

STAR WHORES

A Short Novel By Richard E. Geis

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INTRODUCTION: Originally, the STAR WHORES title was a joke, in 1980, but I used it anyway, and over the years Star Whores has seemed more and more apt. I published a mimeographed 500-copy edition of this back then, and sold out. But could never muster the energy or time to try to put all those inky, wrinkled stencils back on the malfunctioning Gestetner.

Now I've gone into the novel, discovered how badly written it was, how many typos there were, and mended, rewritten and revised until now I present a better novel which I hope readers will find entertaining and appealing in one way or another.

There was a sequel---**THE CORPORATION STRIKES BACK**---another joke, also in mimeo format, which awaits revision and mending, which I expect to accomplish this year and publish here in eFanzines.com.

So, hope you like Toi King and her spaceship adventure and her profession.

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As she entered, Toi King slapped at the control tabs on the wall of her starship cabin.

Soft white light suffused the luxurious room. Classic 20th Century music from the legendary Hot Worms pounded from the sound panels.

The door closed behind her. She took a deep breath, exhaled slowly, and murmured the Companion Guild's prime philosophy: "No harm, no sin!" That thought drove the sinsters crazy.

She laughed, peeled off her blonde wig and dropped it into the sonic cleaner.

Toi was totally hairless. Every hair follicle on her body had been killed three years before when she signed into the Companion Guild.

She quickly stepped out of her green, silky pantaloons and matching loose top. She toed off her harem slippers and walked gracefully---lightly in the .8 Earth gravity---to the privacy wall.

She said to the programmed cabin computer, "My hot shower, spray two, inspect and dry."

The wall opened for her like a flower.

She stepped into a gleaming cubicle and said, "Begin." There were manual controls, but she never used them. She didn't know anyone who did. She had been told the sinsters did.

The cubicle closed its sliding doors and cleansing, scented, soothing hot water sprayed her from a dozen tiny nozzles. Her body paint and face make-up melted away.

She stood with eyes closed, enjoying the shower. She slid her hands gently over her body...over her full, pointed breasts, over her flat belly, into the valley of her loins, over her slim thighs.... She enjoyed touching herself.

The spray stopped. She opened her startling green eyes and knew small lenses were examining her wet body. The cubicle said confidently, "Clean."

The hot, cleansing water came needling to her body again. Then hot air gushed from a dozen different, emerged nozzles, from every angle.

A moment later the cubicle door opened and she stepped out. She seated herself, still totally naked, in a mirrored alcove and said, "Passwords: Otto looked surprisingly cheerful, for a hunchbacked dwarf with leprosy."

The personalized computer [nanorod program registered as Simon R. Green] responded, in a husky male voice, "Your will is my command."

Toi asked, "Who's next?"

"Robert Barger, cabin A-5. Dining officer. Likes kissing, touching, praise, over-reaction. Wants innocent aggressiveness. Likes short preliminary sucking. You must climax. Bring him along fairly quickly. He's gained twenty pounds and tires quickly. Wear your number three black wig, red nipple tint and black labia paint with silver sparkles. Bright red lipstick, blue-gray eye shadow, number six powder. Heaven Scent scent. He likes your white and black skintights. No jewelry. Don't forget to insert a pill."

Toi nodded. She opened her mouth, fished a broken capsule from a hollow lower molar, and inserted another tight-fitting capsule with a top formed like a tooth.

She asked, "How much time do I have?"

"The appointment is for eleven. It is now ten-forty. Twenty minutes to go. I will advise you. There are messages."

"Go on." She began applying the proper passionate red tint to her pink, button-like nipples.

"Mata wants to talk to you and will be here to visit around seven-thirty. Stefan Alexander has acquired your sixperiod visit next day---the thirty-fifth voyage day---from Dik Auroira, the Communications Officer.

Stefan is a Driller, first class."

"Shit!" She had slipped in outlining the surgically-perfected lips of her labia. The quick-drying black paint was hell to work with. She reached for cleansing gel.

"I asked Senya's computer for his readout. Available."

"Any more?"

"Senya wants to see you about her schedule. Pernell and Ivens want to combine and have a three-way with her. She wants to appeal to the corporation for stress time-and-a-half, and she wants all three-ways on her schedule put in the first half of her shift, because they are more tiring."

"Getting into her wall is too tiring for that Companion."

Simon the computer had no comment.

Toi sat, thighs wide open, decorating her lower lips. She finished by sprinkling tiny, clinging stars of reflective silver plastic onto her crotch. Her starkly outlined cleft was certainly eye-catching.

She began doing her face. She said, "I'll talk to her at dinner at eight. Advise her computer."

"It is done."

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At ten fifty-nine, Toi walked swiftly down A level to cabin 5. She strode gracefully as much from the deeply cushioned filament carpeting as from the easy starship gravity. She carried her Companion case in her left hand.

She remembered work tours on interstellar warships destined for highgrav planets. Ship gravity was set for the working conditions ahead, and highgrav tours were hell.

Companions had to be careful and in good physical shape. Some sex positions were dangerous in h-g, some impossible.

But h-g runs did command extra pay.

The destination of this Magni-Space Corporation ship was secret...supposedly. But with cut-throat competition reigning in the galaxy, from Mother Earth outward, with informants and agents planted in each of the monstrosly large mineral exploration corporations which dominated the search-and-exploit industry...it was likely there was at least one spy on this

ship.

Toi wasn't just a Companion 2. She had been secretly (she hoped secretly) trained and employed by Magni-Space to find and neutralize any 'traitor' on this voyage.

Because, she suspected, this ship, THE SEEKER IV, was on its way to a particularly mineral-rich planet. And the corporation wanted to be sure it had the extremely valuable mudball all to itself, at least until legal possession had been established.

They were thirty-four days outward bound and she had no idea if there was a 'turncoat' on board.

In the meantime---her usual work continued.

She paused before the door of A5 and parted her silver robe to inspect herself.

Her skintights were still smooth and unwrinkled.

She ran her fingers over the skintight face mask. The black wig with its long, flowing plastic hair was secure.

She touched her tongue to the tooth capsule in her mouth. She reviewed Barger's requirements and preferences.

She remembered him, of course, but not clearly. There were 29 ship officers and mining executives on board who were entitled to her services at least once a week.

She touched the door button. Seconds later the door slid open and Robert Barger, smiling, gestured her inside.

Toi swirled off her silver robe as she entered.

He wore a blue velvet robe and slightly too much aromatic body lotion. "Ah, Toi, you're so beautiful..." He stood admiring her, then touched a nipple with a fingertip. "I love that outfit."

"Thank you, Bobby." She shivered with practiced ease. "Those are my lust buttons."

"What happens if I press both at once?"

"I get ideas." She shivered again and let a passionate tremor into her voice. She reached into his robe and touched his protruding belly. She skated her fingertips lower to his organ. She pressed against him after a tremulous smile and an aversion of her eyes. She whispered, "I like to feel you get big." She encouraged his erection with hesitant touching.

His arms went around her. He was a big, solid man with layers of thick fat on his waist, belly and thighs. His broad hands caressed her back, sliding on the "wet" skintight material. Toi undulated against him and breathed passionately into his ear, "I'm getting more ideas."

"Let's get on the bed." He took her to the wide, luxurious sleep box

he had lowered from the wall before she arrived.

She stretched out on the very comfortable Manilon mattress and silky coverings. She closed her eyes as he dropped his robe and adjusted the light to soft pink.

Music came on...something with a heavy, though muted, drum beat.

He joined her on the bed. "I always plan to talk with you for a few minutes before we get to the pleasure, but you do things and say things... I always forget."

Toi laughed. "You do things, too." She held him, touching and squeezing...

He was larger than average. But she had been taught well, and surgically altered in certain ways. She was capable of accommodating any man...and most of the devices men liked to use.

She didn't want to talk. Her job was to give him sexual pleasure and an orgasm as intense as possible. She couldn't let him use up too much time with talking.

With men 'talk' almost always led into a life story of woman problems, financial problems, career problems... She had, in spite of her best efforts, heard them all hundreds of times.

Every Companion, in Guild school, was given classes on how to manage The Visit, especially how to limit talk and direct the action.

Because of their training in manipulating people, many C-1 and C-2 Companions were recruited---as Toi had been---as agents by corporations. Even by planetary governments.

Toi was making 2000Cr. per Mother Earth month as an internal Magni-Space spy. She didn't think she was earning her pay.

As he rolled to her she melted into his arms and gave herself to his kiss. A part of her mind concentrated on technique, a part to enjoying it.

He did know how to kiss. In fact, most Space Guild men with contracts that called for Companion services were good at sex, and often provided as much pleasure as they received. Probably because they were exposed to so much highly skilled, professional technique. They absorbed it and tried to match it.

A few minutes later, genuinely breathless, she gasped, "You really can do things with your tongue. I'd forgotten how good you are."

He smiled. "Lots of practice. I've been a spacer for twenty-two years, and every year on a contract with Companions."

"Ummm..."

He began suckling on her nipples. The erotic, tickling sensations were delightful. She writhed more than necessary, remembering his sex profile.

He was touching her cleft now, teasing, wanting more reactions.

He got them. Her body had been deeply conditioned. She moaned, "You've got my code... Oh, I love that."

She had moistened; his fingers rode on a film of natural secretions. Maybe she wouldn't have to use the capsule.

She whispered, "Let me make you more ready. I know what you like."

"What do I like?"

"Let me get a big mouthful and I'll show you."

He made a pleased sound and rolled onto his back.

Toi made a project of eeling over him like a snake. The skintight made it easy, like wearing a coating of oil, and as she writhed over his chest, thighs, belly...she played with him, licked, suckled...making him gasp.

Finally she lay between his widespread, heavy legs, concentrating on using her throat with practiced ease, gauging his arousal by belly muscle tension, by his breathing...

When he began to tremble she lifted her head and asked, "Want me to finish?"

"No, come up beside me. I want to let the edge pass for a minute. Then I'm going to drive you over."

Toi smiled. "Ummm. I'll love that. I love a big man like you who can do that." She snuggled against him and trailed fingers over sensitive skin.

The drum music continued. She knew he would ram her in time with that beat.

He played with her body, too, especially her center; he seemed fascinated with the oval opening in the skintight, and the black lips.

She wriggled and panted. "Oh, Bobby, I want your big ram. I want all of it."

"You'll get it, Toi. Right now." He moved over her.

She made appropriate sounds and welcomed his expert entry. She loudly caught her breath. "Oh, yes! Pound me!"

Toi knew within seconds she wouldn't climax in time; he wasn't going to last long enough. She bit down on and broke the shaped capsule in her molar and sucked the sweet, syrupy drug that oozed from it.

The drug entered her system instantly and galvanized her body for orgasm.

Her arms wrapped around him. She went wild under him. "Ram me! Harder! Oh, Bobby, you wonderful man! I'm there! I'm going! I'm---"

The climax exploded in her loins. Her insides spasmed. She

screamed and contorted under him.

She had timed it perfectly. He was triggered by her seemingly authentic reactions. His heavy, overweight body slammed her into the mattress. He howled.

And then it was over. She was pinned under him as he lay panting from exertion and diminishing pleasures. She waited as he recovered and got off.

Barger opened his wall and stepped into the shower.

Her skintight was wrinkled, of course, and she was messy. She took a clingpad from her carrycase. She peeled the film away and pressed it to her vulva. She sighed deeply again, fingered wig hair from her eyes and got off the bed. She put on her robe.

Robert Barger emerged from the shower. He fluffed his short hair. "That was another great one, Toi. You're the best Companion I've ever known."

"Thank you. Would you record the completion of the visit?"

"Ah, sure. Forgot." He tapped out the information for the ship's master computer for insertion in the contract file. 'Visit completed satisfactorily. Barger, R. 470023-1-2.

Toi then added her name and designation and number. Barger palmed the signature plate and recorded the message.

Toi smiled. "Thank you, Bobby. See you next week."

"I've got some sugar gods here..." He opened a drawer to reveal a tray of the sumptuous pastries he prepared only for officers and sometimes for the Companions.

Toi yearned for at least a dozen! But she shook her head.

"Got some real Earth wine, too..."

"You monster." She hesitated, then glanced at the ornate wall clock. She had some time.

He handed her a sugar god. "We might as well enjoy life. This is going to be a long, long trip."

"Is it? How do you know?" She popped the god into her mouth and closed her eyes as the sweet, tangy taste flowed over her tongue.

"Food supplies---"

The shipwide intercom came on, blaring from the ceiling grid of the cabin. "ALL SECTIONS. ALL SECTIONS. THIS IS CAPTAIN CHILTON. THIS IS CAPTAIN CHILTON. COMPANION TOI KING PLEASE COME TO CABIN B-16 IMMEDIATELY. TOI KING TO CABIN B-16 IMMEDIATELY."

Toi nodded. B-16 was Mata's cabin. That damned irresponsible C-3

had probably gotten herself into a hot contract dispute with one of her men! But that wouldn't require an emergency call like this!

As the only C-2 on board, and the ranking Companion, Toi had to mediate disputes and consult with the Captain and the Corporation and the Guild.

She hesitated, wanting to ask Robert for the use of his shower. But the message came blaring again: "TOI KING, PLEASE COME TO B-16. THIS CAPTAIN CHILTON. WILL COMPANION TOI KING PLEASE COME---"

She said, "Damn!" and quickly left Barger's cabin.

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When Toi hurried down the outer ramp to B-level she noticed first the scattering of men in the short passage, then the grim looks they gave her. They clotted in groups of two and three, talking, scowling.

She turned the corner at the intersection and saw two ship's guards armed with Zenith laser pistols and heavy black plasron truncheons standing guard on each side of Mata's cabin door. The door was closed.

She came up to them. They were big, powerful men. Grim. She didn't know them personally; she'd never served them, and she didn't eat with the lower crew or ever go to their common room. They were Mata's and Senya's men.

"I'm Toi King. Is the Captain inside?"

One of the men nodded and spoke into a collar com. A few seconds later the cabin door slid partway open, on manual. The Captain, Rune Chilton, wearing his officer's headband of purple and white and his on-duty tunic and tights, blocked the way. He looked grim, too.

Toi asked, "What happened?"

He didn't answer. He was a tall, bulky man with bushy blond hair, a hard jaw line and squinting pale blue eyes. He slipped awkwardly out through the narrowed opening as if he didn't want her to see anything inside. "I want to talk to you in your cabin. Which is it?"

She led him to B-15, one door further down the short hall. She read body language well enough to know this was very serious. She didn't speak until they were in her cabin and he had slumped into a deeply cushioned yellow chair.

Toi knew Rune Chilton was fifty-two years old, yet his craggy face was not lined, and his thick blonde hair was not speckled with gray. He was vain, and his face and hair were the products of youthing treatments.

Nevertheless, he now looked haggard and shaken.

Toi kept her silver robe tightly closed. She asked Chilton, "What is it?"

"Murder. She's in there on the floor. Most of her."

Toi felt suddenly shivery and angry. "What? What do you mean?"

"I'm sorry, Toi. Mata was...killed. Somebody killed her in there. Maybe a couple of hours ago."

Toi stared at him. She shook her head. "Why? Mata wasn't into spying or any of that."

Mata frankly didn't have the intelligence or the interest. She was simply a good-natured, big-breasted blonde who liked to eat and was moderately hooked on the big-o pills.

"Spying wasn't the reason she was killed."

"Then what was the reason?"

Chilton sighed. "She was brutally murdered. It looks like a slaughterhouse in there. It looks like some insane...some sexual psychopath..." He couldn't meet Toi's eyes.

Someone knocked on the cabin door. Enraged for no reason, Toi shouted, "Who is it?"

"It's Senya." Voice trembling.

Toi nodded. Of course Senya would have heard the ship-wide call. She knew Mata's cabin number. All three Companions had adjoining cabins in this quadrant of B deck.

Toi let her in. "Sit down. We've got a terrible situation."

Senya Dernolo entered, apprehensive, big dark eyes wide. She wordlessly sat on the edge of a built-in corner chair. She wore a golden robe which split when she sat to reveal a soft-fleshed brown thigh. Her wig was an intricately braided blue-black dome of thin coils. She asked softly, "What happened?"

The Captain told her Mata had been killed. He said nothing more but his face must have told her.

Senya recoiled. "She was murdered?"

"It looks like it."

Toi said, "I want to see her."

Captain Chilton shook his head.

"I've seen death before. Who found her?"

"Umm...Sam Rosemead. He's a Rigger who was due for a visit."

When she didn't come to his cabin he called, then came up from D-deck and found her door open and looked in."

Senya asked shakily, "Could he have done it?"

Chilton spread his hands. "A lot of people could have done it. But there wasn't any blood on him, and he's been spacing for M-S for thirty years. Solid as a rock."

Toi said, "Well, I still want to see Mata, and her cabin. Senya, until I tell you otherwise, go into your cabin and stay there! I'll see you in a while. Go on, now. I have to talk with the Captain privately."

Senya said, "I'm not visiting anybody till the murderer gets caught. Think I want to be next!"

"I'll talk to you after a while, after I find out some things."

Senya nodded and abruptly began to break down into tears. She whispered an Astarte prayer. "Sweet, Magnificent Woman, prime, I plea for love, I plea for the path..."

Toi embraced Senya for a few seconds, then walked with her to her cabin. She looked in to be sure it was unoccupied, then returned to her own cabin.

Captain Chilton had helped himself to a drink from her tiny bar. "I'm not too fond of sweet green Morial wine, but right now..."

Toi asked, "Is anyone in Mata's cabin now?"

"Doctor Rokowski and Ron Warder."

The ship's doctor and his assistant. Toi said, "Captain, as the Official Companion Guild Representative on this ship I have a full and equal right to any information concerning any harm done to any Companion in my jurisdiction, and a full right to participate, at my discretion, in any official or unofficial investigation of any and all crimes against any Companion in my jurisdiction."

She said it flatly, quoting almost word for word from the long, detailed, precise contract between the Companion Guild and the Corporation.

Rune Chilton took a deep breath. "If you want to see it..." He stood up. "Come on. I hope you're not squeamish."

They left Toi's cabin and went next door. The Captain led her inside.

A sheet taken from the bed covered the body. Doctor Rokowski and Ron Warder sat on the bed, conferring in low tones. Their bare arms were SanTex-sprayed to the elbows. Their hands were covered with blood.

When Toi entered they looked up and stopped talking.

There were sticky pools of blood in the carpet. There were blood-smearred fingerprints and handprints and words on the pale green walls. The

words screamed: THE WHORE BLEEDS PUS ... THE LORD CHOLB COMMANDS IT ... THE MOTHER MUST BE PURE ... I AM THE SON OF CHOLB ... EVIL FLESH MUST DIE.

Mata's make-up table was shattered, her cosmetics broken. Her wigs were torn apart.

Toi stared in horror at the messages. Then her eyes were drawn to the sheet-covered body. Red stains were spreading as the expensive, pure cotton absorbed blood.

She tried to speak to the doctor but her mouth was suddenly too dry and her throat constricted. She finally managed, "What...what did...did he do to her?"

Doctor Kelsey Rokowski flicked a glance to Captain Chilton, then stood up. He almost rubbed his left eyelid. A young man in his early thirties, he wore his officer's headband at a rakish angle, contrary to the corporate dress code. He knew Toi; he'd had visits from her for weeks, as had all the ship's officers.

He said softly, "He cut her open all the way down. Disemboweled her. Cut her breasts off. Nearly cut her head off. Scooped out the sex organs."

Toi's stomach churned. She swallowed swiftly accumulating saliva. She covered her face with her hands. She turned away and was taken protectively into Captain Chilton's arms.

She pushed free of him. She breathed deeply for long seconds. She avoided looking at the walls. She finally said, "Cholb. That's the god of the new anti-pleasure cult that's sweeping the worlds."

Chilton nodded. "So I hear. Cults are always extremist."

"We'll have to find out all about it."

Ron Warder said, "A quick way to find the man who did this is line up everybody as soon as possible and check for dried blood, and search every cabin for blood-stained clothing, slippers, and things."

Rune Chilton shook his head. "He's had time to throw all that stuff down a waste chute. It's atoms by now. And any shower on this ship can be set to wash away wet or dried blood from skin, and leave no trace."

Warder persisted. "This guy's obviously a warp. Maybe he's just sitting in his cabin waiting for somebody to come for him."

Doctor Rokowski supported Ron. "An act of such extreme violence and passion might very well have left him in a state of shock...a kind of emotional and physical paralysis. It's worth a quick search, Rune."

Captain Rune Chilton shrugged. "All right. Doctor, you and Ron arm yourselves with trunk guns and take the two men at the door. Two teams.

Start with my cabin on A and work your way down. Check all the waste chutes. Something may have got stuck."

Toi asked Ron Warder, "What will be done with...with the body?"

Doctor Rokowski said, "Ron should stay with the body."

Rune Chilton nodded and went to the computer terminal in the cabin and again ordered an all-ship announcement channel. He said in an aside to Ron, "Join Kelsey when you can. This search will take hours."

Ron nodded and then responded to Toi, "We'll take it to the surgery and do an autopsy."

"Do you do a full blood analysis?"

"Of course. The Diagnostikan does that automatically."

"If Mata was drugged or unconscious while she was killed, would that show up?"

"Yes. A drug strong enough to cause unconsciousness... And there are trauma signals to look for in some of the organs and muscles." He nodded. "It would be easier to live with if she was gone before it happened."

Toi said, "Yes." And she thought it would possibly indicate a different motive.

They listened as the Captain ordered a freeze of all ship crew and mining workers. His voice boomed from the speakers. He hinted at a medical emergency when he said the ship's doctors would quickly examine every person and cabin in the ship.

Toi asked Ron, "Could you tell what kind of cutting instrument was used?"

"It was something very sharp, as sharp as a molecular scalpel. I noticed at the beginnings of the cuts---especially the long ventral cut---a tentativeness. Hesitation. Several false starts."

"As if he was squeamish? Not used to doing something like that?"

Ron agreed.

Toi didn't say anything more about it. Chilton was giving orders to the two guards at the door. She looked again at the walls. She noticed that each handprint and fingerprint in blood had been smeared just enough to prevent identification. She frowned.

Rune said, turning, "I've called Maintenance and asked Vernsel to come up with a couple of his men. They'll move the body down to Medical and clean up here."

Toi asked sharply, "Aren't you going to record this?"

"Yes. I forgot. It should be. I'll have Hinderson come down and do that."

"I want to be present when he records."

"He'll have to take that sheet away."

"I'll survive." Toi was determined that nothing be omitted or altered before a permanent record was made. "I want a paper copy of the record, complete."

"It'll all be in the ship's computer."

"It is my legal right as Companion Representative---"

"All right!" Chilton lifted his palm com again and ordered a link to Hinderson in the ship's control room.

When Chilton had completed that call, Toi asked, "Who was Mata's last visit?"

Rune shrugged. "Wouldn't she have a schedule somewhere?"

"Yes, in the cabin computer." Toi said loudly, "B-16 computer. Override. I am Toi King, Companion Two, Companion Guild Representative. I have a need-to-know Mata's schedule for today."

The cabin computer responded, from the cabin's sound panels, in a low, flat, genderless voice. "No such data in memory."

Toi scowled. Mata had personalized this computer to respond as Mother, a loving, forgiving older woman. Toi checked the cabin computer's small console. The nanorod port was empty. Toi asked the cabin computer, "Do you have any recording or memory of the activities in this cabin today?"

"No instructions. No such data."

"Are there any gaps in your timeline memory?"

"No."

Rune said admiringly, "Nice try."

Toi said, "I'm not done yet. I have a master schedule for all of us in my own computer."

