

## THE PLEA

I stand there in the street as she comes up to me. No one else moves. Her leather bodysuit is scratched and tattered on one leg.

“You didn’t tell me this place was out of business,” she said crisply. “I came all the way down here, saw the locked door, started back up, and then these rope-necks wanted to play with me.” She tossed her head in the direction of the Argaz. “Life with your father trained me well.”

“Ma—” I hiss. Evidently she impressed them.

“Shut up. I went back up to Caladrina’s, and you were gone, and the place was a mess. Caladrina insisted I pay for the wreckage. I had to give him that crystal egg you stole, as security.”

“Ma—”

“Shut up. Then I found out you’d come back down here again, and that made me very disappointed in you. Very disappointed.”

Right now I’m real disappointed in Jackie B. He never could keep from spilling to my ma. The Argaz and Rask’s gacks are now easing out and coming to join us.

“Ma—”

By itself, the door handle turns under my fingers and the door swings inward. A female voice says, “What? Who’s there?”

I push the door inward to a long, dimly-lit room filled with tables, chairs and plug-in cyberparty wombs. Nadienne stares right in my face. Behind her stands Armana, and at the rear utility exit is Georg, looking paler and skinnier than usual.

Nadienne says to me, “Shit! What are you doing here?”

I grab my mader by the hand and drag her inside and shut the door. “Never mind. The Argaz are here, and Rask’s gacks are here, and they all want me dead, and you besides. And what’s Georg doing--”

Ma cuts in. “Tomas, is she a friend of yours? Why don’t you introduce me?”

“Ma—”

“Tomas?”

“This is my mader. This is Nadienne, of Song Clan, and this is Armana. That’s Georg. He’s supposed to be dead.” A murmur outside the door. Georg is muttering rapidly into a comm, and he’s sweating just like I am. He nods vigorously to Nadienne.

A breath-long pause, and the door opens. Rask’s gacks and the Argaz walk in with weapons in hand. “We will kill all of you,” the Argaz announce, “for stealing our coll’s information.”

“But we have a price to take,” buzzes one of the gacks, pointing at me. “This little creature owes our employer a large sum of metal, and it must be made to repay.”

Ripping a gap in my coverall’s leg, they take my beam gun. One of each group covers us, and the others negotiate in the doorway. When they return, Rask has joined them, carrying a wide-snouted beamer.

“We will help you die slowly,” she purrs. “Not like this.” She shoots Georg into a blaze of smoke and shitty steam.

“Argazindari, your information is datavaulted,” Nadienne says, her voice trembling but clear and careful. “Our deaths will release it, publicly.” She blinks, and she only does that to stop tears.

The Argaz huddle, call in Rask, debate. I don’t see Armana any more. One of the cyberparty wombs that was open earlier is closed.

“The solution is simple,” Rask says, turning to us. She points at Ma’s beetle necklace. “We’ll just stat all of you.”

Ma draws me close. “This is my own son. Can’t you just let him work off what he owes you?”

Rask frowns with those long brows, then smiles, and finally says, “No.”