, the women pulling it had brought it back to the barn, where the farmer unhitched them and patted their rumps. Neither gave much evidence of particular physical strain, other than the sheen of sweat, brilliant in the sunlight, covering their bare bodies. Their legs were magnificent even at rest, their breasts full and slightly uptilted, their shoulders broad, though looking odd in the absence of arms. They stood, shifting their weight from one foot to the other idly, looking blank but placid. One looked like Gretel Schweiz, the other was a clone of Sabrina Marion.

The man gave the plow a push into the barn, turned to Megan and held out his hand. That much social custom had survived the interstellar trip, Megan realized, as she shook hands with him -- her glove in his bare hand, actually.

"Glad to meet you. I'm Jason. I see you've met Bret already."

"Hi, likewise. I'm..." She hesitated just a fraction of a second, too short for him to notice, most likely. "...Martin," using a name with some resemblance to her own.

"So you're really from Earth? I imagine that would explain being dressed that way." He smiled.

Megan smiled back. "For real."

"Well..." Jason waved his arm in a gesture that encompassed everything around him. "Welcome to Freeworld. Now there's a sentence I never imagined myself saying."

Megan looked around. "The planet is called that, not just your farm?"

He nodded. "The gods named it that when they first came."

Freeworld. Probably a reference to being free from the control of women. It's a free world from the men's point of view, Megan thought. She could see the women wouldn't agree.

The man turned to his son. "Bret, towel down the horses and water them, while I get Martin into the house."

"Yes, sir." The boy ran into the barn to look after the... "horses."

Jason smiled again. "Come on in the house. You could probably use a cold drink. And not to be impolite or anything but... well, I can't help wondering what you're doing here." He turned to walk towards the house, with a friendly, beckoning gesture to Megan, and she followed him up the steps into a cool kitchen.

Jason went to a small, rudimentary refrigerator, the cooling mechanism clearly visible behind it, and opened the door, saying over his shoulder, "Beer? I grew the barley here. Friend down the road grows the hops."

Megan was about to answer, but froze suddenly, her astonishment surpassing any so far reached today. Sitting on the floor, now suddenly leaping to her feet with a yearning, almost desperate look on her face, fixated on Jason, was a complete, unmaimed woman, the first Megan had seen here. Naked, except for a metal collar encircling her neck, her hair was a bit longer than any of the women's outside, though still not shoulder length. She was breathing hard, almost whining, not as if in pain but as if she could hardly contain her excitement. Not from seeing Megan, whom she gave no evidence of even noticing. She had eyes only for Jason.

She looked exactly, absolutely like Janica.

Discarded on the floor beside the woman was a photocube she had been holding, containing a half-size image of Jason's head. She leaned a few more centimeters towards him, then flinched back with a squeak of sudden pain.

Megan was aware of Jason looking at her expectantly. She couldn't remember what he'd asked. "S-Sorry, what?"

He looked at her curiously, saw her attention attracted to the woman in the corner. "I was asking if you wanted a beer. Isn't she gorgeous? She's my favorite model."

Megan tried to fathom what that meant, realizing in a moment that with seven body types to choose from, Jason had picked this one out. One of the seven models. But for what? "What's she... I mean, what is she?"

Jason looked at Megan in astonishment. "Don't you have dollies on Earth?"

Megan shook her head slowly. "Not in my circles."

Jason grinned and sighed. "You don't know what you're missing. Bought this one about a year ago, had it imprinted on me. It's the greatest."

Janica -- Megan knew she wasn't the real Janica, but she didn't know what else to call her -- Janica grew more distressed by the second, holding out her arms to Jason in supplication, seeming to want to run to him but unable to, despite nothing visible keeping her in her corner. "Imprinted." Megan knew it as the word that described the instant attachment of baby ducks to their mother, making them follow their mothers anywhere. Obviously that was exactly what Jason meant.

Megan saw that Jason was holding a beer bottle, gesturing with it towards her questioningly. A beer certainly wouldn't hurt, she thought, and grabbed at it to give her hands something to do while her mind still whirled. Relieved of the burden at last, Jason grinned. "I better let her go before she goes crazy." He thumbed a button in the wall opposite the one behind Janica. Janica, seeing this, squeaked ecstatically and hurled herself across the room towards Jason, throwing her arms around him, hugging him so tightly the muscles in her arms quivered, rubbing her lightly-furred mound against his upper leg lasciviously, kissing and licking his neck as if in desperation for his taste and touch.

Megan took a long gulp of beer and tried to calm herself. She could never in her life have pictured Janica this way: as a mindless, passionately devoted, almost maniacally driven sex slave for a man. A man who referred to her as "it."

Jason laughed while wrapping his arm possessively around Janica's waist. "The electrified collar keeps it on hold while I'm working. Otherwise it'd chase after me out to the fields and I'd never get anything done."

Megan looked at the corner Janica had just vacated. Megan understood that the collar must have shocked Janica earlier, and would do so anytime she tried to leave her corner, until Jason pushed the release button. There was a food bowl, water dish, a pad to lie on, and behind all that a small cubbyhole in the wall with a toilet -- evidently Janica was toilet trained. She had everything she needed right there -- except Jason. The photocube must be there to remind her of him, Megan decided, to make her feel he was at least partly present. Judging from its smeared surface, she probably spent much of her alone time kissing it.

Bret came in, scuffing his feet dutifully on the entry mat before entering the kitchen. In the abrupt way of children, without further greeting Megan, he shouted "I'm hungry."

Jason nodded. "Me too. I'm sure you are too, Martin." Megan almost looked behind her to see who Jason was addressing before she remembered she was Martin. "Umm, yes, thank you." She drained her beer.

Jason snapped his fingers, and Janica instantly stopped rubbing up against him and looked at him attentively. When he pointed to the corner, she gave him a disconsolate look but turned and immediately went to the corner, sitting cross-legged, still watching him closely as he thumbed the button to reset the shock collar. She picked up the photocube and rubbed her face forlornly against the side of it.

Jason stooped and opened the lower portion of the fridge, clearly the freezer section judging from the escaping vapor. "Pork and veggies sound okay?"

Megan nearly said, "Sure," before her mind froze, a flood of horror breaking over her in a wave that nearly drowned her. Pork. Pigs. She'd seen the pigs. Those women were being fattened up to be eaten! Megan would be eating the flesh of a woman raised to be slaughtered for exactly that purpose. The meat could even be from one of Janica's clones! Megan might be eating her own sister! In any case, Janica or not, Megan knew she could never eat it. It would be hard enough watching Jason eat it. "I'm, err, I'm a vegetarian. Pretty common on Earth."

Jason nodded. "No problem. I'll fix you up something tasty."

"Could I... have another beer?"

CHAPTER 4

During dinner, Megan tried, with limited success, to keep her mind off the main course, which she was not eating, by concentrating on creating a believable story as to the purpose of her trip. Random planetary exploration, she decided, was her best bet, throwing in as near an approximation of the truth as she could -- that there had been no signal from this wormhole, so it was not known that the earlier ship carrying the "gods" had come to this system. Exploration was never done in a one-person ship, of course, but she felt confident Jason wouldn't know that. As it turned out, he did not. He did offer up the official genesis-of-Freeworld story, which cast the gods as the explorers, from the homeworld, Earth, on which they had been as much in charge of things as they were here.

The dinner party adjourned to the living room, which Megan discovered was also the home of the "dogs" she had seen earlier. They had their own area of the room, including a soft pad, a box for their wastes, and food and water bowls similar to... the dolly's. Not Janica's. Megan tried as hard as she could to stop thinking of her as Janny.

The tails of the "dogs," Megan saw to her amazement, were functional: some sort of muscle tissue must be attached at the base, as the women were wagging their tails happily at the attention they received from Bret, while barking joyfully. The boy picked up a ball and tossed it across the room, and both women scrambled to reach it first for the honor of returning it to the boy. The one with Heather's face won out, and trotted back to Bret with the ball clenched in her teeth, her tail twitching madly.

After Bret was sent off to bed, Jason excused himself for a moment and returned to the kitchen, coming back with his dolly clinging to him, lavishing attention on him happily. Jason sat in the largest chair in the room, facing the one Megan had taken, and reopened the conversation about Earth, from dinner. Megan fascinated Jason with descriptions of Earth and its society, avoiding mention of the sex of any of the people in charge, and went on to the safer subject of her experiences on other planets, all while trying to ignore the dolly, who was kneeling in front of Jason's chair, between his legs, rubbing the side of her head against his thighs. When she reached for his zipper, he snapped his fingers and pushed her hand gently away, which she accepted grudgingly as a signal that it wasn't the time for that. She settled for rubbing her naked body against his clothed one to the extent she could from her kneeling position, moaning very softly now and then. Megan repeated to herself again and again, it's not Janny, it's not Janny.

Jason smiled at Megan. "I'm just really amazed you don't have dollies." Megan, unable to backtrack on her unfamiliarity with dollies, had at least asserted a knowledge of "girlimals." Jason went on, "They're more intelligent than most girlimals, and very devoted, as you can tell. No language skills, of course, but there's a set of gestures it can understand. Anyway, is there going to be much traffic between here and Earth, now that you've 'rediscovered' us? I'm sure we could use some technological improvements, though I can't imagine how we'd pay for them. We don't have anything to trade that Earth would need."

Almost choking with amusement at the idea that the government on Earth would accept what was going on here and set up a trade partnership, Megan responded vaguely, "I'm not sure what happens in the case of running into an already established settlement..." She stopped, again trying to adjust to the scene happening in front of her. Janny -- Megan couldn't help it, it *was* Janny -- was kissing and rubbing

her nose against the crotch of Jason's pants, her breathing growing more ragged, with frequent whimpers of need, as if she was reaching the edge of her ability to hold back. Megan quickly shifted her eyes away from the scene as she noticed Jason had seen her look. She didn't realize at the time how Jason was going to misinterpret it.

He gasped and shook his head. "Oh, I am SO sorry. I'm being a really terrible host." He snapped his fingers, and Janica still had enough self-control to stop and look at him intently. Janica's eyes followed Jason's finger as he pointed directly at Megan, and he tapped her shoulder, pushing her gently in Megan's direction. To Megan's horror, Janica came to her feet, quickly walked across the room to Megan and dropped into a kneeling position in front of her. The dolly's eyes, so, SO much like Janny's, focused on Megan's intently, clearly waiting for instructions from Megan, of the only kind she could understand: what kind of sexual attention did Jason's guest want?

Megan froze, with no idea how to react. Based on her knowledge of various Earth cultures, she knew that one thing common to nearly all of them was a tradition that hosting a visitor entailed sharing certain things, as Jason was demonstrating now, and another was that refusing a gift was considered rude -- sometimes unspeakably so. While Megan considered this, Janica quickly pressed herself against Megan, her hands roaming gently but insistently over the shiny material of Megan's flight suit, while kissing Megan's suit-covered leg just above her knee. Janica's hand finally settled in the crotch between Megan's legs and squeezed the material gently, no doubt hoping to sponsor an erection, while her lips and tongue slowly worked their way up the inside of Megan's thigh.

Megan's head buzzed, unable to sort out the tumult of impressions flooding her senses and emotions. Janica, the real Janica, had been, throughout Megan's childhood, the tall, lithe goddess Megan worshipped and for whose approval Megan desperately strove. Megan could no more conceive of a sexual attraction to Janica than a small child could entertain erotic fantasies about her own mother. As for the possibility of an attraction in the opposite direction... Megan would sooner expect the sky to turn red, with a hint of lemon.

Megan clamped down on a shouted Janny, stop, please, don't, her skin crawling with horror at the thought that Janica desperately wanted her sexually, yet Megan still had no idea how to stop the dolly without giving grave offense to a man whose goodwill she might very well need. Megan knew instinctively she couldn't control the dolly: the dolly would accept orders only from her master, who had ordered her to please Megan, and the dolly would stop at nothing to make her master happy. Megan grasped gratefully at the first solution that finally came into her head. "Oh, Jason, this is *really* nice of you, but I'm so exhausted from my trip, and I really walked a long way from my ship... I just don't think I could handle your dolly just now. Later, for sure, after a good night's sleep, I'll really look forward to it..." The dolly's tongue had nearly reached Megan's crotch, and she was making those desperate whimpering noises again.

To Megan's intense relief, Jason slapped his forehead and exclaimed, "What am I thinking? Bad host again. Of *course* you'd be tired." He snapped his fingers again, and Janica's head whipped around. She eagerly ran back to Jason, and Megan was spared the most revolting experience of her life. For now, at least. She knew she had just promised to accept Janica's attentions later, but, well, later was later. She'd handle that when it came. At least she'd have more time to plan a new dodge beforehand.

Jason rolled his eyes, as if suddenly realizing something, and went to Bret's bedroom, saying softly, "Bret, you sleep out here tonight. That okay?"

“Sure, Dad!” came the voice from inside the room, followed soon after by the pajama-clad boy. He was as excited as any child by a change from the usual order of things.

Jason turned to Megan. “You can have Bret’s room, here,” he said, pointing with his thumb behind him. “He’s got his own bathroom, which you can use, of course. Take a bath if you like. I know that gets the knots out of my muscles after a hard day.”

Megan was surprised to find how nice the idea sounded. Her legs were aching, and though the suit’s air-conditioning was functioning at optimal capacity, she couldn’t help feeling fairly ripe -- perhaps that was in her head, but a bath would be wonderful. She muttered a non-committal “Thanks,” not sure of the wisdom of removing her suit, knowing that even Jason’s warped gender-consciousness wouldn’t override his realizing her true sex if he saw her naked. It seemed almost impossible he would intrude, though. Surely a guest in a bath was accorded privacy that Jason wouldn’t invade, at least without warning. Megan stood, even more conscious of the aches in her legs, and said, “I think I’ll sleep until noon.”

Jason smiled. “We’ll try not to disturb you. See you in the morning, Martin.”

At least this time she wasn’t confused by a feeling he might be addressing someone else. “Sure thing.”

* * * * *

Megan shrugged out of the last piece of her many-zippered flight suit and dropped her sweaty shorts, shirt, and underwear on the floor. The steam from the tub felt relaxing. She wished she could lock the door, but it had no lock; it barely had what would qualify as a latch. But the bathroom was separated from Jason by Bret’s bedroom, so at least she would probably hear him coming.

She stepped into the tub and let herself slip inch by glorious inch into the welcoming water, leaning back against the end of the tub and closing her eyes. She felt she could stay here for hours, if only the water would stay warm. Already she could feel the aches in her legs easing.

She convulsed as she saw the door opening, her arms moving lightning-fast to cover her breasts, pressing her legs together under the water trying to hide her lack of appropriate male equipment. She gaped in astonishment as she saw the dolly in the doorway, and nearly blurted out, “Janny!”

From the living room, Jason called out, “It’s trained to bathe you. I know it’ll make it very relaxing. Works wonders for me. It generally keeps that separate from sex, so it probably won’t try getting you stirred up if you still aren’t in the mood. Just sit back and let it work its magic.”

There was no excuse she could imagine for refusing this time, and she probably couldn’t get rid of the dolly in any case without Jason coming in.

There was no time to consider an escape anyway -- the dolly was already climbing into the tub. Obviously she wouldn’t just sit outside the tub to bathe Megan. Megan helplessly watched as the dolly sat in the tub facing her, her expression blank, put her legs around Megan’s waist, and took up the sponge and soap.

To Megan's relief, the dolly did not, indeed, seem bent on making this anything especially sexual -- she simply started rubbing the soapy sponge softly over Megan's shoulders. Megan began to relax, leaning forward as the dolly reached around her to start sponging her back.

Megan suddenly remembered that Janica *had* washed her on occasion -- Janica, ten years older than Megan, had sometimes been left in charge of bath time when their mother had a meeting or for some other reason had to be away in the evening, though she'd always done it from outside the tub. Tears welled up in Megan's eyes as she remembered her sister's soft ministrations, and critical eye towards Megan's cleanliness. Megan didn't think Janica had bathed her since she was about six, but the memories were there nevertheless.

The dolly suddenly stopped soaping Megan, a puzzled look in her eyes, and reached for one of Megan's breasts, squeezing gently. Megan saw the dolly look down at her own breasts, rubbing one hand against the swollen glands on her chest. She sees we're alike! thought Megan. There's something she wasn't expecting! The dolly's gaze dropped down to Megan's female parts, and reached down and rubbed Megan's mound with her hand, below the waterline, her eyebrows knitting even closer together.

Yes! thought Megan. I'm just like you! We're women, both of us! And sisters! Whispering, not wanting Jason to hear, Megan whispered "Sisters!" She took Janica's hand and guided it to her chest, repeating the word. She put her own hand, with Janica's, on Janica's chest, looking intently into her eyes, willing her to understand. "Sisters!"

The dolly's jaw dropped, and a look of concentration Megan hadn't seen there before came into her eyes. Janica's lips curled, and she tentatively pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth. "S-sss..."

Her eyes alight, Megan whispered, "Yes! Yes! We're sisters! Say it! You can do it! Siss-ters!"

Looking so closely into her eyes, Megan thought she detected exactly the moment when the dolly's attention wandered. It doesn't mean anything to her, Megan thought dejectedly. She can't focus on it. It's a meaningless idea, that we are somehow the same, that we have a connection.

The dolly forgot, as well, that she was supposed to be bathing the stranger, and had gone back into sex mode, her earlier order to pleasure Megan not effectively cancelled. She threw herself forward suddenly, wrapping her arms around Megan, her lips seeking out Megan's. Megan didn't even have time to blurt out "No!" before Janica was against her, her thighs suddenly squeezing tightly against Megan's waist, her breasts pressed against Megan's, her tongue exploring deep within Megan's mouth, effectively preventing any protests by Megan. Janica's hips gyrated against Megan's, the friction of their crinkly bushes making Megan's crotch burn. The force of Janica's attack banged Megan's head painfully hard against the back of the tub, and Janica forced her tongue in still deeper, almost seeming to brush against the back of Megan's throat. Megan tried to push the dolly away, frantically thinking to herself, Janny, no, you can't, we can't, we mustn't, it's wrong, it's wrong, when suddenly the sound of a finger snap from the living room ended the attack. Janica leapt from the tub and ran, dripping, out of the room. Megan, breathing in shock through her wide-open mouth, heard Jason call out, "Night, Martin. Sleep well."

Megan, dazed, did her best to bathe herself while her breathing returned to something like normal, and emerged from the tub at length to dry herself, still shaking. She's not Janny, she's not Janny, she told herself over and over. She's an animal bred for sex. Sex is all she knows. They made her that way.

Yet she was still Megan's sister. There was no way to deny that.

In bed, Megan listened for what she judged at least an hour, maybe two, while grunts, groans, the dolly's familiar whimpers of passion, and creaking bedsprings kept her informed of the frantic sex taking place in the next room. My sister, she thought to herself, and her master.

They quieted at last, and Megan, somehow, fell into a deep, welcome sleep.

* * * * *

Megan opened her eyes as the windows hinted at dawn. There was a pleasant smell drifting into the room, and a crackling sound. Megan quickly put on her clothes and flight suit, surprised at herself for taking a chance on sleeping naked -- she must have been so tired last night it affected her judgment. She left off the gloves for now, confident her hands alone, under the circumstances, would not be enough to give her sex away.

As she entered the kitchen, Jason smiled at her over his shoulder. "I guess you wouldn't want bacon. I do have some cereal and fruits, though."

Megan choked, coughing to cover it up, glad her stomach didn't have anything in it. Bacon! From the... She closed her eyes, then opened them quickly before an undesired mental image could take hold, of Jason slaughtering one of the "pigs."

Jason looked at her with concern. "You okay, Martin? I hope you got enough sleep."

"Oh, fine, it was very comfortable. Just had something caught in my throat just now." Megan looked around the room. The dolly was in her corner, with one hand clutching the photocube of Jason, eating her breakfast -- down on her hands and knees, eating it dog-fashion from a bowl. It didn't seem natural that a woman with all her body parts would eat that way, but presumably she had been trained to do it like that. These men never missed a trick in reducing women to the status of dumb animals. Out in the living room, through which Megan had passed, the other two women, with the better excuse of not having hands, were eating from their own bowls in the same way.

Megan joined Bret at the table, as the boy was finishing his last "bacon" strip. With considerable effort, Megan thrust from her mind the source of the meat and started planning her day. Somehow she had to find the real Janica. As Jason set down the promised cereal bowl and a grapefruit, Megan asked, "Which way do I go to get to the... well I don't know what name you have for it, but the center of things. Where the gods are." She wasn't especially eager to meet a god, to say the least -- any one of them would instantly recognize her for what she was, even in the suit -- but the closer she got to them, the closer she was to Janny. Megan anticipated doing a certain amount of sneaking around. If she was caught, she always had her blaster.

Jason grinned. "You're in luck. I was going to need to get to the market in town in a day or so. I can just as well go today. Nothing really needs doing around here today."

Bret looked up, wide-eyed and excited. "Great!"

Megan smiled back at Jason. That would save a lot of time and effort if the... headquarters, or whatever it was called, was any great distance. "I really appreciate that."

CHAPTER 5

The ride into town was disconcerting. It hadn't occurred to Megan that they would use a "horse"-drawn cart. Surely, she thought, a society able to manufacture the sophisticated electronic appliances they had would be able to manage a fuel cell, but perhaps they couldn't pass up another chance to demean women. The two women pulling the cart, the same ones Megan had seen yesterday doing plow duty, didn't seem to object to the heavy labor, and certainly they were built for it. Hauling the wheeled cart was no doubt easier than the plow, but the idea of women as draft animals wasn't any more palatable to Megan today than it had been yesterday. She looked at Jason, who seemed almost hypnotized by the sight of the powerful leg muscles and buttocks rippling, shiny with sweat. Megan wanted to grab him by the shoulders and shake some decency into him, yell at him that they were as human as himself and as deserving of respectful treatment, but she knew it would be useless.

There were several farms along the way, each with its complement of women used as farm animals. Megan was surprised at the seemingly large number of descendants -- or somewhat more accurately, clones -- of the original seven crew members. She saw, for the first time, a horse with Janica's body. It was inevitable there would be some, but the sight, the thought of it, still made Megan grit her teeth.

On reaching town, Jason pulled the cart to a stop in front of a hardware store, jumped down from the cart and tied the horse-women's reins to a wooden bar in front of the boardwalk that lined the front of the row of shops. Megan could tell it was a hardware store because an illuminated liquid crystal sign in the window said so. The whole street was a bizarre mix of ancient and modern -- the road was hard-packed dirt, the boardwalks wooden planks, yet there was no lack of electric lighting. Megan climbed down on the other side and asked, "Where do you get your... girlimals, Jason?" She had reasoned that this would be the place to start. Since the women for livestock and... entertainment were all clones of Janica and her crewmates, it seemed possible that Janica might be somewhere near the point of sale.

Jason pointed down the street. "Fourth building down this way. You'll see the big display window."

Megan shuddered internally at the notion of "displaying" the women for sale, but hid it well -- she had been getting a lot of practice in suppressing her reactions -- and extended her hand. "Been very nice meeting you, Jason. I'll try to swing by and say hi on my way back to my ship."

Jason shook hands with her. "Nice meeting you too, Martin. Say, last night was perfectly understandable, but you sleep with the dolly the next time, okay? I don't want to feel like I don't treat my guests well."

Megan was staggered by the question of how she could possibly get through an entire night alone with a woman who looked exactly like Janica, lived for passionate sex, and was under orders to provide it in copious amounts to Megan. And who wouldn't stop no matter what Megan said and who wouldn't be summoned away as she had been last night. Megan determined that if she did stop by Jason's farm, she would be prepared with some reason why she couldn't stay for the night. She slapped his arm in a friendly way. "Sure thing, Jason. See you soon." She waved at Bret, who returned the wave enthusiastically with a huge grin.

She closed her eyes and sighed as she watched Jason enter the store with Bret, leaving her standing on the boardwalk. Yesterday had been such an appalling experience from the moment she'd set foot on the first outpost of local society. Today probably wouldn't be much better.

She walked down the boardwalk, past a feed store, a pharmacist's, and one that sold home furnishings. Farther on were a few larger buildings that Megan suspected might be factories. When she reached the store Jason had pointed out she stopped and groaned audibly. Yes, she thought, I was right about what today was going to be like.

The sign above the door proclaimed it to be the Girlimal Emporium. In the first display window there were two women modified into dogs, each of them barking energetically at Megan, and presumably anyone else who passed by. For the first time, Megan saw a "dog" with Janica's face.

The Janica-dog didn't look especially angry, for all her barking. In fact, she was wagging her tail, probably pleased by the attention her barking was meant to attract. As with Jason's two dogs, the barking sound was eerily authentic. The barking itself must be part of the training the women get, it occurred to Megan, perhaps aided by surgical modifications of the larynx -- she had already speculated about that when she'd heard the "cows" mooing yesterday. Megan shook her head miserably, thinking of the tragedy that this woman, born with all of Janica's genes and capable of so much, had been prevented from developing any human level of intelligence and, without her consent, surgically reduced to the life of an animal. Megan's anger flared again. Once she was able to make sure Janica was safe, Megan intended to leave plenty of dead bodies lying around. There would be men left alive to take care of the women until Earth authorities could return here in force. But Megan swore to herself that the "gods" would be dead.

Megan forced herself to move towards the shop's door, and saw now that the display window beyond it contained dollies -- seven of them, all naked, one of each "model," including, of course, Janica. There were partitions between them, perhaps because they would be one big tangle of arms and legs in a sexual orgy if they had all been in the same enclosure, which might interfere with customers getting a full view of each one. They had all been sitting on the floor behind the display window, but as Megan came into view each one sprang up to her feet and came closer to the window. Mostly they felt at the glass with their hands as if trying to reach Megan, though two of them were kissing the glass instead. Each one looked at Megan with overflowing sexual ardor, as if she had been in love with Megan all her life and had despaired of seeing her again. Megan was sure customers passing by were sold immediately on the idea of having one of these for their very own. To Megan, it was all appalling. The one with Janica's face, of course, was the most distressing. The others, in other circumstances, might have amused Megan with their display of how much they wanted her, though Megan knew their faces as well, but to see Janica acting the same way, with no personal recognition of Megan but simply a blatant sexual need for her, was almost more than Megan could take.

Megan squeezed her eyes shut, telling herself several times, I can't find Janica if I don't go in. She pulled open the door and entered.

Her ears were assaulted immediately, and it was a tribute to the effective air-conditioning that her nose wasn't. Along one wall were a dozen of the "cow" variant, in small cages stacked three high, each standing over a bucket in the cage presumably meant for receiving wastes, with small troughs for feed and water attached to the front corners of the cage. Each had suction tubes for both breasts that were presumably put into operation periodically for milking. Along the other wall were similar stacks of cages

for “dogs,” most of the women in them sounding a variety of barks and yips. Behind a glass partition, probably there as a barrier against *that* smell, were a number of overweight women clearly intended to be fattened still further as “pigs,” and farther towards the back were separate stalls in which women with powerfully-muscled legs and no arms were standing, or in many cases walking on treadmills for exercise.

