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BLURB:

Captain Querida Buenaventure of the Earth-Venus Transport Authority has a problem. Her relationship with Mick Brody is crashing. She struggles to keep control of her life and finds herself caught up in an assassination attempt on one of her passengers. When she needs rescuing from the surface of Venus, who should show up but "the one who got away," Jim Montgomery. Now, Queri has to sort out who's the bad guy and who's the good guy? All she needs is a little space, a little time, and a lot of love.

Space, Time, and Love
by Angel Leigh McCoy

Captain Querida Buenaventura bent over the blinking console and double-checked the output, but nothing had changed. The interplanetary leisure transport was going to crash-land; there was no stopping it.

"We'd better get strapped in," she said into the crew communication system. "We don't have much time. We're running out of energy fast."

"Aye, Captain," said Mick Brody, her co-pilot. "If we can raise the shields to maximum at the last minute, we might just walk away from this."

Querida snorted. "Dammit, how did this happen? Did they forget to change the cells before we launched?" They were barely out of the city docks, and this was a potentially fatal problem. As if her day could get any worse!

"No idea. But we're going down, no way around it." Mick was right. They couldn't go back, and they couldn't stay aloft. The planet's atmosphere was pulling them down.

"Zira," Querida said to one of the flight attendants, "I'm coming back there to help you get people moving, we don't have much time."

"Yes, ma'am," Zira replied. "What should I tell them?"

"I'll tell them. They deserve to know the truth." Querida pushed a button on her headset, switching to open broadcast. "Ladies and gentlemen, this is your Captain. I need you all to calmly return to your seats, put on your bio-suit helmets, and strap in. We're experiencing a problem with our energy

cells and will be making an emergency landing on Venus; there will be heavy turbulence. I assure you we're doing all we can. Please stay calm and listen to your flight attendants and thank you for your cooperation." She switched her com-link back to its crew-only setting.

Querida put a hand on Mick's shoulder to get his attention. "I'll be back once they're all strapped in."

As she was turning away, Mick rested his own hand over hers and held her in place. "Querida," his eyes pleaded, "you have to let me explain, it's not what you think."

"We'll talk about it when we get home." Querida slid her hand free and left the cockpit. Pure professional stoicism kept her from slapping him across the face. She and Mick had moved in together a month earlier. She remembered the sound of his laughter when they'd gone ring-shopping together, and she'd inadvertently picked out the most expensive one in the place—a blue Venutian diamond solitaire. And yet, that very morning, she'd caught him kissing the fleet commander's assistant. Her initial thought at the sight of them had been that it explained all the nights he'd had to "work late" so often recently. Her second thought had been far more murderous.

An hour later, she'd been prepping to take off on a run back to Earth when she'd learned her co-pilot was ill, and Mick had joined her as her second in the cockpit. She hadn't had time to process what she'd seen, much less to demand an explanation.

Glad now for any excuse to get out of the cockpit and away from him, Querida turned her attention to her passengers.

Moving to the back of the leisure transport, Querida helped Zira and Paul guide the all-female group of passengers from the private cocktail party—a "happy divorce" party for an extremely wealthy woman—and into their seats. They helped them all into helmets, then checked to be sure each one was securely fastened within their harnesses. Some, the less-seasoned travelers, had begun to pray or cry. Many wanted to know what was happening. Querida reassured them the best she knew how.

"Captain," said a woman with pink-streaked hair and more than a little champagne slurring her voice. "You can't let me die. Not when I'm so close to being free of that bastard."

"You'll be fine, Mrs. Block."

"Oh, God. Call me Dee."

"We're all going to be fine, Dee." Querida patted the woman on the shoulder. "Don't worry." What she didn't say was that if one of them didn't make it, then none of them would. The real danger now was an explosion, and if that happened there'd be nothing left of the ship. If all they experienced was a traumatic impact, then their seats would protect them—until Venus's atmosphere came calling.

Mick's voice came over the crew com, "I'm closing the window shields."

The metal panes came down over the glass, cutting off Querida's view of the passing clouds. In the five years she'd been making cargo and passenger runs between Earth and Venus she'd experienced plenty of docking and air conditioning problems, but she'd never had to land her ship on the Venutian

surface. All human habitations existed above the planet in the upper atmosphere, far and away from the broiling surface temperatures of over 850 degrees Fahrenheit.

By then, as was protocol, Mick had undoubtedly informed the fleet officials in Aphrodite City, and they'd be panicking. They'd deploy a planetary rescue ship, or PRS for short; but whether it would get there in time or not was unpredictable. The atmospheric pressure on the planet's surface could crush a ship like hers in less than an hour. Once the hull cracked, it would take less than a minute for it all to be over.

All her life, Querida had wanted nothing more than to be a space pilot. Her every choice throughout school had taken her one step closer to it. She'd aced all her training and had been the youngest pilot ever to earn her three-star license. She refused to think that it would all end on the surface of Venus, a planet named for the Roman goddess of love. Querida had always considered Venus a kindred spirit; Venus had a hard surface, but a soft core, just like she herself did.

The ship lights suddenly went out and were replaced by emergency lighting. Several of the passengers gasped.

"Mick, what's happening?" Querida shouted as she made her way back to the cockpit.

"I'm shutting down everything but critical functions. We need to save any energy we can for the shields as we land."

"Good call. The passengers are settled and I'm coming back in."

"Your window of opportunity is closed, Querida. Take the extra crew seat out there."

Querida's heart beat faster. "What? No, Mick. No. I'm coming in. I'm not going to leave you in the cockpit alone."

"I've locked the door and shut down the override. You can't get in. This is a one-man job. The passengers are our number-one priority, and if we get through this you need to be there to help them."

Querida felt tears swim in her eyes as she realized the full extent of what he was saying. The cockpit seats weren't nearly as safe as the passenger and crew seats; a deployed airbag could hinder the pilot's ability to see and work the controls in the last critical moments of a crash. Furthermore, the chance of a hull breach in the nose of the ship, at the point of impact, was exponentially higher. In a hard landing the pilots had a front-row seat.

She lowered her voice to a hiss. "Let. Me. In. That's an order."

"I'm sorry, Captain. You can have me arrested for mutiny when we get home."

Querida slammed her palm against the door, frustration and fear overwhelming her calm demeanor.

Mick said, "Sixty seconds to landing. Flight crew strap in. Helmets on. Buddy check, please.

I'm going silent. I'll see you on the ground. Good luck."

Querida rested her forehead against the cold metal door for a moment, just a moment, before the sobs and murmured prayers of the passengers brought her back to herself. She straightened her spine and stood up. Turning the com to open broadcast she said, "The situation is in the best hands possible. Mick Brody is one of the finest pilots I've ever known. He'll get us down in one piece." She paused, looking at the passengers' wide-eyed faces within their plastic bubbles. "Once we're on the surface, do not remove your helmet or suit, and do not leave the ship until instructed to do so. The atmosphere on Venus is highly toxic. We will wait there for the rescue ship. Before the day is out, we'll be on stools at the station bar, telling everyone about our adventure. Drinks on me." Querida forced a smile onto her face, then nodded once before turning the com back to crew-only. "Let's do this," she said.

She took the empty seat with the flight attendants. Zira had pulled an extra helmet from one of the lockers for her, and they buddy-checked each others' breathing apparatuses.

"Ten seconds to surface contact," Mick announced over the com-link. "Brace for impact."

Ten seconds.

In those ten short seconds, Querida thought of the people she loved: 10—her Mom, 9—her Dad, 8—her sister Linda, 7—her other sister Genia, 6—her Grandma, 5—her Grandpa, 4—her best friend Carma, 3—her niece whom she'd promised to take to the zoo that weekend, 2—Mick...and just before impact, she thought of "the one who got away"- Jim.

Then began the longest minute of Querida's life. The touchdown jolted every bone in her body and triggered everyone's airbags. White-knuckled, she clutched the seat arms, willing herself not to scream. Others in the ship didn't have as much control and let loose cries of terror. The sound of metal scraping on rock was itself a scream.

