

Blind Justice

By Shadar, ed. by Brantley

Chapter One

Randik inhaled the sweet air, rich with the delicious scent of fear, yet still thankfully free of the unwashed stench that had permeated his nostrils for what had seemed like forever. He was out of the hole and he had a sound little ship and he had some good citizens to shield him.

If not for the last, he knew he'd already be space dust.

A glance at the viewscreen showed two Guardships still bracketing them, bristling with guns at the ready. He knew the bastards would never fire. Not with the President's nephew Algol on board, and with three Members of Parliament sweating next to him.

Nor would they try to board him. Not with the Xcelite chained to the boy.

Xcelite was an extremely fast burning chemical explosive used to break apart the hard, igneous rock of Delphi. The engineers would drop the Xcelite cartridges down their mile-deep drill holes and the powerful burst would open up a whole new cavern. Once it cooled, he and the other prison laborers would break into the chamber and spend the next year digging the ore out.

Each new hole was a death sentence. Prisoners died working in the lethal gases so far underground, but the guards didn't give a shit. A life sentence was a life sentence. Nobody said how long they were supposed to live.

Now this stolen Xcelite was his key to freedom. If detonated, it would turn this pleasure cruiser into shrapnel. All he had to do was think the right thought and it was done. He was a wirehead, with electrodes implanted deep in the pleasure centers of his brain like all the other Delphi convicts. No matter how horribly their bodies were abused, the guards could always make them feel pleasure just by trickling the current into the right spots. It was the ultimate

addiction. Once you had a wire, you couldn't live without it.

Now his wire was hooked to a tiny transmitter in his scalp. As long as that signal got through to the detonator on the Xcelite, it wouldn't blow. And if they did board his ship, a mere thought could turn off the signal. Embracing the blackness of oblivion was fucking better than going back to that hellhole, he told himself.

Still, he knew they'd someday find a way to kill him. But then, everyone died eventually, so what was the big deal? But until that time, he was going to teach the bastards a lesson. Send a message that reminded the good citizens of Reigel Five that convicts were people too. That they deserved better than to be turned into slaves, dancing their pleasures for the laughing guards with the wire current.

He spun his finger on the viewscreen control to point the ship's cameras toward the surface of Reigel Five. Snow covered most of the planet, but the blue atmosphere and patches of green in the south looked like heaven. He decided he would land in the Southy, right in the middle of that civil war of theirs. Algol would serve as bait for rebel and government forces alike. Give the citizens something more to tear each other apart over.

Even more than that, he planned to make the Velorian ambassador come to him. A Protector had helped put him in the hole, busting up the plutonium smuggling ring he ran. His partner, Nygard, had turned out to be an Aurean. A big mistake, as it gave that teenage blonde an excuse to get involved. She'd killed Nygard, and then turned on him, punching him out and dropping him in the hands of the Guards. As far as he was concerned, the little bitch did the last out of spite. By their own laws, the Prime Directive, Protectors weren't allowed to get involved in Terran law enforcement.

But she had, and now he'd make another of those golden girls dance for him. Make her send a letter to the court validating that his arrest was illegal. Get this life sentence taken off his back. That or the blondie could take the fucking rap for killing the President's kin. Either way, his problems would be over.

He snapped his seat harness in place and punched the Execute button on the piloting console. The antigrav spun up and the ship seemed to come to a

stop, eight G's of deceleration slamming him forward, the harness belts bruising his weathered skin. The Guardships raced by him, giving the illusion that they'd just accelerated. He took advantage of the confusion to aim the PCraft for the blue atmosphere below.

The buffeting began in seconds, a reddish glow filling the viewscreen as he descended at a 120% of design limits. Then 150%. He wasn't worried. PCrafts were the best pleasure yachts made, and they could handle a lot more stress than the manufacturer published. It was bad business if any rich shits got killed in their own ships.

He smiled as he saw the Guardships trying to follow, then shallowing off their descent. They were too big for this kind of violent maneuvering. The stresses on their hulls would be outside their design parameters, or so their pilots would say.

Fuck 'em.

Chapter Two

I was halfway through the elegant Embassy dinner in WestHall when my Perscomp tingled with the tone reserved for my personal callers. I smiled politely to apologize for the intrusion, and reached up to touch the tiny transceiver on my ear.

"This is Naomi," I whispered.

"We have an emergency."

My eyes opened wide as I recognized Sandal's voice. He sounded so alarmed that I couldn't keep my own voice from rising slightly.

"Sandal. What kind of emergency?"

"Hostage situation. Escaped convict by the name of Randik Begglestrom got off Delphi by commandeering... Erik's ship. Algol's on board, along with some visiting MP's."

Naomi had never met Sandal's brother, who was Warden of the prison planet – a political plum, of course, and nothing to his credit. The MP's had to be in on the operation. She'd barely heard of Erik's son Algol – just a boy; he

couldn't deserve what was happening to him. But she didn't have time to think about any of that, only that this was a touchy thing, politically speaking – and nothing she wanted to get involved in.

“I'm sorry to hear that, Sandal. But I'm sure the Guards can handle it.”

“Apparently not. He's gone to ground down in the Southy. Contested soil near Abernathy. If the Guards go in, the rebels shoot back and we have a hot war again. I can't leave my nephew in the middle of that.”

Southy. Home ground of the Diaboli – who didn't need wires to project or project thoughts. They made great cops – but they couldn't tell us anything about Randik we didn't already know. Assuming they'd even want to cooperate.

I leaned back in my chair and sighed.

President Bergstrom and I had had something going between us, although I wasn't exactly sure what at times. It had started with business, then gone on to friendship and finally sex, backwards from my usual progression of relationships, but then, Sandal was human. The problem was that he fell in love with me.

All part of the hazards of dating a human, or so my daughter Alisa kept reminding me. She claimed she would never tease humans that way, claiming it wasn't fair to torture a man with perfection they could never possess. But then, she was still young and idealistic. Not that it mattered, after Sandal's coup, after he'd brought about that civil war. He'd imagined that I'd go along with his pathetic rationalizations, he'd thought I'd admire him for his boldness, he even thought I'd return his love.

Wrong on all counts. But he was still President. I still had to deal with him. Until the recall order came, which was almost inevitable. The Foreign Service could hardly look kindly on me for having mixed sex with diplomacy, especially after the siege of the Justice Ministry and the debacle that followed. Thank Skietra the children were home now and didn't have to witness the aftermath -- the bombings, the random assassinations.

I pushed those thoughts away. “So how can I help, Sandal? You know that we're officially neutral.”

I heard Sandal take a deep breath before answering. “They want you.”

“Me?”

“They’re out of fuel, and they need someone to give them flight. That means a Vel. But more than that, it seems that a Protector helped put Randik away. Cher’ee to be exact. He blames you for letting your subordinate exceed her authority.”

“Che’ree doesn’t exactly work for me. All Protectors report directly to the High Council.”

“A legal detail as far as he’s concerned.”

“So I’m to become another of his hostages?”

“I’m afraid so. He’s got some kind of mining explosive, apparently chained to Algol. My military people tell me it’s some pretty exotic stuff. And he claims the detonator is thought activated. Records confirm he’s a wirehead.”

I squirmed in my chair. In my book, the only thing worse than a drug addict was a wirehead. Addicted to their own endomorphins. Just a few nanoamps in the right place and they felt ecstasy, even simulated orgasms. Brains full of wires. My stomach turned at the mere thought of holes drilled in my head, the worst nightmare of an invulnerable being.

“So I guess if I don’t show, he takes them all out? Algol included. Is that the deal?”

“Says annihilation is better than going back to Delphi, Naomi. I believe him. He’s got nothing to lose.”

“When do I have to be there?”

“Twenty nine minutes.”

“What! Southy is halfway around the planet.”

“You can do it.”

“I don’t travel that way anymore, Sandal. I prefer ships.”