Megan didn’t see any dollies, other than the ones in the window display. As she was looking around, the proprietor came forward from the back of the store to greet her, with a broad grin.

“Welcome...” His smile faltered, replaced with a puzzled look. His greeting had been automatic, but now he seemed to be processing Megan’s odd style of dress, at least, and very likely the more disturbing fact he had never seen her before, which would probably be impossible.

Megan smiled tensely, her fingers twitching towards and away from her blaster, hoping the man was not suddenly recognizing her as not sharing his own gender. “I’m from Earth.”

“Oh!! Okay, now that makes sense then! I always wondered whether someone from Earth might come to Freeworld.” He offered his hand to shake, which Megan cautiously accepted, and went on, “In that case, doubly welcome, to the Girlimal Emporium! I’m Jamis, the owner.” Jamis squinted out the window. “Are there more of you?”

Megan breathed a little easier. She seemed to be safe for the present. “No, I’m just an exploration scout. We didn’t know anyone was here.” She wanted to ask where all of these women had come from, but Jamis spoke first.

“I guess in that case, you won’t be here to stay.” He looked disappointed, perhaps at the loss of a potential customer. He looked around. “I don’t suppose any of the girlimals in stock would be useful to you. Other than the dollies.” He brightened a little. “I’m sure you’ve got a lonely job. I could fix you up with a dolly if you’re going to be on the planet a couple of weeks.”

Puzzled, she looked behind her towards the front of the store. “A couple of weeks? You’ve got dollies right here.”

He followed her gaze. “Oh, those aren’t for sale, of course. Those were trained as display models, not meant to be imprinted. They’d seek sex from anyone around you, not just you, and I’m sure you wouldn’t want that. A properly imprinted dolly wants to please *only* you.” He laughed self-deprecatingly. “I’m sorry, here I am explaining technology to someone from Earth. I’m sure you’re way ahead of us. But that’s the problem, you see. I imagine on Earth a dolly can be imprinted for you while you wait, but we’re not quite at that level here. It takes some time.”

“You do the imprinting here? Or where?” The conversation seemed to be headed back towards the right track.

The man shook his head. “Not here, no. That’s all done at Olympus.”

“Olympus. Where’s that?”

In an awed voice, the man said, "It's where the gods live. My whole stock comes from Olympus."

Olympus. That makes sense, Megan supposed. As if Hercules had cleared out all the original gods (read "Women In Power") and had taken over their heaven. She wondered if she'd find a statue of the goddess Hera smashed to pieces on the floor at Olympus. Excited at the possibility that she was near the end of her quest, she asked, "How do I find Olympus?"

* * * * *

The front entrance did look something like a Greek temple from a distance. Behind that a sprawling building, looking as if it had been expanded haphazardly over the years, covered several acres of cleared land at the top of a hill. On the hillside to one side, several more acres had been cleared for... "livestock." There seemed to be six or seven dozen women in the "cow" format, placidly nibbling at the ever-present lettuce or resting on the ground, mooing contentedly. At the far end of the field stood a huge barn, at least three times the size of Jason's, separate from the temple, near which several teams of women in horse form pulled various carriages or farm implements, driven by men holding whips at the ready. The exercises seemed to have no purpose other than giving the women practice at pulling things and to strengthen their legs. There was a small pen of "pigs" near the barn. Another group of men were playing with a number of women converted to dogs, encouraging them to fetch sticks, balls, et cetera, while the women barked excitedly, their tails twitching back and forth. Some of the other dog-women had wandered off on their own, to dig holes with their paws or to snuffle at tree-trunks and bushes, though no doubt their olfactory systems weren't equipped for the world of smells true dogs could perceive. It must be, thought Megan, that they had simply been trained to behave that way.

In every one of the groups, Megan could see individual women with Janica's face, along with Heather's, and the others Megan was rapidly becoming much more familiar with than she had been.

Standing invisible for the moment among the trees, Megan couldn't immediately see a way to reach the temple without being seen. She felt positive Janica must be inside it somewhere. She walked around the building, still hidden safely in the trees, looking for entrances other than the front one. Of the building's windows, the one farthest back on the side of the temple away from the barn seemed the best bet. It was the window at the least distance from the trees, and Megan thought it looked quite useful as a quick exit, so she'd enter that way so she could easily find it when she was leaving. Assuming Janica was physically up to climbing through a window. Megan suspected there would be reasons to hurry at that point.

She sat with her back against a tree and rested, nibbling at the provisions from her pack when she felt hungry, waiting for nightfall. She'd need all her energy at that time.

* * * * *

Megan slipped on the night-vision glasses from her pack, gripped her blaster, stood up, took a deep breath, and walked through the lettuce, picking up her feet as she walked and setting each one down as gently as she could to avoid noise. The grounds were absolutely quiet. Near sunset she had heard a number of barking women urging the "cows" back into the barn -- another part of their training with which she was familiar -- and all of the women were now secure for the night in the barn or the temple, the men gone from the field. Megan had still not got used to the quiet of planet with no animal life

other than humans, and she found she did need to make a little occasional noise just to reassure herself she hadn't suddenly gone deaf.

There was no light emanating from the chosen window. Megan spent several minutes sliding the lower half of the window upward a centimeter at a time, listening carefully for any sound that might signal someone had heard her. She'd had no doubt the window would be unlocked -- the occupants of the temple, presumably mainly the gods, would never expect the worshipful farmers and shopkeepers to attempt a surreptitious break-in, even assuming the farmers or shopkeepers would think there was anything inside that they needed. She finally crawled in, finding herself in what appeared to be a storeroom for electronic equipment. Bet they didn't have that in authentic Greek temples, she thought.

Now that she was in the room, she thought she could hear a distant sound. She stopped, holding her breath, trying to determine its source, but it was too vague, and not consistently present. Listening through the room's door, she decided the noise wasn't near enough to endanger her for the moment. Softly easing the door open, she stepped into a corridor.

She took off her night-vision glasses and stowed them in her pack. The dim old-fashioned glowballs at intervals along the corridor gave more than enough light -- she wished it was a little darker, in fact. The noise she had first heard before opening the door was resolving itself: it sounded like the periodic combined shouts of a number of men. She froze again, but the sound wasn't getting any nearer. It reminded her, incongruously, of the cheers at a sporting event. Not what she expected in a temple, though she admitted to herself that the building's purpose had probably never been quiet religious contemplation.

There were no signs on any of the doors or walls, in keeping with the fact that the limited population using the temple presumably knew where everything was. Megan wondered whether she should take the time to look in every door. She decided to get a feeling for the overall layout first.

Turning left into another, long corridor, she saw that halfway down on the right was a large double-door. As she walked towards it, the shouting sound drew nearer, but still not to the point of seeming dangerous. She listened at the crack between the doors. The sound wasn't coming from inside. She cautiously, slowly, pulled one open, looked inside, and froze, not expecting anything like the sight that met her eyes.

There were row upon row of cots, with a girl on each. They were all on their backs, seemingly asleep. They appeared to range in age from toddler to full maturity, with girls of similar ages grouped in rows from left to right. From front to back, the floor and the cots were color-coded in some way, some colors occupying more area than others. Every one of the girls was wearing a metallic-looking headband that held cottony patches to their temples on either side, and another pair of patches on their foreheads at either side, the patches all having wires trailing from them to a console at the side of the cot. In all the room, not one of the girls stirred. The only sound in the room was their soft, slow breathing.

One seventh of the girls looked like Janica at various different ages of her childhood. By the skin and hair color, Megan could tell which ones of the others were clones of Tanisha Ologwu, Aoife O'Lonigan, and Heather Lopez. Of the identities of the rest, Megan wasn't sure. Megan didn't know what the crew members other than Janica had looked like as children.

To Megan it seemed a little early in the evening for these kids to be asleep -- and certainly unlikely they would be unanimously asleep. Megan's experiences at youth camps had never been like that.

There were a number of doors around the sides of the room. The rational part of Megan urged her to try them. But a more emotional part of her was in charge for the moment, responding to the extreme spookiness of the environment, begging her to get out. She backed up quickly, remembering herself just in time to keep from banging noisily into the door behind her. She eased herself back into the corridor, breathing shakily, her mouth wide-open to keep her respiration a little quieter, the pounding of her heart seeming much too loud.

What in the HELL is going on in there? she demanded herself to answer. No answer was found to be forthcoming, and Megan forced herself to continue down the corridor.

On the left came another corridor -- the wall on her right still enclosed that same huge room she had just left -- and Megan, stopping and listening before reaching the corner, judged it safe and turned.

She was about to pass another door, the only one in a long corridor, when she noticed, to her surprise, that it was the first one she'd seen that had any type of lock. In this case it was a keypad, with ten numerically labelled keys in the standard arrangement.

After some rooting around, Megan pulled a different pair of glasses out of her pack, and a UV flashlight. Setting its frequency appropriately to detect skin oils, she found that four of the keys shone brighter than the others. Okay, those four keys in the combination, she told herself. Assume to start with that it's just a four-digit code, no repeated numbers. Just twenty-four possible combos in that case. She started keying in different combos one after another. On her tenth try there was a click from behind the keypad. She pulled the door open.

The room was enormous, and housed several large, round tanks. Seven of them, she counted. The lighting was much better than in the room with the sleeping girls. Each tank was supported on a metal platform, and there were walkways between the tanks, giving access to what it seemed must be control panels. Megan's eyes registered the general layout of the room in the first seconds, before focusing on what was inside the tanks. She looked within the middle tank of the seven, and its contents puzzled her to the point of holding her motionless, her jaw hanging open.

The tank was filled with a nearly-clear, just slightly yellowish fluid that filled it to its metal-covered top. Within the fluid, a cylindrical metal column, about a foot in diameter, rose from the equipment-covered floor of the tank nearly to its top. At Megan's eye-level, six, no, seven metal bars emerged radially from around the column, spokes that ended in circular metal collars, each surrounding the neck of a nude female mannequin, minus its arms and legs. The mannequins floated in the fluid, upright, facing the central column. Each wore a metal cap on its hairless head, from which a number of wires emerged, and each had rubber tubing emerging from between its buttocks, the tubing slanting downward from there to disappear into the midst of the equipment in the floor. Directly below each mannequin there was a cylinder in the floor, open at the top to reveal yet more equipment inside it.

The human-like figures inspired in Megan a seemingly endless stream of questions. First of all why, she wondered, have the gods stored limbless mannequins in huge liquid-filled vats? Even more puzzling: why do the gods have mannequins that portray *pregnant* women? Every one of the torsos had the

enormously bulging tummy and huge overhanging breasts of a woman nearly ready to deliver, such as Megan had seen in images from centuries past, when women bore their own babies. What could the gods possibly be using them for?

Megan realized, after a few moments, that the identical faces of the mannequins in the tank were familiar. Recognition was made difficult by the bald heads, but the face was one Megan had been seeing, repeated endlessly, since she had arrived at the settlement, on “cows,” on “horses,” and on one of the dollies she had seen in the “girlimal” shop: it was the face of Polina Grishova, Aurora’s pilot. Looking into the next tank to the right, the mannequins had faces again identical to each other, but different from those in the first tank. Again with difficulty due to the hairless scalp, Megan recognized the face of Sabrina Marion, repeated all around the tank.

Megan quickly scanned the rest of the tanks. Tanisha Ologwu was, as usual, easily recognizable by skin coloration alone... There! thought Megan. In the tank second from the end of the row, the face was Janica’s. Easier to recognize than most of the others, since, despite the absence of hair, Megan would know her sister anywhere.

Megan’s list of mental questions only grew longer.

Megan drew in a sudden breath, her hands flying to her face. She had suddenly realized that the eyes of several of the mannequins were tracking her as she moved.

And she could see, now that her eyes had taken in the general scene and began perceiving details, that most of the beach-ball tummies were dimpling and rippling, as if the baby inside -- or babies, the tummies were all too full to contain only a single child -- were kicking.

A silent roar seemed to sweep through Megan’s hearing, from within her head rather than outside it. Above the roar, an internal voice was screaming, They’re not mannequins! They’re not mannequins!

Megan could see, now, the barely visible scars on the rounded shoulder nubs, where the arms had been surgically removed, and similar scars below the buttocks.

Completely frozen in place now, Megan watched in horror as one of the women -- one of the *live* women, all of them were alive, Megan now understood -- began wriggling like a fish at the end of a fishing pole. On her face, the usual blank expression Megan had seen on every woman on the planet other than the dollies was replaced with a grimace of pain. Seconds later, a baby slid out of the woman between the rounded mounds of buttocks where her legs had once been, the baby waving her arms -- it was a girl. Instantly machinery at the bottom of the tank burst into motion, severing the cord and drawing the baby into the cylinder beneath the woman, out of Megan’s sight.

Megan’s legs lost their ability to support her. Kneeling on the floor, she buried her head against her crossed arms, eyes squeezed tightly shut, and tried desperately to control her breathing, and still more desperately to hold back the contents of her stomach that were trying to escape. I can’t leave a puddle of vomit in here! she told herself sternly. I can’t leave signs I was here at all.

Just as Megan decided she was turning the corner towards controlling her reaction, the thought hit her: What if one of the women in the Janica tank is *really* Janica? Obviously Janny had been used originally

to incubate the first clones -- they could not possibly have come from anywhere else. What if she's still serving that purpose?

Megan jumped to her feet in response to an imperative beyond her ability to argue with it, and burst out into the corridor, heedless of the possibility it might be occupied. Luckily, it wasn't. She stood there, torn by conflicting impulses. Part of her wanted to go back into the tank room and see whether Janica was among the breeders. Megan told herself that if, somehow, she managed to confirm Janica's identity as one of the tank's occupants, the shock might leave Megan unable to function at all. If Janny is alive, Megan told herself forcefully, I can't save her all by myself. Certainly not if she's in that tank. None of the women were breathing, so the machinery in the tank, probably through the collars encircling the women's necks, must be aerating and pumping their blood. I could get into the tanks with the blaster, she thought, but destroying all that machinery would surely kill every woman in there.

And if Janny is *not* in that tank, Megan went on, if she's somewhere else, I have no idea where to start looking, and searching the entire building is out of the question. I can hear that there are people here, and I've been lucky enough not to run into any, but that luck can't hold much longer. *I have to get out of here!* If I'm caught, I've failed Janny!

Megan headed quickly, and as quietly as she could, back to the storeroom through which she had entered.

CHAPTER 6

Megan had walked about a kilometer in the direction of her ship, when an important thought stopped her.

I can't bring Janny with me back to Earth, she told herself -- I know it's too dangerous to keep looking for her. But I have to bring back proof of what's going on. I defied direct orders and stole military equipment to get here. I'll be subject to court martial, and probably thrown in military prison for years, maybe even for life, and there's no reason for anyone to believe my bizarre story of Freeworld. It'll look like a self-serving attempt to confuse the issue. Or to make it look like I'm insane, and get off that way. But if I *prove* I was right, that Aurora's crew survived, and that they and their descendants, their clones, are at the mercy of the Hercules cult, which is continuing to do exactly what they were banished from Earth for, only worse...

I need, Megan told herself, to bring a woman back from here. A mindless human turned into a "girlimal" -- who looks exactly like one of the missing Aurora crew. That will be absolutely, totally inarguable evidence, and it will set in motion the rescue of every woman here, including any surviving original crew members -- including Janny. Even if I *still* get thrown in the brig and the key lost, it will be worth it.

As Megan began thinking out how she could steal a live woman, it occurred to her exactly where she could get one.

* * * * *

Megan was standing in the middle of the road, with Jason's farm in view in front of her. It was morning now. She had passed the night nearby, resting though not really sleeping. She wanted plenty of hours of daylight ahead of her once she started heading for the ship.

She heard one of the cow-women mooing in the distance. Perhaps one with Janica's face.

Megan strongly preferred, if she was going to bring a woman back to Earth with her, that it be one of the Janicas. Even though it obviously wouldn't be the real one, Megan would feel she was somehow accomplishing what she had set out to do. And the real Janica would be rescued soon, once Megan started the wheels turning.

Just grab one of the "cows," then? Megan shook her head. She'd eat so much, and drink so much, with her metabolism geared towards all that milk production. And how would I milk her in zero-G? The stuff would float around the cabin through the whole trip.

I'm pretty sure I couldn't fit one of the "pigs" in the cabin, she thought. One of the "horses" might be good. Or a "dog." But Megan recalled Jason didn't have a Janica clone in either format. Just...

Megan shook her head violently. Not the dolly, no. She'd want to pick up where she left off, Megan pointed out to herself, trying to have sex with me, all through the trip.

But she's imprinted on Jason, Megan reminded herself. She was all over me that night, but only because Jason ordered her. That command has to wear off, doesn't it? Otherwise a dolly would throw herself at every man her master had EVER ordered her to please. And that would defeat the whole purpose of personalizing her to a single man. Probably the snap of Jason's fingers cuts it off. Like I saw it do, twice. He hasn't ordered her to please me again since the last time he stopped her.

Okay then. The dolly.

Megan crept cautiously towards the farmhouse, keeping to the trees, keeping an eye out for Jason. She had to make sure both he and Bret were out of the house, which probably happened pretty often in the daytime. There, she spotted him -- as she had seen him the first time, he was again out in a field, with his plow and "horses." Where was Bret?

Megan sat still for at least twenty minutes, in mounting frustration, trying to see where the boy was. At last she saw movement at the barn door, and Bret emerged... Megan swore quietly. He was headed for the house! The whole point was for him *not* to be in the house.

A few minutes later Bret emerged again. Perhaps he'd just played with the "dogs" a moment, thought Megan, or more likely washed up after some gritty barn chore. There, now he was trotting out to the field where his dad was!

Megan was on her feet immediately. Keeping the house between herself and the pair of males out in the field, she approached it. She would be in view for just seconds while she was on the porch. She waited until they were both turned away from her, and slipped inside.

The dolly was in her usual place on the kitchen floor, sitting, all her attention on the Jason photocube. She gave it a kiss, and rubbed her cheek against it, looking up for an instant when Megan entered, losing interest immediately when she saw the newcomer wasn't Jason. When Megan thumbed the release button on the wall, the dolly looked at her again, this time shocked -- nobody but Jason ever pushed the button! A cascade of conflicting emotions washed over the dolly's face.

Megan walked over and gently took the dolly's hand, succeeding in getting her to stand. She said softly, "I need you to come with me, sweetie. We're going on a loooooong trip."

The dolly showed no inclination to let go of the photocube, and Megan saw no reason to make her. It'll probably keep her calm and occupied, she decided. The dolly followed docilely as Megan pulled her along by the hand.

I wish I could get her some clothes, Megan thought briefly, because seeing Janny naked is just too weird, but I don't have time to go rooting around in Jason's bedroom, and dress the dolly up in whatever I find, considering I won't get any help from her. I'll just have to get used to it.

Megan stood at the door, again waiting for the man and boy to be facing away. At the opportune moment, she pulled the dolly out onto the porch, shading the woman's eyes so she couldn't see Jason. In seconds they were in the yard and lost from Jason's view behind the house.

Megan decided there was no danger from the dolly's collar. The signal that would send a shock through it, if Jason should happen to push the kitchen button to reset it, couldn't have a very great range. There was no reason for it to have one.

Since the dolly had at least seen Megan before, Megan guessed that she found it acceptable to be led by her. Perhaps a total stranger could kidnap her in the same way -- Megan had no idea how much independent volition the woman had, if any. It apparently didn't occur to her reasoning powers that she was getting farther away from Jason. Maybe she thought Megan was taking her to him.

Megan tried to establish a brisk pace through the woods, keeping an eye on her scanner to establish the direction to the ship, but her companion didn't seem to understand the idea of hurrying. Megan doubted she'd ever been in the forest before, or anyplace like it, and she kept looking around in wide-eyed wonder. Megan hoped they could make it back to the ship before sunset. Luckily it was still early morning, but Megan and her wordless friend had a very long walk ahead.

At least the dolly's feet seemed tough enough to handle a barefoot walk through the underbrush.

After a few hours, the dolly slowed even more, and looked a little sad and petulant. She was kissing the photocube more often now, with tears threatening to leak from the corners of her eyes. Megan decided it was lunchtime anyway. She picked out a tiny clearing and stopped there, unshouldering her pack and picking out some rations. The dolly sat beside her, staring into the photocube, periodically bringing it up to her mouth and licking it.

The rations weren't terribly interesting -- nuts, dried fruit, dried meat. Megan wished she knew if there were any fruit trees nearby, but didn't want to waste time looking.

After a few bites, she held out a handful to the dolly. The woman just stared at it, puzzled. Megan wasn't sure what the problem was. The dolly had just seen Megan eating it.

It occurred to Megan finally that the woman might never have used her hands to eat. Who knows, Megan thought, maybe during her training she was even punished for doing it. Megan had only seen her eat directly from a bowl.

Megan grabbed a big handful of her rations in one hand and then cupped her hands, letting the food spread out into the palms of both. The dolly looked at it intently, leaned down and sniffed it, and twisted around to stand on all fours as she bent down to lick the food out of Megan's hands.

Megan shook her head in amazement. It never stopped hitting her between the eyes, the endless display of animal behavior in a woman Megan couldn't stop seeing as Janica.

The dolly ate quickly, and in moments was running her tongue along Megan's palms to lick up the last crumbs. Before Megan knew what was happening, the dolly had opened her mouth and sucked in Megan's index finger, running her tongue under it, her wetted lips caressing it, a soft moan issuing from her throat.

As if she'd touched a hot iron, Megan snatched her hand away. "No!" Megan had only just begun to have some success in thinking of the dolly as a person distinct from Janica, but the distinction was so

tentative that what had just happened felt to Megan very much as if Janica had issued her little sister an erotic invitation, and though it had happened before in the bathtub, being seduced by Janica remained, in Megan's mind, the farthest thing from the realm of possibility, as if the sun had suddenly pulled out a banjo and begun singing.

Suddenly Megan started laughing. It wasn't Janica, after all, only a trained sex toy who looked like her. "For God's sake, can't you go five minutes without wanting sex?" In spite of not being imprinted on Megan, Megan could see that to some extent, the dolly had a need for sexual contact so deeply ingrained that any related physical stimulus, such as licking another person's skin, might set it off.

Luckily, the moment had passed. The dolly gave Megan a slightly hurt look, but made no effort to continue what she'd started.

Megan sighed. "Look, if you weren't my sister, I wouldn't mind having a little fun together. But you *are*. Not just that, you look exactly like the sister I grew up with. The one that used to help me with my schoolwork and put plastines on my cuts and bruises... my *big* sister. Don't you get what that means?" She broke off, suddenly noticing the look of intense concentration on the dolly's usually placid face. She frowned. "What is it?"

The woman reached out and touched Megan's chest, covered in the uppermost part of her flight suit. She seemed to struggle with her mouth, then let out a gentle teakettle sound. "Ssss..."

Megan suddenly remembered that moment in the bathtub at Jason's. Her face lit up with excitement. She remembers that! The word! "Yes!" Megan reached out and touched the woman. "Sisters! You're my sister! Can you say that? Sister? Siss-ter?" She drew the word out slowly.

The dolly squeezed her eyes shut as if listening, or screwing up her concentration, and said, "Ssissss..."

Megan almost bounced on the ground in excitement. No language skills my ass! When we get home, she thought, we're going to get you talking, and explain to you what an awful, inhuman thing these men did to you!

Megan's knew that her great-great grandmother could help. She was an expert in developmental psychology, and had recently published her latest paper on language acquisition skills. Megan knew from what g-g-gram had told her that there's no age like zero to three for picking up language -- children who somehow had been isolated through those first formative years and not given a chance to learn a tongue usually couldn't use language effectively later, no matter what teaching efforts were made. But this is Janny! I know she can do it! Megan laughed with delight. "Sister!" she said again. Megan had a sudden thought. "Your name is Sissy! Okay?" Megan thought that would be easier to say than "sister," and would give Megan something she could call the dolly so she could stop thinking of her as Janica. She touched the dolly's chest again. "Sissy! Your name is Sissy!"

The dolly had caught some of Megan's happiness. "Ssissss..." That seemed to be as near an approximation as she could manage for the present. But it was enough. Impulsively, Megan leaned towards Sissy and hugged her tightly, her chin on Sissy's shoulder.

And suddenly, unaware of the transition, she was crying -- crying for the real Janica, who might still be alive, just a few kilometers away after such a long time being light years distant. Megan gripped Sissy still more tightly, sobbing helplessly, her shoulders shaking.

The dolly didn't understand, but caught the mood. Megan could hear her sniffing and crying in her arms.

Megan pushed herself back, sternly forcing the tears away. She looked at Sissy's tear-streaked face, and hugged her again, saying, "Shhh, shhh... stop."

In a few minutes Megan leaned back, as both of them sniffled. Megan managed a small smile. "You're going to have a great life on Earth, Sissy. You'll have everything you need, and you'll learn to talk and all kinds of other things." She touched Sissy's face, and said her name again.

Sissy's face lit up once more. "Ssisss..."

Megan laughed. "That's close enough for now. Maybe I can get you to say the whole thing later." She wiped the last bit of tears out of her eyes and stood up, returning the leftover food to her pack. "Let's get going. I'd really like to get back to the ship before dark." She helped Sissy to her feet, took her hand again, and started walking.

They had hardly gone a hundred meters when Sissy stopped suddenly, jerking her hand out of Megan's, and stood looking at both her hands in distress. They were empty. Megan knew exactly what was missing as soon as she saw that, and wasn't surprised to hear a high pitched moan erupt from Sissy's throat. Sissy dropped to the ground, pawing at the endless bed of lettuce at their feet, almost hyperventilating. Megan quickly dropped down beside her, grasping her shoulders. Sissy was shaking like a leaf, breathing in short, heartbreaking sobs.

Megan said quietly, "Sissy! Sissy! We'll go back. Sissy, stop, it's okay!"

Somehow the sound of the word, her name, quieted Sissy somewhat, though she looked at Megan as if expecting a slap. Megan jumped to her feet and pulled Sissy up, almost dragging her along as she trotted back through the trees. Just as Sissy seemed about to lose it again, Megan bent and grabbed the photocube out of the lettuce at the place where they had eaten. Sissy snatched it out of Megan's hand with relief written all over her face and hugged it between her breasts, then lifted it and planted frantic kisses on its surface.

Megan laughed. "I guess I know where I stand. Let's move on, Sissy." She took Sissy's hand again and resumed their walk.

