



“God, I wouldn’t want to be that poor bastard.”

“Yeah,” replied the woman next to him, shutting down her forklift. “Do we do them any favors saving them when they’re like that?” The pair disappeared through the airlock out of the cargo area.

I ignored the comments, as I always do. They never realize that my ceramic skull piece comes with better than human hearing.

*Better*, I stopped myself, *better*. I’d have laughed bitterly if I laughed anymore. Since I’d become little more than a brain in a can, I’d lost such impulses. Laughing, crying, and screaming had all gone, in that order.

I cast angular shadows on Pictor Space Station’s cream-colored corridors as I headed for the freight office. My shadow remained human—two legs, two arms and a head—but precious little of it had come into the world with me. When a Conchirri fighter rammed LST-190, everything became fire and pain.

When my eyes, or rather *eye*, opened again, I expected to find God. Instead I found a living death in a VA hospital. The docs were kind and the psychs skilled, but nothing changed the fact that my limbs had been destroyed down to stumps and I was burned all over. Nothing to do but rescue the brain, some of the face and torso and plant it in a cyborg body. A near total prosthetic, I even had a replacement heart. After a year of rehab I went back into the line and helped bomb the lizards into extinction when we reduced the Conchirri Redoubt.

And after that...well, without a war I had no purpose. I was a mechanical shell, a sexless tin puppet. My parents, thank God, hadn't lived to see this. I never cared much for the rest of the family and had no use for my brother.

You can never go home again. Too fucking true...

I walked into the office of the Tarabey Mining Company, which ran most of the local mining around Kapteyn's star. The red dwarf lay thirteen lights out from Earth. Scientists theorized it had come into our galactic arm from somewhere else, bringing with it a system of planets and asteroids full of chemical and physical compounds rarely found anywhere else. It would be a miner's paradise if there was a yellow sun or oxygen anywhere, but comforts were few near Kapteyn.

Landa Solae looked up as I walked in. A stocky fiftyish, she ran the freight office with a crop and an unsympathetic nature. She liked me, as I rarely spoke and also took all the long, slow hauls into the mining worlds. I also charged less than other cargo runners since I made so little impact on life support.

"Hey, Tinman," she said.

I rarely used my real name, Pasha Gurov. I suspected Landa preferred to think of me as another piece of machinery, like the forklifts down on the freight decks.

"Got a run for me, Landa?" I was almost surprised by the sound of my own voice, realizing that I hadn't spoken aloud since I headed back from the Dis camp in the outer asteroids.

"Yeah," she said, snapping her bubble gum. "You mind going back to Dis?"

"It's all the same to me."

"Got something new for delivery," she began, but a commotion from outside the office drew her head up. She heaved herself up from behind the desk. I followed.

Landa's assistant, Roger, faced a pleasant-looking young woman in a Confed Customs uniform. "Look, Commissioner, the papers are all in order."

"What's the problem?" Landa asked.

"The problem," the Confed said, her lips drawn thin in distaste, "is this...*thing* in the box."

"I keep telling Commissioner Reagan," Roger said, his bald head sheened with sweat, "that it's legitimate cargo."

"That's not the point." Reagan looked at Lana. "This android in the box is. The thing is made for prostitution."

Landa shrugged. "Not a lot of women out these ways. Men get lonely. Some women, too."

"And you think having a fucking doll," she snapped an accusing finger at the metal and plastic crate, "helps? You're a woman; you can't believe this is a good idea."

Landa sighed. "I wasn't planning on fucking the thing myself."

"It degrades women," the customs agent snapped.

Landa looked at her. "There have been pros since the days of the caveman and they'll be turning tricks on Judgment Day. These things," she waved at the crate, "may save some woman from hooking, or at least from the low, rough end of the trade. The machine doesn't care; it just does what it's programmed to do"

"It's disgusting," the younger woman said.

“Grow up,” Landa said. “It’s just a sex toy that looks like a woman. Next year they’re making a male one, a better version of a vibrator for lonely women on stations who can’t date their subordinates.”

Reagan threw the pad down on the box. “Get this thing off my station.” She spun on her heel and left.

Landa snapped her gum derisively. “She’s probably needs to spend more time with her vibrator. Too tense.”

Roger laughed and handed her the forms and disappeared into the back.

