

BENEATH THE SKIN

by Carolyn Hill

Chapter One

The drug was wearing off. Aleta Graham's head ached and her hands shook as she leaned against a pair of diamond-studded urns embedded in the ballroom's wall. She fought the drug's deadening effect and focused on one clear fact: she must escape, now, while they were all preoccupied with Joanna's wedding.

Aleta peered out from behind the enormous porcelain vase that shielded her from the wedding guests. Joanna was waltzing across the low-friction floor in the arms of her groom. Above the dance floor, the orchestra wheeled in the air, bows sawing across strings, drums booming, cymbals chiming. The music rattled Aleta's nerves.

She craned her aching neck and stared up, past the orchestra, her burning gaze following the inwardly sloping walls of the ballroom. Each wall was formed of gold and platinum bricks, covered with precious containers of various sizes and shapes: fine art and irreplaceable antiquities, all useless now, set permanently in the metal, an extravagant display of the Dagarro Family's wealth. Five stories above, beyond a clear ceiling, lay the airless moon's surface and the void of space.

Withdrawal sank talons deep into Aleta's chest. She gasped and bent double. Dear God, she wanted . . .

Escape, she must focus on that. She wanted to escape. While Joanna smiled in the arms of her beloved under the watchful eyes of Dagarro Family security, Aleta trembled and struggled not to scream. She straightened her spine, took one step, then another, and slipped out from behind the urn into the shadows between two marble sarcophagi.

The music changed, and guests poured onto the dance floor in a rainbow of glittersilk gowns and light-washed haute couture. Aleta slid deeper into the shadows, until she

could no longer see the security guards. Her wrist itched—a maddening, distracting, incessant itch. She scratched furtively beneath her formal glove. The itch grew worse. She yanked the glove off. Her arm spasmed, and the glove slipped to the floor.

Something moved behind her in the darkest shadows: a man's figure. Melting?
Changing?

Aleta blinked, trying to shake off the hallucination.

Softly, gently, the glove was placed back in her hand.

The fingers of the man who had returned the glove clamped over her velvet sleeve, pushing the fabric up her arm. Looming above her, he studied the fading blue spiderweb of lines that streaked her pale wrist.

She trembled again, this time in fear.

Dark on dark he was, dressed all in light-swallowing black silk except for a glowstone earring whose incandescence stained half his jaw a bloody red. The angles of his face were as sharp as the glint in his obsidian eyes.

Darcavon.

He lifted his gaze and met her own. One sculpted black brow rose.

Aleta squared her chin.

Carefully, without touching her skin, he ran a forefinger above the drug's lingering blue trace at her wrist. "A web not of your own making," he stated. One heartbeat, two, then Darcavon dropped her arm.

"Trituros wants you," he said, and stepped past her. As he strode toward the dance floor, light from the cascading candleplants glinted off his tightly bound black hair.

Aleta stood, stunned. Darcavon had seen that she was fighting the drug the family used to enslave her, yet he hadn't called the guards.

It made no sense. The Darcavon she had always so carefully avoided was a perfect creature of the Family Dagarro, as ruthless as Trituros Dagarro himself, advancing in the household ranks with the cold inexorability of a glacier, intent—so rumor had it—on becoming seneschal.

Her hands shook. He must be setting her up for some later, unguessable purpose of his own.

Pulling the glove securely over her hand and wrist, Aleta peeked around the end of the sarcophagus. The closest guard was looking in her direction. Linked to the family's security net, the guard knew that Trituros wanted her and that she should leave the ballroom and head toward the patriarch's office.

She cursed silently to herself and stepped out from behind the sarcophagus. The mouths of the vases buried beneath the clear floor gaped up at her in silent warning. She must be careful—very very careful—or Trituros would know that the drug was wearing off.

#

The man who would be seneschal turned and watched Aleta walk toward the arched doorway. Had she seen him change shape? After long years of planning and preparation, had he ruined everything because he had needed a few brief moments to be himself?

He noticed the slight hesitation in the empath's step as she neared the door guard, and he noted the squaring of her shoulders as she continued past.

The pad of his finger tingled where it had almost caressed her flesh. She had skin as white and cool as purest marble, and eyes as green as ancient jade, lit from within by a fire he'd not seen before in her glance. The family and its drug were banking that fire, enslaving her to their own ends.

But he had ends of his own.

And he would be seneschal, no matter the cost.

#

In the cavernous office, center of the Dagarro Family's power, Aleta stood behind Sol Trituros Dagarro, who floated in his hoverchair. Her ungloved hands rested lightly on the old man's head, and her heart hammered in her chest.

The room was dark, lit only by fluorescent butterflies in crystal spheres that cast a fluttering glow across the patriarch's carved wooden desk. Ancient books lining the walls faded into the shadows; coated with a clear sealant, each volume was fused to the others

in a solid mass that rendered them unreadable.

The only sound was Trituros's ragged breathing.

The patriarch's pain coursed through Aleta's fingers and lodged in her skull as she used empathic healing to nourish his failing nervous system. She must conceal how strongly she felt his pain, lest he realize that she wasn't properly dosed.

"Ah, child," Trituros sighed, "you work magic."

He looked like anyone's grandfather, sitting there, his skin lined and spotted with age, his eyes careworn, his hair white and thin.

He had killed thousands. Maimed millions. Poisoned the lives of countless billions.

Despite Aleta's best efforts, her fingers trembled.

The patriarch's eyes flew open, and his wrinkled hand clapped down atop her own. She knew what he would do before he did it, and she tried to prepare herself for the concentrated stream of poisonous emotion he sent to test her receptivity: all the vile things he'd ever said and done as head of the galaxy's most corrupt of the Ten Families, boiled down into the essence of evil and *felt* at her.

Aleta couldn't help it. She screamed.