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Less than a kilometer from the ship, Sissy sank to the ground, looking exhausted. Megan wanted somehow to tell her how close they were to their goal, but knew Sissy needed a rest. Megan unshouldered her pack again, deciding a meal break would be reasonable, and might boost Sissy's energy. The sun was nearing the horizon, but if it gets dark, thought Megan, I can still find the ship from here.

As before, she held the food out to Sissy in her cupped hands, suppressing an exasperated groan as Sissy went into animal mode again, on her hands and knees licking the food out of Megan's hands. That's another thing we'll have to get straightened out at home, thought Megan. You have so much potential, Sissy. You deserve to live your life as the human you were born to be. And I can't take somebody looking so much like Janica and acting so much like an animal.

As Megan reached back into her ration kit to take a handful for herself, something pricked her attention. Something that shouldn't be there. She froze, opening her eyes wide. She couldn't see anything out of place.

A sound! Something moving through the underbrush. On a world where extraneous sounds were nearly absent. There are no animals here, she reminded herself. Except the human ones. And they should all be twenty kilometers behind me.

The sound was repeated. Closer. Megan leapt to her feet and yanked Sissy upright. "Sissy, we've got to run! Come on, come on!" She began sprinting, dragging the confused Sissy behind her.

She heard Sissy cry out, her hand slipping out of Megan's as she fell to the ground. Megan dug in her heels to stop, whirled and quickly knelt down next to Sissy. She shook her shoulders. "Sissy, Sissy, come on, gotta go, gotta go!"

The dolly's eyes fluttered, then closed. Megan leaned down quickly to listen for a heartbeat, then took Sissy's chin and wriggled it back and forth, trying to get her attention. "Sissy, come on, wake up, wake up!" She gasped as she saw something stuck in Sissy's side, near her waist, shining redly in the setting sun: a tiny needle, about two centimeters, slightly thick in the middle, very sharp at both ends, including the end buried in Sissy's flesh. Megan heard another sound now, the sharp whisper of a pressure gun that fired off the small anesthetic darts.

Megan's hand shot to her own waist and she unclipped the blaster, sweeping it around her in a slow arc, not sure which way she should be pointing it. She felt her left sleeve twitch, and looked down to see a dart caught in the silvery fabric. She whipped the blaster around to the direction from which the dart had come, as another dart stuck in the material covering her thigh. She squeezed off, watching as a beam of light lanced out and a nearby tree burst into flames. The tree had no doubt taken the brunt of the beam -- she didn't hear any cries of pain behind it. She aimed slightly left, at a more open area, prepared to squeeze the trigger again, and gasped as she felt a sharp sting in her neck. She reached out and plucked out the dart quickly, hoping she hadn't got a full dose. She tried to raise the blaster again as the trees seemed to begin to circle around her. She reached down with one hand to steady the ground, which had tilted and seemed to want to rise up towards her. It was on a collision course with her head. She never felt it hit.

CHAPTER 7

Megan was aware first of intense thirst and a pounding headache. She tried to bring her hand up to massage her forehead, and felt confused when she found she couldn't. She shook herself, heard the clinking of chains.

As the mental fog began to clear, the agonized thought ran through her mind on a short loop, They caught me, They caught me, They caught me...

She was sitting on a padded bench in a small room that contained nothing else but a portable toilet in addition to the bench. Her wrists, as she determined by feeling around them with her fingers, were surrounded by wide metal bands, sporting rings on the inside of her wrists that were locked together behind her back. With an effort she twisted to bring the bands into view. They appeared to be the same as the ones she could see, and feel, around her ankles, which were connected by a chain about a foot long.

Aside from the metal restraint bands, she was otherwise completely naked. There was no sign of her flight suit in the room.

Furious at being caught, still more furious that anyone would do this to her, she struggled to free herself from the bands and the chains. Despite no indication that her efforts were accomplishing anything, she continued for several minutes, stopping when the pain in her wrists grew to the point that she knew she was harming herself, and she told herself she needed to be in peak physical condition to handle whatever was to come.

There were no windows in the room, and just a single door. The door had no handle or knob, at least on this side. Most likely it opened, as most modern doors did, by sensing the proximity of someone standing in front of it. Megan was accustomed, by a lifetime of practice, to approaching doors and waiting; some would open to anyone, and some would open to persons wearing the right badge.

Awkwardly, Megan stood and shuffled to the door, her hobble chain clinking along the floor. Unsurprisingly, it didn't open for her. She returned to the bench.

She needed to pee. The toilet, she found, was of a standard type that took in her wastes and sprayed her bottom with water afterward, leaving her clean but wet. If she found herself needing a bowel movement, she knew it would incinerate her wastes into a fine ash after she arose from it. Its presence seemed to indicate, she observed glumly, that she would be here awhile. Though in that case, someone was going to need to bring in food.

She tried to remain calm. I am a Space Force officer, she reminded herself forcefully. I'm trained to be ready to handle any threat.

It only helped a little.

Just as she was preparing to shout the question of whether anyone was out there and listening, she jumped as the door whispered open. A man walked in, smiled, and pulled a chair in after him. He was holding what appeared to be a water bottle.

Megan stifled the instinct to bend forward and try to cover her exposed breasts and the very private cleft between her legs. In her entire life, no man had seen her naked, and in her adult life no woman had either, other than those with whom she was willing to share intimacies. She was outraged that this right to the privacy of her body had been taken away from her, but she refused to give this man the satisfaction of seeing his power over her confirmed. Dignity comes from inside, not from clothes, she told herself. I'm not going to yield up my dignity by showing fear. I'll show him my body, but not that.

The man held up the bottle. "Water?"

Megan was disgusted when she looked at the bottle more closely. It had an oversized nipple, reminiscent of a penis while not actually looking like one. Accepting water in this form would be intensely demeaning.

But refusing water, in any form, was beyond the power of her will. She glared at him and nodded. He held the bottle in front of her, and she lunged for the nipple.

After taking just enough to take the edge off her thirst, she sat back, suppressing the reflex of thanking him. She was positive the water didn't come free.

The man, with elaborate casualness, now sat in the chair, made himself comfortable in it, and then spoke. "How are you feeling, Major Megan Duchain?"

She gasped. "How..."

He waved the question away with a gesture. "Let's get past all that. I know you don't remember the last couple of days, but you've done a lot of talking. We've got some excellent truth drugs here. We know you came here to rescue your sister. We know your ship's computer was damaged, and that it's generating no signal that Earth can detect, and that you stole the ship and no one on Earth knew where you were going, so you're not going to be followed here. So don't bother with the old 'reinforcements are coming in right behind me' dodge. None of that will work."

Megan's fears started bubbling back to the surface. She asked bitterly, "So why are you in here? Forget to ask some questions before?"

To her surprise, he smiled. The smile occupied the borderline between friendly and an annoying smirk. She automatically assigned it to the latter category. Smile or no, she had to assume she was in danger, and remain vigilant. He said quietly, "No, actually, I was going to let you ask some questions. My name is Dion, by the way. Short for Dionysus." She recognized it as the name of a Greek god. Well, she thought, they've been calling themselves gods. Apparently it gets more specific than that. Dionysus was often characterized as the "god of fun." I should tell him I'm not having much fun here, she thought.

Dion continued, "Anyway, questions. Ask away to your heart's content. I'll answer anything I'm authorized to answer. Fire away."

She couldn't see any harm in playing his game. Any information she might get could be helpful. She decided to start with the most obvious question. "Why do you want to answer my questions?"

"Can't you guess? We treasure the chance to tell all about our world to one woman who can understand it. Believe me, that's a thrill. I have a camera hooked over my ear," Megan saw him gesture, "So this will be widely viewed."

Great, she thought. She could not imagine a more humiliating way for a Space Force officer to be viewed: naked and helpless in chains, and seen that way not just by Dion, but by untold numbers of men not present.

But still, as long as he was giving information... "Is my sister alive?"

"We knew you'd ask that one. I promise to answer it if the proper context arises."

Megan gritted her teeth in frustration. What the hell, she wondered, does *that* mean? Is it a Yes or a No? Since she had no power to compel him to answer, she decided she could only move on for now. She couldn't afford to bypass the chance to get answers to as many questions as possible. She didn't see a reason, not yet, to give up completely on somehow escaping. It wasn't possible right at this moment, but the future might hold unexpected opportunities.

She thought back to her most searing memory from her search within the building. "Those women, in those tanks. They are the... source? Of the female population, I mean."

"I'm sure that's obvious."

"Why did you..." She struggled with her rage. If there was any possible way out of this, she needed a clear head. "Why did you mutilate them?"

"Well, under the circumstances, they don't really need arms and legs, do they? Besides, that was one more thing their bodies could provide us with."

Shit, she thought. She'd already been aware that they consumed women as food. But she still hated being reminded. "You know what civilized society thinks of cannibals."

"Come on, where else are we going to get meat? You know there's no indigenous animal life. We stretched out our supplies as long as we could, and then we had to go veggie for a long while. It wasn't till the first generation of offspring grew to maturity that we could start being carnivores again."

Any number of retorts occurred to her, but mention of the early days brought to her mind the whole question of how things on this planet had become the way they now were. "The first generation of offspring came from... the crew."

"You're stating the obvious again."

“How... If what I saw were *all* of the women you are using for... breeders...” She nearly choked on the word. “How have there come to be so many women here in thirty years? I counted forty-nine women in those tanks. Seven tanks with seven each. That hardly seems to account for what I’ve seen.”

“Oh, well, we’ve improved just a little on Mother Nature. We’ve found we can implant a fertilized egg in an already pregnant woman. Just a matter of the right hormones suppressing certain defensive reactions. So they’re each carrying multiple fetuses at different stages of development. It helps that they’re completely immersed in amniotic fluid. That’s what’s in the tank, by the way. You know, we keep implanting, harvesting, implanting, harvesting. The amniotic sac wouldn’t stand for all that diddling under normal circumstances, so you might say we’ve extended the sac to encompass the mother herself. Occasionally a baby is born prematurely. We let it finish developing in that case, outside the mother but still attached.”

Megan winced, glad she hadn’t seen an example of *that*. “How often do you... impregnate the women? In the tanks.”

“The machinery actually does it, of course. So automatic that it doesn’t require very much supervision.” Megan remembered the metal caps the women were wearing, trailing wires. Probably monitoring their brains to keep track of the state of their bodies, she thought. They’d have to do *something* like that, if they weren’t actively watching. “We impregnate each of the breeders once every four weeks. So at any given time, each is carrying at least nine, usually ten fetuses in various stages of development.” No wonder, Megan thought with a shudder, they each look so extraordinarily full. “The machinery also detects childbirth -- I should add the human body is a pretty amazing machine itself, and each fetus, with rare premature exceptions as I said, somehow knows when it is ready to emerge. Leaving behind nine siblings.” Megan’s jaw dropped, and her horror mounted as he continued. “We make the eggs ourselves, fertilized with a full complement of the breeder’s chromosomes. After each birth, a new egg is implanted...”

“Wait, why take all the chromosomes from the same... woman?” Megan refused to keep saying “breeder.” “Why not mix them? All you’re seeing are the same seven faces, over and over again.”

“I’ll bet you can figure that out yourself.”

The answer came to Megan, and made her that much more angry. “You... It’s your way to dehumanize them even more. You look around and see those seven faces, as dogs, as draft horses. As dollies for you to play with. It’s like they’re mass-produced machines, all identical, rolling off the assembly lines. Machines, and not people, in their infinite variety. You do it this way so you don’t have to see them as human.”

Dion shrugged. “They’re women.”

“So...” Megan stopped herself, aware suddenly that Dion’s statement had a meaning for him entirely different from her own interpretation. Women, he was saying, *are* meant to be machinery. Megan believed that because these were women, they didn’t deserve such treatment. Dion, and the rest of the gods, believed that because these were women, they *did* deserve it. If human, they were an underclass of humanity. Megan worked to throttle back her anger once more. “So how do you get boys?”

“Oh, for one in every twenty births, half of the chromosomes in the egg are replaced with the genes from a sperm donor, including a Y-chromosome. That’s where the boys come from. They’re raised separately, usually by the donors themselves. The fathers. Most get some schooling and learn a trade. A few get more intense, high-level training, so that they can take over our work when we are gone.”

Megan sighed. “So each year you get... what’s thirteen times forty-nine... about six hundred babies out of those tanks? Nearly all female?”

“Yes. That’s sufficient for our needs.”

She shook her head, painful as the motion was. Her head still throbbed, probably an aftereffect of whatever drugs they had given her. “So every one of those women in the tanks, they’re each constantly pregnant with *ten* babies??”

“Well, it’s not like all ten are full-term at any one time. Several of them are pretty tiny. It’s probably like a normal mother carrying triplets. Or quads at the most.”

“Why do you do it to them at all? Women on Earth have reproduced for centuries without going through pregnancy.”

“Ah, you see, that’s where you Earth folks have a little advantage on us. We brought as much state-of-the-art technology with us as we could, as you know, but cell fertilization has always been a tricky process, and we simply haven’t managed to get cells to divide by mechanical means. We’ve only been able to do it within the environment of the womb. So we’re forced to do it this way.” He chuckled. “Not that we’ve really been making much effort to improve the technique. We’re satisfied with it as it is.”

Megan suppressed a growl. Satisfied. That seemed to sum it up. These men found it satisfactory to treat women as things, as objects. As baby factories. As meat. As beasts of burden. As toys.

“So then you wait, what, eighteen years for the babies to mature? You’ve got lots of patience, I guess.”

She could hear the smirk in his voice without looking. “Maybe not so much. We’ve improved on nature there too. The human body never *really* needed that long to mature. It’s almost unheard of in the animal kingdom. In response to the right hormones and other chemicals, our babies are fully mature adults, physically and sexually, in five years. Of course, they skip a lot of the traditional necessities of growing up. Learning a language and so on. I’m talking about the females, of course. The boys grow up naturally.”

“But you do train the women, somehow. I mean, how do they know to act like cows? Or horses, dogs? Or... dollies?”

“I understand you stumbled upon our sleep-teaching room. Those girls are spending most of their time in a deep sleep, being fed... what you might call dreams, but the content is under our control, not theirs. In those dreams, the ones destined to be dogs pad around on all fours, bark, eat, herd cows, whatever else we want them to learn to do. By the time we surgically alter them, they’ve already experienced their limited jobs for years, within their minds. It all seems natural to them. They can’t

imagine doing anything else. Of course, we also let them out of bed for hours a day for physical exercise. They're quite physically fit. But any conscious memories of those exercise sessions are suppressed. By the time we release them to start performing their duties, their only memories are the ones we give them."

Something wasn't making sense. "But how did you..." She gasped suddenly. She knew how the training recordings must have been made to begin with. "The original crew. You made them..."

"Create the behavior models we use for sleep-training? Exactly, yes. Not that they were terribly happy about it. But threatening their comrades with pain managed to make them sufficiently cooperative. We recorded only their physical sensations when they modeled the appropriate behaviors, not their emotional reactions to it. We substituted contentment, happiness, pleasure -- girlimals are conditioned to experience those feelings, when they do what they're supposed to be doing. Especially the dollies, of course -- intense sexual pleasure when they are performing, intense need when they are not. All in the conditioning."

Megan thought she knew what the answer to her next question must be, though she wasn't at all eager to hear it. She was already preemptively angry about it. Through gritted teeth she said, "You... maimed the crew, right? To model dog behavior, they would have to really... be like that." She breathed rapidly in and out through her nose.

She wished so much her hands were free to attack him when he nodded his head. "Not *all* of the crew. We only needed a few of them for that -- not including your sister, if you were wondering. As you say, it was necessary. We did have all seven model dolly behavior first, since a full body is required for that. Among the seven of them, they had quite a wide-ranging experience in sexual techniques, both hetero and homo, and we spent quite some time exploring that. All of that is programmed into our dollies now."

It was some time before Megan could go on. As for how they could have made serious, committed Space Force officers -- including *Janica* -- perform a full menu of sex acts with men and with each other, the explanation had already been made clear earlier: each crew member had a choice of either doing what was required or watching another crew member be subjected to unspeakable pain. Probably a pre-selected crew member and pre-specified torture, she thought. That would be the most effective way to do it. Megan seethed inside, and squeezed her left hand hard with her right, trying to release some of the pressure of her anger in the only way she had available.

When she felt ready to go on, she argued within herself whether to ask the most natural follow-up to previous one. She didn't exactly want an answer to it, but she desperately needed one. "After... After the crew were done modeling all the behaviors you wanted... then what? What did you do with them?" Since the question touched on a subject he'd already declined to go into earlier, Megan assumed she wouldn't get an answer this time either. But she had to ask.

Dion looked, somehow, like a patient teacher trying to encourage thinking in a slow child. "What would you do with something you no longer had a use for?"

The anger Megan had managed to reduce to a simmer now exploded. "YOU KILLED THEM??" She sprang to her feet, her hands writhing helplessly behind her.

Dion held up both hands in a calming gesture. "Major Duchain, I want you to really think about this. Would you want them to be alive after what they went through?"

Megan sat down abruptly, as if the question itself had knocked the legs out from under her. In a sense, it had. She wanted, oh so badly, for Janny to be alive. She had come here, leaving behind any chance of returning to the career she had loved, because she'd been so sure Janny was alive.

But... A Janny who had memories like the ones she would surely have after what had happened to her here... A Janny imprisoned, probably tortured, forced into sex slavery...

Megan would do anything to take those memories away from Janny. She would take them upon herself in a heartbeat, if it meant Janny could forget them.

And though knowing now that Janny was dead plunged Megan into a deep pit of sorrow, she was still, in some way, glad. Janny had shed her misery, her suffering. She was free.

And, bizarrely, Megan felt slightly grateful to Dion, for the way he had handled the subject. He had, as he'd said, been waiting for the right context. This was it: the knowledge, now revealed, that Janica was no longer alive, had arrived against a background of information that made Megan feel, at least in some degree, relieved.

Megan's pounding heart slowed. She took a few deep breaths, and closed her eyes.

As she returned to the here and now, a nagging thought that had eluded her consciousness swam to the surface. "How could you have known... I mean, all the equipment you're using here, for the breeders, for the sleep-teaching -- you brought it with you. You couldn't have just suddenly invented it here. It's like you knew you'd have women when you landed. How could you know that energy burst on this end of the wormhole would disable the sleepers, so they'd malfunction and you could wake up and take the crew?"

His eyes lit up. "Ah! You've made some incorrect assumptions. I remember your speculations when you were... under the influence, so to speak, that the same energy burst that damaged your ship crippled ours as well. On the contrary, the energy field is something we put there ourselves a few years ago. We do keep time in Earth years, by the way. You've no doubt noticed a Freeworld day lasts very nearly the same length as an Earth day. There are about 370 Freeworld days in an Earth year, so we fixed our clocks to run off 24 hours in a Freeworld day and then stuck an extra day or two in some of the shorter months to make a Freeworld calendar. Did you know just a few weeks ago was February 30?... Oh, anyway, the energy field. Our space scientists designed a space buoy with a sensor to keep track of the wormhole, to drift where it drifted, and to fire off an electromagnet field spike at any vehicle coming out of it. It's our planetary 'Do Not Disturb' sign." He smiled. "You were lucky to have been in such a small ship. The amount of energy a ship would absorb from the field increases with its size. A ship as big as Aurora would be destroyed. We weren't expecting one the size of yours. As to what happened to the fathership when we first arrived here..." Megan realized he was using their name for Aurora, "That was all according to our original plan."

Megan gaped at him. "That's impossible! There was no way you could execute some sort of 'plan.' You were in sleepers!"

“We weren’t in sleepers before we started out, were we? Your president was so generous, letting us take any equipment we felt we needed to start a new world -- how humanitarian of her! We included, in the equipment, sensors that detected planetary landing, released a gas to be carried through the ship by the life support system and knock out the crew, and created a burst of electromagnetic energy that disabled the sleepers, allowing us to awaken. We waited inside the pods until the gas had degenerated to ineffectiveness, and emerged as the owners of the ship. That wait in the pod for the air in the cabin to clear was the most exciting fifteen minutes of my life, I assure you.” He sighed with happy reminiscence.

So that was why the signal from Aurora had lasted longer than it should have! It was knocked out after they landed, not when they exited the wormhole. Megan’s stomach churned. Janica and the others had been doomed from the moment they had left Earth. Megan tried to get her mind off that.

Her anger flared once more. “The cows, the dogs, the horses, the pigs. The dollies. How can you do that to people like yourselves? Women are half of the human race, and you can’t deny them their humanity! These women, on this planet, they have so much potential! There’s so much they can be! How can you do this to them??”

Dion sat back, crossing his arms, seemingly relaxed despite the heat of Megan’s tirade. “What you are seeing, in these women, *is* some of the things they can be. No woman can be everything. Each of these is one thing. Your position is that they should be something else. Who are you, Megan Duchain, to say what any woman other than yourself *should* be?”

He paused, as if he knew Megan would be unable, on a moment’s notice, to answer the question he’d posed. As indeed, she was.

Dion resumed. “The women you’ve seen... do they seem unhappy? Unfulfilled? Or are they contented with the lives they have? Aren’t contentment and happiness something positive?”

Megan hesitated again. The women in the role of cows, or of dogs... she couldn’t honestly say they were unhappy. And with his “who are you?” thrust, he’d already preempted her response that other things in life were more important.

Wait! she thought. I’ve seen Sissy unhappy.

But Megan admitted to herself that that unhappiness wasn’t caused by who she was, by her lot in life.

But that brought to her mind a question that suddenly screamed its importance, though she hadn’t been given time to consider it earlier. “Where is Sissy? The dolly you caught me with.” Megan couldn’t think of a reason they would have killed Sissy. She must be around somewhere. “I know you don’t care about her, but I’m sure you’ve figured out that I do.” Megan was indeed sure she wasn’t giving anything away. They had found out much more than that about her during her unrecalled questioning under drugs. “Have you returned her to Jason? He shouldn’t lose his dolly and have to get a new one. He hasn’t done anything wrong. I know you could buy him one, but wouldn’t it be simpler to give him back the one he already had?” Megan knew how happy that would make Sissy. Ecstatic, in fact.

Dion seemed about to respond, but paused, appearing to be listening to something. Apparently that was more than just a camera by his ear, and now it was giving him advice from outside. His eyes widened in surprise.

“Excuse me,” he said, and left the room.

* * * * *

“You really want me to take this dolly to the farm with Major Duchain riding along? This whole thing of being nice to her, letting her ask questions, seemed odd to me from the start, but I think giving her what she asked for relative to the dolly and even letting her accompany me seems to be taking it well past the point of necessity.”

Dion almost winced at the man’s all-knowing smile.

“One of us in this room is an expert on the mind and conditioning, Dion. And it’s not you.”

“Okay, why, then? Why aren’t we trying to simply overpower her? Why make her feel as though *she* has any power?”

“As I said, this isn’t really up your alley, Dion. But we need her to let her guard down. She won’t come to trust us consciously -- I don’t imagine she could ever do that -- but we want to encourage certain things to happen on a lower level of her mind. At that level, resistance grows as hope fades. We don’t want that. We need her in a receptive state.”

Dion sighed. “Well, you’re the one that’ll get the blame if this doesn’t work. I’ll be sure to make my feelings known if it comes to that. But you understand why I’ve got a personal stake in this as well. I need to make sure you don’t screw it up. We’ve had so few opportunities to try conditioning on a non-empty mind. I know I’m not an expert, but I also know you haven’t had as much experience at this, specifically this, as you’re making it sound.”

“I’ve spent six years working on this project. Quit worrying, Dion. I’m quite confident.”

Dion sighed again. “Okay, fine.”

CHAPTER 8

Megan rarely tired of examining the scenery of an alien world, but she let it go by unnoticed as the floater made its way towards Jason's farm. She watched Sissy closely.

Sissy, for her part, had all her attention on the cube of Jason's image. She cradled it, kissed it, and overall on the surface she appeared content with it. While obviously it could never take the place of Jason's actual, physical presence, it did, as Megan had seen before, keep Sissy occupied when she couldn't be with him. It surprised Megan a little that the cube *was* still working, after all this time. Megan doubted Sissy had ever been away from Jason for such an extended period before.

Megan was still amazed to be making this trip at all. After Dion had returned to a puzzled Megan's room a number of hours after abruptly leaving it -- she didn't know how long it was, but she'd had enough time to fully test the toilet, and to struggle with her bonds until her wrists and ankles were bleeding -- he had led her, still naked and chain-hobbled, her hands still trapped behind her, down a succession of hallways and eventually out a door to the waiting floater. She wasn't worried that she was being led to her death, or torture, or anything else unpalatable. Dion had radiated an amazement equal to her own the whole time, and Megan decided that anything he thought was a bad idea was probably good for her.

Megan was cautiously excited to be leaving Olympus, and brushed aside any self-consciousness about being nude. They had passed a few men along the way out of the building, who had been surprised and had given Megan long, intent looks, since everything was out there to be seen, but it was Megan's impression that some signal from Dion had encouraged them to move along.

As they waited by the floater, another man had led Sissy out the door. Sissy, as soon as she saw Megan, broke into a huge grin, and said, clearly, "Siss-sy!"

Megan's jaw had dropped. It was the first time Sissy had said the entire word. Megan had wished she could hug her, but her hands behind her twisted uselessly in the cuffs. Sissy's attention was soon recaptured by the cube. Sissy had, of course, been excited to see any friendly face at all, but there was one face more important to her than any other.

So much potential! thought Megan. All of Janica's genes, therefore all of her intelligence. A potential never realized. Potential squashed by the men who ran this world.

Megan started thinking again about escape -- she had thought she would never leave Olympus, but here she was, on the outside. Not through her own efforts, but if they kept allowing her any degree of freedom similar to this, they could make a mistake. Megan vowed to keep an eye out for *any* opportunity, and to take it. I can't take all these women home with me, she reminded herself, or probably even any of them. But our people will come back to this world, when I tell them what I know. Sissy will have a life on Earth. *All* of them will.

* * * * *

Dion had put the floater down at the very edge of Jason's farm. Megan recognized the barn and the farmhouse. In the distance, in a field, she spotted Jason, about a hundred yards away.

Dion pushed the door open. It's time, Megan thought, her heart heavy. As unready as Megan felt to lose Sissy -- it seemed very likely she would never see her again, unless Megan could escape -- Megan leaned towards the cube-absorbed Sissy, and gestured with her chin in Jason's direction.

It took Sissy a few seconds to get the hint and look in just the right direction, but there was no mistaking the instant she saw Jason. Letting loose an overjoyed squeal, Sissy bolted from the floater and took off towards Jason at a dead run.

I love you, Sissy, thought Megan, brushing a tear away with her shoulder. This isn't the kind of life I want for you, but I hope you are always as happy as you are right this minute.

Megan bit her lip. Happy. That was what Dion had said. The women here were happy, content, satisfied. And who was Megan to...

No!! Dion is a smooth talker, Megan told herself, and he got me muddled and confused, for a time. But only for a time. These women have to be rescued, and these men have to be stopped from doing this to anyone else.

