

Mouse:- My request: A lesbian romance. In space.

Laboratory

"Captain Streif?" It was Swabby the medic, theoretically under my orders, but in this operation...? So I pushed through to where he is kneeling on the floor.

"This is one we need, and it has to be you. Talk to her - she was raped and seriously beaten up, and she can't stand being touched by a male, not even me."

And I saw that the apparent pile of bloodstained rags on the floor over which he was protectively bending was a breathing, whimpering - bundle of bloodstained rags. I talked reassuringly as I knelt down beside her, not saying anything important except that I, too, was a woman, while digging out my first-aid training and inflating casts on both arms and one leg, with Swabby watching over us and giving instructions. I thought at first that it was a child, and wondered what made her so important (in Special Services you never ask) but, as I was binding up her ribs, she had tits - she was just tiny. Which meant that, even padded with everything I could lay hands on, the lobster jacket couldn't be adjusted small enough to hold her rigid, but I didn't have to waste time waiting for a stretcher - just picked her up in one arm, with the other hand free for my multigun.

Hell, I was sick at missing out on the action - beats the hell out of rounding up confused civilians in the streets, or their homes. And leads to faster promotion. But the squad's prevailingly masculine, and our rescues were the entire reason we were here at all - if it weren't for them the committee would just have let entire facilities burn, with their occupants. Not 'nice', but cold calculations said 'too many humans requires a culling program. If they do it to themselves it will seem less cruel'.

As I moved backwards, out of the facility, I started to notice my load quietly talking. Rationally, and clearly. "Third door on the left is kitchens. Direct way out without going through the entrance hall." Which, when I brought it up on my suit map, appeared to be accurate, so, despite the 'pull' instructions on the door I crashed through. People inside - wherever there's food, people will congregate, garnering the most universal of all booty - attacked with all the weaponry any kitchen affords. I was forced to twist the cleaver-gripping arm off one of them, but the blood only layered onto older atrocities on the stained stainless steel walls - the state of the original staff here did not encourage moderation. I thumbed my multigun to 'needle, tight spread' and settled down to installing a desire in the raiders to be elsewhere. Any who might survive to get there. And my left-arm load did not seem in the least put out by the cull; was, indeed, cheering me on, then:- "That door. Looks like a pantry or storage cupboard, it's where the bins go out. Small square for collection trucks to turn in, iron grill gates big enough even for you."

Oh, feeling better already - a joke. She's noticed I'm bigger than her (at one centimetre short of two metres tall, and weighing in at over a hundred and sixty kilos I tend to convince most people of this, but she was an extreme case). And her ideas were good - through the door (which turns out to swing both ways) into a corridor, then another (security alarmed, as if that made any difference now) into a courtyard where my suit electronics, freed from the bonds of metal walls, started gossiping enthusiastically with Special Central, who picked up our position on their charts and vowed vehicular support, soonest. I was quite ready to beat the door bars into ploughshares, or whatever (wearing a powered suit can do that to you), but there turned out to be a simple pushbutton that unlatched them from inside - spoilsports. But an ambulance was threading its way through the alleyways; I could hear it directly, not through electronic links - if a garbage truck can make it, an ambulance loaded with specials surely could.

Ambulance

It did. Suit clad figures piled out, and off, and I could deposit my burden on the sensor mattress and look around me. Medics' suits were different from combat suits, very little amplification, just enough to move patients, maximum manual sensitivity unlike our 'rip it apart' gauntlets, but they were hardly feminine. Johanna might be thirty centimetres shorter than I, but her voice was, to be kind, contralto - your first reaction tended toward tenor. My patient had accepted me, but might well have panicked if some unknown started removing the temporary protection I'd applied just minutes before. And to be honest, I was proud of her - incapable of moving herself, in extreme pain, she was neither passing out or screaming. During our escape she had remained rational, kept thinking, given useful suggestions. I could begin to see why she was one of our targets. I longed to return to the combat and apply some punishment to the men who had done this to her, but remembered the panic she was experiencing when we first met.

"Will it be all right if I leave you now, in hands far more capable than mine? I'm supposed to be

directing this raid, but Swabby thought you'd be happier with me."

"Must you? I won't crack again if you go, promise, it's just that, just that..." a few tears, quickly suppressed. "Swabby? He was nice to me - I'm sorry I scratched him."

"He'll survive, he's a Special's medic. Not built fragile. But the important thing is that you survive, and I'm afraid most of the medics here are male. Can you—" The ambulance doors slammed closed, and choice is left behind as the vehicle pulls away. Sharp impacts against armour-plated sides say why, and one of the crew scrambles onto an equipment rack with a spotter rifle, much too light for the purpose, and returns fire. I could have joined him, but instead put my gun down and asked Jorgio, fully qualified paramedic, to help me replace my gauntlets with latex gloves, liberating all of my almost absent sensitivity.

"Now, this young man is going to look at your injuries, because he is massively better than me at the job. Which, I'm afraid, means he is going to have to touch you, because this gives you the best chance of healing up all right, apart from the teeth, which are done for, I'm afraid." I'd unclipped the lobster jacket and was removing the improvised padding, just jettisoning it on the floor. "He's called Jorgio, he's an active heterosexual, and is quite likely to hurt you giving you the best chance, but you're brave - I know that - and I'll be here all the time, and you can see I could rip him into shreds if he did anything untoward. If this is too scary, we'll wait till we reach the hospital, but if you can tolerate..."

"Go on. I'm sorry to be difficult; I can take it." The voice was weak, but very determined.

"Nice encouraging picture you paint of me, Rose. Potential rapist, violent thug - just how I like my patients to see me," joined in Jorgio, slicing through temporary dressings and remains of lab clothing

"Have a good look at the state of her before deciding what reassurance she needs. I've earned some trust, haven't I little one? And I don't intend to wear that out by letting anything bad happen to her."

Don't even suspect that hands stopped working during this dialogue; remains of lab suit were cut away and Jorgio's hands, incredibly delicate, were cleaning off blood and sticking skin to prevent more spilling. And the ambulance wasn't helping much- getting shot at, even in a bullet proof vehicle, doesn't help the reflexes on some drivers. Swerves and bumps complicate his job, and I take a couple of seconds to depersonalise my multi, which let anyone fire it, and pass it over to Frank on the rack. A broad grin welcomed this act - our medics are specials too, but don't often get to use ordinance that powerful.

