

# THE SAPPHIRE HOUSE - PART 3

## *Lie Down with Dogs*

By Marileta Hunsford

**I** can't work at this console," Katherine declared fifteen minutes after she sat down at the computer in the dining area.

Caleb looked up from the newspaper he was reading, his face a study of irritation. "What?"

Katherine rolled her eyes. *It's like talking to a stump with hair*, she thought wearily. Aloud, she said, "I can't work at this console."

"Why?" Caleb had turned back to his paper and was thumbing its recycled newsprint pages absently. She pantomimed choking him, but dropped her hands when he looked at her again.

"This computer doesn't have interspace access, only local."

"Can't you access the Grid from anywhere with Web access?"

"I can access public areas," she explained, "But I can't get to the data code files that make up the mainframe from here. I need to first talk to my computer at home and then command it to penetrate the larger system in the government complex. For that, I need interspace access and this computer only has local."

Caleb did not show the least concern, but turned a page of the paper. "You're smart, I'm sure you'll figure it out."

*That does it*, Katherine thought, pushed beyond the bounds of her usually considerable patience. She stood and marched over to Caleb. Without stopping to consider her actions, she tore the paper from his hands and leaned on the table so their noses were within inches of each other.

"Let me explain something to you," she hissed, "I have two days to find a planet that, by all official accounts, does not exist or unpleasant things will happen to me. I have been hauled around like a piece of carpet all night, haven't slept in twenty-four hours and have put up with your childish attitude. Now, you either get me a computer with interspace access or I'll blacken your other eye!"

Caleb gazed at her impassively and then his eyes slid to the floor. "You tore my newspaper," he stated. Katherine blinked and straightened. She stared down at the first mate, her hands balled into fists. Lazily, Caleb bent and retrieved his paper, smoothing out some of the damage. "All you had to do was ask for another computer," he murmured.

She threw her hands into the air and exclaimed, "I *did* ask--"

"No, no you didn't," Caleb interrupted, "You said 'I can't work at this console', but you never asked if I could get you another computer."

Fighting the urge to throw something at him, Katherine said through gritted teeth, "Can you please get me an interspace access console to use?"

“I will certainly try,” Caleb answered with exaggerated politeness. He walked over to the intercom on the wall and pushed a green button.

“What?”

Katherine brought her head up sharply as a woman’s voice answered through the speaker.

“Tandy, where’s the captain?” Caleb asked.

“In his cabin. Why?” the woman answered.

“We got a little problem,” Caleb said looking at Katherine.

Laughter sounded from the intercom, then, “Caleb, there’s always a problem when you’re around.”

“Don’t be cute with me, Tandy, just beep the Captain,” he snapped.

Tandy tsked as a reply. The next voice that came from the speaker belonged to Otama. “This better be good, Sachs. I ain’t slept all night.”

“What a coincidence,” Caleb said sardonically, “Me neither.”

“So, what’s your point?”

“The PIL needs an interspace access computer. The one here is only local network.”

Katherine frowned at the way Caleb ran the letters of her title together as one word. She caught the insult and was not pleased.

“Don’t even think of letting her near my ship’s mainframe,” Tandy interjected. “She can make the one in the kitchen work.”

Katherine strode over to the intercom and pushed Caleb away. He gave her a dark look and opened his mouth to ask what the hell she was doing, but Katherine put her hand over his mouth and pushed the green button. “Look, you all want inside the Grid so bad then you better get me what I need to make that happen. If that’s not possible, then I suggest you set me down at the nearest port and find another P.I.L. to coerce into treason. Got it?” She took a deep breath and stepped away from the intercom and Caleb.

Silence leaked from the speaker, unnerving Katherine. Exhaustion and anger had made her speak so heatedly, but now she questioned the wisdom of her outburst. Caleb watched her, his eyes dilated and his mouth pinched with fury.

Then, a click and soft sigh of static preceded the captain’s voice, “Tandy, set a course for Marion’s. Send him a flag that we’re coming.”

“Yes, sir,” Tandy said.

“Caleb?”

The first mate stepped to the intercom and pushed the button, “Sir?”

“Escort our guest back to her quarters, then come to my cabin,” Otama directed.

“Yes, sir,” Caleb answered before taking his hand from the speaker panel. He turned and looked at Katherine. She saw that his anger had not dissipated and her heart started to pound with dread as he approached.