Just when it seemed as if they'd glide to a stop, they hit something head-on that jarred the ship, making it lurch to one side and stop without mercy.

Querida's body was thrown back against the seat, forward against the harnesses, then jerked to the side. She felt a sharp pain in her shoulder.

But the ship had stopped moving, and they hadn't exploded. Passengers were sobbing and coughing; the ship had filled with a cloud of white powder from the airbags.

Time resumed its normal pace.

Zira and Paul looked to Querida for instructions.

Querida turned the com to open broadcast. Much to her surprise, it actually worked. "Ladies, I need your attention, please. The crew will now begin moving among you checking for injuries. Please remain seated with your harnesses and helmets in place until instructed otherwise. If you are or

someone next to you is injured, raise your hand. We will come to you." Switching the com back to crew-only, she said, "Go. See to them." Then, she turned toward the cockpit door.

"Mick? Mick, are you okay?"

She got no response.

"Mick? Mick, you need to let me in."

No response.

"Let me in. Damn you!"

"Captain," said Paul, "we need your help back here."

Querida took a deep breath and composed herself. "Okay, I'm coming."

The passengers were more traumatized than seriously injured, but some had suffered bruising, primarily from the harnesses or from flailing arms. One had bitten his tongue and was bleeding, but there was nothing they could do about it without removing his helmet.

While Querida was assessing the situation, the ship's air pumps died and the com system went with them.

Mick hadn't made a peep.

Querida spent the next ten minutes inside the silence of her helmet, trying not to imagine what was happening in the cockpit.

Then the rescue ship arrived. The first indication was a loud hammering on the side of the transport ship, near the door. They were hooking up a docking airlock to control temperatures and atmosphere. Following protocol, the rescuers pounded three spaced and then three quick bangs on the side of the ship.

They were asking if anyone had survived.

Querida repeated the code in response, following with two spaced and then two quick knocks. They wanted to know if it was safe to open the door.

Querida mimicked their code.

Two bangs, spaced: they were coming in.

The flight crew moved away from the main cabin door.

The click of the latching system preceded the sucking release of the seal, then the door swung open, and Querida was looking into the brown eyes of Jim Montgomery.

The one who'd gotten away.

The passengers applauded and cheered. Such relief overtook Querida that her knees went weak.

Jim caught her, but he put pressure on her injured shoulder. She winced and pulled away.

He gave her a concerned look and held her carefully at arm's length while helping her to a crew

seat. He attached a two-way receiver to her helmet; a little suction cup that stuck to the plastic of her visor allowing them to talk without shouting through their helmets.

"Queri? You're hurt?"

"You have to get someone to the cockpit," Querida said. "My co-pilot Mick Brody is locked in there. The door won't open."

Jim cast an uneasy look toward the fore of the ship before speaking into his com unit, "PRS-53, this is Montgomery. We need a roving team to investigate the cockpit as soon as possible. We have no ingress from the main cabin. We may need to force our way in. Over." He nodded at whatever the response was, then turned to point at his second-in-command. "Let's get these passengers onto the ship, Varla."

The other rescuer began directing passengers off the ship and through the airlock. To Querida, it felt like a surreal version of a typical disembarking. Some of the passengers even mouthed "Thank you" to her as they departed.

"God, Queri," said Jim. "When I heard your ship was going down, I nearly lost it."

Memories of her last night with Jim flooded back to Querida; the feel of his hands on her, the gentleness of his voice, the sense of betrayal when she'd learned—after making love to him—that he was married to another woman.

"I'm fine," Querida said, pushing her chin out. She stood, pulled the suction cup off her visor, and moved to where she could nod to the passengers as they left the ship.

Jim stood beside her, but he didn't try to talk to her again. He was second-to-last leaving the ship, at Querida's insistence that she be the last to disembark.

Station security whisked Querida off to fleet headquarters where she underwent immediate doctoring for her sprained shoulder (consisting of a simple ice pack and sling), and fleet officers conducted a debriefing. She was isolated from the others. Time and again, she asked them whether they'd gotten Mick out and how he was. No one would tell her anything. Eventually, they left her alone in the room by herself under strict orders not to leave.

She paced like a caged animal, worried sick and at the end of her rope.

When the door finally opened again, it was Jim.

Querida turned on him. "Jim. Where's Mick? Is he okay? They're not telling me anything."

"Please sit down," Jim said, pulling out a chair for her at the table.

"Oh, shit," Querida said, her nose tingling with tears. "He's dead?"

Jim shook his head. "We don't know."

That took the air from the room and the sense from Querida's head. "You don't know?" She sat in the offered chair.

Jim sat across from her. He looked so serious. "We can't find him, Queri. He wasn't in the cockpit."

"What are you talking about? Of course he was. I know he was."

"He ejected...just before the crash."

"Ejected?" Querida tried to make sense of what she was hearing. "Okay. So, he set the autopilot, prepped the shields, and then got out before the crash. It's kind of brilliant, really. You found him, right? You used the tracking signal on his suit?"

Jim shook his head. "No, we couldn't. His signal went dead shortly after he ejected."

"I don't understand. Did you send out a search party?"

"Yes."

"And?"

"Like I said, we found nothing. No sign of him, He's not on the surface."

"Thank God for that." Querida breathed a sigh of relief. He wouldn't have survived on the surface, not even in his space suit, for more than a minute maximum. The atmospheric pressure would have crushed him.

"Well, he isn't in the air either—although there was an unidentified ship on our radar at the time of the crash which was running parallel to your transport's trajectory. Still, no one has reported finding him."

The implication in Jim's tone was obvious. Jim and the fleet officers thought Mick was involved in sabotage. They thought he had something to do with the crash.

Querida couldn't believe what she was hearing. "An unidentified ship? It must have seen him and picked him up." Despite laws forbidding it, wealthy and extreme adventurers dove off Venus's floating cities for fun and were caught by special ships manned with skilled and well-paid pilots. It wasn't inconceivable that one of them had just happened to be in the area. "I'm sure they'll be in touch soon. He may be unconscious, so he can't tell them who to call."

"His suit has the fleet logo on it, Queri. If someone found him they would know who to contact." Jim leaned forward, elbows on the table. "Look, we know you weren't involved, but time is of the essence here. I've been authorized to offer you a choice. We can release you, and you can go back to piloting like you've been doing. Or, you can join us and help us find out what happened to Mick."

"Us?" asked Querida. "Who's us?"

"The Interplanetary Criminal Police Organization. Interpol."

"What? You work for Interpol?" Querida's whole world was crumbling. "For how long?"

"Since well before we met." Jim sighed. "I'm sorry. I couldn't tell you."

"I have to get out of here." Querida stood and headed for the door. She put a hand up to the pressure plate and said, "I assume I'm allowed to leave?"

"Yes, but call me if you need anything. You have my number." Jim crossed the room in two steps. "And, Querida, be careful. You may be in danger."

Querida pushed the plate and the door slid aside. She left the room, left fleet headquarters, and didn't stop until she'd reached the tiny Venutian apartment she shared with Mick whenever they were there on layover. It wasn't home—that was on Earth—but it was the next closest thing.

As soon as Earth governments had realized that Venus's atmosphere could support floating cities, they'd begun colonizing it. The cities, of which there were currently six, created their own oxygen with vast expanses of bio-engineered cyanobacteria. Each city housed approximately 100,000 people. Untethered, they circled the planet, pushed along by the super-rotation air currents in the upper atmosphere. Thus, one Venutian City Day (VCD, for short) equaled four Earth days. Designed for scientists and the wealthy, the floating cities had all the amenities of home.

The apartment was dead quiet when Querida entered, but she called out anyway. "Mick? Are you here?" Although she got no answer, she looked around.

He wasn't there.

"Email," she said aloud to the data system.

A grid appeared in mid-air, and with a wave of her hand, she navigated to her mailbox. She had plenty of spam, but nothing from Mick.