She turned to me. “Here’s your cargo. It’s an android, a robot joygirl for the miners on Dis. If it works out, I’ll order more. Goddamn things cost a mint, but maybe I’ll get a boy model for the commissioner,” she said and laughed. “Here, sign for it. Standard rates.”

I signed, careful not to put too much pressure on the stylus. My prosthetic hands were stronger than human and occasionally I still had trouble with feedback.

“Roger will bring it down with the regular load. She’s the only special cargo. Just hook her up to a d-sine power unit for maintenance.

“Okay,” I replied. “It’ll take a few hours to rig that kind of power hookup.”

“When can you leave?” Landa looked up at me.

“As soon as the *Chukar* is refueled and reprovisioned.” My ship was an old landing ship similar to the one I’d been burned on. It could handle months in space and carry a crew of six with room for a platoon of armored troopers. I flew it alone.

“The roustabouts will have you loaded by 0600,” she said. “Good flight.”

“Thanks,” I said, because it was what people said. I walked out.

Behind me I heard Roger return and say to Landa, “Well at least we know he won’t sample the merchandise.”

She laughed.

I kept walking.

Next morning I finished preflighting *Chukar*. I’d named the barge for the plump birds my uncle had hunted back in Russia. The rounded hull no longer wore Confed gray, but rather a green and white combination that appealed to me. After the roustabouts stowed the cargo, I rolled out of the launch bay into the sullen red light of Kapteyn and pulled away from Pictor’s two-kilometer flattened disk. With a burn from the engine that would have been hard on a normal human, I blazed into space. Away from the species to which I’d once belonged.

After the autopilot locked, I sat back and pulled a cord from the ship’s computer and plugged into the main vice left to me. I’d loaded *Chukar* library with every book and vid I could find. I also had the best VR system money could buy. I plugged myself in from a dataport in my ceramic skull meant for the medtechs to check my systems. I wasn’t supposed to do this, but I didn’t care. So I drifted away into games and stories. *Chukar* made its way toward the mining camp weeks away.

An alarm brought me out of Beethoven’s Fifth and back into a cockpit filled with white smoke drifting up from gangway to the main deck. I realized it must have been shrilling for a while. I’d been far out of it. Cursing, I unplugged myself and climbed clumsily to my feet. The ship’s auto fire-fighting system should have cut in. My artificial heart didn’t race, but fear still filled me. I hated fire.

Smoke came from the area where I’d secured the android. Great, all I needed was Landa bitching at me over having to submit a claim to Lloyds. I snapped an extinguisher off the wall and cut power to the cylinder in the same move.

*Chukar*, I ordered, using my link to the ship's AI, *cut off all O2 and seal this deck.*

The AI acknowledged with its usual brevity. I'd never added any human interface to it. Didn't want to pretend I had company.

I knew my internal resources could keep me going for hours yet, and vacuum was the fastest way to get the fire under control. Air whooshed out and with it sound. I fired the extinguisher and the fire guttered out. I spent a few more minutes making sure there was no source of ignition before restoring atmosphere.

The outside of the cylinder was charred, with long splits running down the plastic cover. I decided to open it and check the contents. Any damage and I'd have to return to Pictor and Landa, a prospect I dreaded. I cracked the seal and the lid slid back.

She lay on a bed of red velvet, a sailor's dream of a barbarian queen. Blonde hair lay heavy on her shoulders over full breasts, round hips, and strong thighs. The body was almost overripe, nearly a cartoon of a woman's form. I was surprised by the dull ache it raised in me. Once, the sight of her would have brought me to a halt, struck dumb. Now, I was a fragment of a man in a can, with nothing to lust with and only memories of passion.

Its eyes opened. They were the blue of a summer sky and empty of anything human, but they tracked over to me.

"I'm Sassa. I'm here to please you. Tell me what you want." The mouth moved in a good simulation of human speech, but the voice was synthetic and stilted.

"Perform a system check," I snapped. "Report any damage."

"Internal diagnostics mode inoperable, basic systems functioning, memory indicates 2% CPU usage." she replied.

"Unfortunately that means little to me," I said, "except that you are functioning at a low level and I am betting your software is fucked."

"My software fucked," Sassa repeated, straightening up in the crèche. "I am fucked?"

"Well it seems to be your function," I growled.

"I don't understand."

"You're a mechanical whore," I said, angry for reasons I didn't want to think about.

"What is a whore?" she asked, her face blank of expression.

I found an operable diagnostic board in her crèche. It confirmed my fears. The software uploads for decanting the android were fried. I couldn't even put her back into sleep mode.

