

GRIPPING, SMART, SEXY, AND TRULY ORIGINAL

STRATEGIC ENTANGLEMENTS



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STRATEGIC ENTANGLEMENTS

Book 1 in the Kendra Veiss
series

<http://www.deknightley.com>

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To my late grandmother, Vera, who staunchly believed in me, and gave me the confidence to always be myself.

I remember it like yesterday: us waiting at a bus stop when I was seven years old. Her turning to me and saying, "When you write your first book one day, I would love you to dedicate it to me." *When*, not if...

It took a while, grandma, but I got there in the end! Though you have not been with us for a long time, your memory lives on in my heart. I know you would heartily approve of Kendra – she kicks butt like you did!

Glossary

Askar	A medium-sized, militant nation, formerly part of the empire of Basur, and its ideological enemy
Basur	The largest and most influential empire state on Terra
CID	Counterintelligence Directorate, a DSS directorate responsible for identifying and countermanding espionage conducted on Basuri soil
COD	Clandestine Operations Directorate, a DSS directorate responsible for gathering intelligence on foreign soil
DSS	Department of State Security, the Basuri secret service
IAD	Internal Affairs Directorate, a DSS directorate responsible for intelligence activities on Basuri soil
Imhas	Askari secret service
Nalin	A planet in the Delta Centauri system orbited by the Moon Nakin, terraformed by a coalition of Terran nations, including the Bassur and the Askar
OSS	Office of Strategic Services, an elite operational unit within the Imhas
Special Branch	A unit within the CID responsible for monitoring the activities of persons suspected of conducting espionage on Basuri soil
SPU	Special Projects Unit, an investigative unit within the IAD
Targir	The capital of the empire of Basur
Terra	A planet in the Sol system, orbited by the moon Luna
Vella	A small client state of the empire of Basur

As long as emotional needs and frailties exist, so will spies.

- Victor Cherkashin with Gregory Feifer, *Spy Handler: Memoir of a KGB Officer*

CHAPTER ONE

A very bad neighbourhood

AUTUMN 2977

OLD TOWN, TARGIR

1.

A lone woman, walking through a rough neighbourhood in the middle of the night. What could go wrong? For Kendra Veiss, a lot, especially with the trouble trailing in her wake tonight, keeping just enough distance behind her not to be too obvious.

But that was fine with her. For the first time in months, she felt great. Strong, fit, and capable – positive for a change. She walked with shoulders thrown back, head up, eyes scanning her surroundings, carefully stepping around foul-smelling puddles and the trash littering the ground. Some of the stuff on the unloved streets of Old Town didn't bear thinking about. She was especially careful about encountering used needles discarded by the multitudinous drug addicts calling the place — for lack of a better word — home.

Her heel-strikes on the pavement rang out with rhythmic regularity, a confident purpose to them. She needed to project an alert confidence to avoid unwelcome attention. She didn't want to seem like easy prey as she walked towards her home-of-the-moment in this less than salubrious part of Targir.

This part of the Basuri capital had been bombed by the Askar during the war of secession, and it had never returned to its former glory. The old Federation houses had – perhaps fittingly given the schism – never been rebuilt or properly fixed. The well to do families that had once resided here, when it had been a central location, had never returned. The opportunists who had made the neighbourhood their own had lacked the means for high ceilings and ornate ironwork. Concrete apartment blocks to house the poor, and other architectural brutalities, had taken their place.

Anonymous figures lurked from numerous warren-like entrances and exits, hollow eyed. It was a place without mercy.

The physical danger sent a pleasant fizz through her blood, as it had in the past. Only a few weeks ago, still reeling from trauma, it had seemed like she would never enjoy life again. But her employer had taken care of her, put her back together, as she'd always known they would, and now she was back in service. The Department of State Security (DSS for short), omnipotent and omnipresent, promised much, gave much, and expected much in return.

Though she was young, female and alone, as she walked down the dark streets, Kendra was not the easy target she appeared to be. She hadn't taken a gun with her on a girls' night out in downtown Targir, but she carried multiple weapons that were subtle yet effective. They could be deployed silently and without fuss to quickly give her the upper hand in a physical confrontation.

Her favourite was a new and exciting invention from the Office of Technical Services: 'the gauntlet'. It's what the OTS called it, although it looked more like a piece of artistic jewellery she wore wrapped around her hand. There was a bangle part that clasped securely around her wrist, from which multiple silver threads extended over the back of her hand and attached to decorative rings on three of her fingers. There was a barely visible metal plate that ran across the base of her fingers, on the palm side of her hand. The middle finger had three thick rings extending all the way up to below the nailbed, with mesh in between to give her full mobility. She'd received many compliments on it tonight. Women, even strangers, had kept asking where she'd bought it. It looked like a silver and bronze creation by a budding new designer, and it was a work of art all right.

It was a sophisticated piece of micro-technology designed to incapacitate at close quarters. The aim of the device was to provide a menu of options in the field. It could deliver a mild, painful shock, or quick paralysis. At maximum intensity, it was capable of rendering instantly unconscious an opponent weighing as much as one hundred and eighty kilograms. The different settings depended on which parts of the gauntlet she touched together and in what order, and this was what made using the device tricky. She'd had to receive extensive training before the OTS had given it to her to test out in the field. She liked it immensely. It made her feel superhuman. And she was itching to use it! Kendra smiled down at it fondly and wriggled her fingers. It glistened back at her. She liked to think it was winking conspiratorially in its tiny machine way.

The gauntlet was a weapon of stealth or last resort: for it to be of any use,

an opponent had to get close, within touching distance. Therefore, a sensible girl also carried a projectile weapon, for stopping power at a distance. In this case, a tiny yet powerful stunner. It nestled in the clenched fist of her other hand, its thin, sharp nozzle sticking out from between her index and middle fingers. It could be fired from a distance of one meter into a victim, or inserted into flesh and activated after.

“For those times when you really need to gut someone while also electrocuting them,” the tech who’d issued it to her had quipped.

Kendra had grinned. “I know someone like that.”

He’d raised his eyebrows. “Don’t we all?”

The recipient of its charge would be left convulsing on the ground, bashing their head into the concrete and shitting and pissing himself before collapsing prostrate, unable to move, for a good thirty minutes or more.

As a nod to tradition, she also had a state-of-the-art stiletto-blade knife strapped to her thigh.

Kendra was a young woman with an unusual combination of dark blond hair and large, hazel-grey eyes. No great beauty, but pretty enough, with a pleasant heart-shaped face, high cheekbones, full lips and long eyelashes. Her lithe dancer’s body commanded ubiquitous male attention, but equally attracted female envy. Kendra knew shapely legs and high breasts wouldn’t last forever. She relied instead on a trifecta of wit, a sound grasp of psychology, and razor-sharp intelligence. Tools that, if kept sharp, would propel her through life and her career in the Basuri secret service.

She worked in the Special Projects Unit. Though the phrase ‘special project’ tended to carry sinister connotations in intelligence, the SPU was simply the investigative arm of the DSS. The SPU existed to answer questions the DSS didn’t want anyone to know it was asking, and find anything or anyone that the DSS didn’t want anyone to know it was looking for. The work was challenging, interesting, meaningful. She was shielded from the overwhelming pressure that existed in the more mainstream branches of the service to spread her legs, because that was never really necessary.

SPU investigations were elaborately planned and orchestrated affairs where getting quick results was often a priority. The ability to get something from a target, on the spot, required quick psychological assessment and proficient use of so-called ‘techniques of influence’. Difficult to identify as

manipulation, they got results much faster than sex, and were more subtle. These techniques were actually developed and extensively used in sales and marketing. Their effects were powerful, immediate and worked mostly on a subconscious level. For example, a small gift or gesture, even if it was unsolicited and of little value, triggered in most people a deeply ingrained drive to reciprocate a favour. Vague but impressive sounding titles and institutional names engendered automatic trust, and a reflexive submission to authority when a demand was made that would not otherwise be complied with. Kendra found this endlessly fascinating. Personally, she inclined more to the view that authority could go fuck itself.

