

~ The Chronicles of Ratha : Book 2: Home Is Where The Heart Is ~

by Aurelia

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: Each 'book' is an adventure in its own right but each is woven together with a central thread tying the exploits together into one overall saga. Some questions raised in one book will be answered and some will be left hanging, to be answered in a later tale.

Here is a link to Book 1:

http://xenafiction.net/scrolls/aurelia_the_chronicles_of_ratha1_rithc.html

THANKS: Thanks to my beta Heather for giving it the once over and giving me the benefit of her experience.

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Or join me at my Yahoo Group http://groups.yahoo.com/group/aurelia_fan/.

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What had I done?

I had been contemplating this question on my way to Juno to take the Noorthi home. I had little else to do with the ship on autopilot so I lounged back in the chair and put my feet up on the instrument panel in front of me.

I had found an unopened bottle of synth alcohol in a locker and I sat with it in my hand. It was certainly more expensive than the crap I usually drank. So what was stopping me? I had been begging for a drink day after day on Rigeus and now that I had it literally in the palm of my hand it was still unopened.

"Fuck this," I muttered and unscrewed the lid. I took a decent swig of the drink and swallowed before my taste buds had a chance to analyze it. "Ohh shit! What is this piss?" I looked for an expiry date. No, it still had a month or two before it moved into uncharted waters. Could alcohol go off? I had never met a drink I didn't like but this was bitter.

Suddenly a thought came to me and I jumped out of my seat. It took me a minute or two to negotiate the passageways to the common room but I found who I was looking for.

"Did you fuck around with this?" I held up the item in question and looked pointedly at Beri.

"Nnnnooooo. Was I supposed to?" There seemed to be genuine confusion on Beri's face.

"Don't screw with me, woman! This is awful." It was hard enough not to drink when there wasn't a bar in sight, but now I had my salvation in my hand and I still couldn't touch it. Was this some sort of cosmic karma thing?

Grit stood up and approached me. "It's probably the tattoo."

"A tattoo did this?" Okay, now she had me really confused.

"The ochre is in your bloodstream. Your body will remain pure."

"You mean I joined this outfit and now I have to give up alcohol?"

"It looks like it." Beri just grinned at me.

I was ready to forcibly remove that smile from her face. "If it fucks up my love life I may just have to kill someone!" I turned around and walked away, dropping the now useless bottle on the table.

This was not turning out as I had hoped. Joining the sisterhood was becoming one giant pain in the ass, and I couldn't wait to get to Juno to drop them off and be on my way. I suppose I was lucky that I still had the urge to spend some of those stolen credits tucked away in the hold. Now **that** would be depressing.

I went back to the cockpit and resumed my previous position-lounging in the Captain's chair while contemplating the universe.

My thoughts turned to Bessie and I clicked my tongue in disgust. The thought of her in the hands of my sworn enemy just burned me. And I bet they're treating her with disrespect. Bessie needed to be gently nudged, or more precisely caressed, into doing what I wanted her to do. She was a grand old lady of the cosmos and as such she needed some soft handling to get her to fly right.

I could see it now. That snake Andriッサ slamming the power to the floor like she was drag-racing in the Tresellis 500,000. My poor baby. We had been through a lot together, Bessie and me, and I had made a promise to her that there would be plenty more to come. If Andriッサ did anything to her... well, let's say skinning her would be the least of her problems.

And as for Vel... I couldn't wait to meet up with her again. The scales were tipped in her favor and I felt a need to even the score.

Can I come too?

"Yeah, sure." Now I was talking to myself. Maybe the loss of Bessie had pushed me over the edge. No, that wasn't it. I had long conversations with myself all the time. After all, that's what got me into this all-girl club in the first place.

Vel is not a nice woman.

"Tell me something I don't know," I said absently. I stopped for a moment. "Okay, now this is getting scary."

"It is? We haven't even arrived there yet." The voice belonged to Fen, my one and only. Well, not any more. Now that I found out she was a Noorthi, my chances with her were about the same as Bessie ever winning Tresellis.

"What are you doing here?" I asked. "No, let me guess. You lost the coin toss and now you've come to make nice."

"Yeah," she replied then graced me with a shy smile, "something..."

"...Like that. Yeah, yeah." I pointed to the vacant co-pilot's chair. "Sit."

"So what's scary?"

"I'm hearing a voice."

"And that's not normal?"

"Well, this particular one isn't. My other voices at least sounded like me. This one is different."

"Does it have a name?"

"I didn't have the chance to ask before you arrived."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere. Take your time." Fen settled back in the seat, mimicking my position by placing her feet on the panel in front of her.

"Okay." I tried to focus inward. What a stupid idea that was. Me? Focus? I barely listed to what was going on outside my body.

Who are you and what do you want?

This time I wasn't going to play around. I wanted answers and I wanted them now.

Hey, Jordana, it's me.

Now 'me' could have covered anybody I had ever met.

You'll have to be a little more specific.

Rice.

"Crap!" Rice was the last person I expected. For one thing she was dead.

"What?" My expletive caught Fen's attention.

"It's Rice!" It was bad enough that these women had me at their beck and call, now I would have one looking over my shoulder every minute of every solar day?

"Hmmm, interesting."

"Interesting! Oh, no, no, no, not interesting, anything but interesting. Disastrous? Maybe. Inconvenient? Certainly. Going to happen? Uh-uh, no way."

Awww J.

No, Rice. You're just going to have to find someone else.

"You report back to your buddies and you solve this, you hear me?" I was getting angry now. I was being pushed and pulled in all directions and it was pissing me off. How far was it to Juno?

* * *

In their usual fashion they held a meeting, leaving me to relax at the controls while they contemplated their next move. A while later Beri and Fen arrived in the cockpit to find me dozing in the Captain's chair. Or so they thought.

"Did you come to a decision yet?" I murmured, causing them to jump from surprise.

"We're not sure what to do. This hasn't happened before."

"Ohhhh great!" The cosmic karma was kicking me in the butt again. I must have really pissed off someone in this lifetime, and I wasn't counting Vel in that question. She was an exception and as such there was a special place in hell for me for that particular indiscretion.

Hey!

Sorry, Rice. Nothing personal.

You're trying to move the universe to get rid of me. I think that's personal.

"What's she saying?"

My face must have delivered the message loud and clear to Beri for her to ask the question. "We're just having a slight disagreement."

Slight disagreement? I should be insulted.

"Look! Everybody!" I thought a general announcement would save some time. "I like Rice, you all know that, but having her wandering around in my head is **not** what I signed on for." I turned my attention to Beri. "So what went wrong?"

Wrong? There you go again...

Shut up, Rice!

"We're not sure but we think it was because of the violence of her death. She had not been prepared for her next plane of existence."

"Next *plane* of existence? You make is sound so... so..."

"Spiritual?" Fen laughed at my stunned look.

"That doesn't solve my... **our** problem now, does it?"

It's not a problem for me.

Rice!

"But others would have died violently by Vel's hand."

"True, but they were older than her and had been instructed in the Way."

"This is one of those 'I don't want to know' moments, isn't it?"

"Yeah....," Fen just couldn't help herself.

"Something like that. Okay, I get it, but it doesn't solve my problem."

"Maybe you should look on this as a positive thing, *Ratha*." Beri emphasized the name in an effort to guiltify me into accepting what had happened. It was a low blow and we both knew it.

I think it's positive.

Don't you start, Rice.

I removed my feet from the instrument panel and stood up. "Now you listen," I growled. I grabbed Beri's shirt and pulled her close to me. "You all go and put your collective minds to solving this problem, you hear me?" My fist tightened on the material. "By the time we reach Juno I expect some answers and a solution."