Rune said, "As far as that goes, the ship's master computer has a schedule, too, along with records of all satisfactorily completed Companion visits. A starship's master computer cannot be hacked or sabotaged. But this murder was an unscheduled visit. Mata let the killer into her cabin. It doesn't matter who was her previous visit. And we already know Sam Rosemead was her next scheduled visit."

Toi said, "Yes. Yes. I'm just being stupid. This is all so..." She itched and sweated in her silver robe. She needed to peel the pad from her crotch, peel off her skintights, and revel in at least a double hot shower. But she had to wait.

Three men entered the cabin, carrying various sonic and mechanical cleaners. One man was Jak Vernsel, the head of Maintenance. He paled at the words on the walls and the covered, bloody mound on the floor.

Toi felt it necessary to say, "Don't touch anything until somebody records all this."

Davi Hinderson shouldered his way into the cabin. He carried a complex, multi-lens electronic camera and wore a Powrpak vest. He grimaced when he saw the walls and the sheet-covered corpse.

It didn't take long. The maintenance crew waited in the hall.

Davi muttered obscenities as he panned around, took print filter and forensic spectrum close-ups of the words, the furniture, the fixtures, and of Mata's uncovered, butchered white body. The most horrible aspects were the wet, mangled organs, the ropes of tangled intestines, and the remnants of Mata's orange and mottled black outfit she had been wearing when murdered. Her head lay at an odd angle, nearly severed from the body. Her sightless blue eyes stared horribly at nothing.

Toi almost retched at the sight. Rune Chilton turned away.

Hinderson was pale and sick when he switched off the camera. He asked Rune, "You want this in the ship's computer?"

The Captain nodded. "And analysis prints. One set for me, one for Toi and one set for the hard record."

Toi asked, "Did you record this with an A7 security virus?"

Hinderson compressed his lips. "Yes! No possible editing, no tampering, no frame shifting, nothing. And you're out of date; the latest is A-8."

When Hinderson left, Toi listened as Rune turned Vernsel and his crew over to Med Assistant Ron Warder.

She left Mata's cabin with Rune. She said, "I've got to have a shower and a boost. After that I want to talk to the man who found Mata."

"No problem. You're turning into a detective, aren't you?"

"I think I have to."

"If you wish to. The Contract is our master. In the meantime, while you're showering and boosting, think about how we get along from now on. The corporation isn't going to abort this voyage. We're too far out. The men are going to want their Companion visits as per agreement."

She sighed. "I'll have to talk to the Guild and you'll have to talk to Magni-Space about this whole situation. Where will you be in thirty minutes?"

"In the control room, needling all this back home."

"I'll see you then."

After an hour of hassle and dispute with the Guild back on Earth and with Magni-Space on Luna via high-warp needlehole message punches, Toi was worn out again.

Nobody cared about Mata. All they cared about were the inconveniences and expenses caused by her murder.

Seething with rage after an hour-and-a-half, Toi managed to get away from the control room. Now she had to visit Senya.

The small brown woman was lying on her bed watching a story on her entertainment wall when Toi entered her cabin. She ate from a server of no-cal candies.

Senya had spoken permission for her computer to open the door after Toi's knock and voice identification. She said immediately, "Have they found him yet?" She wore a filmy, clinging, mid-thigh yellow tunic. She was bare-skull.

Toi shook her head. "Nobody had blood on him, and nobody was in a blue funk waiting to confess. Nothing was found in any of the waste chutes."

"Shit! Where does that leave us?"

"In a bad position. The captain and I have been arguing with the corporation and the guild for nearly two hours. Something like this situation has happened before, where a Companion was killed on a deep-range corporation ship."

Senya rubbed her thigh nervously. "So?"

"There was Earth Court arbitration and the other Companions were awarded double-stress pay per visit and thirty-percent bonuses for the remainder of the contract period."

"We'll get that from now on?"

"Yes. And the guild insisted on safety factors for us. From now on our visits are recorded and logged on the ship's master computer, and the captain and the communications officer and I will keep separate, duplicate copies of the schedule and all schedule changes. That means all swaps and sales and all non-schedule visits."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to moonlight after what happened to Mata."

"We have to remember that every man we visit must have his cabin computer link to the ship's master computer, and all visits must be

recorded."

"A lot of my men won't like being recorded. Some of them are kinks."

"The recordings will be inaccessible to everyone but myself and the captain. At the end of our contract the visits memory will be erased...if not needed for legal proceedings."

"So the killer won't dare kill us, too, huh?"

Toi said, "I think Mata learned about something illegal on one of her visits this morning and was killed to prevent her from spreading that knowledge. The autopsy report shows she was already dead when the killer tried to make it look like the work of a psycho."

"I didn't know a psycho was loose."

"One isn't. That part of it was just to throw us off."

"What part?"

"Oh...there was insane Cholb writing on her walls. Things like that. But she was actually killed by an overdose injection of a paralysis drug. Normally it paralyzes only limb muscles. But she was given a quadruple dose and at that strength it reaches to the heart."

"Is it...was it painful?"

"No. Doctor Rokowski told us that she went numb in her arms and legs, then couldn't breathe for a few seconds, and then died when her heart was paralyzed."

Senya got off her bed and called her wall open. She sat on the toilet and peed nervously. "He could still be a psycho, couldn't he?"

Toi shook her head. "The whole crew and all the miners have been computer-checked by the corporation and by the guild. All psy profiles were scanned for psycho-sexual paranoia, manic-d, ego strength, social fit...the whole works. None of them showed any extreme emotional knots when they signed on for this voyage."

"Well, somebody must've had a hell of a lot of knots if he could do what he just did!" Senya flushed and was washed and dried.

"Yes, but at the time of the tests back on Too Much, he didn't. I think he killed her to silence her."

"What did she know? What could be so important?" Senya was near tears. She threw herself back on the bed.

Toi thought she knew but didn't dare speculate to Senya. Toi thought Mata found out accidentally that the man was an agent. Maybe that was what she wanted to talk to Toi about when she called and left a message with Toi's computer.

Billions of credits must be at stake for a man to risk murder on a

small, outbound mining ship.

Toi changed the subject. "Senya, the Guild wants us to go back to work. We get double pay and a thirty-percent bonus, from today, based on the double-pay base.

Senya asked, "Who takes Mata's visits?"

"We both do. We each have a fifty-percent increased workload, which means---"

"Nine visits a day?"

"---we have to cut the visit time to thirty-five minutes at least. The crew and the miners have been told---or are being told---by their section heads. There's no other way to handle it."

"We could head back to Too Much and let the government investigate and find the killer!"

Toi sat on the edge of the bed. She touched Senya's smooth, brown arm. "We're too far into the trip, according to Magni-Space. More than halfway out. Then about fifty days for the miners to set up the automatic equipment and make sure it's working right. After that we head back to Too Much and spend our wealth."

"If we live that long."

"There's no danger to us now. I'm sure of it. What we'll both have to do today, as soon as the computer coughs up the new schedules, is record all we can remember about each of our men's sex scenes. And anything we can remember Mata saying about her exclusives. Then we'll link our knowledge because you'll be visiting the officers and execs, too."

Senya nodded glumly.

"It'll be a step up for you. It'll help you when you take your Companion Two exams in a few years."

Senya took Toi's hand and kissed it. "I'm still scared. And I figure nine men a day...for at least a...a hundred days...."

She urged Toi onto the bed with her. "We'll be wrecks. I'll end up hating every man on this ship." She nuzzled Toi's throat. "We'll probably end up hating each other. We'll be too tired and drained and drugged to want each other."

She parted Toi's blue robe and caressed Toi's ivory skin. Toi wore only filmy blue panties under the robe.

Toi and Senya were close. Senya needed another woman for affection and work-free sex. She played her natural, deepest role---the dependent, cuddly, loving kitten who needs someone strong in her life. Yet in her way, especially in love-making, she was aggressive and very passionate.

Toi needed Senya, too, for closeness, for tenderness, for contract-free

sexual play, and for someone to mother and reassure. They complemented each other.

Toi had on occasion been close with Mata, as had Senya, but Mata had been a loner, almost reclusive when she was not on a visit. She had a deep relationship with a man back on Too Much, and hadn't often wanted another woman.

Companions as a rule were close emotionally and sexually on a long contract voyage such as this. It was natural and accepted. Part of the dynamics of being a Companion.

Toi and Senya kissed. After a moment, Toi whispered, "I've got to see the captain in a few minutes."

"Pet me. I want you to pet me."

"You darling." Toi kissed her and began slowly running her free hand over Senya's body...under the filmy yellow tunic and over the slim young woman's velvety-skinned back...down gently over the beautifully rounded naked cheeks...down along the smooth thighs....

Senya clung and kissed. Her small, firm breasts and hard, pebble-like nipples pressed into Toi's larger, softer flesh. She murmured, "I love you so much." She wormed a hand between their bodies and played finger games in Toi's cleft.

They kissed passionately. Toi was quickly aroused, and Senya was panting. Senya whispered, "Let me get the double."

Toi hesitated. She was supposed to meet Rune very soon at his cabin. But she knew Senya needed this closeness and intimacy...and knew she needed it, too.

Mata's death was only now beginning to sink into her subconscious mantel level. Both she and Senya were in shock.

Toi realized she couldn't break this off now, in spite of the horror of Mat's murder. She sighed, nodded and kissed Senya. "Yes. Get it."

While the smaller woman went for the device, Toi shed her robe and panties. She watched Senya pull off the yellow tunic and then open a cabinet in her privacy wall.

Toi sighed and settled onto the bed, legs wide. Senya came to the bed with the sex device they often used, a Series Seven Double Autopleaser.

Senya eased one of the seven-inch flesh-like phalli into Toi's moistened cleft, positioned the pseudopod linked tiny cup over Toi's clitoris, pressed the clinging holding flaps smoothly against the surrounding hairless labia and mons, then opened her own thighs and inserted the companion phallus into herself and suctioned the attached clit cup in place.

Toi watched Senya's sureness and care with the device. She said, "Set

it for a single one for me." The minimum.

Senya pouted but nodded and set a tiny control in the base of each phallus. She pressed small activating buttons.

Toi and Senya embraced. Each experienced a delightful warmth in her loins. The phalli buried in their vaginas began to pulse gently. The cups on their clits also pulsed and caressed.

The phalli were linked by miniature transceivers. There were sensing devices on the surfaces of the phalli which monitored their bodies' sexual arousal. Each phallus could be set to bring the user to a predetermined intensity of orgasm. And each could be set to bring their users to simultaneous climaxes.

Toi normally loved the exquisite slickness of the cup's inner, moving surfaces on her clitoris. But now....

In spite of her inner resistance, hot shivers were already coursing through her. She broke a kiss. "What did you set yours for?"

Senya whispered, "Ten." She wriggled lower on the bed and greedily suckled on Toi's erect, sensitive nipples.

Toi knew the girl was seeking to forget everything in a welter of sexual overload. She knew Senya's lust for pleasure---ten was the highest setting on the device---would leave the woman limp and exhausted for hours.

The phallus in Toi began moving; a slow, deep pistoning that gently pressed to her deepest limit. She usually liked this very much. She felt Senya's hand on her lower belly. Senya liked to feel the flexing of Toi's muscles...the small spasms...the subtle displacement of flesh and consequent moving reaction on the surface.

Toi placed her own hand on Senya's belly and distinctly felt the thick surge of the phallus in the smaller woman's body. The device was moving fast, building her to a higher, more intense climax.

Toi accepted the pleasures as necessary.

After five minutes---

Senya writhed against Toi, suckling on Toi's swollen left nipple like a famished infant.

Toi's own pleasure mounted. The cup on her clitoris was an incredibly skilled little mouth and cheeks and tongue.

Toi lay on her back, panting, eyes closed, arms around the squirming, moaning Senya. It was building, peaking, soon...soon...the one strength orgasm would soon be over. It was all Toi wanted at this time: a nice, sweet climax.

But the problem was Senya's greed; the younger woman (Toi was

twenty-five, Senya only nineteen) liked to be put through the wringer, liked to lose herself, lose her mind in the molten excess of a ten.

Senya whimpered and blindly sought Toi's mouth for their time of climax.

Senya thrashed helplessly in Toi's protective arms. Toi was aware of everything. There was an extra emotional glow as she cradled Senya, held her close, and tried to make the girl's searing orgasm even more complete and satisfying.

The phalli slowed...the cups ceased their adroit, programmed sucking, and the two Companions relaxed in each other's arms.

Toi stroked Senya's bare skull, her neck, back, arms...and stared at the ceiling of the cabin, somewhat at peace for a few moments. But the respite from the horrible murder and from its in-ship consequences would be brief, she knew.

-5-

Captain Rune Chilton asked, "Are you and Senya ready to resume your visits tomorrow?"

Toi was in his cabin, sipping a mixed drink. She wore a long orange robe and a wig of tight blue curls. A small black corder hung from her neck on a silver chain. It had fresh cubes and cells, good for twelve hours. She answered, "Yes. My computer received the new schedules for us. The visits have to be short."

"Even for the officers?" He smiled.

Toi smiled, too. "Especially for the officers. This way you'll have more variety. Senya has a cycle of all the officers and executives. You have the readout available."

"Umm." He swallowed heavily from his drink. "I wonder how she'll like a man with as big a ram as mine." He smirked. "A little woman like her..."

Toi knew Senya could take any man on board, and then some. But the captain was stitched on the size of his organ---obsessively so, she thought---and so she answered as a Companion. "If you smack it all in it'll probably hurt her, like it hurts me."

His eyes gleamed and he smiled. He nodded.

Toi changed the subject. "When is Sam Rosemead due here?" She had insisted on an opportunity to question him.

"Two minutes. And I can have Hari Grent here after you're through with Sam."

"Grent?"

"He's the man who was Mata's last visit."

"How did you discover he was---"

"He came forward on his own. He's confined to his cabin now, until we question him."

Rune's intercom chimed. He flipped a control tab and the on-duty watch officer's voice said, "Rigger Sam Rosemead is here, sir."

"Send him in."

A moment later, Sam sat hunched miserably in a chair beside the captain's large console-desk. Toi sat at other end. Sam said, "I just knocked on her door. It wasn't closed, and when I touched it, it opened a couple inches."

Toi asked, "Why did you go to her cabin at all?"

"Well, I tried calling her, but her computer kept saying 'No calls accepted.' So I got mad because I've got my rights according to the contract. She didn't call and reschedule. She just didn't show! Now, I like my visits, and I'm not going to be cheated! So I went up to B level and knocked."

"How did you know which cabin?"

"Everybody knows which companion is in which cabin."

Toi insisted. "How did you know?"

Sam shrugged. "Somebody told me...in a poker game a couple weeks ago. One of the maintenance guys mentioned you were in B-fifteen, Senya was in B-fourteen, and Mata was in B-sixteen. So I went to B-sixteen."

The Captain asked, "Did she answer your knock?"

Sam looked at the Captain as if he were crazy. "No, sir. So I---"

"Did you hear anything from the cabin?"

"No, sir. So I called in. Nothing. So I pushed the door open a little more and looked in and---"

Toi asked, "Why did you look in?"

Sam spread his hands and made a face. "I don't know... I was curious, I guess. And I was mad. So I took a look inside---and saw her, just a goddamned bloody chunk of raw meat---and some of those bloody words on a wall." He swallowed and grimaced.

Toi noticed tears in his eyes. "Did you go inside?"

"No! One look and I knew she was waste. I didn't want to get any closer. I ran to one of the emergency coms and called the control room."

"Then what did you do?"

"I went back to her cabin and pulled the door almost shut, just like it was before I knocked. And I stayed there in the passage until Lieutenant Zamil and a security guard came."

Rune looked at Toi. "Satisfied?"

Toi asked Sam, "Why did you pull the door almost shut?"

Sam scowled. "I don't know... I guess I thought it should be like it was before."

Toi sat back in her chair.

Rune said, "Thanks, Sam. You can go now."

When he left the cabin, Toi said, "I think he told the truth."

"So do I. Shall I call Hari Grent up?"

"No, let's go to him. I want to see his cabin. And I want our visit to be a surprise."

Rune nodded and tabbed on his intercom. "Lieutenant Allen."

"Sir?"

"I'm going to...a lower deck. I'll call in my location in a few minutes."

"Yes, sir."

-6-

Hari Grent had been watching a sports holo when they arrived at his cabin. He was a short, bald, clean man. Toi noticed immediately how neat was his cabin. Too neat?

The Captain used the cabin intercom to advise the control room of his location.

Toi touched the black corder hanging between her robe-covered breasts and said, "Recording." Then she asked Hari, "Why do you think you were Mata's last visit?"

"I don't know that positively. She got here about nine-fifteen---fifteen minutes late, by the way! And she left here at ten-up."

"How do you know the exact time she left?"

Hari grinned, then sobered. "We made a joke. She said if I could get it up again at ten, she'd do me again."

Toi asked, "Did you?"

"No. She wiped me out the first time."

Rune settled into a chair. "Did she ever mention anything about her

other men?"

"How do you mean, sir?"

"Oh, whether any had big rams, for instance."

"No. Mata was strictly blank about her other visits. When she came to me she tried to make me think I was the only one. She knew exactly what I like and how I like it. And she always loved what I did for her."

Toi asked, "Was she any different the last time?"

Hari shook his head. "No. Well, yes. She was at first, I think. Kind of distracted, like she had something big on her mind. But she switched onto me right away."

"Did she say anything about what was bothering her?"

"No. Her being bothered was just an impression I had. It only lasted a minute or so."

Rune said, "That was around nine-fifteen."

"Yes."

"Are you recording this conversation?"

Hari tensed a bit. "Yes, sir. I switched on my computer when you and Companion King identified yourselves at my door. Simulcopy to the ship."

Toi said, "Did you record Mata's visit?"

"No. I'm only recording this because the Craft League advises it."

Rune said, "It's your full legal right."

Toi said, "I'd like to ask you some questions about your sex likes and dislikes in sex visits. You can refuse to answer, or you can make your answer private."

Hari leaned back in his chair and smiled. "I'm not ashamed of anything. I never want anything outside the options given in the contract."

He smiled at Toi. "I got the new visit schedule a while before you got here. I've got you at five on Fridays from now on. I've never had visits from a Two before."

Toi smiled professionally. "I'm sure we'll have a good time together."

"I know we will."

Rune asked him, "All right, what kinds of sex do you usually want during a visit, and specifically, what activities occurred during Mata's last visit?"

"Let me give some background first." Hari crossed his legs and got comfortable. "I was born and raised on New Freedom, and you know on that ball they don't have any sex laws. Nothing is illegal. So...my mother and I had sex up until I was about fifteen. Then I graduated and joined the space college and moved to Freedom City and got into a heavy sex club with some of the other students."

"Was that all boy?"

"Yes." Hari laughed. "We'd lay around with jak tubes on and see who could blow-off fastest, or how often in an hour. That kind of thing. There was some raw sex, too, but I didn't like anything anal and only one or two of the boys liked to suck rams. They couldn't match the action of a jak tube, so there wasn't much raw sex. It was a lot better---if two boys were stitched---to slip on mutual jaks and lay there kissing and talking till they blew together."

"What about your visits? Get to now."

"With Mata, I like---liked to have her be my mother. She looked a lot like her, and I told her what to say and how to act and what to do..." Hari scowled.

Toi asked, "Didn't you have visits from Senya, too?"

"Yes, but she doesn't fit what I want. I traded her visits with men who liked her better than Mata."

Rune said, "You're not supposed to trade scheduled companion visits."

Hari rubbed his chin. "I know it. Everybody knows it. But everybody does it. We buy somebody else's visits, or we can win or lose them in games. We trade work shifts, so why not companion visits? They're a medium of exchange. It's been this way since companions were perks written into the first spacer contracts sixty-five years ago."

Toi nodded. "We don't like it, but it's a hard custom, now. We owe the visit no matter who holds title to it."

Rune asked Toi, "Any more questions?"

"A couple. Hari, did you love your mother?"

"Yes, of course."

Toi couldn't detect any falseness---physical or vocal---in his reply. She asked, "Was it good sex with her?"

"Sure. It was great. That's why I liked Mata to be my mother. She seemed to really care about me."

"Would Cholb approve?"

"Cholb? Oh...that's the new god going around, isn't it? I'm not religious. On New Freedom I was exposed to all the religions." He grinned and shook his head. "I was immunized at an early age, especially with the High Tah Wisdom sects. New souls for old. What a bunch of frauds."

Rune asked sharply, "Don't you have a moral system?"

"Sure. Basic Human Ethics. Right out of first school."

Rune said to Toi, "Satisfied?"

She nodded. They thanked Hari for his cooperation and left his cabin. As they walked lightly up the ramps to B level, Toi asked, "Where do we go

from here on this? I didn't expect Sam or Hari to be the killer. It'd be too simple and easy."

"You're a victim of holo mysteries where everything is convoluted motives and pre-planned to the second. Most murders are simple, direct and unpremeditated, in real life."

"Maybe on-planet. But on this ship--- What happened to Mata isn't just a case of warp murder."

"What do you think it is?" They had reached B-level and Toi headed for her cabin. Rune accompanied her.

She said, "I think she was killed to keep her quiet. She knew something, suddenly, that the murderer could not allow her to tell or record or write down...or continue knowing. So as soon as possible he came to her cabin when he knew she would be there, back from a visit, and he was friendly, asked her if she'd told anyone about his secret, and when she said no, he injected her with that overdose of paralysis drug, and when she stopped breathing he cut her up and wrote on the walls to make it look like a warp crime."

Rune nodded. "Then he edited the cabin computer in case she had recorded something."

They stopped at Toi's door. She pressed a tiny button on the behind-the-ear chrono she wore. A tiny voice whispered, "Five fifty-six pm."

Toi said, "If we're lucky it'll be that simple." She commanded her door open. "This is like one of those ancient murder mysteries where everyone is trapped with a killer on a non-stop train."

Rune smiled, "And you're the detective. It's almost as if you'd been trained for it."

She smiled, too. "No, it's as you said, I watch too many holo mysteries. That breeds a suspicious mind."

Rune touched her hip. "Being near you breeds a sex-obsessed mind. You were supposed to visit me an hour ago."

"On the old schedule."

"The new schedule doesn't take effect until tomorrow morning. And as Captain, I think I'm due today's visit today."

"Rune... This has been a vicious day. My mind is still full of what happened to Mata. Can I make it up to you later on?" Privately, at first, she thought his request callous and cruel. But then she recalled how she and Senya had cavorted with those sex toys not too long ago.

Rune said quickly, "You mean tonight? Of course. I have a watch starting..." He touched his ear. "...right now. I'll be off at ten. I'll expect your visit at eleven."

"I was thinking of some time after a few days."

Rune smiled coldly. "A captain has some privileges. You'll have five hours to rest and recover from the shock of Mata's death. I'll expect you at eleven!" He turned and walked quickly away toward the ramp.

Toi slammed into her cabin. She muttered to herself as she stripped off her orange robe and blue curls wig. Clinging between her large, pointed breasts was the tiny recorder. She pulled it free and slid its memory stick into a slot in the cabin computer.

She said clearly, "Examine this recording for stress in the male voices." She pressed tabs and buttons.

She stepped out of her orange panties and said, "Spray and dry."

Her privacy wall opened, the shower stall opened and she stepped in.

When she emerged she ordered down her bed. As she lay naked on the silken covers, thinking, her computer chimed and said in its masculine voice, "Message from Senya received while you were showering. Also: ready with voice analysis report."

"Play the message."