“No time for that. And make sure you go alone.” Sandal’s voice was tight, his words sparse. I suspect he was trying not to think what that filthy criminal might do to the woman he loved, or imagined he loved. Terran men could be sweet that way.

“OK. I’m on my way, Sandal. Shoot the coordinates to my PersComp.”

I clicked off and rose to walk rapidly toward the door, gesturing toward my security chief. Everyone's eyes in the ballroom followed the two of us as our feet rose from the floor in our haste. It wasn't polite to show off this way in front of Terrans, but I had bigger things to worry about than manners.

Major Raul'lan caught up to me near the door.

"I need a flight suit right now, Major."

"May I ask why, Ambassador?" The major's eyes sparkled brighter. She hated these diplomatic dinners, and still thought of herself as a warrior, despite her Embassy duties. She'd like nothing better than to duke it out with the bad guys.

"No you may not. Personal business."

"Yes ma'am." The Major flashed down the hall as I struggled to keep up. It had been a while since I'd flown. We free fell six stories in the drop tube to land inside the security center. Raul'lan grabbed a silver jumpsuit from a hook on the wall and tossed it to me. I pulled it on in one smooth movement, zipping it up, the collar closing hermetically tight around my neck, sealing my body in. I didn't need the protection, but my clothing did.

"Sandal will fill you in after I leave," I shouted over my shoulder as I ran up the sloping ramp toward the surface, finally crouching and leaping into the air from the concrete pad at the end.

I felt the sharp buffets of the Mach transition before I'd even cleared the rooftops of the nearby buildings. There would be complaints of broken glass tomorrow.

The snowy landscape shrank rapidly beneath me, and the horizon spread outward until it began to curve as I climbed nearly straight up. Once clear of the bulk of the atmosphere, I began to fly directly toward the horizon, pouring all my strength into my muscles, tensing every part of my body as hard as steel to force an orgone burst. My breasts started to burn painfully as my orgone metabolism kicked into high gear, giving me the excess energy to channel into my volatai which in turn gave wings to my feet.

I pushed through the pain, it had been decades since I'd burned like this,

worrying that my marginally depleted figure wasn't going to support this acceleration for long. Fortunately, it didn't have to. I was out of the atmosphere and soaring through vacuum toward the green landscape of the Southy two minutes later. Now was the frustrating phase. Just relaxing in the zero-G, coasting along in a suborbital trajectory.

I debated pushing it. My bare skin could handle an accelerated reentry, but this flight suit couldn't, and I wasn't going to arrive naked in front of that savage.

I was Ambassador Naomi Kim'Vallara after all.

A lady of measure and means.

Chapter Three

Randik saw a blazing streak cross the sky like a meteorite, and smiled. The Velorian was coming. And fast. The bright point of light course-corrected near the far horizon and began to descend rapidly, finally circling overhead before settling to the ground a couple hundred meters away. The glow of her silver suit was nearly blinding, her pale hair billowing about her head and alive with decorative sparkles.

She quickly stripped the hot metal off and stepped free, revealing a filmy black lace outfit that rose high around her neck. Randik could see the outline of her slender figure beneath the flowing lace as the long, sheer dress swept down to her ankles. She was very tall, more so because she still wore high heels, with diamonds dangling from her ears, her eyes glowing so blue.

She tied her hair back up as she paused in the shadow of a tree, staring curiously his way.



She didn't look like any government official he'd ever seen before.

But she was indeed the ambassador. He recognized her from her pictures. Naomi Kim'Vallara. Matra born. Her Bio said she was in her late fifties, but she could pass for half that by human standards.

Randik pushed away a disquieting sense of intimidation at her beauty as

he watched her walk his way, moving as lithely as a ship's cat. Until today, he'd thought cats were the most sensuous creatures he'd ever seen, and the best adapted when it came to living in low or zero-G.

He tried not to think about her strength or near absolute invulnerability. While he'd always been stronger than any man he'd faced, the ambassador's birthright granted her many hundreds of times his raw strength – a seeming impossibility given her slender form. Until he remembered the purpose of her artificial race -- mating with gods. A near-nuclear event involving unimaginable athletics, according to the archives.

He smiled. Despite their haughty airs and privilege and indomitable power, Velorians were little better than those gentedched whores he'd met on a dozen worlds. Designed for fucking and nothing more.

He comforted himself with that last thought. He knew something about power too, having grown up on the streets and living in prison all these years. He'd learned that attitude and advantage were just as important as muscle.

Advantage that was definitely his.

Chapter Four

I focused in on the profoundly ugly man who stood just inside the entrance of the small ship. His skin was black as coal, his eyes like pools of ink, and his body devoid of any trace of hair, including his shaved head.

Tattoos and scars defaced his powerfully muscled body, and his face was twisted and deformed as if the bones had been broken and badly healed. A thick, golden choker surrounded his neck, a series of runes carved into it. He looked like something out of one of those dark graphic novels that Terrans liked so much.

"You're the one called Randik?" I said as I approached the ship, trying to keep my voice Velorian smooth and cultured.

"They brief you on the deal here?" he growled back, not answering my question.

"Just that you're out of fuel, you've got a wire, including a link to an

explosive on the boy. Anything else I need to know?"

Randik smiled, the golden teeth of a miner flashing. "Yeah. If I think the right thought, even for a second, it blows. If I'm unconscious, it also blows."

Despite his outward bravado, I saw the way his eyes kept flicking up and down my body. I doubt if he'd met a Velorian other than Cher'ee before, and she'd outmuscled him and slammed him into jail so fast he'd barely known what was happening. But impressively, he still managed to project a sense of confidence, his eyes boldly holding mine. I sensed that permeating the air around him as he smiled broadly.

I couldn't help but be impressed.

Not many men could so easily get past the initial intimidation of meeting a Velorian. Especially a human who clearly made his way in this world using his raw strength. As strange as it seemed, his principal physical attribute and mine were the same, just shifted by a few orders of magnitude.

"What we're gonna do here, Ms. Ambassador," he continued, "is that you're gonna find a way to cut me free. Get my sentencing overturned."

"I don't have the authority for that," I said, pausing in front of the ship's door to shake my head. "You were arrested and sentenced by a Reigellian court. Only they..."

"I was illegally arrested!" he shouted. "And not by a Reigellian, but by a fucking Protector on your staff."

Sandal was right. This was all about Cher'ee.

I looked up the steps at him. "Can I come in? We can talk about it."

"Sure," he smiled confidently. "But without your fucking clothes. Don't want no bugs brought in. Just you."

I suppressed a surge of anger. I wasn't a damn Protector, all bright eyes and teenage enthusiasm, happy to run around naked whenever I could. I was a senior government official. "You interrupted a formal dinner at the Embassy, Randik. The only communications device on me is behind my right ear. My PersComp."

"Then destroy it and leave it out there. With your clothes."

I glared at him for a long moment, trying to think of a way to take him out fast. Unfortunately, I realized that no matter what I tried to do, I couldn't move faster than thought. Instead, I glared into his eyes as I angrily reached up to undo my choker. Maybe I could still intimidate him.

Releasing the clasp, I lowered my arms to let my lace gown drift slowly downward across my smooth skin to silently pool at my feet. Like all Velorian formal wear, this gown was designed to be removed with the same elegance it projected while worn.

Randik's eyes followed it down my body, yet surprisingly, his pulse and respiration remained normal, with no overt sign of arousal. Was he gay, I wondered? Or just addicted to his wire?

I felt insulted, but quickly caught myself in that arrogant thought. Was every man supposed to get turned on just by looking at me?

I retrieved the PersComp from behind my ear and crushed it between my fingers as I walked up the steps to enter his ship. He backed up slightly, his eyes rising to stay focused on mine, given I was still wearing my heels. Advantage mine.

"In there." He pointed to the right.

I glanced beside me to see one of the disintegration chambers that modern ships use to eliminate waste products. A non-weaponized application of GAR technology. There was a model placard by the door – a government-issued Pranteen 78.