She had been a wild teenager, an even wilder university student, and now she longed to be – perhaps normal was the wrong word. Kendra was not *normal*, she knew that, and her work all but ruled out a normal relationship. She liked sex – her work was stressful, and she needed it – but on her own terms and for the right reasons.

After the long drought of her recovery, a new friend, Yva, had introduced Kendra to her brother. Kyle was an engineer on an extra-terrestrial mining rig, back home from a twelve month swing on Luna. The attraction had been immediate and undeniable. He had soft brown eyes and a ready smile, and she'd felt safe with him. They were both starved for affection and desperate to please.

To Kendra's relief, it had been an effortless, uncomplicated re-entry into dating. They had clicked together like magnets. She had spent Thursday to Sunday evening holed up in her expensive city apartment with her new lover. They'd done nothing but talk, eat, sleep, shower, and copulate with white-knuckled intensity.

Approximately six hours before, she had risen from bed, drained of all tension and pleasantly aching in numerous places, and kissed Kyle goodbye. Then she'd got dressed for a big night out at the Lonely Duck, a classy upmarket bar, celebrating the impending wedding of an old school friend.

What Aran Reiner had been doing at the Lonely Duck she didn't know. The first sight of him had been heart-stopping. She'd done a double-take when she'd glimpsed him across the room – towering six feet four inches of lean muscle and icy good looks easy to spot even from a distance – but it helped that she'd seen him first. She'd retreated quickly to the back of the bar, her mind ticking over.

Now that the psychosurgery process had been completed, she could think

back to her kidnapping and interrogation with clear-eyed, cold detachment. Seeing one of her interrogators across the room, looking as innocent as an archangel, soft lamplight glinting off his mop of blond hair, skimming off sharp-edged cheekbones and a firm jaw line, had produced only a mild spike of fear mixed with anger. Followed by a violent, predatory excitement akin to sexual arousal. She had decided to stay, ignore his presence, and see what happens. Though it was unthinkable that he would have failed to spot her, he never approached her.

The realisation that he had followed her out of the bar several hours later was an adrenal shot of triumph.

He was following her still, like an unwanted, but devoted puppy. He'd made no serious attempt to hide it, and she'd made no serious attempt to shake him. He was Imhas – Askari intelligence – and if the Askar really wanted to know where she lived, they were capable of finding out. They were capable of many things. Better to see them coming.

Earlier, she had slowed down to an amble, as an invitation for Reiner to approach her and state his business, but he'd hung back, and she'd kept going. She could only assume he wanted to speak behind closed doors. About what she couldn't guess, but she was dying to find out. That night was about to become very interesting indeed.

With him at her back, she could slacken surveillance of potential human threats and have the luxury of picking her steps more carefully around the more disgusting forms of street litter, which included a dead cat immediately ahead. It was a weird feeling, to think of Reiner as a kind of ally, but then again, life in the DSS was nothing, if not unpredictable. It was certainly not for the faint-hearted. She knew that from bitter experience.

She smiled wistfully to herself as she toyed with the idea of using the stunner on Reiner. Perhaps the possibility of this had also occurred to him and that was the reason why he'd refused to approach her on the street.

The Askar, the crazy bastards, were known to put their army and intelligence recruits through all sorts of hell to toughen them up. She wouldn't put it past them to stun Imhas trainees repeatedly to build up resistance. It actually made some logical sense, even if sadistic and demented, and Reiner had a lot of bulk and muscle.

Even so, it would drop him, and he would twitch and writhe most satisfyingly, she thought.

2.

Nearly home, only two streets away from her dark-brown apartment building; tired rows of stark-looking apartment blocks, paint peeling, pieces of broken fire escape jutting out like dinosaur bones.

Kendra was part of a team the DSS had sent into Old Town as a favour to its Indaqui counterpart, the Royal Security Bureau. The Indaqui King's spies had heard rumours that Talmak Bashir, the man believed to have assassinated the young royal's father, was hiding out in the Targiri suburb. The SPU had been instructed to find out if that was true, and if so, to locate him for capture by special forces.

The Indaq had been hunting Bashir relentlessly for nearly two years, but he had so far evaded them. He was a well-resourced and wily assassin for hire, who knew how to blend with his surroundings. If the Basur could find him, they could name their price for delivering him into the young king's hands. He was very eager to have people ask Bashir questions about who had employed him to kill his father – there being too many possibilities to hazard an accurate guess.

If Talmak Bashir had indeed chosen to hide within the borders of Basur, that was the last error of judgment he was ever going to make. The Indaq were a mineral rich nation, favourably located across land and water-based commercial routes, but regrettably plagued by political intrigue.

The new king was forward-thinking and wanted to build strong ties with Basur, which included favourable trade concessions. The Administration was eager to help him have a long and stable rein. So eager, in fact, that one suspected the DSS might take the opportunity to ask Bashir some questions of its own, before handing him over to the RSB.

Ahead of her, Kendra spotted Aryl and Benedic, her friendly local drug dealers, brazenly standing under the bright light of a streetlamp that the council had replaced two days ago. Harmless enough figures, as far as she was concerned, and seemingly indifferent about standing under an impromptu spotlight to ply their trade. Kendra had lived in the building for over a week now, and they were her neighbours. She had made friends with them easily, finding them surprisingly chatty and gregarious in an avuncular kind of way. She knew this was their territory, and they could stand where they wanted in it.

A fun idea occurred to her, and with a smirk she headed in their direction.

“A-B!” she called out to them in greeting. “You two are tireless, gentlemen!”

“Girl, look who’s talking!” Aryl was thin, but potbellied, with deep shadows under his eyes. He wore a grubby white turtleneck sweater, despite the mild autumn weather. His voice was deeper than his reedy appearance led one to expect. “What are you doing out at this time of night? You need to get your tail home, safe and sound, babe! This isn’t Pleasure Gardens!” Pleasure Gardens was an upmarket suburb of Targir, ironically one full of DSS middle management.

Kendra made a dismissive gesture. “What I need is a fairy tale prince to take me away from all this!” She waved her hand to indicate her unsavoury surroundings.

“Is that what this is?” The heftier and older Benedic pointed behind her.

Kendra turned, curious to find out how Reiner had decided to handle the A-B situation. She’d assumed he’d hang back or circle ahead, and was already toying with the idea of trying to lose him if he did, just for fun.

Instead, he’d approached the three of them head on, and was standing much closer to the group than she had expected. Both Basuri men drew their guns. Reiner held up his hands. The Askar were famously a warrior race, and had the big-boned, long-limbed build ideal for the endurance, speed and reach required in close combat. Though Aran Reiner towered over all of them, he rounded his massive shoulders and ducked his head in an effort to appear nonthreatening. Brute strength was no match for bullets.

Kendra eyed him expectantly, riveted. What was he going to do next? He turned and fixed his gaze on her like she was the only person who existed. She remembered vividly that he had stunning blue eyes of an unusually dark colour that she had never seen before. The look in them was a blunt combination of carnal desire and mute appeal. Though she realised he was putting on an act for A-B’s benefit, it hit her right in the chest like a stunner blast, and turned her knees to rubber. *OK ... Wow...*

Reeling, Kendra fought to collect herself. The Askari’s ardent expression caused the Old Town drug dealers to react with knowing sniggers as they watched the couple curiously.

She swallowed. Then drew herself up and cocked her head, giving the Reiner a blunt once-over. Then she turned to Benedic and smirked conspiratorially. “It’ll do,” she said, in response to his question.

Reiner breathed out a sigh of relief and put on a suitably grateful

expression. Kendra turned to go as the two Basuri men lowered their guns. Her fake lover smiled at them guardedly, gave them a stiff nod and stepped past them. Kendra shot him a come-hither look over her shoulder and he walked up to her with an eager smile, his step bouncy with excitement.