"I've loaded in drone seekers - they did train you on these things, I hope? We shouldn't be low on any ammunition." It's a wrench to let someone else touch my weapon, which has been trained into being almost a part of my anatomy, but I have another responsibility. But he can use it, while I can't, not without leaving the operating table, which I find myself extremely reluctant to do.

And ultimately we leave city streets and are free of most people trying to kill us. The drive got smoother, to everyone's relief, but especially Abby's - oh, yes, we've exchanged names. And probably any bacteria she owns, I do, too. Her blood is spattered over my face from potholes and swerves, and I can taste it on my tongue. But Jorgio's magic hands and kit have fixed her up, not good as new but a whole lot better than my makeshift repairs, so obviously we slow for the security checks, and it would have been a whole lot better to have done the work here. But.

I don't want to speculate on how many patients have died here because ambulances couldn't zoom straight into the operating wards as had been planned. I can, however, recite a list of patients who have arrived containing explosive charges or virulent diseases, in attempts to breach the gates, and hospitals elsewhere that have failed to maintain vigilance. But this is the front line, the combat zone of the entire ridiculous anti-medical revolt. Fortified like bank vaults or high-security prisons, no windows, and radar on the roof scanning for incoming missiles, planes or shells. Many of them, including this one, had outlying bunkers where the public were allowed, with A&E and maternity facilities, hardened tunnels with massive security linking them to the main, battle-armoured structure, so staff revolted by the sight of hopeless mothers, fevered children and cripples could dispense some comfort without opening the doors to the many and varied attackers.

They had been strange bedfellows, but it was a big bed. The Gaian tree huggers, enraged by the excess of humanity blamed medicine for having allowed the explosion. Millions of poor blamed institutionalised medical services for not having saved family members, or not having succeeded in extending vaccination programs to the rural poor (who had fought them tooth and nail before the statistics of survival became known), there were 'right to life' cults from a dozen religions, insisting Gods required maximum fertility from their worshippers and 'right to death' advocates insisting that suicide should be universally available, and that machine-assisted survival was against divine law. Those who believed the World Council was using vaccination programs to sterilise populations, their global aim being to lower population pressure. There were even those who, seeing how much of their tax money went into medicine,

rather than whatever project they held dear, considered the economy couldn't support this, and others who approved of medicine in a general way but disliked chemicals, research and computers, preferring traditional techniques often involving crystals, prayers or bits of animal. Backed by tens of millions who had nothing special against the doctors, but wanted to revolt, smash, steal from a society they felt had shown no justice towards them. They all hated each other, and their only common theme was the destruction of everything associated with health care, the synthesis of drugs, of antibiotics, laying waste to hospitals, laboratories, birth control and abortion clinics, trucks with dedicated doctors aboard dispensing cures outside the rich regions.

And wanting to hurt my Abby.

Hospital

Yes, mine. I'm not used to hauling rescues out of firefights - my tendency runs more to rearguard, holding the door open for the escape of my squad - of whom I am overprotective, yes. My first-aid skills have been much in evidence, but almost always in the service of my comrades in arms. Basically, I haven't talked with more than five outsiders since I joined up. I've not been clamouring for leave, have no desire to be in contact with civil society, go to parties, exchange opinions - I'm an undiplomatic, antisocial gorilla.

The ambulance inched forward, stopped, inched again. Frank climbed down from his perch and reluctantly returned my weapon, babbling thanks; I reflexively returned it to personal mode, only my DNA warm in the trigger for it to fire.

"Get anything?"

"Ten, fifteen drones. The autohunt makes it almost non-sporting. And at least one private armed car - the mess we made of it means I can't tell if it was a remote or occupied."

We're not supposed to feel that elation. Killing is not our primary function, just a means to an end. But I knew it too, the adrenaline high of invulnerability, success in the protection of our tribe - the weapons bring it out of the most passive of us, even if we empty our stomachs after.

We stripped (in my case, suit and inner clothes separately), putting all our possessions in specific containers to be tested for foreign influences, while we ourselves were scanned and gave samples of bodily fluids to be tested, and cleared of diseases, nanobots, the possibility that we would transform into supermutants (I giggled, then had to explain my image of trying to dig a collector needle into Clark Kent, bringing a slight, very transient smile from Abby). All this took time - lots of patients die, thousands of others are never collected because of the man hours expended here, and the truth is the most dangerous thing in here is us - if one were turned, by threat, brainwashing or sympathy with the beings he could do enormous damage before being brought down.

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I have never accompanied a patient into the wards before - never even visited one there. And, after the quasi-eternity of intake security I sat, dozing, in the waiting room of an operating theatre, where our temporary make do mendings had been replaced by professionals. Congratulated, as one might a young relative's crayon scribbles, but taken apart and redone without bumps in the road and with all the best tools, not to mention the best hands. I'd only been allowed a hospital robe and slippers, and a couple of friendly interns had patched up my few 'bruises and contusions', the ones you get on every outside op. - probably for training, as there wasn't anything worth patching. Unless, for somebody for whom an 'operation' involves sepsis and bright lights, not guns and chaos, they actually considered the pain worth worrying about - I'll admit its absence was pleasant.

The trolley is wheeling itself to a preprogrammed destination, politely getting out of the path of other traffic as it isn't on an urgent mission. I accompany it, following its manoeuvres, enjoying the slight smell of incense and tropical flowers, the shifting patterns on the wall that don't say: 'sterile, artificial' to the hind brain, but sooth subliminally. If ops needs me I'm easy enough to find. Her face in sleep is childlike, lacking both the inscribed laugh lines and recent pain and panic (and shame for the panic as if someone else wouldn't have felt it), but bruises are developing nicely, and her face will be a colourmap very soon.

It isn't a ward the path leads to, but a private room, the sort I've heard of but never seen. Doorguards tend to be smaller, more agile than field agents. I help transfer her from trolley to bed - that is I pick her up, and the nurse smooths the under-sheet, then I put her down on it, and the nurse does a circuit of sensors, microphones and the like - no drip feed or limbweights, so she can move as far as her injuries let her. The walls talk to her, saying all systems are at nominal. Then she lowers the lights and leaves, giving me no instruction more precise than a wink.