How did a pleasure yacht rate one of those, I wondered, especially after that scandal a few years ago, when a government official had used the office disintegrator to cover up the murder of his wife? A P78 could reduce a human body to a whiff of gas in ten seconds flat, leaving no traceable DNA. Must be one of Erik's perks. Whatever.

Fortunately, Major Raul'lan had demonstrated to the embassy staff that the machines couldn't kill any of us. As usual, she demonstrated that fact by standing inside one herself, letting it run at full power for over a minute. She never missed a chance to prove that she deserved to be a Protector.

Still, I wasn't happy. Surviving a disintegrator didn't mean it couldn't cause me pain, for I'm hardly a Prima One like my daughter Alisa, or even a P-3 like the Major. I pushed that worry away, concentrating instead on Randik's state of mind. He was not only being careful, but he was clearly paranoid about bugs.

Also a control freak. Only his control was all too real. For now, at least.

I stepped inside the chamber, and he shoved the heavy door closed behind me, locking me in. I bit my lower lip as I waited, suspecting this was going to hurt. I was right.

A blindingly bright orange glow suddenly filled the chamber and the most god-awful screeching sound I'd ever heard assaulted my ears. I don't know how to describe the sensation, other than to say that I felt what I imagine a human would feel if someone stabbed a million needles into their skin, all at the same time. That sharp pain was matched by a low, vibrating sensation that grew stronger by the second. That horrible vibration strangely homed in on my clitoris, which bothered me all the more because I knew the combined forces were trying to rip me apart, atom by atom. One force would vibrate the molecules of my flesh to weaken their bonds, and then that pinprick force would break the bonds between the atoms.

Annihilation.

Focused on my sex?

Disgustingly, the two forms of pain combined to create an itchy vibrating glow that homed in on my clitoris. It was suddenly as if all the power in the chamber was going to that one place. As if its only purpose was to bring me to orgasm.

I held my breath, suspecting this was just my body's instinctual way of fighting back, of making me stronger. The Galen had inserted some very specific sexual instincts into our DNA, mainly that of transforming pain and physical stress into arousal.

I refused to give in to the sensation, and instead concentrated on keeping my mouth closed, clenching my backside as well, then tensing the muscles of my inner labia, an area we Velorians have conscious control over but humans don't. I

wasn't going to let that disgusting vibration get any further inside me if I could help it.

Fortunately, the makeup and the glitter gel in my hair was the only thing the disintegrator had to work on, so the light faded quickly and the door opened. I stepped out, rubbing my shoulder where the skin still felt strangely tingly, my hair falling free in my natural style. It was all I could do to ignore the near irresistible desire to reach down and rub by wickedly tingling sex. A mere touch and I'd lose control for sure.

Randik looked down to see my erect nipples, then further down to see the shame of my clitoral erection.

Disturbed by my sudden vulnerability, by my forced arousal, I was also emboldened by the knowledge that forces which would have instantly vaporized a human had merely turned me on. I imagined I was a goddess, and tossed my head to make my blonde hair fly, hoping to draw his eyes back to mine. I leaned closer to him, my face only inches from his, hoping my beauty would intimidate him if my invulnerability didn't.

"OK, you've got me here on your ship, Randik Begglestrom, and I'm obviously not carrying any bugs now. What is it you think I can do for you?"



Randik 's eyes crinkled as he laughed, a deep roll of thunder coming from his barrel chest. "So, the lady isn't only beautiful, but does her fucking homework. Nobody back on Delphi but the warden knew my last name."

"So get to the point, Randik."

"Well, it's fucking simple, your ladyship. You get my sentence commuted, and then you all go free."

"I told you, I don't have that authority."

"In addition," he continued, "you will get this little hostage episode written off as the desperate act of an innocent man trying to prove his innocence. Get

me a letter of pardon.”

“You haven’t been innocent a day in your life, Randik. And nobody’s arrested you yet.”

“But I was illegally arrested before,” he growled. “Your fellow supergirl was chasing an Aurean, and she killed him. Fucked the poor bastard to death as I heard it.”

“If he was your partner, Randik, the you were just as guilty as him. Be glad she didn’t do the same thing to you.”

“She threw me in the damn slammer. Wouldn’t listen to a damn thing I said. I told her that Aurean bastard forced me into working with him. Held my wife and son as hostages.”

“You told them that in the trial too?”

“Sure. But given that my wife and kid went to ground before the court could find them, and our marriage was ship’s law, they couldn’t find any records. The cops just looked at that dead Aurean and all the plutonium, saw my damn rap sheet, and didn’t take my word for shit.”

“I wouldn’t believe you either, Randik. You and your partner, who you say wasn’t, had been up on charges for smuggling, assault and attempted murder. Witnesses always disappeared before the trial.”

“He’s a fucking Aurean. What did you expect?”

“That you’d go to the authorities.”

“And have him snap my god-damned neck? You don’t know shit about humans, your ladyship. We ain’t made of steel.”

“You were up on charges before you met him, Randik. You had a long record.”

“But that’s not the point, now is it, Ms. Ambassador? According to Reigellian law, I shouldn’t have been in that courtroom in the first place. Call it a technicality; call it a flagrant violation of your precious Prime Directive. Either way, it wasn’t a righteous bust. Protectors can’t take Terrans down. Not on Reigel Five. Not on most worlds. That’s the job of the local cops.”

I cursed under my breath. Randik might be a wirehead, but he wasn’t

stupid. Some jailhouse lawyer had been pouring ideas into his head.

“Let me review more of the facts first, Randik. Then I’ll tell you what I’m willing to do.”

Randik gestured toward the Archive console. “Suit yourself, dear. I’m sure you can get a password for the Justice archives. Heard you were fucking the god-damned President and all.”

Chapter Five

It took me a couple of hours to review the data, PCrafts don’t have the fastest comm links around and Randik’s criminal record was extensive, but in the end, the evidence was clear enough. The court sentenced him without disproving his claim that he was being coerced. And Cher’ee had truly exceeded her authority in arresting him. Much as I hated to admit it, I had a Prime Directive violation on my hands.

Damn you, Cher’ee.

And damn you, Terri Raul’lan. She had somehow wangled the provisional appointment of Cher’ee as Protector – just a month out of her rites, without the usual prerequisite of formal training on Erin’dor. Something to do with field experience and sentimental ties to the planet. Most irregular, but then nearly anything to do with the major was most irregular. I suspected their relationship was more than professional, but they were too discrete to prove it.

Even that might have been forgivable if Cher’ee had been competent. This wasn’t the first time she’d messed up, but there was no covering it up this time. The integrity of the diplomatic mission was at stake, not to mention a man’s freedom. Even if Randik was a degenerate and dangerous, he was an unjustly arrested man.

I considered just looking the other way. I could claim he had no case. That the Prime Directive gave latitude in this area. Nobody would question me. He’d either die or go back to prison.

Reigellian justice was supposed to be blind. It weighed each case on its merits. Most of the time, anyway.

Still, it was obvious that Randik was aggressive. A predator. I heard the boy cry out as I studied the Archives. A glance through the bulkhead revealed Randik punching around an MP. The MP was arguing indignantly that he had to be released, claiming he was too important a man to be confined to such a small ship. He was arrogant and pompous and stupid, not to mention obnoxiously loud, the worst set of traits a human could have.

The sharp crunch of fist against bone shut him up. Despite my dislike of Randik, I almost felt like cheering. I'd wanted to do that a hundred times when dealing with Reigellian politicians.

Convinced Randik wasn't going to kill any of them, not right away anyway, I rose to walk forward to the pilot's console to check on the ship's status. It was out of fuel as advertised, but otherwise looked sound. Windshield was blackened a bit. Logs said it had exceeded published design limits by 50% on re-entry. Obviously a good ship, given they were still alive.

The overly steep reentry confirmed one thing though. Randik had nothing to lose. He'd risk it all for his freedom. I'd read enough horror stories about Delphi prison to realize that death was an acceptable second choice for him. Far better than going back to prison.