"What the hell I am I going to do with you?" I said. "It's four more weeks to Dis."

She looked at me. "Query. What is a whore?"

I frowned. "I guess the best I can do is give you data uploads from my VR and AI systems here. There should be enough for you to figure it out yourself. Are you ambulatory?"

"Affirmative," she climbed out of the crèche, and the awkwardness of her android body reminded me of my own machine replacements. They'd made her tall, nearly five-ten. I skittered between pity for it and the dull anger I'd felt since she went active. It fell to the deck, but the luscious body wasn't flesh and blood and neither cut nor bruised. She climbed up, nothing of pain in her face, and stood naked, facing me. With the eyes open and so empty, the voluptuous body seemed somehow sad, even repellent.

"Follow me."

We clumped up to the command deck. I gestured at the copilot seat but the gesture meant nothing to the android. "Sit."

She dropped into the seat with a thud.

I plugged a lead into her skull, then mine, then into the ship's computer, adding the power of the virtual reality system I'd custom built. Since I wasn't running a simulation, the VR gave me only a flat plain. I was myself. Oh, I could have had an avatar of my old body, but it would not have felt any different. Truth was I was afraid of any such pretense. That way lay madness.

I turned on the VR plain. The android stood nearby, a featureless white silhouette of a woman, an unpainted canvas for me to work on. I started downloads on human relations and biology and queued up social stuff I used for the game simulations on VR.

Data whirled toward Sassa at a constantly increasing rate. The VR displayed this as swirling leaves, which disappeared as they touched the white silhouette. But it was no longer white; the android was evidently integrating the data. She appeared as she had been while lying in her crèche, but the body was upright, filled with vibrant life.

I felt something pass me, like a breeze at midnight. Imagination? I shook off the distraction. The data flow began to accelerate again; the machine's CPU capacity astonished me. I knew the war had spurred computer development, but I had never seen anything like this. I focused on controlling the data as she...it, was near the outer limits of my own capacity.

Time passed, or did it? In VR you sometimes felt like you'd always been there. A chime brought me out of it; my internal system sensor had gone on. I needed to add nutrients to my system. Odd, I thought I'd done so two months ago, I should have had at least two weeks left.

I glanced at my instruments and froze. I'd been sitting in the chair linked to the android for two weeks.

"What!" I muttered. "The download should have taken hours at most. What the hell happened?"

"I'm sorry," a voice startled me. "But once you opened up the universe to me I could not stop myself. I had to have all there was. It's so wonderful."

Her eyes held and compelled me. No longer an empty blue sky, they shimmered with intelligence and curiosity. The body, which had been overripe for my taste, now seemed perfection incarnate.

"Get a grip," I said.

"On what?" she asked.

"Nothing," I managed. "A human alone sometimes talks to himself."

"You're not alone," she said.

"Knock it off," I said, my voice harsh. "You're cargo to me. A synthetic joygirl for lonely miners."

"What?" she said, then it seemed like she was listening to some inner voice. I couldn't read her expression but there seemed something of horror in it. "This, is what I was made for?"

"Yes," I said, feeling a vague sense of shame for my species.

"Surely there is more to my existence than this. I can be more."

"Like what?" I said.

"Like this," she replied

The ship disappeared in an instant and we stood in a virtual world. Only it was detailed in a way I'd never seen before. We stood on a hillside, and the detail of it dazzled me, a green lawn, full of blue and yellow flowers stretched down to a shining lake surrounded by gentle tossing trees. A breeze flowed over me and I felt it. God, I felt it on four good limbs. The sun and wind caressed them where they projected from the shorts and t-shirt I wore.

"Does it please you?"

I spun. I'd been so overwhelmed by sensations I'd forgotten Sassa. Whatever I was going to say died on my lips. She wore a simple, blue dress of the same cornflower blue as her eyes. The total effect was vastly more erotic than the clinical nakedness of her crèche. The effect on me was more than mental. My body responded like a teenager's.

Sassa saved me from having to speak. She slipped out of the dress and it fell around her feet. "It's been a long time, Pasha. Come to me."

She didn't need to invite me twice. It was like the first time, the best time, and every time at once. Sassa was skilled and more, joyful in lovemaking. Her strong, lush body drove me mad. I couldn't even speak, overwhelmed by an animal need for her, driven by the fact that I'd never dreamed of doing this again.