“Ah, young love!” Benedic murmured with approval behind them.

She turned around, shot the two dealers a smile and waved goodbye.

Kendra and Aran fell into step, walking side by side companionably. He looked down at her with a mischievous smile hovering on his lips. The white-hot intensity in his eyes had vanished, to be replaced by friendly curiosity. He looked confident and at ease, wearing black pants, a maroon v-neck t-shirt and a beige corduroy jacket.

She looked up at him. “Aran Reiner.” At the Askari black site where they had held her captive, he had told her his first name, but not his surname. She wanted him to know she knew exactly who he was. “Nice to finally have you where I can see you.”

“And who would *you* be, when you are hanging around here?” he grinned. His voice was the familiar low timbre tone, pitched for friendliness this time.

Kendra hesitated.

“I’m guessing your new friends don’t know who you really are?” he added.

Sure, they didn’t. SPU officers never did anything work-related under their own name. That was a basic matter of safety, but also practicality. The DSS created elaborate cover personalities for its officers in the Internal Affairs Directorate (IAD) and had them learn and execute the part, even when the situation didn’t especially call for it. It was good practice for infiltration work. The service directorates like IAD were the breeding grounds for future field officers for one of the two operational directorates: foreign espionage and counterintelligence. In addition to which, people had fun with it. Lying and pretence came natural to spies.

Reiner, for instance, was pretending to be Basuri. His appearance conformed with prevailing Basuri fashion, from his clothes to his haircut, and he effortlessly affected the Basuri dialect of the common tongue. Though his height, light coloured hair and eyes, and high cheekbones were archetypally Askari, plenty of Basur looked like that, so it was possible for him to pass for a Basuri born and bred.

“You don’t want someone to hear me call you by the wrong name by accident, do you?” Reiner pressed.

“Audra,” she said reluctantly.

“Nice,” he said, approvingly. “It becomes you.” He eyed her curiously. “What are you supposed to be?”

She scowled and felt her shoulders tensing. “We are not going to talk about me,” she told him sternly, repeating something he’d said to her during Askari captivity.

“But you are so interesting!” he shot back archly, throwing her own reply back to her without missing a beat. Kendra found herself amused by this in spite of herself.

“Those looks and spectacular acting skills!” she quipped. “You could have been a movie star. Less dangerous and complicated than being an Askari spy.”

“Where would be the fun in that?”

They ambled along as she waited for him to state his business, but he ignored the expectant silence. She decided to move things along. “A bit creepy, following a lone woman home in the dark, isn’t it?”

He gave her a crooked smile. “I was watching your back. This is a rough part of town.”

“How chivalrous you are!” she drawled. “Except that you were following me before I went into Old Town.”

He grinned unabashedly. “When I caught a glimpse of my most memorable DSS operative ever, I just couldn’t help myself,” he said, his voice husky.

Kendra glared, discomfited by the flirtatious tone. “You never struck me as the type who has impulse control issues.”

He shrugged nonchalantly. “You cut an elegant figure. I could watch the way you walk for hours,” he teased.

She scowled again. “Don’t make me shoot you!”

His grin widened. “You don’t have a gun,” he pointed out.

She raised her brows. “Don’t I?”

He shook his head emphatically and ran his eyes over her meaningfully. Yes, yes, she knew – there was no place she could stash it. She looked at him sharply. “That doesn’t mean I can’t do things to you that really hurt.”

He gazed down at her, looking earnest, and shook his head. “I’m not here to make trouble.”

Kendra was about to respond when he added, “I’m really glad you survived our hospitality after all, Kendra Veiss.”

He said her name with a kind of purring, warm intimacy. It did something hot and tingly to the pit of her stomach that it shouldn’t have done.

They reached the entrance to her building. Reluctantly, she came to a stop, and turned towards him. She raised her right hand and showed him the gauntlet wrapped around it. "See this?"

He raised his eyebrows and studied the gadget curiously. "I can do all sorts of nasty things to you with it. Don't tempt me!"

He seemed impressed. "How does it work?"

"For some reason, I'm not in the mood to answer questions from you."

He smiled down at her indulgently, handsome and self-possessed. She experienced a temporary difficulty drawing breath through her lungs. "Very well," he said. "Noted."

She reached out for his hand with her gauntleted one. "Shall we hold hands?" she suggested with a hint of malice.

He eyed the gauntlet guardedly. "Is it going to zap me?"

"Only if I think you deserve it!"

He tentatively linked fingers with her. They climbed the stairs to the entrance hand in hand.

She stashed the mini stunner in her jacket pocket to free her other hand, swiped the door open, and hustled Reiner through the main entrance. Once they were in the foyer and the door closed behind them, she led him deeper into the darkness and told him to turn and face the wall so she could frisk him for weapons. He complied without protest.

His left hand, which she was still holding tightly, was now behind his back. She pulled his arm away from his side and slid her left hand under his light jacket, feeling around his left hip and waist. He made an amused huffing sound. He was wearing a t-shirt that felt very pleasant to the touch, thin and soft, the flesh underneath impressively taut; uncomfortably reminiscent of her ex. Kasper had a body a lot like this, broad shouldered and narrow waisted. She thrust that thought firmly out of her mind.

Her hand went up the Askari man's side to slide under his armpit. She was certain he was right-handed and would carry an underarm holster on the left side.

"Are you looking for a gun?" he interjected with a tone of polite enquiry.

"Or a stunner."

"I'm not carrying either."

Kendra knew better than anyone that Reiner was not a fool, and only a fool would wander about Old Town dressed like he had money to spare without a weapon. She ran her hands across his rib cage to the other armpit. Then down

to the hip. She felt around. Nothing.

“Enjoying yourself?” Now he sounded amused.

Ignoring his comment, reluctantly, she stepped in closer, ran her hands across his waist. Nothing hung from his belt.

She stepped back and released his hand, guided him to place both his hands against the wall in a classic search position and kicked his legs apart. She quickly clapped her gauntleted hand on his shoulder to keep him docile.

“Tell me what you are carrying, and where!” she demanded in clipped tones.

“Nothing.”

She ran her hands across the back of his waist. Still nothing.

“No weapon of any kind?” she demanded with disbelief. He shook his head. “If I find one, I’m going to use it on you!”

He appeared completely relaxed under her wandering hands. “OK.” He sounded amused.

“You walked into Old Town without a weapon?”

“You think I’d take a weapon on a night out?”

He had a point. The Basur didn’t walk about armed unless their job required it, or they expected to need to defend themselves. It was an Askari affectation to carry weapons as a statement, and Reiner was blending in. A sensible idea, with anti-Askar sentiment on the rise. Especially in a neighbourhood like this, where good manners and hospitality to strangers were not high on people’s list of priorities.

“What were you going to do if you got attacked?” Kendra demanded irritably.

“Who’d attack me with you around to distract them?” he quipped.

“What do you want?”

“To have a private conversation with you.”

“Well?”

“Not here. In your apartment.”

“Oh! I am just falling over myself to be alone with you somewhere private!” she exclaimed with heavy sarcasm. “In my own apartment, especially.”

“It’s not really your apartment, is it?” he retorted pointedly. “I’m guessing DSS pays the rent. So, let’s not make a fuss. It’s completely unnecessary.”

“If I make a fuss, asshole, you will end up knifed or shot!”

She could feel his back stiffen with tension. “Sounds like the kind of messy

scene that could blow a girl's cover," he replied.

"Don't you fucking threaten me!" she hissed. Her hand tightened on his shoulder. She pulled out her stiletto knife strapped to her thigh and pressed it into his side, making him flinch. "Blowing my cover is a price I'm prepared to pay, I promise you!"

Reiner took a deep, steadying breath. She could tell he was worried and trying to diffuse the tension. He spoke in measured tones. "If you weren't curious about what I'd had to say, you wouldn't have led me here or let me past those guard dog drug dealers. I swear, I come in peace!"