Still, there was going to be one hell of a stink back on Velor. If my recall had been worrisome before, it was certain now. Cher'ee would definitely be censured, although the Council had recently become tolerant of Protectors' misbehavior... far more tolerant than I was, especially where Prime Directive violations were concerned.

Randik walked out of the passenger compartment a few minutes later, rubbing his bruised fist. He was a huge brute, muscles bulging from heavily tattooed arms, his shoulders as broad as an ox. His shaved head, stubbly face and golden teeth made him look like the poster child for a lifer convict.

"So. You satisfied now?" he growled.

I wasn't sure if he was talking about my research or his treatment of the hostages. "You're hardly an innocent man, Randik."

"But the bust I was convicted on wasn't righteous, now was it?"

I rose to my full height and took a deep breath, the modest swell of my figure reminding me how dangerously low on energy I was. “I think I can fix things, but it will take time. You have my word that I will try. So why don’t you release the hostages before this situation escalates beyond both our control.”

He laughed. “I got all the time in fuckin’ universe, Ambassador. And if anyone escalates this thing, it won’t be me.”

“I can’t do it from here. I need to appear before the court.”

“Then we got ourselves a problem, Ms. Ambassador. ‘Cause you ain’t going nowhere until I’m a free man.”

“Your ship is in the middle of a war zone, Randik. Your presence here in a Northern registered ship could break the holiday truce that was just agreed to. If not that, the Aryans will find us, and they’ll use this to make the government look weak.”

“Us, huh? I like the sound of us.” Randik laughed. “Looks like you just joined my little pirate ship.”

“The Southerns and the Aryans won’t give a shit about the President’s nephew, Randik. In fact, they’d love to nuke us and claim it was a Northern screw-up. An attack even.”

“Then get us out of here, sweet cheeks.”

“I don’t have the energy.”

Randik stared down at my chest. “Now that you mention it, you are a disappointment that way. Always thought Vels were supposed to be busty.”

“I’m a diplomat. Physical power isn’t how I practice my trade.”

“You’re still superwoman. Now lift this god-damn ship and get us out of here!”

“You don’t want me to run out of power while your ship’s a mile off the ground, do you?”

“I’ll take the fucking risk. Just fly us someplace where you can get... food or energy or whatever you need.”

I cursed under my breath. “You don’t understand. I might not get us there.”

He shrugged. “Then you’ll kill the kid along with the rest of us. Probably

happen anyway. Northern Guards are all trigger-happy bastards. Shoot us out of the air, they will.”

“Let me use your comm,” I said slowly, my teeth clenched in anger.

Chapter Six

The worst part about getting Randik’s yacht airborne was the naked walk through the passenger compartment. The MPs instantly recognized me, as did the boy Algol, who gawked at me. They could say whatever they wanted later, at the moment, I needed to save their lives.

The engine room of the yacht was cramped, but the main girders were exposed and the center of gravity was clearly identified. Despite occupying only the last quarter of the yacht’s length, most of the weight of the ship was back here. Two small Masden antigravs for atmospheric use and maneuvering were set on either side of the hull, along with a centrally-located anti-matter thruster for high-speed vacuum flight. The Masdens ran on electricity which came from a pair of Stencil powercells. Their fuel tanks were dry.

I read the engineering placard on the wall.

GVWE: 282,000 kg

GVWL: 372,000 kg

That worried me. Given the empty tanks and small passenger list, the ship was probably closer to empty than loaded weight, but in either case, it was damn heavy. I hadn’t worked out with this kind of weight in ten years. I flew a desk nowadays.

Still, I should be able to lift it, although flying was going to drain my energy fast. The ship would fly like a rock if I lost it, but there was no changing Randik’s mind.

I angrily wrapped myself around the backbone girder as close to the CG as I could, and concentrated on tensing my body, starting with my legs. The girder gave off a cacophony of pops and the hull creaked as I slowly built my strength. Steel-stranded muscles appeared that looked out of place on my slender body. Sandal called it my muscle elegance, these deep clefts of my

dense Velorian muscles. I just clenched my teeth and strained, focusing on my anger, and just about had the ship off the ground when Randik appeared. His hand closed over my ass, squeezing me tightly.

“You got some fucking muscles here, Ms. Ambassador. Didn’t think your skinny ass had it in you when you came aboard.”

“Get your filthy hands...”

Randik flattened his body against mine. I felt the hard throb of his manhood pressing between my cheeks. He was responding sexually to me this time. Maybe he had a thing for muscles.

“Vels like you like to fuck gods, pretty one. Galens. So how ‘bout a dark god.”

“You wouldn’t survive me,” I hissed back at him, looking to intimidate him. “You’re just a Frail.”

He violently shoved his erection between my legs. “A Frail who holds those precious lives in my head, so let’s make this a simple trade. Your honor for their lives, your fucking Highness.”

He laughed evilly in my ear, his breath foul.

With my legs wrapped so tightly around the long beam, I was very vulnerable, and he took advantage of it to thrust himself against me. His perfect aim said he hadn’t forgotten what he knew about women.

I hissed in anger as I tensed the tiny muscles that made up my inner labia, making it impossible for him to enter me very far. This had nothing to do with honor. It had to do with who was in control.

That wasn’t me.

Not that he could anything except hump away between my legs. I remembered he’d been in a prison with only men, and clenched my ass tighter, ignoring his grunting as I angrily thrust myself upward as if to escape him. The ship suddenly broke loose from the ground and started to fly. Staring forward through the bulkheads as I tuned out his panting exertions, my eyes sparkling a brighter shade of blue and the ship turned to glass as I concentrated on the tachyons and neutrinos which streamed through the metal hull. I spun it around

and accelerated toward the north. Toward the closest place I knew where I could get a quick fix of orgone.

Whether it was his wire or the inspiration of my body, I had no idea, but Randik managed to pleasure himself twice before he left the engine room, leaving my thighs wet and sticky. He was a disgusting excuse for a man, but he'd hardly violated me.

Still, I was a Velorian, and what he'd done was tantamount to rape. Something we all feared from the Aureans. The fact that a mere human had pleased himself against my will was humiliating.

I tried to reason through it, telling myself that I'd expected as much or worse. I'd known he was scum coming into this. It didn't matter. My job was to maintain the strict interpretation of law and the Prime Directive. Laws that applied to citizens and criminals. Once people gave up on the rule of law, then the next stop was chaos. Humans had gone there before, but I wasn't going to feed that insanity while on my watch.

My reasoned logic and platitudes assuaged some of my anger, but not all. I briefly entertained a pleasant fantasy of crushing him in my bare hands. Then an even nastier way, starting with that disgusting cock of his.

Right after this was over, I told myself. His ass is mine.

Chapter Seven

My strength was fading by the time the Nirvana resort complex appeared on the distant horizon. I was flying high, twenty miles up, using the thin air to reduce the wind resistance so I didn't have to use as much energy to keep us going. Unfortunately, given the yacht didn't have wings, it was going to take nearly as much energy to set it down as I'd used in lifting it.

Even more troubling, I was flying into the one place where I'd be instantly recognized.

I knew all about Nirvana, even thought I'd never visited. Nirvana was a Velorian retreat, which meant it belonged to my staff members, and it was the one place Velorians could hang out on Reigel Five without being on display. The

only humans here were the well-paid and discrete staff.

Extreme sports were the norm. Things like lava swimming, core tunneling and sun diving – well, you couldn't actually do that last onworld, but you could find a willing partner to go on a dive with you. More personal games too. Nobody was better at acting out sexual fantasies than we Velorians, as we tried to make every new sexual conquest into a mini-drama. Given that there were only a couple of dozen staffers in the embassy, they had to work hard to keep it fresh.