After a pause, Senya's voice came from the panel speakers. "Toi, I got bored after you left, and then one of the miners called and said he'd traded a visit by Mata with Tom Zunger for a visit by me, and he wanted me to fulfill it. I told him today's visits were all off, but he said this trade was made yesterday and I had an obligation...and he said he'd sweeten it with fifty credits. He begged me, Toi! I was bored with my holo and you were off with the Captain... I know I promised no free-lance visits, but this is different. I told him I'd fulfill but he had to link with the ship's computer and record the visit. He said okay, so I went. He's Jon Mantler, he's a Driller second class, on C, cabin twelve, and he wanted some bondage and slavery scenes. Degradation stuff! It was pretty deep and warped. I don't want him on my schedule. You take him from now on. He was Mata's from the beginning. You know she didn't mind that kind of map. When he started in with that I made sure the recorder was on. I just think you ought to know about him. He might be the one who...who killed Mata. I don't ever want to visit him again. I just want to forget him, and forget what happened to Mata...everything. I'm going to cone to sleep and keep coned. I've got a one a.m. visit according to the new schedule, so I've got to get my eight. If you have to wake me up, okay, I guess. But please let me sleep. I'll be up by twelve-thirty. Talk with you later, darling."

Toi said, "Play Senya's message again."

She listened intently. Then she said, "Give me the voice analysis report."

"Significant stress appeared only at one point: when Captain Rune Chilton asked Hari Grent, 'Did she ever mention the men she visited who had big rams?' Stress undercurrent in 'mention' and 'big rams'."

Toi nodded. Rune's stitch on size. She didn't think it was significant. He was always asking her for ram size comparisons and reassurance that he had the biggest ram on the ship. It was pathetic and surprisingly juvenile in a captain.

Toi said, "Record link to ship: Companion schedule revision. Toi King visit to Captain at eleven p.m. this day. Driller Jon Mantler visits assigned exclusively to Toi King. Substitute...umm...mining supervisor Van Dubtin exclusively to Senya. Confirm new schedule."

"Linked, recorded. Voice and authority match. New schedule."

She said, "Wake me at ten-thirty. Cone me." She slipped under the silken covers.

A padded metal cone descended from the wall over her head. She fitted it to her hairless skull. After a ten-second delay hypno sound put her to sleep.

-7-

Toi arrived on time at the Captain's cabin on A-level. She wore a pale blue serape of intricately woven zylon lace, lace-topped slippers, and a platinum blonde long-wave wig. Her panties were pale blue, too, with a provocative lace slit opening.

She had spent almost thirty minutes making up her eyes and subtly contouring her face. She knew Rune Chilton's sexual stitch very well.

The door opened for her when she spoke her name. He was at the small bar mixing a drink by hand. He smiled as she entered. "Ah, you're wearing my favorite outfit. What do you want to drink?"

She nervously tongued the capsule in her tooth. She was uneasy and didn't know why. "I'd like a volcano, but not too much rum, please. It makes me drunk."

She went to the luxurious Zillhide sofa and settled into it. Only a ship's captain rated a double-size cabin and this big, expensive furniture.

Rune said, "A volcano is a man's drink. It's not right for a child like you."

He was slipping into his sexual fantasy quickly. Toi responded appropriately. "Please, Daddy. I like them. And I am thirteen years old!"

"All right. Just this once more." He set about mixing the elaborate drink. He spilled some liqueur and muttered a curse.

Toi noticed his clumsiness. He was drunk. That was a change. But it had been a rough day for him. For everyone.

When he brought the tall, amber drink to her he turned the lights low. As usual he loosened his long robe as he sat beside her.

Toi sipped the potent drink. It tasted delicious. "Thank you, Daddy. It's so good!" She wriggled with delight. She pitched her voice to mimic a young girl's.

He drank deeply from his strong vodka drink. "Alcohol isn't good for girls, Sheela. It makes you think sexy thoughts."

Toi giggled. "I know. That's why I like it. I think sexy thoughts about you, Daddy." She giggled and leaned her head on his shoulder. She wondered how he'd act with Senya? She'd probably make a very good child, as small as she was, but Toi doubted she could act well enough yet. Had Rune ever tried this scene with Mata? Her big, heavy-breasted body wouldn't have fit his fantasy's image needs, but she could have played to perfection the child he wanted.

The thoughts about Mata brought the image of the butchered Mata to mind, and Toi felt sad and nauseated. She lowered her head.

Rune shifted slightly on the sofa and his robe opened to the thigh enough for her to see, in the dim, rosy light, the long thickness of his organ.

She snapped back into her role. This was her job! "Ohhh...I see something!" She reached with apparent curiosity and innocent-girl boldness to touch it.

Rune chuckled. "What do you think that is?"

"It's your ram." she clasped it awkwardly and lifted it experimentally. She acted amazed. "It's so big!"

"Is it the biggest you ever saw?"

"Oh, yes! But I've only seen Jorgi's, and he's only a boy! You're a man!" She leaned over to examine it closely. She moved it this way and that. And then she pretended to discover the skin would move up and down on it. She giggled. "Oh, look, I can make it cover up its head."

"You sure can, baby." His hand crept around to close gently over her right breast, naked under the lace.

She pretended to ignore his touch. "It's getting bigger! And stiffer!"

"It likes you."

Toi giggled again, never taking her gaze from his organ. Rune was

exceptionally large. He was, in Toi's experience, the largest man on the ship, as far as organ size was concerned, though Mata had told of a cargo handler in the crew who might be bigger. But Mata had never visited the Captain...had she?

Toi frowned and sat up. She reached for her volcano and sipped repeatedly, aware that Rune was impatiently waiting to get the game going again.

But she was in command of the visit in the last analysis. A Companion must always be in command.

She said, "Daddy, this drink makes me feel all fizzy and funny inside. It makes me want to do more things with your big ram."

"What things, Sheela?" He continued to fondle her breast. Her nipples had swollen and crinkled.

She wriggled. "And my titties feel so hot and kind of itchy. I like to have you feeling them like this."

"What things do you want to do with my big ram, darling?"

"Ohhh..." She played coy. She pumped him faster. She giggled. "I...I'd like to see if I could suck it. Mari-wo-Deez said women do that to rams a lot."

"That's right. Rams like to be sucked. You go ahead and suck my ram."

"It's so big!"

"Try, darling. Just open your mouth..."

Toi bent further over. She had developed a special technique---every Companion Two had a variation of it (in order to pass the tests for advancement from Companion Three)---which combined seeming first time experimentation with highly effective erotic tongue and mouth work. It was VGS, or Virgin Girl Sucking.

Rune hardened even more. She lifted her head. "Did I do it right?"

"You did it very well, darling. But you stopped too soon."

"My mouth got tired." She bent to her task again. She worked with a bit less feigned awkwardness. She detected a quick increase in his erotic tension and wondered if he would decide to climax this way. It wasn't in his pattern. But another fifteen seconds---

He said, "Stop now! Stop!"

She obeyed. She sat up. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No, darling. It was getting too good." He took a deep breath. "Now I'm going to show you how a man makes a girl feel good." He leaned Toi back into the luxuriously soft cushions and draped the lace serape up over her head. He began nursing on her breasts, sucking noisily, as his hands

roamed everywhere on her body, especially between her hairless thighs, to the plump, pink-lipped mound.

His eyes closed with contentment and he crooned softly. He was really submerged.

Toi watched through the curtain of lace. She was always amazed at the schizoid fantasies of men. Here Rune was simultaneously pretending she was his young daughter, and on a deeper level acting as an infant with his mother. And on a third level he knew she was a Companion, a paid sex-provider.

She knew her job: "Oh, that does feel good, Daddy." She wriggled and squirmed as he probed. "It tickles funny!"

She felt she was doing a good job, in spite of the terrible events of the day that burdened her in a walled-off part of her mind.

And Rune seemed to be deeper into his favorite sex fantasy than usual. In her experience---and from Companion Guild lectures---she knew almost every man held incest fantasies. They seemed inevitable and natural, if not acceptable in almost all human societies. Even men who were not fathers seemed to create daughter fantasies.

Lust and selfishness, she decided, find a way. She knew Rune Chilton had never married and never fathered. At least according to corporation and Space Guild records.

Toi watched him slip to his knees on the carpet. The final act of his fantasy was due about now.

It was a low sofa, and when he eased her thighs open his ram was at the perfect height for what was to happen next.

He leaned far over from his kneeling position and kissed her mouth through the fine lace. "Daddy's going to make you feel even better now, Sheela."

"How?"

"You'll see."

"Are you going to put your big ram in me?" A note of apprehension and fear.

"It won't hurt you, darling. You'll love it."

"It's too big!"

"No, it isn't" He was positioning, pressing....

"Oh! Daddy! Oh!" She tightened her thighs and inner muscles and hit lightly at him with her fists.

Rune was hunched over her, breathing excitedly as he watched his ram enter her.

"Oh, Daddy, I'm only thirteen! You're a giant! Your ram is bigger

than any man's! Ohhh!"

He had entered and was deep, panting with lust, muttering to himself. Toi had never been able to listen closely enough to what he said to himself. She was always too busy concentrating on technique; she writhed and squealed and jerked and moaned as he worked ever deeper.

She managed to relax her strong, trained interior muscles in the correct sequence, to give him the illusion that he was penetrating to virgin territory.

She continued her protests and exclamations and squirmings until he had managed to bury his entire length. He was huge, and he was stretching her to nearly her limit.

Rune snorted and gasped as he overcame her last interior resistance. "Sheela...Sheela...my darling little girl..."

Toi relaxed even more and gradually quieted. She subtly changed the character of her writhing and moaning. She eased into being a sexually awakened girl. "Oh, Daddy. I feel so funny."

"I knew you would, darling. You're so tight and delicious inside."

"What's happening to me? Am I---? Do you have it all in me? All of it? Oh... It feels so... so good! Oh, Daddy, I like it!" She began inexpertly to participate, to awkwardly jerk her hips to meet his renewed plunges.

Toi had to work very hard to be clumsy. And she knew he was close to climax. Another few seconds. There was a key phrase due from him.

It came: "Peak with me, Sheela! Can you peak with me?"

Toi was happy to oblige. She wanted this to be over. She bit down on the capsule in her hollow tooth and sucked the oozing drug. "Oh, Daddy, I'm so...hot! Something is happening to me! I can't stop it! OH! Daddy! OHHH! Ohh! Ohh! Oh, I'm doing it! I'm peaking!"

Toi went into her final, uncontrolled spasming orgasm. She was helpless as her body yielded to the command of the powerful erotic drug. The climax was wracking, real, overwhelming. She thrashed and howled and barely managed to cry, "DADDY!" over and over. She knew Rune was smacking into her like a madman, yelling hoarsely as he spent himself.

And then it was over. He sank away, sliding out of her. And she let her legs straighten slowly, and enjoyed the afterglow and the diminishing golden interior spasms.

The orgasms were artificially induced--- triggered---but they were explosions of real ecstasy. And they always left her limp as a rag.

Rune sighed, lurched to his feet and called for his wall to open. He was into his shower in seconds.

Toi languidly reached for her Companion case and drew out a pad.

She pressed it into place and sat up. She flipped her lace serape down off her head. She yawned and stood up. In her mind she was already back in her cabin. A shower, a Kalmer, a new, short segment of the Werty One Comedy Show, and then sleep. She doubted she'd need a cone tonight.

But she had to talk to Rune, now, about Jon Mantler. She waited.

Rune emerged, dried, powdered, from his shower, and seemed a bit surprised to see her still in the cabin. He was a different man, now. The fantasy was finished, a sex game put aside. He smiled and took a different robe from his closet. "That was a particularly fine visit, Toi."

"I thought so, too. You were magnificent."

"Best rammer on the ship, eh?"

"I hope so. I couldn't take a better one."

He smiled and nodded. "Something you want to talk about?"

She reached to the end table and drank from the volcano he had made for her earlier. "Yes. I got a message from Senya a few hours ago."

Toi told of Senya's alarm about Jon Mantler. "But I don't think the murderer is---"

Rune interrupted her. "We've got to question him. Did she say how deep his sado-maso is?"

"No. She's sleeping now, so---"

"Did Mata ever talk about him? If he's a warp she should have mentioned it to you or Senya."

Toi said in irritation, "No, I don't remember her mentioning him, and from what Senya said she was in the dark, too. She was surprised and thought we should know. But---"

Rune said, "I can't have him confined now, without cause. And we both need sleep. Do you think Senya let him know she thought him a warp and might be the murderer?"

"I doubt it. She's a Companion, after all. He probably thinks she loved it all and can't wait for the next visit with him."

Rune didn't like that. "Don't tell me there isn't a strong element of honesty in Companion visits. Some things can't be faked."

Toi humored him. "True, but frankly, Rune, a second class Driller is an easy man to fool. I remember them well from my C-Three days. I'll have to get used to them again starting tomorrow. Senya couldn't fool you or most officers or execs. But a Driller or a cargo man...yes."

He nodded. "Then it's all right to get some rest. We can go to his cabin tomorrow and check him out."

"The only free time I have is at one p.m. or after six."

"Cancel one of your visits. This is important."

"I can't cancel. I can reschedule, which means a make-up visit at night---in my shrinking personal time."

"You'll have to do that, then. This is an important development, and you're the one who was so eager to investigate and have everything on the record---strictly by the contract."

"All right. When can you see Mantler?"

"Just a minute." Rune went to his computer and asked for Mantler's schedule. He studied the screen. "He's working on maintenance now. He'll probably be in his cabin, sleeping, tomorrow by nine."

"He has rights. Do we ram in on him in the middle of his rest period?"

"If I want to, we can. By nine he'll have had at least...six hours of sleep. If he hasn't been sleeping it isn't our fault. I want to surprise him and I'm taking a security man along, just in case."

Privately, Toi thought Jon Mantler a highly unlikely suspect; he fit too obviously into the "warp" slot the Captain seemed intent on pursuing. But there weren't any other clues.

Toi agreed to meet Rune at the D-level junction at nine the next morning.

She left his cabin and went back down to her own. She showered, and consulted the schedule to see who she had to reschedule. She made a quick call to the man, Bice Verensky, a power engineer on duty, and arranged to visit him at six P.M. the next day.

In their short conversation on the intercom she learned he was a heavy M man, which could make her visit easy. She wished there were dozens of men like him on the ship.

Toi went to bed and found she couldn't sleep. She resorted again to the cone.

At three minutes to nine the next morning, Toi left her cabin and went down the ramps to D-level.

Rune and a beefy security man were waiting at the intersection.

The security man watched her approach with great interest. He smiled.

Toi suddenly remembered there was a security man on her schedule for today. In the middle afternoon. Maybe this was he. She returned his smile. She wondered what his stitch was.

Rune said, "You're looking refreshed and beautiful, Toi."

She wore an opaque violet flare dress and a matching violet curl wig. Sheer violet panties were all she wore under the dress. She knew her breasts wobbled enticingly, and her nipples poked nicely, stimulated by the sensual grazing of the clinging material.

She nodded her thanks for the compliment. "Is Mantler in his cabin?"

Rune shrugged. "He should be." He instructed the security man, "Rud, stay outside his cabin, by the door. Set your gun for heavy stun. Don't come in unless I or Toi call for you."

Rud nodded and drew his big electronic pistol. He set the dial, locked it, and switched off the safety. He returned the gun precisely and carefully to its thick plastic holster on his harness.

Toi didn't like guns, but she had been trained to use every variety. The rocket pistols were the worst, with those dum-dum heads or worse yet the exploding heads. She'd seen depth pictures of what they did to a body. Those pictures had prepared her somewhat for what Mata had been.

Toi asked Rune, "Did you look at Mantler's files?"

"Too busy. Rather do a now-time personal investigation."

Toi asked, "Well, was he working a shift when Mata was killed?"

"I did check that. He was off duty." Rune led the way to Mantler's cabin. He used an emergency override key to unlock the door. They entered quickly. He slapped the light control tabs and the small cabin brightened.

Mantler's bed was out and rumped, but he wasn't in it. His privacy wall was closed.

Rune said, "Could he have been warned we were coming?"

"Who knows? Maybe he was spooked by something Senya said. Maybe he's in the mess eating an early breakfast."

Rune went to the open cabin door. "Rud, you know what Jon Mantler looks like?"

"Yes, sir. I've played poker with him."

"If he comes down the hall, send him in here. If he sees you and runs, stun him."

Toi began looking through Mantler's possessions. Rune joined her.

She was careful to disturb his clothing as little as possible, but Rune rumped, pawed, left things askew. It bothered Toi. She said, "He has contractual rights against this sort of thing, short of an official notification of charges."

"True, except in a Captain's Emergency. I made an official declaration last night after you left, to Magni-Space, the Space Guild and the Companion Guild. This search is within my authority."

"Thank you for telling me."

"I forgot to, when we were out in the passage."

Toi came across a pack of depth pictures under a pile of slippers. They showed naked men in extreme bondage. One photo intrigued Toi: a young, handsome man strapped to a set of rings set in a wall slumped, head down, hanging by the tight straps on his arms and around his waist, neck and legs. There were vivid red whip marks on his chest. Yet he had an enormous erection.

She handed it and the others to Rune. "There's a rival for you."

He studied it. "Is this Mantler?"

"Show it to Rud."

Rune shook his head. He shuffled through the other pictures. "This is heavy bondage, and...here's some torture."

Toi had gone on to check Mantler's cabinet of holo cassettes. She found an entire section of cassettes labeled only by cryptic words or numbers. They were not the usual mass market commercial kinksex releases. "I think I've found some more." She switched on his entertainment center and slipped one of the cassettes into the slot. She found Mantler's remote control pod on the slept-in bed and switched on the holoplayer.

She and the captain stood and watched as THE SLAVE OF ZUNIA began to show.

Rune muttered, "Warp food."

Toi found it interesting. The story was fantasy: a very handsome, well-built young man was held captive by the beautiful Princess Zunia, who enjoyed punishing bound men. As she lashed the young man a slave girl was assigned to suck his organ. It was remarkable that he was able to attain an impressive erection, and even come to orgasm during the apparently extremely painful whipping. The welts and some oozing blood could be clearly seen.

Toi would normally have suspected the story to be computer-generated, but so far as she knew state-of-the-art computer images couldn't yet show this utterly real body detail, especially in the close-ups.

Both Rue and Toi became absorbed in the action, for different reasons. Rune made disgusted sounds as the man was forced to v-lick the Princess as a girl slave rubbed salt into his wounds.

Rune grabbed the control pod from Toi and switched off the holo. "That's enough of that! It's pretty obvious Mantler is the man we're after."

Toi said, "Just the opposite."

"What do you mean?"

"Let's check out more of these holos first." Toi stacked six cassettes in the player. Another bondage fantasy flickered into solidity---CHAINED GIANT unfolded the story of a seven-foot man among the diminutive women fighters of a jungle planet. They captured him as he slept after crash-landing his one-man spacer. They bound him with chains and abused him constantly to make him tell why he was on their planet.

Rune asked, "Where did they get such small women?"

Toi answered, "Some women on Earth grow only four feet tall or less. A religious sect in California deliberately breed for small size. They're called Miniatures, and they are in great demand in the entertainment and service industries."

"This is a vicious story. Why would men take on acting jobs like this? He's just a victim!"

"Credits. Probably lots of credits."

"They're cutting him!"

"Apparently. But notice the close-ups don't show his face. They may be torturing a corpse."

Rune shook his head. "That's enough of that one." He canceled that cassette.

Another came into the screen: TEM'S HUMILIATION.

Rune and Toi watched for a minute as a naked young man, bound in shiny black leather manacles and cuffs, groveled before a tall, imperious blonde Amazon-type woman as two other women urinated on him.

The four cassettes that followed were similar.

Rune canceled the last one and disgustedly threw the control pod onto the bed. "That's a warped stitch if I ever saw one. I'm going to confine him to this cabin and keep him here for the remainder of the trip. He won't kill anyone else."

Toi said, "Didn't you see the pattern and slant of those cassettes? And those photos? He isn't the murderer."

Rune was surprised and angry. "What?"

"He's stitched on male victims! Male punishment! Male humiliation! Male pain! He's a masochist. And only a mental masochist at that. Fantasy! Read the small print in his psycho-sex profile. I did a few minutes before I came down here to meet you. Mantler's been this way since he was a teener. He's been with Magni-Space for twenty-three years. He's got a perfect record. He even avoids arguments. He's cooperative to a fault. He's rated a six point eight self-effacement personality. He's of limited

intelligence. Nothing in his education or hobby record shows the slightest knowledge or interest in religious, anti-sex cults!"

Rune was angry and deflated. "I don't fully trust records and tests. People manage to slip and skip a lot. There's always a corner they don't show."

Toi nodded. "True, but the intelligence and aptitude tests were extensive, varied, and are repeated by the Space Guild every five years. They're strict about that, as you should know. And his last tests were last year."

"You're deliberately---"

Toi ratted on. "He's not a corporate spy or a warped killer. He's just a second-class Driller with no hope of being anything better, and he indulges his low-ego-set with maso fantasies. Let's let him be."

"What if Mata insulted him...made fun of him? He might've---"

"Rune, I'll bet you if we contact Senya after we leave here she'll tell us his request when she visited him last night was for humiliation. He probably begged her to treat him like shit. He probably wanted to be spat on or peed on. That would upset her. She's still a beginner Companion Three."

Rune reluctantly said, "You may be right. But let's check with her."

"I will. I'll leave a message---" Toi slapped the side of her head in exasperation. "I forgot! I listened to her message twice and I still forgot! She had him record the visit last night! We can watch it and we can judge from that."

"I really appreciate all this wasted time." Rune went to Mantler's computer. He commanded a link to the ship's computer. "Was a Companion visit recorded from this cabin last night?"

"Yes." The voice was female, harsh.

Rune made a face and voiced off. "Let's go to my cabin and watch it." He started for the door. "What are you doing?"

Toi was at Mantler's drawers, replacing the depth photos, straightening his clothes to the original configuration she remembered. She placed the holo control pod where it had been first. She stacked the cassettes in their cabinet but wasn't sure of the original sequence.

She looked around. "I hope that's good enough. I hate violating privacy like this."

Rune was amused at her concerns. "It had to be done. I'll tell him the truth if he calls security and reports somebody searched his cabin."

When Toi and he were back out in the hall, and the door was relocked, Rune told Rud, "I want Mantler monitored until I say stop."

"Yes, sir." Rud spoke into a com unit on his harness as Toi and Rune

headed for the ramps.

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When they reached Rune's cabin, Toi said, "I've only got fifteen minutes to spend here. I can't reschedule another visit today."

"If the Captain orders you to---"

"Rune, I have obligations! I have professional ethics. I'm a Companion Two, and I'm happy with my work and I'm proud of my work. I'm good at my job and I enjoy visiting my clients. Most of them are fun to be with. I have a contract. I have professional obligations. I have a right to my personal time. Don't warp me on this, please!"

Rune smiled. "All right, all right."

She continued, "Let's watch enough of Senya's visit with Mantler last night to confirm your suspicions or my judgment."

Rune went to his console and ordered the ship's computer to play its recording of the visit. He offered Toi a drink but she declined.

Senya's visit went as Toi had predicted: Senya was resentful, Jon Mantler was apologetic and pleased she had come.

Mantler said, "Didn't you ask for Mata's information about me?"

"No, it was blocked or something. What kind of sex do you want?"

"Well, you know I look like a big, tough man, and that's the way I have to act with most people. But that's my shell. I'm really different, inside."

"Okay, that's true with most of us. What do you really want?"