While watching Sissy take a flying leap at Jason and wrap her arms and legs around him, Megan said to Dion, "You don't want to go over there and explain?"

"I'd need to take you with me. And wouldn't *that* be awkward."

"I guess that's right. He thinks my name is Martin."

Dion let out a genuine laugh, the first one without a smirk. He closed the door of the floater and, lifting off from the ground, reversed course and headed back to Olympus.

Megan had been waiting for this moment for another reason, beyond wanting to restore Sissy to the place where she was happy. It represented to Megan, as far as she could determine, the end of any leverage that might be exercised against her. She was sure they wanted something from her. She had no idea what it might be, but she was alive, they were being nice to her, and they were giving her a certain tiny amount of freedom. There had to be a reason. They couldn't put pressure on Megan now by threatening Sissy, having let her go. Admittedly, they could go get her and bring her back, but if they intended to use her in such a way, why release her to begin with? That left only Janica, the real Janica, as a possible pressure point against Megan, and Megan, much as she still tried to deny it, did believe Dion when he said Janica and the others were dead. If she were alive, Dion would have said so, because the gods had to know Megan would do whatever they wanted her to do if it meant she could spare Janica any pain, and for that to work Megan had to believe Janica was alive. If Dion had claimed that she was alive, Megan would have made him prove it, and the gods knew that too. The fact Dion didn't make such a claim had to be because he *couldn't* prove it. Her sister must really be gone.

Megan wondered why she didn't burst into tears, if she felt Janica's death was beyond doubt. But Dion, it seemed, had been right. Megan really, really didn't want Janica to be living in a place like this, to live with the memories of the experiences she had had. Janica, from what Dion had told Megan, had suffered enough while she was alive. Megan, as empty as she felt at losing her sister, did feel relieved that the suffering was over.

Megan suddenly remembered that night long ago, at home, when her mother had had Janica over for dinner, celebrating Janica's first visit home since she had graduated from the Academy. Megan, all of twelve years old, sat in awe of Janny, freshly commissioned as a second lieutenant, sitting there at the table in her sparkling Space Force uniform, and Megan had peppered her with questions inspired by absurdly romantic ideas of what service in the Force would consist of. Janica had done her best not to laugh at the stupidest of the questions. Megan had listened with fascination to the answers, but what excited her most of all was simply the honor of Janica paying attention to her. Megan had built up a larger-than-life image of Janica during her extended absences from home, and now here she was, letting Megan into her world!

Gone now. Janica was gone.

Megan found she did need to brush some tears away.

To cover her sudden access to emotion, Megan decided it was time to try to pierce the veil of mystery as to exactly what was going on. They wanted something, and were trying to get it by kindness because, in releasing Sissy, they had apparently discarded the idea of doing it by threats. "So what's the plan?"

Dion gave her a sidelong look. "Excuse me?"

"What do you want out of me? You've got me. You want to use me for something. You use *all* women for something. What is it?"

"Ah." Unexpected by Megan, he smiled. I'm glad you finally asked, the smile seemed to say. "I was going to tell you when we got back. You remember I'm in charge of entertainment, right?"

Oh, right, thought Megan. Dionysus. God of fun. Well, boozing and fun. She hadn't really expected that to be relevant to the conversation. "What's that consist of? What do you really *do*? You seem to be an important person here." Megan was remembering the authority he seemed to exercise on their walk through the building.

"Well, entertainment *is* important. Sometimes, as one example, I stage wrestling matches between specially trained dollies, either on a stage or in mud. They go on until one is unable to extricate herself for a specified amount of time."

Megan curled her lip in disgust, and then her eyes shot open suddenly. That, she realized, had probably been what was happening the night she invaded Olympus. She recalled the shouting, something like cheering, the source of which she had avoided and never identified. If everyone had been watching a wrestling match, that probably explained why the rest of the building had been deserted.

("No, Dion, do *not* tell her about the fights." That referred to another of Dion's occasional stage productions, in which full-bodied clones, driven to pharmaceutically-inspired rage, fought to the death with fists and fingernails; alternatively two clones in dog form would fight each other, with sharpened teeth as weapons. "She would be horrified and infuriated, and it would create resistance to the treatment." Dion had seen the point this time.)

Dion went on, "And I organize the races. Horses, or dogs. Sometimes amateur races, where local farmers bring their own girlimals, and we also have our own stable of horses and kennel of dogs specially trained for racing. A lot of money changes hands."

It occurred to Megan that for the women involved to understand what was expected of them in a race, or in a wrestling match, it must have been another part of the sleep-training -- which in turn meant that the original Aurora crew members had been forced to model the behavior. Two, perhaps three of the crew, the ones who'd been surgically turned into quadrupeds, had been forced to race against each other, most likely inspired in the usual way -- threats of torture to one of their crewmates if they didn't perform to the best of their abilities. And similarly with those who had modeled horses. Megan was glad, once more, that the crew were gone now and didn't have to remember *that* humiliation.

And Megan couldn't miss where this was leading. Her blood ran cold. She glared at Dion. "So I'm supposed to do something like that?"

"Oh, no. In your case something new, something different from what we've done before."

That failed to make Megan feel any better. "Some new twist you came up with?" Even without hearing it, Megan felt sure she'd better make her escape before it was put into action.

"Well, Mens is actually in charge of the project, but the original idea was mine."

"Mens?"

"Yes, the god of mind and consciousness. He handles all of the theory and research on psychological conditioning. The dream-teaching, the imprinting of dollies, all of that type of thing."

"Mens was a *female* deity."

Dion looked at Megan and grinned. "So the books say. We just say the Greeks were wrong about that." He guided the floater to a landing at Olympus, near the door they had left from.

"So what's the idea?"

"I'm not allowed to say. But I can tell you that it will involve something you will actually *want* to do."

Megan almost laughed out loud. "That sounds pretty damned unlikely. Unless you're talking about letting me out of here to fly back to Earth, there isn't anything you could come up with that I could *possibly* want to do." Yet it seemed to fit, in some mysterious way. Unlike the case of the Aurora crew, there appeared to be no plans to torture someone Megan cared about to force her cooperation. The only such person alive was Sissy, and Megan reminded herself once more that if they'd meant to use Sissy against her, they would have held onto her.

"I assure you, you'll feel differently." Dion gave her another smile. The return of the smirk. He reached into a pack beside him. "Drink?"

Megan loathed the drinking process, once more involving Dion holding out a bottle with a phallic-shaped nipple for her to drink from. But she was, once again, too thirsty to refuse, and any refusal could only be temporary anyway. She gritted her teeth, then opened her mouth for the nipple.

After a few swallows, she suddenly felt sleepy. She wasn't under any illusions about the reason. Shit, she thought, they drugged me.

Her last memory was of leaning against Dion's shoulder.

CHAPTER 9

Megan opened her eyes. She was, she discovered, back in that original room -- or prison cell, as it was reasonable to call it, lying on the same bench. Nothing had changed, as far as she could tell. Whatever they were going to do to her, she decided, tentatively relieved, they hadn't done it yet. She reached up to check on the odd feeling around her neck...

Before her hand reached her throat, she froze, wondering how it was that she could use her hand. She had spent enough time bound with chains that it seemed very strange to have this much physical freedom. She waved her hand in front of her face, assuring herself it was really there. There was no metal band around the wrist -- either wrist. She bent over to look at her feet. No bands there either. No hobble chain, nor anything to connect it to. Lacking the metalware, she was even more naked than before. Except for...

She reached again up to her throat, and felt, with her fingers, around the new collar there. As far as she could tell, it was identical to the one that Sissy wore, which was not at all good news. Sissy's was a shocking collar, and had kept her confined in the kitchen so that Jason could get work done without Sissy constantly trying to wrap herself around him.

Megan pressed her lips together. Okay, she thought, I know at least part of the method they'll use for coercion.

She sat fully upright, feeling an energy coursing through her that she couldn't account for. It was as if she'd had fifteen cups of coffee in succession, and she wished she had access to her exercise equipment at home to burn some of it off. Or that she could get out and run a few miles.

She examined the collar in more detail with her fingertips. There was no break in it, as far as she could determine. There would have to be one somewhere, she thought, since they got it around my neck somehow, and it's pretty doubtful they welded the thing in place. Probably the break is just too small to feel. She made an attempt to break the collar, to tear it loose, but was hampered by being unable to get her fingers into the space between the collar and her throat. It didn't interfere with breathing, but it was a snug fit. Obviously measured precisely beforehand.

The last thought led her to wonder how much time she had spent unconscious. She looked closely at her wrists, and realized that, though bruises and cuts were visible, they were substantially healed. It took days for this to happen, she thought, maybe a week, or even more. They had had plenty of time to do *something* to her. She had no idea what it might be.

The energy pumping through her resolved itself to a specific location: between her legs. It was something of an ants-in-the-pants feeling, despite the absence of pants. No, she thought, not quite like that either. It was more like...

No, she realized, it wasn't *like* being horny. Horny is exactly what it was. She was intensely sexually aroused, for no reason she could imagine. She might have just awakened, perhaps, from an intensely erotic dream. But she couldn't recall any such dream.

Megan growled wordlessly to herself. Okay, she thought, they shot me up with some kind of aphrodisiac. Yet there was nothing that could serve as an object of her affections in the room. She could relieve herself with her hand, if she wanted to, but surely simply watching her do *that* wasn't their goal. There had to be some reason for her arousal, but she couldn't imagine what it might be.

They do want me to perform some sexual activity, she told herself. That much is pretty obvious. Whatever it is will be revealed eventually.

Once again she reminded herself that there was no other person they could threaten, to force her to perform. They could only hurt Megan herself, and clearly the shocking collar offered them an easy way to do it. She could hold out against it, she was sure. They were going to be disappointed.

The very fact that she was still capable of thinking defiant thoughts cheered her. She was still in control, despite their ham-handed attempts to force some sort of behavior out of her. She still didn't know exactly what that behavior was.

Her thoughts, focused for the moment on her crotch, caused her to notice her pubic hair was gone. Her legs, as well, looked much smoother than she would have expected. She shaved them regularly at home, but obviously hadn't had a chance since she'd left Earth. Yet as she brushed her fingers wonderingly down her calf, she discovered it was smoother than she had ever felt it. They had depilated her completely from the waist down, and from the feel of it, it might be permanent. Unless they had just done it ten minutes ago, which seemed unlikely. To add to my arousal, she wondered, or to someone else's?

Stroking the smooth skin of her leg did make the tingling between her legs increase. So it worked to that extent. She jerked her hand back as if her leg were hot, and worked to get her mind on something else.

She nearly jumped to the ceiling in startlement when a voice suddenly spoke. There was no one with her in the room, and there had been no indication any such sound was about to occur.

The voice was electronically generated, or more likely disguised to sound as such. Megan couldn't even identify it as male or female, though under the local circumstances there was only one possibility for the sex.

"Would you try to speak, please, Major Duchain?"

What a *really* odd conversation starter, thought Megan. Megan framed in her mind a witty reply ("Would you prefer polite or obscene?"), but the moment she started to open her mouth -- or actually, in the last split-second *before* she opened her mouth -- she felt a sudden bolt of lightning through her body, making her cry out in pain, her whole body hunching to try to contain the agony. It had to have come from the collar, she thought. The oddest thing was that there was more than just the pain. It seemed as though an intensely black emotional cloud had formed instantly in her mind, consisting of every negative feeling imaginable: fear, despair, grief, and the kind of shame she felt when she disappointed her mother as a small child. Tears welled out of her eyes, not from the pain, but from the internal tragedy that overwhelmed her without any identifiable cause.

The emotional pain persisted until she stopped trying to speak. As soon as her mental intent backed away from speech, she could feel the cloud dissipate. It returned as soon as the words "What in the hell..." formed in her mind and she signaled to her mouth to say them: the crippling bolt of pain, and equally crippling internal cloud, stopped her again. She crouched, her eyes squeezed shut, her breath coming rapidly and heavily.

The electronic voice spoke again. "You can see that attempting to speak is something you should never do. You will be much happier not speaking."

Megan automatically sent to her mouth the words "Go fuck yourself!", but the response was batted down once more. It's just pain, I can take pain! she told herself forcefully. She summoned all her will to carefully enunciate "I can speak no matter how hard you make it," but almost fainted before the words had moved a single vocal muscle. There was so much more to it than pain. Her own mind had been enlisted against her. The emotional onslaught sapped her will to fight, for as long as it persisted.

"You will not be allowed to speak, nor to put messages in writing or any other form of interpersonal communication. There are small probes in your brain in the areas that control those functions. The probes, when stimulated, will both activate the collar and initiate the conditioned response of an emotional cascade to prevent the action of communication from being carried out."

Megan, breathing hard again, was trembling both with fear and with anger now. They've operated on my brain! she thought furiously. And whatever they did is, so far, working.

She gasped suddenly. Have they made me a dolly?? Is that the idea? Dollies here can't speak, she pointed out to herself. In their case, it's because they never learned how. And their entire existence revolves around a craving for sex!

It won't work! she screamed at them silently. You can make me *unable* to do something, like speak, but to you can't make me perform sexually like a mindless clone! You can't make me want...

The word "want" set off a memory. Megan's blood chilled. *That* had been what Dion meant. "It will be something you want to do." And I *do* want it, she thought, no matter how hard I'm fighting it. This feeling between my legs is driving me nuts!

It didn't help that the sensation in her crotch seemed to be intensifying. She caught herself starting to move her hand towards it, so strong was the urge to rub her clit and satisfy the growing need. She was proud of herself for resisting.

She was sufficiently absorbed in her thoughts and sensations that she almost missed the fact that the voice was speaking again.

"You will now be guided to the room in which you and your partner will carry out your duties. You may think of the collar you are wearing as a leash. The leash will now be reeled in, drawing you towards that room. Following its guidance will save you from extreme discomfort. Ignoring it will cause the discomfort to increase."

Megan wanted to demand to know how her collar could do something as specific as guiding her from one place to another. She forced herself to bury the question, understanding now how fruitless any attempt to speak would be, only to demand of herself next what the voice had meant by “partner.” That one she thought she could figure out. She just didn’t care for the answer. Since she was, it seemed, intended to be a dolly, the intense arousal she was feeling must be meant to encourage her to have sex with someone. She thought, with a sinking feeling, she knew who. Or rather, the clone of who. She started shaking her head. No, she thought. You can hurt me all you want, but you are *not* going to make me do that.

A light pain, far gentler than the thunderbolts that had struck her earlier, more of an annoying ache, began near her neck, spreading from there. At the same time, she felt the black cloud begin to envelop her again.

I wasn’t trying to talk! she shouted silently. What am I supposed to do? Or not do? Just tell me!

It’s not about talking this time, she realized. It’s what the voice said would happen if I don’t follow... follow what? How do I know where to go?

The pain grew quickly, and the black cloud resolved into an emotion that had a greater component of shame than before, as well as terror. She was doing something very bad, something not worthy of her, something that could not bear examination. And something very bad would happen to her if she didn’t do what was expected of her.

She looked at the door. She understood she was supposed to go somewhere, but how? The door doesn’t open for me, she howled silently in frustration and despair.

At last, sobbing, she jumped to her feet and approached the door. To her astonishment, it whispered open, and she ran crying out into the hallway.

The corridor was empty, a fact for which she was intensely glad. When she had walked these halls naked before, she had been with Dion, who somehow, despite all her mistrust of him, gave her a feeling of being protected. Now she would be alone, at the mercy of anyone who came by. But no one did. She wondered if it was nighttime, which she hadn’t thought it was. More likely, the halls had been cleared for her.

The evacuation of the hallway wasn’t for the purpose of making her feel safer, she realized in sudden insight. It was to make sure she understood she wouldn’t be getting help from anyone. She could feel how badly she wanted that, wanted someone to tell her where she was to go, what was expected of her. But she would have to solve this puzzle on her own.

She wondered, suddenly, whether the same had happened on her first exploration of Olympus, when she’d first arrived, sneaking around in her flight suit to look for Janica. Was it just a coincidence that Dion had scheduled a wrestling match, or whatever it was, for exactly that time? Or had it just given everyone something to occupy their time while they vacated the rest of the building? It seemed very likely, now, that they had known Megan was coming, had followed her progress ever since her ship had landed. Certainly they clearly had known where the ship was in the end, when she was caught. They were waiting for her there. Most likely they had known all along. It was probably a game to them,

letting her explore as they watched. They had known she couldn't cause any harm. So they just let her bumble around, finding things.

Megan had been doomed, she was sure now, from the very moment of landing. She moaned. At least she was still allowed to make such sounds.

The pain had abated as soon as she'd entered the hallway, but was growing again as she stood. And the black cloud was returning: the terror, and even more prominent, the shame. It was a good choice of an emotion to motivate her, she realized. It had always been important to her to do the right thing. Now she was conscious that standing still where she was was the wrong thing, a *bad* thing, and so intense was the feeling that her resistance to trying to set things right was quickly crumbling. She had to move.

Which way?

She took a few cautious steps forward, and the pain and shame increased. Not that way! That's the wrong way, the bad way! Stop, now! If the pain gets worse I'll collapse and the shame will engulf me.

Crying again, she reversed course, and felt immediately better. It was such a relief! Nothing hurt, and she felt good about herself! There was a feeling of... joy, she thought, was the best way to describe it. Smiling, she hurried along the corridor, stopping when she reached an intersection, giving her a choice of going straight or turning left.

She bit her lip, and felt the black cloud encroaching again, and the pain. She turned left, and felt better again.

Reaching another intersection, where the corridor she was in came to an end and she had a choice of going left or right, she hesitated again. Flipping a mental coin, she turned right. Immediately she doubled over in agony, tearful and weepy again, and backed up several steps before turning to go the other way.

The joy returned, she was smiling again, and she nearly broke into a run, hoping to feel even better, when suddenly the pain and the cloud returned once more. I'm in the middle of the corridor! she thought angrily. There isn't a place to turn!

Looking behind her, she saw that there was a door in the left-hand wall.

She backed up towards it, feeling better again.

Independently of all the other feelings she'd been experiencing, her stomach filled with butterflies. That is the place, she told herself. On the other side of that door.

Somehow going through that door symbolized the ultimate surrender, in some sense. To say she had come to this point of her own free will was badly distorting the facts, but there had been no one directing her, ordering her to come to this place. To all appearances, the orders had come from inside her. But inside that room, she knew, the whole point of the exercise would be revealed, something she *knew* she wouldn't like, and to go through that door would be to deliver herself into their control.

She shook her head. They made me do it, no matter what it seems like. I did it to avoid the pain, physical and emotional. I'm already under their control, and it is beyond my ability to fight it.

She frowned. She realized she was avoiding considering how good it had felt when she was properly doing what they wanted. There's more to this than avoidance of pain, she admitted to herself. If I started out again from where I was before, knowing this time where I was going, I'd come straight here, just so I could feel that joy again. I'd *want* to come here.

DAMN Dion, she said to herself forcefully, and damn him for taunting me with the idea I'd "want" what they were going to make me do.

She whimpered softly, knowing that in a moment, the battle of trying to resist entering the room would begin, and that she would lose it.

As she stood there motionless, the pain returned.

I have to go through that door, Megan thought hopelessly. I want so badly to say No, you can't make me do this. She knew the pain if she stood in place would shortly grow agonizing, and that she could have stood against the physical pain. But not the emotional rending. The shame came from within, not outside. It was part of everything she was, a part with importance equal to, or greater than, her rational self that tried without success to hold back the emotional floodgates. She could tell herself all she wanted that it was a conditioned response to the pain stimulus, that it was faked shame, with no real connection with right or wrong, that they had made her feel it. But that was just words against a hurricane.

She made a high-pitched, boiling tea-kettle sound as she stepped to the door. Once she stood close enough, it whispered open. That same force that had moved her to the door made her take two running steps into the room beyond the door, and the pain abated.

There was one other person in the room, a woman, as naked as Megan, sitting on the edge of a wide bed.

* * * * *

SO much happened in the next fraction of a second.

In part of that fraction, Megan told herself she had been right. She felt no surprise at seeing a Janica clone. She had anticipated, from the moment the voice had told her she would be paired with a partner, that it would be one of the Janicas.

But Megan wasn't prepared for her own reaction. The sexual arousal she had been feeling from the moment she woke up suddenly spiked, hitting a plateau at a level she had never experienced before. She didn't understand it. She had spent many hours alone with Sissy -- with *naked Sissy* -- who looked exactly like this woman she was seeing now, and who had tried three different times to seduce her, and Megan had never felt the slightest sexual attraction to her. Megan couldn't imagine feeling such attraction, not to someone who looked exactly like her beloved, worshipped big sister. Yet here it was, that sexual spark setting off a fire inside her, burning through every fiber of her being. The only

thoughts she could sense running through her mind, through her body, through her crotch, were of how soft Janica's lips looked, how silky her skin appeared, how perfect her face was, how inviting her breasts and nipples were, how the curves of her body were so ideally shaped to fit into Megan's embrace, how it would feel when Megan touched her, held her, locked her arms around her, kissed her, felt, tasted, and smelled her, heard her soft sighs, saw her perfection close up.

I've been imprinted! screamed the tiny voice of rational Megan. They did it to me, and now I know exactly what Sissy feels when she sees Jason!

All of these thoughts and sensations passed through Megan in the first half of that fraction of a second, so fast that the clone's very first physical movement had not had time to happen yet.

When it did, it shook Megan to her core. The Janica-clone bolted to her feet, with the most profound look of astonishment Megan had ever seen on any face anywhere, her mouth a round O that an instant later, closed and worked in concert with her vocal cords to begin saying a word that started with M. The Janica-clone suddenly bent over as if in intense pain. Looking up at Megan then, the clone raised her arm to waist level, her fist clenched, her thumb separate from it pointing straight upward.

Megan couldn't breathe. She could only hear the words rushing through her mind overwhelming all other thought, It's really Janny! It's really Janny! It's really Janny!...

Dion never said she was dead!! Megan suddenly remembered. A replay of part of her first conversation with Dion returned to her mind, Dion responding to Megan's question of what they had used the original crew for after they'd finished modeling behavior for the clones.

"What would you do with something you no longer had a use for?"

The anger Megan had managed to reduce to a simmer now exploded. "YOU KILLED THEM??" She sprang to her feet, her hands writhing helplessly behind her.

Dion held up both hands in a calming gesture. "Major Duchain, I want you to really think about this. Would you want them to be alive after what they went through?"

Janny was alive! Dion had never said she wasn't! Megan had simply leapt to the conclusion she feared the most. And Dion had left her hanging there!

She's alive and she's here!!

Janica had gotten farther towards saying a word -- Megan's name! -- than Megan was able to. But that must be because the sudden shock of seeing Megan had provoked a reflex action, too quickly for the pain reaction to catch it in time. In all probability it would never happen again.

And then, after that, Janica had done something only she would do.

Megan couldn't remember exactly when that thumbs-up signal had developed between her and Janica. But they had used it, over the years, to signal Everything Will Be Okay. Megan remembered falling and skinning her knee, and through her tears, after deciding it wasn't so bad, she had signaled thumbs up to

Janica. When Janica was crying after a breakup with a girlfriend in high school, and Megan had blundered into Janica's room, Janica had smiled weakly and given Megan the sign, insisting through her tears that everything was going to be okay.

Nobody, as far as Megan knew, knew about the sign except the two of them.

Thus ended the first fraction of a second after Megan entered the room.

* * * * *

What did not end, after that first fraction of a second, was Megan's physical need for Janica. Her craving. Her desire. The imprinting was too strong to be resisted.

Megan tried resisting. She tried SO hard. She remembered having felt so sure she would be able to triumph over whatever force impelled her towards... well, the Janica-clone she had assumed she would encounter.

Mocking her efforts at resistance, Megan's left foot took a step forward. Then her right. Then the steps became a brief run. She was only dimly aware that Janica was also moving forward, as if blown forward by a gale of wind behind her that she couldn't stand up against, and that Janica was making the same moaning sounds of need that Megan was.

They met with a jarring slap of bare skin meeting skin, and immediately lips met lips. The tingling that had been growing stronger between Megan's legs since she awakened exploded, and she felt a desperate need to run her hands over every inch of Janica's body, down her back, squeezing her buttocks, up to her breasts to let them fill her cupped hands, caressing her face, all while maintaining the kiss. She rubbed Janica's tongue with her own, and then hooked it behind Janica's teeth, wanting to lock their mouths together so the kiss would never end. Janica's hands were wandering as well, going down into the cleft of Megan's buttocks and then underneath, fingers brushing softly against Megan's vaginal lips, becoming slippery from the juices there, and Megan's whole body quivered as Janica's fingers entered and stroked her clit. Megan let out gasping breath after breath through her nose, moaning, near exploding.

Still not breaking the kiss, Janica pulled Megan towards the bed. On reaching it, they fell together, Janica twisting to roll on top of Megan, wrapping her arms around Megan and sliding them underneath Megan's back, pushing her tongue deep into Megan's mouth, grunting with the effort. Megan slid her hand down Janica's side, around her buttocks and between her legs, feeling wetness there equal to her own, and repeated the favor with her fingers that Janica had given her earlier. Megan wanted to be on top and tried to roll Janica over, and they compromised with a side by side position, arms tight around each other, each bringing her right thigh up to press against the other's crotch, each twitching her hips, their bodies rocking together, each moaning ever louder, the moans muffled by their continued kiss. Each used her fingers inside the other now, and soon they screamed together, Megan feeling an orgasm wash over and through her more intense than any she had ever felt.

And as the orgasm receded, the iron grip of unanticipated, inexplicable, unwelcome erotic passion for her sister relaxed, just slightly. Enough for Megan to feel the weight of what she'd done. She instantly backed away from the kiss, and her hands flew to her face, not quite fast enough to miss seeing Janica's jaw drop in shock, or the instant flush that made Janica's face look as though she fallen into a vat of red

paint. Megan, her eyes hidden behind her fingers, knowing her face was the same shade as Janica's, shook her head vigorously, and made a monumental effort to speak, to say how sorry she was. That same pain as before, that same terror that insisted that disaster and unfathomable horror loomed, made her stop once more. She chanced a look at Janica, whose expression made it clear she was going through the same inner sensations as Megan.

Megan was glad to see that expression, telling her that Janica had been driven unstoppably by the same inner forces that had overcome Megan's will, and that she understood. Janica knew that Megan was not in control of herself, any more than she herself had been.

How could they make me do that?? Megan demanded of herself.

She heard the clamor of recrimination in her mind, and the voice telling her how ashamed she should be. Yet the shame, real as it was, was somehow only theoretical, only intellectual, only rational in comparison with the emotional weight of the dirtiness she had felt earlier resulting from simply trying not to walk down the hallway to the place they wanted her to go. She was, in some odd way, a little relieved by the shame she was feeling now. It was *her* shame, not something imposed on her artificially. In some way, they had reduced her ability to judge her own actions by her own rules and standards, and substituted rules of their own. But she still could generate feelings that really belonged to her.