Afterward, we lay on the hillside, with me trying to catch my breath and shaking with exhaustion. I could only barely remember having made love like this. I was so grateful for the lassitude and satisfaction spreading through my body that I refused to think, to wonder why this was happening. As I drifted off, Sassa sang softly in a language I didn't know.

I woke hours later, turned to her and she smiled. We made love again, slowly and tenderly. After, she rubbed my back. I noticed a picnic set that I hadn't seen before. Sassa spread a supper and we ate in companionable silence, as I feared to break the spell.

*My god, I thought, she seems so real.*

"Let's go for a walk, my love" she said, reaching down and picking up her blue dress and shrugging it on. "This is our home."

Caught in the dream and unquestioning, I gathered up my clothes, dressed, and took her hand. We walked down the hillside. I said nothing, lost in the fantasy and happy for the first time in a decade. Grass tickled my sandaled feet. I loved the sensation.

Day turned to night and we slept under the stars, waking to a warm breeze. I don't know how many days passed this way. Eventually we found ourselves at a cabin under some trees. Sassa cooked and I cut firewood and slept in her arms.

One morning after breakfast, we reached a flat place with a gravel road. Sassa led me up the road toward a copse of trees. I saw an old aircar. Seated on the rear engine deck was a man. I froze when I saw him.

He looked up and a familiar smile cut across the pleasant broad face. "Hey Pasha. Nice to see you, Sassa."

"Mac," I whispered. "Tommy Macmillan, you died on Okara III."

"Not here," Sassa murmured back. "No Conchirri war here, no burning tanks. He lives in a little home at the back of those trees with his wife, Lise."

"She died when the Conchirri hit Fenris IV. That's when he joined up."

"No war here," she said.

"See you later, Mac," Sassa called.

"Okay, come by tomorrow. Lise is making lasagna."

We walked on but there were clouds now; a storm was building in me. It wasn't real. None of it. The exhausted feeling from making love, the beautiful, peaceful valley, Mac, none of it. I didn't have the parts of a human. I was Spam in a can.

The thought of Mac jarred me. Sassa could not have found information on Mac in *Chukar's* systems. She'd downloaded everything in the ship's computer, everything in the VR system and, finally, everything in my own mind. I'd been emptied like a can of tomatoes. My mind had been invaded, raped.

I pulled free of Sassa as the sky went dark and thunder rumbled. Open shock registered on her face.

And then we were back on the deck of the *Chukar*. I sat up slowly, pulling the lead from my ceramic skull with a cool deliberation I didn't feel. I forced myself to turn toward Sassa where she lay in the copilot chair. She too sat up, pulling a lead out from under her thick, blond hair. She looked at me, no longer appearing quite so real as she had in my...dream, or whatever it was we'd shared, but she was no longer the machine I'd uncrated.

"Didn't you want to stay, my love?" she said, in a voice that hit me in places I did not have. Something like puzzlement drifted over the perfect face.

"It wasn't real," I raged. "None of it. The sex, the hillside, Mac, none of it was real, all simulations." I looked deep into her eyes where I so wanted to see depth, complexity, and truth, and I couldn't tell what I saw.

"And you, Sassa," I said, slowly standing, "Sassa isn't even your name; it's your model. You don't love me, or anything else, you simulate reactions."

She, too, stood, walking over to the bed I occasionally use when I don't sleep in my flight chair. She pulled a sheet off and wrapped it around herself. Again, it was more erotic than her nakedness and somehow seemed a statement as well. Her face was pensive as she turned back to me. "And if I simulate it so well that you cannot tell it from the real thing, does it matter?"

"Yes," I cried.

She tossed her head to move the golden hair out of her eyes. "And if I do it so well that I cannot tell? Does it matter?"

Were those tears glimmering in her eyes? No, impossible and, if they were, again it was only programming.

"Sassa," I said, schooling my voice to gentle. "You're not a person. You may have dumped more data into your memory than your designers believed possible. The simulation may be near perfect. But you're not alive.

"Are you?" she asked.

I fell silent, no longer sure myself.

She looked away. "You tell me that I do not want. That I don't feel. But I cannot separate these appearances from what you tell me is the truth."

A weary disgust filled me. I remembered Landa and the commissioner. "*It's just a sex toy, like a vibrator.*" Here I was discussing life and love with a doll. I'd lost everything in the war but awareness and self-respect. I could see people laughing at me for feeling anything for Sassa. What was I going to do? Buy her? Selling *Chukar* and all I had wouldn't have covered it. I may have been maimed, but I was not going to become pathetic.