"I seem to recall that Rice said as she died that she wanted to be like you. Looks like she got her wish."

I didn't appreciate Beri's parting remark. It was a solemn reminder of that heart-breaking moment of the young woman's demise. I had felt a deep sorrow and a certain amount of guilt for my part in the circumstances leading to Rice's death.

* * *

We made the hyper-jump to Juno successfully, coming out on the far side of the planet. If we were going to be on their scanners I wanted them to think we came from another direction.

I slowed down speed to blend in with the local craft and I felt like we were dawdling. Could these ships go any slower? But I was not taking any chances. Not with my passengers and not with my cargo. I wanted both intact at the end of this day.

Beri found me maneuvering the ship in and out of space debris loosely called traffic. It seemed Juno was the hub of trade in this area and it must have been market day.

"Why don't you just fly in?"

"You know, for someone who was suspicious of anything that breathed on Rigeus you sure are eager to get caught."

"But this is our home."

"And you got kicked out of it, B. What makes you think they're not still there?"

"It's been a long time."

"A long time to get settled in, sweetie. Just trust me on this one, okay?"

Beri looked disappointed.

"I thought you weren't eager to face the sisters. What's the hurry?" But I could see she didn't know. "I know there isn't much privacy on this ship. Is that it? Looking for a room where you can just close the door and step away from the universe for a while?" Beri had been through a lot, even though she would never tell me.

"Yeah, something like that."

That phrase was like some virulent disease, infecting everyone on this ship, and I was well and truly sick of it. But while I had her alone there had been a burning question on the tip of my tongue that I wished to ask her. "Are you and Fen an item?"

"An... item? Like a piece of clothing?"

"No, together... sharing the same bed... you know, an item."

"I told you we don't do that."

"No, but are you and her connected... together... what was it you said? Ah, emotionally."

"Fen and I have shared a moment or two but I do not think we are, as you say, together."

"Well, she sure likes you. She kept putting her hand on your shoulder when we first met."

"That was support, my friend, nothing more."

"Well, it didn't look like support to me." I sounded jealous. If I was being truthful here I probably was. But enough of that for now.

"Now, what about Rice? Have you managed to come up with a plan yet?" If the truth be known, Rice had behaved herself most of the time. But it was the principle, you know? Jumping into me without so much as an 'is it okay?' is just plain rude.

"If you don't want her then there is only one option that we can see."

"And?" Here's the bad part. Beri was hedging, I could see that.

"We could exorcise her."

"Exercise? I have her in my head and now she wants to exercise?"

Beri's brow crinkled up for a moment before what I was saying dawned on her. "Not exercise, J, ex-or-cise. Cast her out of your body."

"Okay, so where does she go?"

"Out into the cosmos to roam forever."

Beri was playing me with her pretty words, but what if it was true? Rice's spirit was still very much alive and looking for a home. "You play dirty, Noorthi lady." My eyes narrowed as I glared at her. "Alright, she can stay... for now, but you're just going to have to find someone else willing to carry her."

As if trying to tip the scales back in my favor I turned the conversation back to Juno. I couldn't have some spiritual leader getting one over me in a game of one-upmanship.

"Tell the girls to go strap themselves in. I'm going to take the ship in low and find some quiet spot outside the city. Look, just leave this up to me. We don't want to announce ourselves just quite yet."

* * *

I managed to find an open patch of ground outside Juno's capital that would take the ship's size. It was a tight squeeze but I'd fitted Bessie in much less. As the engines ran down I waited

patiently for Beri and Fen to arrive. I hadn't called them but I knew they would come anyway, trying to press their case for inclusion in the landing party.

"Ratha."

There you go. I smiled to myself.

"No, Beri."

"But..."

"No. I'm going alone."

"We have a more pressing claim than you to go."

"True, my friend, but they're not looking for me." I hope. "If I run into trouble I have a better chance of getting away without worrying about you."

"We can take care of ourselves." Beri was clutching at straws but she was convincing no one.

"I have one word for you... Rigeus." I could see the desperation in her eyes but I was not going to relent. "Look, what's the point of making me Ratha if you're not going to let me do my job?" I stood up and moved to stand in front of her. "Beri, everything will be fine. Just let me check it out first, okay?"

She simply nodded.

I knew she was disappointed and I watched Fen come up behind her and place her hands on Beri's shoulders in comfort. Beri could deny it all she liked but I could see Fen cared very deeply for her. Damn it.

* * *

Trust me to park in the worst spot possible. It was like poor Bessie sitting in the last slot of the parking bay. Anyway, I had to climb over rubble and negotiate boulders before I even touched the outskirts of the city. The only positive thing was that it would be unlikely anyone would look in such an inhospitable spot.

As I came to the outer buildings I could see there was poverty here, like so many of the inhabited Class 4 planets. The houses were very basic, four walls and a roof, and not much else. This was a shanty town, housing the poorest of the Juno residents who performed the menial tasks of the metropolis.

I skirted around the busier parts of the city, slowly making my way towards the largest building I could find. There were scattered remnants of an ancient culture around, either knocked down or defaced in the intervening years. It was sad really, especially if all that was left of Beri's culture was in ruin. So many centuries of history wiped away in the flick of a signature on a decree.

I detoured to the spaceport and scoped out the ships there. With the aid of Beri's maculars I could see quite a number of ships similar to the one we were traveling in. But they weren't the reason why I came. I wanted to see if Bessie was here. My sweep of the bay looked to be futile and I had all but given up hope when I caught a glimpse of a familiar broken antenna dish.

My heart leapt wildly. She was still in one piece. I couldn't see her clearly but she was here and within my reach. Before I could stop myself I was sneaking closer to get a better look.

Who was I kidding? It wasn't for a closer look but to touch her. I had to touch her. She was a part of me and it just broke my heart that she was being abused.

My cosmic karma must have been paying back some credits because I managed to get to her without being discovered. I reached out and it was then I noticed my hand was shaking. She meant a lot to me, my Bessie, and I didn't really feel at home unless I was sitting in my seat inside her.

My hand caressed the cool metal, feeling the familiar lines and bumps on her hull. I allowed myself a moment to re-acquaint myself with her form before looking for any new dents that snake may have inflicted on her.

Okay, I give it to Andrissa. Bessie looked in pretty good shape considering she had been driven by someone who didn't know her like I did. But that didn't stop my plan to find her and make her pay.

I tentatively went inside, breathing in the familiar smell of ozone and lubricant. I was this close to jumping into the saddle and riding off into the sunset with my gal until my stupid brain reminded me that I had another ship waiting for me out in the badlands. I couldn't drive two ships at once, damn it!

It took more willpower than I knew I had to leave Bessie behind in the hangar bay. This time, however, I made sure that I kept track of her whereabouts with a well hidden tracker button. I was **not** going to lose Bessie twice!

I went in search of the Noorthi's home. It wasn't that hard to find. Look for the biggest building in the heart of the city.

I managed to find a convenient rooftop that overlooked the compound. The maculars allowed me to study the layout and what forces, if any, were present. I just lost those karma credits when I observed the guards liberally spread about inside the facility. I had easily counted at least twenty, and that was those that I could see. All heavily armed and all on guard.

I lay there for some time to watch the activity coming and going. There was a large square building outside the compound that seemed to house the guards and there was a constant flow of traffic to and from there as shifts came and went.

Besides the men there were a number of electronic fences to hurdle as well and I was just not equipped to tackle them. I was one woman-a resourceful, athletic woman, sure-but one woman just the same. Returning home was now not an option for the Noorthi, at least not yet.