"Well...I'd like you to please tie me up and...call me names and spit on me and punish me for offending you. Make me squirm. Make me feel ashamed and guilty. Make me beg for forgiveness. And then...here...use this on me. Knot it around my ram and balls and then sit on me...and jack me...and when I tell you, if you can, please, I'd love to have you piss on me."

"While I'm sitting on your---on your chest?"

"Yes, with your ass close to my face."

"Then pee...on your belly?"

"Yes, please. If you can, when I beg you to, while you're jacking me. That way I'll shoot off and it'll be fantastic."

Senya asked, "Mata did that for you all the time?"

"Yes. She was really good at it. She'd save up for hours before visiting me, and it was lovely. She could piss a quart. I've got a special absorbent pad to put on the bed, to lie on."

"That's a... I've never done that." Senya was clearly reluctant. She stood, half naked in an orange net dress, arms folded, and pouted.

"Please? Would you try? I thought all Companions---"

"All right! I guess I can pee on command. I was trained to, anyway, and I suppose I can still do it. Do you want me naked?"

"Yes, and I'll be naked, too. And please treat me like shit. Be really angry with me...really tie me up good. Make it hurt me."

"That I will, you worm! I'm not happy with this late visit anyway, and I think you're a Class A warp! So...get that robe off, you shit-faced idiot! Get down on your knees and beg me not to cut off your ram and make you eat it!"

As time passed, Senya seemed to get deeply involved in her Mistress role and enthusiastically punished Mantler. His cries and reactions were real. Senya was panting.

Toi asked Rune, "Seen enough?"

"I want to see it all the way to the end, to be sure."

"I don't have time. I've got ten minutes to make myself up as Loria Hawkins, the holo star, and visit an exec who met her once and who's been ramming her via Companions ever since."

"Sounds like fun." Rune stopped the recording and said, "If you have to go..."

Toi blurted, Rune I don't think a warp killed Mata. There's got to be a rival corporate agent on this ship, planted or bribed, who killed her, probably because he let something slip to her. Maybe she realized it, maybe she didn't. But he couldn't take a chance, and killed her and tried to make it appear to be a religious sexwarp crime."

Rune sobered. He scowled. "Maybe you're right, but...if you are right it complicates things."

"Is this voyage special? It has to be to a Class A Treasure planet to justify murder."

"I can't tell you that."

"Check with Magni-Space. Maybe they'll okay my knowing." She thought, I am their secret employee, after all!

He looked at her thoughtfully. "Huh. Maybe."

Toi almost confessed she was a corporate agent herself, but held her tongue. She remembered an instructor advising her, "Never volunteer any information without a purpose clearly in mind!"

She gestured at the door. "I've got to go."

Rune waved permission for her to leave. As Toi left his cabin he told the computer to play back the previous thirty seconds of the recorded visit.

When Toi entered her cabin she said to her computer, "Is Senya in her cabin?" She took off her violet flare dress and matching wig.

Her computer answered, "Senya is on a visit to Mac Leeger, Security, Cabin C-19."

"When will we be in our cabins at the same time? Open the wall."

As Toi's privacy wall opened, her computer answered, "Estimated ten minutes of cabin proximity starting approximately four forty-five p.m."

Toi cleaned her face and bare skull. As she wiped and reached for the Loria Hawkins contact mask, she said, "Give her computer this message: I want to visit her at that time for five minutes. It's very important. End message."

"It is done."

Toi fitted the mask to her face and smoothed the skin mask edges to invisibility. She dialed for the Hawkins wig. Her computer brought it from storage/cleaning.

She said, "Record for reference. Share with Senya's computer and flag it. Den Rado visits: He's fat and friendly. Likes playful attitude, a fantasy of Loria Hawkins on an impulsive escapade. She visits him, does not know him, is drunk, and propositions him. She is impulsive and highly sexed. She is pleasantly surprised at his sexual skills and has two orgasms. The first as he rams can be simulated, low key. But she is delighted and wants more. He'll be tired from the ramming and will go oral. The second o sometimes can be real and non-capsuled. He's exceptional at clit licking. End."

But Toi didn't think Rado would accept brown-skinned Senya as Loria Hawkins.

"It is done."

Toi asked, "Time?"

"Your visit with Packaging Executive Den Rado is at ten a.m., due in three minutes. A-level, cabin nine."

"After that?"

"Next scheduled visit is at ten fifty-five a.m. with Peel Gordon, Electronics Maintenance, First Class. C-level, cabin twenty-one."

Toi nodded. She'd have to make a new record of all her clients' sexual preferences and stitches. One-third of them---like Gordon---would be totally new to her.

She rather looked forward to it. It wasn't the sex---that was the job

part of it, and there was only so much variety---it was the spread of new personalities, the characters, the surprises she liked.

She donned the red wig and added last minute touches to the Loria Hawkins 'look'. She said to the illuminated mirror in a low, excited voice, "I don't know who you are, and I don't care. Just ram me!"

The mask was tight and flexed perfectly.

Her computer said, "One minute."

Toi hurriedly slipped on bright red see-through panties, a red, gossamer-thin harem vest, and matching red pantaloons. She ordered, "Close the wall!" as she grabbed her Companion case and ran from her cabin.

She heard her computer say, "You'll be late."

She called back, "Lock the door!"

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When Toi rapped on Peel Gordon's cabin door an hour later she was tired and ten minutes late. Den Rado had been exhausting in showing off his athletic ability and sexual knowledge.

For the Gordon visit she had chosen to wear a glow-green, moving-stripe cling dress, matching foot slippers, and an orange flow wig. Her eyes were fiery red.

Peel opened the door himself. His face lit up when he saw her. "I was afraid you'd skipped me."

"I'm sorry. I was late for my previous appointment and it ran over, and I had to spend a lot of time changing out of a total costume, showering and dressing again. This new schedule doesn't allow enough time for preparation. Not to mention resting." In spite of herself she sighed as she entered his cabin.

He said, "Loona, close the door. Record all while the Companion is in the cabin. Feed to ship's master computer."

His computer, speaking with a lilting woman's voice, very pleasant, said, "It shall be as you command, master. Would you or your visitor like refreshment? A drink? A morsel of Heavenly Playground zin-nut cake?"

When she entered, Toi had noticed a clutter of electronic parts and tools, and racks of nano boards and wafer files on his extended console. She

laughed and said, "I've never heard a personal computer talk like that! With real personality."

Peel said, "I upgraded it. Loona is almost human. The only thing she lacks is a body."

Toi liked him immediately, in spite of his expertise in electronics and computers...which made him a suspect in Mata's murder.

Peel wasn't good looking or well built, with his round head, his narrow shoulders and wide hips, but he exuded happiness and self-confidence.

Toi said, "Thank the limits of science! If Loona had a body I'd be out of a job."

"We're getting there. The problem is creating an efficient, realistic organic body for her quote mind. It's a nightmare of interlocking nano complexity. Would you like a drink and a slice of cake?"

"Of course I would, but time--- What's your pleasure?"

"How much time do we have left?"

"Not more than twenty-five minutes, I'm afraid."

He nodded, disappointed. "I'm a slow-peaking rammer. I like to spend a long time at it. An hour. Makes the sensations incredible at the end."

"Oh, I'm sorry. If you'd like to reschedule to two visits a month, I could give you an hour or a little more, per visit."

Peel agreed to that. "I'll survive with my autojak for two weeks, I guess. We'll just talk and have some cake now, if you like."

"Couldn't I suck you? I'm very good."

"I don't like being sucked. It's nice once in a long while, but I feel it's a waste. I'd rather ram long and slow and easy."

Toi was mildly surprised at his refusal. But some men were very strict and particular about their sexual activity. Still, she felt he was being cheated this time.

She said, "Why don't you put on your jak and let me hug and kiss you till you climax?"

For this "blind," first-time visit she had worn an amber robe and a honey-colored wig that tumbled wavy hair past her shoulders.

She opened her robe to show her naked breasts and enhanced, erect, pink nipples. Her cleft this time was decked with glittery purple. She purred, "You could play with me while you're jacked."

He cocked his head. "Okay. But first the drink and cake."

"I'd rather help you with your pleasure first, if you don't mind. Then if there's time I'd really enjoy a bite."

“I like my jak time long, too, but let’s not totally waste the visit.” He said to his computer, “Loona, open my wall. I need my sex machine. And slide out the bed.”

“Your wish is ever my command, master.” The wall opened.

He took an elaborate jak unit from an opened cube in a revealed closet as the bed curved out of the end of the wall.

A moment later, Toi and Peel lay naked on the bed. She watched as he slipped the long, fat, metal and plastic gourd over his ram, adjusted the angle and placed sensors. He set the time, suction, wetness, heat, plunge and tightness controls on the pod.

He said, “Usually I like to go at least thirty minutes, but....” He handed her the control pod. He smiled. “Do the honors.”

Toi noted the settings. Twelve minutes. That was quick enough. She nestled closer to him and offered her lips. When he kissed her she pressed the ON button. Her mind veered to the history of sex devices....

The Autojak had been engineered for reliability, silence and effectiveness. It had been created on Earth initially for sale to solitary men temporarily without women, as a pornography ‘toy’, then issued by governments to prisoners and male soldiers. It solved a lot of problems.

Soon after the swift social-cultural acceptance of the Autojak, women of all ages demanded its equivalent, and the Autopleaser was quickly developed.

There were dozens of competing products, but the Autopleasure Corporation had emerged as the provider of the best products and had become a top-fifteen corporation on the Interstellar Stock Exchange, for over 150 years.

Toi personally owned ten thousand shares.

Jaks and pleasers had been made more complex and pleasing until now the devices could equal and often exceed the purely physical pleasures of any kind of sex---barring pain-bondage-fluids fetishes---for het or hom couples as well as singles.

But Toi knew nothing could substitute for another human being in your arms. The warmth, the subtle interpersonal psyche interplay, the old-fashioned need for companionship and shared emotion.

Love and romance and marriage were still the ideal and the best natural relationship between people.

But she knew live sex Companions were also necessary. The oldest profession was alive and well, now established as Good and Legal.

The expansions of the giant Earth corporations into space---and the creation of the space guilds---had resulted in men and women demanding

human sex in space, on long voyages, and the existence of the Companion Guild on Earth had inevitably resulted in contracts involving Companions who served executives, crew and workers.

Most secular Earth societies accepted sex and sexual pleasure as necessary and natural and a basic human right. Sex providers were as legal and respectable as any service profession.

That was certainly true of the expanding, interconnected galactic commercial civilization which served all of the 137 varied human societies, empires and colonies.

But most of the religion-ruled cultures attempted to restrict and use sexuality as a means of control and to enhance power.

The Cholb anti-sex worshippers---a cult grown to an aggressive religion---were a growing presence on more and more planets.

Toi hated them.

But Peel's pleasure reactions to his Autojak brought her back to her professional obligations.

He began to caress her body, and his touching and kisses told her he wanted to be the aggressor.

Toi decided to be passive and appreciative. Since his hands were gentle on her, she didn't have to act. His kisses were very enjoyable.

She decided not to orgasm by means of the capsule in her mouth. He wasn't touching her cleft and clit that much, and twelve minutes wasn't long enough for her to build a credible climax passion. But she did respond to his increasingly fervent kisses.

Peel murmured, "Ummmm... I'm looking forward to ramming you for as long as I want. Sweet and slow..."

"I want you to, Peel. I love it that way. I like you. It'll be wonderful."

Minutes later he began to breathe fast and tightened his arms around her. She responded to his passionate kisses on her large, soft breasts by moaning softly and then tightening her arms around his neck. She still got a shiver thrill of joy and satisfaction when a man climaxed in her embrace.

After a moment more he sighed deeply, rolled onto his back and said, "That was fine. Better than I thought it would be. I wish I could have set it for much longer, with you in my arms."

Toi kissed him lightly. "Two weeks from now we'll have over an hour to do anything you want."

"How much time do we have left now?" He called to his computer, "Loona. Time?"

"Eleven-twenty and twenty seconds, master."

Peel asked Toi, "What would you like to drink?"

Toi was slipping into her robe. "A lime Quenol would be delicious."

"And a beer for me, Loona, with the cake for both of us."

"I hear and obey, master." The cabin's serving cabinet opened and its tray emerged with half a loaf of sliced zin nut cake, two disposable white dishes with cling forks and knives. The drinks emerged on a separate tray above the larger tray which served as a table. Two cushioned seats slid out.

Toi was impressed. "You've done a lot to this cabin that isn't called for in the contract."

"I like to improve things. It's a hobby. Everybody has to do something with free time. I'm not a holo hound or a game player...so I give my computer and cabin equipment some added capabilities."

Toi wondered what else he could do. She asked, "Did you kill Mata?"

"What?" he asked incredulously.

"Did you?"

"No, I didn't kill her. I liked her a lot. Do you know why she was killed?"

"Tell me."

"Toi--- That was just a question, not an offer of information."

Toi had asked the rude, direct questions so that his answers would be recorded---and later stress tested. Just in case. Because Peel Gordon was a perfect candidate to be a spy for a rival corporation.

Toi smiled and said, not quite truthfully, "I ask every man I visit the same questions. You never know, I might luck out."

"You might end up like Mata, too, if you luck out."

"But the visits are all recorded. He wouldn't dare."

"Maybe. I could have pre-commanded a time delay in Loona, then edit the recording to eliminate evidence of another murder. I could guide the conversation so you'd appear to leave, then call you back for a minute---dead you---then cut the last part of the recording. You'd appear to have left."

"Isn't this conversation being recorded directly, real time, by the ship's computer?"

"No, it's being fed to ship by my personalized cabin computer. The captain's instructions do not specifically forbid time delays in the data link. And if I know that, others probably do, too."

"Shit!"

Peel grinned. "Exactly."

"But wouldn't the ship computer notice the delay?"

"Yes, if it was instructed to notice, and it would tell you a delay

occurred if it was asked a precise question. Would you like another glass of Quenol?"

Toi shook her head and asked, "Could you wipe parts of another cabin's computer, and then---or previous to that---wipe selected parts of other cabin computer memories if those computers are linked?"

"Sure. Anybody with some up-to-date computer training and a UTA override and interlock could do it."

"How does that work?"

"The override breaks through existing command structures once an interlock is made. The override is a supreme authority to the computer. God, in effect. New commands are accepted without question. Memory can be wiped without autobackup."

"What does a UT..."

"UTA."

"What does it look like?"

"I don't have one, or I'd show you. They're about as big as your thumb."

Toi touched her earpiece for the time. "I've got to leave now." She popped a last small piece of nutcake into her mouth. "Peel, thanks for the treat, and for the answers. You've been a great help."

"I hope so. Do I really have to wait two weeks before seeing you again?"

"I'm afraid so."

"How about socially? Would you like to come by for a talk---more cake and lime Quenol---and more fascinating computer education?"

Toi was tempted. She sighed. "Peel, I'm not allowed to, and you know it. A Companion cannot show any favoritism to any man on her visit schedule while on contract. We have to stick to ourselves. Companions' free time is spent with Companions."

"I don't see why."

"How long have you been in the Space Guild?"

"Ten months. Ah...now I get a lecture."

"You sure do. In the early days of safe space travel, when long commercial voyages began and corporate space activities became extensive, the New Equal Rights Movement---NERM---influenced ship crew training and selection, so that mixed-sex crews were tried. But it didn't work out because sex and jealousy and frustration raised ugly heads. A lot of people were killed in interstellar ships and a lot of ships were lost due to sex and love problems."

"And so the Space Companion Guild was born."

“Right. Actually, a serious prostitute’s union movement began in twenty-ten on Earth in the old United States, and eventually became respectable when prostitution was legalized by decree by Life President Malone in twenty thirty-five.”

“Over a hundred years ago.”

“Still true. The corporations turned to the Companion Guild when their Space Guild crews began demanding contracts that included sex benefits on long voyages.”

Peel said, exasperated, “I don’t need history. I need you on a social basis between ramming visits.”

“Peel, if I start seeing a crewman or an officer or an exec socially or in my cabin, or begin eating with a man in the dining room, it will set up jealousies and rivalries and competitions and sometimes hatreds and fights. I might get emotionally involved with someone. It would affect my work.”

Toi continued, “The socializing-on-my-free-time problem got to be too much of a problem, and the Guilds and the corporations realized it.

“Companions socialize among themselves. We are specially selected women, highly trained---”

“And you get paid twice my wage!”

“Yes, we do. And we’re worth it. If we weren’t, the corporations wouldn’t pay it.”

“For laying on your back and letting a man ram.”

Peel’s last remark curdled Toi’s liking for him. “There’s a lot more to it than that! But I’m not going to argue. I’ll see you in two weeks.”

He nodded and said sourly, “Yeah.”

Toi smiled professionally. “I’m really looking forward to that hour of slow, sweet ramming.”

“You’ll get it, don’t worry.”

She winked, nodded, and left.

As her cabin door opened for her and the lights and music came on, Toi stepped forward and tossed her Companion case toward a nearby luxchair.

There was a sharp, tinkling pop and her case was jolted in the air. The

case fell to the carpet, a small dart embedded in the tough brown faux leather.

Green fluid oozed from the needle.

Toi stared down at it, frozen, incredulous. Then she looked quickly into her cabin, suddenly terrified. She looked at the inside door frame and saw a metal cylinder taped there. She looked at the opposite frame and saw a small mirror fastened there.

The weapon was a miniature dart gun powered by a tiny power cell and a one-shot compressed air capsule. It was triggered by a photo-electric beam.

The instant the beam was broken, the dart had been propelled.

Toi was positive the green fluid carried in the hypodermic dart was a quick-acting deadly poison. She had read about this stuff---TerminolD---in various intelligence and spying articles in her computer readouts from the GalaxyNet.

The poison paralyzed the body within two or three seconds, and intensified the paralysis until the heart stopped in about thirty seconds. As Mata had died.

She stood unable to move, heart pounding, suddenly dry-mouthed. If she hadn't impulsively started to toss her case---

She noticed scrawled words on the side wall: CHOLB RULES DIE DIE DIE NOW FLESH HOLE THE KING IS DEAD.

She began to shake. She backed away from her cabin doorway and leaned against the corridor wall. She thought, I've gotten too close to him! But who? How?

Her legs were trembling and abruptly became too weak to support her. She slid down with her back against the wall.

Toi sat there for five minutes, shivering, trying to focus her mind, waiting for the shock to pass. Somebody had entered her cabin and fastened the dart gun and mirror in place during the last... She touched her ear watch. During the last thirty-eight minutes.

Rune Chilton turned the corner from the Level B intersection and saw her sitting on the carpet. "Toi!" He ran to her.

"Somebody tried to kill me!" She struggled to her feet. He helped her.

He said, "How? What happened?" He peered into her cabin and saw it was empty. "Out here?" He put his arm around her and urged her into her cabin. His hand instinctively and possessively cupped her left breast.

Toi resisted the movement into the doorway. She didn't care about his hand. "No! It was a dart gun---inside on the door frame. There might be

other guns in there!”

He stopped. He saw the cylinder, then the mirror. He saw her Companion case on the floor and the embedded, leaking dart. “Yes...I see. You were lucky.” He checked the cabin door lock.

“I know. It was just chance that I had my case forward and it broke the beam.” Toi liked his strong arm around her, and the strangely reassuring cupping of her breast. She was still trembling.

Rune said, “Toi, order your door closed and locked. We’ll go up to my cabin. I’ll have Security come here in armor and search your cabin for any other guns or traps.”

“Yes, thanks. She gave the order and her computer obeyed. As she and Rune walked toward the ramp, Toi asked, “How did he get in?”

“With a UTA, I imagine.”

“Oh...yes. I was just visiting Peel Gordon, and he told me about them. Is a UTA something like the override key you used to get into Jon Mantler’s cabin?” “A little. My override key is limited to doors. A UTA and an interlock can manage it by countermanding your orders to your computer.”

“How?”

“It can be done by interlocking with your computer through the mike in your door. A few words and the door opens. A few more words and your computer won’t remember it opened the door. Very simple if you have the right equipment.”

“You sure know a lot.”

He shrugged. “I’m the captain. I have to know a lot.”

“My sense of protection and privacy is gone. That’s terrifying.”

“I’ll take care of you, Toi.”

A minute later they entered Rune’s cabin on Level-A. He immediately went to his console and gave orders to Security.

Toi went to his bar and punched for a very strong mixed drink.

When he had finished, Rune said, “They’ll have your cabin examined and secure in about an hour. They’ll call me when they’re finished. I’ve got to go down and let them in. Stay here and relax.” He smiled. “Drink three of those.” He went to the door.

Toi asked, “Are you going to use your override key on my door?”

“Yes.”

“Do you keep it on you all the time?”

“No. It’s in the control room security box.” He left.

For a moment or two Toi sipped her powerful drink. Then she got up and went to his console. She keyed for a link with her cabin computer.

“Has anyone entered the cabin while I have been absent?”

“No.”

“The Captain is going to override your door lock. Record everything that is said and done in my cabin from this instant.”

“It shall be done.”

“Any messages?”

“Yes. Alic Walker, Power Engineer Second, Level-C, cabin nineteen, You were due at his cabin five minutes ago. It is now eleven-forty.”

Toi nodded. She felt a strong obligation to make her visits! But now... She needed a shower, a change of outfit...a change of everything, including ships! How could she make visits if a man was loose who wanted to kill her?

When he learned he'd failed with the dart gun he'd probably try again!

And who could it be? Mantler? But he didn't fit. Peel Gordon was more likely...except she had been with him during the time the killer had entered her cabin and set up the dart gun.

Who else? There were dozens of suspects!

Toi felt sick with frustration and dread. Maybe Rune could think of something when he got back.

She hadn't ended her link to her computer. She said, “Call Walker and...tell him I'm on important ship business at the command of the captain, and that I'll reschedule him at the earliest possible moment. My apologies.”

“It is done.”

“Any other messages?”

“Yes. Your three p.m. visit today, Son Harper, and your three forty-five p.m. visit today, Land Van Rese, want to combine with you in Van Rese's cabin---Level-C, cabin three---if that is agreeable with you.”

“Yes. Confirm that. I might be able to make up some time that way.” It was unlikely either of them was the killer. “Who's my visit after Walker?”

“Tom Wu Li, a Transport executive, Level-B, cabin six. He likes an alien creature fantasy. You are an invader on the ship, incredibly sexual, and you must force him to lick your clit as you suck him. Human semen is a critically necessary element in your alien diet; without it you will soon die. Your orgasm is necessary for proper utilization of his semen. He likes variety in your costume and alien look. His pattern shows a preference for an exaggerated mouth and vulva.”

“Yes, I remember his stitch. Message him I probably won't be able to do his visit today. If I'm going to be too late, I'll reschedule. My apologies.”

“It is done.”

It was done, all right. The attempt on her life had changed her life. She didn't want to walk the corridors alone anymore. She didn't want to be alone with a man anymore. Should she carry a weapon?

Toi thought of something and smiled. Maybe if she required her men to see her in three-ways or four-ways she'd be safe, with escorts.

But most men preferred private visits. They didn't want their private sex stitches known by other men. And their contracts called for private Companion visits.

It seemed to Toi that most of the officers and execs and crew and workers would be forced to use their autojaks frequently from now to the end of the voyage.

She thought maybe there could be mass jacking parties, with her and Senya dancing or sexing together for their audience. Maybe they could go from man to man at his orgasm moment to give special, climatic services....

Toi giggled and realized she was getting silly. It was this drink she'd been constantly sipping. Or it was some kind of hysterical reaction.

She moved from the computer console to a luxchair. She put the drink aside and sat, frowning, thinking.

Long minutes later, Rune's cabin door opened and he entered. He said, “I stayed after Security went in. There were no other dart gun ambushes.”