"Child." He rotated in his floating chair, looking much healthier than he had when she entered the room.

She pulled away, but he caught her wrist and lifted her sleeve. He shook his head at the fading blue web of blood vessels beneath her skin. "I've been neglecting you."

Aleta bit back a curse. Only a while longer, and she might have escaped, might have been free.

"You are invaluable to me, child." His rheumy eyes locked upon her own. "I shouldn't have let the Chan girl's wedding distract me from your proper care."

Trituros reached toward his desk. A compartment slid open, from which he removed a slim hypo-knife and a jar. The jar's seal popped at a touch of his finger. He inserted the hypo and extracted a small, opalescent object: her savior, her damnation, the drug known as sand or, in this more concentrated form, pearl.

His smile was gentle. "Your reward for faithful service."

Aleta stiffened as he held the hypo to her wrist. The knife stung as it sliced her skin, deposited the pearl into the web of blood vessels, and sealed the breach. She knew the drug was already flooding her veins and arteries, artificially enlarging her capillaries so that they became visible to the eye, dragging her down beneath its sticky strands. It would steal her will. It would dull her wits.

Trituros patted her hand and turned, his jaw twitching once to activate his comm implant. “Send in Chan.”

The door slid open, and the lights came up as more butterflies poured into the crystal globes. Joanna’s father, the Dagarro seneschal, entered the room.

“Sit, old friend,” Trituros said, waving a hand toward a chair placed before his massive desk. “A momentous day, this. A fine day for your daughter to wed.”

Pierson Chan smiled. “Indeed, Sol Dagarro, a fine day.”

As Chan settled himself in the chair, Trituros motioned to Aleta. “Get us a drink, child.”

Her wrist tingled as she crossed the room and tapped the spine of one of the thousands of old books. A bar unfolded from the ceiling, and she removed two goblets and a decanter. By the time she was done pouring the wine, her arm was prickling and her chest was warm. She fought the drug, but it fought back: the rim of the goblets sang softly, and the thick red wine seemed to flow in slow motion, its sweet heavy aroma swirling up to envelop her.

She took careful steps now: set her heel down, then pushed off from the toe, right foot, left foot. She placed the first goblet within Trituros’s reach on the desk and handed the second to Pierson Chan, who smiled kindly at her. She froze, blinded by his smile.

As the drug swamped her senses, the room seemed to fold in upon her. She lost the thread of the men’s conversation. Butterfly colors screamed; air slammed at her ears. Aleta fought the hallucinations, trying to cling to reality, but reality was so full of cruel memories . . . years of struggle, of poverty, of being alone.

The drug defeated her. With a mother’s warmth and a father’s love, it buried her unhappy past beneath a syrupy coating of euphoria. Aleta sighed, let caramel colors carry

her away, and entered the dream.

#

After some uncountable period of time, Aleta's system acclimated to the drug's initial rush, and Trituros's voice penetrated the syrupy fog.

"Child."

She stirred.

"Good. There you are." Trituros shifted in his hover chair and pushed his empty goblet across the desktop. "Bring us more wine."

Aleta did as she was bid. She took delight in the pull of her muscles as she crossed the floor. She smiled at the simple pleasure of standing in place when she was done. She awaited Trituros's order to withdraw so that the patriarch and his seneschal could talk serious business. She was content.

In her mind, something fluttered, its wings beating—once, twice—then went still. She thought, mildly: Had there been something bothering her? No, surely not.

Trituros's bass voice rumbled pleasantly in her ears. "Pierson, old friend. You have betrayed me."

Insect shadows flickered across the desktop, the rug, the chair in which Chan sat. Aleta smiled at the pretty patterns.

Pierson Chan's arm jerked, and wine flecked the front of his shirt. He lowered the goblet and set it aside. "Trituros, I—"

"You, of all people. Old friend."

Aleta watched, mesmerized, as Pierson gripped the chair's armrests, his knuckles like chiseled stone.

"Child."

Aleta swung her gaze slowly, focusing on Trituros's face. He motioned toward Pierson Chan.

She looked from Trituros to Joanna's father and back again. Trituros repeated the familiar motion.

Pierson swallowed.

Mechanically, Aleta stepped forward and wrapped her fingers around the back of the seneschal's wrist. This was not routine, Aleta thought vaguely, not the sort of thing Trituros did to Pierson Chan.

But she knew her task. Sharpening her attention to a pinpoint, she read Pierson's emotions. They fluttered beneath her fingertips: anger, resentment, apprehension. Trapped butterflies.

Two guards stepped into the room, followed by Darcavon.

Pierson's apprehension grew.

Trituros watched Aleta's face as he continued. "Old friend, you made a deal with the Trefanu. You sold them Dagarro secrets. And in exchange, they allowed Joanna to marry their third-born son."

Aleta felt Pierson's fear, sharp and tearing. Despite the pain, she smiled. She knew this emotion, had felt it many times in the people Trituros had her read. Fear was familiar, predictable—welcome.

"And now," Trituros shook his head, "you must die."

Pierson's sudden spike of mortal terror was too much, too close. It hurt. Oh, it hurt. Aleta's body hunched, but she laughed in joy because this terror, too, was familiar. She knew it like she knew the drug's embrace.

Trituros smiled. "No one betrays me." He stared hard at Aleta. "Especially those I hold dear."

Across the room, his back to the wall of imprisoned books, Darcavon folded his arms.

Trituros returned his attention to Pierson. The seneschal's wrist shook beneath Aleta's fingers.

"You did not sell our most important secret. There is some loyalty in that." Trituros's gaze softened, and his lips worked for a moment, as if he were chewing something. "I will be merciful."

Aleta felt hope coalesce in Pierson, like drops of fine wine in a nearly empty decanter.

“I will see to your daughter. I shall take care of her . . . as my own.”