My arms and legs were starting to shake as I approached the small landing field, watching the terrain flatten out as I approached. I was coming in low. I clenched my teeth and concentrated harder, but the ship still sank with alarming speed. I found myself wishing Sandal was here now, as arousal of any kind would enable me to dip deeper into my energy reserves. Instead, I smelled Randik's stink all over me, dampening any kind of enthusiasm I could generate.

I tried to push Randik's memory away and think of my ex-husband, Janek, usually a forbidden topic. But Janik had been very good at one thing, and that was what I needed to think about now. I focused on some old memories of endless days making love with him, feeding the racy memories by rubbing my pubic bone against the steel girder, working to ignite at least a flicker of arousal. Enough to get the rest of my body into the game so I could keep the ship aloft another two minutes.

It worked, at least to a point, just enough to keep us airborne until the landing skids finally kissed the landing pads of Nirvana. The ship slid crookedly to a stop, and I collapsing, slumping down the huge girder to collapse at its base, completely exhausted.

Randik picked that moment to return to the engine room. "So, you feeling a little more human now, your Highness?"

I didn't have the energy to waste to even look up at him. I didn't have to. The smell of his unwashed body was ripe with the scent of musk, and his hormones were radiating through the air. The bastard was turned on again, and he'd come to continue his abuse.

It was all I could do to stay conscious as he rolled me over, roughly jerking

my limp legs open, and then thrust himself on me. I had no strength to resist him this time, my body weaker than if I'd been wearing gold. He used his unusual strength to take advantage of that, roughly overcoming even my extreme tightness to rape me.

Thankfully, unconsciousness came and took me away so I didn't have to listen to him grunt.

Chapter Eight

Randik used his wire to keep himself hard as he came three more times, enjoying by far the best fuck of his life. The Velorian was beautiful and oh so tight, despite being unconscious. He'd done a stiff before, but compared to her, the Ambassador was a goddess.

Finally, when even his wire couldn't keep him up, he pulled his pants up and walked wearily back to the Pilot's console, using the current to keep just enough endomorphins in his system to overcome his fatigue. He contacted the resort and asked for help, saying they'd had an emergency engine failure and the Velorian on board had landed the ship. Now she was depleted. Could someone come over and revive her?

The voice on the other end of the comlink was wary. Clearly they'd heard news of the hostage situation.

Randik lost his temper and angrily shouted his demands back at them, veins bulging from his forehead, confirming their worst fears. He gave them the same spiel about killing the boy along with the MPs. Also about the explosive. He made it sound convincing.

A woman soon appeared in the doorway of the resort and started walking toward the ship. Randik was surprised to see long, straight black hair, yet with eyes glowing Supremis bright. An Aurean, Randik worried, his flash of anger smoothed by his wire.

His worries faded when the woman came to the small river that separated the landing field from the resort, and instead of leaping it, she just walked across the water's surface. She was a Vel, pretending to be a Prime. But why?

When the woman got to the ship, he repeated the same scene with her as he had with the Ambassador. She glared at him like he was some kind of bug as she stepped naked out of the disintegration chamber, all blonde hair and blue eyes now, and breezed by him, heading back toward the engine room.

Randik whistled at her impressive figure, wishing he'd saved a little of himself for her. She had the largest tits he'd ever seen.

She returned with the Ambassador in her arms, and flew back to the resort complex.

Chapter Nine

I awoke to see a ridiculously endowed raven-haired woman sitting over a red-hot grate on the floor of a huge, stone room, flames licking around her. She was wearing a black synthetic leather top, zipped down the middle, a black G-string and over the knee leather boots. It took but a glance at her glowing eyes to know she was a Prime.

Terrified, I tried to crawl away, only to collapse before I moved two feet, overcome by fatigue again.



The Prime turned to look at me with her oversized eyes. “It’s not what you think, ma’am. Just a weekend diversion. A wig. Role playing.”

I blinked and looked back at the woman as I heard her Velorian accent. It took a few more seconds to recognize her. She was Annalee, a visa clerk in the consul section. A Brava.

“Anna? What... what the hell are you...”

“That convict claims you’re working for him,” Anna interrupted urgently. “He claimed you flew his ship in on empty tanks.” She looked down at Naomi’s flat chest. “Guess the tanks aren’t the only things empty.”

“He’s got a beef with the courts and the embassy,” I gasped, finding I was so weak I was having trouble breathing. “I’m... I’m trying to work it out.”

“Yeah, he gave me the short version.” Anna said as she looked down at my legs. “Guess he tried to give you the long version too, huh?”

I wasn’t going to dignify that question with an answer. “You need to help me.”

“Figured as much. Your convict friend is getting nervous, so I figure we have to do this the fast way.”

“Do?”

“Recharge you.” She rose to open the door, revealing a blonde-haired man standing behind it. “This is Laren.”

Laren was Anna’s husband. I’d officiated at their wedding last year. I looked back at Anna, who looked so convincing as a Prime, and found it interesting that he had such fantasies about making it with a Prime. Those were dangerous thoughts for a Brava, and very rare.

“Laren and I have a certain resonance,” Anna continued, “and I’ve got more than my share of orgone at the moment, as you can well see. If you don’t mind Laren being the medium, I think we can get you on your way again soon enough to keep those hostages alive.”

“Resonance?” I smiled weakly. “Never heard love called that before.”

Laren knelt beside me, a concerned look on his face as he sniffed at Randik’s rancid scent. “That bastard will pay, Ambassador. If you don’t take care of him, I will.”

“Not right now. He just has to think the wrong thought and that kid blows up along with everyone else.”

“We’ll find a way. But first, we have to fix you.”

“Thank you, Laren.”

“I’ll be very careful at first.” Then he winked. “At least until you get your legs under you. So to speak.”

I looked up at Anna and realized that this was probably going to be an interesting culmination to their role playing. I suspected it would play out as a Prime channeling her power through a Messenger to recharge a Protector, or some script like that. And if I didn’t become part of their fantasy, then a clerk making it with the Ambassador would be good for a new one. Or some nasty gossip.

In reality, recharging was one of the most abusive but effective combat techniques the Aureans practiced. The ‘living batteries’, as they called their highly endowed women, traveled to battle with their male warriors. Despite being among the most devastating warriors in the universe on their own right, they were normally relegated to the role of keeping their warriors at full power. If their male companion ran into a Protector, her job was to make sure he didn’t run out of power. And if it came down to sexual combat, she would join in, channeling her prodigious reserves through the male warrior.

Dangerous stuff. I just hoped these two knew what they were doing.

Not that I had a better idea. I was too weak to do more than lie there as Laren kneeled over me, taking himself out. I felt a brief flash of pride as I saw both the way he looked at me and the strength of his arousal. While Randik had been big for a human, Laren was Velorian, and while Velorian women were invariably beautiful from head to toe, Velorian men had only a single location where they were truly beautiful. One inhumanly perfect and slightly oversized organ.

I smiled sexily up at him as he lowered that part of himself, gently guiding himself to me. I gasped in pleasure as a spark of orgone flashed the length of my vagina, and then again as he took me easily, reminding me in that perfect moment that I’d been with Sandal for so long. I’d almost forgotten the supreme power of a Velorian male.

I couldn’t help but smile up at Anna as I gave myself up to her husband, feeling fulfilled for the first time in a long time. Anna just smiled back at me,

reassuring me that she was proud to lend me her husband this way, especially since we both knew that the energy transfer could only happen during orgasm.

I was also aware that this kind of sex was a form of lethal combat, starving each other of energy as easily as providing it, and if Laren wanted to kill me, he could easily do so now. All he had to do was to stimulate my orgasm before his, and he'd suck the last ergs of my energy away, dropping me into a coma I might never recover from.

Timing was going to be everything.

Fortunately, the very last of my orgone was sufficient to send a few tingles of arousal to my nipples to make them hard, the radiating outward to join with the wondrously hard, fullness of his gentle fucking. Anna lay on her husband's back, her breasts glowing warm as he took me in missionary position. She touched herself, carrying herself to the point of ecstasy, timing herself to the same moment as her husband. The two of them came as one, merging their wild passions to open an energy channel from her body to mine, her husband the medium.