I waited a while longer in the hope of seeing someone in authority but I was disappointed. Today was obviously one of those days where the leader didn't come out to play.

There was no point waiting round any longer. It had been several hours and I knew Beri would be ready to chew me out for taking so long. Just wait until she heard the news. I left the roof with a heavy heart. Now I didn't want to go back, knowing what would be facing me.

* * *

I was making my way back through the city to the ship when I spotted a run-down mechanic's shop. In the pile of junk outside was a second-hand antenna dish. I don't know what made me take that detour into the shop. Maybe I was hoping that buying the replacement dish for my Bessie was a sign that I would get her back. It was a sort of 'welcome home' present for my girl.

There wasn't a lot of time for bartering for the piece of metal. After all, I was supposed to be getting off this planet before our presence was discovered.

"What did you do, you piece of crap!"

The voice inside the shop was angry. There was a smacking noise after the words and it made me move a little faster into the building. A rotund man was standing over a slightly-built kid, well more like a teenager, his hand raised for another strike. He looked up to see my angry face. "Can I help you?"

"For one thing, you can leave the kid alone!"

"She's none of your business."

She? I looked again, this time more closely, and I still couldn't see it. Then again, it was hard to see anything underneath all that grime and dirt. I would just have to take his word for it.

You can't leave her here.

I know that, Rice, now be quiet.

"What if I make it my business?"

"Then I'll call the troopers."

I didn't need that. I don't know if he could sense that or not, but getting the troopers involved was not a good idea.

"What's she worth to you?"

What are you doing?

Trying to find his weakness.

"Now why would I be interested in selling her?" But his eyes glistened with the thought of extra credits.

By the way he was treating the girl I knew that he didn't really care about her, so paying him to take her off his hands was a good option. "Because you're not interested in looking after her. Again, what's she worth to you?"

The hand that had been raised settled on his chin, rubbing it thoughtfully as he tried to come up with a figure. He wanted it all, I could see that. "What are you willing to pay?"

I glanced at the kid on the ground and could see sadness, resignation and hope in those eyes. While she wished to get away from the abuse, it was heartbreaking to know that she wasn't wanted.

"A thousand credits."

"A thousand? That barely feeds and clothes her."

"Yeah, I can see that you spend it on her." My eyes raked distastefully over the poor girl's state of dress. "All right, fifteen hundred. And you throw in the small antenna dish on the heap outside." Hey, it was worth a try...

"Two thousand." He tried to squeeze a little more out of me.

"Fifteen hundred. That's my last offer."

"Two thousand," he repeated.

"No deal," I said finally before turning on my heel and walking out. I didn't look at the kid and I didn't look at him as I left.

Why didn't you pay him the two thousand?

Rice, I don't have that sort of money.

What about all that stuff in the hold?

Where did you hear that?

J, your mind leaks secrets.

Just don't tell Beri.

But

No, Rice. Keep it to yourself.

"Stranger, wait up!"

I smiled. I had him.

Told you.

I let the smile drop as I turned to face him. "Yes?" I asked nonchalantly. From the moment I had walked into that store I knew I had a deal.

"So, kid, what's your name?"

If I had to guess she must have been in her adolescence, maybe 14 or 15, but there was a steely strength to that wiry frame.

"Malt," she mumbled into her shirt.

"Well, Malt, say goodbye to home. You're not coming back."

Despite the news she smiled. Not that it surprised me. I had been studying her for a while now and I could see she was quite happy to leave behind her roots.

"Where are we going?"

I had absolutely no idea. My thoughts hadn't gone past the fact that the Noorthi had no home here now and I had to find somewhere where they could live without being hunted down. Suddenly the reason for stealing those credits became crystal clear.

"Don't know, kid. I suppose I'll find out once we get out there." My head nodded towards the sky.

* * *

After a couple of wrong turns I finally found the passage leading back to the forgotten path behind the city. It took a bit of time to negotiate the boulders and debris one more time but I was finally blessed with the sight of the stolen ship in the distance.

"That's a trooper ship."

"Really?" I had already seen a number of them at the nearby spaceport but I was interested to hear what truths the girl would tell me.

"Yep. Visit the Count all the time."

"Who's the Count?"

"That's what we call him." Suddenly the girl became very chatty, filling in some gaps in my vague knowledge. "He lives in the Big House."

The Big House. She meant the Noorthi's compound. Someone named the Count had orchestrated the banishment of the sisterhood to Rigeus and was obviously Vel's boss. I smiled. I would love to see his face when he finds out that Vel had his ship and his money stolen from under her nose. He would not be pleased. And that was the reason that I did it. I wanted her to feel the wrath of the man to whom she was indentured.

At least for now death was too good for Vel, after what she had done. I wanted my chance but now was not the time, not while I was responsible for the sisterhood. In the meantime any discomfort the Count could inflict on her was welcome by me.

As we boarded the ship, Malt stopped.

"What?"

She just stared at the gathered Noorthi.

"You've seen someone like them before?"

She just nodded.

"Where?" But I knew where. I assumed the girl hadn't left this planet so that left only one other place.

"The big house."

"A Noorthi?" Beri asked hopefully.

Malt nodded again. "Saw her in the courtyard a few times."

"Was she alone?"

"Nope. Troopers all around. Like she was a prisoner."

"That would explain how this Count person knows about the ochre."

"A sister would never divulge the secret." Grit replied angrily.

"Well, can you explain why they are mining the ochre?" I snapped back.

"Now is not the time for discussion."

"Beri's right. We need to get out of here before we're discovered." I was already in motion towards the cockpit.

* * *

I detoured the ship to where I had stashed the antenna and some supplies, getting my sisters to do the manual work of getting the goods on board.

"What is all that?" Beri asked as her finger pointed at the mound of boxes.

"Oh, this and that."

"You had time to do some shopping? I thought you were trying to get us home."

"Sit!" I barked out the word so harshly Beri jumped. I said it again. "Sit!"

"Well?" Beri's eyebrow rose.

"You're not going home." I held up my hand before Beri could answer. "At least, not yet. I checked things out and it doesn't look good. This guy they call the Count has moved into your... your... what do you call it? A Great Hall?"

"It's a good a word as any."

"Okay, he's moved in and it doesn't look like he's going to move out any time soon. There are armed guards everywhere, and before you ask I am **not** going to take on a pack of armed guards by myself." I continued, "Now, from what Malt has told us, he and Vel are working together so it's likely that whatever is here is just the tip of the meteor."

"What about our sister?"

"Malt said it didn't look like she was in any immediate danger. She's just going to have to wait."

"Well, you seem to have decided our fate for us," Beri muttered like a spoilt child.

"Hey! Don't you start! You asked me to do this and now you're complaining? You can't have it both ways, B." What did they want from me? The impossible, obviously.

"But our sister-"

"Is alive. My priority is to find you a safe place to hide."

"Maybe we should have stayed-"

"Well, maybe you should have!" I stood up and walked away before we both said things we couldn't take back.

* * *

I went to supervise the storage of the supplies in the hold. There wasn't a lot of room left but we managed to get everything in, including the antenna dish. I just hoped my Bessie appreciated the effort. If she did, she was the only one.

"What's in here?" Epi inquired pointing to a large metal box. She knew I was angry, after all I was muttering to myself while the crates were being packed away.

"It was supposed to be a present for you girls, but since I don't seem to be appreciated I may just dump them." I was sulking, I knew that, but Beri was being unreasonable. She was asking things of me that I couldn't deliver, at least not yet.

Maybe that was my problem. I wanted to deliver the impossible but couldn't. I wanted to see that look of worship in their eyes. I suppose it came down to I wanted to be a hero to them. Then I thought that was just being selfish. It seemed I had a lot to learn about the Ratha business.