Kendra angled the blade upward so the tip dug into his skin, gripping the hilt with angry force. She stood on her tiptoes and tucked her chin into his left shoulder. She spoke into his ear in a fierce whisper, her heart lurching in her chest at their close physical proximity. "I don't want peace! I want to gut you like a fish!"

His jaw was pressed against her temple. She could feel his stubble. He was wearing a fresh, woody aftershave and his smell made her heart kick in her chest. The psychosurgery was still holding well. She felt no paralysing twinges of fear or panic in her limbs. In fact, fear was far removed from what she was feeling...

"I appreciate you have strong feelings about me," he murmured.

Kendra was furious to be told that she had *strong feelings* about Aran Reiner, but, of course, it was true. She couldn't deny it without looking ridiculous. "But you are a professional. So, you're not going to gut me, are you?" There was a teasing drawl to his voice.

She fought down her furious disbelief. She could hurt him just to vent her frustration, but otherwise, he had her at checkmate. "To be decided," she snapped. She stepped back from him, gripped the stiletto tighter. "Come on then!" She pointed to the stairs. "Up!"

He turned around slowly and looked at her. She stepped further away. "After you!"

He climbed up the first flight of stairs and paused at the top of the landing. He turned and looked down at her questioningly. She hung back and gestured for him to keep going. "Don't stop until I tell you!"

The elevator hadn't worked for years. Though Kendra was back in decent shape, she was out of breath by the time they reached the sixth floor, her

heeled feet protesting in particular. The Askari, however, was not even remotely winded. Panting, she glanced resentfully at his wide chest that must have the lung capacity of a deep-sea diver's.

She hung back from him on the stairwell, acutely aware that he was dangerous from an elevated position at the top of the staircase. She could clearly see him, in her mind's eye, shoving her down the stairs so she crashed to the bottom of the landing, breaking her neck.

She pitched her voice for command. "Back away from the landing!"

He was completely in shadow. His silhouette loomed large and imposing, outlined vaguely by ambient lighting from the street filtering through the grimy windows in the stairwell. The shadowy figure cocked its head, considering. Her fist closed around the stunner in her pocket. He stepped back, as instructed.

Kendra climbed up one step, then another, keeping him in sight. She tossed her keys at him. He reached out and snatched them out of their air with unerring precision, then waited silently for directions.

"Open the door!"

He looked down, ran the bunch of keys between his fingers. "Which key?"

"Figure it out."

After a beat, he looked around and asked, "Any chance there's a light up here?"

"I don't know – what do you think the chances are?" she retorted sarcastically.

He maintained patient equanimity. "Do you have a torch on you?"

"Stop whining and get on with it!"

Reiner sighed and turned his back to her reluctantly.

He set about the task by touch with self-possessed patience and dexterity. Kendra kept her eyes fixed on him as she came up the stairs. He was clearly absorbed, guiding each key into the keyhole to test the fit. She heard the click when the right key slid all the way in. The lock tended to stick and she always had to jiggle it, sometimes quite violently. He accomplished it with a flick of the wrist and a forceful push. He opened the door and stood back for her chivalrously.

With a sinking feeling, Kendra realised she had forgotten to frisk his legs. She waved him away from the door. "Turn around and place your hands up against the wall!"

Reiner froze in puzzled surprise. "What? Why?"

“Just do it!” she snapped.

“We just did this five minutes ago!” he protested with a frown.

“What can I say, I just can’t get enough!”

“What the hell are you looking for?” he exclaimed, bemused.

She waited, insistently. “Hands nice and high, now! I’m sure you know how it’s done.”

He rolled his eyes and complied. “This wall is sticky with something,” he complained. “It’s disgusting! Can’t we do this inside?”

“It’s not much nicer in there.”

“Come on, I don’t mean you any harm!”

She dropped to one knee, for stability. “Given our, shall we say, unfortunate history, excuse me if I don’t take you at your word!”

She ran her hand down the length of one leg. Then on the inside of his thigh and calf, and then down the other. His flesh felt so hard, it was as if he was armoured. It made her twitchy that his body was so attractive. It pulled her like the moon pulled the tide.

Reiner sucked in his breath. “You still...remember all that?” he ventured cautiously.

She paused with her hand on his other thigh and craned her neck upwards to look at him. “Oh, yeah! Vividly! What makes you think I don’t?”

He looked over his shoulder down at her. “I thought they did something to, you know... get you back together.”

“It doesn’t wipe your memory!”

“Do you wish it did?”

She stood up abruptly. “No.” There was an ominous glint in her eyes. She pointed imperiously. “Get in!”

3.

Reiner stepped through the door reluctantly and stood crowding the threshold. She shoved him from behind, none too gently. His bulk was difficult to shift, and he only moved half a step. She trooped in closely behind him, snatched a snub-nosed pistol from its hiding place in a pot plant by the door, and pressed it into the small of his back.

“That’s right – now I have a gun! Kindly follow directions!”

For a split-second he froze in surprise, then advanced cautiously into the room. The kitchen window blind was broken. Streetlight filtered into the room through the broken slats. She reached out and switched on the light.

Reiner looked around the place and his nose wrinkled like he’d smelled something bad.

The young woman’s eyes twinkled. “You don’t think it’s cosy?”

He turned on his heels to face her with effortless ease that spoke of dangerous speed and agility. “Apologies for the inconvenience. I did try my best not to mess with... whatever you’ve got going on here.”

She acknowledged that he had. Even so, as a known spy, Reiner was under constant surveillance by Special Branch, the unit in the DSS Counterintelligence Directorate (CID) responsible for keeping a close eye on persons suspected of conducting espionage within Basur. They would have tracked him here, because it would have been impossible for him to evade them while he was following her. This was going to raise eyebrows. So much for ‘I’m not here to make trouble for you’. She expected to spend most of tomorrow answering their questions.

“That’s very big of you. Not to worry,” she said cheerfully. “I can make this work.” She pointed to the small dining table. It had only two chairs, one on each side. “Sit!”

He headed in that direction with his loping gait. It took him two steps to get there. His size seemed to take up the whole room.

That was the extent of her apartment – a large room with a bathroom attached. The rest of it, the kitchen, bedroom, living room/dining area was a modest rectangle of space, with the kitchen at one end near the front door, and the bedroom at the other end, near the bathroom.

She took her wrap off and hung it on the hook hanging from the back of the door. Intelligent blue eyes studied her. His brow creased for a brief instant. “Make it work? You wouldn’t supposedly be turning tricks for this

job, would you?”

Kendra was furious not only that he'd thought that, but that he'd had the nerve to put it into words. She suppressed her irritation and permitted herself cutting sarcasm instead. “Disapprove?”

He responded with a jaded smile. “I'm sure you are dying to tell me how little you care about my opinion, Kendra.”

Reluctantly, she liked the way he said her name. He shrugged his jacket off and hung it over the back of the chair facing her, pulled the chair out and sat down.

Kendra walked over and sat down opposite him. “Of course, I'm not turning tricks. Officially. But look around you! Do I look like the kind of girl who can afford to turn down a well-heeled John?”

The Askari man grunted and shook his head, still serious. “You don't want to go down that road. If word gets out, and it always does, this will get you very unwelcome attention from the wrong people. The kind who don't take no for an answer when they show up at your door to make you a job offer. Messy. Bodies to dispose of. Noses out of joint at the DSS, I wouldn't be surprised.”

Kendra knew all this and had merely been facetious about moonlighting in negotiable affections. She resented being lectured about it by an operative of a rival agency. It made her look amateurish – which was rich, coming from them!

She wasn't about to fight a pointless battle. “Fair point. But we digress. Now, what's this all about?”

“How about a drink?” he suggested.

Her face set into a hard mask of hostility. She gripped the gun and pulled the safety off with an emphatic click.