Toi nodded. There was a constant lump of fear in her throat. She got to her feet and asked, “Rune, is there a way to UTA-proof a cabin computer?”

He nodded. “The control room and the ship's master computer are set up to be invulnerable to UTA and interlock attempts. So is this cabin's computer.”

“I wish I could stay here.”

“You're welcome.”

“But it's against Guild rules. Could you make my cabin and Senya's cabin safe that way, too?”

“No, I'm sorry. That's secret equipment and restricted, protected programming.”

“So what do I do? He'll try to kill me again, won't he?”

Rune rubbed his eyes. “Maybe.” He went to his console. He called Security. “Elkhart, I want to know where Jon Mantler is now and where he's been for the past hour.”

“Give us a few minutes, sir.”

“Call when you've got something.”

Toi didn't think Mantler was the killer, but didn't want to argue again with Rune about it.

When Rune turned back to her, Toi asked, "Could you unbreakably link the ship's computer with my cabin computer? Wouldn't my computer, as a part of the main computer, be able to resist a UTA and an interlock?"

"Yes. That's good thinking. We can do that."

"And add Senya's computer?"

"Yes."

"And add cameras that can't be tampered with?"

He smiled. "You're really scared, aren't you?"

"And I want you to give me a gun!"

"Toi, can you handle a gun?"

"Yes! I've had training." She lied to protect her status as a Magni-Space corporate spy by adding, "My grandfather taught me to use a bullet gun as well as a laser and a stunner."

"Really? You're very accomplished and very knowledgeable. You're not the simple sex companion I thought. "

"I'm just very afraid."

"I know. We'll get to arming you in a few minutes. But first I've got to tell you some things. Very important things about this voyage."

"All right. Go ahead."

"Two hours ago I received a coded needle from Magni-Space instructing me to take our final sealed course pod from the ship's security box and insert it into the guidance drive. There were other instructions in the needle, too. Some of them concern you and Senya."

Toi became keenly alert. "I'm listening."

"My instructions are to invoke a communications blackout. No more squirts to the guilds or even to Magni-Space, except in a Level Ten Emergency. Not until we get back into close prox to Too Much."

"Why?" Sickening dread seeped into the pit of Toi's stomach.

"Because we're not on a routine fringe mining voyage."

"What is it, then?"

"I can't tell you."

"Oh, really? Let me guess!" Toi was furious---and terrified. She blurted, "We're warping way out beyond the fringe to an extremely metal-rich planet worth quadrillions. Magni-Space has invoked the Secrecy clause so it can claim and exploit the planet---or an entire sun system---for itself. And ram any employee on board who objects!"

Rune Chilton sighed.

"Am I right?"

“Close. Anybody could guess that. All the search and exploit corporations do this sometimes.”

Toi felt used and abused by Magni-Space. They had said this voyage was routine and that her secret employment as their agent-on-board was just a precaution.

She said, “But our contract has a three-month time frame!”

“That clause is elastic. This voyage may take four months. The corporation has the established right of Commercial Urgency which allows an extended time and which allows a blackout. The Secrecy is justified.”

“I say a brutal murder and an attempted second murder qualify as a Level Ten emergency!”

“I don’t. And Magni-Space obviously doesn’t, since it needed me to obey the instructions in the security box.”

Toi said desperately, “The Companion Guild will sue them to the Coal Sack!”

“No doubt. But as you guessed, the wealth involved dwarfs the costs of any contract violation lawsuit.”

“Shit!”

“I’m sorry.” Rune went to his bar and tapped the keyboard for a drink. He turned and asked, “Can I make you something?”

“No, I’ve still got...” She had put down her drink. She picked it up. The eterna-ice clinked in the glass.

Rune said, a moment later, “If it’s any consolation, I think you are right about Mata’s murder. I now think it was the work of a rival corporation agent. There must have been a leak in Magni-Space about this voyage. Maybe Intraspace, or Universal, or even Impex managed to recruit an agent from the crew or miners...or the companions.”

“What? Do you think I’m an agent? You think I killed Mata? I was on a visit when she was killed.”

Rune smiled. “Maybe you have a confederate.”

“This isn’t funny.”

Rune continued. “Maybe you smuggled a pinhole transmitter on board. Your mission is to send a signal when we arrive at the treasure planet. One small squirt in the right direction and an armed ship warps in and everybody is killed except you, and your employer claims the planet.”

“Stop joking.”

Rune’s computer chimed. He said, “Speak!”

“Search completed in cabin of Companion Toi King. Negative, sir.”

Rune asked, “No other weapons of any kind?”

“None, sir. And no secret transmitter, either.”

Rune grinned. "Fine. Thank you. Off." He said to Toi, "So it's likely you're not the killer agent, unless you do have a subordinate agent on board."

Toi was furious. "You didn't tell me you were having them ransack my cabin!"

"You can understand I had to take the opportunity."

She said reluctantly, "Granted. But that still leaves me as target number two for the real killer agent. And I don't know why he wants me dead!"

"Perhaps he knows you're a rival corporate agent. Are you?"

Toi felt trapped. She said, "I'm not an enemy corporation agent! And even if I were an agent, why kill me?"

Rune pursed his lips. "He probably thinks Senya told you something about him."

"Well, I don't know what it would be. She never got the chance to talk to me."

Rune's computer chimed again. He barked, "Speak!"

"Elkhart, sir. Our nano-monitors on Jon Mantler faded and went dead from ten-twenty a.m. to eleven thirty-two a.m., a few minutes ago. He was in K hold and he's in K hold now, apparently working."

"Does he know he has monitors on him?"

"We don't know, sir."

"What can block or negate a monitor signal?"

"Nothing I know of, sir."

Rune scowled, hesitated, then said, "Elkhart, arrest Jon Mantler and put him in a security cell. Send the team that just searched Toi King's cabin to Jon Mantler's cabin. They are to total search his cabin for weapons and unauthorized communication devices. I'll meet them at Mantler's cabin in three minutes with my override key."

"Yes, sir."

"Off." Then Rune turned to Toi, smiling. "Your worries are over."

She said, "I can't believe Mantler is the killer."

"Why not, for life's sake? He was unmonitored during the time you were with Peel Gordon. He had time to get to your cabin, gain entry, rig the dart gun, and return to his work."

"Yes, but...his psy-profile.... I can't believe he's capable of what he did to Mata's body."

"He's sado-maso! And even you would be surprised at the things a man will do for a billion creds."

Toi didn't argue. In spite of her doubts she felt relieved. She took a

long drink from her glass. She said, "I'd like to stay here until he's arrested and the search is completed, if you don't mind. I feel safe here."

"I'd be delighted." He leaned close and kissed her briefly. His hand cupped her breast. "I'll be back in a few minutes."

"I'd like to take a quick shower."

"Of course." He commanded the cabin computer to obey her shower orders.

Seven minutes later, Rune returned. He saw Toi lounging on the sofa, loosely enclosed, naked, in one of his thick, blue, leisure robes. She wore her orange flow wig rather than be hairless.

He said, smiling, "Mantler's in a dangerous, high-warp maintenance area in K, out of Security reach. No problem, but he won't be in custody for a while. The cabin search is started."

He settled close to her on the sofa. "You're very tempting. How about passing the time in bed. Heavy ramming time."

Toi felt she couldn't refuse. She couldn't resume her visit schedule until Mantler was arrested. She tongue-touched the orgasm capsule still lodged in her molar. She felt grateful to Rune. She felt he had earned a treat...and so had she. She enjoyed heavy ramming on a purely basic instinctive, physical level. And chut the guild rules for once. Her drink was making her a bit whoozy and loose.

She nodded and smiled and said in her Innocent Girl voice, "Like last time? It was so wonderful! But I'm still sore way deep inside me. I don't think I could take all of your giant ram again."

Rune Chilton delightedly entered the offered sex fantasy. "Of course you can, Sheela, if you're aroused enough. And I know how to do that." He stripped off his tunic and tights. He said, "Computer, lights low."

The cabin darkened. Three eterna-candles popped up and lit.

Toi flung open the blue leisure robe that had covered her. She thought she might climax without benefit of the capsule. It happened occasionally, in the right circumstances.

When his hardening ram was exposed, she said wonderingly, "Ummmm, it's bigger than I remember. And it's getting bigger!"

"You can make it so big you won't believe it, darling." He was naked now. He came closer and stood with his swaying, throbbing ram close to her face. "Suck it."

She obeyed.

He watched, a strange smile on his lips, hot lust in his eyes.

She monitored his excitement with her right-hand fingertips on his

tensed stomach and then on his thigh. Heartbeat...muscle tensions...breathing... Just when she expected, he pulled out of her ravishing mouth.

He knelt on the green zelon sculpted carpet and leaned forward to kiss her and fondle her large breasts. His heavy ram wobbled against her silken inner thighs, against the lips of her cleft, against her swollen clit.

Toi shivered with real anticipation, surprised at her own lust.

Rune panted with arousal, eyes closed, deep into his fantasy.

After long, sensuous moments of passionate kisses and cleft teasing, he whispered, "Is my girl ready?"

Toi whispered, in her true voice, "Oh, yes! Ram me!"

He came into her like a giant.

Toi gasped and quickly relaxed certain implanted interior muscles and clenched others.

Rune said, "Just a little more, darling..." He rammed deeper, grunting, breath ragged.

Toi yielded the last of her capacity and felt the whole of him buried, felt his pubes pressing and rubbing against her swollen, sensitized clit. She moaned with genuine passion. "Oh, yes...ram...ram! This is so good!"

A large part of her body/mind was deeply into the sex, into the undeniable, mounting pleasures. She held Rune, enclosed him, and groaned and gasped and quivered for true as he plunged and plunged and plunged!

A real, honest, natural orgasm blossomed and she lost herself in it, gloried in it, and shuddered helplessly when Rune trembled and cried out and jolted her with even wilder, frantic, greedy thrusts.

And then it was over. He was gone from her body and from her arms.

Toi lay on the sofa as if drugged. She heard him order open his wall and step into the shower.

She lethargically reached to her Companion case and pressed a pad to her center. She smiled and sighed. She didn't want to think about anything but her tingling, fading pleasures.

When she heard the drier come on in his shower she slowly put on the outfit she had worn on her Gordon visit---it seemed like hours ago.

She found her drink and sipped the last of the cold liquid. She idly studied the pale blue cold cubes. They were solid nano-friges. She didn't fully understand the technology.

Rune stepped naked, dry, from the shower stall. "You want to use it?"

She did, but didn't want to take off her orange wig. She didn't want him to see her naked skull. Men always knew she was sex-for-hire woman, but a Companion's naked skull was still an emotional shock. The sight

wrenched them from their fantasy and illusions. Suddenly she was a fake, and the role she had played was a cruel fake. They hated her for their needs.

Toi said, "I'd rather---"

Rune's computer chimed. He said quickly, "Speak!"

"Elkhart, sir. We have Mantler in a security cell. He fought and tried to get away when he was arrested. The men---Cattery and Rothman and Ding An---had to stun him twice."

"Good. Did he say anything?"

"No, sir. He'll be unconscious for four hours."

"Anything from the search of his cabin?"

"Yes, sir! The team just reported. They found a Zeis-Kemo miniature pinhole transmitter fastened to the underside of one of his clothes drawers. And there was a small injector gun under another drawer with a capsule of Parilizon in the chamber."

Rune laughed. "Great! Well done! Work up a full report with pictures and texts and send it up as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir."

"Off." Rune turned to Toi. "We've got him! You and Senya can relax, now."

"It seems too good to be true."

Rune patted her head. "I was right about him! He probably faked that maso stitch, and maybe Mata caught on. She was a smart girl. She probably tricked him into revealing something about his being an agent for...who knows? We'll get it out of him when he wakes up."

Toi ducked away. Rune was arrogant, egotistic and patronizing. She said, irritated, "Mata wasn't into spying or any of that shit!"

Rune scowled. "Well, he killed her for some reason! He's a corporation agent and we've got lockbox proof."

Something rang false to Toi, but she couldn't pin it. She smiled and shrugged. "I suppose you're right. I hope you're right. I do feel better."

"And my ramming didn't hurt any, hmmm?"

"It was really fine."

"It really hit the spot, umm? The deepest spot you've got."

She said reluctantly, "Yes."

"Any other man ever get that far in?"

She was weary of his boasting and insecurity. She sighed. "No, no one. You've got to have the biggest ram on the ship...maybe even in this sector." That was a far reach.

He laughed, pleased. "All right! Listen, I've got a watch on the control deck in a few minutes. You can get back to your schedule now, with

no fear.”

Toi nodded and said goodbye.

As she went down the ramp to Level-B, Toi wondered why an agent would hide his secret, miniaturized communications equipment---and a gun!---in such obvious, easily discovered places as the undersides of drawers in his cabin?

But she was willing to assume he was a stupid amateur. Stupidity would explain a lot!

As Toi reached her level she met Tem Zamil in the curving corridor. He smiled, lifted his hand in greeting and said, “I’m looking forward to tomorrow’s visit.”

Toi stopped and turned. She couldn’t remember him on her revised schedule. “Tomorrow?”

“I am now. I just won your visit to Fourth Officer Gayden in a poker game. I was just on my way to message the ship’s computer of the change.”

Toi smiled, too. “Fine, Tem. I’m looking forward to it. I really enjoy your conversation...and your sexmaking.” She remembered him as being stitched on breasts. She thought he must be a hell of a poker player, since she knew he had regularly won visits to Mata from the crew and miners.

Mata had been proud of attracting an officer. Naturally her huge breasts would have attracted him. And she had been an excellent Companion Three. She would have made Two very soon.

Remembering Mata in this way was painful. Toi’s throat tightened. She didn’t want to, but she knew se’d have to take a happy pill when she got into her cabin.

Zamil said, “I’ll show you the progress I’m making on my town.”

“Oh. Yes.” Now she recalled his hobby: micro miniaturization. He was constructing an 18th Century French village on a table top. Complete in every known detail, inside the houses as well as outside.

She remembered his cabin as cluttered with historical holodisks, screens, even a lot of old, old books! She couldn’t imagine the patience and skill required as he worked with those stepdown waldos and powerful magnification fields.

He had let her peer into the viewer and examine his work. The interior of the village inn had been marvelous. He had even fashioned a ledger and inscribed guest names and dates and charges for rooms and meals all in archaic French.

Toi asked, “What part of it are you working on now?”

“I’m titling the leather-bound books on the shelves in the mayor’s office.”

“How do you know which titles to use?”

“Research. Everything must be authentic. I’m going to enter this village in next year’s Fifty World Super M Scale contest.”

“I’m really impressed.”

They continued on their ways, and a minute later Toi reached her cabin and said, “Open up.”

The door opened, but she paused, wary and scared in spite of herself. She looked at the inside door frame.

Finally she said aloud to herself, “Oh, shit, do it!” and walked inside, tense and skin-itchy.

But nothing happened and she relaxed.

By the time she had showered and swallowed a fast-acting long-lasting rumberry-flavored happy pill, Toi was in the mood for making more visits...after lunch.

She settled onto her bed, totally nude, without wig, make-up or enhancements. She closed her eyes and took long, deep breaths. She said softly, “Passwords: Otto looked surprisingly cheerful, for a hunchbacked dwarf with leprosy.”

The personalized computer responded with its husky male voice, “Your will is my command.”

Toi whispered, “I’m glad you’re all there, Simon.”

“Your will is my command.”

“Message to Senya.” Toi gave the news of Jon Mantler’s capture and the evidence against him. She suggested she and Senya have dinner together at eight.

It was almost twelve-thirty. Time for some lunch. She could resume her visits at one-thirty. She said, “Simon, who do I visit next?”

Her computer answered, “Durk Cordre, Maintenance Second Miner. Level-D, cabin two. No other data.”

Toi nodded. He was one of Mata’s men.

She sighed. She quickly donned non-visit clothes and a brown wig which de-emphasized her body and beauty. She left her cabin to go up to the Executives Diningroom.

The dining room on Level-A was restricted to ship officers, mining execs and companions.

As Toi entered the room the men at tables looked and smiled and waved. Some called greetings. It was not a large room.

She returned smiles and waves and pleasantries...and went directly to the reserved Companion table. By Companion Guild contract companions were left alone. It was an unpopular rule and strictly enforced.

Toi knew that if she let one man eat with her or stop by for a moment to chat, other men would claim the same right and if rebuffed or not allowed to get their 'fair share' of her dining room time would get ugly, resentful and mean.

Bloody fights, even killings had in the past resulted from 'favoritism' in the dining room or mess. And at least half the time Companions had been hurt.

Toi scanned the menu's offerings. After a moment she slid aside the ordering panel cover in the tabletop and pressed appropriate pressure spots for hot Frant Spice tea, TM crab salad, and a half portion of red peach pie.

As she waited she leaned back in the comfortably padded chair and closed her eyes.

It would be nice to relax later with Senya. Just talk, eat, play a holo game or watch a good, funny cube. Maybe have sex if they both felt like it. But sex wasn't likely. The new schedule was too heavy. Having up to nine intense, drug-induced orgasms per day was exhausting, even though Companion applicants were accepted partly because of a naturally high liking for and capacity for sex.

A tiny chime sounded and the center of the table opened.

Toi's drink and salad and pie rose into the opening.

She took them off the server and pressed the green Accept node. The server descended and the table closed.

As she ate, Toi was aware of receiving more attention than usual. She guessed the men were talking about the arrest of Jon Mantler and the attempt on her life.

The security men involved had obviously not been told to keep silent. When she had almost finished her salad, Toi ordered another hot tea. When she finished lunch the time was seven minutes to one.

Toi returned to her cabin, sonic-cleaned her teeth, sucked a mint, peed, was washed and dried and scented.

She wondered what Durk Cordre's stitch would be. She could have ordered a depth photo of him and reviewed his life history, but chose to be surprised a bit.

Toi arrived at his cabin on time, but he wasn't in, or wasn't answering his door.

She finally said to his computer, "If you have a contract-approved reason for not accepting my visit, or for not being here, please message my computer for a rescheduling. Otherwise---"

A big, heavy-set man in a soiled blue work coverall rounded the corridor curve on the run. "Hey, Toi!" He slowed. "Sorry I'm late. I was making some critical power lode adjustments and you don't stop once you're into one of those monsters."

Toi smiled. "I understand. But we've only got about thirty-five minutes now."

He grinned. "I'm a fast rammer, honey. Let's get inside. Open the damn door, Harvey."

The cabin door opened. Durk and Toi entered. He said to her, "Lounge a minute. Be with you as soon as I get clean." He raised his voice and said, "Shower me, Harvey. Fast and hot. And send out the bed. And record this Companion visit---and send it to Ship." He turned to Toi. "Right?"

"That's right." She liked him.

His wall opened as he stripped off his coverall and stuffed it into a waste chute.

Toi settled into a deep chair and looked around his cabin as the bed slid down and he finished undressing.

The walls were crowded with framed zoil paintings of male and female nudes, each subtly distorted in some way. Each disturbingly colored.

Cordre surprised her. A corner hobby table with a drawing board caught her attention. It held a painting of a half-completed male nude on a sheet of permalac. The table was cluttered with artist's tools and color pumps and anatomy texts.

She glanced at his naked body as he stepped into his shower. Surprise! He was magnificently muscled and his heavy, swaying ram was very large. Her experienced eye told her he didn't even have a semi-erection.

She smiled at the thought that Rune was now perhaps the second largest on ship in the ram department, and if he found out he'd suffer

terminal ego shrink.

Toi got up and looked more closely at the wall paintings which, she now realized, were all by Cordre. He was a fine artist!

He liked to work in bold colors, and his figures were skillfully out of true to emphasize...misfits...strengths and weaknesses...disturbing expressions.

The framed painting fastened to the inside of the cabin door stopped Toi. It was a portrait of Mata that accented her huge white breasts, prominent red nipples, and too-long flowing blonde hair. Her eyes had been rendered wildly intense: large blue beacons which dominated the painting.

It was a very striking painting. And now very depressing.

But Toi was still studying it several minutes later when Durk stepped from his shower.

He noticed and said, "Yeah, she was wonderful. I'd sure like to get my hands on the warp who really killed her. It sure wasn't Jon."

"What do you mean?"

"I know him! I work with him every day! I was with him a couple hours ago when those Security goons came down into the bay to get him. He couldn't believe it when they told him he was under arrest for killing Mata."

Durk stepped closer. "Then they zapped him with those stun guns. All he did was bend down to pick up his tools and they thought he was going for a weapon!"

Durk scowled with outrage and anger. "Zzzzzap! Then they gave him a few more jolts when he didn't fall down fast enough to suit them. Shit, they were thinking about zapping me, too! I could see it in their eyes."

"You were with him? How long?"

"Today? Since the beginning of our shift. Since six this morning. We spent five hours doing our monthly power lode inspections and calibrations. It takes two men to do that."

"You were with him all the time? Even between ten forty-five and eleven-twenty or so?"

Durk frowned in memory, then said, "Yeah. We were into one of the big digger engines about then, running low-level pulse tests, and it was ten-thirty. You have to run those tests without your watch in...without any unshielded e-equipment at all."

"Then how can you be so sure of the time?"

"I remember because I forgot to take my watch out. Jon noticed I still had it in my ear and yelled at me. I remember that last time whisper. It was ten-thirty. And we were in that engine compartment for an hour after that."

Toi began to be afraid again. She asked, “Why...why can’t you wear a watch or have electronic tools”

“You can’t have unshielded e-tools or equipment. And shielding weighs too much to put around ear watches.” Durk continued, “The pulse field from a Woodel six-A power lode damps all naked electronic activity within its radius. That’s why the lodes themselves are shielded except during inspections and recalibrations.”

She asked, “Do you wear a shielding suit to protect your body and your head?”

“No, that’s the good thing about the Woodels. Their pulses don’t affect the human body or brain. Just e-stuff.”

And that, Toi realized, was why the the nano electronic monitors hidden in Jon Mantler’s clothes---and skin-burrowed on his body---had faded during that period.

And coincidentally that period was the time when somebody had rigged the dart gun within her cabin door.

She asked, “Were you with Jon Mantler yesterday when Mata was killed?”

“Sure. We were doing the same thing---power lodes---and we heard the captain blast that all-ship call for you to get up to Mata’s cabin.”

“You were with him yesterday morning? All the time?”

“Yes! Except for a pee break---five minutes. We’re a team.”

Toi smiled tremulously up at him. Were they a murder team, as well? She asked, “But can you *prove* you and Jon Mantler were together from around eight to ten yesterday morning?”

Durk Cordre was getting angry. “Not now, if you don’t believe me! But you can check with our supervisor. And we both signed the inspection certificates on the work pads, and those pads have time recogs and they’re linked to Ship!”

“Who is your supervisor?”

“Ev Loo Sing. Why all the damned questions?”

“Because if what you’ve just told me is true, then Jon Mantler isn’t the man who killed Mata.”

And that meant, Toi realized, with a slimy pit of fear in her guts, that the man who did kill Mata, and who then tried to kill her, was still unknown...and maybe still wanting her dead.

Toi asked, “May I use your console for a moment?”

Durk nodded, but asked, “What about my sex time wih you?”

“Don’t worry. This doesn’t count against your time.” She went to his computer board and keyed to the ship’s master computer. “This is

Companion Toi King. Connect me to Ev Loo Sing's cabin. Record. Notify Captain Chilton that Toi King asks him to view her visit to Durk Cordre from one pm."

"Being Done."

Ev Loo Sing answered the ship's call. "Yes?"

Toi began to explain...

Two minutes later, Toi thanked Ev Loo Sing, keyed off, and turned, smiling, to Durk. "I think we've cleared Jon."

