

1.

“Earth? Yeah, mate, I don’t mind going there again. It isn’t such a bad flight.”

The sound of heavy boots echoed through the empty hall. The white walls were all but blinding. Not so much as a smudge on any of them. The Collector watched as Sam pressed buttons on the tablet attached to his arm.

“Knew I could count on you for this.” His voice was distant as if the conversation were already over. “Same rate as usual work for you?” He didn’t want an answer.

“I just made a run there less than a month ago. Why do you need something else this quickly?” Third Emperia gave him many contracts, in fact the various government departments were the only agencies rich enough to pay his harvesting fee with any regularity, but two specimens from the same planet in less than a month? That was unheard of. Especially for a planet as small and unimportant as Earth. What could they want with another woman?

“Can’t really say. The orders came from high up, though. Its a bit above your security clearance.”

“Yeah, your’s too, mate,” The Collector muttered.

Sam Washington, despite his feelings and imagination, was nothing more than an errand boy for the Third Emperia research department. Of course he wouldn’t know anything. Still. It was strange.

“Shouldn’t take me more than a week. Transfer the contract and I’ll get it signed.”

The Collector pulled his jacket tighter as he stepped onto the docking station platform. The smell of jet fuel singed his nose and metal screeched as a freighter landed in front of him. A massive ship, probably carrying enough supplies to feed an army, it would crush his ship without even noticing it. Behind it, the vastness of empty space beckoned like a long-lost friend.

Two specimens so soon from Earth. And the orders came from high up? How high up? What could possibly be going on?

He shook his head.

They didn't pay him to think. It was a job. One that would give him enough money to take some time off and explore Wyndsor 7. Who really cares what they do with another human woman? That was no business of his.

The screen crackled and filled with snow. Lines ran vertically across and the picture froze before resetting. Empress Kork frowned. They needed to upgrade the cameras on the docking station. The largest empire in the history of the universe, and yet she couldn't watch the docks without the screen freezing. Why had Captain Larston not done that? As Head of Security, shouldn't he be concerned about outdated security equipment in such an important sector of the system? The captain had seemed distracted lately. Maybe there was something going on he had not told her about yet.

That could wait. Larston was on mission elsewhere today, anyway.

She watched the man sweep bangs - were they brown or black? It was hard to tell with this screen - out of his eyes and board his small ship. Off to Earth to grab a human woman. Just another job for him. Fire licked from the exhaust pipes and the ship drifted lazily into space.

"He's off." She didn't turn around. There was no need. He would be there.

"Good." The voice was as low as normal, but was that a touch of exhaustion she heard? After all of this time, was he finally slipping? "And you will inform me when he returns."

"Of course." It wasn't a question, but she was still the Empress. No one could give her orders.

Turning her back on the screen, Kork crossed her arms and fixed her stare on the man. His white beard tickled the top of his chest and his brown robes, something like a burlap sack, looked even more uncomfortable than normal.

"I still don't understand," she said. "Who is this man? There's not much in our systems about him, which is unusual enough. But he's a nobody. And why do you want him to harvest from that horrid planet? No one goes to Earth except petulant children on hunting holidays."

"It isn't for you to understand." As usual, he didn't glance at her. Would he even see her if he tried? Sometimes it seemed like his mind was disconnected from his body.

Drawing her shoulders as far back as she could and titling her chin towards the ceiling, she said: "I think, as Empress of Third Emperia, it is my right to know what happens in my domain on my orders."

He ignored the remark. She had thought he would. "It is your orders?"

"Yes and no." She sighed. The man was a rock that couldn't be broken with the sharpest pick. "I gave the order, but through so much paperwork that it couldn't be traced to me, that I'm sure of."

"Good."

Her shoulders slouched. After all these years, after all of her success, it still felt good to see him pleased with her.

"You know, sometimes I wish you'd come without orders. Maybe I only want to talk with you. I miss my father."

For the first time, her father looked his age, even if she didn't know exactly what age that was. Wrinkles deepened at the corners of his mouth as he frowned. "Soon, Sonnett, soon. I promise." No one called her that, not anymore. It made her heart beat faster to hear it. "We are nearing the end now."

"How can you be sure?"

"I am not. But it isn't for me to say or know. I do as I am told, as was predicted." Yet another answer that wasn't an answer. A particular speciality of her father's. "But it is nearing the end, so I have been told. And when it is over." He paused and a muscle twitched in his neck. "We can be a family again."