But still, she *did* feel ashamed, and the real shame, though not as overwhelming, was no more fun than the artificial kind. Automatically, still looking into Janica's eyes, she tried again to say "I'm sorry," but as before, the words were sidetracked before they could begin, and she felt that same bolt of pain and, now, the surge of the stronger, more deeply-felt shame -- for trying to speak, not for having sex with her sister. There was nothing in the room to write with or on, so she took Janica's hand, intending to use her finger to trace the letters spelling "I'm sorry" in Janica's palm, only to encounter the same painful consequence that attempting to speak brought on. Yes, thought Megan, the voice back there *did* tell me I wouldn't be able to use written communication either.

Tears spilled out of Megan's eyes. She wanted so badly to talk to Janny, about so many things, after all these years, to ask her so many questions. To ask what she had been doing over the last thirty years. And she couldn't. And she absolutely did *not* want to feel what she was feeling. The magnetic attraction drawing her to Janica, the powerful sexual need for her, had not gone away. It was only resting after the need had been satisfied, but, as Megan was becoming aware, the respite was very temporary, and the force inside her was building again. The tingling between her legs had never gone away. And she was becoming more aware of its continued presence by the second.

She noticed that Janica was breathing faster than a moment ago, her nostrils flaring. She's feeling it too, Megan realized.

It's going to happen again, Megan thought helplessly, and I can't stop it! *We* can't stop it.

Knowing it was pointless to try to say anything, Megan held her fist in front of Janica, thumb upraised, and gave her a shaky smile.

Janica smiled wanly in return. Then she gently took Megan's fist, still with thumb up, pulled it towards her lips and kissed it.

Megan's smile was more genuine now. She felt warmth spreading through her. That feels so sweet, she thought, and it's nothing sexual. Just something one sister does when the other makes her feel better.

Then Janica began licking, her tongue passing slowly and wetly over Megan's curled fingers, then her wrist, and starting up her arm, with an already-familiar moan of desire.

The tingling between Megan's legs was in full flame again. No, she thought, please...

The intense magnetism, the sense that everything about Janica was what she needed, what she must feel rubbing against her, what she must capture with her arms and legs and never let go of, returned to full force. Megan reached out convulsively and pulled Janica towards her, her mouth fastening onto Janica's, wide open, lips moving, tongues rubbing.

They were both startled when the door to the room hissed open suddenly. Megan froze when she saw a man enter.

Megan told herself afterward she should have been prepared for what her body did next. She knew Mens and his cohorts had spent a long time contaminating her mind, filling her with a sexual craving far beyond her control. But she had avoided imagining all of the ramifications.

Though it wouldn't really be accurate, Megan thought later, to say she had no control over her body's actions. Her body did exactly what she wanted it to. She just couldn't seem to control the wanting.

Instantly letting go of Janica, even forgetting, she realized afterwards, Janica's existence for the moment, Megan rolled away from Janica, fell backward onto her back on the bed, and raised her legs into the air, split wide apart. Staring intently at the man, or more accurately at his beltline, where his penis was hidden away by clothes, Megan patted her vaginal lips insistently with her fingers, whimpering "Uhh? Uhh? Uhh?", trusting him to understand she was begging him to fill her.

Beside her, the barely-remembered Janica had whirled up onto her knees, facing directly away from the man, her butt towards him, and was reaching behind her to pat her own sex invitingly, her head twisted around to look towards the same part of him that Megan was, while making sounds similar to Megan's.

The man looked at Janica first, and waved her away. Janica made a shocked squeaking sound of disappointment, moved off to the side, and then began crying. He returned his gaze to Megan, made a gesture with his hand, the fingers together tapping against the thumb. Megan gasped excitedly. She knew what the gesture meant. She had no idea *how* she knew what it meant, but it seemed part of a language she was somehow, unaccountably, familiar with. The hand gesture meant Megan should use her mouth.

Megan threw herself forward, pivoting on her butt, to sit upright at the edge of the bed, while the man was pulling his pants down. As soon as his erection sprang free, Megan reached for it, circled it lightly with the thumb and forefinger of her right hand, leaned forward and sucked it into her mouth.

Closing her eyes, she moved her lips up and down the shaft, her tongue rubbing it underneath. When she felt ready, she took a deep breath, took the head in farther, quickly, suppressing her gag reflex, and swallowed it.

She felt a warm joy spreading throughout her body. Her holes -- her mouth, her vagina, her rectum -- were sad voids in her body that could only truly be filled by a penis. Only that male body part that fit her own parts so exactly, its fullness perfectly complementing their emptiness, could make her feel complete and whole.

She let the head slide out of her throat, took another breath, and swallowed it again, this time letting it move in and out slightly so that her lips rubbed back and forth along the shaft. Then she took a firm grip on his buttocks and pushed her face hard against him, flattening her nose on his lower stomach, in his pubic hair, trying to take him in still deeper, deeper.

She felt the triumphant orgasm approaching, summoned it, welcomed it... HERE! It intensified as she worked to hold herself still, not biting.

The rational part of her mind was left with many puzzles to solve. She didn't know when she had learned anything about oral sex with a man, or indeed any type of sex with a man. She especially didn't know how she had learned to swallow an erect penis, when she sometimes had trouble just swallowing pills.

But there were so many other things going on that she didn't understand. These mysteries would just have to wait their turn.

As her orgasm subsided, the man suddenly jerked, and emptied himself partly down her throat and partly, as he pulled back, into her mouth. She gulped, swallowing the slick, salty fluid, and let the now-shrinking penis slip out of her mouth. She kissed the head, licking up a last dribble of semen, hoping somehow the kiss could encourage it into new life. Hoping the encounter wasn't over.

Beside her, she was fully aware of Janica sobbing now. Megan understood. She knew how she would feel if the man had rejected her and chosen Janica, not allowing Megan this chance to be completed, to have her emptiness filled.

The man pulled up his pants and, as wordless as he had been throughout, left.

No, thought Megan, don't go! She stood and ran towards the door. Just two paces beyond the bed, she doubled over as the lightning pain from the collar spread through her body, along with the now-familiar terror and shame that stopped her in her tracks.

The rational Megan, held in the background since the man had entered the room, came back to the fore. As she backed up, reducing the pain and the emotional weight blocking her way, she shook her head. They can't stop me from leaving! Not by just making me feel bad about it, by making me feel scared of it!

Determined to break their hold over her, she took two long steps forward, and then cried out on agony. It's *only* pain, she told herself. And the emotions aren't real. Not real. Not real!

She took one more step forward and collapsed, and lay convulsing on the floor, no longer able to control her muscles in any way.

She felt her skin scraping on the floor underneath her. The pain abated the smallest bit, and she was able to look towards her feet and see that Janica was grasping her ankle, pulling her out of the agony zone.

Megan managed to sit up at last, her body still trembling but able to obey her will once more. Crying, as Janica still was, she reached for Janica and pulled her into a tight hug, stroking her hair, a gesture echoed by Janica.

Megan realized, in puzzlement, that she couldn't recall any detail of what the man had looked like. That he had been real was without doubt, but she couldn't so much as remember his hair color, let alone the shape of his nose or chin. She knew she had been focused on a lower part of his body, but she felt sure she had looked directly at his face when he'd first entered -- Yes, she reminded herself, I did! I had to decide that he *was* a man, to begin with -- but she could never have described him now.

She shrugged off the mystery, leaned back and looked at Janica, and saw again the perfect sexual mate, everything she needed. The tingling in her crotch, never at any time absent, was dialed up once more. Her rational self, seeming more and more reduced to pure observer status, was unable to generate the same degree of resistance as earlier. The dolly within her was consolidating power, becoming dominant. Megan lunged forward and kissed Janica, open-mouthed, moaning with arousal. We can't leave this place, Janny, she thought, but I have everything I need here. I have you. I want you, I want you, I want you!

Megan pressed forward, pushed Janica over onto the floor and lay atop her, rocking her hips. Janica sighed with pleasure, wrapped her arms and legs tightly around Megan and began licking her neck.

CHAPTER 10

In succeeding days, life fell into a routine. Megan grew more sure that there was no way to escape the room, and less sure that she wanted to.

Megan could tell when the days started and ended. The room lights dimmed slightly at some point. After a night's sleep for Megan and Janica, the lights brightened again. They were never entirely off.

Each day, during the bright hours, four or five men would come into the room, separately. Megan wondered if they were on some sort of schedule, since the intervals between seemed more or less uniform. Each time it happened, Megan and Janica, in behavior far beyond their control, each desperately begged the man, without words, to use her body, to fill one of her holes. The one chosen would be ecstatic; the other crushed. The strange phenomenon of facelessness continued. Megan could never remember any of their physical features -- and she'd tried her best to look closely at them when they entered -- nor could she ever tell if she'd seen any of them before. More surprising, she couldn't afterward recognize or describe any of the penises that filled her, despite her fervent concentration on them, or whether she'd seen any of *them* before. She supposed it must be part of her conditioning.

In between, they were alone with each other, and spent a significant portion of it helplessly drawn, by their conditioning, their imprinting, into sexual activities much more varied than Megan's previous experiences had ever been.

Megan wondered why they allowed her to spend so much private time with Janica, unobserved, until it occurred to her there might be any number of cameras hidden in the walls. All that was required was a tiny hole to let light through, all but unnoticeable from more than a few inches away -- and some or all of them might be in the parts of the room Megan couldn't reach. She supposed images of her and Janica's sexual activities would have some entertainment value. Megan herself wasn't a voyeur, but she knew most men were.

And of course, it wasn't really a matter of watching sex. It was rendering women powerless and humiliated. Megan certainly felt that fully.

Each day began with one of them awakening first and kissing or licking the other awake for their first lovemaking of the day. The bed had no sheets to cover them, so they slept simply lying atop it. The room was warm enough that that was no problem, especially as they shared body warmth -- they always slept holding each other.

On the side of the room that was accessible, there was the bed, a bathtub, and beyond the tub a shower and a portable toilet, the last of these identical to the one Megan had used in the room previous to this one. While Megan and Janica were finishing their first-thing sex, the tub would begin filling with water - - suggesting to Megan that they were indeed being watched -- and they would afterward bathe together, each cleaning the other with a soapy sponge, with a lot of giggling, and intimate touching that often, again, led to sex.

There were two vertical metal columns, each with small holes at various heights, between the bed and bathtub. During the day's first bath, a high-powered spray of water would emerge from the holes, directed at the bed, to hose off the surface of the bed, and clean it of perspiration and sexual fluids. Directional microwaves would then evaporate the water, which would be conducted upward through the ceiling air conditioning vents as steam. The air in the rest of the room didn't warm significantly -- it was a triumph of thermal engineering -- and Megan and Janica could return afterward to a clean bed. After the bath, they could rinse off the soap in the shower, drying themselves in front of a warm air blower.

Whenever necessary, they made use of the toilet. Even when one of them was on the toilet, their need for each other gripped them: While Janica was sitting on it, Megan usually knelt in front of her, between her legs, and laid her head in Janica's lap, arms around Janica's waist, while Janica stroked her hair, and their roles were reversed when Megan was on the toilet. It was just one more oddity to Megan, for whom peeing and, even more so, bowel movements had always been extremely private things. Not that there was anywhere in the room where privacy was possible, but the normal Megan would have left anyone alone during that process.

There were small doors in the wall beside the bed, which would whisper open a few times each day, and a bowl of chopped meat with, probably, some fruits and vegetables mixed in, and a bottle of milk would slide through on the floor. Janica and Megan would both eat from the bowl, in the style of dogs, as Megan recalled Sissy eating in Jason's kitchen. For the first meal, Megan had tried to pick up the meat in her fingers, but her hand froze before it reached the bowl, as she was overcome with that same pain and artificial shame that signaled when some behavior was not allowed and made it impossible for her to do it. Janica, Megan could tell, experienced the same block. So both of them took turns putting their mouths down to the bowl and licking up the food. They *were* able to pick up the milk bottle, which dispensed milk through that same type of oversized nipple Megan had used before -- but each of them could only offer the milk to the other, not drink it herself. Megan liked doing it that way anyway, so it didn't matter. She adored holding the bottle and watching Janica sucking from the nipple. After the meal, the bowl and bottle would be retracted back through the opening in the wall.

In the half of the room that Megan and Janica were unable to enter, there was nothing at all, other than the room's door.

Aside from bathing (after each encounter with a man), eating, and eliminating wastes, Megan and Janica spent all of each day, from waking until falling asleep, holding, stroking, and petting each other, not necessarily in such an intense way as to lead to orgasm -- though that happened often -- but just to be touching each other.

Megan, deep within herself, continually struggled with the horror of what she was being forced to do. A lifetime of self-control had been ripped away from her, all of her concepts of decency were assaulted, and she was prevented from talking, from sharing the burden, with the one person she loved above all others and who could understand what she was going through. There was one thing she wanted to tell Janica more than anything else: that inside she was still the same Megan, that she was still Janica's little sister, no matter how much uncharacteristic and perverse behavior the men had grafted onto her defenseless mind. She knew Janica would understand that without being told, because they had done the same thing to her, but it was important, crucial, to say it somehow. It would be a way of defying their tormenters, of reestablishing the relationship that they both wanted back, even if they were both powerless to negate what had been done to them. And she couldn't do it.

Their second full night together was, like their first, interrupted twice by one of them, first Megan and later Janica, awakening and, feeling the other beside her, being helplessly compelled by conditioning to initiate another episode of sex that, as it always seemed to, far exceeded anything Megan was accustomed to in intensity. The next morning, after having sex once more on waking, the tub began filling -- they were getting used to that -- and Megan and Janica held hands over the few steps to the tub.

Megan's butt was still slightly sore from her last male visitor the day before, who had used her anus. No one had ever played with Megan's butt before, but she found she loved having a penis fill her rectum completely, that same relief from her emptiness as with her other holes. Megan had her orgasm, as intense as the first, long before the man did -- she seemed consistently to climax well before the man, which defied everything she had been told about sex with men.

As she and Janica shared the bath, Megan thought of a way to get her message to Janica. Sitting behind Janica in the tub, washing her back with the sponge, Megan decided that nothing more elaborate than a simple "I love you" was needed: she was sure Janica would understand that it wasn't meant in a romantic, sexual way, but instead that Megan loved her in the same way she always had, as a sister.

It would have to be done in gestures, with spoken and written words denied to both of them. Megan laid it out in her mind -- she would get Janica's attention, point to herself, tap her fist against her heart, and then point to Janica.

Megan got as far as tapping Janica on the shoulder, but as she tried to begin the "I love you," her will seemed to freeze up, and she once again felt the pain and shame that was always so effective in stopping undesired behavior. The shame sapped her determination, undermining her ability to fight against it. She couldn't do it.

Come on, she said furiously to herself, even *that* is forbidden?

With Janica already twisted around to look at her, Megan felt she had to do something. She made the thumbs-up gesture.

Janica looked straight into Megan's eyes, gave her a small smile, and a brief, tiny nod, and returned the gesture. Megan smiled back. I think that did it, Megan decided. And I think I'll have to be satisfied.

She wasn't, entirely. The gesture, over the years, had had so many slightly-different meanings in different contexts that it was hard to say for certain exactly how Janica had interpreted it this time. But her response suggested that the idea had come across.

I wonder why we can still do that gesture, Megan asked herself. She supposed it might be that, after so many years, the gesture had become such a deep part of their relationship that it was purely reflexive, and beyond the reach of the blocks that Mens -- Megan figured all of this must be his handiwork -- had installed in both of their minds. And it might be that the very vagueness of the actual literal meaning of the gesture -- far more cloudy than the gestures of "I love you" Megan had tried and failed to make -- was another of the reasons it couldn't be blocked. In any case, it was nice to know that the real Megan and the real Janica, buried deep underneath the crap the men had piled on top of them, could still speak to each other.

As if to make up for the lapse in its control of Megan, the ever-present tingling in her crotch intensified. Megan knew what was coming, and was not only powerless to stop it, she was unable to *want* to stop it, much as she wished she could want that. The excitement, the need, built quickly.

Megan dropped the sponge in the water. Her left arm still around Janica's waist, she let her hand slide up to Janica's left breast and cupped it in her palm. Letting her thumb brush lightly back and forth across the nipple, as she had already learned Janica liked, she brought her right hand around and down between Janica's legs, using her fingers below the waterline to rub Janica's sex. Janica responded immediately, breathing hard in moaning sighs, and now Megan began licking Janica lightly behind her right ear.

Janica spun around suddenly, wrapping her legs around Megan, right leg over Megan's left, left leg underneath Megan's right, and pulled Megan against her, grinding her mound against Megan's, while pulling Megan's head forward and plunging her tongue deep into Megan's mouth.

Megan had no further rational thoughts for a time.

* * * * *

They were both always sad after one of the visiting men departed, the rejected one more so than the chosen one, and they comforted each other in the only way their conditioning allowed them. Making love after a man had rejected one of them, plunging that one into an abyss of sorrow, was, for Megan, the one time she could give in to her sexual need for Janica without guilt. Holding each other as one of them cried, the other stroking her gently to soothe away the weeping, seemed, for once, good, and right. It was something they both needed for survival. Megan always knew, each time, that within minutes their sexual desire would spiral out of control once more, but it almost, almost seemed worth it.

Between visits by the men, Megan wished they would stay away, even though she was excited beyond measure as soon as one entered the room. She had two conflicting reasons for her wish, reflecting the two Megans, one on the surface, one buried underneath. The buried-underneath Megan simply wanted to stop being used and abused as a sex object. The one on the surface wanted more time to spend making love with Janica. When she and Janica were alone, Megan, the surface Megan, the Megan created by men in the lab, wished they could somehow knot their tongues together so they could kiss as long as they wanted, never having to eat, never having to sleep.

* * * * *

It seemed to Megan as though any body part that for a time had been neglected became the next center of attention. She wondered if that might be part of the conditioning too, and it added to her suspicion that the main purpose of the entire exercise was for her and Janica to put on a show for unseen witnesses. A few days ago Megan had looked at Janica's breasts and suddenly felt she wanted nothing more than to feel them filling her mouth, and she and Janica had spent at least an hour taking turns sucking each other's breasts. The next day it was feet and toes: lying side by side facing opposite ways, each had sucked the other's toes, Megan sometimes sucking only Janica's big toe, sometimes stretching her mouth to accommodate all of the toes at once, taking them as far into her mouth as she could, and that had gone on for perhaps an hour as well. Still sucking, each of them had at last begun meanwhile using her right hand to play with the other's sex, and that had led to orgasm very shortly, each one's

cries still muffled by toes. Another day Megan had become utterly fascinated with Janica's butt. She demonstrated the hands-and-knees position on the bed that she wanted Janica to adopt, then spent a considerable time slowly, sensuously licking Janica's buttocks, listening to Janica's moans and sudden gasps of pleasure, and her squeaks and giggles when Megan ran her tongue up her crack past her anus. Janica, of course, had eagerly returned the favor after her orgasm. The next night they had slept the entire night each with her head between the other's thighs, face pressed into the other's crotch, and in the morning licked each other to a climax.

As the days progressed, something in Megan continued telling her this was wrong, that she should be objecting to the hijacking of her mind, and making plans to escape back to Earth with Janica. But she found she couldn't quite remember why that was important. Lying still with Janica in bed, their arms around each other, breasts pressed together, legs entangled, looking into each other's eyes between kisses, Megan wished this time spent with Janica could go on forever.

CHAPTER 11

Janica groaned, opened her eyes tentatively, and squeezed them shut again. Too bright.

The ground underneath her made her skin itch. She was naked, still. That part wasn't surprising. With effort, she pushed herself into a sitting position.

She was in an open field, a meadow, covered in some sort of vegetation like lettuce.

Suddenly she remembered where she had been before, where she would have assumed she would still be. "Mig!" Janica spun around in her seated position, and saw her sister lying behind her, apparently unconscious. And as naked as Janica was. Janica shook her. "Mig! Wake..."

Her hand flew to her mouth. The wonder of being able to speak hit her.

Megan stirred groggily, and rose up on one elbow, squinting at Janica. "Janny? Where are..." She gasped, her eyes wide, her hand flying to her mouth in a gesture identical to Janica's. "We can talk!"

Janica nodded. "It seems so. Mig... Here, let me help." She took Megan's elbow as Megan tried to sit up further.

Megan looked around herself, mystified. "We're *outside*! Janny, how did we get out?"

"You don't know either? I didn't do anything. I just woke up here."

Megan's face went suddenly bright red, and she spun her head away from her sister's nudity. "Janny, I am so sorry. I can't believe..."

Janica waved off the apology. "No, I know it wasn't you. I felt the same thing. Somebody messed with us. I would never... you know." She looked away as well, feeling her own face flush.

She looked immediately back at Megan again, all of the questions she had wanted to ask for so long rushing back to her mind. "Mig, what are you *doing* here? I was on Aurora. We'd just landed, and then the alarms went off, some kind of gas. I felt groggy..." She looked wide eyed at Megan. "Am I back on Earth? Did they bring me back? How did I not wake up for the return trip? And... how did you get grown up?" She glanced at Megan's breasts. "I mean *really* grown up." She looked away quickly once more, embarrassed again. She had spent *so* much time recently tasting those breasts. Looking at the ground, she said, "You're fifteen. No, sixteen, sorry. Or you were when I left. How old are you now?" There was never a way to tell with any adult.

Megan looked stunned. "You don't remember *anything*?"

Janica shrugged helplessly. "Not between being gassed on Aurora and then waking up in that room, when you came in. You didn't say where we are. Earth?"

Megan shook her head, wide-eyed. "Look, this will be a lot to take in." She looked off into the distance. "We're on Freeworld, not Earth..."

"Freeworld?"

"That's what they call it here. The world you landed on with the Hercules cult. They got out. They rigged it so that gas went off, the sleeping pods deactivated, all that. They took over, and settled here." Janica felt Megan's eyes boring into hers. "Janny, that was thirty years ago!"

Janica felt lightheaded. "And h-how..." She breathed slowly, trying not to faint. "And you? How did you get here?"

Megan sighed, looking bitter. "Space Force wouldn't go rescue you. They put the wormhole off limits, because they assumed it was unstable. I went to the Academy, got my commission, my grades got me into the Research branch. I studied particle physics, and found a new particle associated with wormholes that made it possible to track you." Megan smiled. "That's where a lot of those years went. I'm sorry I didn't work faster. Anyway, they still wouldn't let me come find you. So I stole a ship."

Janica gawked at her. "You *what??*"

Megan looked exasperated. "Janny, that was the only way I could get here!"

"Oh, no, Mig, I didn't mean... I am so, SO grateful you came for me. But I'm so worried for you! Your career is over!" She leaned towards Megan and hugged her, thinking how odd it was to talk about her little sister having a "career."

Suddenly, that feeling, that tingling between her legs, was back. It had been gone, and she realized now she hadn't been conscious of it being gone until it returned, though it was in much weaker form than it had been all during... that time. Holding Megan, it was hard, very hard, to stop herself from going farther. She let go of Megan quickly and scrambled away backwards on her hands. "I'm sorry."

Megan smiled suddenly and made a thumbs up sign. Janica grinned back and returned it.

Megan's smile grew in warmth. "That's how I knew you were you, when I got into that room. You did the thumb."

Janica, puzzled, asked, "Who else would I be?"

Megan shook her head. "I'll get to that. Anyway, don't worry about what just happened. I know what you felt. I felt it too." Her flushed face was back. Janica noticed Megan's nipples were suddenly very erect. She looked away again, quickly.

Megan sighed. "Janny, they did something to us. They messed with our heads, like you said, and they probably took your memories away of what's happened since you landed, too. I didn't know they could do that, but it wouldn't surprise me. So that explains the big... blank spot. Thirty years of it."

“The Hercules cult? They did this to me? To us? And that’s who those men were that kept coming in?” She shook her head. “It’s so weird, I can’t remember any of their faces.”

“I know. Neither can I. And yeah, it’s the Hercules, but now they call themselves gods. Olympian gods.”

“What??”

“That’s what they call their big headquarters, Olympus. And they’ve taken names of gods. They’ve got descendants now, farmers, shopkeepers, and so on, but the original men are the ones in charge.”

“Men run everything? What about the women?”

A whizzing, buzzing sound seemed to fly past. A moment later came a loud, echoing crack.

The combination struck a memory in Janica. She spun in place and gasped. A man was standing, a hundred yards away, holding something that looked, at this distance, like a piece of thin tubing.

Janica whirled around to shout at Megan, “Projectile weapon! That guy is shooting at us!”

Megan was already nodding and scrambling to her feet. She looked around desperately, saw a thick, extensive stand of trees a few hundred yards in the opposite direction, and pointed to them. “That way! Run!” She took hold of Janica’s hand to pull her along for a few steps, then let go.

Janica, running, shouted out, “Mig! Zig-zag! Keep changing direction!” Battlefield wisdom from old Academy classes came back to her.

Megan was already doing that, and shouted back, “I know!”

There was a second gunshot, from farther away. Janica didn’t hear the bullet this time, but tried to run still faster, not wanting to give the shooter too many more chances.

Janica dearly wished for a bra. The bouncing of her breasts wasn’t an aid to running. And she couldn’t possibly have felt more vulnerable, running from deadly danger naked.

She entered the woods, and heard Megan coming in behind her. She turned in the direction in which the trees seemed thickest, still hearing Megan trail her. She dove to the ground behind a small bluff, and seconds later Megan hit the ground a few feet away.

Janica spun towards her. “Mig! You okay? You hit?”

Megan shook her head emphatically, and put her fingers across her lips. “Shhh.” She whispered, still trying to catch her breath. “No, missed.”

They waited several minutes, breathing hard, listening for sounds of pursuit.

Megan looked around, and whispered, “I think he lost track of us, and this is a big enough wood that he’s probably not sure where to start looking.”

Janica nodded, then raised her hands quizzically and whispered in return, "What the hell, Mig? Why is somebody shooting at us? I wouldn't be surprised if they want to recapture us, except I don't know how we could have got out to begin with without their help. And why with a bullet-thrower? Is that all the farther their technology is?"

Megan smiled ruefully. "Oh, no. I know they've got better. And you'd better know they've got sleeping darts, if they wanted us alive. They don't. Those shots were to kill."

"But why? And why with something so ancient?"

Megan lay down flat and buried her face against her hands. "Sport. This is for fun. They're hunting us." She looked up. "And that's why they let us go from that room. They got tired of *that* game, and started a new one."

Janica felt very puzzled. "How is it you know so much about them? They can't know all that on Earth."