Epi opened the trunk and found clothes. "How did you know what sizes we were?"

"Well, I went around in your sleep and measured all of you... sheesh, woman! I told the merchant one hundred sets of clothes, various sizes. The rest is up to you to make them fit." My finger pointed at the six large wicker baskets in the near corner. "And there's some fresh food for the next few days. I don't know about you but I'm sick of replicator food at the moment."

I left the girls to discuss amongst themselves who would wear what out of the pile of clothes. Now in my world it would have been a fistfight just to get to the trunk let alone find something that fitted. It must have been a Noorthi thing.

* * *

A while later Fen found me where I usually was... in the cockpit. At least this time my feet weren't up on the instrument panel. I had the starfield map up on the holoboard trying to find a home.

"She can't come and talk to me herself?"

"She is as stubborn as you are."

"While I disagree because I'm more stubborn than she is, doesn't it go against your rules or something to be argumentative?"

"I suppose it does. I think Beri is just nervous about facing her fellow sisters."

"That's not going to happen just yet, so tell her to lose the attitude. That's my department." But I

did smile at her as she leant against the bulkhead. "Sit down a spell," I offered, pointing to the co-pilot's chair.

"Can I ask you something?"

I saw Fen stiffen at my question.

"Don't worry it's nothing you can't handle." I smiled as her body relaxed. "Why is it so important that we rescue your sister on Juno?"

"Beri lost her mother on Juno. Maybe that has something to do with it."

"Does she think it's her mother?" That would put a whole new complexion on the situation.

"She doesn't know. But it's a matter of not leaving one of us behind."

"Look, Fen..."

"Before you explain, I understand. I really do. You will do what needs to be done when the time is right."

"I wish you would tell your leader that." And since we were talking... "By the way, how did Beri become your leader? No one else wanted the job?"

"Beri's mother was Ashman, head sister if you will, and it was handed down to her daughter, just as Beri will when her daughter reaches adulthood."

Damn. Beri's pain came into sharp focus. Vel had taken away a hell of a lot more than her dignity. Suddenly I wanted to turn this bucket of bolts around and go in search of Vel and beat the crap out of her.

"So is this Ashman the leader of all the sisters in the cosmos?"

"No, an Ashman is assigned to each House."

"I see."

What's the matter? What are all these new words you're thinking?

Better not to know, Rice.

I didn't want to be responsible for the spiritual corruption of a minor but every colorful, venomous epithet I could think of I applied to Vel.

"Jordana, are you there?"

I reached for the intercom switch. "Yeah?"

"Is this kid here yours?"

"Yeah." Suddenly I owned a girl. Hmmm... I suppose I did, even though I didn't believe in buying people. "Is there a problem?" Of course there was otherwise Epi wouldn't be calling me.

"We're trying to get her cleaned up but she's-"

"Pissing you off. I get the picture. I'll be there in a minute." I turned to Fen. "So, anything else you need me for before I go and see to the kid's bath?"

"You're taking your duties seriously." Fen seemed amused by my constant mothering.

"I figure if I don't things are going to get awfully sticky real quick. Now, if you'll excuse me I've got to go clean the kid's ears. You can stay if you want and make sure we don't run into anything." That was what the autopilot was for but if Fen wanted to watch the stars go by, who was I to stop her?

* * *

When I arrived at the bathroom it was mayhem. The kid was backed into a corner trying to shrink away from the many hands attempting to strip off her rags.

"What is going on?" I roared. Everything stopped. Heh, there was nothing like making an entrance. "Hey kid." What was the kid's name again? Ahh, yes, "Hey Malt, get over here!"

She looked nervously from face to face, trying to decide whether she could get to me without being mobbed.

"They're not going to hurt you. Now, come here." I was stern but trying not to sound angry. Finally she came over, hurrying the last few steps to hide behind me. I looked down to the head peeking around my waist. "They're not going to hurt you, Malt. They just want to clean you up a bit." With the girl this close to me I figured she could use a clean as well. She stank.

"Now go on." I nodded my head in the sisters' direction, hoping that Malt would take the hint. The kid shook her head at me. "What's wrong? I said they're not going to hurt you." Again she shook her head.

I looked up at my sisters and murmured, "Give us a moment please."

Once the room was empty I turned to face Malt. "Okay, they're all gone. Now why won't you let them touch you?" My thoughts caught up with my mouth and I became angry. "Did he... you know?" I struggled to say the words.

Malt's brow wrinkled in confusion for a moment before clearing. She shook her head. Lucky she did because I would have turned this ship around and gone back and rearranged his manhood.

"Okay, then what's the problem? We're all women here." I looked her in the eye. "You are female, aren't you?" Was that her secret?

She nodded but her head dropped at the end. Something was definitely bothering her.

I grabbed her arms and pulled her with me as I backed up to find a seat. Sitting down I was finally at her eye level. "Come on, Malt. Let's get this sorted out now." I knew I wouldn't have time later.

What was I doing? I've been called a 'mother' many times in my life but I'm sure those that called me that didn't mean the nurturing kind. I had gone from barroom brawler to maternal figure in a few short weeks. I was clocking up some serious points against this cosmic karma thing.

"What are trying so hard to hide?"

Malt backed away from me and began to remove her clothes. Piece by piece the material fell away until she revealed what she had tried so hard to cover.

Now if I had made a bet with myself as to what the girl was hiding I wouldn't have even come close. "You're a Davorian," I said matter-of-factly.

Whoa! That girl's got-

I know, Rice.

"How long were you a slave, Malt?"

"Three years."

"And I figure that slavery is illegal on Juno. Is that why you're strapped like that? So he could hide the fact that you were an illegal alien?" The girl just nodded but a single tear slid down her dirt-laden cheek. "Come here, kid." I pulled Malt back in and hugged her gently. "Everything will be okay." The last binding came free and Malt was able to finally move as nature had intended her to.

"Where are your parents? Back on Davor?"

"They're dead," she said with finality.

"So where do you want to go?" After the sisters were taken care of I would take Malt home.

She thought about it for a moment before answering, "I have nowhere to go. Can I stay with you?"

Oh, poor kid.

You got that right, Rice.

"On one condition. You let the others clean you up."

Reluctantly she agreed.

"Hey Epi? You can come in now!" I hollered.

The sisters stepped through the door and stopped, their mouths dropping in shock.

"Whoa!" Epi managed to find her voice. "She's got four arms!"

"No kidding? I must have missed that." I gave Malt a wink and it earned me a smile. I had a feeling that I would be doing lots of things unfamiliar to me to see more of those smiles.

* * *

I waited in the corridor while Epi and her girls cleaned up Malt. I took the time to do a little research and found out an interesting thing or two about Davorians. The day was looking up.

I could hear an occasional tear being shed but on the whole the washing was quiet. Epi came and went, finding some fresh clothes for Malt to put on. When it was all done the door slid open and there stood a girl or, more precisely, a young woman who I had never seen before. If it wasn't for the fact that she had four arms it could have been one of the many young women on this ship. "Woow! You clean up good." I was impressed.

Malt didn't say anything but she did smile. It lit up her face and changed her whole visage. Was this the same girl I bought in a mechanic's shop?

Epi had obviously found some suitable clothes in the trunk I had brought back, having enlarged the armholes to take in Malt's second set of arms, which originated in the armpits of her first set. Her bottom set of arms looked fractionally longer than the top set, probably making the use of both sets in unison easier. But for a girl with two sets of arms it wasn't obvious. Well, I mean I could see she had two sets of arms but they didn't stick out at all angles but sat one on top of the other. Now I was confusing myself.

You can say that again...