To hide the moisture in her eyes, she turned back to the screen. A new ship had taken the spot of the harvesters. Surely he was unimportant. But this woman he was bringing back, who was she? Why was it so necessary to get her here? She didn't need to turn around to know her father had left. The security guards Larston assigned to her would be furious at how easily he could reach her.

But it didn't matter what they did, he would find a way. And she would hear from him again when they were ready for the next step in the plan.

Humans were so easy to abduct. Really, they almost begged for it. They collected into cities, building towering monoliths pinpointing exactly where they lived, and they never put up a fight. Earth always held the easiest paychecks.

The jets blew the snow and pine leaves into the air, creating a streak of chaos trailing the ship. The Collector tipped the nose towards the sky before diving down again to skim the tops of the fir trees. That was always fun. It was a shame this was not a warmer climate. Displaced birds desperately attempting to pierce the hull of his ship was always fun to watch. The debris fell to the ground behind him and settled on a fresh blanket of snow.

"Sir, might I suggest gaining some altitude? Reports indicate that you are in the visibility zone."

The Collector looked at the readout to his left. Sure enough, the visibility report was in the red.

"Ah, relax Tinny, I'm just having some fun." Nevertheless, he pulled up on the throttle to increase his altitude a bit.

"We are still running the risk of being detected. We are entering a more populated zone."

“Who cares? Give ‘em something to talk about.” Where was he supposed to direct his voice when he was talking to his AI co-pilot? He looked at the small speaker in the center of the console. It was not the best, but that’s where her voice came from, so it made the most sense.

“It could compromise the mission, sir.”

The Collector chuckled. “It’s not an important mission, mate.” He raised the altitude once again and engaged the cloaking system. Anything to make Tinny happy. A few golden lights sprinkled the landscape underneath him. The small town was settling into their homes for the evening, watching hours of random talk shows or sitcoms. “You don’t have to call me sir. You know that. We’re the only ones here.”

“Copy that.” The Collector heard the artificial voice straining, as much as an artificial voice could strain, to not finish with “sir.” He smiled again.

The universe was full of so many worn out planets that were brown and dusty or covered in steel as far as the eye could see. The Earth was colorful and vibrant like a child had designed and painted it. Every inch was alive and teeming with energy. To see it now, from thousands of feet in the air, the rolling hilltops blanketed with pure white snow, it enraptured him. The green, the open sky, the bright sun. It all seemed right, like it was supposed to be this way.

The sun had almost completely set below a ridge of hills. The sky was an explosion of soft reds and yellows. The snow-covered treetops started to glisten in the twilight. The Collector slowed down to watch as the Earth became something surreal under the new colors. This was the best time of day on the Earth, maybe on any planet he had been to. Drotheria definitely didn’t look like this at its star-down.

But he couldn’t afford the delay. There was too much to do.

“Tinny, pull up the fastest route to the destination.”

“Yes sir,” Tinny chirped back and his navigation screen was suddenly full of data and coordinates. The loading bar was full after a few seconds and The Collector pushed the

“autopilot” function. He leaned back in his beat-up old chair as his ship picked up speed and height, the soft red colors washing past him at a rapid rate.

He could not afford to fall in love with this planet.

“Tinny, I can’t just walk around in a fully metallic suit. That’s gonna draw some attention.”

“Sir, I’m afraid I must insist. I have been unable to acquire an accurate atmospheric reading. We do not know how much oxygen is out there.”

“I’ve been here plenty of times,” The Collector responded. “I think I know I can survive the atmosphere.” His ship landed at the top of one of the tallest buildings in the city. Crowds surged and wove through the streets below him like waves in an ocean. They seemed to follow a pattern he couldn’t see.

“What if the atmosphere has changed since the last visit ?” She stopped calling him sir.

“Does it look like the atmosphere has changed to you?”

“I am unable to secure readings,” Tinny responded.

“That’s what I thought.” The Collector unplugged the drive that contained Tinny from the port in the ship’s dashboard and inserted it into a port in his belt. Suddenly Tinny’s voice was coming from the tiny translator device inserted into his right ear.

“Your suit has the highest caliber cloaking device available for download. You will not be seen. It really is the most prudent course of action to ensure the success of the mission.”