Querida got out of her flight jumpsuit, showered, and put on pajamas. Exhausted, Querida fell asleep on the couch. She'd drawn the sofa out of the wall with the intention of sitting only for a few minutes. She hadn't thought she'd be able to sleep, but the moment her head hit the sofa pillow the exhaustion caught up with her, and she didn't stir until dawn.

When she awoke, she came to with thoughts of Mick rising to the surface and a clearer mind. She had never been anything if she hadn't been practical. She dug through Mick's belongings. He didn't keep much in the apartment, but Querida stuck her hand in every pocket and rifled through every drawer. She found nothing of interest; not even any evidence of his affair. She tried to get into his system account, but it was locked to his vocal imprint.

She searched harder. She scoured the all the little nooks and crannies of the apartment where a person who had something to hide might stash something. The apartment consisted of only the one

room and a toilet, and all the furniture folded up into the walls to conserve space. They called them "custom apartments" because they became what you wanted them to—entertainment room, dining room, game room, gym, bedroom—with a simple verbal command.

Querida and Mick had shared an economy-sized one.

Where there wasn't a piece of furniture in the wall, there were drawers and cabinets. Querida called out every hidden object in the room, "Couch...bed...treadmill...table...." She searched the cubbyholes and the objects themselves. The room shifted and changed around her, becoming a living room, then a bedroom, then a work-out room.

Finally, she found something. In the drawer where the auto-laundry dropped items found in the pockets of clothes en route to be cleaned she discovered a small vinyl envelope with a disposable data chip in it. She plugged the data chip into the apartment's data system and found that it stored four numeric entries:

2315-03

12-303-5588

196-3320-4593

MB79331

And a name: Divani

Querida stared for a long time at the display, trying to figure out what it all meant. Only two of the entries made any sense. The first was the flight number for the transport that had crashed, realizing that made Querida's stomach churn unpleasantly. The second was an Aphrodite City phone number that Querida didn't recognize. That was where she needed to start her search for Mick.

First, however, she had to make a decision. Should she tell Jim about this and become part of the bigger Interpol investigation, or should she handle it on her own? That was the question.

CHOICE 1.1: Handle the investigation on her own, as a free agent.

CHOICE 1.2: Work with Jim and Interpol.

[BEGIN CHOICE 1.1]

Querida dialed the phone number from the data pad, fidgeting as it rang.

A woman answered, "Hello? Who is this?" and Querida nearly disconnected the call.

Instead, she took a deep breath and said, "Good morning You don't know me. My name is Querida Buenaventura. I'm a friend of Mick Brody's."

The silence on the other end of the line made Querida wonder if the woman had hung up.

"I'm trying to find him. He's missing."

The woman sighed. "You have no idea what you're getting involved in, Miss Buenaventura. Your boyfriend is in serious trouble. If I were you, I'd go back to your quiet life and find a new boyfriend."

"No. I need to find Mick. If he's in trouble, maybe I can help him."

The woman chuckled. "You can try." She said nothing for a moment, then continued, "Against my better judgment, I'll talk to you. There are some things you need to know. Meet me at the Solarium Café in an hour."

"How will I know you?"

"It doesn't matter. I'll know you." The woman hung up.

Querida wasn't used to flying blind. She hadn't recognized the woman's voice, and yet the woman claimed to know her. *What had Mick gotten involved in?* Whatever it was, she couldn't believe he was a murderer; she was still having a hard time believing that he'd cheated on her. No matter what Interpol thought, Querida had to find the truth. And she was going to start with this woman.

She dressed in casual clothes, tucked her phone in her ear, drew on her jacket, and headed for the Solarium Café.

Much to her surprise, Querida did recognize the woman; she'd seen her the previous morning in Mick's arms.

The woman had a sultry sway to her hips as she approached and offered her hand to shake. "I'm Sara. Let's sit down."

Querida shook the woman's hand, albeit somewhat reluctantly, then followed her to an isolated table.

The waiter approached them there.

"Double espresso," Querida told him.

Sara said, "Hot tea with honey, please." She watched the waiter walk away. "I'm sorry it's come to this."

"To what?" Querida asked, folding her hands in her lap to keep them from shaking noticeably.

"Mick lied to us both. We'll be lucky if we're not arrested as conspirators."

"I don't understand." Querida felt close to tears, but she bit her bottom lip to keep from crying.

"What are you saying?"

"I only just found out about you this morning, when you saw us. Mick had never told me he was in a relationship. He and I've been seeing each other for several months. I knew from the look on your face what was happening, and...Mick didn't deny it...so, let's just say I knew the score." Sara hung her

head. "I thought we were in love."

Querida said nothing. She had no words.

"But," continued Sara, "he was just using me. I'm the assistant to the fleet commander at Flight HQ. I don't have much power there, but I do oversee flight crew scheduling. I didn't realize what he was planning, his...act of sabotage, until it happened."

"I don't believe you," Querida said. "Mick would never purposefully endanger passengers like that. He'd never endanger me." Her voice broke with passion. She wanted so badly to believe her own words.

"Look, I'm only here to warn you. You don't have to believe me; I'm the one who arranged for Mick to be on that transport as your co-pilot. Weren't you surprised to see him?"

Querida had to admit that, yes, she'd been surprised to see Mick there. They'd originally been scheduled to fly separate transports back to Earth, but her original co-pilot had been taken ill. She'd been annoyed, because he was the last person she'd wanted to see. She'd half-suspected that he'd arranged to co-pilot with her so he'd have her as a captive audience for his empty apologies.

"But why?" Querida asked. "Why would Mick do such a thing?"

"Money. What other reason is there?" Sara leaned forward and looked directly into Querida's eyes. "It obviously wasn't for love." Her gaze shifted over Querida's shoulder, and her eyes widened. Quickly, she pushed back her chair.

"What is it?" Querida asked, turning to look.

Mick was on the moving sidewalk, heading for the café, with not a scratch on him. He was dressed in jeans and a dress-shirt, his brown hair tousled as if he hadn't bothered combing it. The sun caught its golden highlights and made them gleam.

Sara stayed crouched as she rose to her feet, glancing around for a quick exit. "He can't see us talking. He'll kill us both."

Mick stepped off onto the café platform and spotted Querida.

By the time Querida searched again for Sara, the other woman was nowhere in sight.

Mick hurried over and took Sara's abandoned seat. "Querida! There you are. I've been looking all over for you."

"How did you find me?"

"Your jacket."

Querida nodded. She had a tracking device in her jacket, and she and Mick had exchanged codes so they could always find one another. At the time, it had felt romantic.

"We have to talk, sweetheart," said Mick.

"Where have you been?"

Mick shrugged, "I had things to do. They think I sabotaged the transport."

"Were you with *her*?"

"No. There's nothing going on between me and Sara."

"I saw you."

"You saw me hugging an upset colleague who then surprised me by kissing me." Mick's tone held complete sincerity. "I swear to you, if you'd stuck around you'd have seen me reject her. She came onto me."

The waiter chose that moment to deliver the tea and espresso.

Mick looked oddly at the waiter, the tea, and finally Querida.

Thinking fast, Querida said, "I'm sorry. I wanted that tea to go, please. "

The waiter frowned, but took the tea back with him.

Mick raised an eyebrow. "That's a lot of caffeine. Feeling the need for speed, honey?"

Querida changed the direction of the conversation. "They think you sabotaged the transport?"

"Yeah." Mick's green eyes took on a worried slant. "I'm trying to fix that. They're wrong, you know? You do know that, don't you? I had nothing to do with the crash."

Querida drank the bitter espresso in two quick swigs. She wanted nothing more than to fall into his arms and let him console her- to ignore her fears, but she simply didn't know whom to trust. "I want to believe you. I do."

"But..."

"But, I have too many unanswered questions."

"Just don't give up on me. Not yet." Mick reached out to take Querida's free hand in both of his. He squeezed insistently. "I love you. I'd never put you in danger like that—not knowingly."

"What happened in the cockpit? Tell me."

Mick glanced at his watch. "Not now. I have to go."

"No, you can't. Where?"

"We'll talk more later, okay?"