There's a comfortable chair in the corner, and a computer post. Perhaps it would be better if I sat

down until she woke, just so she didn't wake up feeling abandoned, wondering where she was...

"Psst." My eyes spring open to discover another pair, brown, shining and mischievous, looking back at them. "You snore."

"So would you," I whisper - exactly why, I don't know, the microphones in this room are sensitive enough to pick up the difference between waking and sleeping breathing, "if you were sleeping in this chair. But you're right; I'm making your monitors' task more difficult. I'll find my way back to my quarters."

"Don't you dare. I've never had a big, tough bodyguard before - admittedly I don't have a big, tough body for one to guard - and I'm going to make the most of it while I can claim invalidity. Cuddle?"

I gesture to the walls, and electronics thereattached. "They'll hear everything - and see most of it. As is their job, not perversion. You are barely out of the operating theatre, most of your ribs are held in place with staples and office glue, and due to your arms being immobilised you can't cuddle a fluffy toy. I went to some considerable effort getting you this far and..."

"Which is why I can't leap up and drag you down to thank you. Cuddle!"

There was no suggestion in that word. Pure order. As I work out how to arrange her, casts and all, so I can fit on the bed too, I swear I hear the wall giggle. No hanky panky, her in her hospital gown, me in my issue underwear - she is next best thing to immobilised, and I wouldn't dare risking anything in the state she's in. Just two little mammals, telling the universe that, scary as it is, we've got comfort.

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Turns out our operation was a greater than usual success and several more of her colleagues were brought in alive, if damaged, to be cured in the general wards (and ultimately be integrated into the laboratory structure). Which left me wheeling a well-propped Abby round to see friends who spoke fluent immunology together while I watched more or less patiently. More as it became clear that she was orchestrating the meetings to vaunt her new possession, me. The hospital staff approved - I wasn't supposed to go out on missions, except in emergencies, and specials tend to get edgy and nervous when restricted. It's universal, part of the mindset that fits us to the career, just as not getting nervous under strain is essential. So having two potential problems cancel each other out suited them very nicely.

Which is when I suggested that, apart from needing someone to feed and clean her, Abby could very easily become an outpatient, as there was no urgent monitoring going on, and bones set at their own speed - I could look after her, light work, in my apartment, keeping both of us out from underfoot of more urgently needed staff. I got a crash course in care, and massage, and we were thrown, giggling, out of urgencies.

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My quarters are within the hospital complex, and the powers that be are delighted to let me install Abby there - beds in wards are always in short supply. I was obliged to transport the boss lady through stores for hangings and paintings to transform it from 'a concrete bomb shelter' into 'a liveable space', wiping her cheek against bales of cloth since her hands lacked tactile sensitivity. It turned out I had enough credit to have gold plated the entire interior. And the chosen cloth and decor hardly made a visible dent in my account - there had never been anything I wanted to spend my quite adequate salary on.

Now there was, even if the calculation centre of my brain couldn't quite work out why.

Soon my room is transformed, the sound system as often oozing out ragas as blasting Wagner, colourful and smelling of... of everything. Or everything enthusiastic and alive, of flowers, of spices, incense, no disinfectant or stale vomit, no hospital. I'd threatened to get an extra bed, as I might roll over in the night and without arms she'd be crushed. She was very ironic about my tendency to 'chuck something in the microwave and shovel it into her' and vowed that her first action, after scratching herself thoroughly, would be to cook me some real food. (She still hasn't. Cooking in a space station requires a whole new set of techniques, and she's always been too busy to learn them. In orbit, I cook better than her.)

Then the bombshell. She wouldn't be staying here. The hospital was a practical one, with no need for advanced research - she was an advanced theoretical modeller, who would no longer require medical observation - she, and several of her less damaged colleagues would be flown out to somewhere cutting edge developments, rather than just cutting edges, were continuing. And we discovered, quite unexpectedly, that we didn't want to be separated, that our physical fling, her appreciation of the lack of responsibilities imposed by physical immobilisation, my acceptance that she wanted me to take charge,

that her 'suggestions' were not officer's orders had expanded into a partnership. Discussions between us and surprisingly sympathetic staff suggested solutions, some fairly outré, but most boiling down to a very old contract - we should get married, which would make separating us a question of crowbars and danger, rather than a mere relocation slip.

Wedding

As a wedding it had a lot in common with a fancy-dress party. My mates largely turned up in prosthetics and bandages, most of the fit ones being on call, and several dress uniforms had appeared, mainly smelling of camphor and showing signs of never having been worn before, especially on those who had drastically changed weight since joining. I had expected to marry in dress uniform - it had precedent. But my squad had surprised me, less than an hour before the ceremony, with a garment cut out of some white and slithery cloth, fitting like a second skin, to the point I couldn't wear anything under it without the fact being apparent, leaving it equally obvious in the photos that there wasn't anything but it between me and the world. Mind you, the specials had all seen me naked, and it was hardly going to shock medical staff. So only lab crew, researchers and techs, were getting anything new, and she had wanted to show me off to those. Abby's crew had worked hard on getting her a dress that didn't look totally ridiculous with casts and slings, though the hospital staff had cut back the casts a trifle to free enough finger to apply a ring to, and sign the register, broken fingers knitting up faster than arm bones. They were going to remove the casts entirely for the voyage, but recommended keeping the two slings to tuck easily tired arms into. 'There will be a lot of muscle loss'. The bruising on her face was hardly visible, even from as close as I was (which was, roughly, as close as it was possible to get), partly because her complexion doesn't show bruises like mine, but also due to the makeup job somebody had applied, and she looked superb. After the ceremony we were hugged and kissed, stripped and redressed in more practical travelling clothes (yeah, right there - non conventional for a marriage, but time was of the essence) and bundled into an armour-plated vehicle to take us to the airport (which had a tin can tied on behind, to draw the attention of terror gangs?). There was food and drink (especially the latter) for our guests, but we were away the moment Abby's arms were freed.

Quito

We held hands, looking out of the panoramic viewing gallery of Mariscal Sucre international airport at the sleek, four-engined spaceplane on the runway, being prepared to carry us to our new life together. It was being prepared to carry a lot of other things, too; that palette was canned food, the skyfarms were far from being self sustaining yet, let alone feeding the manufactories, but we knew our priorities were in order.