“This is kind of awkward,” he persisted. “We both need something to take the edge off, don't we?”

In what felt like a retreat, she flounced off to the kitchen nook, eager to put some distance between them. She placed her gun on the kitchen counter, filled up the kettle, turned it on, and banged around some mugs angrily.

Five minutes later, she moved towards him carrying two mugs and handed one to him. The Askari picked it up uncertainly and peered inside. His brow creased. “What the hell is this?”

Kendra sat down opposite him. “Tea.”

“Tea!” he exclaimed with disgusted disbelief.

“What do you want, Reiner?”

“Maybe a beer — ”

She interrupted brusquely. “What are you doing here?”

“I suppose I wanted to see how you were doing,” he responded, leaning forwards.

She leaned back and stared at him. “You have some serious nerve!”

He locked eyes with her. “Why’s that?”

Fine, she thought, technically, he’d intervened to save her life. He wasn’t about to let her forget it. But if he was here looking for favours, he could piss right off. She wasn’t going to let him forget the less commendable things he’d got up to.

“I’m so deeply touched!” Acid dripped from her voice, strong enough to strip flesh from bone. She leaned forward with an expression of mock sympathy and laid her hand over his. “Have you grown a conscience?” she whispered, making it sound like terminal cancer, or a deeply embarrassing STD.

Aran chortled. He turned his hand over beneath hers and brushed the tip of his index finger across her palm. She withdrew her hand sharply. “Call it collegial concern.”

It was incredibly unfair, she thought, that he had not one, but two dimples. He sat back on his chair. “So,” he went on, his voice dropping into light conversation gear. “How are you coping with the indignities of slumming it with the poor folk?”

Kendra shrugged. “It’s not too bad. The people are nice to me.”

“Really? Things must be a lot more civilised here than the place I grew up in. You would have been eaten alive!”

Kendra stilled. “You grew up in a place like this?”

He nodded, his face tightening. He drummed his fingers on the table. Kendra interpreted it as a nervous deflection gesture. Her eyes reflexively followed the movement. He had impressively large hands, with square palms and long fingers. They looked strong and capable ... of all kinds of interesting things.

“Quite like it, yeah.”

She looked him up and down, every expensive inch of him, from his expertly cut hair to his carefully polished leather shoes.

“Don’t believe me?”

“If so, you have shed your lowly beginnings like a snake sheds old skin!”

she exclaimed.

Aran Reiner's eyes froze into icy pebbles. The muscles in his arms and shoulders coiled up in an alarming manner. She suddenly realised she'd left her gun on the kitchen counter while making tea.

"Why not?" he said, his voice hoarse. "Places like this are pits of hopelessness and despair. How old do you think the kids are around here when they first realise, they're worthless to anyone that matters?"

His words were delivered in low, even tones, but the feelings behind them packed a punch. In spite of herself, Kendra was moved. She lowered her eyes and sighed.

"I wasn't blaming you" she said, softening her tone. "And you have the wrong idea about me," she added. "I wasn't born with a silver spoon in my mouth!"

He waved his arm in a dismissive manner. "Don't spin me a tale of woe about your middle-class single mother upbringing!" he interrupted. "You don't know what deprivation is. You might as well be a goddess come down from her holy mount to walk among the mortals and sneer at their clueless foibles. Maybe get a bit of rough while she's at it."

Stunned, Kendra sat back in her chair taking stock of what just transpired. "Should I be flattered or alarmed that you know quite so much about my childhood?"

He focused his eyes on her but made no comment.

"If it makes you feel any better, I assure you, I know exactly how it feels to be looked down upon." She closed her eyes in theatrical pain. "Every time I am forced to mix with my cousins."

"How is your father doing?"

Oh, seriously, what the fuck! She had not expected that! She stiffened.

"Why would you ask me about him?" she demanded, her tone turning hostile.

Reiner shrugged. "I sympathise with him."

She sucked in her breath. Furious. "Him, not me?"

"*You* signed up for a dangerous job. You're his only child." He frowned. "Why the hell would he let you join the secret service?"

Kendra's fingers were curling into fists. "Let me? He couldn't stop me. I'm an adult. This is Basur, remember, where women don't have to revolve around the whims and convenience of their male overlords?"

"It doesn't make it any easier to have your daughter..." he paused and swallowed, "hurt. What good is power and money if you can't prevent that

from happening?”

“He doesn’t know what happened,” she snapped coldly. She blinked, her eyes stinging as she teared up.

“He knew you were missing.”

“And now I’m back,” she said. She picked up her cup, her fingers shaking, and gulped some lukewarm tea.

He stared at her. “Wow! That’s pretty harsh.”

Kendra clenched her teeth. “I don’t need your judgment!” she leaned toward him aggressively. “Do you think I should tell him that the Askar held me prisoner? For nearly a week,” she added. “Will that be less harsh?”

There was a pained silence, with the spectre of Askari reputation dangling in the space between them like a freshly hanged corpse. Reiner let out a long sigh.

“I don’t know what to tell you, Kendra. What happened to you really sucks,” he said with seeming sincerity. Then added, to her utter astonishment, “I really regret my part in.”

Kendra sat rooted to the spot, stunned. Her eyes flooded with tears.

“I fell apart. After,” she said thickly. “They had to glue me back together,” she hissed through clenched teeth, “piece by piece.”

The Askari once more shifted in his seat, looking deeply uncomfortable. He looked down at his hands. “I know.”

She wasn’t having that! “What do you know? How can you *know*?” she demanded, brushing tears from her eyes.

“I’ve been interrogated. But the old-fashioned way. Real damage, not just tricking the brain to think it feels pain.”

She resented hearing what had been inflicted on her minimised to something less than “proper” torture. She bared her teeth in a snarl. “The pain is real if the brain thinks it is!”

“But it stopped at the touch of a button, didn’t it?” he answered. “There was no physical trauma. Whereas I can tell you, broken ribs are a gift that keeps on giving, especially if they lock you up somewhere cold and damp afterwards, with only a hard floor to lie on. It hurts to stand, it hurts to lie, it hurts to sit. It hurts to breathe. Every minute of every hour hurts.”

Kendra wasn’t going to be fobbed off with tales of woe, and she wasn’t going to be made to feel sorry for him! She cocked an eyebrow. “I’m guessing, basic Imhas training?” she quipped sardonically.

He did a kind of amused exhale through his nose. “Even we are not that

hard core.”

But she wasn't ready to let it go. If it had made sense, what they'd done to her, she'd have made peace with it. But she couldn't, because it didn't. “But why the fuck did you do it in the first place? I mean, that's what still drives me crazy! That is what I cannot fathom!” Maybe it was pointless to rile, but maybe riling at him might finally make her feel better.

He held her gaze, seemingly accepting that this enormous, dark thing between them had to be tackled head on. She watched him chew his lip, formulating a careful response. That made her explode again.

“Let's be honest with each other, here, Reiner! Can we just say it? You clowns abducted and tortured me for hours for information that I didn't even have!”

“I had nothing to do with your abduction,” he said, softly. “I was ordered to question you. I don't always ...,” he took a deep breath and then exhaled slowly, “like my orders, but I always have to obey them.”

So: the not-my-decision defence! She folded her arms, gripping the elbows tightly, and pinned him with a glare that conveyed emphatically what she thought of that. “You went about doing that very thoroughly.”

He stared down at his cup of cold tea as if it had suddenly become fascinating. Though not fascinating enough for him to have taken a single sip from it. “I needed to be sure. My instincts told me you didn't know, but I didn't know if I could trust them. I've never interrogated anyone before. Women are supposed to have a higher tolerance for pain, but you ...,” he shook his head. “Not you. You are good under pressure and you don't panic. But you can't take pain. It comes as a shock to you. My sense was, if you knew anything, you would have told.” He leaned back in his chair away from her, and added awkwardly, “Anyway, that's what I thought.”