Hope evaporated. Pierson drew a ragged breath, and Aleta drew one just as ragged.

“Trituros,” he said, “I beg of you—”

“It is too late.” Trituros waved a hand. “You should have come to me when you were first troubled by temptation. Now, it is far too late.” He stared once more at Aleta.

“Guards, take Mr. Chan for a walk outside.”

At this sentence of death, all the things Joanna’s father had tried not to show Trituros flashed through Aleta’s flesh and across her own face: terror, hatred, denial, despair. She staggered, a butterfly with torn wings.

Trituros’s smile broadened, and he sipped his wine. “A fine year, this vintage,” he murmured.

As the guards led Pierson Chan out of the room to die on the airless surface of the family’s moon, Aleta swayed and collapsed to the floor, sitting in a graceless heap.

Darcavon took a step forward. The whisper of his black silk garments scraped at her ravaged emotions.

The light in the room seemed to recede, then rush forward frantically, drowning sound and sensation. Aleta sank her fingers into the rug, holding on.

Into the roaring silence, Trituros raised his glass and proclaimed, “A toast to the bride and groom.”

Aleta drew a ragged breath. Another. The air was thick.

Darcavon strode to the desk, snapped a clipdisk onto the wooden surface, and placed one hand, spider-fashion, atop the disk. “So,” he said.

“So,” Trituros agreed. “Your information was correct.” He studied the other man. “Now you wait to see if I will reward you with Pierson’s position. You watch me, knowing that I know your kind. Ambitious. Useful. Dangerous.” He set the goblet on his desk and lifted a finger. “You think, perhaps I will kill you, so that one day you do not serve me as you served Pierson.”

Impassive, Darcavon waited.

Trituros hovered out from behind his desk and drove his chair in a circle around the

other man. Darcavon neither made way for the patriarch nor turned as Trituros passed behind his back. Aleta huddled in her skirts, crawling into dream.

“How shall we repay the Trefanu’s slight upon our family’s honor?” Trituros asked abruptly. “I say we kill their son, Joanna’s groom.”

Darcavon’s lip curled. “You are testing me.”

Trituros paused beside the desk, hovering upward so that their eyes were on the same level.

Darcavon planted his other hand on the desk and leaned toward Trituros. “I say we don’t kill him. We addict him. That will destroy the marriage eventually, at which point, Chan’s daughter will return of her own volition. The Trefanu will know who has ruined their son, but they will have no recourse. Instead of a quick death and clean grief, their agony will be ongoing as the galaxy ridicules their son’s weakness. He will serve as a constant reminder to the lesser families—that it is folly for any of the Thousand to plot against the Ten. And if the Trefanu do manage to free him from the drug, then we arrange for his death.”

Eyes locked, the two were still for a moment before Trituros smiled. Darcavon nodded and took his hands from the desk.

“Well done,” Trituros said. “A drink for my new seneschal, child.”

Trituros’s command brought Aleta back from the haze she had pulled protectively around her. Her limbs lifted her from the floor and carried her once again to the bar, where she poured wine into yet another goblet.

It was beyond her, however, to carry the drink to that dark man who stood waiting by Trituros’s desk. But there was no need: in two long strides, Darcavon crossed the plush white rug and took hold of the slender goblet.

She looked up at him. His fingers and her own lay side by side on the glass, almost touching. The heat of him flowed over her skin.

She let go of the goblet and stepped back.

Something unreadable moved in his dark eyes.

“One more test,” Trituros said, and motioned Aleta to take Darcavon’s wrist.

Aleta's hand rose, then hesitated. Drug-induced obedience struggled with her instinct not to read this man.

Darcavon lifted an eyebrow. He cocked his head to one side, seeming to study her hesitation. A moment passed, stretched thin between them.

Smiling the barest ghost of a smile, Darcavon thrust his wrist beneath her fingers.

Aleta cried out. His emotions were a vast, deep, dangerous ocean, layer on layer of cold currents descending in a churning morass. She swam frantically on their surface, pulled this way and that, fearing to drown.

Then a sudden clarity, despite the pearly fog of the drug: out of the depths, a disturbing rapport—a salty chill that called her, blood to blood. She craved that connection like she craved pearl.

“Child. Tell me.”

Aleta jerked at Trituros's sharp command and read the surface of Darcavon's mind.

“Confidence,” she mumbled.

“Louder,” Trituros said. “These old ears.”

“Confidence,” she repeated, her voice flat. “Determination. Ruthless calculation, competence, and self-control.” She paused. “Desire.” A hunger that shivered along her skin.

She felt Darcavon's wrist twitch beneath her fingers and looked up into eyes as cold and penetrating as his emotions.

As a riptide would suck her body from the shore, so that glance sucked the drug from her mind, revealing danger, danger all around. She must cling to that clarity.

Trituros tapped a finger on the desk, considering, then nodded to himself. “Desire is good. Through desire, he can be controlled.” He hovered to the ground and pointed to the floor in front of him.

Swift as nightfall on the sea, Darcavon swept away from Aleta and knelt on the white rug at Trituros's feet, his black cape settling like a liquid stain around his legs as he placed his steeped hands between Trituros's own.

Aleta sucked in a breath. The sudden loss of contact with Darcavon struck like drug

withdrawal. Danger: he was as dangerous as the drug. She must fight the pull of both the drug and the man.

#

The new seneschal bowed his head. “My loyalty is yours, Sol Dagarro. And my life.” The lie fell easily from his lips, as so many lies had done in the past.

Trituros activated rings on each of his middle fingers and speared the seneschal’s hands with two metal filaments. He did not even flinch.

“I take your loyalty, Darcavon.” The metal filaments retracted. “For now, you may keep your life.”

#

Aleta stared at the spots of Darcavon’s blood marring the white rug. Remember, remember: that blood could be her own.