Together. That was the important thing. Oh, I suppose 'life' might count, too, but five years in special services you get used to the idea of it all finishing abruptly - we've all had friends to whom it happened. The idea of not being alone, in the sense of part of a family or couple, is a bit more difficult to get my head round. Perhaps I shouldn't have been gripping that tiny little hand in my oversized paw, considering her arms looked spaghetti-thin even compared to her fragile forty-two kilogram frame - the casts had only been taken off at the airport just before the flight from Calcutta - oh, the spaceplane could have taken off from sea level at the North Pole, but every metre of altitude, every millibar of atmospheric pressure that the plane doesn't have to fly through is extra payload or a higher orbit.

A colourful little truck, looking more like a Lego model than a serious vehicle, drew up to the side of the plane. Without anyone getting out, a telescopic arm started exchanging hexagonal tubes, bright red with a white flash, the standard for liquid hydrogen. In the corps I had been trained in how one could be converted into a bomb, either to do it myself or recognise when it had been done, they'd become that common. They were the most convenient way to store and transport wave and tidal power, and their monitoring electronics were quite sophisticated - as were their mechanical valves. The foam containers are stronger than metal ones of similar weight, and give appreciable heat insulation, saving energy. Lots of planes used them, along with trucks and ships, but few had the honeycomb ranks like ours. The other hexagons, black and white, Lox, were loaded within the accelerator tube.

Those of you who were raised on films of the Apollo project are probably wincing at the idea of flying my fragile darling into orbit before she is completely recovered, but the spaceplane is no more challenging than the aircraft we'd flown in. Cardiac patients were flown into space to ease the strain on their hearts. Our take off might be propelled by a linear accelerator, but that was to maximise payload; otherwise it could perfectly well have taken off from a standard runway, with no more difficulty.

All airports nowadays have defences worthy of military establishments - aircraft are just too tempting as targets, used by the rich, polluting the atmosphere, extremely visible, excellent weapons - but no other was as charged with anti-missile lasers and missiles, antipersonnel automatic weaponry, lethally electrified, anyone who got into the compound was someone who shouldn't have, condemned to death, with a number of diverse and frequently painful ways of accelerating this inevitable goal. Behind the barrier was the cluster of hotels, car hires and personal service establishments that grows up around any

successful transport hub, and beyond those, the mountains - the last of Earth that we would see.

The PA announcements shifted from incomprehensible Spanish to equally scrambled International English. After a century and a bit of commercial air travel, and more than that of audio announcements, information transfer was by destination boards and small men with bundles of paper. Like the one so smartly civilian suited that he just had to be secret service walking towards us now.

"You're a little - conspicuous - m'am." That, at least, was true. My bulk had always been visible, and there was nobody else on the deck. A few months before I'd have accepted the risk without thought, but now I had another reason to stay alive. "And while we very much appreciate the practice you are supplying to my concealed marksmen, my camera scanners, you've been on the news a lot recently, and must be classifiable in the top ten of 'the world's most hated couples'. So if you could move on to some region where only my boys and girls can scan, or at least we can track the data trails of everybody who's jacked in eavesdropping..." We were allowing ourselves to be hustled into 'priority' territory, where coffee is delivered hot by smiling uniformed staff and actually tastes roughly coffee-y, rather than being the luke-warm sludge spat out of machines that hadn't liked it either.

Despite the intrusion into our now-shared personal space I was smiling, nay, grinning like a pumpkin, running my thumb over the texture of the ring settling into one of my sausage fingers while Abby's much smaller replica rattled around on hers - there was a piece of string like a child's glove keeper preventing her from losing it before those twig fingers filled out to 'small and dainty', as they had been before. Less than fifteen hours ago I had dropped that ring onto the digit protruding from the cast, and had to put my own on too, as there wasn't enough strength there to do so. 'Till death shall you part' had seemed the most likely outcome for some time, but it felt so good that it be formal.

"We've already collected thirty-seven poisoned articles, including umbrellas, Zimmer frames, knitting needles and boarding passes, have captured three sets of breast implants with nitro-glycerine replacing silicone..."

"Really?" Abby's eyes shone with amusement, not terror, at the situation we'd got ourselves into.

"Not really nitro-glycerine, no - it would have been too unstable to take out of the taxi. But just as explosive. One of them even had poisoned spikes implanted in her nipples, like a Bond film - and an electric wheel chair rigged to short out the batteries and catch fire. You don't want to know how many would-be passengers are suffering from a variety of lethal diseases, many acquired very recently, just dying to get to know you - though, since medical research was moved into orbit, some of those will have nothing to do with you - we get half a dozen every flight. The holding cells have more residents than the departure lounges, and most of them are the last survivors of a much larger collection filtered out in take off checks on five continents. As bait even the congress chairperson fades - though it's never been so evident which airport she was taking off from."

Somehow the situation didn't feel as drastic as it probably should have done. We'd finished the romance story and were now in the 'happily ever after' phase - and the 'ever' was beginning to look as if it might last years rather than hours.

Poured concrete and armour plate - the accelerator didn't need enclosing, its coils could have been set up on open ground. Still, like this wind ceased to be a factor, and shooting at the plane as it set out was much more difficult. And the locals got far less sonic boom, as mach one was passed inside the tube. Rendered even more important by the fact that it wasn't just the daily manned vessel that took off from here

There were no windows but we were well underground anyway - nothing to see. The back of each seat was a high definition 3D screen, with controls in the armrests for selecting in flight movie, external cameras or computer mode, which Abby dived into as soon as she was strapped in to my satisfaction.

As always with commercial flights we'd both got deep enough in the distractions to be surprised when the door hissed hermetically closed and announcements about what to do in the unlikely occurrence...

Movement starts absolutely smoothly in those accelerators - own magnetic bearing, a couple of kilometres of track to get us up to mach 2. Even the sound barrier has been anticipated, and the shockwaves are barely detectable inside the cabin. Our screens started a countdown, with a shot of the phallic end of the accelerator pointed at the sky. Just before the final 'zero', when we were ejaculated at mach two point something, an aluminium cover, accelerated just in front of us and serving to keep the atmosphere non-turbulent as we flew through it, was clearly visible as it fell into the jungle, and then there was the briefest flash that was us, jets already hot, crossing the continent toward the skies. Had the engines failed to function we'd have splashed down in the Atlantic - no mean distance for a ballistic shot.