I felt them going crazy on top of me, and tried to help by reaching my long legs upward to dig my heels into Anna's lower back, putting my long muscles to work to hold the threesome together, urging Laren on to the second and vastly more powerful orgasm of a Velorian male.

Laren took that as his sign to let loose, and began to thrust with all power of his birthright. I leaned my head back and cried out, arching my back higher to lift both of my lovers off the rough floor.

Laren's powerful passion went to ground inside my body, his exertions so great that the back of my head began to crack the concrete around me. Not like I was in any state to notice such trivialities. Instead, a rush as powerful as the suction of a tornado enveloped me as I soared into the delicious light of orgasmic delight. The room exploded in blue-green light as megawatts of orgone power shot between them like lightning bolts, all of that blinding glare finding its way between my legs.

Chapter Ten

Despite burning off half my borrowed orgone while carrying Randik's ship from the Reigellian surface to the most distant moon of Reigel Five, I was still feeling ridiculously endowed as I leaned back in the soft G-couch in the back of the passenger cabin. The flush of energy made my eyes glow as if they were lit inside. Not easy to sleep in the dark that way.

Now if only the MP's would quit staring at me. The only clothing I was able to wear was a plunging gown that one of the MP's had bought for his wife. Even then, it was poised to rip down the front if I took too deep a breath. Men noticed things like that, especially when the woman beneath was made of steel.

I'd chosen the moon of Lanar because it was close enough to Reigel for fast comm. transits, but far enough away to keep us off the space defense net. The only problem was that it was tidally-locked to the planet, making for long days with temperatures of 200° C in the daytime, and -200° C at night. The only permanent human habitation these days was a base near the north pole, on the opposite side from where we'd landed.

But aboard ship there was at least air for the passengers, and a few hours at dawn and dusk where the hostages could wander around outside without Randik guarding them. Nobody was going to run away to brave the temperature extremes.

Randik showered and dressed in some clean clothes, making him look almost human. Unfortunately, he wasn't really sure how to spiritually rejoin the human race. Too long in that hellhole, I suppose.

He went back to using his wire and having sex with himself. Strangely, I felt sorry for him and his solitary passions. But not nearly sorry enough to help. Mostly I just pitied him. I was enough of a liberal that I truly believed he acted the way he did because he'd been raised poorly. That prison had trained him to believe that violence and intimidation were the best ways to deal with other people.

I tried to explain that to the MPs, but they were less than sympathetic to my discussion about blind justice. I knew they would have killed Randik with their

bare hands if they had the strength. They knew I could, and they couldn't understand my reluctance to do so, despite the loss of the boy. They kept whispering among themselves about Velorian naivety and liberal thinking, something the wiser humans, meaning themselves, had given up a long time ago.

I closed my eyes and waited for time to pass. We were waiting for the courts to hear my appeal.

By the end of our third day on the moon, it was clear the courts were going to take their time, especially given that I wasn't going to show up and make the case in person. Randik was in a foul mood, and he started punching walls and cursing at anyone who moved. I stayed in the main cabin to protect the hostages, playing cards with Algol, who didn't say much – maybe Randik had told him to keep quiet. But he seemed fascinated with me, probably because I used to date his uncle. Or maybe it was just my dress.

Which made me wonder how people interacted in human cultures when they became related by marriage. Of course, I knew the basics. That over-emphasis on fidelity, emotional and physical. Also a sense of belonging, of family and non-family. But exactly how did it change how people felt about each other?

While I tried to puzzle that out, I also took the opportunity to also study the explosive capsule that was chained to Algol's body, examining the internals of the titanium chains that secured it, looking for a weak spot. The capsule surprised me by screaming bloody murder when I reached out to touch it, a scream that was matched by Algol's as it sent a signal back to Randik's head. He stormed into the cabin, shouting that if anyone touched the capsule again, he'd set the damn thing off.

Algol was sobbing and shaking like a leaf, but Randik didn't seem to care. I rose and glared at him before stalking wordlessly off to sit in the pilot's seat.

"We need to get this crate under cover," Randik growled as he followed me forward. "Ship's insulation is starting to break down."

"Now you start worrying about your hostages?"

"Fuck you."

“You did, remember? Wasn’t much fun. For me anyway.”

“You little whore. You were more than happy to make it with that asshole back at Nirvana. You just needed a bigger dick, huh?”

“More precisely, one that isn’t so limp. Humans aren’t just dinky.”

“You know I was more than enough for you.”

“Yeah, then why did I fall asleep during the act?”

“You passed out...” Randik started to say, and then caught himself. He was wise enough to know he’d never win an argument with a Vel about his sexual prowess.

“So what you gonna do about keeping us from cooking or freezing?”

“What do you have in mind?” I asked sweetly, enjoying making him squirm.

“How ‘bout you move a few of those rock slabs over there and make a bit of a cave. Shove the ship inside and then park one slab over the opening. It’ll moderate the temperature.”

“And you think I’m strong enough to do all that?”

“That’s what that Infernal Engine or whatever it’s called on Velor made you artificial people for. Muscle freaks who’ll fuck any...”

I rose to my feet and backhanded him up against the wall, my flash of anger surprising me with its suddenness. “You don’t even know what its like to be human, Randik. You’re the last person who should be judging me!”

Randik smiled as he sat on the floor, wiping a drop of blood from his lip. “So, the ice queen does have a temper after all. But no goddamned brains. If you’d hit me hard enough to put me out, the explosive would have gone off. Dumb shit.”

I spun around and stalked out the door of the ship, fists clenched, angry with myself now for losing my temper. I was very aware that he’d been taking stimulants to keep from sleeping, not to mention using his wire. Still, my stomach churned with anger. A part of me truly wanted to wipe him from the face of existence, melt him to ash with my eyes, yet I was stuck here on this moon with him, waiting for the damnable courts on Reigel to consider setting him free.

It wasn't fair.

But then, life never was.

I tried to work off my anger by starting on the shelter. It took a lot of muscle to lift and move the huge boulders at the base of the cliff, but the exercise was healthy, and my anger faded quickly.

It took a few more hours of smashing away with my fists to cut a ship-sized hole into the igneous rock flow that formed the cliff. Randik just watched as I would shatter the rock with fist, then dig my long fingers into the face and tear out huge chunks of rock. He was a hard-rock miner and seemed to get off on my working it with nothing but my bare hands. He kept making obscene suggestions behind my back, which was only made worse because I was working naked again. That dress was all I had.

Now what was left now was to secure a slab large enough to close off the entrance. I found one a few hundred meters from the ship, and struggled to hoist it onto my shoulder. I guessed it weighed about 300,000 kg. Not so impossibly heavy now that I was flush with orgone. Once it was teetering off the ground, I tried to rise back to my feet, my thighs burning from the strain. I straightened my back to carefully balance the slab as I used my volatai to both steady myself and keep my feet from sinking into the rocky ground, feeling like I was an ant crawling off with a sand boulder. My breasts grew itchy hot as they metabolized orgone, but not hot enough to glow, which was good, given Randik's eyes.

Strangely though, it felt really good to push my body. I was just starting to enjoy the burn when I saw movement in the distance. Several furry animals like very large dogs were creeping down the ravine beside the landing site – they looked all too familiar. Had they escaped from that exotic animal preserve the Northerners had operated here as a tourist attraction before the civil war put an end to tourism?

“We got company, Randik. Over there in the ravine.”

“Yeah. Saw it earlier.”

“You could have said something.”

“That's why I'm carrying the GAR.”

I walked closer with the huge slab on my shoulders, struggling for all I was worth to keep my balance as I positioned it.

“A little to the left,” Randik called out as he stood fearlessly under the slab, sighting along the sides. “Back some. A little more.”