“Leave us, child.”

She took a shaky breath and turned away.

“Child.”

Aleta jerked backwards, as if filaments pierced her own flesh.

“Remember,” Trituros said, “I will take care of you. Always. As I take care of all my old friends.”

Released by a wave of his hand, she stumbled from the room, knowing those words for the threat they were. All that he had done in her presence today was no sign of trust, but a way to drag her further into complicity.

She must escape, or die.

Chapter Two

“I’m supposed to wait for Sol Dagarro in the docking bay.” Aleta concentrated on keeping her voice steady. She couldn’t tell if it sounded normal or not. She could barely stand. The service corridor kept leaping about.

The uniformed guard who blocked her access to the docking bay shook his head. “There’s nothing in my orders about that.”

“Won’t you ch-check? Maybe it’s a recent update.”

Shrugging, the guard activated the readout built into his headgear. He studied the display as it scrolled down the surface of the contact lens in his left eye. “I don’t see anything.”

Aleta clenched her teeth to keep them from chattering. After she had left Trituros’s office, she has gone straight to her quarters, changed out of her gown, and dug the pearl out of her wrist. Now the wound ached, and her body was once again suffering the first symptoms of withdrawal. But at least her head was clear. Stealthily, she snuck her gloved right hand into the pocket of her blue overtunic and withdrew a small, drug-filled hypo, concealing it in her palm.

“I don’t understand.” She took a step forward. “Sol Dagarro said—” She pretended to stumble and threw her arm out toward the guard, as if searching for support.

She was too slow. The guard had plenty of time to strike her hand away. The hypo clattered to the floor, releasing the pearl, as he backed up and drew his gun.

“Don’t move,” he said. His gun’s red tracer beam targeted her chest.

#

The computer alerted Riven when Aleta dug the pearl out of her wrist and headed for the docking bay. He cursed, then thanked his maker that he'd set up a special program to monitor her actions.

If Trituros found out what she was up to, she would be punished. Severely.

He would have to prevent that.

Riven pulled off his dark silk cloak and headed for the door. The air shimmered around him. By the time he stepped through the doorway, he was someone . . . Other.

#

Without taking his eyes off Aleta, the guard activated the communications implant in his jaw. Time dilated as Aleta waited for the house alarm to sound. She had centuries to study the individual hairs on the back of the hand that was pointing the gun at her chest.

But the alarm didn't sound.

Wrinkling his brow, the guard stepped to a panel set in the wall and tapped the touch-sensitive pad with his free hand.

Still no alarm.

He glared suspiciously at Aleta, his forefinger tightening on the gun's trigger. She tried to swallow, but her throat was too dry.

A winged bat flew out of nowhere and stung him.

Aleta squinted at the dark object stuck beneath his jaw as he slumped to the floor. No, she decided, it was too small for a bat.

Someone short and wild-haired came running down the corridor. "Let's go," the newcomer ordered, gesturing at Aleta with a hand that held an old-fashioned tranquilizer gun. A sleek console glove enclosed his other hand, and his fingers flexed as he interfaced with a distant computer. A float box followed along behind.

Aleta flinched.

The man stepped past her. "You get the pearl, then open the door," he said as he stripped the uniform off the unconscious guard.

Aleta stared at him. "What?"

“I’m helping you,” he said. Grunting, he hauled the guard off the floor by his armpits and stuffed him into the float box.

You’re helping me, Aleta thought, feeling giddy. But who the Dark are you? Fear overwhelmed her, then rage. Be careful, she thought. Shocky withdrawal was playing havoc with her responses, swinging her from one emotion to the next. She must be careful.

He’d told her to get the pearl and open the door. Good enough: that matched her plan. While the stranger donned the guard’s uniform and tied back his wild head of hair, she gathered the hypo and the drug. She felt as if someone were chiseling ore out of her cranium. But never mind that. Steadying her shaking nerves, she managed to return the pearl to the injector. Then she stabbed her finger at the door control on the wall panel. Whatever the newcomer was up to, she was getting out of here. If he tried anything, she would drug him.

The door didn’t open.

She glared suspiciously at the man. He was working his console glove, his covered fingers dancing busily in the air.

“Did you—” she began. But it was too hard to continue. She stabbed at the door control again. This time, the door opened.

“It’s a craft-up job,” the man with the conglove muttered, “but it’ll fool the security cams.”

Aleta ignored him and stepped through the oversized doors that led to the docking bay. The man stepped through at her heels, followed by the float box.

She glanced around. Workers were clustered at the south end of the immense bay, fussing over Trituros’s personal weftship. Wedding guests were beginning to depart at the west end of the bay, their bustle of activity drawing a good deal of attention. That left the north end, where the family’s smaller speeders were serviced, empty of personnel except for a patrolling guard. The guard looked up as the doors opened, his face a blur at this distance. Aleta’s mysterious rescuer waved at him before taking the sleeve of her tunic and steering her briskly toward the south.

“Leave me alone,” she said, pulling away.

He scooped her arm into his and tugged. “Sorry. But I’m helping you.”

“You said that already.”

He shrugged. “I’m not much of a conversationalist.”

“And you’re going the wrong way.” Aleta planned to stow away on one of the guests’ ships at the west end of the bay.

“Just for a moment. To fool the guard.”

Aleta studied his face. Her whole body shook.

“It’s not a good idea to just stand here like this,” he pointed out.

She stepped behind a storage container, and he followed her. The float box with the unconscious guard inside bobbed along behind them.

“Go back to wherever you came from,” she hissed. “I’m leaving.”

“Me, too.” He gestured at the blood-stained wrist of her glove. “I’m not a big fan of the family. They’ve hurt you.”

“I don’t have time for this.”

“That’s the truth.” He consulted his conglove. “We can take speeder J14. Come on, let’s go.”