"Where are you going?"

"I'll tell you everything. I promise." Mick stood without releasing Querida's hands until the last moment, then he turned and strode from the café.

Querida paid the waiter, took Sara's honey tea in its to-go cup, and went home.

[END CHOICE 1.1; link to PART 2]

[BEGIN CHOICE 1.2]

Querida didn't know why she'd never deleted Jim's phone number, but she was glad she hadn't.

"Hey, Queri," Jim said. "I'm glad you called. Have you had breakfast?"

"No."

"Why don't I come to your place? You make some coffee. I'll grab donuts on the way, and we can talk."

"Okay. My address is—"

"I know. I'll be there soon."

Querida didn't like that Jim knew so much about her, and she obviously knew so very little about him. Yet at the same time, it pleased her to think he'd kept track of her. She had so many things she wanted to say to him, but had never had time to explain anything.

The more she thought about it, the more convinced she was that, even if Mick had sabotaged the flight, he would have done so only under heavy duress. She just couldn't believe that he'd endangered all those people. And he had endangered her.

Jim's knock on the door put an unwelcome flutter in Querida's stomach. "Stop it," she told it. "It's just Jim, the married guy who lied to you."

Aloud to the room, she said, "Entrance open," and waved Jim inside.

He came, as promised, bearing donuts. It had been almost a tradition between them back when they'd been dating. The sweet bakery smell brought back memories of warm and sexy times.

"You look great," Jim said.

Before Querida could stop herself, the quip escaped, "Liar." The accusation had a deeper meaning for them that then made the moment awkward. Querida put a smile on her face to cover her thoughts.

"You've never been good at accepting compliments."

"Open table," said Querida, and a table sized for four dropped down out of the wall along with two padded benches, one on either side. She provided napkins from a drawer nested in the wall and, as she sat down at the table, she said, "Smells good."

"Yeah," Jim replied. "I'd forgotten how much I missed...donuts."

"Mick hates donuts, so we never get them."

Jim nodded, eyes on Querida's face. "What a shame."

They did more eating than conversing after that, filling the gaps with small talk, and Querida was surprised to discover how hungry she was.

Eventually, Jim wiped the powdered sugar from his face and sat back in his chair. "Have you

heard from him?"

Querida shook her head. "No."

"That makes sense, I suppose. The going theory is that he's been planning this for quite some time. If he were going to involve you, he'd have done so by now."

"Involve me in what?" Querida wiped her own mouth.

"In the sabotage."

"That's ridiculous. Mick would never purposefully harm anyone, especially not me. I don't buy it."

"I'm sorry, but the evidence against him is strong." Jim ran a hand back through his short black hair. "The only thing we can't figure out is why he did it. Do you have a guess?"

Querida shook her head. "I have no idea."

"Well, then," Jim smiled a bit. "That's the first item on our task list. We need to find out why this happened. Once we know that, then we'll be in a better position to figure out if Mick was involved or not."

Querida stood up from the table and crossed the room. "Window." A panel slid down, allowing a view through part of the ceiling and part of the wall. Beyond was the Venetian city, it sparkled in sunlight that broke through swirling clouds in flashing beams. Flying vehicles streaked between buildings and hover platforms.

Jim came to stand behind her. "We'll find the truth all right. I'm sorry you're going through this, I should have warned you."

Querida turned to face him, and his hands came to rest on her upper arms. "Warned me?" she asked. "About what?"

Jim's expression held sadness and something else—something akin to guilt. "I've known for awhile that there was something off about Mick."

"What does that mean?"

"Just that his behavior sends all the wrong signals. When you started seeing him I did a background check, and there are holes in it large enough to fly an interplanetary tanker through."

Querida stared at him, incredulous. "Why did you do a background check on my boyfriend?"

Jim shrugged. "I was looking out for you. I always have, you know?"

A uneasy feeling stirred inside Querida's stomach. "Why," asked Querida, "would you do that? You're married. And, we broke up."

"About that..." Jim ran his hands down Querida's arms and took her hands, holding them tightly. "You ran out so fast that night, Queri, and you refused to take my calls. You didn't give me a

chance to explain."

Querida couldn't look at him. "Explain what? How you led me on even though you already had a wife?"

"I'm sorry. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't. I—"

"No, I don't care. I'm not interested in hearing how your marriage was falling apart or how she didn't understand you. I just don't care that much."

"Listen to me, Queri. It's not what you think."

"If I had a nickel for every time a man said that to me, I'd be rich," Querida said. "No. It won't matter what you say. I'm with Mick."

"I know. Believe me, I know." Jim turned away, his hand going to the com link at his ear.

"What? Yeah. Okay. I'm on my way." He touched his ear again. "I'm sorry. I have to go."

Querida wrapped her arms around herself.

"I'll call if we learn anything," Jim said, then disappeared out the door.

[END CHOICE 1.2; link to PART 2]

[BEGIN PART 2]

At a dead end, Querida roamed around her apartment, unable to sit still. Her mind raced back and forth as well, over the details of the past few days, trying to find some semblance of pattern in the events, trying to understand.

The computer system buzzed.

"Who?" Querida asked aloud.

A computerized voice said softly, "Mick Brody calling for Querida Buenaventura."

Querida commanded, "Answer," then said, "Mick? Is that you?"

"Yes, it's me." Mick's voice came through the system so clearly he could have been standing right beside her.

"Are you coming home?"

"Not yet. I need your help." He didn't sound desperate, only determined. "There's someone I need to talk to, but she won't let me get near her. She might listen to you. Will you come down here?"

"What's going on, Mick?"

"She knows something about the crash, I know she does. It was no coincidence that I was on that flight with you."

"Who are you talking about?"

"Sara Gerber, the fleet commander's assistant. The woman—"

"The woman I saw you kissing." A hard note entered Querida's voice.

"It's not what you think, but we don't have time to discuss that. I'm at her place. I'll send you the coordinates. Get here as quickly as you can."

"You're at her place?"

"Please, Querida. It's a matter of life and death. End call."

Querida didn't move for a half a minute, turning her options over in her mind. In the end, she decided she wasn't ready to turn Mick in. She could have called Jim and told him where Mick was going to be, but she didn't. There were still too many unanswered questions, and Querida wanted those answers more than anything. Once her mind was made up, she went straight to the door giving the command: "Open entrance," and went out into the Venutian night.

Calling a T'porter—one of the many driverless vehicles that roamed the city at night, taking passengers from place to place along zip-lines and fast tracks—took only a moment. Querida transferred the coordinates Mick had sent—242, 1790, 0900—to the T'porter's system and payed the fare. The T'porter took off at a quick pace and sped up as it merged into the busy and chaotic air traffic.

Within minutes, the T'porter had arrived at the destination, and its door popped open.

Querida emerged onto the deck of an enormous apartment complex. It rose above her, a mass of cubes all connected in chaotic fusion, and it fell below as well, dropping into a bank of clouds that had gathered lower in the city's atmosphere. Querida wondered how she'd ever find the right apartment, but as she entered the building's lobby, she heard a scream and saw Sara Gerber at the far end. Sara crumpled to the floor; there was blood, lots of it, on the wall behind her.

Querida broke into a run and quickly arrived at Sara's side. She felt for a pulse, but didn't find one. Someone had shot her in the center of her forehead.

"Help!" Querida called, then looked around to see three men approaching from different directions. One was a security guard, flustered and crazy-eyed.

Jim was there as well, stone-faced.

Mick was also there. He knelt down beside Sara, or started to, until Jim grabbed him by the shoulder of his shirt and hauled him back.

"Touch nothing!" Jim commanded.

Querida stood up on shaky legs. "What the hell is going on? Who did this?" She felt a bit crazy-eyed herself.

Jim looked at Mick. "What did you do, Brody?"

"Me? I didn't do this."

"I'm taking you in." Jim wrapped one hand around Mick's wrist and gave it a shake. A metal

bracelet on his own arm opened automatically into a pair of high-tech handcuffs and locked on. As Jim reached to capture Mick's other wrist, Mick resisted.