Megan sighed heavily. "I got caught, Janny. They had me in custody for a couple of days -- well, really longer, I think, I was unconscious for part of it -- before you and I met in that room. And they told me stuff. Dion. Dionysus. He told me. He's the 'god of fun.' He told me what happened to Aurora, among other things." Megan looked at Janica and hesitated. "It's really all blank? Everything after Aurora landed?"

"Mig, I'm telling you, to me it's like I just woke up in that room, and then you came in." She tried to read Megan's expression. "Why?"

Megan looked down. "I... I'm glad you don't remember... I mean, I know it's hard for you, and really confusing. But Dion told me... things they made you do. After they took over. You and the others." Megan closed her eyes tightly, and shivered. Then she shot a look back at Janica. "Don't ask, okay? I shouldn't have even mentioned it. Don't ever ask, please?"

"Mig, I need to know about the others."

Megan shook her head quickly. "I'm sorry. Really. I shouldn't have said anything. And I don't know anything about where the others are now, or what happened to them. I swear." She reached out and took Janica's hand. "I'm glad you're here with me now. And that you don't remember." Looking back in the direction from which they'd come, with an air of wanting desperately to change the subject, she said, "Anyway, Dion is in charge of... entertainment. I'm sure this is his latest idea. Hunting us."

"To kill us? To kill *me*, finally, after thirty years? Why now?"

Megan shook her head. "Janny, Dion did tell me things, but I still don't get how these men think. I don't think we can figure out an answer to that."

"You came here in a ship. Can we get to it?"

Megan bit her lip. "It's damaged. I think it could still get us home, but they'd be watching it. That's how I got caught to begin with. If they're not actively watching it now, with us on the loose -- which seems

pretty unlikely -- they'd probably still have an alarm system. They'd get there before we could lift off. And by now they must have stripped it of everything useful, especially the computers, to see what information we had about them."

"So you've been thinking about it."

"Uh-huh."

"If they've left the ship intact, can we get a distress signal home?"

Megan shook her head. "The radio is one of the things damaged."

"Well, we still need to get to the ship. But if they're watching it..." Janica looked at the ground for a time. "What do you think of this? We go to the ship, go up to it and touch it, then get away from it and watch to see if someone comes?"

Megan nodded slowly. "But we'd better wait a few days, at least. Maybe a week. They might think we've given up on it by that time." She looked around. "They want us dead. But we don't have to die. This is a pretty lush planet, if you don't mind being vegetarian. We can live off the land. If we can get away, if we can keep them from finding us indefinitely."

Janica nodded. "Let's wait couple of weeks, then, not just one, before we try for the ship. How long are the days here?"

"Almost Earth normal. Okay, we wait. Count fourteen days."

Janica nodded. "The first thing we need..." She suddenly looked to her left, where the sky was getting darker. On the other side, she saw that the sun was setting. Well, the star. "It's dusk, Mig. We'd better settle in. I think the hunt is probably over for the day. Unless they've got night-vision. Do they?"

"I'm sure they do, but I have a feeling they won't use it. I'm sure there are very strict rules for this. If the sun's going down, I think we're okay through the night."

Janica looked around. "Do you hear any running water? We could use some."

Megan sat silently, listening, then shook her head. "Can you make it to morning?"

Janica nodded. "I think I'm okay, as far as that goes. A little hungry and thirsty, but nothing major." She lay back along the ground. "I think the night will be warm enough, even without clothes. It's hot now, and kind of humid."

"Okay. And like I said, I think we're safe from hunters, for now." Megan stretched out a few feet from Janica. The light was nearly gone now. "Night, hon."

Janica, as she lay still, felt she was missing something. As soon as the stirring in her crotch began again, she knew what it was. Oh, shit, she thought. Shit, shit...

“Janny?” Megan’s voice was uncertain, nervous.

Janica hesitated, then said, “I know.”

“Why... why is it still happening? I mean, it’s not like before, but you feel it, don’t you?”

Janica was silent as she thought. “We... how long were we in that place? About a month?”

After a few seconds, Megan said, “I think so. It seems like a lot more, and it seems like a lot less. I mean, it went fast, but seemed to be forever too. You know? But I guess a month, that sounds about right.”

“So...” Janica paused again, deciding how to say it. “We probably... did that with each other... two hundred times. Maybe three hundred. That many orgasms. Really mind-whacking ones. I never had anything like that before. You know what they felt like. Now they’ve taken whatever was making us do that out of us, but...”

“We’ve kind of internalized it?”

“Well, it was internal the whole time -- I mean, they did it to us, but they made it so it was inside us. But it’s... like a drug. We’re kind of...”

“Habituated?”

Another long pause. “Yeah.”

“But we can fight it, right? We can want to do something, but we don’t have to.”

Janica felt relieved. “Exactly. We’re adults.” She laughed. “You weren’t when I left, but you are now.”

Megan laughed with her. “Night, Janny.”

After about ten minutes, Janica heard Megan clear her throat, then say softly, “Can you sleep?”

Janica realized how very far from any possible sleep she was. A very, very familiar feeling was growing stronger. Her crotch was tingling, her labia swollen, cool from wetness. Her nipples were hard. Her face felt flushed. Her breathing felt tight. “No.”

The silence stretched, not suggesting the end of conversation now, but an increasing tension.

I’ll say it, thought Janica. I know Mig is about to. “We need to sleep. We have to be as alert as we can be tomorrow. So we need to... make it so we can sleep.”

In the darkness, Janica heard Megan roll towards her. “This is just for that, right? So we can sleep after?”

“Yeah.” Janica reached to where she thought Megan was, and stroked her hip. The tingling, the wanting, increased.

She felt Megan’s fingers stroking her face. “It’s not our fault.”

“I know,” Janica said quickly.

She moved her head forward, and her lips brushed Megan’s as they came towards her. She opened her mouth, and let her tongue lick against Megan’s. I can’t see her, Janica pointed out to herself. I could pretend it’s any one of my friends I’ve been to bed with, or a girl I met in a bar.

Immediately she realized there was no hope of that. Megan smelled a certain way, breathed a certain way, made certain little sounds, did certain things with that tongue. For a month Janica had thought *only* of Megan, her physical presence, how it felt to touch her body. Except for when the men came, every part of Janica’s mind had been absorbed with Megan. She couldn’t just turn off that way of thinking and switch it down a different track. Not this soon.

Just this one time, she told herself. We both know why we need to do it right now.

Both of them whimpered with growing arousal, and moved closer together, putting their arms around each other. Janica reached down and softly stroked Megan’s vaginal lips. They were almost frictionless.

Janica stopped thinking about the men, the Olympians, the liberties they’d taken with her mind, the thirty years they’d taken away from her, the things they might have done to the crew that Megan wouldn’t tell her, the things they’d made her do with her own sister, the fact they were now trying to kill her for sport. She held Megan more tightly, wrapped her legs around her, kissed her harder, and didn’t think of anything at all.

CHAPTER 12

Janica awoke, feeling her body entangled with Megan's in a way that had become very familiar to her over the past weeks. It was morning, the ground around littered with randomly distributed bright spots of sunlight sneaking down through the obstacle course of leaves. Automatically, out of habit, she kissed Megan gently, her lips moving wetly against Megan's, feeling Megan respond after a few seconds, making her own contribution to the kiss, her tongue brushing softly against Janica's teeth.

Janica's brain, lagging behind her body in emergence from sleep, suddenly remembered.

She gasped, released her hold on Megan and wriggled back away from her along the ground, shaking her head as she saw Megan looking at her. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry! I was only half awake."

Megan rubbed her eyes and stretched, then held her hands towards Janica, palms outward. "Janny, I know, I understand. Who *could* understand better than I do? We have to stop saying 'sorry' all the time. It's not our fault." She looked around. "What's for breakfast? I'm starved."

Janica smiled, and sat up, wrapping her arms around her shins. "I think Mom stepped out to get us some breakfast rolls." She felt at the lettuce-like vegetation covering the ground. "Think this will kill us?"

Megan got up on her hands and knees, ripped away a few leaves and brought them up to her nose. "Smells okay. A little like cut grass, when you get it up this close." She frowned in thought. "I don't think it can be poisonous. When the men first started settling this place, they didn't have meat..." She hesitated for a moment. Janica wasn't sure why. She knew they had meat now -- she'd been eating it for weeks. Megan went on, "They had to survive on *some* sort of local vegetation. And it doesn't seem as though the plants on this planet could have evolved any poisons as a protection from animals, because there *aren't* any animals." Megan winced, as though she'd said more than she wanted to. It was obviously connected with animals which, Janica suddenly realized, had not yet put in an appearance. They must, she thought, all be on another part of the planet.

She was stopped from further meditating along those lines when Megan shoved a wad of the leaves into her own mouth. "Mig!"

Megan chewed and swallowed, and shrugged. "What else were we going to do? You bring your testing equipment?" She sat still for a moment, then said, "Not bad. They don't have a lot of taste, but they're moist, which is really good right now. If there's a poison, it must be pretty subtle. I don't feel anything. Except more hungry. My stomach is telling me to get it more of that stuff." She ripped up another handful and offered it to Janica.

Cautiously, Janica took the leaves and bit off the end of one. When nothing terrible happened, she took a bigger mouthful.

Megan swallowed some more leaves, then stopped, looking down. She opened her mouth twice as if to speak, closing it each time, not getting anything out until the third try. "When I woke up and you were kissing me..."

Janica looked away, feeling her face go red. She fought against the feeling she should apologize again.

Megan continued "...I... my first feeling, not my first thought, my first *feeling* was... I wanted to keep going. And that just really scares me."

Janica nodded, and sighed. "It's going to be hard to get over it, isn't it? Are we always going to be uncomfortable with each other? Like we are right now?"

Megan pounded the ground with her fists. "Damn it, that is so unfair." She looked up at Janica, and obviously saw the expression of shock Janica felt. Megan held up her hand. "I didn't mean *you*, Janny. I meant *them*. I didn't want to say it, but now that you did, you're right, I *do* feel uncomfortable around you, and that's one more thing they did to us." She turned onto her butt, sat up, and, like Janica, wrapped her arms around her shins. "We have a lot of things to fight against, but we should give priority to that one. That we feel uncomfortable. Because we *need* each other. It's a survival thing. We need to be on the same wavelength at all times."

A stray thought on how to deal with the discomfort flitted through Janica's mind, and she batted it down mercilessly, knowing where it had come from. But it returned, and with it came another thought: that her haste in rejecting the first thought, and her refusal to consider saying it out loud, were perfect examples of that dangerous discomfort, and that Megan was perfectly correct in saying that a breakdown in their ability to communicate and feel in tune with each other was a deadly danger to both of them.

Janica's heart pounded, knowing that giving voice to her thought could very well make things worse between them. And that was the very last thing they needed. But if I don't say it, she told herself, if we can't communicate because of that fear of making things worse, it will complete a wall between us that will last forever. She worked to control the shaking in her voice. "We're both uncomfortable because they made us have... these sexual feelings for each other, and we've never thought about that as being part of what we are to each other." She saw Megan's brief nod, suggesting she thought that much was obvious, and went on. "We've had sex... and more sex and more sex..."

Megan bit her lip. "Yeah..."

Janica waited to see if Megan was going to say more. She tried to read Megan's expression, and gave up and continued on, growing more nervous. "...and we did it because they made us want it, so much that as much as we tried fighting it, we couldn't beat it. Now a lot of the force of it is gone, but still, last night, we were fighting what was left of it so hard that we couldn't sleep, and we had to give in, and so we're trying still harder today."

Megan gave her an I'm-not-sure-where-this-is-going look.

Janica took a deep breath. "What if we just stop fighting it?"

Megan blinked, and gave her a wide-eyed look. "Huh?"

Janica quickly said, "Look, it's not something I ever wanted, and I know how hard I fought it. But wouldn't it be a relief to stop fighting, and just live with the fact that they made this be an unwanted

part of us? And from now on we can just say, okay, it *is* part of us. Just embrace it, and surround it, and adopt it, and be what it makes us. See what I'm saying?"

Megan turned her head through a small angle and looked at Janica out of the corner of her eyes. "I *think* I know what you're saying, but I have to make totally sure, because I could really make myself feel like an idiot if I'm misunderstanding. Are you saying you think we should have sex?"

"Let's call it making love. Because I *do* love you, and I have all your life. Just never in a sexual way. But yes, that's what I'm saying, but to do it because *we* want to, not because somebody else wants us to. We can't get rid of the feelings, but we can make them something that's *ours*."

Megan looked more directly at her, remaining silent for a time. Oh shit, thought Janica, I *did* make things worse.

Finally Megan said, "And you mean right *now*?"

Cautiously, hoping she wasn't giving the last provocation for a huge fight, Janica nodded.

"And whenever we feel like it? Because it's looking like we'll be feeling like it a *lot*."

Janica nodded again, pressing her lips together as if waiting for an explosion.

What she saw on Megan's face, though, was wonder, not anger. As if the idea was falling into place for her.

Slowly, Megan reached for Janica's hand, and wrapped her fingers around it. In a choked voice, Megan said, "I always loved you too. I'm sure you know that."

Janica felt her throat tighten, and a small tear leaked from her right eye. She nodded.

And then, not sure how it had happened, Janica found herself in Megan's arms, her eyes looking at Megan's from just inches away. She leaned forward to kiss Megan, and met her lips halfway. The kiss became a series of many kisses, soft, wet, lip-clinging, much more tender and less desperate, and therefore sweeter, than in all the other times they had done it before. Janica ran her hands up and down Megan's body, tenderly, listening to the quiet, satisfied sounds Megan was making in her throat. Megan began licking Janica's neck. And it felt very natural -- something they were accustomed to by previous experience, but now in no way forced, just an expression of intimacy by two wanting to become one.

They lay on the ground now, their movements in tune without a word spoken, and the excitement built, two bodies moving together, building a union by holding, rubbing, kissing, and now using fingers and tongues in what they had learned was the most effective way. Janica could sense the orgasm coming, and held it away as long as she could, wanting this first time -- and really, in an important sense, it was the first time -- to last longer, so it would take up that much greater space in her memory after it was done. But she could hold it off only so long -- and only until Megan also exhausted her ability to hold it away. It arrived, and was as all-consuming, as intense, as any they had ever had.

They lay still, breathing hard, still locked together by arms and legs, each with eyes locked to the other from inches away. Megan gave Janica a tiny smile, looking as if a larger one lurked nearby. "Okay, that does feel better."

Janica laughed and kissed her. "No more fighting?"

Megan grinned. "Not about that." She kissed Janica back.

CHAPTER 13

If we do make it home somehow, thought Janica, what are we going to tell Mom? Because she'll know. When I visit Mom's, we're going to want to sleep in Megan's bed... Janica corrected herself, remembering that Megan must have moved out of the house decades ago -- so weird to think how much time has gone by! -- but when we visit Mom, Janica's thoughts continued, we'll want to share a bed. And Mom will know.

She ordered herself to worry about that later.

She looked around them. She kissed Megan one more time, and said, "Really, though, if we don't find some water, we'll get pretty cranky in a hurry."

They untangled themselves from each other, and both stood. Janica frowned. "The ground around here is sloped down that way," she pointed to her left. "If there are any creeks or rivers, they should be down there."

After following the slope for several minutes, they found themselves at the edge of the grove of trees, where it gave onto an open meadow. Farther down, the ground became rocky, and a small stream was visible following a meandering path through the rocks.

Janica bit her lip. "Out in the open."

Megan nodded. "I'm not seeing any men from here, but I wouldn't count on it being safe. We'd better go get a quick drink and come back here. We might find something safer later."

Janica pointed. "Let's get down to right there, that boulder we could get behind while we drink."

"Zig-zag."

"Of course."

Megan grinned at Janica. "Make love after we get some water?"

Janica laughed quietly and kissed Megan again. "After we get water *and* some better shelter. Ready?"

Megan took a deep breath, took Janica's hand and gave it a squeeze, then released it and took off at a dead run, angling left after twenty yards or so. Janica trailed her, following a different path but staying close.

Halfway to the stream, Janica whipped her head around when the whizzing sound from yesterday was repeated, and turned back in time to see Megan hit the ground, the back of her head bright red. She screamed, "Mig!!" and ran straight for her, dropping to her knees beside her.

Everything seemed unreal. Her heart pounding, her stomach sick at the amount of blood coming from Megan's head, Janica rolled Megan onto her back, ready to give CPR. She sensed no movement from

Megan, no breathing. She felt the side of Megan's neck, slippery with blood, and couldn't find a pulse. Her eyes streamed with tears, and she could only repeat, "Mig, Mig, Mig..."

She felt a blow just above her left breast, that knocked her onto her back. She tried to get up, but couldn't move from the pain. Couldn't breathe. Everything faded.

* * * * *

Artemis, the god of the hunt, knelt by the two bodies, a half-dozen men forming a semicircle behind him, looking on. "Both dead." He looked at a small screen he held in his hand, tapped it a few times with his finger. "Telemetry says it was Ares' bullet that got the new clone..."

A short man, holding an antique rifle pointed at the sky, said, "We knew that much."

Artemis glared at him. "Just making it official. You got the other clone, Demeter. Several shots were near simultaneous, but telemetry tracks the kill shot to your gun."

Demeter pumped his fist. "Yes!" He looked at the rest. "Barbecue at my place tonight."

Several of the others clapped him on the shoulder. One turned to Ares. "How do you manage to hit moving targets with that thing?" He gestured at the rifle.

Ares shrugged. "Practice." As the god of war and battle, he considered it his job to hone his skills with every weapon known. He looked down at the blonde-haired clone, the one with the new face. "I'll keep this one." He always ate his kills himself.

One of the men beside him said, "Ares, you'd share her if she was Earth-born meat, right?"

Demeter defended Ares. "Come on, that's a moot point. There hasn't been any Earth-born meat available for the last six years. And it's not likely we'll get any more."

The man shrugged. "Just wondered."

Artemis straightened up, his knees cracking. "We'll have the porters carry them back to Olympus." He looked around. "Shit, where are they?"

Demeter pointed down to the stream. "Getting a drink."

Artemis whistled for the porters' attention and summoned them.

* * * * *

Jamis, the owner, stood in the front doorway of the Giralimal Emporium, pleased at the size of the waiting crowd. "Open for business, folks. Just took delivery on the new face..."

A man at the front of the crowd interrupted him. "You got them in all forms? I'm looking for a new horse. Could use a new cow too."

Jamis grinned. "Got some of everything. I can take orders if I run out, and new stock can be in in a few days. Olympus says they're turning them out fast."

Another man stood fascinated in front of the display windows, looking at the new model of dolly. The dolly, a pretty girl with light blonde hair and that new face everyone was waiting for, smiled at him in a seductive way and rubbed her mound while thrusting her hips towards him provocatively. He said to Jamis, "Got to get me one of these."

Jamis nodded. "Let's come inside and do the paperwork. Dolly takes a couple of weeks, you know. And you'll need to provide some images of yourself, and a DNA sample, so they can do the imprinting."

The man nodded. "It's funny, she looks a little similar to the gold-haired one. Not the same, but similar in some way."

Jamis nodded again. Maybe that's the reason, he thought. When he'd first seen the new face, he'd had a sharp *deja vu* feeling, as if he'd seen it before, though he didn't know how that could be possible. Maybe it *was* the similarity to the standard gold-haired model, but that didn't seem sufficient. It was as if he had seen this exact face somewhere before, but he couldn't for the life of him think where it could have been or how it might have happened.

He shrugged, flashed a general smile at the crowd and backed into his store. "Well, come in, come in, everybody! Let's see what everybody wants."

CHAPTER 14

Mens thumbed the door opener under the front of his desk and looked up as the door whispered open, displaying his version of a smile to the young man standing nervously at the entrance. "Come in, Pietro." He gestured. "Have a seat."

"Yes, Your Eminence." Pietro nodded spastically and scuttled to the chair in front of the desk. It was hard to know how to act in a private audience with a god. Though Pietro was consciously aware he had earned this privilege.

Mens waved a negligent hand. "Dispense with that. You're a demigod now. 'Sir' will do."

"Yes, Y... Sir."

Mens shuffled some infoslabs around on his desk. "Now, since you'll be working for me, I'd like to bring you up to speed on some of the projects my office is working on. I know you know the theory -- your test scores have been outstanding, by the way -- downloading minds, uploading, imprinting, all of the things we do within the mental environment of clones. And you've also excelled in the lab, getting some hands-on experience with the principles in actual practice. As you know, Hypnos handles the technical end..." Hypnos, god of sleep, Pietro's always-busy mind reminded him. "...and pioneered the sleep-teaching technique we use for general distribution clones, while my own contributions have been on the theoretical end. Your especial strength on the theoretical side is the reason I've invited you to join my little team." He flashed something of a smile again.

"Yes... Sir. I'm grateful for the privilege, and eager to get started." He smiled back, trying to look relaxed. The smile was too quivery. He put it away.

Mens cleared his throat. "Now, of course, your actual experience with clones, other than those you've experimented with in the lab, has been limited to standard issue girlimals, virtually mindless, their bodies and what there *is* of their minds adapted to specialization in a single particular task -- physical labor, farm produce in the form of meat and milk, and of course, in the case of dollies, sexual gratification. Hypnos runs the operation that gives them those abilities."

Pietro nodded, glad to be able to give such a simple response to his new boss. He waited eagerly for Mens to start telling him things he didn't already know.

Mens continued, "But there is another type of clone, those into whom, for various purposes, we have uploaded the memories, the minds, of the original crew of Aurora. Oh, and of course, one new one. You've seen the new clones?"

Pietro nodded again. "Yes, Sir. It is really strange to see a brand new face on a girlimal."

Mens nodded in return. "Indeed. The face came from Major Megan Duchain, who arrived here about six years ago in search of her sister, Lieutenant Janica Duchain. Janica is that one with gold-colored hair."

Pietro blinked. He'd never heard names attached to the faces before.

Mens caught Pietro's surprise, and gave him a smile that was becoming more genuine from exercise. "You've reached a new level, Pietro. In the work you're going to be doing, you'll need to know the backgrounds of the crew, and of our more recent interloper. That will be a critical help to the work we do with them. Here." He picked up an infoslub from the pile, reached across and handed it to Pietro. "This contains the names of the Aurora crew, images so that you can match names with faces, and as much biographical information as we could glean from the ship's log and from hypnointerviews. You should take that with you and study it. You may open it now if you'd like."

"Yes, Sir." Pietro tapped the surface of the slab, bringing the first page to the screen, showing a list of the names, ranks, and shipboard duties of the crew members, plus basic info on Major Megan Duchain. "So Lieutenant Janica Duchain was the science officer."

Mens nodded. "Yes. Anyway, as you know, it takes five years for a clone to grow from birth to full physical maturity, after nine months in gestation, so it's only just now that clones of Megan Duchain are being released to the general public. We have, however, had units from the very first litter for a few months now, and have already conducted some experiments, making use of the downloads of Major Duchain's mind that we recorded immediately after her capture.

"For the most part, the ideas behind the experiments we do with the loaded clones come from Dionysus -- such an active imagination the man has! -- and the results have entertained the gods for years. It is, as you can guess, my office that makes them possible."

Pietro, finding the god far more affable than he would have imagined, was becoming more comfortable, enough to venture a question. "So the types of experiments, the sort of things I worked on in the lab -- they're not just for pure scientific research purposes? They've been put to a practical application?"

"Yes, some of both. Scientific research to be sure, but also, yes, practical uses. For example, you are familiar, of course, with the races. Specially trained girlimals, in dog form or horse form, race in front of an enthusiastic crowd, betting ensues, all that."

"Certainly, Sir. I've been to many races myself. Both the trained ones, as you said, and also the amateur races in which local farmers bring their own livestock to compete."

Mens nodded. "Just so. But you most likely did *not* know, because attendance is restricted to gods and demigods only, that we also race clones into whose brains we have uploaded the minds, the memories, of the Aurora crew. Each upload into the appropriate body, of course."

Pietro's eyes widened. "So... if I'm following you correctly... you race dogs who actually think they are Aurora crew members? A dog with the body of..." He glanced down at the screen of the infoslub, "...Polina Grishova really thinks it *is* Polina Grishova? It has all of Captain Grishova's memories?"

Mens smiled once more. "Precisely."

"Memories as of when, Sir?"

“Good question. We use the minds of the crew downloaded as of landfall. The memory of each crew member goes up to the moment of falling unconscious on Aurora, before our sleeping pods were disabled and we awakened.”

Pietro shook his head in wonder. “So each recalls its entire life, and the mission of Aurora, and then after landing on Freeworld and feeling woozy on the deck, it suddenly wakes up and finds it is a dog forced to race naked on all fours before a crowd of male onlookers?”

Mens’s smile broadened. He nodded.

“And... what do they make of it? I assume you monitor the discussions among them.”

“We do monitor their activities, but there aren’t any discussions. We’ve rendered them unable to communicate with each other.”

“But what happens when one of them sees another clone with its own face? Surely that would be confusing to a nearly incapacitating degree.”

“I’m sure it would be, but we avoid that. It would indeed spoil the illusion. We maintain a kennel of seven dogs, one of each crew member. And in a separate facility, seven horses. Each of *those* thinks it is one of the Aurora crew members. The horses don’t know about the dogs. And none of these ever sees another clone of any kind.”

Pietro shook his head slowly in admiration. “Amazing, Sir. I assume the purpose is total humiliation. From admired Space Force officer to mute performing animal. And sexual objects as well, of course, being forced to display their bodies naked before dozens of men.”

Mens gave Pietro an irritated look. “I should think that goes without saying. These are the women who wanted to maroon us here. But for them, we would be on our way to controlling Earth right now, instead of settling this backwater world.”

Pietro tensed, not having wanted to offend. The question of why Aurora crew members, or rather clones who believed they were crew members, were treated as they were should indeed have been so obvious as to go without saying. “I apologize for seeming dense, Sir. I really was just thinking aloud.”

Mollified, Mens nodded. “I should allow for the fact you were born here. You’ve read the history, but that’s not the same as having lived it.”

“No excuse, Sir. Neither of us is on the planet we *should* be on.” He breathed a sigh of relief when Mens smiled again. “Are there plans to return to Earth?”

“Tentative plans, yes. It would be foolish to do so with our current technology. There are dozens of us versus billions of well-armed women on Earth. We do have a project, through Ares’ office, seeking to find a way to overcome our disadvantage in numbers, but any such breakthrough is probably centuries away.”

"I hope it's in my lifetime, Sir." Pietro switched to the subject of a question that had occurred to him. "Are you able to measure the emotional reactions of the crew in either or both formats? The racing dogs and horses?"

"Yes, and we're very pleased with the results. Each has an EMI..." Pietro knew the acronym for Emotion Monitor Implant. "...in its brain, which can distinguish among a wide variety of positive and negative emotions, and the readings we receive can be expressed as a number on a scale from ten, a delirium of joy and happiness, down to minus ten, the depth of despair, emotional pain, and hopelessness. We're working to find way to push the readings ever lower. The racing dogs and horses are quite miserable, their EMI readings holding steady at an average of minus seven." He handed another infoslub across to Pietro. "In our experiments we have gone still lower in the EMI index, but due to the entertainment value, we plan to keep the dog and horse racing program running indefinitely."