Steal a speeder, instead of stow away? It could be a trap. But if it worked, she could go where she wanted and wouldn’t have to fear discovery.

Her head pounded. She decided to take the chance. “All right.”

His smile lit up his face, and his plain brown eyes sparkled. “Good.”

They headed north at a rapid pace. The guard she’d seen when they entered the bay was nowhere in sight.

Fifty meters later, they ducked behind the closest speeder as the guard’s boots sounded on the metal deck. They waited as he passed them by, then made a dash toward the shadow of a second speeder. Strange, Aleta thought: her would-be-helper was also wearing boots, but his footsteps were as silent as her slippered feet. She didn’t have time to ponder the mystery. It was hard enough to run as they darted from cover to cover. She lurched along unsteadily, feeling worse with every step. When she stumbled and almost

fell, the small man landed the float box, pushed her on top, adjusted the controls, launched it again, and raced the final hundred meters to the mouth of an airlock in a zig-zagging path that made Aleta's head pound.

I'm going to throw up, Aleta thought. Or faint. Or hit him.

Glancing at her, the man flashed an apologetic half-smile. "Not much farther. Hang on."

She shifted her grip on the box and gritted her teeth.

He used his conglove to open the airlock. They stepped inside the lock, waited for it to cycle, then exited into the tube that lay beyond. It was dark inside the tube, and he left it that way as they moved toward a second airlock, which they entered and cycled in turn. Once through that lock, they were aboard a speeder docked on the moon's surface.

The man landed the float and helped Aleta into a flight chair in front of the ship's controls. He wrestled the guard out of the box and plunked him into a second chair. "The pearl," he said, holding out his ungloved hand.

Aleta stared at his hand for a moment, feeling particularly dull-witted, before fumbling at the pocket of her overtunic and giving him the drug and the hypo.

He crushed the pearl with the hypo's handle, reloaded a small portion of it, and injected the guard. "If you'd managed to use this on him, you would've killed him," he remarked. "You've got a really high tolerance. Even this dose will fry his brain."

Her hands shook: she hadn't considered that the dose might kill. Stupid, stupid.

The man looked at her. "You were desperate," he said softly. "And your wetware's gone jaggie." He jostled the waking guard. Dropping his voice an octave and giving it a lazy lilt, he asked, "How you feeling, buddy?"

"S'all kinda . . . wunnerful," the guard replied, his head rolling and eyes watering.

"Yeh, it is, isn't it?" The fingers of the man's conglove moved as he talked. "Listen, friend, you remember me. My name's Mikuan, I do maintenance on the shuttles."

"Mikuan. Sure. Big guy, lil' m'stache."

Aleta blinked. Her rescuer was clean-shaven and anything but big.

"That's me." He clapped the guard on the shoulder with his free hand and kept right

on doing whatever he was doing with his conglove. “Me and Stuart here, we gotta take that speeder out again, you remember, the one that gave us so much trouble last time.”

One of the guard’s eyes slid closed, and his lips pursed. “Las’ time?”

“You remember.”

“Oh, yeh. Tha’s right. Lodda trouble.”

“Right.” The man slid into the pilot’s seat and punched at the flight controls with his free hand. He frowned, uttered a soft expletive, and for a few moments his conglove worked feverishly.

Aleta shifted in her seat. Her brain was finally catching up. This was all too fast, too much, too—

“That’s it,” her rescuer said. He nodded to the guard. “You got a job to do, buddy. You gotta report to docking control, tell them that me and Stuart are taking the speeder for another check-out flight.”

“Mikuan and Stuart takin’ the blonkin’ speeder for another check-out flight.”

“Right.”

The guard sang the words happily to himself several times as the speeder powered up. “Sssh, now, buddy, hold it,” the man with the glove said and activated the voice-only communications relay. “Docking control,” he said, “this is Mikuan in speeder J14, requesting clearance for launch.”

“Mikuan, this is Docking Control.” The comm made a soft popping sound. “That’s a negative. There’s no launch scheduled.”

“The Void there isn’t, Control. You think I’d waste my time here if there weren’t?”

“There wasn’t any launch on the schedule when I came on duty half an hour ago, Mikuan. Power down.”

“It’s on the door guard’s schedule, Control. He’ll confirm it. I’ll wait while you check with him.”

There was a click of static, then, “Harvey, this is Control. Mikuan says he’s got a check-out flight scheduled. Can you confirm that?”

Continuing to work his conglove with one hand, Aleta's rescuer used his other to nudge the guard, who barked cheerfully, "I confirm tha'. Mikuan and Stuart takin' the blonkin' speeder for another check-out."

"Strange. Thanks, Harvey."

"Nooo problem." The guard smiled beatifically to himself as there was another click of static and Docking Control came back on-line with the speeder.

"Mikuan, this is Docking Control. Harvey confirms. But if you aren't on my schedule, I can't—"

A light on the man's conglove blinked green.

"Do me a favor, Dock. Check the schedule again, will you?"

"If it were anyone but you, Mik . . . what the? I'll be deep-spaced, but it's right here. How'd I miss it?"

The mystery man raised his conglove in a silent gesture of victory. "Dunno, Dock. You been imbibing a bit to celebrate the wedding?"

The man at docking control growled. "Real funny, Mik. Ha ha. Now get out of here; you're cleared to depart."

"Roger, Control. Speeder J14, out."

The speeder hummed as its engine engaged. Aleta sank back into the flight chair as the ship accelerated, her body aching.

"One more kluge and patch, and that's it," the small man said in his original voice as he watched the sensor display. "They're scanning." His conglove twitched, he nodded curtly, then turned to the flight controls.

"You can relax now," he said to Aleta.

Hardly that, she thought, as her muscles spasmed. "We're free?"