I had forgotten about Rice for a second there and the fact that she kept eavesdropping on my thoughts.

Don't push your luck, Rice.

Sometimes you are just no fun, J.

Look, Rice, this is not fun, you understand me? This is deadly serious. I have a lot of stuff to

think about and I don't want you interrupting. Got it?

Yeah, sure. But who can I talk to, huh?

Rice, honey, I hate to remind you but you are dead. You're not supposed to be in my head. You're not supposed to be in anyone's head.

You suck all the life out of death, J.

I wrapped my arm around Malt's shoulder and walked with her towards the cockpit. Maybe I could find something for the girl to do. Well, I really wanted to know what she was capable of but I wasn't going to push it.

"So, kid, is there anything that you're interested in?" Her head tilted in question. "You know anything you're good at."

"I like tinkering with stuff," she murmured. I guessed that she had been told rather forcefully not to raise her voice.

"What sort of tinkering?" My senses were tingling. I had a feeling that Malt was going to come in handy.

"With, you know, stuff."

I sighed. Malt was turning out to be as vague as Beri. "Malt," I said seriously, "what stuff?"

"Anything I can find. I like stuff like... that." She pointed to the instrument panel as we reached the cockpit. Her second set of arms remained by her sides, probably from being restrained there for so long.

"Do you invent, errr make up stuff?"

"Sometimes," she replied absently but her eyes were fixed on the electronics in front of her.

She was, as they used to say in the ancient days, a geek, her mind already mentally taking the panel apart and building something more to her liking. I really liked this kid because she was me. Not the geek part, no. I was hopeless at fixing things, well at that age anyway. Necessity made me a crude mechanic. But I had a feeling she was smart and inventive. I could see that in the depths of her eyes. She just needed someone to encourage her.

When I was her age I was as single-minded in my pursuit of reaching for the stars, forever hot-wiring my dad's speeder to go in search of adventure. I always said it was his fault for getting me into trouble. If he hadn't reminisced so much I probably wouldn't have tried to follow in his footsteps.

Haha sure, J. Keep believing that.

Well, that's my excuse and I'm sticking to it, Rice.

"I got nothing at the moment. Everything here we need to fly the ship." But I was curious as to how inventive Malt was. My senses were on alert and that was always a good sign, at least in the past it had been. Something was telling me that I had gotten a real bargain for my money. I know we were making our escape but as far as I could see no one had even noticed that we were there. Maybe a small detour could be fitted into our hectic schedule.

"Is there anywhere around here that has junk? You know derelict ships and the like?" I was not familiar with this quadrant, having spent most of my renegade life on the other side of the universe. Oh, I had heard a lot about this place but this was my first visit. Somehow I suspected it wouldn't be my last either.

I brought up the holomap of the area. "We're here. Juno," I said as I pointed to the large sphere just off centre of the map. "This is Calceter." My finger shifted to a smaller planet a couple of inches to the right of Juno. "Ix." My finger shifted to the left to a tiny speck the opposite side of Juno.

I watched Malt as she studied the 3-D map with interest. Was she aware of life outside her mechanic's shop on Juno? "We went there." She finger rose and jabbed at a point near Calceter. My eyes squinted to see it because it was so small. Was it a moon?

"We?"

"Him and me. That's where we got our stuff."

Of course, why didn't I think of that? That lowlife had to get his stock from somewhere. "Do you feel like getting some stuff to tinker with?" It was a small detour in my books. Besides I was still trying to decide where to go. If this little scavenging trip turned out like I hoped it would, it would be worth the risk.

"Sure." But I could see the apprehension in her eyes.

"Come here, Malt." I sat down in the Captain's chair and dragged her with me until she stood in the cradle of my legs. "You are not a slave, do you understand me?"

"But... but... you bought me."

"I know that but it was to get you away from him. You are free. You can leave any time you want." But I hoped she wouldn't. The kid had struck a nerve with me. Maybe it was not so much a mothering instinct as a fierce sisterly protection.

"Really?"

"Sure. Just tell me where you want to go and I'll take you there." I knew the other question sat on

her lips but she didn't want to ask. "You don't have to hide any more, Malt." She watched me and I let my sight drop to her arms.

All this emotional stuff was hard work so I pushed her in the direction of the co-pilot's seat. "Now strap yourself in and let's go find some junk!"

* * *

It took an hour or two to reach our destination and in that time I did two things. Firstly I did some poking around on the ship's computer and secondly I spent the rest of my time arguing with Beri. It didn't matter how I put it, she couldn't understand why I was indulging the kid.

"I just don't understand why we are wasting our time going to a junkyard."

"B, how many times do I have to explain it to you?"

"Once more?"

"Malt comes from Davor. I looked it up on the computer. It was colonized about four hundred years ago. Not long after the colony was established the planet was hit by a radiation storm called a cosmic splinter. Got that so far?"

"Of course." Beri looked nearly insulted.

Okay, I was being condescending, I knew that, but if I could figure it out I couldn't see why she couldn't. "The population was affected at a genetic level by the passing storm. The generations that followed were littered with mutations. Two heads, extra legs, ESP, telekinesis, you name it they had it. Now Malt has four arms but I suspect that she also has an intelligence the likes of which we haven't seen before."

"Now, that I don't get. If she was that smart how come she ended up a slave to some worm selling junk?"

"Her planet was raided and her family killed. Did she have a choice?"

"Well, she could have opened her mouth and ended up somewhere better."

"Somewhere better? I doubt it. No B, just somewhere else. Maybe she'd still be in that compound you call home." I looked directly into Beri's eyes. "If she's as smart as my smart-o-meter is telling me, she could be the advantage that we need. Believe me I can smell a smart ass a light year away."

"We need an advantage?"

"If we want to stay alive, yeah. Look, at worst we pick us some stuff to keep her happy. You never know, we might find some stuff that will be useful."

"And where are we going to put it, huh? The hold's already full."

"Then we pick up little stuff. Hell, I don't know! I don't have the Ratha manual on me!" Now I was getting defensive and when I get defensive I get belligerent, and I didn't want to be that with Beri. Surprisingly, she's about the closest thing I had to a friend and that depressed me. A woman I barely knew was my best friend.

"You've really not got any idea have you?"

"B, it's not that simple, okay? There is more to this than just getting you home. Something is happening in the Big House that is going to have far-reaching effects in this universe. Until I know what that is and how it affects us I am not going to go rushing in on a fool's errand!" I took a deep breath. *Calm down, J.* "In the meantime I have made my decision. End of story!"

I didn't like having to pull rank on her but I could feel a meeting coming on and I just didn't have the time or the patience to plead my case. It was my ship so my decision. "Now go and strap yourselves in while I land this baby."

Malt joined me in the cockpit, passing a disgruntled Beri on her way in. She looked hesitantly at me.

"Don't worry about her. She's still upset about leaving the Noorthi on Juno." A little white lie was needed in this instance because I didn't want Malt retreating into her shell. "So, do you know what you're looking for?"

"Nope. What do you want?"

"I don't know. Maybe gyros..."

"No, what do you want me to make?"

"What makes you think I want you to make something for me? This was just to keep you busy."

But she didn't answer. I spared a moment to glance to the side. She just sat there smiling at me. "You can't read my mind, can you?" By the stars I hope not. I had had enough of the Noorthi invading that territory.

"Nope. Why else would you be visiting this moon?"

Why indeed. The girl was too smart for her own good. "You got me. If you were me, what would you need?"

She thought for a second before answering. "A scanner. To see if the ship is tagged."

"Scanner?" I hadn't even considered the possibility that we were being tracked. "What else?"

"A cloaking device would help."