He took her arm in a tight grip and practically dragged her from the dining area. Katherine clutched the front of her skirt to keep from tripping and trotted to keep pace. When they reached the door of her cell, Caleb pushed down the handle and opened the door. He shoved Katherine into the room and then followed her into the small space.

She pressed her back against the far wall, but that only left a pace and half between them. Her bravado drained away as she envisioned all the horrible ways Caleb could kill her. “Stay away from me,” she said as forcefully as she could. “You’ll catch it if I can’t do the search for that planet.”

“Oh, you don’t need your legs to work at a computer,” Caleb purred. Katherine’s eyes grew as round as beta discs and she began to sweat. “No,” he continued, “You only need your eyes, your arms, and your hands.” He took a step closer to her, his pants brushed against the stiff fabric of her dress. “Don’t even really need your ears or nose. And you can definitely do without your mouth.” He took the last half pace toward her. His lips were pressed against her ear as he finished, “In fact, we could all do without that.”

Trying to keep calm, Katherine said, “How effectively do you think I can work with parts of my body missing?”

“Well,” Caleb conceded, “Maybe I’ll wait till after you find what we want.” A scrape of metal made Katherine’s breath catch. She nearly wet herself when Caleb held up a small, sharp knife before her eyes. He slid it below her ear. “I’d like a little memento, though, to make up for the sass you been giving me and to pay you back for my eye.”

A muted whimper of terror vibrated in Katherine’s throat as her face grew white and tense. A distant part of her mind was heartily ashamed of herself for being such a coward. Still, she had no idea what this man was capable of or if he meant his threats.

She gasped as a tiny thwomp preceded her hat falling to the floor. Caleb had cut the elastic band that held the headpiece over her hair. “I’ve always hated those damn PIL hats,” he said and stepped back, sheathing his knife again. He turned to the door and left without another word.

Katherine heard the lock click and the sound revived her anger. She bent and picked up the ruined hat then hurled it at the door with a screamed curse.

Another six hours passed. Katherine slept part of the time, but hunger and thirst, not to mention a fierce need to use the water closet, would not let her rest for long. As a distraction from the discomfort, Katherine thought of Otama’s question. She had no intention of really locating the information. To do so would mean breaking a considerable number of laws. She cared too much about the Union and the Grid itself to commit treason.

Still, the challenge intrigued her. A planet that did not officially exist would be difficult indeed to find. She closed her eyes and mentally entered the Sapphire Grid. Katherine thought of the search she could use to find Hebron, the tools she would need. Information pathways led her deeper and deeper into the Grid’s system until she was in a state of trance.

Katherine had not only studied computers and informatics at the University, but was obsessed with all sorts of knowledge. She devoured books, audio files, and visudiscs on everything from the biology of a slug to New Order Romantic poets of the twenty-third century. In essence, Katherine had developed her brain into an organic computer. She held innumerable packets of information and could retrieve almost any of them with the right question.

Even without a console, she knew the Grid so intimately, and contained so much relevant information, independent of the Grid, that she could plan a search for Hebron almost completely just sitting on the cot. The search so engrossed Katherine that she did not hear the turn of the lock. Nor did she notice when the door swung open, revealing Caleb.

“Hey, time for grub,” he said, “Captain says you’re to join us.” She didn’t acknowledge that he had spoken and, at first, Caleb thought she was ignoring him. Then, he realized she had not heard a thing he said. “Hey!” he called. Still nothing. Reaching out a hand he shook her. Katherine jumped a foot off the cot and cried out in alarm. He too jumped back and looked at her as though she might fly at him any moment.

Katherine clutched her chest as her heart nearly beat its way from behind her ribs. Panting a little, she looked up at Caleb and said, “What’s the idea scaring me like that?”

“Here, if you ain’t got the sense to listen when someone’s talkin’ to you, then don’t blame me if you choke on your own heart,” he growled.

Katherine felt her pulse slowing and rose from the cot. Caleb watched her as she smoothed her dress and hair. “You ain’t a head case are you?” he asked suspiciously.

“I beg your pardon?”

“A head case?” he said again, “Someone not quite right up here,” he tapped his own head for emphasis.

Katherine sighed, “If I *were* a ‘head case’ do you think I would admit it to *you*?”

He took a step into the room, crowding her against the cot. “I think you’ve already forgot the little chat we had earlier,” he murmured.