“Tinny, it’s fine. I don’t want to wear the suit.” There was no real reason to push back so hard against the suit. On any other planet, he would wear it for sure. It was a risk to not wear it. But maybe for once, he wanted to fit in. For at least an hour or two, he could pretend that he belonged here.

“Sir...” Tinny began.

“Tell you what,” he interrupted. “If something happens, I give you full permission to download a dictionary and call me every insult you can come up with. Deal?”

Tinny did not have time to answer before the latch opened and the stairs began to descend without making a noise. The wind whipped The Collector’s hair as he stepped on to the roof of the building. He was holding his breath without realizing it. Almost as if to spite Tinny, he took one long breath in and held it. The non-machine generated air felt amazing as it filled up his lungs. It tasted sweet, like it did after a rainstorm, and felt somewhat wet on his skin.

He stepped away from his ship and turned back to look at it. It was almost invisible, besides a barely perceptible vibration, almost as if the air were humming. No one would be able to see that, especially not from the ground. That new cloaking module he had bought turned out to be worth it. Good. It was pricey and not the easiest thing to install.

The elevator took far too long to reach the top of the hotel. The Collector bounced his foot against the ground and ran his fingers through his hair. It was cold this high up. He pulled the jacket tighter around him as a shiver ran up his back.

“If you were wearing the suit, you could have jumped off of the building and suffered no ill effects.” The Collector reached down and pressed the silence button on his belt, next to the Tinny port. He’d probably hear about that one later. He glanced over the edge of the building, to the people dodging each other on the sidewalk far below. The lights of the storefronts reflecting neon signs like a watercolor. The wait wasn’t so bad.

A cacophony of noise, lights, and smells wafted into him as he stepped out onto the busy street. He stopped and took a deep breath in. The smell of sewage and bread mixed in his nose. He smiled. It had taken roughly two weeks of travel to reach Earth; two weeks of being trapped in an airtight bubble speeding through endless stars. Now he was in the fresh air. He could reach out and touch other life forms. He could walk and run and jump without worrying about knocking his ship off track. It was enough to make anyone appreciate the smell of

sewage. He ran his hand along the side of the building, feeling the rough stone against his cold palm.

The street ahead of him filled with humans. According to the report on his navigation system, this was a city known as Nashville. It was not listed in the Galactic Empire's almanac. Nowhere on Earth was. The actual planet barely had a blurb. It was listed as "Non-communicative" as if that was all anyone needed to know about it.

Despite many different trips to Earth, the Collector had never been to Nashville, but Tinny's readings indicated this place was the best spot for their current mission. This particular strip, Broadway according to the very handy street signs, was full of lights, loud noises, and overflowing with music. He winced as he passed a bar with a full band yelling into an empty restaurant. This music was nothing like the beautiful poetry the Runspah sector created. But at least they were passionate about it.

He unmuted Tinny as he meandered through the crowds. "Alright, Tinny, you know what we're looking for. Start scanning." Tinny did not reply. He did not expect her too. She had to still be upset about the muting, but she was following orders. She always did.

People brushed past him on all sides and crowded around him at every crosswalk. It was like a dance, but no one bothered to show him the steps. He found himself bumping into strangers and mumbling an apology in words he thought they might understand. No one spared him a glance. The music and lights blasted through his senses. It was so hot in the middle of these people. What happened to the snow? It was supposed to be winter in this sector. His chest was tightening. The street felt like it was closing in on him. He needed some space to think. He stepped into a quieter street and leaned his back against a building, eyeing everyone who passed. Tinny would alert him when she found a suitable candidate for the mission.

The Collector fit in well with the surrounding crowds, but everyone around was so focused on getting to where they were going that they didn't even spare him a glance. His thin, dark blue jacket and rough jeans were little protection against the biting wind and he stared

longingly at the scarves and hats of the people who passed him. Some of them were so carelessly worn, he could grab one so easily. But that would draw attention to himself. He couldn't do that.

His eye caught on a young woman with auburn hair spilling from under her white toboggan. Her pale skin was rosy with cold. Her head was down as she moved quickly through the throngs of tourists, her pink backpack bouncing against her back. She clearly was not here for fun; she had somewhere she needed to be.

"Hey, Tinny, what about her?" The Collector said. He kept his voice down as a couple past him. He was sure that Tinny knew who he was talking about.

"She has been scanned, yes."

The Collector waited for more information. "And?"