"Good, but we'd need one for the ship and eventually one for wherever we settle."

"And a remote for your ship."

"This ship? What would I need a remote for?"

"So you could fly the ship away. But not this ship. **Your** ship."

"How did you know about Bessie?" Okay, now she was scaring me.

This kid is good.

You're telling me, Rice. Maybe too good.

I like her.

Yeah, I see a lot of you in her.

Thanks.

"Who were you talking to?" I must have looked stunned because she giggled. "Your face does that little scrunching thing..." Her finger rose and doodled in the air in imitation of her description.

"She's one of the Noorthi. She was killed a little while back and her spirit ended up in me. The woman who killed her took my ship."

"And you want her and the ship back, huh? It doesn't take much to figure that one out."

"Well, I want the ship back. And the woman? I'd like to strap her to the back of my ship and incinerate her as I jet off to the stars."

"That's not very charitable."

"She doesn't deserve charity, Malt. She is an evil woman."

"This girl in your head? Would I like her?" It was an almost wistful question.

"Yeah, Malt, you two would be great friends." And then it hit me. "Maybe you should get together."

"Why would I want her in my head?" Malt asked curiously.

"Well, then you'd have a friend with you always and you'd never be alone."

"But what about you?"

"I'm not alone, Malt. I have you."

That was an extremely mushy thing to say, J.

It was a moment of weakness, Rice. It won't happen again.

"Now let's find somewhere to land." I looked out the window and wondered how I was going to do that. It was a graveyard for ships, satellites and robots. Anything metallic that had passed its used by date could be found here and it looked like it was just dumped wherever it fell out of the sky.

It took a few passes before I could find a spot to put down. It was not ideal but I had no choice. There was an overhang of rock that I needed to negotiate to access the open ground and it was going to take all my concentration.

Slowly, the ship responded to my deft touch, the retros working in quick succession to avoid running into the cave wall. Now Bessie would have just glided in no trouble but this was a bigger and newer ship and was prone to not responding as quickly as I would have liked. Considering what she was carrying I was prepared to compromise on its maneuverability.

There was a gentle rumble as it touched the ground. I shut down the engines and sat back. "Okay, Malt, now it's your turn." I snapped the belt lock open and stood up, stretching out my tense muscles.

We made our way to the airlock and Malt's biosuit.

"You be careful, you hear me?" I told her seriously as I helped her into her suit. "Be as quick as you can. If you need help, holler."

She nodded as the airlock door closed. I hit the button for the outer hatch door and watched the gauge as the air in the bay emptied. Epi came up beside me as I stared at the airlock door.

"She'll be fine."

"What? I'm not worried about her." I tried to sound unconcerned. After all, it wouldn't be good for me to look soft-hearted now, would it?

"Of course not." But Epi's smile told me I didn't fool her either. "Now get out of here and go back to the cockpit. You can't do anything more here."

She was right. I was useless here and besides I would get a better view from the pilot's seat. Not that I was keeping an eye on her, mind you.

You are such a sap, J.

Thank you for the vote of confidence, Rice.

Now the kid was going to be my voice of reason. That was all I needed. I wonder how long it would take to convince Malt that she needed a friend.

So here I was sitting in my usual seat watching Malt scrounging around in the mass of twisted metal. She returned a number of times to the makeshift cave depositing her finds outside the ship before venturing out again. I got a 'thumbs up' for my trouble when she caught me watching her.

Heh, she saw you.

Rice, if you don't shut up...

You'll what? Shoot yourself in the head?

Damn. Rice had figured it out. All my threats were useless. She was inside my head and there was nothing I could do to control her. Then it was probably wise that I didn't have a blaster in my holster. Andriessa had that, damn it! But I could lay my hands on as many as I could carry a few rooms away.

Suddenly an alarm went off and my body tensed as I leapt out of the seat. It took me a few seconds to find the source of the sound and switch it off. "Shit!"

What?

"Something's coming!" I reached for the radio. "Malt! Get your butt in here!"

What is it?

"Can't tell yet, Rice. It's too far away. But it's traveling pretty fast." I watched the girl scramble over the piles of junk trying to get back to the safety of the ship. "Come on... come on..." I was muttering to no one in particular.

I was nearly going cross-eyed trying to watch both the long-range scanner and Malt's progress at the same time. It was going to be close. "Epi! Incoming! Get to the hatch and let Malt in as soon as she arrives!"

"Gotcha!"

When Malt got hooked up on something I was just about jumping out of my chair. The alarm sounded again. "We've got another one. This time it's faster." I was under the impression that this was a quiet piece of the universe, so I made a mental note to talk to Malt about giving me the full details before we go storming into any situation.

In the meantime I could see that Malt was not going to make it. "Malt, take cover."

"Why?"

"Two incoming and you're not going to make it."

She scrambled backwards and managed to get herself free. I could see her head swivel as she searched for a hiding place. It only took a moment or two for her to disappear from my sight. She was safe, at least for now.

The first unknown slowed down as it came closer, approaching with some caution. However the second missile sped along its trajectory, slamming into the metal with great force.

"MALT!" I screamed. The projectile had hit nearly on top of the girl. My legs were in motion and I headed to the airlock and a biosuit. "Oh God!"

"Hey! Slow down!" Epi was trying to stop me and I wasn't listening.

"Get out of my way, Epi." Even as I spoke I was feeding my legs into the suit.

"What about the first ship?"

"Who cares about the first ship?" I wasn't thinking very straight.

"Now listen, Ratha..."

"Don't you try that on me, woman! I sent that girl out there and now I have to get her back!"

"I know you feel responsible-"

"Responsible? If she hadn't met me she would still be alive. Unhappy but alive."

"And now you have to keep us alive. That's your job, remember?"

"And what about her?"

"The junk has hit. She's either dead or alive."

"Or injured. Did you even think of that?" While we were arguing I was still dressing, now to the point that all that was needed was the helmet.

"What about that first ship?"

I took a deep breath and tried to put my panic aside. My instincts were screaming at me to go find Malt but Epi had a point. Was it a matter of sacrificing one for the sake of the many? If that was what being Ratha was about then I was returning my membership.

"I'll check." I may have sounded calm but I ran to the cockpit. The first ship was now in visual range and seemed to be searching for something. It was a trooper ship, just like the one I was sitting in. Damn. I shut down the power in case they were scanning.

Seconds later Beri ran in. "What did you do that for?"

"Shhhh. We're being scanned. Tell everyone to be quiet."

Beri disappeared as quickly as she had appeared, relaying my message to everyone on board. Slowly the sounds died until we sat there silent. It was eerie to not hear anything. No babble, no engines and not even circulating air. While lack of air was not a problem it was a haunting feeling just sitting there dead. And that's what it was like out there. Empty, lifeless... nothing. It was just cold metal devoid of life.

It didn't look like the trooper ship could see us as we were tucked away under a large overhang of rock, but it was doing a pretty thorough scan of the area. Was it looking for something in general or us in particular? Malt's suggestion came back to haunt me. Had we been tagged? Now more than ever I needed to know the answer before I found a place to call home.

Time was ticking by and my thoughts went out to Malt. Had she been hurt or, worse, killed? Guilt lay heavily on me. First there was Rice and now Malt. Was I a jinx?

Stop thinking like that.

But everyone I come in contact with ends up dead.

You warned me, remember?

And little good that did you.

It was my fault, J. I opened my mouth. Who knew she would do that?

I did, Rice.

I don't blame you, J. You're the best thing that ever happened to me, and I'm sure that if you asked Malt she would say the same.

Too late for that now, Rice.

A blip from the scanner drew my attention back to the junk pile. The trooper ship slowly rose and accelerated away, obviously content with whatever it had, or hadn't, found.