"For the moment. A check-out flight takes two hours to run. Control won't fret for two and a half, since Mikuan's slow. I altered the relevant security cam records so that they show a replay of Harvey's interaction with the maintenance team last check-out, and I patched another replay into the scan they just took of the ship. Their scan'll show two life-forms aboard, Mikuan and Stuart.

“After two and a half hours, though, they’ll wonder if there’s trouble. They’ll run a search that will pick up the ship’s signature trace. Nothing I can do about that. While they’re running the search, security will examine the records, find the sloppy craft job I did, and know something’s up. When they scan the moon for genetic patterns, they’ll know that you and the guard are missing. Three hours from now, at the latest.”

Aleta’s ears rang. She struggled with his torrent of words and settled finally on what he hadn’t said: the way he worked that conclave meant he had to be the reclusive hacker who lived at the core of the Dagarro moon and was in charge of computer security.

“You’re Merlin,” she said.

“That’s me.” He plied the controls, and the view on the screen shifted.

Her tongue felt thick. “So. Why help me?”

The guard began to snore.

Merlin smiled. He had a nice smile. Everything else about his appearance was quite forgettable, a bit on the ugly side even, but nothing remarkable. He and his drab clothing were just unattractive enough to make people ignore him.

“Because I like you,” he said.

Aleta snorted.

“Don’t worry. They won’t know I’m gone. I’ve got holograms and programs parsecs deep to simulate my presence. The hack jobs on the records will look too crude to be my work. Later I’ll frame Harvey by ‘finding’ false data in the Net that shows he’s a Galgov agent. And I’ll make sure Harvey disappears so they can’t hurt him.”

Aleta crossed her trembling arms tightly across her chest and concentrated on breathing. She hurt. All over.

His smile faded. “You’re in pain. Let me—”

“No. What’s the real reason you’re helping me?”

“I told you why. I like you. Besides, you were botching the job.”

She shuddered and bent double, clutching her stomach.

He jumped to his feet. “Let me take care of your wrist and give you something to ease the withdrawal.”

“No! No more drugs.”

“All right, but you’re going to crash spectacularly—”

Those were the last words she heard for quite some time.

#

Riven kept silent watch as Aleta slept. He admired her courage. She was as intriguing as really tight, really complex computer code. He’d love to unravel her.

Plus, she smelled . . . delicious.

She was distracting him. He couldn’t afford that.

He had to file his report.

He flipped a tiny clipdisk out of his conglove and slid the disk into a game unit he’d taken from one of the speeder’s storage compartments. The virulent purple logo for *Viral Sky III: Prisoner of RenZan* flared into holographic splendor in the air.

He grinned: Game of the Month had scored another coup—the very latest in gaming action, sent to select clientele via uncopyable clipdisk that had to be returned to Game of the Month before the next disk would be sent. A dedicated player could spend days working through *Viral Sky III*’s fifty blistering levels. It had taken him only five hours. But, then, besting a computer game wasn’t the real challenge here.

His smile faded as he popped the clipdisk out, ran his bare finger along the edge, and reinserted the disk.

No game logo this time—just blank space, ready for his report. The disk had read his DNA and was prepared to encode his message. When he was done, a second pass of his finger would hide the report beneath a reinstated logo.

“Objective three achieved,” he said. “Phase four initiated.” He glanced at Aleta. A damp tendril of raven hair curled across her cheek.

He ignored his strange reluctance to mention her in the report. “An unanticipated development: the family’s empathic healer has fled. I am tracking her progress.” Her absence might kill Trituros. If so, no loss: Trituros was an obstacle. His son, Voygaros, was more malleable. “Achievement of objective four, through either primary or secondary means, on schedule.”

#

“Sorry about this, but you’ve got to stand.”

Aleta pushed the voice away and clung to sleep, but pain forced her to wake. Panting heavily, she bit back a scream.

She was no longer in the ship’s chair and no longer in the speeder. Merlin was pulling her off the float box. His hands burned through her overtunic, and the deck pushed needles into her feet as he set her down just outside an airlock at the end of a docking tube.

“You can ride again later, but you’ve got to be conscious when we go through customs. You think you can do that?”

“I . . .” The deck tilted, and she clutched Merlin’s arm. She could feel spiders crawling all over her skin.

“Aleta?”

Clenching her teeth and tightening her grasp around his sleeve, she took a step. She could talk or walk—one or the other, but not both.

He seemed to understand. The airlock opened, and he led her out into madness. Light flared, stripping her eyes of moisture. Sound beat against her ears, and body parts seemed to rush past on all sides as a group of travelers exited a nearby transport and joined the stream of people heading along a brightly colored docking ring. Everyone bustled toward a series of blue archways.

She concentrated on walking. As Aleta, Merlin, and the float box passed beneath one of the arches, sensors blinked, registering data. A chime sounded, and a red light winked on, summoning the attention of someone at the other end of a link. A barrier slid across their path.

“Gentlepersons,” a soothing voice said as the comm screen flickered to life. “Port World Securascans have detected that one of your party is in significant distress. May we render assistance?”

“Thanks,” Merlin said, “but she’ll be fine.”

“Our data would seem to contradict that analysis. The woman in your party appears

to be suffering from severe withdrawal of a drug interdicted on half the known worlds.”

“Pearl’s not illegal on Port World.” Merlin’s voice grated in Aleta’s ears. “You’re famous for your tolerant attitudes. Toward many things.”

The man on the other end of the comm cleared his throat. “That is true. However, coercion by means of drug addiction is illegal on Port World. We must ascertain that the woman is not being forced against her will.”

“The only one forcing me against my will,” Aleta rasped, “is you. Let us pass.”

Sensors flickered.

“The level of pearl in your system—”

“Is almost nil,” she spat. “Which should indicate to you that I’m not being drugged, I’m being detoxed. So let me through or I’ll sue you for needless pain and suffering!”