"She is a suitable candidate."

"Why didn't you tell me that?" He left the wall and began to follow her. She moved through the people on the sidewalks without even glancing up. A muscle was working in her jaw and her shoulders were raised.

"Because certain emotional characteristics have determined that she is not the ideally suited candidate to complete this mission."

"What does that mean?"

Was that worry in her voice? "It means there are more...suitable candidates available."

"Yeah, okay, fine. But if she meets the requirements and she is right there, why not just use her?" The Collector forgot to keep his voice low and was drawing the attention of people passing. Even if they couldn't understand his language, a strange man talking to himself and watching a young woman would be worth noting on almost any planet. "I want to get this over with so we can get to Wyndsor."

"Sir, I will have to caution you against that. Readings indicate there may be more suitable-

"I don't care if someone is *more* suitable. She is suitable. And right there."

Tinny did not respond.

"Tinny, please run the checks. You know what to do." He turned around and started walking back towards his ship. Tinny would follow the instructions even if she was upset by them. There was something about this girl that intrigued him. He felt drawn to her, impressed by her.

The ride back to the top of the hotel was much longer than the ride down.

The ship hovered over the quiet, two-story home, the jet engines humming, but not loud enough to draw any attention. With the camouflage module engaged at full power, no one in the surrounding houses, which all looked identical to this one, would know that he was here at all.

The Collector pulled the Mobility Orb out of the over-cramped storage closet. He really should clean that when he got the chance. Not right now, of course, but at some point. Most of it was sentimental junk he had picked up during travels. He wasn't going to need that stuff. He probably would never look at it again. It would be easy to toss into a nearby star.

He inserted Tinny's drive into the port on the back of the orb and watched as it blinked into life. It took a few extra seconds to power up. Maybe it could use a performance upgrade when he could afford it. Another expense to add to the growing list. Soft blue lights illuminated around the Orb and it hovered in place, the camera, which looked unnervingly like an electronic eye, stared at him.

He swung the orb around and popped off a panel on its back. "I need to make sure your new cloaking device is functioning right. With this thing, you should be completely invisible. Unless you bump into things." She wouldn't do that. She was better at this than he was.

“Sir, I have to ask you again to reconsider.” Tinny’s voice was more muffled coming from the metallic orb. “My reading indicates that she -”

“I know what the readings indicate. I’m choosing to ignore them.” The Collector stuffed a small capsule that swirled with purple fog into a port at the bottom of the orb. He turned back to his computer and fired up the display, revealing a grainy image of the back of his head. He really needed to buy an upgrade module for that camera. Another item for the list.

“I fear this is going to end poorly.”

“Well, if it does then it does and it will be my fault.” He shrugged. “But it’s time for you to get going.”

Tinny flew out of a small hatch that opened near the baseboard. The Collector rubbed his hands together and watched as Tinny’s arm-like attachment slid open a second-floor window. They were moving too fast on this mission. Normally, he preferred a research period for his missions, but he was ready to have this job done. The quicker he could get to WyndSOR 7 the better.

But Tinny was an expert. She paused just inside the window and a gradient of red light illuminated the walls around her. She lurched to her left and extended her short, pipe-like arm once again. There was a small creak as the door opened.

The Collector smiled to himself as Tinny poked a hole in the proper tube and dropped in the canister full of purple smoke. These centralized Air Conditioning units made it really easy to disseminate whatever he wanted to the entire house. He loved Earth. They made everything super convenient for him. There was no lassoing raging animals here.

His suit was hanging haphazardly in the closet of the sleeping compartment. With the heavy suit and the bed pod, there was hardly any space to even move inside the room. But that didn’t matter, he didn’t need to move that much. His clothes were spread over the dresser or bundled in piles on the floor. No one was ever on this ship. At least, not when they were awake. What did he care if things were a bit of a mess?

His sighed as he picked up the exosuit. This thing was the worst to put on. The parts were heavy and awkward to handle. Pressing the wrong button would result in the suit unfastening into a bundle of similar looking panels that would take a few hours to reassemble. He had to move carefully, but that was difficult while trying to convince a metal suit to bend to his will. Maybe his suit needed a mobility upgrade. Another item for the list, but this one could wait. When he was back in the Emporio System, he would check the markets and see what was available if he had a few credits to spare.