Kendra waited in livid silence until he finally looked up at her again. He sighed wearily. “I know you think we are incompetent idiots, but the fact is, we're not!” He shook his head, incredulously. “That you'd be snatched on home turf when you didn't even know anything...” he said with a bitter chuckle. “That just doesn't happen! I've never heard of that happening! You're smart and I thought you might be playing me...” He sighed again. “I know you can't accept that as an excuse. What it is, is an explanation.”

Kendra swallowed with difficulty. “Well, that's something ... thank you.” And she meant it.

Aran ran his hands through his hair with agitation. “I want you to know

that I'm nothing short of mortified about this! Not only did we torture a girl, we tortured a girl pointlessly!"

Kendra automatically bristled at being referred to as a *girl*. Not only was she not a girl, it was obvious from his tone he was using the word to denote someone weak and helpless. But his voice was thick with anger and frustration, so she decided to forgive the sexism just this once.

"If I ever find out who's responsible for it, I am going to punch their lights out!"

She smiled weakly. She felt pathetically grateful for what he'd just said. "It was the unfairness of it all that's been so hard to bear. I know it's naïve to expect fair in anything, but it made me so angry!" She laughed a bitter, shaky laugh. She brushed a tear off her cheek. "I might not be a hero, but I'm not a baby. If I'd actually had what you wanted, I wouldn't have felt like a victim. I would have felt like a professional who'd a very bad day on the job." She was dangerously over-sharing, but it felt cathartic to tell him that.

Aran nodded at the word "victim", regarding her with a limpid blue gaze. "Do you know what a neural whip is?"

She frowned. "Some kind of horror show thing that gives you an electric shock? They're an urban legend, aren't they?"

He grunted. "If you mean they don't exist, you are unfortunately misinformed. I don't know if it's an electric shock they give you, but on contact it feels like the inside of your body is on fire while the surface of your skin's getting flayed. It doesn't last long, but it's plenty long enough. Anyway, the pain is immense, but what I remember as the worst part of that experience is that I pissed myself."

Kendra stared at him, mouth open. He continued on as if he hadn't noticed her reaction. "Somewhere around strike three." His eyes sparkled with wry amusement. "And I could feel the wetness soaking through my pants, all the way down my leg, the entire time they were at it. It really felt like that was what made it unbearable. I felt violated by it... We all kid ourselves we can control what happens to us. It's a huge blow to be shown otherwise."

She swallowed. "Who used a neural whip on you?"

"Obviously, I can't tell you that."

She sucked in her breath and took stock. Her natural suspicion was reasserting itself. Why would someone like Reiner show up at her door, not only to apologise for doing his job, but to actually confess to fucking up? She cocked her head and studied him suspiciously. "No offence, but that story

sounds made up.”

He didn't seem perturbed. “I have the scars to prove it,” he responded with perfect equanimity.

Kendra stared. “You have scars?” she challenged. “From a neural whip?”

He nodded confidently.

“That still exist?”

He nodded again.

“Why? Why wouldn't you get rid of them?” It was rare to have scars these days with skin resurfacing so readily available and affordable. This was especially so in Basur, where the obsession with perfection reached its self-indulgent peak. Even the Askar had it, surely, especially the very well-resourced Imhas.

“It takes a long time and it's tricky. They're micro-burns.” His lips turned up at the corners as he gazed at her. He sat up in his chair. “Would you like to see them?”

He was pushing her to invite him to take his shirt off or bluffing pretty hard. Should she call him on it? Hell, normally she wouldn't hesitate, but in this case ... She looked into his laughing blue eyes and decided there was only one correct answer. The Askar only understood one thing: strength. She was Basuri. The Basur were superior, indomitable, and always would be.

“That would be most enlightening,” she said politely. “Thank you.”

He pushed his chair back away from the table. It made a loud scraping noise. He stood up and peeled his t-shirt off without hesitation.

Kendra sat rooted to the spot. Her eyes flicked down to scan his torso quickly before he could see her do it. Her breath leaked out of her when her gaze ran past washboard abs and hovered on the way his pants hung off his hips. The downy patch snaking down to his pubis from his belly button was a dark honey colour, otherwise his chest was hairless. A dream of wide planes, hills and valleys of muscle under smooth, golden skin that she longed to run her tongue over.

She caught sight of a burn-like scar shaped like a half-moon under his left collarbone and a darker slash under the ribs on the same side. Perhaps he'd had a rough upbringing, like he claimed. But then she reminded herself to take everything he said with a pinch of salt. She was certain by now that he was an accomplished liar and manipulator, and he would know which buttons to press.

He turned around and she gasped loudly and clapped her hands to her

mouth. There was an extensive network of uneven tendril-like marks across his shoulders and down his back. They were in clumps, spider-like.

“This... whip thing? Does it have multiple ends to it?”

He turned around to face her. “Yes.” He reached out for his shirt. “They spread out and kind of cling to your skin.”

“How do you explain these to your lovers?”

He looked surprised at the question, and she felt herself blush. She had blurted it out without thinking.

“It’s not much of a problem.” He pulled his shirt back on. “Being Askari seems explanation enough for most women.”

Kendra looked sceptical.

“You people seem to think we fight each other on the streets over a piece of bread.”

Kendra didn’t engage with the resentment in his voice. She knew the Basur were prejudiced against the Askar. She thought the prejudice quite justified.

He sat back down. “I tell them whatever they want to hear,” he said bluntly. “If a woman seems too smart to swallow a story, I just don’t let her see them.”

She almost asked how he did that, then thought better of it.

4.

Kendra glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall. “So, are we done?”

“With what?”

“Whatever you came here to do.”

“Can I be something other than a John?”

Kendra looked at him, startled by the change of subject.

“Otherwise your friends downstairs will try to mug me on the way out,” he explained. “And, I will have to kill them.”

He stated that as an unquestionable fact, and she shook her head with disbelief. It was a ludicrous but very Askar thing to believe – that you had to kill someone who tried to mug you! Also, that you would succeed, when they had weapons and you didn’t. It struck her as quite funny, except that she didn’t need him making trouble like that around here. Aryl and Benedic not only lived in her own building, they were obviously gang connected. For someone to hurt them who might be in any way associated with her was out of the question. It would create such heat that she’d have to be pulled out of the assignment.

“What do you want to be instead?”

He narrowed his eyes. “How about a suitor?”

She huffed and crossed her arms. “And what would people think if I were to be dumped by a suitor after one night? Because, of course, you’re not going to be back!” she added firmly.

Aran tipped his head back and appeared to mull this over. “An infatuated man wouldn’t hang around here, bonking his intended in squalor,” he mused. “He’d want to show off his fancy apartment to her, his shiny car, and then wine and dine her. He’d stress how he could take her away from all of this.” He made a sweeping gesture with his hand.

“Fine, whatever.” She looked at him expectantly.

He stared at her, making no attempt to leave his chair, let alone her apartment. “It’s only been an hour or so,” he pointed out. Then he grinned, “About the length of a trick.”

Kendra sighed impatiently. “Funny. Seems so much longer.” She rubbed her eyes, feeling herself fading. “I’m really tired.”

“Then make some coffee,” he retorted, unperturbed by her defiant glare. “You’re dying to retrieve your gun, aren’t you?” He nodded back toward the kitchen counter. “From where you left it so absent-mindedly?”

She stood up smoothly and headed for the kitchen. “How long are you proposing to stay?”

“Long enough,” was his frustratingly unspecific answer.

Smug bastard! He thought he held all the cards.

She put the kettle on and got new mugs for the coffee. It was crappy instant stuff, and she hated it with a passion. But this was what people around here drank, so this was what she drank. Attention to detail. As she was still new in the building, she tended to attract visitors, often inconveniently.

She carried the steaming mugs to the table, and then went back to get her gun.

Aran observed her with a smirk. He didn’t want to leave, that was obvious. So, what more did he want? He made her jittery and skittish.