Querida watched as the fight escalated, and before long the two men were wrestling on the floor; rolling and punching, kicking and scrambling to get the upper hand.

"Stop it!" Querida shouted. "Stop it!" She edged closer to them, and in the corner of her eye she saw a shadow move. It startled her, because it was so near and unexpected. The shadow emerged from its alcove and became a man dressed all in black, with a hood covering his face and a long-barreled gun in his hand.

The man's eyes were cold and all business. He turned on his heel and ran for the exit.

"Jim!" Querida screamed. "Jim!" Stepping back instinctually, Querida tripped on Sara's body and fell.

Mick and Jim had stopped fighting and were caught in a moment of suspended animation, staring after the assassin.

Jim stayed in a crouch and pulled his weapon. "Interpol! Halt!" He took aim.

The man stopped and turned to face them, gun ready to fire.

Jim didn't wait for the man to shoot, but pulled the trigger. The bullet hit the man square in the chest and he dropped.

Querida scooted until her back was pressed to the wall.

Jim stood slowly.

Three more masked gunmen came in the front door, raising guns as they strode forward in unison.

"Queri!" Jim called. "C'mon! We have to get out of here! Come to me!"

"Quickly, Querida!" Mick gestured as he put a large planter between himself and the gunmen.

"This way!"

CHOICE 2.1: Go with Mick.

CHOICE 2.2: Run to Jim.

[BEGIN CHOICE 2.1]

After only a moment's hesitation, caused as much by the guns aiming her way as by her indecision over whom to trust, Querida crawled forward and got to her feet. Staying low, she ran as fast as she could toward Mick.

The quiet thump-thump of silenced weapon fire sounded, and bullets tracked her wake. They

were trying to kill her! Were they trying to kill her? As if to answer her unspoken question, a corner of the planter exploded and showered the two of them with dirt.

"We have to get out of here. Give me your hand!" Mick latched onto Querida's hand and pulled her with him toward the nearest hallway. "Stay low!" They crossed a brief open space, and bullets thunked into the wall beyond them.

"Interpol!" Jim shouted on the far side of the room. "Cease fire immediately and drop your weapons!" His gun wasn't silenced, so when he fired back at the men it made impressive and distressing bangs.

Querida looked over her shoulder in Jim's direction, worried for him.

"He'll be okay," said Mick. "C'mon!"

They ran, hard and fast, hand in hand. Their footsteps rang in harmony on the faux marble flooring as they hurried down a long hallway lined with apartment entrances. It stretched for nearly a hundred meters, but no other halls branched off it, nor were there any stairs or elevators.

"There has to be an exit here somewhere!" Mick said as they came to a dead end.

"Someone will let us in." Querida turned to the nearest apartment door and triggered the com unit beside it. "Hello? Please, this is an emergency! Can you let us in?"

No answer.

She tried another as Mick tried one as well. No answer. No answer.

One of the gunmen appeared at the far end of the hallway, his attention focused on someone behind him. He shot off a couple rounds back the way he'd come, then paused as if watching to see if he'd hit his target.

Querida felt panic rising in her chest and wondered if it was Jim who had him pinned down.

"Mick?"

Mick was trying another apartment door.

Heart pounding, Querida went all the way to the hall's dead end. She noted a console there, and realized it controlled a delivery door, a door that slid aside to allow residents to unload their belongings from hover vans. Querida turned all her attention on the console.

The door was locked, of course. She pushed the button to open it again and again, but it flashed only red. "Open," she said. "Unlock." Then, "Exit open. Exit unlock. Door open. Door unlock." She tried every voice command she could think of—but nothing worked.

A voice from inside one of the apartments responded to Mick's frenzied knocking with a terse, "Go away. I've called security."

More gunfire sounded down by the gunman. His target was fighting back, and he was using the

edge of the doorway for cover.

Querida gave up on opening the door the easy way and turned on her personal display with a touch to her earphone. She called up T'porter Central, punched in the commands, and quickly approved payment of the fee.

Mick arrived at her side and began fiddling with the door controls. He went through the same process, the same useless voice commands that Querida had. When none of them worked, he said, "There's got to be an override somewhere here. Maybe behind this panel—" He pounded his fist against it, to no avail.

"Can you get the panel off?" Querida asked.

The sound of gunfire ceased.

Much to Querida's disappointment, the gunman was still standing, waiting, and watching as before. If there was no one left to stop him, he'd be coming for them next.

Querida and Mick were sitting ducks.

"Get the panel off, Mick. Hurry!" Querida checked on the gunman. He meant business. As he turned toward them, he limped and put one hand on the wall to steady himself.

"Mick! He's coming!"

Mick took a step back and kicked his heel into the panel as hard as he could, then did it again. The cover buckled.

Querida saw a woman in a security uniform appear at the far end of the hall. She was holding a weapon. "Stop right there," she shouted. "Drop your weapon!"

The man with the gun stopped.

Mick looked over. "What's happening?"

"Nothing good," Querida replied. "Get that door open!"

Slowly, the man turned to face the guard.

With a grunt of effort, Mick placed another kick in the center of the console. The light on it blinked green briefly, and as if on cue, the door slid aside—but only an inch. Wind sucked into the hallway, making a loud whistling roar.

With a quick and skilled move, the gunman aimed at the guard and took the shot.

The guard fell to her knees, her face a mask of shock and pain. Blood bloomed on her uniform.

"No time!" Querida shouted and shoved Mick into the wall to get at the console. She tore the cover away, reached into its guts, and took a handful of wires. She yanked them out as hard as she could. There was a crackle of electricity accompanied by the smell of ozone. Sparks shot out from the hole.

The door slid all the way open onto a view of the sky.

"Impatient much?" Mick said as he pressed away from the wall.

"Worked, didn't it?" Querida leaned out to look at the menagerie of floating buildings all tethered together by wires and T'porter lines, high above the planet. She and Mick would never survive the fall; they'd suffocate long before they burned up at the planet's surface.

The gunman was coming again. He increased his pace, half-running with an injured lope, closing the distance quickly.

The T'porter Querida had ordered slid up to the dock and its doors opened.

"Jump!" she shouted, but she had already begun her leap.

Flying through open space for half a second before tumbling into the T'porter's interior, Querida realized what a crazy idea it had been. Nevertheless, she landed inside the vehicle. It bounced with her weight, but corrected itself in time to receive Mick as well. He landed half in and half out, clutching the oh-shit bar, but quickly climbed inside.

"Shut and lock doors," shouted Querida. "Undock! Go, go! Full speed!"

Mick and Querida turned in their seats to look back at the gunman who hobbled into the doorway and watched them go. He pushed up his mask to reveal a pinched and angry face.

Mick gasped.

"What is it?" Querida asked.

"I know him. That's Nadi Divani, head of security at Block Industries."

"Block Industries? The woman who reserved the transport that crashed was Dee Block, the soon-to-be-ex wife of Block Industries' C.E.O. You don't think...?"

Mick nodded. "I'm starting to." He wove his fingers through hers.

"That bastard," huffed Querida. "He was trying to kill his wife before she could divorce him. It was all a big set up. They killed Sara. She must have been involved. I'm thinking she arranged it all for them. She knew too much."

"Yeah," Mick replied.

"Then they tried to kill us. They didn't have to do that."

Mick settled into his seat and turned his attention to Querida. "Never mind. You're shaking. Are you hurt?"

Querida relaxed as well, shaking her head. "It's just adrenaline. You?"

"I'm fine."

Silence settled in over the T'porter, the only sound the whizz of the rails. Querida loved the feel of Mick's big hand in hers, and she wanted to trust him, but he wasn't making it easy. She thought hard

about what she knew. One big question still loomed over her, and only he could answer it.

Querida watched his face. "Did you have anything to do with this?"

"With what?"

"With these assassination attempts."

Mick shook his head. "How can you ask me that?" He turned away to look behind them again, as if watching for followers.

Querida opened her mouth to complain that he hadn't answered her question, but then something terrible occurred to her. "Oh my god," she said. "Dee Block is still in danger. If they're tying up loose ends, then she'll be on that list."