Yet I could no longer bear her gaze, either, and turned away. "Return to your crèche, switch to minimum power mode." I looked at the chronometer. To my shock, I saw we'd been gone weeks of real-time. "We'll reach Dis in thirty-one hours. Remain there until then."

Her footsteps sounded behind me. I turned back to the controls. A lot of maintenance and checks had gone undone. I lost myself in the mechanical efficiency of tending to *Chukar*. It was all I had and I had neglected it.

Thirty-one hours passed quickly and Dis grew in my screens. A well named world: great, grim, red and rocky. Mines on its surface used mass accelerators to shoot mineral slag into orbit. Dis had no atmosphere and I made an easy approach, coming down in the roofed-over cavern of Lode. A sliding hatchway rolled back to admit my ship, then the elevator lowered *Chukar* to the cargo level.

I forced myself to stomp down to the cargo deck. Sassa lay in her burned and damaged crèche like a corpse.

"Activate," I snapped.

Animation flooded back into her and she sat up smoothly. She turned to face me and started to speak.

"Remain silent," I said. "Follow me." I turned quickly so I didn't have to look at her.

We walked down to the *Chukar's* main lock. When we got there, I realized she still wore my old sheet. For a second I thought about asking her to drop it, but it seemed petty.

The hatch cycled open and two men and a woman stood there on the dock. The woman was slim and dark with a ragged haircut and form-fitting black clothes. The men were hard-bitten miners. They looked at Sassa like wolves look at steak.

"Hey," the woman said. "What's it doing out of its crate?" Her sharp green eyes bored into mine.

I felt naked before those accusing eyes. "Malfunction. Her crèche caught fire. She's...it's undamaged."

"Damn," one of the miners said. "I can't wait to plug into that thing."

"Yeah," the other said. "Maria, you may have made a mistake. None of your other girls can compete with roboslut here."

“Imagine how much they’ll miss all your affection,” Maria said. She came forward and pulled the sheet off Sassa, who didn’t resist. She inspected the perfect body. “No damage. Report your CPU status and diagnostic state.

“All systems nominal,” Sassa said in a flat voice, “CPU at 20% of capacity and undamaged.”

“OK,” Maria said. She signed a clipboard and handed it to me. “The crèche was for shipping; you can dump it. I’ll take the toy. You boys get down to the cargo hold with a lifter and get the rest of the cargo.

“Ok,” the shorter minor said. He grabbed Sassa’s rear as he passed her and squeezed it hard. “See ya later.”

Sassa didn’t react.

Maria tossed me the sheet. “Follow,” she said to Sassa, and strode off.

Sassa started forward, then stopped and turned to face me. She looked at me steadily, with no hint of blame or accusation—only a child-like disappointment.

“I could have been more,” she whispered. “We could have had more.” Then she walked after Maria, merely a machine following a program.

The lock cycled closed and I was left wondering what the hell I was. I walked on feet that didn’t feel the hard metal of the deck, to the darkened pilot’s compartment. I stood there alone for hours, as if I could somehow hide in a cloak of eternal night. A flesh and blood man might have gotten drunk and lost himself in another woman, could have started a fight and let someone else’s fists beat Sassa out of their mind. I had no such option.

I looked at my ship, which was all I had, as my prosthetic eye cycled through its modes: starlight, infrared, radar. I’d talked to the ship in lonely hours but, unlike Sassa, it had never spoken back, never sung to me, never offered anything of comfort.

It came to me then, as all great certainties do. One moment it was simply there, stark and irrefutable. I had no life. Nor would I have one in the future, destroyed shadow of a man that I was. I’d turned my back on the only joy or peace I’d been offered since the war. Why? Because of pride, not willing to be mocked for living with a toy doll. Well hadn’t they made a toy doll out of me? Maybe I was entitled. Maybe I was mad. But another day of this life wasn’t worth having. I needed Sassa.

I opened the lock box under my command chair and pulled out an Ingersoll laser, standard Marine issue and illegal. I’d never quite known why I had it. Maybe for protection, or in case I wanted an easy out some day. I belted the bulky Ingersoll on and twitched it around to my back, then pulled a travel cloak from a locker. The nondescript garment was common among spacers, who always need access to their tools and equipment.

