

## TOMAS SEES NADIENNE

I stop in at Zill's, the cheap-food cockpit. I straddle a stool along with all the lurks and the hooks, munch on the burls this place scorches to a nice dark brown, count the hagflies mating on the stone ceiling, watch the blues out in the understreet drag away parts of dead people. The green-burning pyro smell that's always up my nose keeps away the stink.

My metal's gone, and I owe Rask for the shipment. Her cocks won't like that.

I should have stuck with duct-cleaning.

"Tomas." A light voice in my left ear. Nadienne. So much I missed her, it's been months; I turn, and she's next to me, but there's tall Georg the Cadaver, dangling by her side again. My gut hurts to see him with her. Some lurk with lizard ears and a patchwork face squeezes past me on his way in.

"Watch it, cock," I snap at him. He's gone. I glare at Georg. "So?"

He shrugs. "Ask her."

Nadienne shrugs, but her mouth is set and the words come hard. "You aren't there, Tomas. I've tried, I'd keep trying with you if I thought you'd be around for me. You never are. You're just crazy." Even with that halo of light brown hair, her round face has a look as hard as the mile-deep stone around us.

My gut lances me. "So you just gave up on me, that's right?" I drop the burg on the trencher and wipe my hands on both coverall sleeves. I'd just started to think maybe she'd hang on, give me a chance to get the pieces plugged in.

"Tomas--" Georg starts. Big idiot, all hair and eyes.

"Eat your lip, halfcock." I stand up fast and jab my shiver up under his chin. His eyes bug out; the shiver's vibro edge will split his jaw in half if he moves. Pyro makes me fast.

"Tomas." Now it's Nadienne. "Don't. I made the choice. If you'd just dropped the hose, I'd have--"

"Stuff it, sweets." The hose is my pyro connection. My shiver keeps Georg's chin up. Nadienne loved me, once. "Yeah, you're just another hook to me now. Go bleed with your sisters over there and take Hair Boy with you. He'll sell your pots and pans." I twitch Georg's jaw to the left a bit, then to the right. His eyes water.

“Goodbye.” I pull the shiver, slap the burger to the stone floor, and head out. Time to find pretty Armana and collect, before Rask finds me.

Back up the screw stair to Caladrina’s, at the Aswar Tyrae crossing, lots of steps, yanking myself up along the black steel handrail. I don’t like the lifts, because inside one you’re a bird in a can. A killer will put a dozen slugs or a high-beam through you while you pass his floor. That’s why I limp on a bad left foot, even with all the repair time I spent in the tank.

Nadienne brought me through all that. Damn her and those green-spattered eyes, and that long neck I couldn’t stop kissing every time we made love. She’d whisper that poetry to me, that song of Thringe’s I could never remember, until I’d sleep. That was the only time I’d ever dream sweet things. And now she’s gone.