The helmet was always the last piece to go on. It was so contained and it pressed his ears into his head. He slid it on and held his breath while it powered up. The visor lit up with readouts and the metal pieces over his body sprang to life with the jet power. He checked the readouts on his forearm. The battery power was getting low. There was enough for this job but would need to recharge it on the way to Emporio. The cloaking device was fully operational, communication channels were open, all of the gadgets were in their docks. He was ready to go.

He slid out of the open door and gilded weightlessly to the ground. The miniature jets in his feet wobbled as they engaged. He almost lost his balance, but caught himself against the house. Those damn jets. Maybe it was time for a more advanced version of this suit, one that would allow for some serious height and fly time. He never felt the need for it before, but these jets were uneven now. The list was growing far too long.

The window Tinny opened was easy to get into with the jets and the enhanced movement capabilities of his exosuit. He pressed the button to import Tinny's navigational data and several blue dots appeared on his visor in a line that ended at a closed wooden door. Tinny floated near the utility closet. Her work was mostly done for this mission. His boots were loud, even on the carpeted floor, but it did not matter now. The sedative should have done its job, as it always had before, and no one in this house would be waking up for at least 8 hours, no matter what.

He paused at a framed picture of the target with her arm around a tall, dark haired girl. They were smiling radiantly, carefree and joyful. Their faces were glowing with warmth and welcome. In the background a large white arch split the sky. Some kind of bridge maybe? It really was a great picture. He understood why they would want to display it.

The girl's room was small but organized. Her white desk was stacked high with thick books with hard covers and loose papers underlined and highlighted different colors. The soft white light of the moon pouring through the window bathed the scene in an eerie glow. He walked to the bed on his tiptoes even though it made no difference in the suit. It was always funny seeing humans sleep by laying flat. It seemed like such a waste of space. But she looked comfortable enough. The corners of her mouth were turned up, almost as if she were smiling in her sleep.

He pulled a small, silver square out of a compartment on his thigh and pressed a button in the center. It expanded into a full-sized stretcher that hovered in place.

This was the part he always hated. It felt far too intimate. It was sort of funny, his name was The Collector and his least favorite part was always the actual collection. He wrapped his arms around the unconscious body and lifted her several feet out of the bed, the power in his suit making the lift effortless. Tinny, floating in the doorway, controlled the stretcher into gliding under the woman and The Collector lowered her onto it.

His breath was fogging the inside of his visor. He heard the fan turn on and the fog vanished as quickly as it appeared. The Collector checked the timer that was running on his forearm dashboard. He had started it as soon as Tinny had deployed the narcotic. They still had plenty of time, but he always checked the timer. He could never be too careful.

Tinny gave him control of the stretcher again without direction. He remembered the days of trying to do this job alone. It was almost impossible to control all aspects of the mission at the same time without overlooking something or meandering into dangerous situations. He

remembered one particular time when he was greeted with the barrel of a large gun. There was a chance he broke some intergalactic laws on that mission, but it couldn't be helped.

Tinny was a life saver. He only had to worry about his small part of the job and had complete confidence that Tinny would be capable of handling her portion.

The Collector slid a small, silver disc out of a slot along his waist, pressed a button in the middle of the disc, and dropped it onto the sleeping body on the stretcher. When the disc landed on the woman, the entire stretcher, body included, became invisible. Portable cloaking devices were another life saver. The Collector opened the bedroom window and paused to inspect the quiet, dark street. No movement from any of the houses. Perfect. He used the controls on his forearm dashboard and the heat map image of the stretcher in his visor display to maneuver the stretcher out of the window. Tinny followed it out, re-initializing her cloaking device in the process, and The Collector closed the window behind them.

After a successful collection, The Collector always wanted to walk out of the front door. It seemed so natural and basic. But he couldn't. Of course, he couldn't. The mission was not complete yet and there was no time to be arrogant. A door opening by itself could be the difference between a successful mission and a failure. Instead, he walked back down the hallway and slid out of the window. He engaged his jets and hovered in place while he closed the window before ascending to the roof.

The night was very still. Down the street, not a single light was on in any house. He could almost believe he was the only living person in this area. There was no wind to rustle any leaves, no roar of passing cars on an interstate, no dogs alerting inhabitants to potential intruders. Everything was peaceful. The light layer of snow that blanketed the ground reflected the glow of the few, sparse streetlights were strewn haphazardly down the street. The Collector took three deep breaths, tasting the plastic of the artificial oxygen, and the corners of his mouth twitched.