She sat back down and took a careful sip, wincing at the cheap coffee taste. He looked at her across the table. Angelic dark blue eyes, lips just full enough to make her long to suck the bottom one, then bite into it. “Well?” she snapped, feeling overwrought.

His lips drew into a lazy smile and his eyes sparkled. “All this defensive bristling, babe,” he teased playfully. “Am I getting under your skin?”

For a second or two, it was impossible to breathe. “Don’t be too proud of yourself, now,” she retorted.

“We can make small talk for a little while, can’t we? Consummate professionals like us? You were such fun to talk to, back at the black site. Tricky and unstable, like a stick of dynamite.”

Kendra’s lip curled. “I only talked to you to stave off the prospect of rape.”

He snorted. His lips curved into a smile that showed glimpses of white teeth. His eyes flashed with wicked amusement. “You can’t possibly think you are that distracting a conversationalist!”

An astonished cackle burst from her lips. “You are such an asshole!”

He nodded in good-natured agreement. Then his expression turned serious. “Can I ask what they did to fix you?”

“You mean ... the psychosurgery process?”

He nodded again, looking grave, but intrigued. “Yes, what’s that like?”

The technology was new, and the Askar probably didn’t have it. She didn’t judge it to be confidential information that she shouldn’t disclose.

“It’s pretty amazing. A miracle, really.” He was watching her expectantly. It made the pit of her stomach feel fluttery. She could imagine there were women who would do anything to have his attention focused on them like

that. “First they put you in a hypnotic state. There is a special pod you climb into, all padded and warm and womb-like. You lie there all snug, and it even plays soothing sounds at you. But the best thing it does is inject you with drugs.”

“What kind of drugs?”

“To induce hypnosis.”

“What’s the hypnosis for?”

“To find out everything that happened, in a gentle way.”

His expression was still grave, but he met her eyes squarely.

“You still relive it,” she went on, “but you’re distant from it. It’s like you’re watching it happening to someone else.”

He nodded soberly. “And after?”

“They stick you in virtual reality,” she smiled, “kind of like a VR holiday camp, and give you psychotherapy.”

“Why in VR?”

“They can manipulate your environment. And your sense of time passing. It felt like I spent about a year living in a beach shack.” Her eyes danced mischievously. “I ate huge fresh prawns, participated in a wedding, learned how to weave baskets.”

“You can weave baskets?” Reiner exclaimed in astonishment.

Kendra nodded. “You bet! It’s a skill and an art,” she boasted.

He chortled. “And is this a hobby you are still pursuing?”

Her voice wobbled with laughter. She shook her head. “Can’t get the palm fronds around here.”

They laughed companionably at that. Then the Askari said, “That’s really quite impressive! You seem...” he shook his head in wonderment, “well, nothing like I would have expected. So soon after.”

Kendra had to agree. Psychosurgery was nothing short of incredible. Not that long ago, she would have still been a mess at this point, only three months after.

“I’m surprised you haven’t been deported,” she said after a while.

“I guess the DSS wants me where they can see me,” he smiled confidently.

That was pretty much what Special Branch had told her.

She narrowed her eyes at him. “I have an idea, Reiner!” she announced cheerfully. Her upbeat tone immediately put him on guard. “You ever been hit by a stunner?”

Reiner bridled. He sucked in a breath and watched her carefully. “Ye-e-

es...” he admitted cautiously.

She grinned nastily. “What’s that like?”

He bit his lip as he studied her speculatively. “It short-circuits your entire system from top to bottom.”

Kendra stood up, walked to the door and pulled the stunner out of the pocket of her wrap. She turned around and held it up to him.

His eyes shifted from her face to her hand. “Well, you are well-stocked with gadgets, I’ll give you that.”

Something flared in her eyes like lightning in a stormy sky: white-hot and deadly. “I’ll tell you what!” she said cheerfully. “Let me stun you with this and all is forgiven! It’s not even a full-size stun-gun. Just the miniature version,” she cajoled. “What do you say?”

Aran placed his hands flat on the table. He spoke carefully. “In principle, I sympathise with your dark desires for revenge. But I’m going to have to politely decline.”

She pouted. “That is not at all what I was hoping to hear!” she said disapprovingly and looked speculatively down at her hand.

He half-stood abruptly, and stabbed a finger at her in warning. “I mean it! You try and point that thing at me, and I will physically attack you!” His weight shifted forward, and she put up her hands and waved them about in a gesture of surrender.

“All right, all right! Who would have thought someone so big and macho would get in such a tizz about a tiny little sting!” she mocked.

“You lose control of ... umm... sphincter function,” he explained with earnest urgency that she found amusing.

Ah, of course! She chuckled. “So I hear.”

“Put that away!” he insisted. “I’m not kidding!”

“What’s the magic word?” she said with a sneer.

“Please,” he said, reluctantly.

They both looked at the clock. Aran sighed and stood up, and then walked into the small kitchen area and looked around. He found a mug on the drainer and filled it with water. Kendra knew it tasted unpleasantly metallic and was not surprised at the wince on his face when he swallowed.

He wedged himself against the sink, about as far away from her physically as it was possible for him to be. His gaze travelled over her head towards her bed, which looked as lumpy and uncomfortable as it actually was. She’d not bothered to make it that morning. He looked away.

“Is there anything bearable here to eat or drink apart from your appalling coffee and tea?”

She raised an eyebrow and shook her head. “Sorry. You hungry?”

“I could use something to do with my hands,” he stated, gazing at her.

Kendra wasn't sure what she was supposed to make of that statement, and she avoided it like a potential landmine. “You could wash the dishes,” she suggested facetiously.

He glanced over at the empty sink beside him. “Which ones?”

She pointed at the mugs on the kitchen table with a flourish. She was surprised when he walked over and collected them. He carried them to the sink and rinsed them out without fuss or fanfare.

“I hear somebody at the University of Pesh is making great strides in giving the Mawarid women bigger breasts,” Kendra said archly, by way of making that small talk they were supposed to be making. She'd read that in a newspaper, so had absolutely no idea if it bore any resemblance to the hard facts.

The Mawarid were genetically re-engineered humans who'd been especially designed to inhabit the Askari part of Nalin. Nalin was a mid-sized planet in the Delta Centauri system that had been terraformed by a coalition of Terran states that held territorial stakes on the planet. The Mawarid experiment had always been on the forefront of genetic engineering, although it had not been without glitches and the occasional horror story. Thanks to it, the Askar were miles ahead of the Basur in manipulating the human genome. A lot of the leading work in the field had been done by professors from the university of Pesh, the second largest city in Askar. The scientific research they conducted in Pesh and on Nalin was sometimes frowned upon as ruthless or unethical, but it certainly got results.

The Askari chuckled at her remark.

“You don't think it's a serious scientific endeavour?” Kendra pressed him.

“Giving women larger breasts sounds like something there would be a lot of money in,” he noted shrewdly. Genetic engineering and its various applications were a gold mine for the Askar.

“Indeed. A lot more than in, say, giving the Mawarid men bigger cocks.”

He shook his head in disagreement. “If there is one thing that would generate more excitement than bigger breasts, that would be bigger cocks.”

“Among men, I would have to agree with you.”

He glanced at her over his shoulder. “You don't think that would interest

women?”

“Well, I’m not going to go as far as that, but I think most of us wouldn’t consider cocks to be the most urgent area of improvement about men.”

Aran laughed jovially. “Yes. There would be a clear line of difference of opinion about that among the sexes.”

“Do you want a bigger cock?”

He glanced at her and spluttered. “Not personally, no.”

“Be honest, now!”

He chuckled merrily. “I have enough trouble with the one I’ve got.”

“Ooh! What kind of trouble?”

He grinned and avoided the question. “Do you want bigger cocks? Across the board?”

Kendra made a face. “No. I would be interested in the development of some kind of vibrating function, though.”