Mick's eyebrows shot up, and he met Querida's gaze. "You're right. If it isn't already too late." He faced the controls and said, "New destination." When the T'porter had acknowledged, he stated the coordinates, "196, 3320, 4593."

The T'porter slid into a new configuration of movements and headed straight for city central, where the wealthiest of Aphrodite City resided. A handful of minutes passed before they were zipping along between sparkling glass towers and crystalline structures, within which Querida could see swimming pools and gardens—the wealthy so enjoyed being seen.

The Block residence was at the apex of the city, a penthouse apartment in the upper atmosphere. It had a ring of windows all around it on the front, but the T'porter flew to the back where a solid wall with a loading dock awaited. They docked there and tried to establish a com link with someone inside.

"Mick Brody, reporting. Badge MB79331."

Querida frowned. That number. She remembered seeing it on the data chip she'd found among Mick's belongings.

A computerized voice said, "Please give retinal verification."

Mick leaned to place his eye in front of the T'porter's retinal scanner.

A moment later, the door to the Brody apartment slid open.

Querida followed Mick inside without saying anything. Fortunately, Mick avoided looking at her, or he'd have seen the uneasy questions on her face. *Was Mick working for these people? Why did he have access to their home? Maybe he was involved after all?*

"This way," he said with confidence.

Querida let him lead the way, but she put some distance between them.

[[END CHOICE 2.1; link to PART 3]]

[BEGIN CHOICE 2.2]

After only a moment's hesitation, caused as much by the guns aiming her way as by her indecision over whom to trust, Querida crawled forward. She quickly got to her feet and, staying low, and ran as fast as she could toward Jim.

The quiet thump-thump of silenced weapon fire sounded, and bullets tracked her wake. They were trying to kill her! The corner of the wall exploded and showered Jim and her with shards of plastic.

Jim wrapped his arm around Querida and pulled her out of sight around the corner. "We have to get out of here," he said. "I've called for back-up, but they could be minutes away, and I don't think we'll have minutes if we stay here. C'mon."

"What about Mick?" Querida asked.

"He can take care of himself." Jim captured her hand, and they took off down the hallway. After several meters, they found themselves in front of a set of elevators. Nearby, a door opened onto stairs.

"Stairs," Jim said. "My car is parked in the garage, just three flights down." He went to the security panel and input an emergency override code known to all police, fire, and rescue personnel. The stairwell door clicked open.

"Wait." Querida pushed the up button on the elevator.

"Stairs," Jim repeated.

"I know. Hold on."

Jim looked anxious. He watched for their chaser. "They'll be here any second," he whispered.

"Get ready," Querida said as the elevator arrived and the door slid aside. She reached in and pressed the topmost floor's button, then slipped quickly back out again. Without waiting for the elevator door to close, she rushed to the stairwell, pushing Jim ahead of her. "Go, go, go!"

Jim got the message and hurried through, shutting the door behind Querida once she was in.

"That ought to keep them for a little while," she said. "Let's go."

Querida rarely used stairs, but she quickly got into a step rhythm that allowed her to make quick progress. They'd just rounded the second landing when the sound of the door above opening echoed in the cavernous well.

Jim and Querida both froze, listening.

Heavy footsteps started down the stairs.

Heart in her throat, Querida gave up all pretense of stealth and hurtled downward.

Jim stayed close on her heels.

The footsteps picked up their pace as well, leaping every other step with booming footfalls that made the gunman sound like a giant—getting closer and closer.

As Querida jumped the last few steps to the next landing, she heard the unmistakable pop of a silenced gunshot, and the plastic wall cracked loudly somewhere behind her.

"Keep going," Jim said between huffing breaths.

Querida nearly lost all reason as her only goal became to get away. She raced down the last set of stairs and had the door to the parking area in sight when she slipped on the edge of a stair and went down in a hard tumble.

Pop, pop! Two more bullets came their way, but this time, Jim was ready to fire back. He let loose two bullets of his own with booms that resounded up the stairwell, making Querida's ears ring.

Without pausing, he reached down and hauled Querida to her feet, a hand in her armpit. "Get up! Get the door!"

Querida had no time to wonder if the fall had injured her. She felt pain in her shoulder and hip, but it wasn't enough to keep her down. She slammed into the door, all her focus on the command panel beside it. It wanted a "resident code."

Jim came up beside her, facing back the way they'd come, gun aimed at the stairs. "9115932," he said.

Fingers shaking, Querida tapped the numbers onto the touchpad—and got it wrong.

Pop! Pop!

Blam! Blam! Blam!

"Queri!" Jim put his back to hers, protecting her with his own body.

"I...I've got it," she said, inputting the correct code. The latch on the door clicked.

Querida and Jim stumbled through to the parking area.

The gunman's shadow hit the threshold first, and then he was there as well, gun in the lead.

Querida saw a woman in a security uniform appear behind him. She was holding a weapon.

"Stop right there," she shouted. "Drop your weapon!"

The man with the gun stopped. Slowly, he turned to face the guard.

Querida shoved the door shut.

"This way!" Jim shouted out the command as he took off around the railed walkway lined with cars tethered in their spots. A criss-crossing array of lines routed them in and out of the garage, going to and from the main traffic lines outside. "That's my car over there!" Jim yelled, and a smaller black and white vehicle beeped and opened its door.

Querida heard gunshots in the stairwell behind them. She ran for all she was worth toward Jim's car. They leapt into the car, and Jim gave the command to shut and lock the doors. "Undock," he said. "Proceed to..." and then he called out coordinates that Querida didn't recognize. The door slid into

place, and the car dipped and turned away from the dock.

Querida turned in her seat to look out through the back window. The gunman had just come through the door, and there was no sign of the guard. He must have shot her.

"We're safe now," Jim said.

"That was insane." Querida was still riding a wave of adrenaline and determined to understand what had just happened. "They killed Sara Gerber. Why would they do that?"

"It smells to me like they were involved in the sabotage and are cleaning house. That would explain why they want Mick too. Gerber's the fleet commander's assistant. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that she was the one who arranged the flight and put you on it."

"I think Mick may have been having an affair with her," Querida admitted, speaking more quickly than usual. "I saw them...kissing."

"I see." Jim sat back and put a hand on her shoulder. It lay there, warm and heavy, comforting. "Let's take a breath. We're safe now."

"But, why Mick? He could have just as easily been killed in that crash."

Jim shrugged. "I don't know. For revenge? Maybe he rejected her or dumped her?"

"Maybe." Querida remembered the data chip she'd found among Mick's belongings. "Oh, wait. You have to see this." She brought it out of her pouch and showed it to Jim. "He went to a lot of trouble to hide it."

Jim took it from her and studied it. "What's on it?"

"I don't know."

"Well, let's see." Jim slotted the chip into the car's console and a heliodisplay, a projected computer screen, appeared floating in front of him. "It was among his things," Querida explained. "Does it mean anything to you?"

Jim waved his hand across the heliodisplay, bringing the data out of a file and into view. The numbers and name formed in translucent green. "That one's your flight number, and hm, that's an A.C. phone number. What's that other number?"

"I don't know."

Jim frowned, studying the display. "That third number could be city coordinates. The rest, I'm not sure. Some sort of serial number perhaps? And Divani? That's a fairly common last name in Aphrodite City."

"Coordinates," Querida said. "Of course. So, what are we waiting for? Let's put them in and see where we end up."

Jim smiled slowly. "You're scary when you're hyped on adrenaline."

"I think you mean to say I'm sexy when hyped on adrenaline." Querida smiled too.

"Eh." Jim's eyes sparkled. "You're always sexy."

Querida's heart skipped a beat—and it had nothing to do with adrenaline.

Jim ordered, "New destination. Coordinates 196, 3320, 4593."

The car slid into a new configuration of movements, heading straight for city central, where the wealthiest of Aphrodite City resided. It took only a handful of minutes before they were zipping along between sparkling glass towers and crystalline structures, within which Querida could see swimming pools and gardens. The upper echalon so enjoyed being seen.