Katherine tried to slide around him, but Caleb blocked any chance of escape. Deciding to use honey rather than vinegar, Katherine said politely, “I apologize for my bad manners. You surprised me is all and I tend to get edgy when surprised.”

He looked at her a few moments longer, then, he took a step back. “Whatever,” he said gruffly and motioned for her to precede him out the door.

“Where are we going?” she ventured.

Caleb rolled his eyes and answered, “As I said before you had your little spasm, we’re going to eat. Or do you want to stay here for another six to eight hours till we land?”

“Thank you, no,” she said and headed off down the hall toward the dining area.

As she neared the end of the corridor, the sounds of clinking tableware, talking, and laughing grew louder. Katherine stopped just outside the archway uncertainly.

Babe Holt sat at the far end of the table, piling his plate high with a soupy green substance. Captain Otama occupied the seat opposite the arms master and was very intent on something that looked like canned tomatoes. To the captain’s right sat a man who looked Japanese except that he had eyes as blue as aquamarines. A woman, Tandy presumably, sat on the captain’s left. Katherine could not see much of her except that her cherry red hair had been cut short and left to spike in all directions until it looked like a cartoonish helmet.

Caleb entered the dining area, nudging Katherine along until she too stepped into the light. Babe saw her first and waved her over to a seat between him and Tandy. “Miss Beauregard, sit your pretty self down here.” Feeling very out of place, Katherine walked around the table and took the proffered seat. Babe began filling her plate and she gave his selections a dubious look.

“I think she’s old enough to feed herself, Babe,” Tandy said acidly before sliding a forkful of food into her mouth.

Babe looked at her and replied, “Just being polite is all. That all right with you?” Tandy did not answer, but rolled her eyes in disgust and bent over her plate.

“Hope you’ve been comfortable, Premiere,” Captain Otama said around a mouthful of rehydrated tomato. Katherine gazed at him, unsure of whether he was being facetious.

Deciding to play it straight, Katherine answered, “It’s a little smaller than I’m used to.”

Otama smiled beatifically but, before he could answer, Tandy cut in, “This ain’t a cruise ship.” She gave Katherine a disdainful look as though the P.I.L. were something beneath contempt.

Katherine glanced at Otama, but the captain was fully occupied with his food. Her eyes traveled to Caleb, who had taken a place across from her, but he was engaged in conversation with the Japanese man next to him. She turned her gaze back to Tandy’s contemptuous face and said, “It would take a very blind person indeed to mistake this,” she gestured around her, “For a cruise ship.”

“You making some sort of crack?” Tandy snapped as she narrowed her eyes warningly.

Katherine bristled at the woman's unwarranted hostility and replied, "I was merely stating fact."

"Aw, Tandy, shut up," Babe chided, "What're you squawking about? She ain't done nothing to you."

"Babe," Tandy seethed, "This isn't your business, so, butt out."

"It's my business, though," Otama said quietly, "You'll treat our guest with some respect."

Tandy sniffed, "Since when is a person we've kidnapped 'a guest'?"

"Since I said so," the captain replied with a hard look at her. Tandy fell silent, but tossed a furious glare at Babe and Katherine.

After a few moments of uncomfortable silence, in which Katherine forced herself not to gag on the horrible tasting food, Babe said, "So, this the first time you been on an Argent?"

Katherine swallowed the bite she had just taken and answered, "Yes, it is. In fact, I've never left Huga before."

The blonde man's face grew tight with shock. "Never?" he asked incredulously. He looked around at the other diners then back at her. "I'd go crazy if I was landlocked for more than a few days."

"Is that how it happened, Babe?" the Japanese man chuckled.

Babe flipped him off and said, "No one's talking to you, Akio."

Akio laughed again and said, "Remember that the next time you need air cover while running for your life with a case of Medicil on your back."

The whole crew, except Tandy, laughed at what appeared to be a long standing joke, but Katherine stared at Akio, a terrible realization dawning on her. "Are you smugglers?" she asked in an anxious voice.

"We prefer the term 'free-lance cargo agents'," Akio said proudly.

Katherine swallowed and looked at Captain Otama, who watched her with a thoughtful expression. Her gaze swung to Babe and he wiggled his eyebrows at her playfully. Then, she looked at Caleb. The first mate gave her a mocking smile, as though challenging her to make an issue of their criminal status.

*I am in a lot of trouble*, Katherine thought to herself as her stomach dropped.