However, no such inconvenience touched us this launch. The little dot that was us seen by satellite,

detected by radar, measured by inertial systems and satnav, crossed the continent, and it was fascinating to see its position fuzz and defocus as the different systems disagreed and argued about the nearest kilometre. All totally irrelevant, a security ruse - the craft's autopilot knew perfectly well what it needed to do to mate with the station, but there were several viable solutions to the problem and an enemy with a missile might choose the wrong one. And all the while the pressure against our backs, pushing us ever faster, was constant. There might have been a faint jar as we passed the sound barrier, but the screen had been telling us our speed so it could just as well have been psychologic. Attendants served meals and drinks, offered headphones for the movie or our music selection, and instructed us as to the functions of various seat adjustments - couldn't they have done that during the wait before launch? - but I turned out to be too big for sleep mode; the passenger behind would have had his screen rammed into his face. Pity, since the wedding had been thirty-two hours before, and it was thirty-six plus since either of us had slept. Still, I had snoozed in less comfortable conditions than this, and Abby was excellently served. One of her brand new - oh, all right, reconditioned second hand hands - crept back into mine, surprised to learn it belonged there, and I could feel that silly piece of string preventing our union from slipping off and getting lost.

I woke up feeling physically strange, which analysed out to the force from behind being still constant, but weight being severely reduced. This was not, as might have been guessed, because we were so far from Earth its attraction was falling off, but due to the speed, offered me in kilometres per hour - ridiculously large - and mach figures, which was compensating for most of that attraction. I'd been out of contact when we'd changed over from air-breathing to rocket propulsion, so I can't certify it had been as smooth as the rest of the process, but since I had slept through it can't have been much of a jolt. Unless I was more exhausted than I thought.

Abby snores, too, in a restrained and ladylike way {Ladylike? Me? When I get some muscles back into these arms I'll hit you.}. And she snuggles, which makes it difficult to get out and eliminate the cup of tea I'd accepted earlier while there was enough gravity for it to flow in the right direction. They were obviously monitoring seatback cameras and an attendant materialised and smilingly substituted for me while I untangled fingers.

"Newly weds?" Not actually a whisper, but even less intrusive, not carrying at all.

"Yesterday. No, probably the day before by now, but new, yes." I kept my voice as low as I could, but Abby still squirmed, so I went to take advantage of the last vestiges of available gravity - I was not looking forward to microgee sanitation.

Returning to the seat I discovered an Abby awake, and ready for the same experience. As I had brachiated back almost entirely by force of arms, and didn't trust her newly released limbs, I escorted her on the double trip, thanking the attendant, a pleasing if undermuscled male, for his attention.

Too late, as we strapped back into our seats, to sample any of the films or alternative entertainments, so the screens showed us the geometry of our approach to the station. Perversely, as we approached our destination it became an Achillian tortoise - our mutual velocity reduced inversely proportionally to our distance.

The thrust from behind reduced, little by little, and the pull from the Earth vanished completely. Our digestive tracts tried to decide whether this new lack of direction was a good thing or not, while our ears said others in the cabin had not been so lucky, and the 'not' had come upon them faster than their reactions could handle. Attendants swam through our restricted vision window with vacuum-cleaner devices, and there were no disasters in our region, and we settled down to wait - or possibly, as 'down' was becoming increasingly irrelevant, settles in. Abby was experimenting with the novelty of hands, partly on the familiar surface of computer control, but largely on the unexplored (by her) surface of me - since she'd been at this since take off a number of closures had stopped being so for access, and I'd had considerable attachment to do before travelling the length of the cabin. She was much less disturbed - I'd had the use of that squirmly little body, except for the arms, since she'd moved in, and needed less exploration, but it would be

Which was taking forever. Not time for a film? We could have watched a feature length. All right, watched pots and all that; finally the two dots, us and the station, were zoomed in till we could see we were coming in tail first, drifting with just breaths of gas correcting the path. And a tether unrolled, followed by a boarding tube, and we were home.

Home we'd never seen, but would never be going back from. Home that they still had to get us out of this vehicle into, which looked like a lengthy job - attendants were putting people, medics, techies - into suits, carefully, one at a time, and hadn't even looked at us yet. I don't think you could claim I was 'impatient' to start our honeymoon, but 'eager', yes. *What I don't quite hear you say and you've been living together three weeks?* Which we have, but with only one pair of hands between us, and considerable frustration.

Arrival.

Quarantine. Of course everyone from the plane, crew and passengers was quarantined - it would have been the supreme irony that the new centre of medical excellence should be wiped out by plague, an irony that the fanatics would have loved to organise. But it had been organised that Abby and I be together, and separate from the others. Which was much appreciated.

Oh, we knew that everything we did, said and were was monitored, filmed and analysed and frankly I didn't give a flying f - no, that's exactly what I did give. Several times. When we met up with others, at meals or awaiting our turn for the centrifuge hour - it had been decided we should keep our bones, despite never going back to the surface, as when the station was completed it would be spinning fast enough that gravity adaptation would be useful - we were both apparently radiant with smiles and goodwill, raising the spirits (and doubtless envy) of those with fewer reasons for joy.

But even young lust can be sated. Though the separation between us and station staff lasted less than the forty days its name suggests, and even less than the twenty eight a honeymoon might desire, less than half the twenty days of separation had passed before we were bouncing off the walls. Which was fun, but not very constructive. Abby got her computer connected to the medical central and succeeded, before we were freed, in solving one of the problems (about a virus structure- don't expect me to explain, I'm just here to look proud) that had been bothering people for more than a year, and was making great progress on two others to the admiration of her future colleagues, while I was immersed in the security web, until now woefully relaxed. Uh? No, I'd much prefer a relaxed security myself, but every plane that docked brought new residents, practically refugees, and if I was going to be head of security, which seemed extremely likely, I would have to take into account the fact that, sooner or later, a fanatic was going to make it here, and a station was horribly vulnerable to sabotage. Unfortunately the space we had was too small for me to attempt adapting my martial arts skills and immobilisations to different gravity conditions - that, and the fact my only conveniently available opposition was not up to my weight, and tended to try to prolong clinches rather than escape them. I did, however, run several computer simulations, and attempt the positions - but it's not the same. And despite our work there was always time for a kiss or cuddle, extraordinarily more satisfying than the same action before we were in love.

