

Captain Jamerson sat behind her desk, poring over her holoscreen – the words were visible through to the other side, though they were backwards and made no sense. Probably written in alien. Silver didn't know the captain could speak alien and she caught herself smiling at the thought of Justice Jamerson standing in front of a room full of blue-skinned aliens addressing them in their own tongue. Especially as the captain was notoriously bad tempered about aliens

Silver cleared her throat. "Ma'am?"

Justice pushed the screen aside, took one look at Silver and said, "Oh for goodness sake. I told them I needed a thespian. A thespian. Not a lesbian. Nobody around here listens to a damn word I say."

"Um." Silver felt her cheeks burn. "No, ma'am, nobody sent me here. It's about Athanasia..."

The captain got to her feet and walked around her desk to go and stand beside the window. She looked out to the vast expanse of space, though there was nothing much to look at other than the stars. Maybe a planet or two. A few moons... "What about her?"

"She's refusing to fly to Alkeemik." She winced, expecting the captain's temper to show itself.

Instead, Justice rolled her eyes. "I haven't got the time or the patience for one of her hissy fits. Tell her she will do as her captain commands." She knocked on the wall. "Hear that, old girl? You will fly to Alkeemik or I will have you sold for scrap."

Silver grinned, imagining the pretty little ship-sprite folding her arms and pouting at the insult. She waited for the captain to return to her seat before she asked, "What do you need a thespian for, cap'n?"

"Look at this." Justice twisted the holoscreen so Silver could see, though it still looked alien to her. Justice tutted impatiently. "It's Shakespeare, girl, Shakespeare. Please tell me you know who that is?"

Shakespeare? The name rang a bell. "Isn't he the captain of the Titania?"

"He is a 16th century British playwright!" Justice said, raising her voice in indignation. "Goodness me, the level of education..." She trailed off, shaking her head. "I need actors so I can see for myself what one of these blasted plays is all about, they make very little sense written down like this."

"Maybe there will be actors on Alkeemik," Silver suggested. She'd have to have a word with the ship, convince her that it wouldn't be so bad to fly to the red planet.

"Maybe there will." Justice drummed her fingers on the desk, her nails tapping the polished surface. "Was there anything else?"

"No. I'll uh... speak to Athanasia." She snapped a salute and then turned on her heel and left.

#

There was a time, shortly after she'd been promoted from her position as janitor, that Silver had thought she might get better quarters. But no. Her room was still the one next to the engine room, small and noisy and with an air vent that she should probably look at fixing sometime soon.

She was an advisor now. Members of the crew called her the Ship Whisperer. Ship Botherer was another one, though she didn't like the sound of that so much. And it meant that she got to spend most of her time entertaining Athanasia and keeping her occupied so she didn't think about killing the crew. Again.

As jobs went, it was pretty much the best one she'd ever had. Anything that kept her from having to clear up the aftermath of a bout of space sickness was like manna from heaven. Whatever manna was. Something to do with bread?

Silver frowned as she shrugged off her purple overalls, leaving them in a pile on the floor. Janitors wore grey. Technicians blue. Advisors wore purple. Apparently. She'd never seen Barkley, the captain's advisor, wear overalls of any colour. Not that she minded wearing purple overalls. Athanasia was a big fan of the colour, telling her it brought out the green of her eyes. The ship could be such a flirt sometimes.

Anyway, she was off duty now, so she changed into jeans and a t-shirt and let her hair down from its tail, giving it a cursory brush and a quick spritz with the shine spray. She checked her appearance in the mirror and then headed out of her quarters to the room next door.

Briefly, she placed a hand on the metal casing of the ship's engine, feeling it throb beneath her. Then she approached the glass tube in the centre of the room and touched its surface. "Athanasia?"

A small ball of light appeared in the middle of the tube and then expanded to fill it before it came together again and formed into the shape of a person. A very pretty female person. A wave of affection flowed from the tube, making Silver's fingers tingle.

"I'm afraid we're going to have to go to Alkeemik."

Why?

"You know why. We need to pick up supplies."

Why?

Silver took her hand away from the glass. "Please don't start that. Look, we won't be there long. We'll take the shuttle down, stock up and then be on our merry way again. I don't know why you don't want to go there anyway."

Athanasia folded her arms and lifted her chin. *It's full of whores.*

"I doubt the *whole* planet is full of whores," Silver said. "Anyway, I'm not interested."

I saw you.

"What?"

I saw you looking.

"Looking at what?" Silver asked.

Another woman.

"The ship is full of women, of course I look at them!" Silver exclaimed. "I can't walk around with my head down, I'll have an accident. Besides, they're real women—"

I'm real.

"—with breasts I can actually get my hands on!" She realised she'd raised her hands to Athanasia's chest height on the glass and moved them quickly to her sides. "Sorry."

I love you.