My muscles were burning from the strain I lowered it over the opening to test the fit, when a blur of black fur launched itself directly at me. A single glance confirmed my earlier fear – it was a Bonaz, one of the fiercest predators around. Nearly sentient, it had four-inch razor sharp teeth surrounding a circular mouth that looked almost like a Terran shark. Those jaws were more than capable of tearing and arm or leg from a grown man.

The Bonaz latched onto my right leg with its fearsome teeth and started to shake me violently, sawing its teeth back and forth as it shook me. Instead of escaping with my leg in its jaw as it had intended, it gave off a loud screech as its teeth broke against the steel muscles that were holding the slab up.

Still, I was horrified by the way the snarling, stinking beast was tearing at my skin, its claws tearing slashing upward between my legs as it searched for softer flesh. I tried frantically to kick it away, but that merely tipped me further off balance, threatening my control over the slab. I desperately threw myself forward the last few feet as Randik stood in the middle of the artificial cavern, slowly drawing his GAR while the Bonaz tore at me.

It got even worse when a second Bonaz came at me from behind and attempted to sink its teeth into my fleshy backside. The force of the blow pushed me forward enough to lose what was left of my balance. The end of the huge slab crashed down, missing Randik’s feet by inches.

With my hands now freed, I grabbed the two beasts by their furry necks and held them to my chest, twisting my arms until their spines snapped with a loud crunch. I finished by tossing their bodies in opposite directions, corpses slamming wetly against the sides of my newly made cavern.

I was just starting to wipe the saliva off my breasts when Randik pulled his GAR from his belt and aimed it right at me. I dodged to the left, and the beam grazed my hip as it struck a third beast that was silently charging from behind.

The animal's head exploded, spraying blood in all directions as it fell to the ground, its momentum carrying it forward under my legs. I flipped into the air, coming to a stop upside down, feet standing on the ceiling.

"Where there's three, there's a pack," Randik shouted up at me as he checked the charge on his GAR. "These Bonazi can't be from the zoo."

Those had been sterilized, I recalled. Couldn't have bred.

"Then get inside with the others. These beasties can't hurt me."

"Not unless they have a Kintz with them."

I shuddered. Kintzi were known to use Bonazi elsewhere the way Terran hunters used hunting dogs: to find and flush prey so they could take it down. If these Bonazi were new, somebody had to have brought them...

The Kintzi themselves were the closest thing to the Uruk-Hai Orcs of Tolkien's ancient tales; half Primal, half cat creatures that were more than capable of taking down an ordinary Velorian, especially if they attacked in pairs.

"I said to get back to the ship," I shouted. "I can deal with them."

Randik looked at me for a long second, and then turned and ran.

I looked up just in time to see Algol standing just outside the door of the ship, gesturing wildly to me. An incoming Bonaz saw him too, and running as fast as a Cheetah, it adjusted its course to go for the younger, more tender meat. Randik saw that, and instead of dodging to the side, he turned and threw himself directly into the path of the Bonaz. Its jaws closed on his left leg, just above the knee, and the impact flipped him upside down. The Bonaz slammed him to the ground as it began to savage his leg.

I leaped after Randik, my feet never touching the ground until I landed on the Bonaz my right knee slamming down to break its back. I tore it free of Randik, only to have most of Randik's leg come with it. Blood was spurting a half meter from the end of the stump.

"What the hell were you doing?" I asked, knowing full well that he'd just acted to protect Algol. The hostage he'd booby trapped with explosives.

Randik just groaned, pounding his fist into the ground as he held back a scream of pain. His eyes were big with fear – he knew losing a leg was a lethal

wound if not treated properly.

Dropping the dying Bonaz I wrapped my hands around his thigh and squeezed to stop the flow, the last spurts of hot, coppery-tasting blood filling my mouth and eyes. Blinking it away, I opened my eyes wide and focused my heat vision on the stump, burning the flesh to cauterize the torn arteries. The stench of burned meat made my stomach wrench, but the blood flow slowed.

A new movement coming fast from my left signaled another Bonaz attack, so I fairly tossed Randik through the door of the ship and spun around to throw my fist at the Bonaz. The beast was all teeth as it attacked me, and my fist shattered a few of them before my arm disappeared into its maw. It's high-pitched howl of pain sounded like the squeal of a giant rat as its teeth closed with murderous intent on my shoulder. I rotated my body in mid air to wrap my legs around the Great Dane-sized beast, and squeezed hard, feeling the satisfying crunch of shattering bone as my reward. The beast's eyes were as large and yellow as tennis balls as it collapsed, gasping its last breaths away.

A quick glance revealed that the rest of the pack was now circling and howling in the near distance. Easily a dozen. I wondered why they weren't attacking. Perhaps they were smart enough to realize what I was.

Or maybe, they were waiting for their master to arrive.

That last thought left me cold with fearful certainty. I dove through the door of the ship and slammed my hand on the close button, leaving a bloody palm print, and then sprinted through the passenger compartment, horrified to find Randik's blood seemingly everywhere. Once inside Engineering, it took only seconds to position myself at the CG, wrapping myself around the girder as I began to tense my body, building my flying power.

We were almost off the ground when a tremendous blow shook the ship, rolling us over on the side. My thrust vector was suddenly way off, and the ship began to skid across the ground to slam into the cliff next to us. I desperately tried to roll the ship the other way, only to have another blow hit us, turning the ship all the way over this time.

I was disoriented now, trying to thrust downward instead of up, my reflexes

all wrong. The ship skidded around as I tried, hopping off the ground a couple of times as I struggled to fly, only to sustain an even harder blow. Sparks and then dust filled the air as the hull breached!

There was no hope of getting off the moon now. Not without killing my passengers. I dropped to the ceiling, now the floor, and cautiously headed further back into Engineering. I had to reseal the hull.

What I saw turned my blood cold. A meter-wide hole had been ripped through two-inch titanium alloy, the edges torn as if by claws. Nothing but a Kintz could have done that!

Desperately looking around for a way to seal it, I realized the usual meteor patches weren't going to cover a hole that big. I started looking around for a piece of decking I could tear loose, only to see a furry head pop through the hole. It was covered in golden fur and had huge yellow eyes. For all the world, it looked exactly like a small lion. Except for one thing. It was smiling at me in a very human-like way.

I turned and ran.

Chapter Eleven

I used my heat vision to weld the Engineering door closed from inside the passenger compartment, that steel bulkhead the heaviest one on the ship. Three and a half inches of high-carbon steel. Yet even as I did it, I knew it was useless. The Kintzi would find it child's play given its harder-than-steel claws.

I was nearly done welding when something slammed into the door from the other side, and ten vicious claws tore through the thick steel. I stepped back in horror as the Kintz slashed at the door as if it were little more than paper, shredding the thick steel into slivers. I tried to push the horrified MPs behind me as I retreated up the aisle, Algol too, but I knew with a horrible certainty that there was no way I could protect them from a Kintz. If I stayed to fight, we'd all die.

The ignoble thought crossed my mind that there was no reason for me to die here. The humans were already dead. What would be gained by my dying too?

My conscience was wrestling with that cowardly thought when the ship jerked again, and one of the MPs fell forward toward the Kintzi. Its paw moved too fast for human eyes to track as it ripped upward, long claws eviscerating the doomed man from groin to collar bone. His intestines spilled out on the floor in a steaming coil, his wildly beating heart and collapsing lungs dangling from his chest cavity. The dying MP just stared into the Kintz's face, uncomprehending his own demise.

The Kintz ended it by grabbing the MP's head, its lethal claws projecting from the end of almost human fingers, and squeezed. The already doomed MP's head exploded like a ripe melon that had been hit with a sledgehammer. Bits of gray matter and bloody gore splattered across my already coated skin.

My terror was now so great that I couldn't pull my eyes from monster's yellow orbs, mesmerized by my own pending death. Algol was the only one who had the presence of mind to grab my arm and pull me backward. I blinked as I heard him calling to me, telling me to get away. His voice broke the beast's spell.