The threat of legal action did the trick. The screen cleared, and the barrier slid away. “Very well. Welcome to Port World.”

They exited the arch and moved down a ramp that led them to a walkway that carried them to a promenade that wound through this section of the vast asteroid. The air smelled of pepper, and voices reverberated as shopkeepers hawked their wares and shoppers bargained for the best deal in a bewildering babble of tongues. The shopkeepers’ stalls varied wildly: a stall brightly painted and sparkling with colored lights sat next to one swathed in dark velvet curtains, which was flanked by another bristling with faux-bamboo protrusions, and yet another with pink bubbly crenellations, and so on, into the distance. Their wares were equally exotic and varied—tender, unidentifiable fruits; glossy tech playthings; antique curios of dubious provenance; and all manner of goods in between.

A trio of girls dressed in green ribbons raced giggling in their direction. Aleta flinched as one of the three flung an arm out to point enthusiastically at a display of small purses emblazoned with an image of a teen idol. “Faz!” the girl cried. “It’s Faz!” And the trio descended on the display.

Aleta’s ears rang, and her eyes ached. “Why here?” she managed to ask as Merlin

helped her sit on top of the float box.

“It’s close and a good place to shake pursuit. I’ve got friends here who’ll help us.”

The float box swayed. She swallowed, closed her eyes, then opened them again to study his back as he led the way through the crowd: not the broad shoulders of your standard knight in shining armor. Just a shrimp in a conglove.

She winced. Was she that ungrateful and judgmental, or was it withdrawal talking? She’d spent four years drugged, four years without a will of her own. Who had she been four years ago, at age sixteen? Who was she now? She wasn’t sure.

She could feel her self—her will, her awareness—coming back from the place that the Dagarro Family’s drugs had sent it so long ago. She hoped she would like herself when she finally returned.

It made no sense that this man was helping her. But for the moment, she would let him. She had no choice, really.

It was all she could do not to fall off the box.

#

He caught her when she fell.

She was a light weight in his hands, even in these hands.

He brought her to a safe house, arranged for her care, and sat by her bedside, gripping her gloved fingers as she burned. When duty called, he had to tear himself away.

He returned to her side as soon as possible. She was raving, drenched in sweat. Fear closed his throat as he scooped up a damp cloth and laid it across her brow. Claris, her caretaker, just shook her head when he asked, in a strangled whisper, how Aleta was doing.

She might not live through this. He knew that.

He sat in the chair, steeled himself to watch, and throughout the coming days did what he could to help her survive.

#

When Aleta awoke, she couldn’t remember having gone to sleep. The lights were blessedly dim, and she was lying on something soft. She had absolutely no desire to ever

move again.

“How do you feel?”

She turned her head as carefully as if she were handling nitroblast and focused on Merlin. He was sitting in a chair by the side of her bed. “Much better.”

He smiled and leaned forward to lift a cloth from her forehead. “You look it.” After dropping the cloth on the floor, he broke another out of a sealed pack and laid it across her brow. The scent of lemons tickled her nose, and her skin tingled pleasantly. “For a while there,” he said, “I wasn’t sure you’d make it.”

A ring of teeth marks marred the edge of his hand. Bits of fever memory fluttered through her mind, and she blushed. “I bit you.”

“Yep,” he said, seeming immensely pleased. “My lady’s mark of honor.”

Aleta wasn’t sure she liked the sound of that.

He displayed his hand. “Fine depth to the bite. You’ve got strong teeth. Just like the rest of you.”

Maybe he’s crazy, Aleta thought, but said, “I’m sorry.”

“Not your fault.” He grinned and sat back, draping his arms comfortably over the sides of the chair. He wasn’t wearing his conglove.

“How long have I been out?” she asked.

“Four days.”

She glanced around, unwilling to meet his eyes. Four days of maddened, puking, delirious mess. And he’d seen it all. And cared for her. “You . . . thank you.”

His cheeks pinked. “It wasn’t just me. Claris helped. She was here with you while I went back to the Dagarro.”

Aleta’s eyes narrowed. “You went back?”

He gave her a long, level look. “You didn’t exactly give me time to plan in advance. There were a few things I had to take care of. In fact, I’ll have to go back again soon.”

Her hands shifted under the covers. Realizing that her wrist no longer hurt, she lifted her arm and discovered a smooth patch of plastiskin sealing the wound.

Her gloves were missing.

Merlin must have noticed her panic. He shook his head slightly and reached beneath his chair. Without making contact with her skin, he dropped the gloves into her outstretched palm.

She tugged the gloves on over her fingers. “Claris. One of the friends you mentioned.”

Merlin nodded.

“These friends. Do they have ties to the Dagarro?”

His plain brown eyes measured her, seeming to assess her hidden thoughts. “No.”

She measured him in turn. “So how does the Dagarro computer wizard come to have non-Dagarro friends?”

“I don’t suppose you could just trust me for a while?”

A moment of silence passed.

Sighing, he sat up straighter in the chair. “No, I suppose not.” His cheeks flamed bright red, a coloring that did nothing to enhance his appearance. “Look,” he said, lacing his fingers together and examining the result before meeting her eyes, “I know all about you. I spy on you all the time.”

“You spy—”

“I knew that’d make you mad.”

“All *the time*.”

He scrubbed at the air, his face turning an even brighter shade of red. “No, not when you’re, you know, naked and in the bathroom and stuff.”

Aleta blinked.

“It let me help when you were in trouble, so there’s some good in it, right?” His Adam’s apple bobbed in his skinny throat, and he dropped his gaze. “You’re smart. Your plan to escape was dumb, but you were drugged. Even so, you managed to do what not one in a billion could do. You shook the drug off long enough to cut the pearl out, and then you kept it together with the guard, and when I showed up, you didn’t freak, and you said just the right thing at customs, and—”

“Stop.” Aleta rubbed her forehead, pushing the damp cloth aside. “You don’t know

me.”