Silver sighed and sunk to the floor, her back to the glass tube. "I know," she said. "And I love you. I do. I just miss being able to touch someone."

The steady thrum of the engine grew louder and Silver sat up a little straighter. She turned, only to find the glass tube was empty.

#

They were going to Alkeemik. The announcement came through shipcom when Silver tuned in. She lay on her bunk on her back, staring at the ceiling and hardly listening to the rest of the news. So Athanasia had decided and not bothered telling her. It unnerved her. The ship told her everything. Everything. She was the Ship Whisperer.

"Off," she said. She sighed loudly when shipcom didn't respond and repeated, louder, "OFF." Then she smacked the wall until she had silence.

She lay for a long while, trying not to think too much but thinking the same things over and over and over. Athanasia was upset. And she'd been the one to upset her.

Eventually, she slept.

#

Silver had watched the red planet of Alkeemik grow larger and larger from the space deck. Then she'd headed back down to the engine room and tried to get Athanasia to talk to her, with no success. When the call came to board the shuttle, she waited in line with the others in the hangar and boarded behind Barkley, Justice's advisor.

"Cap'n already on board?" she asked the man as she ducked her head and entered the shuttle.

"Captain Jamerson has an important meeting and has asked that I take her place instead," Barkley said. He seemed put out by this, and fussed with his belt, cursing it until Silver leaned over and connected it for him. "Thank you," he said. "I'm to speak with the Hallorn stockist and arrange transport of the goods myself. You know what these people are like, they'll only speak to ship captains half the time, I've absolutely no idea what to say to the man if he refuses our price."

Silver shrugged. It wasn't her problem. "What meeting?" she asked.

"What?"

"What's the important meeting?"

"Don't you know?"

Silver rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't ask if I knew."

"Well it seems rather odd that you don't know, given your position," Barkley said. He wiped his palms nervously on his trousers as the shuttle's engine started up. "She's talking to Athanasia."

Silver felt a twinge of something stir uneasily in her guts. Jealously? Or space sickness? No, she never got sick. She frowned. "What about?"

"How should I know?" Barkley asked impatiently.

Silver rested her head back against the head restraints and glowered to herself. It was nothing to worry about. Athanasia was probably doing this to wind her up. The ship probably *wanted* to make her jealous. She realised Barkley was still speaking to her. "Hmm?"

"I said, what are you doing in Hallorn?"

"Hiring actors," she replied. *They're trying to get you out of the way*, a treacherous voice said. She ignored it and closed her eyes as the shuttle started to shake.

#

Hallorn was a city in the desert country of Holdernay on the planet Alkeemik. Everything was red and dusty and looked a lot like pictures of a place on Earth called 'Eejit' that Silver had never wanted to visit ever. The buildings were hunched shells of metal, erupting from the sand at set intervals, all neat and uniformly boring. Most were shops of some sort and many of the shopkeepers were Alkeemikes – tall, gangly, insect-like beings with eyes on stalks and facial pincers. Silver had no interest in Alkeemike whores and had no idea why Athanasia thought she would have. She wouldn't even know where to begin... She screwed up her nose at the thought and carried on, looking for likely actors.

Humans walked the dusty streets, as well as other beings. Several languages floated past her ears and she wasn't entirely sure any of it was English. She hurried to keep up with Barkley and the others from the shuttle, not wanting them to leave her behind.

Thoughts of what Justice and Athanasia might be discussing circled her mind and refused to leave her alone, even when she spotted a pretty Jamink girl dressed in silks and entertaining a small crowd. She growled irritably to herself, told herself that it was none of her business, even though it most definitely *was* her business, and caught up to Barkley, grabbing his arm to get his attention.

"Where do I find actors?" she asked.

"You passed them," he said, pointing back at the Jamink girl. "It's all right, you go and talk to them and we'll meet back at the shuttle. You remember the way?"

She did. Vaguely. "I suppose so."

"Good. I'll see you later." He patted her arm and turned away, leaving her to look back at the actors.

She approached the crowd cautiously, slipped in between two Alkeemike women – or what she presumed were Alkeemike women from their complete lack of dangly bits – and watched the Jamink girl dance about on the small stage. Jaminks were humanoid, the only thing that made them appear different were the large goat-like horns curled against their skulls, and their amber cat-like eyes. There were more of them behind the stage, working puppets and playing instruments made

from animal bones. All of them were female and for a moment, Silver forgot all about Athanasia as she watched, transfixed.

She licked her dry lips and was just about to step around the stage to find someone to talk to, when a hand descended on her shoulder and made her jump. Turning, she came face to face with Captain Justice Jamerson.

"Cap'n! How did you...?"

"I took the second shuttle," Justice said, clasping Silver's hands. "Come with me."