I walked out of my ship and onto the spacedock. As usual, it was freezing cold on my human parts. Harsh white worklights threw hard shadows around the ships, equipment and stores. Voices echoed though I saw no one. Boots clattered on metal walkways and ladders, or on the slagged rock of Dis.

There was no security on Dis; it wasn’t a port of entry, just a miner’s hole. Anyone could come and go, so I tried not to attract attention by moving furtively. I didn’t see anyone I knew. I passed out of the spacedock area into the habitat sections and wrapped my travel cloak closer,

I knew where Maria’s place was. Everyone did. She’d come as a miner and found the money was surer with drugs, booze, and prostitution. She bought a place called the Red Star on the canyon wall. It started a general store and now stocked all manner of illicit pleasure.

I wound my way through corridors heading for crater wall. Eventually I found myself in front of The Red Star. I rarely came here, having no real need of it. Now I studied it as a soldier, looking a multitude of entrances. A group of miners and spacers, all men, made their noisy way to the doors. I fell in behind them.

Smoke of various types and the dull roar of too many people talking filled the inside. I spotted Maria at the far end of the room by the bar and steered for a small table at the back. I passed a number of men around a blowsy woman with a short skirt.



“Hey Annie,” one of the men said. “You better watch out, the new girl’s gonna cut into your action.”

“Only for the boys who don’t know what to do with a real woman,” she shouted back. Raucous laughter followed.

I reached my seat. A younger, slender girl with a surprisingly bright smile took my order for a beer. I asked her about the new girl.

She grimaced. “It’s not actually a girl. Android. You ask me, it’s better than having a real girl have to do that. No offense,” she added.

“None taken,” I said. “Is it going to come down?”

“Nah, it’s probably going to be working nonstop soon as they figure it out.” she said. “It’s upstairs in the back room.”

“Oh, the one against the back of the crater wall?”

She gestured over her shoulder. “Nope, the one right over the front.”

I tipped her and she walked off, avoiding groping hands with a practiced ease.

I started toward the twin staircase, leaving my drink on the table.

Joe the bouncer stopped me. “Hey, Tinman. Where ya going?”

“There’s a line for bathroom, as always.” I said. “I was going to use the upstairs one.”

“Nobody goes upstairs unless they pay for a girl. You know the rules.”

“Oh, for Christ sake, Joe. I’m not going sneak in on a girl.”

“Yeah,” Joe said. “I forgot. Ok, go ahead.”

I started up the stairs.

“Hey,” Joe said. “Wait a minute. You don’t have a johnson to pee out of, either. Whaddya need a bathroom for?”

I gave him a glare. “I’m still alive in here and sometimes there are wastes that need to be eliminated. How much you want to know about this?”

Joe raised a hand in disgust. “Forget I asked.”

I walked up when I was sure Joe wasn’t looking. I cut left and walked down the short corridor to the front. I opened the door.

Sassa sat on the bed. A man stood over her, his pants down. “Hey,” he said. “Wait your turn.”

“Sure,” I said. “Wrong room.”

He turned away back to Sassa. I reached him in two strides. I didn’t need to draw the Ingersoll. My hands were metal and plastic and I remembered my training. I hit hard, maybe too hard. As the miner fell across the bed, a stain of red came from under his scalp.

Sassa looked at me, her face blank. “Why are you here?”

“Do you want something more than this?” I asked.

“You already know the answer.”

“Will you come with me? I don’t know what I have to offer you.”

A slow, sad smile came over her face and she again looked like a live human. “Yes, I will come.”

“Did they leave you any clothes?” I asked.

“No.”

I opened the closet door, and found a shirt and harem pants. These I threw to Sassa.

“But how will we get away? I’m valuable property. This Maria will not let me go.”

I looked at the dead man on the bed. “I think we are past worrying about theft.”

From under my cloak, I drew the Ingersoll and dialed it to tight beam. I opened the window, leaned out and played the beam over the building storefront. Flames broke out instantly. Seconds later there were screams and shouts. A buzzer went off, as did the sprinkler.

I opened the door a crack: half-naked people were running around. I took aim with the laser and fired down the hall. Curtains flared and steam whipped by as the laser obscured the hallway.

“Let’s go,” I said. We headed out, looking for a back stair. I found one quickly, obligingly labeled *Fire Exit*. I also found a travel cloak lying on the ground and picked it up, whipping it around Sassa’s shoulders.