For the next hour, they wandered together through a fairly engaging and wide conversational territory, endeavouring equally not to trip any mines. It was refreshingly cooperative for a change. Very different from the pointed sparring they’d engaged in at the black site, which had left her drained and exhausted.

Her mind wandered to the dip between the two halves of his back. The powerful thighs that felt so firm to the touch, and the bulge of his calf muscles.

She wriggled on her chair uncomfortably and got up to make coffee again.

He was still standing by the sink and she had to stand right next to him. She glanced over at him and liked the way his t-shirt fell across his flat stomach and narrow hips. She imagined sliding her hand under it and tracing the sagittal line of hair running from his belly button down to his pubis with the tip of her finger. His voice trailed off in mid-sentence, and she thought her face must have revealed something of what she was thinking. She didn’t dare meet his eyes and continued with what she was doing with what she hoped was methodical, self-possessed confidence.

He resumed talking but seemed to find her mundane task unaccountably fascinating. She could feel his eyes hungrily latched onto her every move, and she bit her lip with the effort of suppressing the disturbing, but undeniable attraction she felt. Being trapped in its suffocating grip while

having to pretend it wasn't there was such torture, she longed to lose her temper just to release some tension. But to do so was completely inappropriate while they were outwardly engaged in friendly chit-chat. It was maddening.

He moved away first and returned to his seat at the table.
She wondered what his tongue would taste like.

Twenty minutes later, Kendra's strength was flagging, and Aran too looked like he was feeling the strain. The space in the apartment felt too small for the two of them. Finally, he sighed and stood up.

"It's time for me to go. Thank you for your forbearance, Kendra."

"My forbearance didn't seem optional, though it's nice of you to thank me for it."

He smiled a tired, charming smile that showcased both dimples to perfection. "No mercy to the end, huh?"

"Sounds like your interrogation methods."

He froze mid-stride and shot her a look of startled reproach.

She held his gaze. His eyes were extremely beautiful. The hint of sadness in them made her want to surrender to the impulse to throw her arms around him and cling on. She felt drained, relieved and bereft at the same time.

"Forgive me if I don't walk you out."

He looked away. "Goodnight, Kendra."

"Goodnight. Aran."

He closed the door behind him carefully.

She glanced around her apartment, feeling a surge of panic, and a few moments later she threw it open. "Hey!" she hissed after him, trying to keep her voice down. "Did you take my gun?"

He ignored her and swiftly descended down the dark stairwell, disappearing out of sight.

"Reiner!" she called furiously and ran after him down the dark stairwell.

5.

Reiner paused by the front entrance of the building and turned to face her. “Yes,” he said. He lifted his shirt. Her gun was tucked into his pants. “I borrowed your gun.”

She sucked in her breath. “Son of a bitch!” she hissed. She launched herself at him from halfway down the last flight of stairs.

Reiner stepped forward to meet her with disquieting speed and without hesitation. The physical impact knocked her back and she stumbled into the wall. His fingers locked under the wrist clasp of the gauntlet and he forced her arm up, keeping the gauntlet well away from himself. Regaining her footing, she stepped into him and drove her left fist into his side. It connected, but the blow bounced off a hard wall of abdominal muscle he managed to engage in time, making little impact. He twisted her arm abruptly to drop her to her knees and pinned her wrist up against the wall. He set about trying to pry the gauntlet off her hand. This was not going to be easy. The gauntlet was designed to wrap securely around the hand so as to be difficult to dislodge by force. The wrist clasp release was difficult to find, and there was a trick to triggering it.

Kendra struggled to get to her feet. He threw his leg across her and pinned her chest to the wall with it. Snarling, she turned her head and sank her teeth into his thigh. At first, she wondered whether she’d got hold of his flesh through the fabric of his pants, then she heard him draw his breath in, and felt muscle clenching under her teeth. He maintained the pressure across her chest and focused hard on prying the gauntlet off her hand, his movements becoming more urgent and jerky as the pain in his thigh set in. He breathed through it with hissing pants.

The Askari tried to force the clasp around her wrist off, but had to figure out how it opened in near darkness. She attempted to close her fingers together in the way that activated the stun function. Showing good instincts, he noticed that immediately and hastened to stop her. He grabbed her middle finger and bent it back away from the others. She growled with the pain and twisted sharply beneath him.

There was a feeling akin to being punched in the chest with something soft but heavy. Kendra slumped abruptly onto the floor and heard the Askari drop away from her. There was complete silence.

She blinked hard a few times, only getting a narrow band of tunnel vision.

She couldn't see Reiner, but she could hear him, trying to move, somewhere at her side. Whatever had gone awry with the gauntlet had hit them both.

Kendra felt weak; too weak to even hold her eyes open. She couldn't move her arms or legs.

Reiner groaned. "Ken-dra?" Despite their struggle, he sounded concerned for her.

"Please. Don't. Leave. Me. Here..." she whispered.

6.

Kendra's eyes fluttered open. She was lying on her back in her bed in her Old Town apartment, fully dressed. Aran Reiner was lying partly on top of her, one arm thrown across her middle. He was so still that he looked dead, but she could feel his breath, strong and regular, on her neck. It made her shiver with pleasure.

He was also fully dressed and, like her, was still wearing his shoes. Kendra was annoyed about that. She only had one bed cover and would have to spend tomorrow at the laundromat washing and drying it in time to use again the following night.

Her blanket was under them both and there was no way to get to it. She still felt too weak to move her own body, let alone try to budge his. He looked completely out for the count. She surmised he'd carried her up six flights of stairs, and from the way they were lying, he'd been carrying her over his shoulder when he'd collapsed with her onto the bed, and passed out.

Impressive. He'd managed to get himself to his feet, carry her dead weight up the stairs, and get the door open. He should never have been able to do that. The force of the gauntlet hit must have been dissipated by distributing between the two of them.

Luckily it was a warm night, so she could do without the blanket, and Reiner radiated warmth beside her. His handsome face, so innocent in sleep, was pale and drawn. He looked completely drained.

She had no idea what the time was, but it was pitch black outside. She lifted her head ever so slightly and twisted it to glance at the kitchen window. The room spun violently around her, and she had to close her eyes and lie still, retching with a wave of nausea. The man beside her didn't move. She reached down to try and lift his arm off her in case she needed to stumble off the bed to vomit, but it felt impossibly heavy and she gave up.

Lying still seemed to make things better. She breathed through the nausea, keeping his arm at her hip. The mere thought of trying to recover her gun from somewhere on his prostrate body made her feel profoundly exhausted. She itched to remove the gauntlet from her hand. It had obviously malfunctioned when Reiner had tried to remove it by brute force, and she was nervous about having it still attached to her. But she was hesitant to open it in the dark, in case it was broken and zapped her again by accident.

Tentatively, careful not to trigger the vertigo again, she turned on her side,

facing away from him. She curled up and backed into his body, and drew his arm across her waist for warmth. She slipped her thumb beneath his palm. It was comfortable and she closed her eyes for a moment.

Waking up the next morning was like rising from the dead. Not in a euphoric kind of way, rather, in a clawing through six feet of earth lying on top of her kind of way.

Realising she was alone again, however, was a shot of adrenalin straight to Kendra's heart. Reiner was gone! He'd been in her apartment – alone and unsupervised – while she had been lying in bed, passed out!

She leapt out of bed, her body protesting in all kinds of ways, and frantically stumbled into the kitchen. She dropped to her knees by the sink and opened the cupboard beneath it. Her fingers found the latch of the secret compartment where she kept sensitive electronics and pried it open. Kendra pulled everything out and examined it feverishly. Camera, phone, computer, parabolic microphone: everything was present and accounted for. She sat back on her heels and sighed with relief.

She found his note on the kitchen table.

If you want your gun back, give me a call.

A

PS: I didn't touch your phone or your computer. Or ravish you in your sleep. You are welcome.