"How long *have* the races been going on, sir?"

Mens paused for thought. "What is it... about twenty years, I believe." He smiled once more. "We'd keep it running in perpetuity, but given the longevity of the human body, two hundred fifty years is probably the limit. The clones were brand new at the start, far younger than the crew members inhabiting their brains thought they were, but there is still that limit."

Pietro blinked. "But still, long-term indeed. Don't they rebel? Go on strike, refuse to run?"

"No, for a number of reasons. That actually did happen in the first version of the experiment, so we terminated that and made some tweaks. Each clone now has electrical stimulation devices implanted in its rectum and vagina, to give painful shocks if the clone seems not to be giving its best effort. Even that proved insufficient in the second experiment, so we added some psychological conditioning by a technique similar to sleep-teaching. Hypnos handled the technical work on that, of course. If any clone refuses to run, or refuses to eat, in case you were going to ask about hunger strikes next, it feels an intense anxiety, which builds gradually with continued refusal, similar to that in an alcoholic denied the opportunity for a drink in a stressful situation. And when the clone finally gives in, the small sense of relief is submerged under a heavier sense of shame for having resisted. The combination of pain and unbearable emotion seems to work well. No clone has succeeded in prolonged resistance, nor attempted it more than twice."

"Oh! I just remembered about the new one! Megan Duchain. Since you now have an eighth model, are you planning to add her to the kennel of racing dogs? And the horses?"

Mens shook his head. "We're not going to fold her into that particular experiment, no. It's been stable for a long time, and a new clone, whose presence would be unexplainable to the current clones, most of whom don't know who it is and none of whom would have any idea how it got there, would almost certainly be disruptive. It's inevitable that, even without any of them being able to speak with the new clone, at least one of them, particularly Janica Duchain, might realize that a rescue had been attempted, and though it obviously had failed, a successful one could come later. It would give hope to any of the clones that reach that conclusion, and hope is exactly what we don't want." He paused. "Of course, we have other experiments in mind for Major Duchain. We've already completed one, and started on a couple of others. The goal in the first one was to determine whether we could imprint the Duchain sisters on each other. The standard sexual obsession."

Pietro's eyes widened. "Imprinting on a loaded clone? But that can't be possible! You can only establish an imprint in a blank mind, not in an already-existing personality. All our textslabs are clear on that." He stopped himself from pointing out that Mens himself had written the textslabs.

"Well, we find on occasion our theories can be wrong. Dionysus suggested the idea for the experiment with Major Duchain to begin with, and I admit I was skeptical. But I started turning some thoughts over in my head, and it occurred to me it *might* be possible, if the mental resistance to the imprinting could be reduced somewhat.

"You've read, in your texts, my theories on the immune system of the mind, similar to the immune system of the physical body. It acts to prevent the mind being controlled from outside without the mind's consent. In standard hypnosis, the hypnotist does appear to control the subject's mind, but in normal cases only because the subject has voluntarily permitted such control, and even then the permission is quickly revoked if the hypnotist tries to take his control too far. Such acts of hypnosis bypass the mind's immune system because the subject, in a sense, has turned the system off.

"But just as the body's immune system can be suppressed from outside, by various environmental factors or by specially designed pathogens, I came to believe that the mind's system could be suppressed as well. I spent six years developing a two-pronged approach: one part of the protocol consisted of a chemical intervention, a cocktail of drugs that turned out, indeed, to reduce the mind's protection from outside forces, and the second part consisted of a certain amount of psychological preparation to make the mind more suggestible.

"All of this was aimed at an initial experiment along the lines of the proposal by Dionysus, at the time Major Duchain was captured. The idea caught the attention of Zeus, who was eager to see Dionysus's plan put into action, and Zeus assigned to my office the task of making it work. So that is what I spent those six years on, with the work coming to fruition, fortunately, at just the time the first clones from Major Duchain became available.

"Dionysus's proposal was that we take clones of the Duchain sisters, upload the minds of the two sisters into their respective clones, and then imprint them on each other -- give them, in other words, an insatiable sexual need for each other, meanwhile also making them amenable to sexual use by the gods.

"Obviously their minds would be *very* resistant to such an imprint. But the rewards, in terms of emotional distress, would be great indeed. The Duchain sisters would react strongly to their helplessness at finding that a force from within their own minds was imposing an incestuous relationship on them that neither of them desired nor approved.

"I felt the drug cocktail alone *should* be sufficient, based on preliminary tests with loaded clones during that six year period as I developed the treatment, but I thought that the addition of the psychological preparation would make success a near-certainty.

"When clones of Major Duchain became available at last, I decided to include, in the setup of the experiment, the imprinting both with and without the psychological softening-up, to determine whether the latter was really a necessary part of the treatment. With the Megan Duchain clone, after uploading her mind into it, I used both the drug cocktail and the psychological intervention, while with the Janica Duchain clone, I used the drug cocktail alone..."

Pietro was feeling relaxed enough in Mens' presence that he did something he wouldn't have tried at the start of the session: he interrupted. "What does the 'psychological intervention' consist of?"

"Dionysus helped with that. In interviews with Major Duchain before the experiment began, he presented himself as being more helpful than she had expected, revealing a large amount of information and even carrying out, in good nature, one of Major Duchain's requests, having to do with the dolly in her possession when she was captured." Mens smiled. "That part took some doing. We went to the farm on which the dolly lived, and borrowed it from its owner... what was the name... Jason, and spent an hour or so reinforcing the dolly's memory of Major Duchain -- after all, the dolly hadn't seen the major in six years, and Major Duchain needed to see that memory in the dolly's eyes, since the major thought that at most a few days had gone by since her capture."

Puzzled, Pietro almost interrupted again, but decided he could probably read about the circumstances of Major Duchain's capture in the infoslub.

Mens issued a raspy chuckle, surprising Pietro again. "Dion took some pride in his ability to encourage Major Duchain to form desired conclusions in her mind without actually telling her any lies. It was something of a game to him. Most usefully, he persuaded her that her sister was dead, and then managed to make her grateful for that." Mens rolled his eyes and grinned. "Be careful around Dion, Pietro. He'll convince you your left foot is missing. In any case, with Major Duchain, his efforts did help dial down the emotional temperature a few degrees. The goal was that Major Duchain, while not in any way trusting us, was led to relax her vigilance, and in consequence her resistance to hypnotic suggestion was relaxed as well. The drugs did the rest.

"As I said, we didn't make use of any of that prior preparation in the case of Lieutenant Duchain -- Janica. We simply used the drugs, followed by the standard imprinting procedure. It was my belief that the protocol used on Megan Duchain would be successful, but that the less complete one, with drugs alone, used on Janica Duchain might go either way. But in either case, the results would be of interest. If imprinting succeeded on Janica Duchain, as it turned out it did, then each sister would be sexually obsessed with the other. If the imprint failed, Megan Duchain would experience uncontrollable sexual need for her sister that was not reciprocated.

"There were some additional preparations we made, including various related brain implants and drug-aided hypnotic suggestions, but you can read about the details in your slab." He gestured at the more recent one he'd handed Pietro. "Let me show you the initial results."

He touched a panel on his desk, and after several selections an image appeared in a large cube at the side of the room. A clone of Janica Duchain, about half life-size, appeared, sitting on a bed, as another clone entered the room: Megan Duchain. The two stared at each other briefly, each looking stunned, and then the Janica-clone made a hand gesture towards the Megan-clone. The two then rushed to each other, embraced, and then initiated sexual activity that grew steadily more intense. Mens touched the panel again, and the image faded.

"Remarkable," said Pietro, who seemed to find it difficult getting comfortable in his chair for a moment. "Did they have any sort of sexual relationship beforehand?"

Mens shook his head. "It was very important to establish the absence of any such relationship, of course. We questioned both clones thoroughly in a hypnotically absent state, so they, of course, couldn't recall the questioning afterward. And no, neither had ever for a moment felt any sexual attraction nor considered any such intimacy with her sister."

"What was that gesture?"

Mens smiled. "Dieter's idea, and a very good one. Dieter is on my staff, and will be one of your coworkers. He thought that, in the absence of any ability to communicate, Megan Duchain, who knew about the existence of clones, including in dolly form, would think she was simply meeting one of them, rather than her actual sister. So we implanted a false memory in each of them of a hand gesture they could use that would convince Megan Duchain she was really seeing Janica."

Pietro shook his head in wonder. "Ingenious. I'm eager to meet Dieter. You said the experiment was terminated?"

"Yes. It turned out a little disappointing in the long run. Reading of their emotional reactions from the EMI were acceptably low at first, between minus eight and minus nine, but gradually rose to average around minus four. The two subjects seemed, especially in certain circumstances, to take comfort from each other, including in a sexual context. In the end, we decided to end it, but to try to gather just a little more information before the clones were terminated. We managed to cancel most of the imprinting -- not all of it, as I wanted to leave a small residual trace -- and turned the two clones loose in a hunt. I asked the hunters to hold off on the kill for a day, because I wanted to see what happened under that sort of stress. The result bore out our earlier observations: Their sexual relationship had become not only mutually agreeable, but an actual source of happiness, with the EMI reading reaching positive figures. Certainly not what we wanted."

Pietro frowned. "So you're not going to try that again?"

"Oh, quite the contrary. When any experiment doesn't work out, you simply adjust the initial conditions and try again. Always remember that, Pietro."

Pietro felt his face flush. He should, he realized, have known that. "So the new experiments you spoke of are revised versions of the original?"

Mens nodded, then looked at his timer. "Why don't you come back, after you've finished studying those slabs? We can pick up from there next time."

Pietro stood, just before Mens himself did. They shook hands. A lot to think about, Pietro told himself.

CHAPTER 15

Megan stretched groggily and opened her eyes. The hold of sleep on her was still strong enough that she didn't feel ready to move.

Her memory returned, and with it a sense of alarm. Shit!! she thought. They hit me with a sleep dart! They must have been watching the ship! Sissy, we have to get out of here...

Confusion flooded her when she realized she was in an enclosed room, not outdoors. She and Sissy had been near the ship when Sissy went down with a sleep dart. Then one hit Megan. She'd tried to pick it out of her, hoping she hadn't got a full dose. They must have caught me! she screamed at herself.

She tried to rise, and felt physical confusion on top of mental. Something seemed wrong with her body.

Her jaw dropped as her arm came into view. She froze into immobility.

Her arm ended at mid forearm. There was no hand. The stub of her arm ended in a padded paw of the type she had seen on the "dogs."

No, she thought, no, no, no, no...

In near panic, she kicked her legs into view. As she'd feared, both legs ended above the knee, with paws similar to those on her arms -- she found that both arms were shortened now.

They turned me into a dog! Why?? And what did they do with Sissy?

And where are my clothes?? she asked herself, growing still more frightened and angry. There was no sign of her flight suit anywhere. Nor her shorts, or shirt. Nor her underwear. Megan gritted her teeth in fury. The violation of her privacy involved in stripping her, knowing that men, the "gods," had done it, angered her almost more than the involuntary surgery to which she had been subjected. No man had ever seen her naked, and she'd intended that none ever would.

She whipped her head around at an unexpected noise, and saw that a roomful of other "dogs," surgically reduced women like herself, were behind her, all apparently asleep. One of them had made a snorting sound in her sleep. That had been the noise.

The dogs all shared the same large, padded mat, about fifteen feet square, that Megan had been sleeping on. Megan tried to roll onto her other side for a better look, and the discomfort on her backside resolved into a tail that seemed to have been grafted, somehow, onto her backside at the upper end of her buttocks. Like the tails all of the "dogs" she had seen had sported. Damn it, she thought, damn it!

The oddest thing was that though she hadn't realized the tail was there, its presence felt somehow natural, as if it belonged there. Certainly there was no pain from it, nor from her amputations. Obviously some recovery time had been involved. She had absolutely no sense of time having passed since being shot with the dart while trying to help Sissy. But clearly weeks must have gone by.

She rolled the other way, off the mat, and, much more easily than she expected, got up to stand on her four shortened limbs. While feeling very odd, it somehow also felt natural to be standing that way. Like the tail, it seemed right. More mysteries to attribute to the unremembered time since the dart.

She regarded her surroundings, struggling to stay calm. She was in a room that had no visible door, nor any windows. Soft light came from glow-globes in the ceiling. There were bowls at one side of the room, each seeming full of food or white liquid she assumed must be milk, each one directly below a nozzle from the ceiling that Megan suspected must refill them. There was a portable toilet of an unusual squat design... it occurred to Megan that the toilet was shaped in just such a way that she would be able to use it, straddling it with her abbreviated legs. There were three metal pipes, a horizontal one hanging from two vertical ones attached to the ceiling, whose purpose eluded Megan until she saw the drains below them. Shower, she decided. There was nothing else in the room, no furniture of any sort.

Examining the other women, the clones, more closely, she saw that there were seven of them. More specifically, there was one for each Aurora crew member. The chocolate-skinned one cloned from Tanisha Ologwu was easy to spot, and the black-haired one based on Heather Lopez. Further away, Megan saw, with a tightness in the pit of her stomach, was the golden hair of her sister Janica.

Each “dog” had a tail, like Megan’s, matching her skin tone.

Megan was startled by a sudden clacking sound, which was repeated a second later and then ceased. The clones began stirring -- it must have been a wake-up signal, Megan decided -- and all quickly rolled to their feet.

The clones immediately headed, on all fours, over to the food bowls, sharing them because there were three of them for the seven clones. Each clone, Megan saw, had the usual blank, placid stare of any of the “girlimals” Megan had seen, with the exception of the dollies.

Megan had avoided looking directly at the clone with Janica’s face -- she had become accustomed to seeing it reproduced everywhere she looked, but she still fumed inside that Janica’s genes had been used in such a way. But the Janica-clone came into her field of view anyway, trotting on all fours toward the food like the others. Some extra degree of alertness in the clone’s face suggested to Megan that perhaps it was Sissy, though she reminded herself Sissy was a dolly, not a dog. But if they turned *me* into a dog, she thought, maybe they did it to Sissy too.

Megan started to speak, and got as far as “S...” when the dog with Janica’s face caught sight of her and suddenly stopped dead, with a very non-clone-like look of shock and amazement on her face. The Janica-clone managed to whisper a single word: “Mig!!”

Megan felt the world spinning, and she had to spread her legs apart, all four of them, to keep from falling over. She could only think: It’s Janny it’s Janny it’s Janny...

Before Megan could say a word in response, she managed to notice that none of the other “dogs” were paying the slightest attention to her or to Janica. Though some were facing in her direction, all remained intent on eating. Finally Megan was able to choke out: “Janny! It’s really you!”

Janica came towards Megan at a stumbling run, and stopped a few feet away, still looking stunned, seeming only to have wanted a closer look. A hug, of course, was in no way possible. "Mig! How did you get here?? What are you doing here??" Janica stopped speaking suddenly, a look of disappointment spreading over her face. "Just one more thing that doesn't make any sense. Now I know for *sure* this whole thing is a dream."

Megan shook her head quickly. "It's not, Janny. Or if it is, I'm the one having it. I *am* here. I came to rescue you. And the others..." Megan looked again at the others, still lapping up food from the bowls, still with no show of concern for her or for the drama playing out in front of them. Several, she noticed irrelevantly, were wagging their tails. Still do not know how they do that, thought Megan.

Standing there staring at Janica, Megan became aware that the muscles of her own buttocks were twitching in alternation, rhythmically. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw her tail waving back and forth. Is it automatically going to do that when I'm happy or excited? she wondered. Like when I see the sister I came light years to try to find? She looked back at Janica, still stunned that she was here.

Amid the inevitable pushing among the clones for the limited number of bowls, tempers flared slightly on occasion, and sporadic yips and barks could be heard, those amazingly authentic barks such as Megan had heard from Jason's "dogs."

Janica inclined her head towards the others and sighed. "That's the kind of thing I'm talking about. Impossible stuff. None of them have said a single word the whole time, and none of them even seem to recognize me. Not even Heather! They just act like dogs. It doesn't make sense. It *has* to be a dream." Tears began flowing from her eyes. "Except I can't wake up!"

"The whole time? Thirty years??"

Janica gave Megan an are-you-crazy look. "Three *days*, Mig. I woke up here, and I can't figure out what I'm doing here or what the hell happened." She blinked, another part of what Megan said evidently having played back in her head. "And what do you mean, you came to rescue me? How could you know, and how could you get here in three days? See, that kind of thing is why I know it's a dream." Her eyes narrowed. "And why do you look older? You look at least twenty. You're, what, fifteen? No, sixteen."

Megan, desperate to break through Janica's resistance to reality -- Megan was sure she was going to need help from someone who actually knew what was really happening -- Megan said, "I'm forty-six, Janny. I told you, you've been gone for thirty years. So it makes sense I look older, right? Think about it: are dreams that self-consistent?"

Megan turned as an odd sound came from the area where the clones -- apparently they must be clones, not the real crew, into whose midst Janica had been thrown for whatever reason -- and gasped in shock. One of them, the Heather one, had her face pressed firmly in between the buttocks of the Sabrina Marion clone, and it appeared, from the movements Megan could see, that the Heather was licking the Sabrina's vaginal lips. The Sabrina had her eyes closed, her mouth open, obviously very aroused by the attention.

What shocked Megan most of all was her own reaction. She felt a need building in her, a need to do the same thing she was witnessing. To lick and to be licked. Some dog-like behavior Megan had not previously seen on this planet seemed to have been programmed into these clones -- and, in some way Megan couldn't fathom, programmed into her as well. It *had* to be that. Megan enjoyed oral sex on occasion, but not to the point that seeing it done would make her wish she was doing it. She'd never been a voyeur in any sense. The men of this world must have done something to her beyond just surgery. This was a liberty they had taken with her mind, somehow, in the same way they had taken liberties with her body.

Megan was actually getting wet. And she didn't know why.

Feeling her face flush, she looked at Janica, whose face was also bright red. Janica whispered, "We all do that. I don't know why. One more thing that doesn't make sense."

"We?"

Janica bit her lip and nodded. "There's this really weird... push, inside. Like I... want to even though I *don't* want to..."

"I know. You don't need to explain." Janica's words had perfectly described what Megan was feeling.

In all the weirdness, at least something seemed to fit together in Megan's mind. "They messed with you, Janny. Your mind, not just your body, and that fits with thirty years of memory being taken away. I mean, if they can make you do this kind of thing..." She gestured once more towards the clones, and the sex scene in progress. "...then blanking out thirty years in your brain is no trouble at all!"

Janica stared at Megan a long time, and finally said a long, stretched out, "Why??"

"I don't know that, Janny. But you know *who*, don't you? The Hercules cult! Those men you were taking into exile on Aurora. They got loose somehow, and they're responsible for all this." She swept her short arm to indicate their surroundings. "You know what kinds of things they were doing to women back on Earth. This is way beyond that, but it's their style! And I've already seen women here, with surgery to look just like these ones do, these... Did you figure out these are clones? That doesn't fit with your three-days thing either, but if you're willing to believe thirty years have gone by, they've had plenty of time to make *those*." She gestured at the clones again.

Now all of the clones were engaged in back-door oral sex, in three pairs. Megan felt a strong tingling between her legs, and a tickle as a dribble of sexual juices ran down the inside of her thigh. And to her intense shock, she suddenly realized that she not only wanted to do what she was seeing the clones doing, she wanted, most of all, to be doing it with Janica. She had already felt afraid of what was happening inside herself, but this took the fear to a new level. She had never, ever imagined having sexual feelings for Janica. Wishing for intimate, erotic contact with Janica, to Megan, was the same as wishing her food would dance. The idea was too strange to have ever entered her head.

Trying to slap her mind onto a different track, she said, "You hungry? We should eat." Even that brought unwanted associations to Megan's mind, and she decided immediately not to tell Janica that

the meat in the food was not only human, but that some of it was from clones who were literally Janica's identical twin sisters. And that the same was true of the milk.

It was food, though, and was clearly all they were going to get. There weren't any alternative menus on a table with an attentive waiter ready to take their order. And Megan was really hungry. She trotted over to the nearest bowl.

There was, as it had not occurred to Megan until this moment, no alternative to eating it the same way the clones had: like dogs. Suppressing a groan that might have put Janica out of the mood to eat in that same way, Megan gritted her teeth, and bent down to eat straight from the bowl, to encourage Janica to do the same, then remembered Janica had already been doing it for three days. Or perhaps thirty years, as the case may be.

The last of the food and drink vanished, as Megan let Janica have the final scraps, leaving Megan slightly unsatisfied and thinking they'd probably better get in on the feeding earlier the next time.

No, thought Megan, with a sinking sensation. That unsatisfied feeling isn't from food. She looked at Janica and felt, now, an intense gravitational attraction, pulling her towards Janica as if a basic force of physics were controlling Megan, something that couldn't be evaded or ignored.

She looked at Janica's eyes, seeking help. Janny knows what I'm feeling right now, Megan told herself. She said so. She's felt that same need, that same helplessness. That thing the men did to us, put inside our heads. She tried hard to hold Janica's eyes, but her own eyes kept flicking back towards Janica's backside.

In a hoarse whisper, feeling her face burning, she stammered, "Janny, I... Could I... Is it okay..."

She saw then that Janica's eyes were wide, her mouth open, her breath coming in brief pants. Janica nodded her head spastically, and closed her eyes. "Please, do it, do it, do it..."

Megan shuffled as quickly as she could around and behind Janica, and saw that Janica's vaginal slit, very swollen, was shining with milky beads, some already dripping down to her thighs. Janica was so aroused she couldn't stand still. Her hips were quivering, twitching.

It was, for a time, Megan's last observation of anything outside herself, outside her own need. She moved forward and pushed her face hard against Janica's butt, her tongue reaching. Janica shifted her stance slightly, arching her back to bring her vaginal lips within easier reach for Megan.

Megan began lapping eagerly, pushing her face against Janica so hard she could feel Janica's buttocks squeezing her nose closed, so that she had to time her licks around her breathing. She knew the tip of her nose was pressed directly against Janica's anus, but she didn't care. She listened to Janica's uneven, gasping breathing, for signals of whether she was hitting just the right spot. She forced her tongue between the folds, now wet with different fluids from the two of them, searching for Janica's clit, finding it more by listening to Janica's reaction than by feel, licking around it, caressing it with her tongue, riding with Janica's movements, her spasming hips, until Janica's entire body quaked and she cried out.

Megan experienced one single instant of elation, a feeling of success, and then it was drowned by wave after wave of shame. This is JANNY's butt my face is in, she screamed at herself. How could you, Megan?? What if Mother saw? Megan felt the full strength of the memories of every time in her life she had disappointed her mother, had done something she had known was wrong, had blindly gone ahead and done something she had known she shouldn't do.

She dropped onto her side, hiding her face as well as she could with her arms, and lay there and cried, her body shaking with the overwhelming shame. She could hear Janica crying in the same way.

CHAPTER 16

Pietro looked away from the image of the weeping dogs as Mens began speaking. "We're much more satisfied with the direction this experiment is taking, this and the revised version of the dolly experiment. The EMI readings are fluctuating between minus eight and minus nine. Carlo, another member of my team, had suggested that we had been using shame incorrectly in the earlier experiment. As you must have read by now..." Mens paused and raised an eyebrow.

Pietro responded, "The details of the imprinting of the Duchain sisters? Yes, Sir."

Mens nodded and continued, "We'd used shame to shape behavior -- you know, perform this action or you will feel ashamed for not doing it -- and it was effective as far as achieving the goal, but it left both dollies with positive feelings when they *did* perform correctly. And as I have mentioned before, sexual activity, which the EMIs told us caused very negative reactions at first, as the sisters had never before had sexual feelings towards each other and were very embarrassed, gradually became a source of comfort, and in the end, during the hunt, after the imprinting had been reduced, the urge towards sexual activity remained and became something very positive. It was Carlo's suggestion that shame be used in a different way. Taking advantage of the natural tendency towards feeling shame following impermissible sex, we conditioned into the subjects a stronger reaction, using hypnotic suggestion to increase the strength of the natural shame reaction approximately five-fold.

"At the same time, we wanted to vary the intervals between episodes of sexual activity. In the new 'dog' experiment, from which you have just seen video recordings, we used a lighter degree of imprinting, still strong but less all-consuming, so that the subjects would last a longer time between uncontrollable sexual urges, very specific ones in this case, in order to give the subjects plenty of time to reflect on the fact of being dogs. In that experiment, their attraction towards each other builds slowly over a period of hours, eventually reaching the point of being irresistible. They have oral sex, in the format you have seen, about twice daily, alternating giving and receiving, and, of course, experience the powerful emotional reaction afterward.

"We left them able to speak this time, so that they would be very conscious of being different from the background girlimals, causing them to feel isolated and threatened. What I would like to see, what I anticipate may occur, is that, under the stress of fighting a losing battle against their mutual sexual needs, and the powerful negative explosion of emotion that always follows giving in to those needs, they will seek refuge in a rejection of their own humanity and identification with the surrounding dogs, who all seem to take their sexual habits casually and cheerfully. I believe the two subjects will, over time, cease speaking to each other, and will communicate only minimally by barking, a sign that they have come to think of themselves as dogs. Yet deep within, they will know they are human, and the conflict between two contradictory self-images will further depress their internal emotional environment. We shall see if that happens."

"And you've said there is a new version of the dolly experiment?"

Mens nodded. "Yes, with the new shift in strategy, the more effective use of shame. Let's look in on that one. This will be a live feed." Mens touched the controls on his console again. The images of a roomful of dogs wavered and faded, replaced with the image of two unmaimed women, the Duchain

sisters in dolly form. They were in an intense sexual embrace, each with left arm tightly around the other while the right hand stimulated the other's sex, legs interlocked, hips twitching spastically, lips locked together in a passionate kiss, both of them moaning and gasping continuously.

Mens smiled. "I knew we'd catch them in the act. They usually are. We have left the male interruptions out of the scenario this time -- all of the gods made use of the subjects once each during the initial experiment, and have moved on to other interests. So the subjects have been left entirely on their own. We also allowed them to speak, as in the dog experiment, so there was no need to give them the thumb-gesture memory -- they can establish their identities for each other without it. In this version we have managed to increase the strength of the imprint slightly, and they have sex as many as fifteen times daily -- followed, as in the dog experiment, with an artificially intensified burst of shame..."

The two sisters suddenly spasmed and screamed in orgasm, their bodies vibrating so violently that the bed itself seemed in danger. And immediately following climax, they broke the embrace mutually, rolled to face away from each other, each adopting a fetal curl, and wept inconsolably.