Durk sat, still naked---magnificently naked in Toi's judgement---on the edge of his bed. He asked, puzzled, "How? Because he was with me today...and yesterday?"

"Yes, as confirmed by Ev Loo Sing. He couldn't have killed Mata." And, Toi realized, that new reality raised several vicious questions. If Jon Mantler was innocent, who planted that incriminating gun and transmitter in his cabin? Did the real killer have a duplicate gun and transmitter?

And would he again try to kill her?

Durk said, "The guy I think is guilty is Tem Zamil."

Toi was surprised. "Why?"

"I think he has some kind of psi power. The shit wins anything he wants at poker. The day before Mata was murdered he won two of her visits for---today! One of them was from me!"

"Then why would he kill her?"

Durk frowned. "He doesn't use them! He ramming sells them!" He abruptly said, "Come on over here. We're wasting my time."

Toi saw his big ram growing. She smiled and said silkily, "Let me make it up to you." She dropped her shimmer robe and stepped out of her black frill panties and slippers. Proudly naked, she approached Durk. She couldn't help asking, "Do you know who else lost a visit to Mata?"

"I think Lum Rogers was the other loser in that game. Shit, I had three kings and Zamil had four lousy deuces. You can't tell me---"

"What does Lum Rogers do?"

"Oh, he's a cook."

Toi held up a finger and went back to Durk's console.

Durk muttered a curse.

Ship directed her call to Level-B kitchen where Lum Rogers was working. She said, "This is Companion Toi King. I'm investigating Companion Mata's murder. This is an official call."

"Okay, but I'm elbow deep in turkey stuffing. I'm using a clip phone." He had a confident tenor voice.

Toi instantly pictured him skinny and strong. She said, "I need to

know if you lost a visit from Mata to Tem Zamil while playing poker two days ago.”

“I sure did. I wasn’t the only one, either. That guy wins visits all the time. Some of them yours, too, from other officers and execs, I hear. He’s a ramming visits broker. He sells those visits he wins. He probably makes more credits off visits than you Companions do.”

“What time was your visit for?”

“Ahh...three today.”

“Thank you, Lum. You can resume your stuffing.” Toi broke the link as Lum Rogers said, “Rather stuff you---”

Toi asked Durk, “When was your Mata visit?”

“Nine this morning.”

Toi nodded. She now thought Zamil might have sold a Mata visit to the murderer, who visited Mata before she could visit him.

But now she had long-suffering, impatient Durk to take care of. She moved sexily to him and kissed him passionately. She whispered, “I’m very sorry for the interruptions.” She gently handled his huge, hardening ram. “Are you off duty now till tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” He nuzzled her magnificent breasts. “Ummm. I’ve never rammed a Two.”

Toi held a double-handful of throbbing ram. She played finger games with it. She was now oddly excited. She asked, “What do you want?”

“I’m just a fast rammer, honey. But I do like the way you’re touching me. Do what you’re doing for a couple minutes.” He licked at her nipples, then suckled briefly. Then he lay back on the bed and watched her soft, gentle, teasing hands.

Toi long-stroked him and fingered special pleasure nerve clusters. She offered, “Want me to do something nice with my tongue?”

“Sure, but not too nice. I want to go off ramming.”

“I know when to stop. It’s part of my training.” She engulfed the glans and played a sensory tune with her tongue. She felt his body tense and heard the small surprised grunt of intense pleasure she could always provoke.

She closed her eyes and enjoyed using her techniques...her art. She kept control, always aware of his arousal level. At the right moment she lifted her head and asked, “Want to ram now?”

“Yes!”

She learned he preferred the rear position. She knelt and braced and relaxed interior muscles in case he wanted to thrust all the way in immediately.

But Durk was considerate...at first. But soon he was truly ramming, sending his massive organ deep...deep!

Toi gasped as he piled into her, smacked into her, impaled her, held her with big, strong hands on her hips and pulled her back to meet his jolting, engorging thrusts.

It was her turn to grunt and moan from the incredible sensations of ravishment, of brute power, of helplessness.

Her training had prepared her for these moments and had taught her to accommodate them, even enjoy them.

This basic, primitive act of submission to a big man ruthlessly intent on his pleasure touched instinctive levels in her brain. This was eternal. This was how, in extremis, mankind assured its continuation. It could not be denied. Raw, brutal sexual power. Durk was truly a son of mother nature.

Yet on another level Toi listened acutely to his breathing and reached back to palm his tensioned left thigh. He was panting, almost sobbing, swiftly reaching his point-of-absolutely-no-stopping. His pulse raced.

Years of experience and judgments told her exactly when to bite down on the capsule nestled in her molar. As the drug entered her system this time it had a far more galvanizing, more powerful effect than usual. She began to whimper and keen and groan and shudder. Her insides spasmed.

She felt his climax as a series of giant, golden, invincible thrusts. She cried out loudly, and tightened with clonic, erratic contractions in the throes of her very real but forced orgasm.

In a far corner of her mind she knew the drug-induced climaxes were too quick, too short, too wracking. They were too much like a man's orgasm. And she realized the drug must have been developed by men, to 'fit' men's climaxes. Perhaps she could raise the issue in a Companion Council when she got back to the civilized worlds.

Afterward, after Durk had finished howling and roaring and plunging, he held her close---still buried in her---he sighed deeply, repeatedly, and said after a few minutes, "You're the best I've ever had. No lie. The absolute best. I can't imagine what a Companion One would be like." Then he pulled away and left her gaping, empty.

Toi said weakly, "That was an incredible sex experience." She barely had enough strength to take a pad from her case and press it to her cleft. For some reason this fast ram with Durk and that tidal wave of an orgasm had been totally exhausting.

She slowly assembled and donned her garments. She gratefully accepted a mug of quick, hot caf. She asked Durk, "May I ask a favor?"

"Sure. Anything. I can ram again if you want to wait a few more

minutes.”

“Oh, I’d like to, but I have to get back to my cabin...and I don’t want to go alone. Would you walk with me?”

“Yeah. Be glad to. You think the warp who murdered Mata is maybe going after you, now?”

“Something like that, yes.”

“I’m your man anytime, anytime, for anything.” Durk kissed her neck. “Recorded.”

Toi touched his cheek. “Thank you.”

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Ten minute later Toi was safely in her cabin, standing in her shower, enjoying the luxury of a double-long hot spray. But her thoughts were not as pleasurable.

She and Rune would now have to question Tem Zamil about that morning visit by Mata he had won.

If Zamil was the murderer.... That would be too easy.

Toi decided she would definitely demand Rune give her a gun.

When she emerged from the shower, she asked, “Any messages?”

“One. From Senya.”

“Summarize.”

“She will have dinner with you. She’s happy you suggested it. End.”

Toi sat at her console and keyed Rune’s cabin. His computer answered. “Captain Chilton is not available. Please leave a message.”

She called the ship’s control room. The Com officer told her Rune had left the control room to inspect part of the drive level.

“When he checks in, please tell him Toi King wants to talk with him on urgent business.”

Toi keyed off and sat, naked, thinking. Then she keyed to Tem Zamil’s cabin. His computer answered, “Tem Zamil is off duty and does not wish to be disturbed. You may leave a message.”

She guessed he was deply immersed in his micro miniaturization hobby. Toi knew the control room---or Rune---could override that Do-Not-Disturb, but she could not.

And she had thought better of her impulse to question him about that

morning visit to Mata he had won at poker.

She keyed off without leaving a message.

She decided to first talk to Rune. Jon Mantler had to be cleared and released. And then a visit to Zamil with some Security men would be a logical step.

Toi asked her computer, "Simon, who's my next visit?"

It replied, "Jim Abu Dom, Sergeant, Security, cabin C-15. Data from Senya Dernolo follows. He is stitched on death. He wants his Companion to seem to collapse and die in his cabin. He puts her on the bed and plays with her body. He eventually rams her mouth, then her vina. The Companion is to show no reaction. No response. No orgasm. The more dead the Companion can appear, the better. After he has finished---he has in the past climaxed twice in one visit---the Companion is to revive and not remember anything of what happened during her unconsciousness. Senya recommends a three grain tablet of Simorte in a drink soon after entering his cabin."

Toi had encountered this stitch before. It sprang from an extremely weak ego and sexual insecurity which used to be called 'performance anxiety.' These men---and one woman she remembered---couldn't manage sex with a conscious woman: it was too demanding, too stressful, too threatening. Sometimes they showed mother hate and/or sadism during their use of a woman's "dead" body.

Could Jim Abu Dom be the killer?

She asked Ship to provide Jim's verified whereabouts during the time of Mata's murder.

Ship responded: "Jim Abu Dom was in the C-Level Physical Recreation Bay during that time frame. He wrestled Greco-Roman with Kang Sloo, Gregory Fench, Smill Oneon and Onterio Lang. The matches were vid-recorded."

Toi was relieved. But she still didn't want to be unconscious today in any man's cabin. She would not take the drug Simorte which shut down its user's body safely, but at the cost of consciousness. She had used it twice and hated the swirling, black-on-black inner nightmare world it imposed on her brain.

She decided to take a strong trunk and depend on self-hypnosis and her acting ability.

She asked, "When am I due at his cabin?"

"Two minutes from---now."

Shit. She'd be late again. She quickly sprayed on a pale white body tint, applied smearless purple lipstick to her mouth and nipples and cleft,

dark-shadowed her eyes, chose a tightly curled black wig, and slipped into black lace panties. A silky black robe and black slippers completed the outfit.

Toi said, "Simon, notify Jim I'm on my way."

"It is done."

She checked herself in the mirror. She looked like a sexy corpse. Very good. She swallowed a 15 mg Kalm capsule with a sip of wine and turned to leave.

But Toi had a sudden apprehension. She feared going out into the corridor alone. And it was too late to call an escort. Or was it?

She went to her console and keyed Jim Abu Dom's cabin. She apologized for being late and asked him to come and escort her.

He agreed eagerly.

He arrived at her door a minute later and identified himself. The ship's master computer, linked to her own, matched his voice with its memory and said through Simon, "Identity confirmed."

She commanded open her door.

Jim Abu Dom was a tall, muscular, dark-skinned man. Toi had noticed him occasionally on the ship but never met him.

His eyes lit up when he saw her in her "death" outfit. "You're beautiful!"

Toi smiled her thanks for the compliment. She left her cabin, and as they walked toward the ramp she said, "I probably shouldn't be visiting you. The reason I asked you to escort me is that I don't feel well at all. I have a terrible headache."

He didn't know how to handle that. "Did you take a pill?"

"Yes, but it didn't help. I feel like I'm going to die." She lurched softly against him.

Then he realized she was playing to his stitch. He smiled broadly and put his arm around her. "I'll give you something in my cabin. We're almost there. You can lie on my bed and rest."

"Yes... Thank you, Jim."

A moment later they were in his cabin. The bed was already down. He said commandingly to his computer, "No calls accepted. No interruptions for thirty minutes. Record and link with the ship."

A submissive woman's voice said, "I obey. Linked. Recording."

Toi swayed and pressed her hands to her face. "Ohhh... I'm so weak... I can't see! I think I'm dying! I--"

She collapsed to the deep carpeting and began a self-hypnosis exercise to keep herself completely relaxed and limp, to lock up her mind from her

body. The heavy Kalm dosage helped.

She monitored what was happening to her body, but only marginally. She managed a 99% withdrawal from the outside. With elaborate care and attention she constructed an inlaid, rare-wood chess board in her mind. She set up Medieval Earth pieces and precisely played an intricate game with a very strong opponent, a white-bearded old man who rubbed the side of his nose and mused aloud about her moves. “Ah, the knight fork you wish to create, hmm? I must not allow that. Maybe if I block with the queen pawn...hmm? What is your alternate attack, my dear?”

Far back in a corner of her mind she saw a tiny ship’s cabin. A tiny man had picked up a tiny, limp woman in a black robe and put her on the cabin’s bed. It wasn’t a very interesting show. The tiny man was doing sexual things to the tiny woman. It wasn’t important.

She tried a three-move combination to gain a bishop and breach the castled king’s defense. It failed. She lost a knight and put her queen in mortal danger. She escaped and, while waiting for the old master to make his next move, turned her attention briefly to the tiny cabin.

The tiny man was ramming the tiny, limp woman. How boring.

The old man said, “Yes...now I must put an end to this game. If you will notice my rook? See how it bears on your bishop pawn? Now if I bring my queen here...”

The climax of the game had arrived. He was a superb chess player. She was unable to prevent mate in six moves.

Her attention was caught by events in the tiny cabin. The tiny man had finished with the tiny woman.

Toi said to the old man, “I resign. But Ill beat you next time.”

“Ah, my dear, I see you so infrequently. Unless you visit more often you’ll never defeat me.”

She said playfully, “But you’re only a figment.”

“Am I? Or am I an alternate or visiting intelligence? Can you be sure you are the true master of your mind?”

She said, to herself, “Enough.” She had to leave him. She dissolved the chess board and pieces. The old man smiled as he melted away. She unraveled her cocoon.

Toi felt wrinkled bedding under her naked body. Her mouth and throat felt a bit sore. She did not need a pad on her cleft; she had been cleaned up there.

Toi sighed deeply and opened her eyes. She saw Jim Abu Dom standing naked beside the bed, watching her.

He abruptly smiled. “For a few minutes I thought you might really be

in a coma.”

“Did I faint? I don’t remember anything.”

“You seemed remarkably dead. You’re far better at being dead than Senya. It was a superb experience for me this time. You were very convincing.”

“I’m glad.” She sat up and closed her black robe. Her black panties were on the carpet. Jim handed them to her. She slipped them into her Companion case and got to her feet. “I have to leave now. Thank you for taking care of me while I was unconscious.”

He laughed. “It was my pleasure, Toi. And next week I’ll take care of you again.”

She nodded and smiled. “Of course. Visiting you is very restful.” She moved to his cabin door...and hesitated. “Jim, would you be very kind and escort me back to my cabin?”

“Toi, I’d escort you to the gates of old hell...or New Heaven.” He took a bright red robe from his closet and slipped it on. “Just give me a call whenever you need me. Here or at Security.”

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Toi again thanked Jim for the escort service and entered her cabin, again with some anxiety as she entered.

She said to her computer, “Simon, shut and lock the door. I need a full body cleanse shower double hot. Then dry. Any messages?”

“No messages.”

The privacy wall opened. She stripped off her black robe, black wig and black slippers. She took the black lace panties from her case and slipped them in the cleaner.

Naked, feeling grimy and used, she nevertheless delayed showering.

She sat at her console and keyed Security. She asked the officer on duty if Jon Mantler was still being held. He was.

She keyed the control room. “Is Captain Chilton there?”

Second Officer Tyler answered. “No.”

“Did he receive my previous messages?”

“I don’t know.”

She called Rune’s cabin.

His computer said, "No calls accepted. Leave a message."

Toi keyed off and sat back in her chair. She idly rubbed her right nipple.. Where was he?

Simon reminded her, "Your shower is ready."

"Ask Ship if Captain Chilton received my advisory that he listen to the recording of my visit to Durk Cordre, and if so, when."

Simon answered, "Ship informs he did, at one forty-three pm."

She rose and stepped into the shower stall. The hot cleansing cycle began. But Toi said, "Stop!" In the dripping silence she said, "Simon, is Captain Chilton now watching or listening to my visit to Durk Cordre?"

"Yes. Watching. The replay has not been completed. Four minutes to end."

She smiled and said, "Resume my shower now."

She loved the ensuing multiple jets, the foams and rinses. She used a special handheld nozzle for a vaj rinse.

She was dried and refreshed when she emerged and noted six minutes has passed. Rune should be calling her soon. She wondered if Lieutenant Zamil was still in his Privacy mode? She thought she'd better talk to Rune first about Zamil's possible link to Mata.

Toi treated herself to a small glass of wine. She lounged, totally hairless, totally naked, in her deep, overstuffed chair and asked, "Simon, who's my next visit?"

"Rik Chamez. Driller First. Level C. Cabin nine. No data. Your visit is scheduled for two twenty-five pm. It is now two twenty-two."

Toi sighed and gulped her wine. "This schedule is impossible. Message him I'll be late."

"It is done."

She decided to wear her silver Channing wig and silver Monroe robe and cleft décor for Chamez. And the silver peek&seek panties, too. With red jewels and clips for accent.

It was an elegant A-outfit. Rik Chamez would think he was getting a very special visit. She told Simon to bring out the silver ensemble.

Why didn't Rune call her?

As she swiftly decorated herself and donned her outfit, she ordered Simon to call Captain Chilton again.

After a few seconds, he computer said, "No calls accepted. Not in control room. Leave a message."

"Message. Rune, this is Toi. You've heard what Durk said about Jon Mantler, and about the Mata visits that Tem Zamil won. We've got to talk to Zamil. If he used that morning visit hour he could be the murderer and the

agent. If he sold that morning visit then the buyer might be the man we want.”

She added, “Zamil isn’t accepting calls, and I’m afraid to go to his cabin alone.”

She waited three heartbeats for Rune to accept her call. Silence. Finally, she said, “I’m about to go on a visit. Please call me at about three-thirty. End.”

Toi wanted another glass of wine, but said no to herself. She said aloud, Simon, call Chamez.”

When Chamez answered, Toi said, “Rik, This is Toi King, your imminent Companion. I need a favor. I need you to come to my cabin---B-fifteen---and escort me to your cabin. I don’t want to have to walk the ship alone.”

“Not a problem. But what are you afraid of? I heard they grabbed Mantler for what happened to Mata.”

“Well, now there’s some question as to whether he’s the right man.”

“Oh? Okay, I’ll be right up. Want me to leave now?”

“Yes. And Rik---what kind of sex do you like?”

“I’m an old-fashioned first course sixty-niner miner, with a doggie ram at the finish.”

“My favorite combo. See you in a minute.” Toi remembered to insert an orgasm pill in her tooth.

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Fifteen minutes later, Toi was lying on her back on Rik’s bed taking his small ram deep in her working mouth, moaning in special appreciation for the real pleasure she received as he skillfully licked into her cleft and teased her swollen clit.

She roamed her hands over his flexing buttocks, over his back, down his tensioning thighs. She could tell he was getting close. Another few seconds of this and there wouldn’t be any doggie ram finish.

This one, she thought, would be quick and easy. His thrusts down into her mouth were less careful, now. Her head was pressed down into the pillow and his short ram repeatedly plunged to the back of her throat.

She was used to that. She had---years ago in Companion Academy---

mastered the gag reflex and had complete control of her throat muscles.

Toi felt the tell-tale trembling in his thighs...the climactic, vibrant hardness of his ram. Time for the countdown.

She adroitly bit into the orgasm capsule in her molar without at the same time biting his ram, and sucked out the sweet drug.

Within seconds a surge of sexual excitement spread through her body. She dug her fingers into him and urged faster moves. Her cleft jumped against his ravaging, tonguing mouth. Her insides spasmed dramatically. She screamed with ecstasy around his ram.

She heard his gasps and cries and felt him shudder as he climaxed. She used her throat muscles, her tongue, her palate, her inner cheeks, even her teeth, in practiced combinations of sucking, pressures, constrictions, touches, grazing...to give him the best possible orgasm.

For a long moment after their intense pleasures had faded, they lay in each other's arms, relaxed, breathing deeply.

Rik whispered, "That was unbelievable!"

"Ummm."

He said, "If that's what a Two can do, I wonder if I'd survive a visit by a One."

Toi patted his hip and slid out from under him as he lifted. "It's a matter of experience, skill and willingness to please. I give One-level pleasure now. After this voyage I'll be testing for Companion One."

"I'll bet you pass with flying colors."

"Thank you, Rik." She wondered idly where that phrase, 'pass with flying colors' came from? Old Earth, probably, but---

Rik's computer blared with Rune Chilton's voice: "Captain's emergency privacy override. Sorry to intrude, Chamez. Toi, are you there?"

She said, "Yes."

"Come to Level A, cabin three, immediately! This is vital ship's business."

That was Tem Zamil's cabin! "I'll be there in a couple minutes!"

Toi didn't ask Rik to escort her to Level A. She forgot her fear, perhaps because there was still Kalm in her system, but primarily because

she felt Rune would have sent a Security escort if there was real danger.

She slipped on her silver robe, toed into her slippers, checked her wig and face in Rik's privacy wall mirror---a few repairs were required---and slipped off her damp peek-and-peek silver lace panties. Rik had been a 'wet lover' in his mouth work in her cleft. She was about to put the panties in the waste chute when he asked, "Can I have those? As a memento?"

Toi smiled and nodded, flattered.

On her way up the ramps, Toi wondered: had Zamil confessed?

She noticed as she walked that her silver lace robe refused to stay closed and that her pink and white cleft---decorated with a few remaining special silver sparkles which were flavored and which melted harmlessly in the mouth and on the tongue---was visible with every step.

She stopped and tugged at the fragile material, but it had been stretched during her sixty-nine with Rik.

She shrugged. This sort of thing happened. Fortunately, the Companion Guild contract covered this. Magni-Space would pay for it.

Her impulse was to detour to her cabin and get something more secure and opaque to wear. But Rune had said 'immediately' and he'd sounded stressed. She continued on. Her semi-nudity didn't bother her, and the men would like it.

A big Security guard stood by Zamil's cabin door. The door was ajar. Its lock had been cut away.

She smiled hello and was inwardly amused by his automatic male glance at her exposed cleft. She asked, "Is Captain Chilton inside?"

"Yes, Companion, he is." He pushed the door further open for her.

Apprehensive, Toi entered---and froze.

Tem Zamil was lying face down on the carpet by his holo wall. The position and stillness of his body told her he was dead. She saw no blood. He wore a brown lounging robe which was awry, exposing his ramstrap.

Rune stood to one side with Doctor Rokowski. Rune said to Toi, "I'm sure this time we've got the right man."

She asked, "You mean Zamil? What happened? Why is he dead?" She began to walk around the body and saw part of Zamil's face. The contorted, fixed expression was of unbearable agony. It shook her.

She backed away and, fumbling, sat in the chair next to Zamil's micro- miniaturization hobby table.

Rune said, "I listened to your visit with Cordre. That was good work on your part. Damned good thinking and questioning. I checked the duty chart and found Zamil was off, checked with his computer and got a privacy order. So I overrode and ordered him to come up to my command node in

ten minutes. I was going to question him with Security present.”

Toi said “But---”

Rune continued, “There was no acknowledgment. No response at all. So I called a Security man, came down here and burned away the door lock. His computer didn’t respond. We found him like this...about ten minutes ago. I called Doctor Rokowski, and then you.”

Toi asked Rokowski, “How did he die?”

The doctor pursed his lips. “I found an empty bottle of Terminol on the floor. Unless the Diagnostician tells me I’m wrong I’d say he drank the whole damned bottle. Probably enough to kill twenty men.”

“But there’s agony on his face! Terminol is supposed to kill without pain...even give a sensation of pleasure with intense sleepiness.”

“Yes, a ten cc dose. But the amount he took--- The pleasure would be intensified by a factor of twenty or so. Exquisite pain for up to ten seconds is probably what he really experienced before losing consciousness.”

Toi frowned and forced herself to study the body. “You mean he committed suicide?”

The doctor shrugged. “Looks like it.”

Rune said, “He must have realized he was caught. He couldn’t face a trial for murder, attempted murder, private espionage, attempted space piracy... There are a dozen charges that could have been brought. He faced a sentence of brain death and the sale of his organs to compensate Magni-Space and Mata’s family.”

“But we don’t have any real proof he was the murderer...or an agent.”