“I’ve read your files.”

She gave him a bemused look.

“I know you’re from Gypsum, that your mom died young, and your dad died a sand addict after slaving his life away in the mines and losing his savings on the stock market, where your brother still works. I know you discovered your talent when you were six and healed your father, who’d sliced his leg open while he was on a bender. You spent the next ten years healing people enslaved by the Dagarro exploitation of Gypsum’s resources, until finally the Dagarro Family noticed you and took you for themselves.”

Aleta clutched the covers.

“I’ve never heard you laugh for real,” he continued. “You hardly ever smile. I think you never had a chance to be a child. You were always taking care of others.”

He paused for a moment and tilted his head. “I want to take care of you.”

She stared, no longer seeing him. Instead, she was lost in the dark heart of the mines of Gypsum, feeling the black misery and deep depression of adults whose emotions she’d had to tap in order to heal them. She knew intimately the unrelenting psychic and physical wounds caused by life on a planet whose economic system had been devised for one purpose only: the benefit of the Dagarro Family. She had watched her father crumble under the pressure, feeling him slip away as addiction to sand took him farther and farther from her, until the overdose claimed him, and she arrived too late to bring him back. Too late, because she had stolen a moment for herself and stopped to talk to a handsome solaratti who wooed her with sweet words: Trituros’s son, Voygaros, who was strong, straight-backed, and dressed in fine clothes no commoner could afford.

She blamed herself for her father’s death. It had been a relief when the family took her away and gave her the drug. They used small doses at first—small doses that mercifully numbed the pain she always felt when healing others. Then it had enslaved her.

Their wealth and their protection had been as much a drug as sand. They had taken care of her. No more mine-dark days. No more pain-deep insights into others’ emotions.

No more struggle to survive. Only Trituros to heal. And when she had, at last, come to see the true depth and breadth of the family's evil, there had been pearl to numb the painful guilt of complicity. And there had been the excuse that they had addicted her.

"I'll take care of myself," she said to Merlin, thinking, as she had thought so many times over the years: why, oh why, didn't her talent include the ability to heal herself?

"You need me," Merlin insisted. "The Dagarro pursuit ships were faster than our speeder, only half an hour behind us when we got here. My friends flew the speeder off, took it into weft as a decoy. They took Harvey, too, and they'll make sure he'll be okay but never talk." His bare fingers flexed as if he wore his conglove and were trying to program her responses to him as he programmed his computers. "I'll help you disappear. I'll take you someplace the Dagarro will never find you."

She laughed, a bitter sound. "Is there such a place?"

He leaned forward. "I promise there is."

"You still haven't explained why you have non-Dagarro friends."

He sat back and shrugged. "I work for the Dagarro. But I don't approve of their drugs or the way they exploit commoners." His plain brown eyes locked onto her own. "I'm going to take the family down someday."

"And for that, you need friends."

He said nothing, just watched her.

Slowly, Aleta peeled off one glove. She held out her hand, and he looked at it quizzically. She beckoned with her index finger, but he sat still as stone.

"You've read my file," she said. "You know that pearl deadens my ability to sense, just as it deadens the pain. You know that I have to make a determined effort to read someone when I'm drugged."

He lifted his chin.

"And you know that I'm not drugged now. If you put your hand in mine, I would have to make an effort *not* to read you." She cocked her head, and her finger curled.

He took a deep breath, raised his hand, and placed it in her own, flesh against flesh.

The clarity of undrugged contact was so jolting after all these years that Aleta gasped

and shut her eyes. Merlin's honest desire to help swamped her senses, overriding all else. But beneath the tidal wave of his protective impulse, she felt hidden currents, hidden secrets. That he had secrets didn't shock her; she had expected as much. What did shock her was the rapport, the instant and entangling sense of connectedness to him, as if he had shoved his hands into her hair and pulled her under, clasping her so tightly they must breathe as one or drown. The rapport reminded her immediately and disturbingly of her earlier contact with the sinister Darcavon.

For a moment, she had the absurd feeling that Darcavon and Merlin were one and the same.

But that wasn't possible. And there were enough differences in the mental and emotional feel of the two men that she shook the thought away.

Releasing his hand, she broke the contact and opened her eyes. He was gazing at her with an odd look on his face.

No, this plain man and Darcavon looked nothing alike. What, then, would account for the similar rapport?

"You want me to trust you," she said softly, "but you don't trust me. You're not telling me the whole truth, Merlin."

His jaw twitched, and his breath grew shallow.

"Darcavon."

His face grew absolutely still.

"When I read you, I feel . . . something I've only felt once before. In Darcavon."

She watched him watch her.

"Can you explain why that is, Merlin?"

"No."

She seized his hand.

"Tell me that again, Merlin."

"No," he said. "I can't explain."

He was telling the truth. He couldn't explain. She dropped his hand.

He rubbed his palm against his knuckles. "Damn."

“I’m not so likable anymore?”

“I didn’t say that. But it’s unsettling. Knowing you can just . . . do that.”

“Unsettling.” She smiled. “Yes, good. I can live with that.” She bent forward.

He tucked his hand out of reach.

“Even a wizard like you, with talented friends, wouldn’t take on the Dagarro Family alone.” She ran the list of the Dagarro’s enemies through her mind. “You lack the arrogance of solaratti and their minions, so I don’t think you’re a spy from another family. That just leaves Galgov. Are you a government agent, Merlin?”

The absolute impassivity of his homely features gave her the answer. Moments passed before one corner of his mouth curled and broke into a rueful smile. “Yes,” he said. “I’m a Galgov agent. And I offer you the government’s asylum.”