"...as you can see." Mens laughed briefly at the excellent timing. "Before long they will roll towards each other and begin again, not for comfort but because, as much as they hate it, their imprinting is far too strong to control. Unless they fall asleep -- they do that three or four times daily, for hours at a time, out of exhaustion. They do also stop for food several times daily -- that's another imperative we programmed into them, since otherwise they might starve. And we draw the bath for them occasionally. It always looks as though each wants to bathe alone, but shortly after one enters the bath the other joins her, and bathing each other soon turns, not surprisingly, to sex again."

"How long before you terminate the experiment to take stock and make adjustments for the next one?"

Mens looked at the image of the crying women thoughtfully. "EMI readings have been almost ideal, hovering around minus nine, and have remained quite steady. We could hardly picture them being unhappier than they are currently. I'd like to keep this going as long as that persists. In fact, we are thinking of expanding the experiment."

"How so, Sir?"

"To accommodate the other six Aurora crew members, in pairs. We're drafting the protocols now. In each case, as in the current Duchain experiment, compulsive sex would be followed by a temporarily crippling, artificially enhanced burst of negative emotion, all the more upsetting because the subjects will remain unable to control their sexual urges despite knowing the next episode will affect them the same way. We actually have one pairing ready to go. We found, during hypnotic debriefing of the crew, that two of them, Sabrina Marion and Polina Grishova, are purely heterosexual in orientation, with no erotic attraction to women at all. Not surprising we would find two such in a crew of seven, as that comes close to the proportion of the general female population. They will be imprinted on each other, to the same degree as you just saw with the Duchain sisters. In the case of Marion and Grishova, they will be conditioned to feel intensified distaste and disgust after each sexual episode.

"For the others, in the absence of natural antipathy to sexual contact, we're working on implanting false memories. Heather Lopez and Gretel Schweiz will recall an argument over a prized possession of one of them accidentally damaged by the other, which led to an argument that escalated to a physical

altercation, after which they only spoke to each other when their duties required.” Mens smiled. “Each will recall herself as the injured party, the one whose favorite treasure was broken by the other. After each round of sex, each will be conditioned to feel an intensified burst of anger, and self-loathing for being unable to control her unexplained sexual cravings.

“In the case of Tanisha Ologwu and Aoife O’Lonigan, each will be given an intense distaste for the other. O’Lonigan will be given a dislike of Africans in general, and in particular will recall that throughout the mission she felt Ologwu was unqualified, a poor leader, and that Ologwu treated her unfairly. Ologwu will be given a dislike of redheads, of whom O’Lonigan is the only one, and a memory of O’Lonigan being obnoxious, uncooperative, and occasionally a discipline problem. Also, her consciousness of O’Lonigan being the crew member farthest below her in rank will be enhanced, and paired with contempt for their class difference. Each will be completely unable to understand why she is sexually attracted to the other, nor why she is unable to prevent herself from acting on it. And each time they have sex, each will feel intense hate for the other afterward. They will, however, each be inhibited from physically injuring the other. As will Schweiz and Lopez, of course.”

Pietro grinned. “I’d love to hear some of the conversations between them. In any of the pairs.”

Mens shook his head. “Not possible, at least not in this round of experiments. For each pair we will be establishing a communication block, similar to that used in the first Duchain experiment. We came to feel that communication was needed for the Duchains, because Megan’s presence is so inexplicable to Janica that there is a danger of her discounting the reality of it -- as you just saw in the dog experiment, where Janica assumed, at first, it was a dream, but now appears to have been convinced otherwise, with the help of Megan’s explanations. Megan’s ability to tell Janica how she came to be there is crucial. In the first experiment, the belief on Janica’s part that what she was seeing couldn’t possibly really be happening probably muted the natural negative emotion that would otherwise have accompanied her inability to prevent her erotic coupling with her sister. That may very well be why that experiment failed: Janica would experience natural shame in even dreaming about sex with her sister, but would eventually adapt it with the rationalization that we have little control over our dreams. Add to that the fact that Megan was aware of the existence of clones, and of dollies in particular, and may not have been able to entirely rid her mind of the suspicion that Janica might not really be who she seems, and we see all the disadvantages of the two sisters being unable to communicate.

“But in the case of the other pairs, none of those problems arise. Unlike the case of Megan Duchain, who wandered around the settlement and became familiar with clones before being caught, all of the Aurora crew’s minds were downloaded at a time before our clones even existed, so none of them would ever imagine the crewmate she is seeing is anyone other than whom she appears to be. And no member of any of those pairs is surprised in any way by the other’s presence. Their memories, in every case, run up to a point at which all seven were together on the ship, so there is nothing inexplicable about waking up in the presence of one of the others. And of course, there are positive advantages to the communication block. It is always possible one member of a pair might say to the other something that brings the situation into a new light, perhaps a memory that doesn’t fit with the established story created by implanted memories, particularly in the case of the Lopez/Schweiz experiment, in which the subjects’ implanted memories contradict each other. But without the ability to communicate, that can’t happen.”

“Oh, and nothing like the Duchain sisters’ hand gesture is needed for these pairs either.”

“Exactly. That was introduced due to our anticipation that Megan would surely think she was simply seeing another clone, which, again, doesn’t apply to any of the others.”

Pietro nodded. “Are there other experiments being considered?”

“In early planning stages, yes. We have, for example, Mikael’s suggestion that we give one of a pair of crew members the same supercharged lactation that our cows have, and then make it impossible for the other to obtain food *except* from the other’s breasts. We have the Duchain sisters in mind for that one, but may expand it to the others, again in pairs. It’s an intriguing idea.”

“It certainly is. May I work on that project, Sir?”

Mens nodded. “By all means.” Mens stood, ending the audience, and extended his hand. “Tomorrow, you’ll meet the rest of the team. I look forward to your contributions to our efforts.”

“I’m eager to get started, Sir.”

* * * * *

Pietro shrugged off his tunic and hung it in the closet, then went to the kitchen to punch up a cocktail on the drink panel. His quarters, on the uppermost floor of Olympus among the suites reserved for demigods, were beginning to feel like home already. Each god had his own estate in the province surrounding Olympus, and that, Pietro thought, must be very nice. He was happy with his suite, though.

In the corner, his dolly, one of the new models cloned, he now knew, from Megan Duchain, quivered with excitement, looking at him with desperate longing and a whimper of need. It was still holding the cube with Pietro’s image that kept it company in his absence, but in a negligent way, something it didn’t need now that Pietro himself was present.

While he started his drink, he ordered up a dinner from the food panel. In the few seconds before it appeared, he looked again at the dolly. What seemed to be an important thought bubbled just millimeters below the surface of his mind, but he couldn’t quite bring it up to consciousness.

His dinner finished, he thumbed the release button in the wall for the dolly. With a squeal of ecstasy, it hurled itself at him, wrapping itself around him and planting rapid-fire kisses all around his face. Gradually sinking lower along his body, with its hand caressing his crotch, it finally unbuttoned and pulled down his pants, and his underwear, and took his erection into her mouth, sucking with her eyes closed, making contented noises, while he gasped at the intense sensation. He enjoyed all of the many modes of sexual contact the dolly knew, but it had already learned that he liked oral sex best.

An hour later, lying on the floor naked with the dolly curled around him, apparently asleep, the elusive thought finally burst through to the surface, startling him enough to stir the dolly, though not bringing it all the way out of sleep -- it only wriggled slightly against him, nuzzled his chin with her cheek, and subsided.

Why, he thought, couldn’t we do that? Is there some impossibility I’m overlooking?

It was already clear that a loaded mind, in a clone, could accept an imprint. In that first experiment with the Duchain sisters, each had been rendered unable to control her sexual urges, with each other and with any man who came by. Yet, aside from those unstoppable compulsions, each still maintained some degree of unity with her body, a control she could exercise at times when the compulsion was not in effect, and even, to some extent, when it *was* operating. Each could decide to lift her arm, wiggle her fingers, could decide to use the toilet when needed, and could even, when the compulsion made her unable to prevent herself from engaging in sex, make a decision about what kind of sex it should be, and felt herself issuing the commands to her body to make the movements that the compulsion required.

Why couldn't we make the mind of Janica Duchain, or of Sabrina Marion, or any of the others, mere passengers, mere observers, in their own bodies? Why couldn't the body of my dolly, here, carry with it all of the lifetime of memories of Megan Duchain, and a sense that it *is* Megan Duchain, yet have no sense of connection with what the body of the dolly is doing? Be able only to watch, to take the input of the senses of sight, hearing, touch, smell, taste, to be aware of what is happening, but utterly unable to affect it? To have no sense that when the dolly moves, that she, Megan, is making her body do that?

And why just dollies? Why not make every clone, in dog form, horse, cow, pig, contain the conscious mind of the crew member on whom the body is based? And not just in the lab, but in every clone in every farmer's field or kitchen? And all of them only able to experience the senses of the body, but not affect it, as though every movement was performed by someone else inside the body over whom they had no control?

And we're so close to that! That first Duchain experiment showed we can make a clone, who thinks it is a crew member, do things the crew member desperately wishes she could stop doing. Why not make the body's disconnection from the mind's will complete?

Pietro disentangled himself from the dolly, led it back to the kitchen and confined it there, then rushed to his office to begin tapping notes into his slab.

CHAPTER 17

Mens sat back from his desk, his eyes wide, his mouth curving into the most genuine smile Pietro had seen from him. “That is really an outstanding idea, Pietro. I confess I have no idea whether it can be done, but we’ve recently done a number of things I’d thought couldn’t be done. If you’re successful...” Mens frowned. “Wait. How can we know whether we *have* been successful? If a crew member is along as a pure passenger in a clone’s body, and is unable to affect the behavior of the clone, what’s our evidence she’s really there? If it’s really been done as you’re describing it, by that very fact we wouldn’t be able to see any proof of it in the clone’s behavior.”

“No proof in the *behavior*, correct, but I believe the EMIs, the emotion monitor implants, will show it.” Pietro was remotely aware that he had now reached the level of comfort with Mens that he could actually lecture him. “In a normal dolly, say, I don’t know that this has been looked at before, but I believe an EMI would register exuberant joy when its owner makes use of it. But if the dolly were carrying, say, Captain Grishova’s mind, there would be conflicting emotions, with Grishova’s mind being appalled at what her body is doing. Similarly, when a normal dolly is left on its own, unable to meet its need to gratify its owner, it would be emotionally crushed, while one carrying a crew member’s mind would have that emotion mixed with relief. We would be able to measure these things.”

Mens pounded his desk, startling Pietro. “Yes! Pietro, I want you to start working on this at once! Work with the others on existing projects if you wish, but give this top priority! Is there anything you need?”

Pietro thought. “Not right away, I think. For a time it will all be so theoretical I just need to think, maybe consult your records...”

“That will all be open to you.”

“Thank you, Sir. Oh! Actually, I did have one unrelated question that has been bugging me for days.”

Mens nodded, and waited.

“You said that, in preparing Major Duchain, or that is, her mind within the clone, for the first experiment, Dionysus was helpful in putting her in a receptive frame of mind, and that in particular, he found a way to make her believe the original Aurora crew was dead without saying so, so that, for the time being, she wouldn’t concern herself with her sister’s whereabouts. If they *are* dead, nothing should have prevented him from coming out and saying it. I have never read anything about the fate of Aurora’s crew...”

“We keep that to ourselves. Our preference is that we don’t empower the crew by saying we killed them, which may suggest we feared them, or that we kept them alive long after we had any need for them, which may suggest we were afraid of the consequences of killing them. The fate of the actual crew is...” he made a flippant hand gesture, “...beneath consideration, an unimportant detail.”

“But if I’m understanding what you said about Dionysus and his interaction with Major Duchain, then the crew *is* alive. Yes?”

Mens nodded. "It's time you learned that. Yes. They're alive. As is Major Duchain."

Pietro had never been quite sure he would hear it confirmed. He put all of his surprise and wonderment into the question: "Where??"

Mens smiled. "You may be able to figure it out. It was not entirely accurate to say we had *no* further use for their bodies. In a practical sense, they can continue to contribute for many years to come."

Pietro gave him a puzzled look, then suddenly gasped in amazement. "Oh!!"

* * * * *

Megan wriggled. She could never break herself of the habit of wriggling. Somehow it always seemed as though her muscles were going to seize up in a body-wide cramp, but they never did.

She wished she could sigh. It wouldn't accomplish anything, but somehow it would help.

She couldn't move her head, within the unshakeable grip of the metal collar around her neck from which so many inputs into her body emerged, but she could move her eyes enough to look downward to see her hugely expanded tummy, her breasts resting on its upper part on either side. It always looked the same, since it had grown to its current full size, surrounding the babies slowly growing inside her. The babies never let her forget they were there. She could feel them moving inside her, sometimes kicking. Looking around the tank at the six copies of herself, all beach-ball shaped baby factories like herself, Megan could see their tummies dimpling from the shifting around within. Sometimes, if she looked downward at the right place at the right time, she could see her own tummy ripple as one or more tiny feet kicked inside.

Gravity, she assumed, encouraged the heaviest babies, the ones that had been in her longest -- the ones closest to birth -- gradually to settle towards the bottom, at last to escape her when ready, to be immediately replaced, she was sure now, with another fertilized egg by the mechanical probe working up through the tube in her rectum. There was no pain involved in the implantation, only the unhappy realization that she was being made to grow yet another clone of herself, another twin sister to be enslaved by a pack of evil men, to be another farm animal or sex toy.

Or maybe occasionally a boy. She wasn't sure where the boys, like Jason or Bret, came from. She supposed that was her job as well.

She remembered how terrified she had been, at the very beginning, after being captured with Sissy, when she had awakened in the breeding tank and understood where she was. It had been her greatest fear, since seeing the tanks, that she would end up in one. And she remembered panicking because she couldn't breathe. It was some time before she realized breathing wasn't needed.

She knew far more than that about the state of her body now. It was the only thing in her environment she could examine in detail.

Megan knew she couldn't survive outside the tank. She wasn't breathing, and she was aware of the absence of a heart beating in her chest, a feeling she had ignored all her life until it was gone. She knew,

by the throbbing feel around the collar, that it was pumping clean, aerated, nutrient filled blood through her veins, taking the place of the heart, lungs, and probably stomach, and she had no doubt, since it would make perfect sense, that these organs had been removed, to make more room for babies.

She also knew that, like all of the breeders she had seen in the past and present, she had no arms or legs either. She wasn't fooled by the fact that it felt as though her limbs were there. They didn't respond to any attempt to move them, not as if they were held in place but as though they were asleep. Looking at the limbless clones in the tank with her, she knew exactly what she herself looked like.

At first she had been angry, infuriated, over the hideous wrong done to her by men so evil they had been banished from Earth. But anger, and terror, and panic, can only last so long in a situation that never changes. Now Megan simply concentrated on ways to pass the time. The vast amount of time, and the difficulty of filling it all, challenged her ingenuity.

At the beginning, she had found herself in a tank with six breeding clones -- she hoped they were clones -- with the bodies of six of the seven Aurora crew members... all but Janica, she saw, and hated the men afresh for that cruelty, though she realized she wasn't entirely sure she wanted to see Janny this way. All of their tummies, like her own, had been flat, but had begun slowly, slowly, as the weeks and months passed, growing. Megan had been terrified when she first saw a baby spill out from underneath one of the clones -- Polina Grishova, as it happened -- knowing that it meant she herself would give birth to the first of her babies within days. When it came, it was painful, but after a time it was over, it was done -- but she could still feel babies moving inside her. That was when her belief that there must be more than one baby inside her, and that more were being implanted regularly, was verified beyond doubt.

Megan kept track of passing time by counting babies, though she didn't know the amount of time between deliveries. She was methodical about it, as she was in all things: starting with the clone immediately to her left -- Heather Lopez -- she fixed that clone in her mind as her "anchor point," mentally moving the anchor one step clockwise each time she had a baby, to help her keep count. Megan herself was the anchor point after her seventh baby, the fourteenth, the twenty-first, and so on. In between, she developed various mental games: remembering plots of ficslabs she had read, or of videos she had seen, trying to recall classmates from each year in school, their personalities, whether she had liked or disliked them, conversations she had had with them.

She had also trained herself to make her mind go blank for days at a time. Or it might have been hours. She hoped it was days.

It seemed odd that she couldn't recall any breaks for sleep. She knew she must still be sleeping sometimes. Somehow she kept missing it.

After her sixty-eighth baby, there was an unexpected discontinuity. Without being aware of having lost consciousness, though she must have -- probably a drug had been fed in through her collar -- suddenly the tank, instead of being populated by clones of various crew members, was filled instead with six exact copies of herself. Seven Megan Duchains in the tank altogether. All of the new ones began with flat tummies, which had slowly, so slowly grown to be as rounded as Megan's own, and then they began having babies, at the same rate as herself. Megan was stunned by the only explanation that made sense: that she had been in the tank long enough for her earliest babies to have grown to maturity, and

that six had been chosen to assist her in her mission to contribute Megan Duchain after Megan Duchain to a world that would strip them all of their birthright as humans.

From now on, she thought bitterly, with a rare return of emotion, I'll just be one of the identical machines cranking out Megan babies. The familiar blank looks, that she had seen on the faces of all clones except Sissy, reinforced the idea of them being machines, and that she herself was nothing but another.

She had felt sure, by this time, that years had gone by, but she hadn't thought it could be *that* many years. It scared her that she could possibly have been in the tank that long, but in a sense it also cheered her. She'd made significant progress through her lifespan. There were, she knew, still a couple of centuries to go, but she was closer to the end than she had thought. She yearned to reach the end.

And it gave her a way to measure the passage of time in years. Presumably eighteen years must have passed so far, so she must be having three to four babies each year. She could keep track that way from now on.

Life went on.

She started over on her count, from the time when the other Megans had appeared. Ten babies... twenty... She was up to twenty-six. About eight more years have gone by, she thought, according to my theory on the frequency of births. If I live two hundred years in here, she told herself, I'll give birth... what is it... about seven or eight hundred times.

Automatically she tried to sigh again. Another habit she couldn't break.

She felt a familiar pain shooting through her, an electrifying stomach ache. Shit, she thought, shit, shit, it's time again. She felt the movement, felt it reach the point where she could start to push. Wriggling like a hooked fish, exactly the way she remembered seeing a clone in the tank give birth so, so long ago in another lifetime, she felt it slowly squeeze out of her.

Twenty-seven.

* * * * *

"So the Aurora crew have been making babies in the breeding tanks all these years?"

Mens smiled. He nodded. "We've now got eight tanks. In each, the original physical body of one of the Aurora crew, or in one case Megan Duchain, is busy making our clones for us. Along with six copies of each. Now, I should point out, if you are wondering how we produced so many Megan Duchain clones as quickly as we have, that half of the breeders, once we obtained Major Duchain's genetic code, were impregnated with clones of Major Duchain instead of themselves. Now that we have a reasonable supply, and there are now seven Megan Duchain breeders, we've gone back to having each breeder reproduce copies of itself."

Pietro sat back, pinching his lower lip absently, a habit that was part of his thinking process. "I suppose they still have the escape of dreams."

Mens shook his head. “We thought of that ahead of time. Among the electrodes implanted in their brains and serviced through the helmet, one of them detects the characteristic activity of dreams, and with a small trickle of electricity it sidetracks the content of the dreams on the way to storage in permanent memory. Most of us have no recollection of most of our dreams; the breeders can’t remember *any* of them. They also, as a consequence, have no memory of falling asleep to begin with.”

Pietro shook his head in admiration. “Ingenious.”

Mens looked off into the distance wistfully. “It’s a pity that the crew’s life as breeders can only last so long. A lifetime, centuries long though it is, must always come to an end.”

Pietro nodded, then blinked and sat upright suddenly. His heartbeat quickened. Mens’s comment had set off a spark in his mind that grew into a flame quickly. He was accustomed to that. He was used to being the smartest boy, now man, in the room, and had felt desperate for Mens to have that perception of him. His idea of the Aurora crew being carried as passengers in the minds of every clone had helped in that direction, he was sure, but both he and Mens were fully aware that making the idea a reality might be impossible. He needed an impressive idea that would work in the real world. Mens’s last statement, and the wish expressed in it, had opened the door. He said to Mens, with a small smile, “Not really.”

Mens looked amused. “No, Pietro, really, that’s one of the unbreakable rules of life. It has an ending.”

Pietro shook his head vigorously. “No, Sir. What if, after a century or so, you made another download of the breeders’ minds, and then upload *that* into a new set of clones? The new ones would have an entire life ahead of them, in the tanks, but they would feel as though they had already been in the tank a hundred years. And then keep doing that.”

Mens sat straight upright, his jaw hanging loose. “Such a simple idea... Why did we never think of that? They would have memories, eventually, of thousands of years in the tanks. A life that really never needs to end!”

“Exactly, Sir.” Pietro beamed at him.

Mens looked at Pietro steadily for a minute without speaking. Pietro waited.

At last Mens said, “Pietro... I have one bottle of a very fine cognac from Earth. May I interest you in sharing it with me?”

Pietro’s eyes glowed. “Absolutely, Sir.”

CHAPTER 18

Janica lay curled on the bed, her hands over her eyes, her head aching from crying but her tears drying. She was so, so, so ashamed of herself. Of her weakness. Of her inability to protect Megan from her big sister. From me, she thought miserably.

From behind her, she could hear Megan sniffing, but no longer sobbing.

That's not good, thought Janica. We're both coming out of it.

They'd both learned not to comfort each other during their post-orgasm crying jags. That only started them fondling and kissing again.

Janica had expected that the mutual attraction forced on them somehow would gradually decline in intensity. But it had only become stronger. Probably, she thought, it's been reinforced by those overpowering orgasms, unlike any I've ever known. Our bodies, she told herself, have come to know very well what to expect from sex, and have come to need it all the more.

They hardly talked anymore. The only real opportunities for extended conversations had come during mealtimes, when the force within them briefly loosened its grip. Mostly they had exchanged tearful apologies, but Megan had passed along what little she knew. Janica felt so incredibly grateful to Megan for everything she had done, everything she had given up, to try to rescue Janica. And look, Janica thought, at how I treat her in return.

The tingling between Janica's legs began its uphill climb in intensity once more.

No! Dammit, no!

I don't have to do it again! she told herself, as she had hundreds of times before -- was it a thousand by now? I know how powerful the need is, but I don't have to give in! I'm not one of those mindless dollies Megan told me about! The strength of my will got me through the Academy, through impossible-seeming situations in flight training, helped me escape dangers on alien worlds. If I did all those things, I can do this! And I'm the big sister! If I can gather my strength to beat this, I can show Mig the way!

Attempting one more time, with only a tiny shred of hope, to control the craving without involving Megan, Janica reached down and began rubbing her own mound, her fingers teasing her labia, that whole area so wet and slick, while she began squeezing her right breast softly with her other hand, playing with the nipple, her eyes closed, mouth open, trying to concentrate fully on the feeling. There was still some embarrassment in masturbating while her "little" sister -- so unbelievably grown up now! -- lay behind her on the same bed, but it was minor. Janica knew that Mig understood, and had many times tried the same thing herself. It hadn't worked yet, but Janica had to keep trying, had to rid herself of the sexual arousal that became so strong so fast, before she turned to...

No, Janica, don't even say her name in your mind! Don't think about her. She's not here, she's not here, it's just me...

Behind her, Janica heard a liquid rubbing sound, and knew Megan was working on herself too. No, ignore it, Janica! She's not here, she's not here...

The tiniest moan escaped Janica's throat, despite all her efforts to suppress it. She knew the sound would draw Megan, Megan would touch her, stroke her... No, stop thinking about it!...

She heard Megan's choked voice whisper tearfully "I'm sorry, Janny," and felt fingers along her buttock. Before she could order her body not to move, Janica rolled over backwards on the bed, and saw that Megan was reaching for her. Their arms went around each other easily, and they kissed softly, then harder, and competed to see who could deliver the most kisses and licks to the other's cheek, chin, neck, each holding the back of the other's head with one hand while the other arm and hand roamed up and down the other's back, their legs intertwining. Janica felt the sole of Megan's foot rubbing lightly, sensuously, on her calf muscle. The tingling between Janica's legs turned to an insistent buzzing, her hips rocking in time with Megan's, their moans growing louder.

Janica's resistance of moments ago was forgotten. She only felt the excitement, the flush, the need. As always, when she was embracing Megan, feeling her stomach and breasts pressed against Megan's, feeling Megan's lips and tongue exploring her body as her own tasted Megan's, the devastating shame was gone for the moment, there was no past to regret, no future to worry over. There was only the present, the sensations of her body, the need for Megan, Megan, Megan...

* * * * *

Major Brianna Marion felt her heart race as her ship emerged from the wormhole. Her scanners examined the star system in front of her, and in seconds found that one of the planets was fully capable of supporting life. That has to be the place, she thought. After all this time, never giving up hope, all the work involved in becoming a top pilot while also studying the notes on iota particles that Megan Duchain had left behind...

Megan had the right idea, Brianna thought, but she wasn't the kind of pilot I am. That must have been her undoing. That's why she never returned.

I'm going to return, Brianna said forcefully to herself. I'm coming back to Earth with proof the Aurora crew is alive. I'm sure they made it through. Megan had noted that the timing of the loss of signal from Aurora didn't fit with the idea of wormhole collapse. Aurora *had* made it through the wormhole. Brianna was sure of that. And there, in front of her now, was the planet on which, for whatever reason, following whatever malfunction, the crew had been marooned ever since. Forty years.

Brianna had been twenty years old, a Space Force Academy cadet, when her mother, Aurora First Officer Sabrina Marion, had been lost, and "presumed dead," in whatever tragedy had taken Aurora.

Lost and now found, Brianna told herself. Though Mom had been missing forty years, that didn't matter now. She would still look the same now as on the day she left. She's got at least a century and a half of full, vigorous youth still ahead of her, Brianna reminded herself. And she's going to spend it on Earth. She can leave the last forty years behind and live the life she was meant to have.

There was a brief pinging sound, startling Brianna, and then it seemed as though the ship exploded around her. The computer screens winked out, along with all the cabin lights. Emergency power brought the lights back, but a restart of the computer system was only partially successful. Her fingers shaking, Brianna tried to reestablish contact with crucial subsystems. Navigation was only partially enabled. She would be able to get down to the planet's surface, but would have to use manual controls. She tried to send a signal back to Earth, to the Earth authorities with whom she had already burned bridges with her theft of a ship. Communication with Earth, she found, had been disabled.

Brianna gritted her teeth, working to calm herself. I can get to the planet, she thought, and there will be other ships there. Megan Duchain's ship, and Aurora herself. Both were probably damaged, since no one had returned on either ship, but between those two ships and mine, Brianna told herself, we may well find enough working parts to put one functioning ship together.

And we will do that, Mom. I am bringing you home.

END