“Hey, Tinman.”

I turned, keeping the laser under my cloak.

“Where you going with that?” Joe held a short, nasty club in his hand.

“Damned if I know,” I said drawing the laser out and firing. The club exploded in smoking fragments. Joe screamed and covered his face.

We fled down the stairs and out into the crowd. Clad in our travel cloaks, we didn’t draw much attention. As soon as we were out of sight, we started running. I run clumsily, but I don’t tire. Sassa ran more fluidly. In minutes we reached *Chukar’s* dock.

I cycled the dock door. My ship, its green and white hull gleaming under the lights, looking like salvation. We ran toward her.

I didn’t see the machine gun until it stuttered, rounds tearing into my legs and dumping me to the ground. Lights spun and lead crackled. I couldn’t feel pain, but my systems all screamed damage.

I flipped over to see Maria and two men closing in. One held a submachine gun, its barrel smoking. The others held pistols.

“Tinman, Tinman,” Maria said. “How could you do this to me? Going nuts over a sex toy?”

“A sex toy with a laser,” Sassa said.

We all looked at her in surprise. Sassa stood with the Ingersoll leveled at them.

Maria looked at Sassa as if she had a horn on her head. “What the hell?”

“Ignore it,” said the machine-gunner. “It’s just a bot. It ain’t programmed for combat...”

The laser licked out and the machine gun glowed. He howled and dropped it.

Maria and the other raised their guns.

“My chassis,” Sassa said, “is similar to the ones used on a humanform combat robot. Bullets will damage this pretty plastic, but not enough to save you.”

“Guns,” I said. “Drop them and run.”

They did.

Sassa came over to me.

“I’m ruined,” I said. “You got everything I know when you interfaced with my mind. Take the ship. Get away.”

Sassa looked deeply into my eyes, then reached under my arms and pulled me up with ease. We entered the ship. Sassa got me into the command chair and I plugged into *Chukar*. Automatics cycled the hatch above us as alarms hooted and Dis control shouted in my ears.

*Chukar* lifted into space and I hit a full burn. For lack of any better thought I headed us outsystem.

“This is Dis control,” this voice was more authoritative. “*Chukar*, answer. We are launching two patrol cutters and we have sent an alert to all stations and outposts in Kapteyn’s system. You have nowhere to go.”

I left the engines on full burn. Unless those cutters were at Defcon 4, they wouldn’t launch for at least a half-hour, probably longer. He shouldn’t have told me.

“A poor deal for you,” I said to Sassa, gesturing with my good arm at my slagged and wrecked legs.

She smiled at me, then strapped me in and began connecting me to the ship’s computer. “I have a plan,” she said. “It’s the only way out. You’ll have to trust me.” She plugged the lead into my skull. I could feel her ghost slip past me to touch the ship’s AI. I didn’t care. Whatever Sassa decided was okay with me. I leaned back. We were together, no matter what followed.

The ship disappeared and we were on the hillside over the valley again. Spring softened the world around us. I laughed for the joy of feeling the breeze play over my body and the heat of the sun on four good limbs.

Sassa laughed too, a musical sound no orchestra could have rivaled. She smiled and the blue of her eyes reflected the cornflower blue of her dress. She walked up and placed a hand on my shoulder as she pointed down into the valley. "There's our new home. See the stone building by the lake?"

"Yes," I said.

"Mac and Lise live on the other side of the hill. We'll see them later in the week and there will be other friends later. We'll never be lonely." She took a few steps forward then stopped and looked at me over her shoulder.

"I can stay," I whispered.

"Yes."

"You'll stay too?"

She reached back and took my hand then kissed me on the mouth, soft and warm. She smelled slightly of cinnamon. "We will be here together," she said. "At the rate we need it, the ship's power will last hundreds of years. And time here, my darling, time here will move at the rate we want it to. We have forever, forever and ever."

"That will be about right," I said, putting my arms around and kissing her for all I was worth, which was a lot more than it had been yesterday.

When the *Chukar* passed the point of no return without slowing, the cutters from *Dis* regretfully turned back. There was no chance of stopping the old assault barge before it reached the great dark between the stars. Time became irrelevant to the *Chukar* as she continued to accelerate in the blackness. Gradually she cooled as the centuries rolled on and her hull headed for absolute zero. But that was only outside. Inside, the *Chukar* held light, laughter, and endless warm nights

The End