“He must have thought we did, or soon would have. Especially when I ordered him up to my control room node.” Rune gestured around. “As soon as this is recorded and the body is removed a search team from Security will come in. I imagine they’ll find proof.”

She said, “What about his computer?”

“Wiped.”

“Why would he wipe it?”

“Maybe to wipe incriminating information. We’ll find out eventually.”

Toi wasn’t satisfied but she kept silent.

Rune started talking to Dr. Rokowski. They were waiting for Davi Hinderson to arrive with his hi-res recording camera.

Toi’s gaze came to rest on the high-powered electronic magnifier on the hobby table. It was power-on. The miniature office resting in the depths of the work well was blurred in Resting Mode.

She idly switched the field to Work Mode. She stared down at a section of the now vastly enlarged office floor. Worn, soiled wood boards.

The miniature tools in the field, controlled by waldo gloves next to the magnifier, were highly specialized inscribing units.

Hadn't Zamil said, when she'd met him near the ramp, that he was putting titles on books on the office shelves?

Toi knew how to shift the view field and use the gloves. Zamil had shown her how several times in past, hour-long visits.

She tilted the office view until the bookshelves came into view.

Rune asked sharply, "Toi, what are you doing?"

She looked up and shrugged. "Nothing. I just can't imagine him being the murderer. He loved this hobby so much. He didn't seem like a man who cared about credits enough to spy----and kill."

She looked down into the well. She used one finger on a control slide to unobtrusively track the focus along the created, shelved books. She idly read the archaic French titles. She wondered which was the last title he had worked on.

Rune laughed. "He probably wanted enough to buy a million-credit machine, and credits for a lifetime of that warpy hobby."

Toi found the last title. It was the third book from the end of the bottom shelf. The spines of the final two volumes were blank. The gold printing appeared to have been done in haste.

A terrible coldness made her shiver. Nausea claimed her stomach.

The title read: 'Rune Chilton killed me'

Toi began to shake. She couldn't stop it. And then tears came to her eyes.

Rune stepped toward her. "What's the matter?"

He must not see! She feigned an attempt to rise from the chair and used the movement to hide moving the view controls. The tiny office shrank and then swung drunkenly. The view field shrank from the village building and then to a sky view.

Toi lurched from the chair and forced herself into Rune Chilton's arms. She knew Rune was capable of killing her, too! He'd already tried it! She couldn't let Rune know that Zamil had left that accusation! Because she believed Zamil!

Part of her mind was cool and calculating. She pressed her near-nakedness against the captain. She said brokenly, "He killed Mata! I liked him! And he killed Mata!"

She pulled away from Rune, grabbed a heavy, metal statuette of an explorer space drone and screamed as she smashed the control panel of the miniaturization unit.

She knew the nano-small 18th Century French village was safe---auto-

saved to its memory rod---and no one of the ship could access it. Only an expert on a civilized planet could read that rod.

Rune reached for Toi, took the statuette from her shaking hand and held her against him. “Hey, easy...easy. We know how you feel.” There was a shade of satisfaction in his tone. His hands stroked her back, sensuously moving the silver lace of her robe.

Toi sobbed convincingly and was revulsed by his touch. She hoped her act had fooled him.

She let him guide her to a chair next to the food serving console. She slumped into it and cried into her hands. She was in shock, but not for the reasons thought by Rune Chilton and the doctor and the security guard--- who had entered at the smashing and her scream.

The words Zamil had hurriedly inscribed burned in her mind: *Rune Chilton killed me.*

In his last moment of life...

She believed this last testament.

She said weakly, “I want to go to my cabin.”

Chilton said, “Of course. Rud, take her down.”

“No, I don’t need an escort, now. Just leave me alone for a few hours. I’m not visiting anybody, either. Maybe tomorrow.”

Chilton said, “All right. We’ve all had a shocking two days. I’ll put out an all-cabin announcement...about Zamil and about your visits. What about Senya?”

Toi said, in quick decision, “Cancel her visits, too. We’ve got to change the schedule. We can’t keep this up. We’ll have to cut the visits to one every ten or twelve days.”

“Well, we’ll talk about it later. You go down to your cabin and take a heavy trunk. Cone to sleep for a few hours.”

“I think I will. Thanks.” She couldn’t look at Chilton or at Zamil’s body. She hurried out of the cabin.

That evening, with Senya, as they ate a private meal in Senya’s cabin, Toi was quiet and self-absorbed.

Senya nervously chattered. “You don’t know how relieved I was

when the Captain made that all-ship announcement about Zamil. I think he took the easy way out. Zamil, I mean. I was right in the middle of a visit---a three-way if you can believe it---and I had to let them finish. It was a don't-dare-stop situation, you know? Truth is I like a three-way if it's all ramming, but I'm not at all stitched on the mouth thing, like most men are. I don't really understand how you can...."

Toi tuned out. She was in secret turmoil. A constant, sickening dread Had killed her appetite. She sipped wine.

Senya was oblivious of Toi's distance. She went on, "I'll suck if they want it, and they usually do, and I pretend to enjoy doing it, I'm a good Companion, after all, but you know, like today, Kunrad and Xorta insisted on a ram-suck combo, and you know Xorta went for anal ramming. He makes these warpy comments while he's doing it. I'm sure glad Durk Cordre doesn't want to anal ram---you know about him from today, don't you? That ram is monstrous. He'd be too much, at least for me. I don't think the guild should allow anal ramming. Anal anything, actually. What do men get out of it they don't get from normal ramming?"

Toi was thinking about Tem Zamil's death. It was horrible, but she couldn't avoid it.

Was that last book a malicious suicide joke? Had Zamil secretly hated Rune Chilton? How could he have hurriedly inscribed those words if he'd just taken a massive overdose of Terminol? If he'd inscribed the words before the overdose the words would have been more precisely done.

She realized she was subconsciously trying to evade Chilton's guilt.

Toi interrupted Senya's interminable monologue. "Can I use your computer for a minute? I need to make a short call."

"I don't mind. Are you finished with your cake? You only ate a few bites."

"Yes, thanks. I'm not very hungry." Toi went to Senya's console as Senya commanded for the table to clear and clean itself.

Toi called Medical. Ron Warder, Doctor Rokowski's assistant, was on duty. Toi asked him, "What did Lieutenant Zamil die of?"

"Terminol, as we thought. One hundred and seventy-five cc's of the stuff. He wasn't taking any chances of waking up."

"How much time did it take?"

"He was on the floor three seconds after he swallowed it. He had excruciating pain for about two seconds before his mind winked out. He was dead beyond recall six seconds after that."

Toi thanked him and keyed off. She sat thinking.

Senya asked, "What was that about?"

“I was curious.”

“Well, I’m curious about our new schedule. When do we get that all worked out? The guild has to protect us! Magni-Space will work us to death if it can. We’d be doing triples and quads every hour if it was up to the corporation. We’re captives here. Ramming slaves! We---”

“I’ll see the captain about it later. Maybe tomorrow morning. I’m not sure we can deal with the corporation or the guild. We’re supposed to be in a communications blackout. For security reasons.”

“Well, I’ll tell you, I’m not going back to the schedule we have now!”

“No. I’m not either. There’ll have to be an emergency adjustment. The contract gives him the power to do that.”

“He’d better do it, then.” Senya came to Toi and kissed her. “You feel like some fun?”

Toi returned the kiss but said, “Not now. Let’s watch a comedy. I’m worn and raggy and all I want to do is not think and not move.”

Senya agreed. She ordered out her bed and she and Toi lay side by side, holding hands, and watched an hour-long holo romp called ‘Making it on Morningside.’”

But while she watched, and while she laughed and made occasional comments, Toi was thinking terrifying thoughts.

Captain Rune Chilton.... He could have killed Mata, framed Mantler, tried to kill her, and could have killed Zamil. He had the motive if he had sold out to a rival corporation.

Roi remembered that Rune had insisted at first that Mata’s murder had been the work of a religio-sexwarp. He had been so eager to blame Jon Mantler. And as soon as he realized Zamil was pinpointed as a source of damning information---he could have killed Zamil.

But how do you force a man to drink a bottle of Terminol?

Toi went around and around in her mind. The only hard evidence pointing to Rune was Zamil’s accusation on the spine of that microminiaturized book shell. And that could have been a warp revenge---a retaliation---against the Captain who had just ordered him to an official hearing which would...Zamil must have known...put him in a security cell for the rest of the voyage and assure eventual mind death.

Naturally Zamil would have hated Rune and could have inscribed the “death bed” accusation.

But why make the accusation that way? Who could he have ever expected to discover that micro-book title on the micro-shelf in the mayor’s micro-office in a micro-18th Century French village hobby recreation?

To Toi’s knowledge there wasn’t another man on the ship with the

same arcane nano-modeling hobby.

And by ruining the controls of Zamil's equipment, she had made it impossible for anyone else to see that book.

In that hysterical moment of shocked belief in Rune's guilt---to protect herself---she had virtually destroyed the evidence against him.

Toi sighed. Why should she worry about it?

If Rune Chilton was the murderer he now thought himself in the clear. All she had to do is keep quiet and not do any more detective work. Just accept that Tem Zamil was guilty and had committed suicide.

But there was something in Toi that couldn't allow this kind of crime to go unpunished...and unsolved. She had to know for sure! And if Rune Chilton was the man who had killed Mata and done those terrible things to her body, and had tried to kill her, too---then Toi would do everything she could to see him convicted and put to mind-death.

Toi left Senya's bed and went to the computer console. She keyed to Security. Jim Abu Dom was on duty. She asked for the results of the total search of Tem Zamil's cabin.

Jim said, "You'll have to ask the captain. I have orders not to reveal anything to anybody."

"I have the right to all information pertaining to the murder of Companion Mata Conrad."

"I'm sorry. You'll have to ask the captain for that informaton."

"Well, can you tell me if Jon Mantler is still being held?"

"Yes. He's out. Didn't you hear the captain's announcement?"

"I was coned and tranked."

"See the captain, Toi. I'm sure glad I got my visit from you today. I probably won't see you again for weeks!"

"You'll appreciate me all the more. Thank you, Jim." She keyed off.

Senya called from the bed, "You just mssed a great skit. I'll replay."

"No, don't bother. Do you have any happy pills?"

"Sure." Senya left the bed and asked, "Twenty grams? I've got heavier."

"A twenty is fine." Toi downed it with a gulp of wine.

Senya suggested, "After a few minutes maybe you'll feel like some sexing."

"Maybe. What do you have in mind?"

"Nothing mechanical and no o-drugs. I need to be petted, and I want to give you a nice long lickoff."

Toi smiled and stroked Senya's smooth, hairless skull. "I can't say no."

Senya gently reached into Toi's crimson robe and touched large, silky breasts. Senya lifted her mouth for a kiss.

Senya's computer chimed and spoke: "Important message for Toi King and Senya Dernolo from the captain. Recorded."

Senya pouted. "Let's ignore it for now. It couldn't be too important or he'd over-ridden my privacy order."

"I'd rather know now."

Senya pulled away and sat up on the bed. She commanded petulantly, "Play it!"

Rune's voice came from the speakers. "Sorry to intrude, but the ship's computer has just completed the new schedule for your visits, and I'm keying for printouts now. Please look it over and make any trades between yourselves, or adjustments. Just so every man has his contract rights met once during the thirteen-day cycle the computer adopted. It gives you a maximum of forty minutes with each man and twenty minutes minimum between visits."

Senya complained, "A whole hour to rest, prepare, and make a visit!"

Rune continued, "This is about the same time-frame as before. You can thank your guild for that. The men are taking the frequency loss. But we recognize there are limits to your ability to give quality service. Please transmit your changes to the master computer and I'll order a print copy to every man."

There was a short pause, then Rune said, "Toi, I have the results of the search of Zamil's cabin. If you'd like to drop by my cabin before midnight you can look them over and we can discuss them. End."

Sheets of paper emerged from the console and dropped into the slide tray. Toi took them to the bed. She asked Senya, "You want to look these over now?"

"Later." Senya slipped off her own robe---pale yellow gauze tizlin---with matching panties. She reached again into Toi's crimson robe and traced circles around one of Toi's swelling nipples.

Senya tried to gently pull Toi down into her arms.

Toi smiled and let the printout sheets slip to the carpet. Ram Rune Chilton and the murders for a while! She refused to let these moments be ruined. She sank down on the bed.

Toi kissed the top of Senya's velvety head and enclosed the smaller, darker woman in her embrace. "We'll have time together every night, and we won't be exhausted."

"Mmm...you're so soft and warm and nice..." Senya cuddled against Toi and pressed her face into the deep valley between Toi's breasts.

Toi crooned to her as she would an infant and gently stroked the younger woman's lovely body.

Senya kissed and licked and hungrily sought Toi's nipples. Her hands kneaded the warm flesh.

Toi enjoyed Senya's reversions to babyhood---the mindless touching and fondling...and now the avid suckling.

Toi's nipples tingled and breasts glowed. Similar sensations were born in her loins, and she began to very much want Senya's promise of a slow lickoff. Senya had a great natural talent for licking.

After endless kisses and touching, Senya kissed a path down Ti's heated body. She slipped naturally between Toi's opened thighs and parted the cleft. She kissed and tongued the protruding, swollen clit.

Toi sighed and closed her eyes. It would be very good. She gave herself to the pleasure.

Soon Toi was restless, breathing fast, murmuring praises as Senya's devilish tongue darted and stabbed and slithered. She reached the point of all-yielding, trembled violently and accepted the swet, golden tumult of fierce, hot orgasm.

Senya knew how to prolong the rapture. She let Toi recover for a moment, then brought on another intense tide of pleasue.

And another...

Finally, Toi whispered, "That's enough. Oh, you darling, that's enough. You'll turn me into a tongue addict." She moaned and panted, "Ooooo.... Senya, stop!"

Senya lifted her head. She smiled with love and kissed Toi's trembling inner thighs. She moved up the bed and again cuddled against Toi. "Were those sevens?"

Toi caressed her and whispered, "They were all nines, you little devil! What are you doing on a mining ship? You could be wallowing in luxury on Too Much, giving some rich woman so much pleasure she'd put you in her will."

"I only want to give that kind of pleasure to you."

Toi smiled and held Senya close. "I don't think you're really suited for the life of a Companion. You're too romantic."

"Oh, I don't mind all the sex work with men, just so I can really love somebody like you."

Toi didn't want to argue, or lecture the younger woman. She kissed Senya, embraced her, and closed her eyes for a while.

Later she'd return to the real, terrifying world of greed and death, where her survival depended on her acting ability and her experience at

reading men.

She'd visit Rune Chilton and resume her risky investigation of the murders.

Murders?

Toi opened her eyes. Her unconscious had decided Rune was the real killer.

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Toi entered Rune Chilton's cabin that night at eleven-thirty. She wore a shimmering purple cling robe and a shimmering purple Dutch cut wig. She carried the folded printout of the new visit schedule. She and Senya had checked it over.

Rune gestured her in. He was in uniform. "I can only give you about twenty minutes."

"That's what I've been saying."

He smiled. "You exaggerate. But you'll have more time from now on. Did you and Senya read all the small print at the bottom?"

"Oh, yes. The pay scale adjustments. Now we get less."

"Less work, less pay. I've arbitrarily rescinded the danger-pay increases. Zamil killed Mata, tried to kill you, and committed suicide when capture was imminent. There was a gun and a wormhole signaler in his cabin indicating he was an agent for another corporation. Case closed as far as I'm concerned."

Toi bit her tongue. She couldn't let him know she suspected him.

Rune continued, "The ship's computer worked out your pay and schedule on a pro rata basis. The crew and miners get more pay to compensate for fewer Companion visits."

"Yes, but with forty minutes per visit they'll want to go twice! They'll all be primed after ten or twelve days. Senya and I'll have to work twice as hard per visit. That's not fair."

"I can't take that possibility into consideration, Toi. The contract deals in visits, not orgasms."

"I want to take it up with Magni-Space and the guild. This voyage should be aborted! Two people dead! And I would be dead, too, except for my impulse to toss my case."

“Sit down. Want a drink?”

She sat but declined a drink. “I want this whole situation squirted back to Too Much for renegotiation or arbitration.”

“I told you before, I can’t do that. We’re warping in secret and in silence. Those are approved, legal corporation orders.”

“How long before I can contact the guild, then?”

“After we reach our destination and make an official Magni-Space claim and get the machinery going.”

“How long is that in days?”

“I’m not sure. The course and destination are secret. The master computer is programmed not to reveal that. But it will probably take us another two weeks to get out far enough to where I suspect the planet might be. Also, these secret warp courses are usually zig-zag.”

“But you could stop the warp sequence we’re in now, couldn’t you? In an emergency?”

“Yes, in a true emergency.”

Toi lost control and made a mistake. “Two murders---nearly three, and that isn’t an emergency?”

Rune’s eyes narrowed. “Zamil committed suicide.”

Toi went cold. She managed to continue at the same level of anger, as if she had simply misspoken. “All right! One murder, one attempted murder, and one suicide! But maybe Zamil had an accomplice! You don’t know! I think you should abort this voyage! Let Magni-Space send out another ship!”

He shook his head. “No. Final. Now let’s talk Zamil. The search turned up three very interesting items. An advanced, very powerful wormhole transmitter. It was hidden in the base of that drone statue you used when you went berserk today. Now, that rage of yours was a surprise. You’ve always been so under control and rational---even when you saw what he did to Mata.”

Rune was studying Toi, frowning.

Toi’s mouth went dry. She said, “I don’t remember. It’s all a blur.”

“It was uncharacteristic. Was he more than a friend? An enemy?”

“Zamil? He was nice to me, but he was just another visit.”

“Then why did you lose control? Were you very, very close to Mata?”

“

Toi managed a blush. It was a trick she had learned years before, previous to Companion Academy. She looked away from Rune and triggered body-mind responses to bring tears to her eyes. “Mata and I were lovers, if that’s what you... Yes, I was in shock when...when it

happened...when she was... Slaughtered!"

Toi let him see her tears. "I couldn't react then. But in Zamil's cabin something finally broke in me." She trembled her voice. "I wanted to kill him! But I couldn't! So I killed his--- The thing *he* loved!"

Rune seemed to believe her. "You need a drink."

She was relieved. "Yes...I guess I do." She slumped into his sofa.

Rune checked the time, hand-made her a strong drink, and as she sipped, said, "Getting back to those discoveries in his cabin, the search team found that wormhole transmitter, a Beta laser gun with three power clips, and a miniature UTA."

Toi didn't react. She pretended to be self-absorbed.

Rune added, "There were no incriminating documents---linking him to a rival corporation."

Toi said softly, almost indifferently, "Did those things have his fingerprints or dna on them?"

"No. No dna, anyway. We don't have dna analysis equipment on this ship. The statuette of the drone had his and your fingerprints. The transmitter hidden inside was clean. Apparently he hadn't yet touched it. The laser gun housing and grip are made of a special plastic which will not accept prints. Same for the UTA nano ring. It's all special equipment used by corporation espionage agents."

Rune hurriedly added, "If you want to see them, they're in the Security safe box."

She nodded, seemingly uninterested. She wondered why Magni-Space hadn't given her any of that stuff?

She knew she wouldn't find any unexplainable gap or mistake in Rune's information. He had somehow visited Tem Zamil, forced or tricked the man into drinking all of that Terminol, and then planted the incriminating equipment---as he had in Jon Mantler's cabin...

She realized Rune Chilton was a very desperate man.

And, as Captain---the supreme authority on the ship---he could enforce the communications blackout, have anyone locked up, and even kill again if he had to.

Toi gave in. She said, "Well, all right. I guess that's all settled." She took a big swallow of her drink, put down her glass, and handed up the visit schedule she had brought. "Here. Senya and I made a few switches. I've got Jon Mantler exclusively, and I gave Jim Abu Dom to her."

Rune accepted the schedule. "I'll feed it to the ship."

Toi rose from the sofa and turned to the door.

Rune said, "How about something to insure a good night's sleep?"

“I don’t want another drink.”

What I’m thinking of is better than a drink, a pill, or the cone.” He was grinning in a certain way. His gaze had slipped to her gaping, shimmering cling robe.

Toi said, “You just rammed me last night. And don’t you go on duty in a minute or two?”

“I can make time. I’m the Captain.”

“Rune---”

“Don’t I deserve a favor? I want to make you howl one la--- If I have to follow this damned schedule I won’t see either you or Senya for...eleven days!”

Toi had caught that slip. She thought he’d almost said “one last time.” Fear was reborn in her guts. What was he planning? Was she being paranoid?

She didn’t betray her intensified fear. She said, “I really don’t feel like it. I’m sleepy and tired and angry. Use your autojak. I’m sure you’ve got one big enough.”

“Toi!”

But she quickly left his cabin and ran down the ramp.

In her own cabin, as she peeled off her shimmering cling robe and ordered a shower, Toi realized the full implication of his unfinished sentence. Something was going to happen before eleven days passed. Before the ship reached its destination!

What was the event to be? Would a rival corporation ship attack them? Or would Rune leave this ship and rendezvous with another? But what would be the point of leaving, or an attack, unless Rune knew this ship’s destination?

Could he know?

Theoretically only the ship’s master computer would know---when that final, coded rod was inserted. And there were all kinds of built-in programs and specialized defensive viruses in the computer to prevent withdrawal or access to that secret course information.

Toi puzzled over these questions for an hour before coning herself to sleep.

The next week passed uneventfully. Except that Toi discovered Rune had canceled his order that all Companion visits be recorded in the ship's computer.

When she asked him about it he was curt: "We're back to normal now. There's no need to tie up a percentage of the master computer with all that sex. Besides, the men weren't happy with it; they like their privacy."

She didn't argue. She waited, with ever-increasing tension, for something to happen.

Another day passed. She began to relax. Had she leaped to a wrong conclusion? She relived seeing that message left by Tem Zamil. The man could have been the killer. That could have been a revenge accusation. What had Zamil to lose?

The next morning, on her first visit...

Toi was with Marvo Tyler, the ship's Second Officer, in his cabin. She was lying on his bed, her filmy yellow robe spread wide, her cleft decorated as a mouth, her nipples as eyes. She watched him insert a sex spinner into the holo player. He was naked.

Marvo Tyler was stitched on voyeurism. He loved to watch others do sex while his Companion sucked him.

That was fine with Toi; she wasn't required to climax with him. She was only a glorified autojak.

She amended that thought: she had a role to play with him, and she provided basic human female companionship.

She sometimes thought female companionship was the real, underlying reason for Companion visits: Men needed a woman's company once in a while...needed the softness and warmth of real flesh and the sound of a real woman's voice.

An infantile need, she suspected, but so very powerful.

The sex part was important, but actually secondary. Men hid their infant's need for Mother under their powerful male need for sex.

There were companies developing chip-intelligent biological mouth and vina inserts for use in machines which would eventually result in incredibly skilled androidal AI robots which would surpass, technically, anything sexual a skilled, experienced Companion could do as far as providing physical pleasure.

But the human factor, the emotional warmth, the presence of another real person---the smiles, the meeting of eyes, the subtleties of voice... Loneliness and need for Mother love would keep the Companions in business forever. The oldest profession would survive.

Tyler climbed into bed and lay beside her. “I’ve been saving this holo for a long time.”

“Why?” Toi turned and rested on her right forearm. She began caressing his pale white chest and belly and thighs, with special lingering touches for his sack and hardening ram.

“I paid two hundred credits for it on Too Much. It’s supposed to be an absolutely legitimate steal of Tonya Mondolani in private sex.”

Toi made a face Tyler couldn’t see. Mondolani was a famous holo star, supposedly the best actress since Jan Perrson.