Ultimately, the twenty days did draw to a close and, still glowing like fireflies, we were ceremoniously welcomed into residence and introduced (it seemed) to the entire population, not merely of the station but the factories, greenhouses and laboratories in close orbit, sometimes close enough to be physically tethered (nanofibre, the material strong enough to build the orbital tower when the time was ripe, and enough sheer mass existed in orbit, was manufactured in microgee, so was a tiny fraction of the price on Earth). A construction site the size of a city, inhabited by the cream of every profession. Everything here was lifted from Earth, twenty tonnes at a time, by spaceplane or laser launcher; the Moon mines were still net users of mass, though soon... And we met director Newton, a nice enough politician, as politicians go, who was officially in charge of keeping everyone happy, and working - though stopping this crowd from working would probably have involved total restraint or lobotomy. Death might work - though we had deaths, and nobody even suggested stopping to increase safety precautions as they would have on the surface, where they had lots more people (and, to my totally politically incorrect view, people

Security now was basically the job of a bouncer in a pub near a construction site - tough customers you didn't want to hurt but who can get a bit unruly. Like every frontier society they were making alcohol, though with the standard of the laboratory the rotgut was less debilitating than many. But in time - not very much time, the way things were advancing - there would be sophisticated crimes, and justice would no longer be the sheriff with his six gun but the forensics lab, like practically all of Earth. Highly intelligent, motivated assassins would try and eliminate the director, myself, and Abby. The quantities of money in play guaranteed that. And it was up to me to make sure they were detected and deflected before they did, which involved thinking faster than them, earlier than them and above all better than them, and surrounding myself with a crew nearly as determined as me. Without being able to recruit or conscript from the ground.

Fortunately I like challenge.

And two blocks of architecture as big as condominiums were attached to kilometres of nanofibre and spun up, ever faster, and suddenly lots of construction workers were getting exultantly drunk in the most dangerous environment known to man, and we couldn't let any of them become unworkworthy, and one of the regions where exercise centrifuges were no longer needed contained a block of cells that could contain twenty-four prisoners, and the long period of running flat out to stay in the same place had started.

Station

"They don't like us at all."

"That's no wonder. With over eighty-five percent of station personnel of the masculine persuasion..." Dr. Abbigail Forster, Abby, silhouetted herself and stretched against the gibbous Earth and brilliant pixels of stars. The viewport might have been purely electronic, but it would take a visual acuity way beyond human to detect the difference between what it said and a hypothetical piece of glass through the hull. "... they must have thought Santa was piloting the spaceplane when they saw two female first names on the roster. Only to find we cancelled each other out."

"Why are there so few? With a thousand applicants for every post, surely they could find qualified - ladies - who would also enjoy relieving their comrades' um- physical requirements?"

I'm Major Rosamunde Streiff, muscular and powerful, very much the stereotyped 'butch'. I had joined the specs - the special services, never to be abbreviated to SS if you wished to keep your limbs intact - as midnight struck on my eighteenth birthday in Adelaide, and had been a rising star in the interception forces when I had been assigned personal bodyguard to a gang-raped, broken-boned teenager who, I had been informed, was an absolute genius at cybergenetics, and would break down if even approached by a male doctor.

At the time I'd felt it an insult, tainted with sexism - no longer be giving orders to my squad, being seen by her superiors, paths to promotion were obstructed and confused and, with both Abby's arms broken, obliged to perform tasks more suited to a servant. I could hardly wait for my charge to be flown into orbit, where all worthwhile biological research was being done (originally, to protect society from microbes, spills, biohazards. More recently to protect researchers from what passed for society). Still, the youngster was a stimulating conversationalist, self-deprecating and humble (when not totally enthralled by a problem in her speciality), grateful for the attention, and standing (or frequently sleeping) guard in a hospital in a high security enclave was a pleasant break from endless stimtabs and mindless mobs

Until I, whose only 'romantic' impulses until then had been totally physical, short lived and with men (generally squad-mates), pleasant enough but in no way important, discovered that my feelings for the under-nourished, coffee-skinned, diminutive researcher had gone beyond the purely protective/maternal stage and I could no longer imagine our separation. Promotion no longer seemed so important; while the hands had been unusable I'd worked as a computer interface for the girl who couldn't stop working, prevent herself thinking, stop attacking the problem with teeth and toenails, if that was all she had, and had caught a glimpse of her genius, but it hadn't been that which introduced me to love but the sheer power of that will. And then the day we'd dared reveal to each other feelings that neither had experienced before...

"Still too many of the World Council from patriarchal retrograde theistic communities, who can't believe anything without testicles can be effective, let alone competitively so, in any intellectual discipline."

The World Council, whose average age was in the upper eighties, wanted a continuity in medical services - for the important people on the planet, at least. Officially they could only recommend actions, not order them; practically, any state which did not follow their suggestions would be starving within three months. Which had saved the lives of several hundred thousand medical practitioners and researchers, although not of several million others caught in the pogrom.

"What are those bruises? As a blonde, your skin does mark terribly easily. I hope I didn't cause any of them?" With a laugh in the voice; Abby had optimism as the cornerstone of her personality, and it was obvious that even using the full strength of her newly healed arms she could never have hurt her lover.

"Brigadier General Khalim thought he could convince me to 'widen my tastes'. He seemed to see physical dominance as a prerequisite."

"Ouch. Did it hurt?"

"No, just as they said, if you take care only to hit the soft bits... oh, him. He couldn't own up to if it did. Macho traditions."

"And the rest?"

"The cracked bells, the washed out horn, blow into my face with scorn..." Rosa's voice was better adapted to shouting commands across the parade ground, and even the battlefield, than singing, but its harsh tones suited the ancient ballad. Abby's eyes went blank, then patterned, and even when they glittered anew with her natural exuberance her face was elsewhere as if she were listening.