Silver could only do as she was told, as Justice dragged her back through the crowd and quickly behind one of the shops. She was just blinking sand out of her eyes when the captain pushed her back against the metal shell, and covered her mouth with her own.

For a moment, Silver kissed her back, her heart thumping. Then, when the captain took Silver's hand and placed it over her breast, she pulled back and looked at her in surprise. "Uh... I don't think we should be doing this." She removed her hand.

"Of course we should, you wanted this," Justice said, grabbing Silver's hand again.

"I used to want this," Silver said, pulling her hand back. "But then the whole thing with Athanasia happened... and anyway, you're straight!"

"It's *me*," Justice said, grinning. "Athanasia!"

Silver frowned.

"It's me," Justice said again, lifting a hand to touch Silver's face. "I love you." She kissed her again but this time Silver pushed her roughly away.

"You've possessed the captain!" she hissed.

"So?"

"So?" Silver repeated. "So? I can't believe you!"

Athanasia stepped closer, her hands hooking around Silver's waist. "I'm just borrowing her body, I'll give it back. Come on, you love this body."

She did love that body. The captain's breasts were so... and her arse was especially... She swallowed. "I can't. It's not right."

"You wanted to touch me, so touch me!"

"Not like this," Silver snapped. "This is... weird. And creepy. This is very creepy."

"I love you, Silver."

"And I love you," she replied. "But I can't do this. I can't. I'm sorry." She gently removed the captain's hands from her waist and stepped away. "Give Justice her body back."

"If you really loved me you wouldn't be able to keep your hands off me," Athanasia said, placing her hands on Justice's hips.

"But that's not *you*," Silver said, exasperated. "Please just go back to the ship, let Justice go and let me get on with hiring these bloody actors."

Athanasia glared at her, lips pursed. The look didn't suit Justice's face and Silver frowned until Athanasia turned on her heel and flounced away. She sighed and walked back to the Jaminks, just wanting everything over and done with.

#

Back on board the ship, Silver presented the acting troop to the captain and then waited outside the room as the captain had asked. She stared at the grey wall opposite, feeling deflated and tired. Athanasia had vacated Justice's body at least, but what would happen now? Would the sprite take someone else? Or would she let it go?

Silver was just massaging her temples when the door to the captain's room slid open smoothly and the troop trooped out. She straightened up, smiled when one of the girls looked at her, and then watched as another crewmember led them away down the corridor.

"Silver?"

It was the captain. Silver entered the room and stood before the desk, snapping a salute.

"Ma'am."

Justice steepled her fingers in front of her chest. "Good work, Silver. I'm pleased with the actors. They've agreed to perform the play at the price I'm offering and I'll get to see something I've always been curious to see. Thank you."

"You're welcome, cap'n." She smiled briefly and then moved her gaze to just over Justice's shoulder, her cheeks warming as she remembered the kiss. She waited for dismissal.

"I am aware of what happened on Alkeemik."

Silver glanced at the captain and then away again. She cleared her throat, opened her mouth to speak, but Justice raised a hand.

"Athanasia tricked me and I am very unhappy with her," Justice said. "But, I understand why she did it."

"You do?"

"Absolutely. Can you imagine what it must be like not being able to touch the person you love?"

Silver frowned. "Well, yes—"

Justice waved her into silence. "Go and speak to her at once. Let her know that I've spoken to the tech techs and they're working on something to enable her to use the hololounge."

"But why would..." She trailed off as the realisation dawned on her. The hololounge was used for recreational activities – snowboarding, horse riding, Quidditch and the like, but some crewmembers used it for less wholesome activities. If Silver used the room and Athanasia was there, then they could... *touch*. She swallowed. "Oh."

"Well? What are you waiting for, girl? Go and speak to her, I have work to get on with."

Silver saluted and left the office quickly. She walked back to the engine room, heart pounding all the way, certain people were looking at her and reading her thoughts.

It was cool in the engine room. Quiet but for the whirr of the air con and the hum of the engine. The tube in the centre of the room glowed with a yellow light and she approached it cautiously, hoping Athanasia wasn't still angry with her.

"Hi," she said, touching the tube. "I have some news."

I heard.

"And?"

I'm pleased.

Silver watched as the light formed into Athanasia's shape and smiled when the sprite put her hands to Silver's on the other side of the glass. "Won't you be embarrassed?" she asked.

Athanasia laughed. *No.*

"I will be. A bit. I mean, I have to stand there and ask the tender to load the program."

I can load the program.

Silver thought about it and a smile crept over her lips. "I suppose you can," she agreed.

Of course I can.

Silver felt a wave of pleasure flow through the glass into her hands and she gasped and pulled away, grinning. "What was that for?"

A preview. Come closer.

"Wait." Silver went back to lock the door and then she returned to the tube. She pressed her forehead to the glass and Athanasia did likewise. "I love you," she said. And the pleasure hit her again.