The residence was at the apex of the city, a penthouse apartment in the upper atmosphere. It had a row of windows on the front and sides, but the car flew to the back where a solid wall with a loading dock awaited. They docked there.

Jim spoke to his car's com unit. "Search resident's name."

"Block," came the reply. "Gerald and Dee Block."

A spark flared in Querida's mind. "Dee Block," she said, "was the woman who hired the transport that crashed. She was celebrating her upcoming divorce. You don't think...?"

Jim shrugged. "I've heard of worse. If her husband tried to have her killed before she could finalize the divorce, then that would explain a lot. But Queri, Mick was working for Block."

"What? No, he wasn't."

"Yes, he was. He was moonlighting on Block's security team."

"How do you know that?" Queri shook her head, though it would certainly explain Mick's late nights and unusually long hours at work.

"I was following him."

"Oh no." Another, nastier thought hit Querida. "If Block is behind all this...if this is all about killing his wife, and he's tying up loose ends, then...Dee could be in serious danger."

Jim nodded solemnly and tried to establish a com link with someone inside.

When no one answered, Jim again used the emergency access code, saying the numbers aloud in the car. The dock door opened onto a vast open space lined with luxury vehicles parked in berths. A walkway with a railing rimmed the space.

Querida asked, "Is there anywhere you cops can't go?"

"Pretty much no."

The car slid into a visitor berth, and the door opened. Jim exited first, then offered Querida a hand as she stepped out. They crossed the dock, fighting the wind that whipped around them, and entered the building. They found themselves in a long, silent corridor lined with fine art paintings and

prints. Footstep-hushing carpet covered the floor.

"Why were you following Mick?" Querida asked.

"Because I needed to know you were okay."

"So you spied on my boyfriend? That's kind of creepy."

Jim turned away. "Let's go. We need to find Mrs. Block."

Querida let him lead the way, but she kept some distance between them.

[END CHOICE 2.2; link to PART 3]

[BEGIN PART 3]

The Block apartment didn't have to store its furniture in the walls. It sprawled more like an Earth home than a Venutian one—a luxury Querida would have loved to have been able to afford. Furthermore, the Blocks had obviously imported antique furniture from Earth. Though there weren't many pieces, they added touches of whimsy to the otherwise sleek, white apartment.

Querida heard Dee Block before they found her. The woman's voice was pitched high with stress. As they approached, they could better make out her words.

"Gerald, you greedy son-of-a-bitch, you were nothing when I met you, and you'd still be nothing today if it weren't for me."

"Bullshit," said a deep man's voice. "I'm a self-made man. It had nothing to do with you, wife. If anything, you've been an albatross around my neck for years. For the first time in decades, I agree with you about one thing: it's time to end our marriage. Take her up to the balcony and drop her off. Let gravity take her straight to Hell."

Querida rushed past Jim before he could stop her and skidded to a halt in the room. "Wait!"

They were in an elegant living room that held a baby grand piano—a rarity in Aphrodite City. Nadi Divani, Block's head of security, had Dee Block by the upper arm and was lifting her up onto her tip-toes. On the other side of the room stood Gerald Block, an imposing man with gray at the temples of an otherwise youthful head of brown hair. He wore a gray designer suit with a mandarin collar.

Block stared at Querida. "Who the Hell are you?"

"Captain Buenaventura?" Dee cried in surprise when she saw Querida.

Querida surveyed the room as both Jim and Mick stepped out of hiding on either side and made their presences known. The final showdown had arrived, and Querida knew she had to make a choice. Fortunately for her, she'd figured out who was guilty and who was innocent.

CHOICE 3.1: Mick is innocent.

CHOICE 3.2: Jim is innocent.

[BEGIN CHOICE 3.1]

Mick stepped up to Querida and took a position beside her. "It's over, Block. You're busted."

Jim aimed his gun at Divani and said, "Interpol. Let her go. Now."

Divani immediately complied and raised his hands.

Dee took several hurried steps to one side, rubbing her arm as if it pained her.

A siren sounded in the apartment, soft and urgent. A flood of ACPD cops rushed in, took up positions around the room, and began handcuffing Gerald Block and Navi Divani.

"You're all under arrest," Jim said. "That includes you, Brody."

Querida raised her hands. "No, wait," she said. "Mick, why did you eject from the cockpit?"

The room went quiet, as if everyone wanted to hear Mick's answer. "Someone," he said, "had disabled the distress call system. About a minute into the flight, I realized it was down."

"What? Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't want to worry you. At that point, I had no idea we were in trouble. I figured we'd never need it, and I'd just report it when we landed. By the time we were headed for disaster, it was too late. There was nothing you could have done."

The distress call system was there in case a ship fell too close to Venus and was grabbed by the intense gravity, as Querida's transport had been. Once there, normal ship-to-base communications became difficult as microelectronics on the ship began to break down due to the acid, heat, and pressure of the lower atmosphere. A ship's last-ditch hope is the distress call system that utilizes a simple shielded transistor to send a Morse-code S.O.S. signal that can be tracked by rescuers.

Querida nodded. "They'd never have found us."

"Yes. I ejected because I knew it would trigger my seat's tracking beacon. It was the only thing I could think of to get help on its way."

Jim interjected with an aggressive tone. "We found no sign of tampering on the ship. How do you explain that?"

Mick nodded. "It wasn't until I'd been rescued that I found the electronic jamming device in my pocket. It'll have my fingerprints on it, but I didn't know I had it on the transport. I believe that's why Sara kissed me. She put it in my pocket." He turned to Querida, "I swear there was never anything between Sara and me. I found her crying, upset, and I stopped to see if she was okay. Next thing I knew she was hugging me, crying on my shoulder. And then, when I tried to gently remove her, she planted that kiss on me. I think that's when she put the device in my pocket."

A light quaver snuck into Querida's voice. "You...should have been killed when you ejected."

"I got lucky." Mick reached a hand up to touch Querida's cheek. "A tourist transport caught my signal and snagged me before I dropped too low."

Jim growled, "You got really lucky."

"What can I say? I'm a lucky guy."

Querida shook her head, but couldn't help smiling back. "I want some of that luck." She lifted up to press her lips to his. The kiss was soft and heartfelt, more emotion than heat.

Jim frowned deeply. "You were working for Block. Can you explain that?"

"You can, right?" Querida said.

"I can, but... This isn't how I wanted you to find out." He paused, and Querida's stomach dropped. *So, he did have secrets.*

Jim's smile turned self-satisfied.

Mick reached into his pocket and pulled out a small blue velvet box. "I needed to earn extra money...for this." He opened the box. The ring inside gleamed, a blue-white Venutian diamond. "It was the one you wanted, so I had to get it."

Querida stopped breathing.

"You have to believe me," he said. "I had nothing to do with all this. I overheard Block threatening his wife. At the time, I figured it was just something husbands and wives sometimes say to each other, but I could testified to it and it would have been used as evidence against him. He couldn't afford that. So, he arranged for me to be on the transport. When that failed, he sent his assassin after Sara and me. Probably you too, in case I'd told you anything."

Jim hovered beside Querida and Mick.

"You see," said Querida with a broadening smile. "He's innocent." She rested her hand over the ring box and gently closed it. "Put that away...for now."

Jim still didn't look convinced. "You're going to have to come down to the station and give a statement." His expression was dour. "I'll drive you." His next words were meant for Mick alone, but Querida heard the exchange. "So help me God, if this is some kind of ruse, I'll find out; and I'll make sure you spend the rest of your life in prison."

Mick snorted a small laugh. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? Sorry to disappoint. I can produce plenty of evidence that I'm telling the truth, starting with the captain of the ship that picked me up and ending with payments to the jeweler."

Jim led the way to his car without another word.

Before getting in, Querida put her hand on Mick's arm and pulled him to face her.

"I'm a lucky woman," she said.

Mick nodded seriously and replied quietly, "I want some of that luck." His arms wrapped around her, and he pulled her close against him. When his mouth found hers, it wasn't soft, but it was heartfelt, with as much heat as emotion.