Now go and find your girl, J.

This was one time I was prepared to heed Rice's words, already in motion bringing the ship back up to power before I went on my rescue mission.

Epi stood there, helmet in hand, as I arrived. "What took you so long?"

"Knew I was coming, huh?"

"Yeah, something like that." She chuckled at my growl but didn't apologize for using the words she knew would annoy me. She handed me the helmet. "Now, go on and get out of here."

Now I was being kicked off my own ship. Who was bossing who around here? I didn't give it too much thought because I had a girl to rescue out there.

Every time I stepped out into the vacuum of space it got to me. I don't know whether it was the fact that I was out of my element or whether I felt the enormity of the universe I lived in. Maybe it was a bit of both. Whatever I thought of at the time one thing was for certain. If I ran out of air I was dead.

I started to make my way towards where I thought Malt was. "Malt. Hey! Let me know you're okay." There was silence and that was not promising. "If you can hear me but can't reply, give me a sign kid!"

It was hard work climbing over razor sharp metal and trying not to cut my suit. I was trying to move as fast and as safely as I could towards a point that I was not even sure existed. Suddenly the suit snagged and I felt the tug on my shoulders. Gingerly I backed up, using my hand to unhook the seam. I held my breath as the material came away, hoping against hope that I hadn't done any damage.

"Is everything okay?" Epi's voice came over the earwig in my ear.

"Yeah, just got hooked up. Anything from Malt?"

"Sorry, nothing. You need to go more to your right, about ten degrees."

"Thanks." I started to pant with the exertion, fogging up my visor. "Damn it." Why did these things happen at a time when you didn't want them to happen?

"Everything alright?"

"Yeah. How am I doing?"

"Okay, about twenty feet in front of you."

"Thanks Epi."

I checked my oxygen level to make sure I had enough to get back. That was not a problem so it only left me finding Malt. I picked through the junk as I made my way forward. "Come on, Malt, where are you?"

A hand shot up out of the rubble. Had she heard me? I didn't care if she had or not, I had found her. My feet slipped as I scrambled to her rescue.

"Malt? Can you hear me?" There was still no response but her hand clenched and unclenched. Despite the odds she was alive. My hand reached for hers grasping it tightly. She squeezed my hand and I breathed a sigh of relief. She at least had the presence of mind to be aware of me.

Piece by piece I moved the debris away, slowly revealing Malt underneath it all. She had been pinned down by a beam but it was the weight of the rubbish on top of it that had stopped her from moving it. I was down to the last layer of trash and between us we moved that metal beam and freed her from her imprisonment.

"Are you injured?"

Malt tapped the side of her helmet and shook her head. I found my air gauge and waved it in front of her visor. I smiled as her hand came up in a "thumbs up" signal. Smart kid.

I got my shoulder under her arm, struggling to get a grip without squashing her spare arm. It was slow progress back towards the ship as we slipped over metallic remnants that were begging for us to get caught on them. So intent was I on Malt's welfare that I probably wasn't taking care of my own.

The ship loomed large as we got closer to our destination. I don't know whether it was the extra weight of supporting Malt or I was out of condition but I was starting to sweat. I could see that I was going to have to get myself in shape because I was spent. We had just cleared the field of debris when everything started to go dark

* * *

Suddenly I was inside the ship. How did I get here?

"Thank the stars." I heard Beri say with relief.

My chest hurt. "Who hit me?" My voice didn't have its normal volume but I ignored it.

"Me." Epi lowered herself to one knee and came close. My fist shot out and connected with her jaw, sending her back onto her ass. Now normally hitting someone wasn't a big deal for me but this time it took just about every ounce of strength I had. "What did you do?"

Epi sat there and rubbed her jaw. "I tried to save your life."

"And what was wrong with my life? I didn't need any help."

"J, you were dead." Fen appeared next to me.

"Oh, Almighty Carn! If you're telling me then I must have been in trouble." I looked into Fen's

eyes to see the truth of it. "What the hell happened?"

"You must have nicked your suit out there and your oxygen bled out."

"Yeah, yeah. I'm not that stupid, Fen." She held up the suit and stuck her finger through the offending hole. "Oh." Well, what could I say? "Sorry." I mumbled. "How's Malt?"

"A bit banged up but she'll be fine. She got you in here."

"Really?" How did she do that? Did I have to add super strength to her growing list of attributes?

"Not literally, you dummy. She came in and got us suited up to lift you in here."

Damn, that would have been handy. "So how long was I... you know."

"A few minutes, don't know exactly."

Okay, so how did I survive? Did I really want to know? Maybe I should just accept the miracles as they come. Chalk one up to my cosmic karma.

So, Rice, you've got nothing to say?

My chatty off-sider was abnormally quiet.

Rice? Stop sulking and talk to me.

The silence was like a fart in the cockpit. Deafening.

Rice! Now stop this and talk to me.

There was still nothing. I felt a jolt to my heart as I realized that I had lost Rice. Had she been freed to the cosmos on my death? Damn, I was just getting used to the kid in my head.

"I've got some bad news of my own." I really didn't want to tell them but they had a right to know. "I think I've lost Rice."

"How could you do that?" Epi pointed a finger in my face.

"Hey! Back off! It's not like I deliberately died to get rid of her. She was a good kid!"

"Then it's just as well she decided to move house." Malt spoke up for the first time.

"Good to see you're okay, kid," I said from my position on the floor. I was still flat on my back and hadn't even attempted to rise. If that punch wiped me out I was sure standing would be a disaster. I didn't want to fall over in front of the sisters. Hey, I can't help it. I didn't want to appear a fool in front of them. I'll admit it. I have an ego the size of this ship. I had to be tough

all the time otherwise everybody would think that I was easy and then it was work, work, work all the time trying to change their opinion of me. "So where is she?"

"In me," she murmured quietly.

"Huh, so you got your friend finally."

"It appears so."

But I couldn't decide whether she was happy or not about it. "Give it time, Malt. She's annoying at first..." Malt's face frowned. "Hey, Rice, you didn't let me finish. I was going to say she's annoying at first but in the long run she's worth it."

Malt's face changed to a smile. "She said 'what a mushy thing to say, J'."

"Yep, that's Rice alright." I was glad that Rice finally found her home, even though by Malt's expression she might not have felt the same way. "Everything will be fine you two. Once you've worked out something that works for both of you you'll be the best of friends, I know it."

"Really?" I think Malt was hoping so.

"Yes, really." I looked up at the gathered crowd around me. "Now if you'll all back off I'd like to get up." I knew I couldn't on my own so I nodded at Epi. I suppose I should be glad she didn't take the hit personally otherwise I'd still be on the floor. She and Grit got their hands under my arms and lifted me up, holding tightly as I tried to get some equilibrium. "I gotta lie down," I murmured. *Before I puke...* I added in my mind. The room was swimming and so was my stomach.

* * *

I awoke in my bed on the floor. It had been a rough few hours since my death. I had no idea that dying could take so much out of you. But it did bring up one point that, until now, I hadn't even considered. I was the pilot of this bucket of bolts. If something happened to me the Noorthi were stranded wherever I left them. It was something that I would have to address quickly but who could I trust? There was only one person I knew I could turn to. I yawned. Even thinking tired me out.

"Feeling better?"

"How long have you been here?"

"How long were you out?" It seemed that Epi had taken it upon herself to be my nurse maid. "So how do you feel?"

She seemed determined to get an answer out of me so I gave her one. "More like death warmed up." That was so true. I felt like shit.

"If you say so." I started to get up but Epi put her hand on my shoulder. "Whoa! Where do you think you're going?"