"Mid twentieth, Dylan, oh history buff. Sometime I think they froze you for me before I was born, waiting for the perfect match. Did you really crack the bells? And who's this chambermaid?" Contrary to her companion's, Abby's voice always had a laugh bubbling up in it, and was pure and musical as a robin's. Probably because her genius in biological calculations had exempted her from military service, even during the plague that had caused so much death and sterility and stopped mankind crossing the twenty billion mark (numbers still reducing, to everybody's relief except the families of the dead or sterile) and had convinced millions that biologists and members of the laboratory staff, who had worked themselves to exhaustion developing the vaccine which had ultimately stopped the dying, had been under the orders of the world population authority to cause the deaths, cut the fertility rate, generally turn back the clock. Tens of millions had been killed by mobs, letter bombs, religious fanatics, conspiracy theorists... for five years it had been open season on medical workers or anyone who could be associated with them, until there were no doctors to treat patients except in protected enclaves, where only specific patients were given entry. While outside children started to die, and the mob, ignoring the fact that it had been their own actions that had driven all potential help into hiding, killed authority figures, or the leaders that had led them into this impasse, or both.

"I suspect we were chosen in reaction to the trend. Not that we aren't excellent - they wouldn't risk the station by using less than the best - but there were others for each of our posts who were as good. We're the token weird couple, mixed race, single sex, differing culture. We prove to the liberal minority that all tastes are being catered for."

Mankind would not die out, but numbers might well drop by half, as the sterile lived their childless lives and faded out. But it could drop lower than that with no economic downside; there would be a slight excess of empty houses slowly crumbling back into the landscape. But for that, there should be as many couples excluded from the production line, or yet another major plague, this time without the medical services to fight it back under control. And, symbols of the first solution, we redressed, and walked out among our fellow humans, blissfully barren.

Crisis

It was hardly a major surprise. The spaceplanes' crews had been joining the station for over a year now, and there were fourteen vessels in loose orbit among the various constructions

Apart from myself my 'police force' consisted of five people, two of them ex-colleagues from Special Forces, the others computer and paperwork specialists. There was almost no conventional theft, and rules about contraband were extremely relaxed

I'd been training promising youngsters in various martial arts I was modifying for different gravity conditions - micro, lunar, Earth, variable. Certainly these were generally the most aggressive, the trouble makers, which made breaking up fights more challenging - but there were fewer informal combats and more organised duels, which generally we didn't interfere with. I was also developing weaponry that could be used in an environment separated from vacuum by two thin layers of metal and foam. Lasers, explosives, fast-moving, heavy projectiles and battle-axes were out; any projectile needed to be lightweight and not over penetrative, though autosealing would take care of small enough punctures. So they had to be lightweight darts, or needles, or shatter on impact. Easy to design protective clothing against. So skill weapons, rapiers and shuriken plus close up weapons like poisoned needles. Low cost nanofibre made garrottes and bolas that were practically unbreakable and would cut off a limb. Airpuff guns destabilised your opponent in microgee, while working as a reaction drive if you centre the thrust through your own centre of gravity. And of course lots of bare hand/foot strikes.

The medical crew (largely massively overqualified - almost all the researchers had had ordinary medical qualifications before specialising) generally approved of the exercise, even those who didn't themselves indulge. except when they had broken limbs to patch up, and even then there were fewer non-training accidents than previously in construction and manufacture - learning to use your body in one exercise helps in coordination in others. And yes, we got sweaty and inebriated together, and even those who disliked each other got to feel some of the team bonding of a fighting force, and even yesser, I occasionally regretted not being free to follow up the close contact wrestling with more intimate contact, but even if I knew Abby would tolerate an occasional lapse I felt no real temptation - what we had extended beyond mere physical pleasure.

* * *

It had been the Earthside comptollers of the Space Service who had 'suggested' that the unused spaceplanes would be better off in orbit than on the ground where they constituted a rather too tempting target. We were still sending goods down in non-returnable parachute pods, and even then they were shot at by ack-ack and fighter planes launched from territories theoretically signatories to space law, showing how little their governments actually controlled the people they claimed to represent.

There were several more magnetic launchers by now, in various high altitude points not too far from the equator - a couple in the Himalayan plateau, bickered over by India and China, two more in the Andes and even one in Africa, although that one was almost always unusable due to what were essentially tribal disputes. Still, the unannounced, unexpected launch came from a hardened military runway in Australia, not optimum for location or height, and with no launching coils. Everybody knew the spaceplane could do it, simply by reducing payload, but there'd been no contingency plans - and the thing could carry a fair sized bomb, or a squad larger than my force, but the flights were always preprogrammed - no pilots in the 'planes, though there is an interface to reprogram so a human can take over in a total emergency, but with passwords and protection against intrusions, and... but whatever humans can devise, other humans can override, and there was a commercially available flight simulator program for the spaceplane - quite a popular one.

Anyone could find out exactly where we were at any time - our orbit was fixed, and in no way secret. Theoretically we were very vulnerable.

Practically we were not that badly off. I hoped they would bring up a gang of armed jihadi thugs, confident in the knowledge of the number of policepeople I had, how they were armed, and that their leader was a woman (that sort never accept that a woman can be as effective and aggressive as themselves). I still had my exoshell, as some as them might well, too, but mine had been continuously since I arrived - I was confident that my posse would take out anyone trained in Earth gravity. If they had read the official report of our police force, and that we didn't have any heavy weapons, and underestimated our potential, so much the better. And it wasn't in any of our literature that the spaceplane has to dock with the microgee structure - we were pushing pictures of our rotary, gee stabilised regions and not emphasising that to get to these required passing through microgee - theoretically a spaceplane could synchronise and dock with a rotating mass, but it had never been done, and probably never would, sober.

We suspected that, rather than come through the docking tube one at a time they'd attempt the movie technique - suit up and swarm out, coordinating in space. They'd probably done months of computer simulations. In which case my boys would have the advantage of home ground, and experience. I warned them not to get overcocky - a bullet or beam doesn't care how much experience you have - and spread them wide, wearing mirror-bright armour to reduce the risk of stray lasers.

Wide, that was the problem. We had so much territory to defend. Greenhouses, factory spheres, living spaces, labs... So if they organised a concerted attack against any target, they'd have numerical advantage, until reinforcements could get there, and using cold jets and rockets that'd be some time. So we'd rigged a net of threads - more nanofibre - stretched between us, so we could reel each other in, and it was a weapon in its own right, cutting through suits, guns or men while being almost invisible.