Suddenly, a dark blue light descended from his invisible ship, engulfing him. The light showed up in his visor, but any nosy neighbors looking out of their window would not see a thing. He gripped his hands into balls and bit down hard. This part was terrible. As the light washed over him, he felt warm and weightless. He drifted up towards his ship, making sure to keep his arms tucked in close to his body. The entrance port at the end of the light ladder was pretty narrow. He had learned the hard way to stay compact to slide into his ship. It was always upsetting to be lifted off of the ground by the light ladder, having no control over your own speed or even direction. He was so powerless over this entire procedure.

The harsh metal side brushed against his left shoulder as he slid into the cargo hold of the ship. Tinny had already guided the stretcher into the transport pod. The woman now rested inside a pod, standing against the far wall of the cargo hold. It was lit by a soft light near her feet. Her head was upright, her eyes closed and her mouth parted open. She could be an idol on an altar.

The Collector caught himself staring at her a little too long. He knew Tinny was already nervous about this mission, for some reason, and he did not want to give her any reason to be even more on edge. He pulled the latch on the wall beside him, causing the light ladder to retract and the latch to close and pressurize with a loud hissing sound. He removed his helmet and inspected the readout on the monitor next to the holding pod.

Everything seemed stable. Her heart rate and blood pressure levels were what they had come to expect. Her psychotic state was normal and relaxed, indicating the narcotic was working. Brain wave scans showed no signs of fear, confusion, or pain. None of the warning alarms had triggered during the mission. They had remained completely unseen and undetected. The specimen they picked up was female, in the appropriate age range, with the proper emotional makeup.

All in all, this was shaping up to be a successful mission. They still had to make it back to Emporio, but that wasn't the hard part. The human in the cargo hold would be surprised to

learn how careless and nonchalant other members of the universe were about intergalactic space travel. It really was safer than flying in an Earth-bound plane. Far easier, too.

With the ship out of the orbit of the star called Sun, humming and vibrating as it blazed its way through the universe at an unbelievable speed, The Collector stood in the cargo hold, staring into the peaceful face of the woman they had collected. The lines around her cheeks were like rivers cutting through a plain. The light freckles across her nose were dull and faded. A single strand of hair drifted in front of her eyes. If only he could reach forward and push that piece of hair behind her ear.

“Tinny, why were you so worried about picking her up?”

“Readings of her emotional makeup indicated that she could potentially lead to problems in the future.” Tinny spoke from the portable orb behind him. He had forgotten to plug her back into the ship's system. The autopilot system could use the boost. The standard system built into the ship would still work to get them on track, but having it guided by an intelligence always gave more surety in mapping a route.

“What kind of problems?”

“Readings of both you and her revealed there is a strong likelihood of growing attachment.”

The Collector paused. What did she mean by that? Did she think he could grow attached to this Earth woman? After all they had been through together, did she really think that was a possibility? She was from Earth. He was on a mission. “Are you saying what I think you're saying? That I'm likely to...”

“I believe it's called fall in love.”

“That's ridiculous. She's from Earth!”

“This is what initial reports have indicated. The readings-”

“Damn the readings!” He spun around and glared into the eye-shaped camera. “I’m not going to fall in love with anyone from Earth. They’re animals, worthless. No one comes from Earth. Do you really think I could love someone like that?”

Tinny remained silent.

“We will take her to Emporio, they will do whatever it is they do to her, we will take her back home. She will never be awake.” He started to pace back and forth across the cargo hold. Tinny spun in place to keep the camera focused on him. “How can I fall in love if I don’t even talk to her?” He did not wait for an answer. “She is just another job. After this, we’ll have enough money to spend some time poking around Wyndsor 7. Like we’ve been planning. That’s what I’m focused on. That’s what I’m here for. Not to fall in love.”

Tinny did not answer. The Collector could sense what she was thinking. She would always believe the readings completely, it was her default position. She would listen to him, though, and they had a pressing mission to complete. They had come too far to backtrack and start the mission over. She may not agree with his choices, but she had to accept them now.

“Wait for me in the cockpit. I’ll plug you back into the ship.”

Tinny drifted out of the room without comment. She had said what she had to say.

The Collector stood for several more minutes, watching the sleeping woman. She really was quite beautiful. At least for an Earth woman.