[END CHOICE 3.1 – THE END]

[BEGIN CHOICE 3.2]

Mick stepped up behind Querida and said, "Montgomery, I see you made it here too."

Jim raised his gun, pointing it first at the man restraining Dee Block, then at Mick. "Interpol. Everybody take a step back and relax. Release Mrs. Block." His eyes held a keen alertness, the kind you see in the eyes of predators who've identified their prey.

Querida raised her hands in surrender. "It's over," she said. "They know everythi—"

A strong arm wrapped around her neck, cutting off the last word, and she felt a cold circle of metal press up under her jaw. A heartless voice sounded in her ear, a voice that had—until that moment—always spoken to her with caring and gentleness.

Mick said, "Put the gun down, Montgomery."

Querida's stomach dropped and her heart gave a painful lurch. She put one hand on the arm that was holding her.

Jim hesitated a moment, but only a moment, then set his gun on the floor at his feet. "I need to warn you, Mick. The Aphrodite City police are already on the way. They'll be here any second."

"Shit!" said George Block. "We have to get out of here. C'mon, my car's docked in the garage. Bring my bitch wife, and we'll toss her off from there. She might bounce off a few buildings on the way down. If she's lucky, she'll be dead before the atmosphere gets her."

Mick gave Querida a shove with his hip, prodding her to move forward. "Keep it cool, Montgomery, and I'll let her go on the dock."

Querida leaned back against Mick's chest, resting her weight against him, and began moving slowly forward with awkward, imbalanced steps. "You said you loved me." She let the hurt be heard in her voice.

"Baby," Mick replied, "you were a sweet vacation from my normal life, but it couldn't last forever."

"Your *normal* life?" Querida stopped moving, and Mick gave her a little shove to get her going again.

Block was already at the exit, urging Divani and Dee through.

"Don't take it personally. I'm just not the settle-down type. It's a drawback of my career."

"You and Sara?"

"Yeah. She was just part of the job. I needed her to sabotage that flight. She got me in places I should never have been, like the flight deck, late at night. It wasn't hard to convince her we needed somewhere private to...get to know each other better."

Querida clenched her teeth, but didn't respond.

Jim asked, "So, why'd you get on that transport, if you knew it was going down?"

Mick laughed, and Querida felt the rumble through his chest against her back. "Pretty ballsy, right? Truth is, I know Querida. And she'd have found a way to save those people if I hadn't locked down the cabin. So, I arranged to be picked up. Easy-peasy. Killing two birds with one stone. Unfortunately, I hadn't counted on you sniffing around her. If you hadn't gotten that rescue ship to her so quickly, well...let's just say they were a snuffle away from a hull breach and a hot acid bath."

The doorway loomed in front of Querida. Block, Divani, and Dee had moved on and turned the corner at the end of the hall, out of sight.

Mick kept talking. "Because of you, I failed. Block doesn't like it when his people fail. Only reason I'm still alive is because I promised them you. Sorry to say it, Querida, but you know too much. Your death'll get me back into Block and Divani's good graces. Way I look at it, you—" Querida chose her moment.

Her flight training kicked in, including anti-terrorist tactics. She dropped her weight abruptly, pulling downward on Mick's arm so it didn't catch under her chin. She turned her head and slid from his grasp. Butt landing on the floor at Mick's feet, she wound up and elbowed him as hard as she could in the shin. She expected a loud blast, a flash of white, and a bullet in the brain, but Mick had relaxed too much while bragging about his accomplishments. Yet again, he'd underestimated her. Pain jolted through Querida's funny bone, but Mick also cried out and took a stumbling step back.

Mick's focus turned fully on Querida, and Jim seized the opportunity to drop to one knee and pick up his gun.

"Freeze, Brady! I will *shoot* you!"

Querida couldn't see what Jim did, but it must have been the wrong thing. There was a loud blast, but no flash of white and no bullet in Querida's brain. Instead, Mick fell hard and fast to the floor behind her.

Querida scrambled to her hands and knees and crawled away, turning as she went.

Mick had a blood stain spreading on his chest. His gun lay near his hand, but not in it. He looked like a fish out of water, his mouth moving with gasps.

Jim stalked over, gun trained on Mick, and kicked the other man's weapon toward Querida. He looked at her and asked, "You okay?"

Querida nodded, unable to form words.

A scream echoed into the room from down the hall. Both Querida and Jim looked that way.

Dee! Querida grabbed Mick's gun, leapt to her feet, and hurtled down the hall.

"Queri!" Jim shouted. "No! Don't! Let the police handle it!"

But, it was too late. Querida was on autopilot. She turned the corner at the end of the hall and headed straight for the dock. As she emerged onto the platform, she found Block getting into a silver Mercedes LX sky-car. Divani was dragging Dee toward the railing, beyond which lay only open air and gravity.

A sobbing Dee struggled against the man, but he was far larger and stronger than she.

"Stop where you are, Divani!" Querida shouted, halting in place and taking a firing stance. "Let her go, and I won't stop you from leaving!"

Divani looked at Querida and seemed to study her, taking her measure.

Querida didn't flinch.

After a moment, Divani dropped Dee right where she was and turned toward the Mercedes, crossing the dock with long strides. Before he could get there, however, Block pulled the door shut and the Mercedes purred to life.

Divani started running toward the car and took a flying leap onto it as it backed out of its berth. The floating car bounced as Divani's weight landed on the roof. "Block, you son of a bitch! You're not leaving me here."

Block's face had gone white, but his mouth had a determined set to it. The car finished backing out and turned toward the exit. With a sudden burst of acceleration, it shot forward.

Divani somehow managed to hold on, though he was screaming expletives at the top of his lungs.

The sound of sirens suddenly echoed within the bay's open expanse, and flashing lights reflected off the walls. The Aphrodite City P.D. had arrived and were blocking the exit.

Block's car braked abruptly. That time, Divani couldn't hold on. He spun off the Mercedes, onto the top of a police car, then over and off the other side.

The last Querida saw of him, he was diving into traffic. He fell into gravity spread-eagle, eyes wide, with his mouth open in a final scream.

Querida went to Dee and helped her to sit up. "You okay?"

Dee nodded. "I will be, Captain. Thank you." She looked a mess; she was tear-streaked and

pale, with a bloodied lip and nose. She had fought hard. Querida hugged her.

Paramedics arrived with the police, and they swarmed Dee, pushing Querida aside once they realized she wasn't injured.

Querida backed toward the building entrance, watching the paramedics work. She bumped up against a solid body and felt a pair of heavy hands come to rest on her shoulders.

Jim's voice was quiet and intimate. "Are you hurt?"

Querida didn't know how to answer that. The wounds from Mick's betrayal went quite deep. Finally, she replied, "Nothing that won't heal." She leaned back, letting Jim wrap his arms around her stomach. It felt good, and she needed a tiny bit of self-indulgence.

After a moment, Querida said, "Jim?"

"Yes?"

"Are you still married?"

Jim took a deep breath, his chest rising against Querida's shoulderblades.

"Queri, that's what I've been trying to tell you. I was never really married. I was simply undercover. It was all a farce, part of my cover, but I couldn't tell you. Not then. And later, when the assignment was over, you'd already moved on to Mick. For all I knew, he could have been the best thing for you. That's why I started checking him out." Jim pulled Querida more tightly back against himself. "I fell so hard for you, Queri. I love you. I'll always love you."

Those were the last words Querida had ever expected to hear coming from Jim's mouth. She didn't know what to think. Relief joined a complicated mix of other emotions to make a dizzying cocktail, and Querida gave herself over to the happiness she felt in the circle of his arms.

When the silence stretched too long for comfort, Jim said, "You know. You're scary when you're—"

"You mean 'sexy,' don't you?"

"Yes," he said softly. "Yes, I do." His lips rested briefly against her neck, a warm pressure that took the first step toward healing Querida's wounded heart.

[END CHOICE 3.2 – THE END]