Bombs were more problematic, but a ground liver would probably not realise how little effect a shock wave would have in vacuum. Our little captured comet had been moved into place and its orbit stabilised with thermonuclear explosions, without upsetting anything else in our local region. If they'd got a big enough bomb and used the spaceplane as shrapnel we'd take damage, but we'd bounce back, if there were no more attempts.

Of course all our preparations were useless. Somebody on the 'plane saw their trajectory on the screen and decided they could do the trip faster than the computer. When we saw the extra blast, we knew it meant a bomb - and we were wrong. The thing missed us by a thousand kilometres, blasting away, trying to correct the error as long as the fuel lasted. The apogee of the ellipse was well outside the orbit of the moon, and when the inhabitants realised that any secrecy they might once have had had gone they started transmitting - powerfully enough to be heard on Earth. Insults and obscenities to start with, then, as it became clear we were doing nothing to save them, pleas and demands for rescue.

Which was not technically feasible, however it might look to an Earth-based observer. We had spaceplanes, lots, and carefully hoarded fuel, plus some we were making from comet water. We could calculate an intercept orbit and probably even match velocity, but not reclaim them in any reasonable time. 'Reasonable' meaning before they'd died of asphyxia or thirst. They were on a seventeen day orbit, with three days of supplies because they'd tried to kill us, and public opinion thought we should sacrifice ourselves trying to save them, that this would be seen as very heroic. And somehow, yelling 'come forward and fight like a man, so I can kill you, bitch.' didn't inspire the same sentiments as asking for help might have done. We had some very fertile, inventive minds aboard, who just might have come up with a solution, if the request had been posed politely, but as it was most of them were drunker than Space Authority might really have approved of, celebrating the fact we hadn't had to defend our home. In any reasonable story we'd have had a heroic and successful battle - actually everyone, even the aspiring heroes, was very happy to let their own ignorance and stupidity do their fighting for them.

And perhaps something could have been arranged from Earth. They could have possibly launched a

lowload plane with enough fuel to do an intercept, and even divert the trajectory into one that could have got them back alive. But simultaneously with the attack plane's takeoff (simultaneous in Earthly terms - an hour or two's leeway meant nothing in these timescales) ultralights had dived into four of the magnetic tubes, with bombs, if not particularly powerful ones, meaning no full power launches from Earth for a week of repairs and recalibration. Deliberately to prevent intervention, one can assume, but it certainly made the politicians' job easier 'We couldn't even try to rescue them and bring them home for trial, they'd prevented us'.

When the 'plane came back after its long loop (slightly off its predicted path - they had evacuated the air when their CO₂ scrubbers were no longer up to the task) it was an Earthbased takeoff that intercepted them. Carefully, because one of them could have survived after the closedown of transmissions, and be waiting on a dead man's switch, or something could have been booby trapped. As it so happened, this was not the case - the doors swung open to the stars, but still, as the fuel containers were replaced the plane was programmed to set down in Arizona, flightworthy. They had been eight men and two women, with rocket launchers, nerve gas, explosives and personal weapons like knives and pistols, presumably intended for gravity regions. But at the end the cabin cameras show a massive gang-bang, and it's possible that it was acted out, but it looked as if the girls were brutally multiple raped before depressurisation. Abby went into nightmare mode, that she had escaped two years before, believing it finally, and I - I regretted the men (boys, some of them) were all beyond my retaliation. They'd obviously read my records and aimed that straight at me - our meeting was not widely known, neither of us is famous. And Abby had been getting over her trauma - cautious with men, but no longer trembling terrified. And now, back to the cling, weeping dreams, and for her what is probably the worst, the memories leaping up and interfering with the concentration needed for her work.

So, which of you is going to say I should never have let her see the footage in the first place? Despite her size she's an adult woman, not a child to be censored. Loving her does not involve restricting her choice, protecting her from the universe, however much I might want to do so. Back before leaving Earth I did not adopt a daughter; I married a wife, teamed up with an individual at least as worthy as myself, and I have never - not even when sleepless, weeping nights followed in succession, leaving me confused and muzzy in my work - never regretted it.

Everything about the ship was analysed, first in space as robots replaced the fuel hexes with full ones, then on the surface when they landed, including their computers, and we learnt they hadn't even tried to find alternative solutions. Had they done their calculations right, the recoil of their automatic weapons combined with the thrust from their rocket ammunition could have reduced their voyage by three whole days, and venting their cabin air precisely, and living in suits, would have brought their path quite close to us. Little use, you say, if they'd all have been dead anyway, but if they had been willing to sacrifice seven of their members, already condemned, three could have stayed alive long enough to have been a nuisance. Not much of an option, true, but it has to beat a futile orgy, doesn't it? And they'd never even looked at options, accepting fate. Actually, given a pity they came from Newton's first law, which doesn't ever slow down projectiles in space; either pistols or rockets could have been used against us at any range, even the other side of the moon, if trajectories were calculated precisely enough.

Lying together in the wreckage of a bed after a particularly bad night, knowing that blood from my scratches was impregnating into the sheet, or what was left of it, but not willing to take comfort arms away to spray on skin I mentioned "It's almost a shame they came from all over. With our new weather forecasting we can bring the parapods down to within fifty metres of a target and distribute something nasty but non-lethal - I'm sure you've got something suitable in your lab."

"Don't ever say that. Don't think it, even. I know you - you're like me, and would get nightmares if ever you killed a child. And you'd be considerably more difficult to restrain." Here she demonstrated that her restraining me was not a viable proposition without chains, which was great fun if hardly serious. As a couple we were like that - break a serious atmosphere with humour, or passion, and then come back to it: "You're more direct than I am, but just as idealistic."

Look, I like her believing the best of me, all right? I didn't correct her misapprehension. People have died on raids I've been on, innocent bystanders or merely stealing food, in the wrong place at the wrong time. Giving me guilt, and occasional nightmares, but nothing compared to Abby's flashbacks. Deep down, I've just not got as much good in me as she has. It's not just my size that made me into a soldier - all right, 'security specialist' - while she became a researcher; I get a buzz from the violence and risk which she totally lacks. And yet we fit together impeccably, with hardly a worthwhile row in the - could it really be five years we'd been a team? How could I tell her she was wrong, that I'm as violent and potentially dangerous as the men who nearly killed her? I'd lose her for sure - and I love her more than anything else in this world.