A large, black holo field cube formed above the foot of the bed. A pinpoint of light appeared in the blackness, expanded, and became a blurred-edged view of a luxurious bedroom.

Tyler whispered, “They used an ancient spike cam!”

The sex industry used all the old and new technology to create and sell its products. Reportedly, secret surveillance of the sex lives of celebrities was the current spice.

But Toi had heard that stars cooperated and demanded and received enormous credits for permitting these so-called spike spies.

Toi played finger games with Tyler’s genitals as they watched the first minutes of the holo. Tyler was hard, but it was too soon to begin sucking.

The solid, blur-edged window of reality showed two naked young women kissing passionately on a bed. The depth picture zoomed for a close-up, and the younger woman, a lavender-haired, high-breasted beauty, was unquestionably Tonya Mondolani.

The other woman was shorter, blonde, with blazing blue eyes.

Tyler, not looking away from the holo, fumbled his hand to Toi’s lush breasts and carefully, pleasantly pinched her nipples. Toi moved a bit to give him better access.

He whispered, as if afraid to alert the holo-women they had watchers, “Look at her breasts! What keeps them so pointed?”

Toi didn’t answer. He didn’t want to know Mondolani’s uppers were constructs of plastic coil, G-sponge, special thick fluids, and guided-growth flesh. They reportedly were more real than real.

Toi began a gentle stroking of his ram. Slow and easy...

“Ummm! Tonya likes plasflesh rams! Look at the size of that one! Oh...she’s passive. The blonde is going to wear it. Damn, I wish they could pan left a little!”

But they couldn’t. The spike’s view was fixed--and limited.

Tyler murmured, “I can’t believe... Beautiful! Suck them, girl! Get her ready for it!”

Toi judged it was time to slide down on the bed and start mouth action. With luck she could time his climax with Mondolani's.

A moment later, Tyler whispered intensely, completely involved in the holo, "Don't forget to turn it on! Yes! Pink and wet. Real lube! Umm! Ummm! Get more of it in! She loves it!"

Toi closed her mouth on his ram and began the tight, wet, head-bobbing, tongue-sliding combination she remembered Tyler liked best.

He soon was breathing fast, squirming, nearly into climax, aware of Toi's expert sucking, but 'into' the holo as if it was real now. He gasped, "Make her scream! That's the way! Make her belly shake! Keep it moving! Don't stop now! She's coming off!"

Toi had him trembling on the edge. When his voice hit that last, excited peak, she went into her climax sucking technique.

Tyler whimpered and hip-thrust reflexively. His voice keened into a whine.

Toi dealt with quick, powerful jets of semen. She swallowed as she continued sucking. She was indifferent to its taste.

As she had often said to aggressive sex-is-disgusting religious warps on Too Much, she and they drank and ate and enjoyed animal and insect secretions and fluids and body tissues every day---milk, fat, butter, eggs, meat, fish oils, honey---so why be horrified at swallowing healthy human fluids?

Toi listened to Tyler's cries and felt his muscle tensions. She altered her sucking to make his climax last longer and be more intense. And she knew when to stop.

Tyler sighed with completion and seemed to melt into the bed.

Toi looked briefly at the continuing holo. Tonya Mondolani was now thrashing wildly as the other woman's hips drove a monstrously big, red, vibrating, spinning undulating ram into her flower-decked cleft.

Toi was surprised any normal woman could accommodate something that size. But she guessed that like herself and every other Companion, Tonya had been surgically altered and enhanced.

It was the fashion on most high tech planets for wealthy women and celebrity women to be able to perform in certain ways as well as a Companion. They had to meet the competition. They even attended special sex technique classes given by retired Companion.

And often these rich or famous women demanded men of great size, skills and endurance as lovers and husbands.

A certain number of men visited the plasurgeons, too, and took instruction and training.

Toi moved up on the bed and settled next to Tyler. He still had ten minutes due him.

The holo ended. Quiet came to the cabin. She touched him affectionately and paid him a compliment she knew he'd prize. "You jet as hard and as much as any man I've ever visited. It's really an experience when you go."

"Hmmm! I guess that's true. Senya said that, too."

Toi had suggested Senya tell him that. It helped Tyler's ego. He was an ordinary man---skinny and rather short and muscle-soft due to the usually easy ship gravity---a competent middle-aged Space Guild officer.

She petted his shrinking ram. "You're like a geyser."

"Part of it's you, Toi. You suck like a dream."

The compliments became a bore.

Toi said, to change the subject, "Do you ever wonder what the ship's computer---the big one---thinks about itself...maybe what it thinks about us and our behaviors?"

"No. Even the most powerful computers are still idiot savants. They do their thinking where we point them, and they do it very well, but they never have truly independent thoughts or viewpoints. They'd have to have a Self, an ego, and that comes from biology. Dna. Genes."

"But if we put quadrillion bit chips together with an advanced AI program maybe it would---"

It's been tried. Again and again. You get faster and you get incredibly detailed knowledge, but you never get a me, myself and I."

"Never any feelings?"

"No. Computers are total sociopaths. Toi, the chip in that holo player doesn't care what content is on the spinner. And this ship's master computer doesn't care where the ship goes, just so the course is readable and doable. It would send us into the galactic core---as long as the warp engines held out---and the computer wouldn't care in the least. It isn't aware it has a stake in anything."

"Well...how would we know where we're going? If there was an error in the course which would run us into a sun?"

"In that case the computer is programmed to warn us. But not because it gives a shit about us or itself. We're warping blind and silent, guided by an amoral computer with unbreakable instructions to keep our destination secret."

Toi pouted. "So we're forced to trust Magni-Space with our lives, no matter what? It all depends on what course Rune put into the computer?"

Tyler chuckled. "That's right. It's in the contract. That's what big

credits do to us.”

Toi scowled in thought and licked her lower lip. Her fear of Rune, briefly forgotten, returned.

He asked, “Would you like some New Freedom Varmos Fudge? I’m stitched on the stuff, even if I get sick from eating too much, sometimes.” He opened a nearby wall drawer and took out a cannister of the expensive candy.

Surprised, Toi accepted a piece. Varmos fudge---made of powdered Varmos beetle found only on New Freedom, an insect more sweet and oddly tangy than any other sweetener in the human worlds, with NF berries, Hoolnuts, and Earth chocolate---was a level-four addictive, not quite illegal.

She smiled as she nibbled. Tyler wasn’t as dull and predictable as she had thought. She liked him a little more.

Toi returned to the subject of computers. “Do all the big exploration and mining corporations use the same kind of master computer in their ships?”

“No. We have a ZXt-34, and that’s the best as of six months ago. The others are still probably using ZXt-25’s in most of their big ships.”

“But the corporations all use ZX computers in all their ships?”

“Yes. ZX is the only corporation that makes a trillion function layered chip computer designed for long reach warp drive starships.”

“Then I suppose ZX has standardized spinners and standardized virus readers in its t-series computers?”

“Yes. Why engineer each model differently? The important components are memory rods, decision caps and function readers. What are you getting at?”

Toi popped the last of the fudge into her mouth and licked her fingers. She replied, “I’m wondering how to invest my surplus credits when we return to Too Much. I think now I’ll buy ZX shares. They seem to have a monopoly on supplying computers to starships.”

“Yes, that would be a good investment. As humanity spreads out in the galaxy, the volume of space to be explored and exploited increases exponentially, requiring bigger and better starships...and computers...to handle the next generation warp drives.” He offered her another piece of the criminally delicious candy.

He said, “Companions earn high credits, I’ve heard.”

Toi declined the candy. She responded, “We make it, then spend it, usually. But I save most of mine.” She gathered her filmy robe around her. “I’ve got to go. Thanks again.” She impulsively kissed him on his sweetened lips.

As she stepped from her shower, Toi said to her computer, “Simon, is Senya in her cabin?”

“No, she is not.”

“Leave this message: We have to---”

She felt the strange, sickening, five-second disorientation of a warp exit. She gripped the shower door for support. Why would the ship unexpectedly revert to normal space?

She said, “Simon, call the control room.”

She was lucky and got instant response. A man asked, “Captain?”

She recognized the voice of Marvo Tyler, the Second Officer. “No, this is Toi King. Marvo, why did we shift out of warp?”

“I don’t know. We’re not in a sun system. Get off the grid. We’re trying to find the captain.”

“You don’t know where he is?”

Tyler cut the connection.

Toi sat as if frozen for long seconds. Then her hands curled into small fists and she swiftly reached for an opaque, green robe, rewigged as a blonde, stepped into cling slippers and went to the door. She said, “Simon, call Security. Have them check the lifeboats. I think a spy is trying to escape the ship.” She used the manual door control to leave her cabin.

She turned left and ran down the ramps. The lifeboat bays were on Level G, just above the huge cargo holds.

Toi was breathing hard from unaccustomed running and wishing she had used a lift tube when she reached the first lifeboat bay.

The seal on the lifeboat airlock door control panel had been stripped away. The entry control was smashed. The lifeboat could not be used.

She dashed out of the outer entranceway to the next bay. That lifeboat had been made inaccessible, too.

Somebody was making it impossible to escape the ship in an emergency!

Toi ran from bay to bay.

She found him in the access room to the fifth lifeboat. He was pounding the controls to junk with a big sensor wrench. For an instant she

couldn't believe it was he. She hadn't really believed her deductions and speculations.

This was the man who had murdered Mata and butchered her body. He had almost succeeded in killing her! And he had murdered Tem Zamil.

All she could think of was to delay him somehow until the Security men arrived. If they were on the way. If they had believed her message.

She took a deep, shuddering breath and said, "What in hell are you doing, Rune?"

He turned instantly. His expression changed several times within a second. He looked past her to the empty corridor. He said, "You're a Magni-Space agent, aren't you?"

"Yes. And you belong to...Universe?"

"Good guess." He smiled and hurtled the big sensor wrench at her.

Toi was surprised. She tried to dodge but was hit on her right forearm. She cried out and cradled the arm against her belly. She thought it was broken. The pain was severe. She sank to a kneeling position.

Rune approached, picked up the wrench and glanced up and down the corridor. "You're smart, Toi, and you're dumb-ass stupid. Where's your weapon?" He went past her to the sixth lifeboat bay.

There were only seven lifeboats.

Toi struggled to her feet and followed him. "You switched courses, didn't you? Universe gave you a final course which brought us here. And you've got the secret Magni-Space course to the new treasure planet on you now."

Rune began smashing the sixth lifeboat access control panel. Between blows with the heavy wrench he said, "Right. You've figured it out. And my price...was very high."

The both heard the sounds of running in the outer corridor.

Understanding twisted his face. "You bitch!" He drew a laser gun from under his tunic and slid off the safety. He stood calmly, gun leveled at the bay doorway.

A Security man in the corridor yelled, "Look into five! I'll check---" He appeared in the doorway.

Rune drilled a sudden, intense white rod of killer light into the man's chest.

The man screamed and fell, a wet, burned hole in his body. He thrashed in brutal agony.

Toi shrank against a wall.

Rune looked grim. He ignored her. He stepped past the dying man to the corridor.

Toi heard another sizzling discharge of the laser gun and the shriek of another man.

Toi was terrified! Her heart thudded crazily. Her guts felt sick and loose. She helplessly drooled urine on the vinyl floor. She had never been this afraid!

But she desperately crawled to the contorting Security man and with a trembling left hand took the laser gun from his hip holster.

He was oblivious to her. The awful smell of cooked flesh filled the access bay.

She had fired a laser gun five times in familiarity and practice sessions. But not left-handed! She had never expected to have to use one as now---in a fight for her life!

She struggled to her feet and pushed off the gun's safety. The gun automatically readied itself---a low hum, a soft vibration. It seemed alive.

She edged into the corridor and saw a second Security man down. It was Jim Abu Dom. He had died instantly. The firebeam had lanced his head.

Where was Rune?

The remaining lifeboat!

She moved painfully to the seventh lifeboat bay and looked in.

Rune stood by the slowly opening ship-to-lifeboat airlock. He was impatiently edging into the gap.

Toi had no choice. She stepped forward, aimed her gun with her trembling left arm and hand, and pressed the firing stud.

She had aimed at his torso, as trained. But the split-second, incredibly bright beam seared between Rune's arm and body. He jerked, his gun dropped, and he staggered back from the instant, ugly, red hot gash in the airlock door.

An incredulous look came to his face when he saw her. He held his burned arm away from the charred furrow in the side of his tunic.

The airlock door continued to open. The lifeboat entrance was only a few feet away.

Rune said, "All right. A serious mistake. Join me, Toi. I'll share with you. Universe is paying me fifty million credits." He made a move toward the lifeboat.

"No!" Something in her command stopped him. She had kept her gun aimed at him. Her voice shook. "Why did you kill Mata?"

Rune said, "She was an agent, too. For Intraspace, I think. She gave me a knockout drug during a visit, but it wasn't strong enough. I saw her searching my cabin. She found the new course spinner. I don't know if she

realized what it was, but I couldn't take the chance. So I bought another visit with her from Zamil, went to her cabin..."

"And you guessed I was an agent, too?"

"Yes. I thought you and Mata were a team." Rune looked at the inviting lifeboat doorway. "Then I figured you for Magni-Space."

"How did you kill Zamil?"

"Toi, let's get into the lifeboat and off this ship! We'll have enough money to retire on. I'll split the fifty million with you, twenty-five each. You can go and do what you want for the rest of your life! There are one hundred and fifteen human worlds, and most are not members of the universal law federation."

"How did you kill Zamil?"

"Why do you care? We're wasting time! All right! He agreed to a bribe---a million credits to keep quiet---but then he wanted more and I knew he'd never stop draining me. I gave him a choice: Terminol or a laser beam to the guts. He knew I'd do it, so he took the Terminol. Drank the whole damned bottle!"

"He was working at his hobby while you talked, wasn't he?"

"Yes. So what?"

"He left a miniature accusation against you."

Rune nodded. "And you saw it. That fits. But now---" He held out his hand, wanting a handshake. "Let's both be rich. We have to leave right now. You want a life of luxury or the life of a Companion? Do you like being rammed six or more times a day? You like catering to stitches and warps?"

"I'm not going to ratify your murders, Rune. And if I joined you you'd murder me the first chance you had."

Toi continued holding the humming laser gun aimed at his heart. She ordered, "Now slowly lie face down on the deck."

He didn't move. "Toi, you've got the gun. How could I kill you? You can't bring Mata back to life! Don't be an idealistic fool! Come on! Join me!"

He took a step toward the inviting, open airlock.

"Rune!"

He kept moving.

She pressed the firing stud too hard but that only slightly altered her aim. The white hot beam pierced his lower back. He staggered and howled.

Toi was paralyzed by emotion and tension. She was unaware she still held down the firing stud. After an instant to reset and tap another energy pod, the gun's terrible white beam winked on again and sliced him almost in

half as he reacted to the laser shot through his back. He collapsed.

Toi gasped and turned away. She dropped the deadly weapon. Rune's smoking insides were spilling out.

But he wasn't yet dead. She heard him making small, ugly sounds and heard small rustling movement. She forced herself to turn and look at him.

He was lying in a pool of his blood and guts, fumbling at something at his waist, under his blood wet, burned tunic.

She realized she had to go to him and restrain his hands if there was another weapon.

Rune was panting, sobbing, glaring at nothing with insane determination. He was holding something. Not a gun. It was a remote control detonator.

As she went to him and tried to stop him, he managed to press a small red button.

But there was no explosion in the ship.

Then Toi realized the signal must have activated a timer.

A twisted, agonized smile formed on his bloody lips. He gasped, "If I can't win...nobody wins."

"Rune, where's the bomb?"

"You're going...to get...rammed...one...last...time."

"Where is it? How much time do we have?"

"Fif...teen..."

"Where is it? Rune, please!"

But he had stopped breathing.

Trembling violently, Toi realized she was kneeling in his blood and purplish entrails. Her hands, knees, her robe, her slippers were bloody. She staggered to her feet.

Fifteen. Had he meant they had fifteen minutes before a bomb exploded? It must be minutes. Fifteen seconds had already passed.

The lifeboat airlock was open, inviting her to save her life.

She knew that even if she could instantly mobilize everyone on board there was virtually no chance the bomb could be found and deactivated in time. Rune would have hidden it too well.

The lifeboat. The only lifeboat, now. She could call Senya, and maybe they could escape, but...

Toi forced herself to stoop and search the body. She found the secret course spinner rod taped to Rune's left side. She peeled it away and pressed it to the small of her back, under her opaque, bloody robe.

She heard running in the corridor. Men's voices. Shouting.

Toi stared at the open lifeboat airlock for long, tempted seconds, then ran out into the corridor. “Here! Captain Chilton is dead!”

Three minutes later, Sam Allen, the First Officer, stood grimly with Toi in the corridor, listening again to her hurried story. He believed her. He held the activated remote control pod in his hand. He said, “All right, you think this started a timer to allow the captain to get clear of the ship in a lifeboat before a bomb exploded. He said we had fifteen minutes?”

“Yes! He said I’d be rammed one last time. And when I asked how much time we had he said fifteen.”

“Minutes?”

“I don’t know! He only said ‘fifteen’ before he died!”

Allen looked around at the surrounding press of Security men, crewmen, and miners. “All right, we have to assume a bomb exists. It’s possible he made a mistake in programming it or arming it. But we have to assume he did it correctly and that it will explode in...nine minutes. And it’s probably located in a critical area of the ship.”

A crewman said, “Drive Room.”

Another man shouted, “Air supply.”

Another said, “Space suits.”

Allen said, “There are only twenty suits. The bomb isn’t likely to be powerful enough to totally destroy the ship. Sections could still be air tight. The master computer is on full damage alert.”

“Let’s get in the lifeboats and get out of here!”

“There’s only one lifeboat that can get---”

“The airlock is closing!”

Toi could see into the lifeboat bay. The airlock was just closing the last few inches. Then it sealed and its luminescent Locked ring lit red.

Men trampled Rune Chilton’s mangled body as they threw themselves at the manual controls. One man stabbed at the control panel.

But whoever had slipped unnoticed into the airlock knew enough to instantly seal-and-lock the airlock door. He was now entering the lifeboat and sealing that smaller airlock.

First Officer Allen shouted unheard commands. The men were frantic with panic.

Seconds later the screaming and shoving and shouting and cursing were silenced and stilled by a huge sound which signaled the emergency opening of the ship’s outer hull. The roar of the lifeboat’s exit left everyone stunned and unnaturally quiet.

Just as the babble of fear and rage began again, Allen sent a splash of harmless but blinding, wide-angle laser fire into the ceiling. Everyone

quieted.

Allen shouted, "We only have time to search the most likely places! Tyler, take ten men to search the control room!"

The Chief Drive Engineer yelled, "Warp monkeys, follow me!"

A mining executive shouted, "Down to the holds! Search!"

The crowd of men scattered.

Toi watched, dazed, heart pounding, feeling sick. They had maybe six minutes left. There was no chance---

She suddenly realized that with his last words Rune had given her a clue to the bomb's location. The bedrock of his character had dictated those words: *rammed one last time*.

Did that mean the biggest ram on the ship would...? It didn't make sense. But maybe the bomb...

She ran to First Officer Allen and asked, "What shape would the bomb have?"

He answered in anger and despair. "I don't know! Any shape!"

The intercom in the lifeboat bay chimed and Allen answered it. A crewman reported, "Sir, a maintenance man down here saw the captain walking among the machines an hour ago, and carrying a storage pack."

"Where? What hold?"

"E Hold, sir."

Toi said, "That's between the main warp reactors, isn't it?"

Allen nodded. "E Hold is like the hole in a doughnut." He started for the corridor. "Come on! We need everybody! A bomb in the right place in E could destabilize those warp twisters. We could be radioactive, inside-out mush five seconds after it went off."

Toi ran after him as he commandeered an elevator and used a pocketcom to alert everyone in the holds below. She touched her ear and learned they had about five minutes left.

E Hold was huge and round and deep, full of caged, orange mining machinery. Men were here and there, climbing, looking, flashing handlights in the gloom. Others were opening storage lockers, cabinets, crates.

Toi felt dwarfed by the massive treads on giant crawlers, the long reach composite beams, the ten-ton loaders, the looming tankers and the ugly, menacing diggers.

She felt sick. There were too many of these gigantic machines to search in the time she had left. Thousands of places where the bomb could be hidden, covered, disguised.

Where would Rune hide a bomb down here among these giants? He must have felt small and humbled, too. In spite of his big ram! Where

would he...?

Then she saw it. The Thrower! The massive, forty-foot-long tech-encrusted tube capable of boosting huge sausages of plastic-encased ore off planet in a beamed warp field.

The Thrower lay cradled on its side, in the enclosing gap between the reactors, and she saw the ram-vina symbolism instantly.

When erect on-planet, the huge, glowing, energized tube spewed gobs of white-clad ore into a long chain of warp-beamed wealth that would eventually reach a Magni-Space smelter-factory complex floating near a colony planet.

Toi screamed, "The Thrower! The bomb is in the Thrower!"

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Two days later, Toi lay in First Officer Sam Allen's arms, enjoying the soft flutter of his tongue on her excited nipples.

She reached and played with his smallish ram. She couldn't help saying, "We'd be dead if Rune had had a small one, like yours."

Allen smiled and wasn't offended. She knew he didn't care. He said, "I used to feel contempt for that man for all his bragging about his size. That was a strong warp."

Toi said, "I'm glad he had that warp. He wasn't aware of what he was telling me, at the end."

Sam whispered, "Being that close to death---seconds away---for me, makes this visit very, very special."

"For me, too." Toi shivered as she realized yet again how close to death they had all been. She thought she was still in minor shock. If Rune had made a more sophisticated, tamper-proof bomb...

After a miner had found the bomb in the Thrower and ripped wires from it, she and Sam Allen had spent over an hour in the control room squirting reports and depth photos and other evidence and testimony back to Too Much. She had exchanged brief messages with the Companion Guild and with high executives in Magni-Space. The secret course to the treasure planet was now safely in the control room security box.

Magni-Space had awarded her a million credit bonus. And the Guild was sure to make her Companion One as soon as the ship returned to Too

Much.

Sam gently touched her smooth, flower-decked cleft. “Nothing like danger safely past to make sex more pleasurable.” He gently explored with curious fingers.

“Ummm! Yes, it does!” Toi tongue-touched the orgasm capsule in her tooth. “Because you know exactly how to ram me. You always amaze me.”

He laughed, pleased. “An acting captain always knows how to ram with authority.”

“In that case, Captain Allen, prepare to ram! I’m ready.”

As Sam Allen moved over her, Toi remembered how her mother had objected to her choice of profession as humiliating, degrading and shameful.

Those values were straight from the new Cholb dogma, which she understood was an offshoot of Old Christianity.

She’d responded---the words were etched in her memory--- “Mother, it’s my life and it’s my body and it’s my responsibility. The Sex Rights clause of the All Worlds Constitution makes sexual services legal and subject to binding contract. There’s nothing wrong with sexual pleasure, and there’s nothing wrong with providing sexual pleasure for a fee.”

Her mother had retreated to her Y-shaped Cholb cross and to her chanted prayers.

Toi had simply moved out of the homecube and had rarely contacted her mother after that.

Five years ago.

Now she concentrated on panting and moaning while undulating erotically under acting Captain Sam Allen. It was pleasant, good exercise.

Toi liked to give pleasure, and liked to use the power of sex, and to use her growing knowledge of people to skillfully intensify their pleasure.

Her religion was simple: Pleasure is good. Pain is evil.

Organized religion, she felt, was fueled at its heart by denying pleasure and inflicting pain.

She liked to improve herself, to be the best, and to always be in control.

Well, almost always in control.

END NOVEL