I slowly backed up the aisle, hoping for a miracle, knowing that my only hope for survival was the Kintz's lack of flight. If I could get him off the ground, the advantage would be mine. But how to do that without dying first?

The Kintz didn't give me time to think as it leaped directly for me. Despite its speed, my world went into slow motion. I glanced up, knowing I could punch through the roof with but a single leap and escape. I had all the time in the world. Instead, my eyes slowly lowered to meet those of the beast, and I instinctively threw myself forward, meeting the Kintz in the center of the cabin.

Slow motion turned into speeded up motion as we collided in a *thud* of steel bodies. I struggled frantically to wrap my arms and legs around the beast, hoping for a crushing hold. But the beast was stronger and faster than me, and its claws raked my skin, tearing it to send horrible waves of pain through my body, my luminescent blood joining the rest of the gore that coated the cabin.

Shocked that I was truly feeling pain for the first time, and that my skin was torn, I just hung on, feeling the beast's muscles flexing like spring steel beneath the fur. I tried desperately to twist myself around, trying to avoid its

slashing fangs, hoping to wrap my legs around his body from the safe backside. Instead, the Kintzi flipped around in my arms to face me, its huge paws slamming closed on the sides of my head with the force of doom.

A ringing sound like a huge bell filled my skull, and everything went black.

Chapter Twelve

I awoke to find myself slumped in one of the seats in the passenger compartment. The Kintz was sitting on its haunches on the floor, picking its teeth with a small bone. I saw three pair of men's boots, legs gnawed off at the ankles. The MPs had been eaten!

Looking further up the cabin, I saw Randik lying on the floor, gasping for breath. He was bleeding out from some new slashes down his back, and showed signs of cardiovascular collapse from the loss of blood. The boy, Algol, was cowering in the corner at the front of the cabin, his eyes wide with fear, and his face deathly white. He was holding the Xcelite capsule in his hand.

I didn't give myself time to think, and instead just acted on pure instinct. I leaped over the seats to try to reach the boy, my thoughts racing ahead. I'd wrap myself around him and punch through the hull and fly off. Maybe find a cave somewhere a few miles away to protect him from the 200⁰ C heat outside.

The other side of my brain knew it was a useless plan. Humans couldn't survive 200⁰ C for more than a few seconds. He'd be long dead before I found a place to shelter him – if I even could find one. But anything was better than being eaten alive by a Kintz!

I was reaching out for the boy when a tremendous blow landed against my back, slamming me to the floor so hard that my face burst through the titanium deck, the blow burying my head below floor level. More claws raked down my back, tearing my flesh, and I felt its cruel teeth clamping around the back of my neck. The killing bite of a lion!

Every instinct said to dive the rest of the way through the hole, then escape the ship, but instead, I threw all my strength into a final upward thrust against the Kintz's face, hoping to propel him through the side of the ship and up

into the atmosphere. My neck tore from his vicious bite as I spun around, facing him, fully intending to toss him out of the atmosphere completely.

Instead, he snapped his head forward and its huge jaws closed, completely engulfing my left breast. Its teeth tore into my softest flesh. Horrified by its bite and the ripping pain, I threw all my strength into my fists, slamming them down on its furry head. Instead of letting go, it only bit harder, teeth sinking deeply into my flesh, the pain sending my volatai into spasm. I crumpled to the floor on my back, spurting blood, unable to fly as the Kintz continued to tear at me, seeming intending to eat me alive. I fought back the only way I knew -- I kicked up under his tender underbelly as hard as I could, and managed to empty its lungs of air. It released its bite to gasp for air, and I pulled away to leap for the boy again.

The Kintz was fast, despite having its wind knocked out. Unbelievably fast. It got to Algol before I could, and took his right shoulder into its jaws, biting down with a horrible crunch, tearing half his shoulder away. The helpless child spun around, blood spurting all over the walls from torn arteries, one side of his leaping heart exposed to the air.

I knew at that instant that I couldn't save him.

"Don't stop now, you bastard," I screamed instead at the Kintzi. "Eat all of him. Stuff your furry face with his delicate flesh. Eat him!"

I don't know if the Kintz understood me or not, but he grabbed the dying boy's body as he slumped to the floor, tearing his arms from their sockets before ripping huge pieces of flesh out of him, ten pounds to the bite. Mercifully, the boy was dead before his brain could even register what was happening to him.

I used the moment while the Kintz fed to crawl closer to Randik. By the time I got there, all there was left of the poor boy were his boots.

The Kintz's stomach was bulging with all the meat it had gorged on, yet it still looked ravenous as turned to advance on me now.

"Randik. Wake up. Randik!" I shouted into his ear.

"Wha... getting so cold. So dark..." he mumbled.

"Detonate the explosive. With your mind. Now!"

“Don’t want to hurt... you’re helping...”

“The boy’s dead. All of them are, Randik. The bomb is inside the Kintz. It’s just us now. Do it!”

I turned to see the Kintz staring toothily down at me, fangs dripping in bloody gore. It started to reach out its claws to take me, only to stiffen when it was mere inches away.

Its eyes bulged from its head as they lit up like laser, and its engorged stomach bulged outward like an oversized balloon. A blinding glow turned the middle of its body transparent.

Randik had done it!

I kicked the beast as hard as I could, hopeful that the explosive would be contained by its nearly invulnerable flesh, but its body burst instead, exploding into a thousand bits as the near nuclear burst slammed into me.

The force of the Xcelite explosion, contained until it had reached peak pressure, blasted what was left of my consciousness away.

Chapter Thirteen

I woke up, I don’t know how much later, to find myself lying in a shallow crater, bits and pieces of the ship scattered around me, the largest piece being a section of the nose that was jammed inside the cave I’d dug. Bits and pieces of a dozen dead Bonazi lay scattered just beyond, the rock walls covered in their gore.

Rising to my feet, I looked down to see the wounds on my chest healing with Velorian speed, a bluish glow surrounding me. Hours must have passed, and the miracle of the Galen’s genetic gifts were hard at work. Thankfully, I still carried enough orgone to feed those healing powers.

Still, I was so battered and sore that I was barely able to stagger around on rubbery legs. All around me, bits of flesh were bubbling in the 200⁰ C heat, fat rendering. Human flesh. Randik’s mostly, I assumed. I didn’t want to think it had come from the Kintz’s stomach.

Also bits of the Kintz itself, including its intact skull, its flesh formed from

enough Galen DNA to remain unharmed by the extreme heat. If the explosion had been any less powerful, it wouldn't have suffered anything worse than indigestion.

I was the only survivor.

I'd come here to save the hostages, and failed. If only my greatest threat had been Randik, I might have saved them. But something far worse than a human criminal had decided this day. It was with the greatest sadness that I started to dig a hole to bury what was left of the humans.

That's when I remembered Kintzi don't travel alone. They're pack animals, just like their hounds. Looking around fearfully, I saw only the destruction of the ship. Still, the Kintz's mate might be coming, and their females were more vicious than the males. I had to get back to Reigel Five in a hurry. Major Raul'lan had to know there were Kintzis in our system. Once alerted, Protectors would come, and the Kintzi would die before they could take more human lives. Or any Velorian ones.

I finished with the burials. There was hardly enough left of Algol to identify. A shame; he was the only one I could care about. Algol... named for a star. That didn't strike me as the kind of sentiment that would have appealed to his father, or even to Sandal. The Bergstroms thought of themselves as stars, but only in terms of power – no different from Randik, in the last analysis.

Only, it was just then I saw the golden choker Randik had worn around his neck, half buried in the wreckage. I paused to pick it up, studying the strange runes that he'd decorated it with while in prison. The marks of a doomed man. A man without hope.

Looking inside, I saw two names: Mary and Jonah. His wife and child.

Perhaps I could truly meet them some day.

And maybe, I could tell his son a tale in which Randik, for at least a single moment, wasn't the criminal. A story where he'd bravely risked his own life to save a boy.

I think his son would like that.

The End