"To get this bucket into the air."

"Oh no, no, no. You're staying put. We're safe for now."

"No, we're not." Malt joined in the conversation. "I found this." She held up a small coin between her fingers.

"Is that what I think it is?"

"A credit?" Epi offered.

"You wish. No, it's a tracker. You were right, kid." As I knew she would be. "Help me up, will you?" Both women go their arms under my armpits and lifted. I stood woozily on both feet and waited for the swaying to subside.

"You're in no shape to fly."

"Don't you think I know that!" I snapped. "Sorry. Get me up to the cockpit and I'll get the ship off this moon."

"What about this?" Malt held up the coin.

I was tempted to tell her to junk it right here but I wanted to keep this place ours for the moment. If the Count found it he would probably stake out the area and our source of raw materials would be lost. "I have a better idea."

* * *

I returned the ship to Juno and sent Malt on an errand, hoping she wouldn't run into the pig from the mechanic's shop. An hour went by before her return and I made good use of that time. I made a call.

"Hey, Rales? It's J."

"What have you got yourself into?" he whispered.

"Why are you whispering?"

"Keep it down, will ya?"

"What's going on, Rales?"

"This place is crawling with guards, J, and they're all looking for you. Vel's really pissed. She's got a reward out on your head."

"The way I feel right now she can have my head. Look, I need a favor."

"What am I not surprised?" Despite the circumstances Rales managed a laugh.

"Vel's in with bad company, with someone the locals call 'The Count'."

"And how did you get caught up in it? Sticking your nose in it again, huh?"

"We haven't got time for this. Will you just listen? I need a good pilot, Rales, someone who can be trusted implicitly." I was rather proud of myself for using such a big word.

"Implicitly, huh?" he said right before he laughed at my expense.

"Yeah, yeah, I need a name."

"There's only one who would turn down that reward in the blink of an eye. Sasha."

"No! Not her. Pick someone else, Rales. It's too dangerous."

"Do you think I could stop her? Once she's got something in her head nothing will change it."

"Then don't tell her. I don't want her involved in this." But I had a feeling my words were falling on deaf ears.

"Hey, like father like daughter. Could you use a rusty old mechanic?"

"And why have you become so interested in trouble?"

"Because things are changing here, J, and not for the better. These guards look like they've moved in for the duration and I don't want to be around if they stay."

I sighed as my hand rose to rub my forehead. This was getting more and more complicated by the minute and it was drawing in friends who I didn't want to see get hurt. Still, if Vel had taken over the spaceport then no one was safe. "Alright, I could always use a *great* mechanic, Rales."

He chuckled and I knew I had said the right thing. Not that it was a lie. He had kept Bessie going long after others had given up on her. For that alone I would have him, but I knew by reputation he was one of the best. "I'm on the lookout for a couple of ships-one about the size of my Bessie and one slightly larger that can take about twenty. Both will need to be armed. This has got to be done quietly, my friend."

"You don't have to tell me twice."

"Good, cause I'm not going to. Look, gotta go in case you're being monitored. I'll be in touch."

"Hey J? Be careful."

"You too, buddy, I want you both in one piece."

I cut the transmission and sat back in my chair. What was I doing? My own little group was expanding into... what? An army? I doubt that the Noorthi would be comfortable with that. But what else could I call it? Vel was bringing a war to me and I suspected that I wouldn't be able to get out of the way of it without someone getting hurt. I had already lost Rice and I was damn well going to try not to lose anybody else.

My mind faded out for a while and I sat there staring out into space. Malt's return finally drew my attention. She was smiling so she must have succeeded in her mission. Now I was thinking like a tactician. Mission? *Stop it, J. These are women and children not soldiers. Your job is to keep them safe, that's all.*

"So, how did it go?"

"The tag is on its way to Vidan."

"Good job." I chuckled. Malt had planted the tracker on a cruise ship heading to the far reaches of the universe, stopping at every inhabited planet along the way. I figured that should keep the Count busy for quite a while wondering what I was up to.

Malt sat down in the co-pilot's chair, now comfortable with her status in life.

"You're looking awfully pleased with yourself."

"Me?"

My eyes narrowed. "What did you do?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" I seriously doubted that.

"Not really." She looked over at me and saw my expression, deciding it was probably prudent to tell me. "I just arranged a little accident at the shop."

"That's going to draw attention." I was already reaching to start the engines.

"Nah! It'll look like an accident."

"You... you..." I was afraid to ask what she had done. "You didn't kill him, did you?" Not that he didn't deserve it but I didn't want Malt to have his blood on her hands.

"Nah, but he'll be picking bits of metal out of his butt for years to come."

"Heh, that's my girl." I said the words without much forethought.

"Thanks," she mumbled. I looked across and saw her eyes filled with tears.

"Hey, it's okay. We're leaving now."

"No, it's not that." But she couldn't continue.

I reviewed the conversation and then realized what I had said and how she had taken it. I reached across with my hand and patted her shoulder. "You're a great kid, Malt. Don't let anyone tell you different. Now let's get out of here."

* * *

I was still at a loss where to go. Suddenly the universe was shrinking around us, just like our options. Malt and I sat around the holomap discussing possible locations. "You got any ideas?"

"I don't know much about out there." Malt stared out the cockpit window towards the vastness of space.

"This isn't my territory and my home is now in the hands of the Count. It looks like wherever we choose neither of us will know much about it."

"What about the computer?"

"It came up with a few possibles but I have reservations about using them. If we choose one of those what's to say they won't do the same thing? Consult the computer then visit them one by one until they find us. No, we have to come up with somewhere on our own." God, sometimes I hated this job.

"What about fuel?"

"It's getting low, so there's another problem."

"There's a fuel dump behind the spaceport on Juno."

"And what are we going to do, huh? Just fly right in and say 'fill her up'?"

"Why not? It's a trooper ship."

"For one, Vel would have filled them in about us and they'll be on the lookout for a trooper ship."

"But they wouldn't be expecting you to do something that bold."

"Bold, Malt? Try stupid, insane, balls the size of... hmmm..."

"What are these balls?"

I was not going to sully Malt's innocence with vulgar references. "Never mind." Could I do it? Malt did have a point though. They wouldn't be expecting it. Besides, our options were practically nil. This was going to take balls alright. Big brass ones the size of Juno.

* * *

"This is *not* going to work."

"Haven't we been through this before? Why do you have to be so negative?" I muttered from the pilot's seat.

"Because if something goes wrong then I'm never disappointed."

Epi was being a real downer. I needed my personal cheer squad yelling 'Ra! Ra! Ra!' and instead she was muttering 'you're going to drop the ball'.

"Okay, we're coming up on the fuel dump. Everyone to their places!" Everyone? All I could find was four uniforms. I commandeered one and Malt took another one. As much as I wanted to leave her out of it she was the only one who knew the layout. That left two uniforms for them to fight over. No, they didn't fight but had a lengthy discussion as they usually did. Finally I stepped in and assigned the uniforms. One fitted Beri like a glove while the last one sat on Epi like a sack.

"Can't you put those somewhere?" I asked as I waved my finger at her breasts.

"And where do you suggest? My back pocket?"

"That would be preferable to where they are now. They're sticking out too much."

"I can't help that. It's the way I'm built."

"I can fix that," I countered and made a move to stand up. "Now where did I put that laser?"

"Ha ha, the woman thinks she's funny" Epi muttered but her eyes looked out the window with concern at the rapidly approaching depot.

"Where to, Malt?" I could see where to go but I wanted the kid to feel she was contributing something to this fiasco.

"Right over there, see?"

"Yep." I nudged the control and gradually descended until a gentle shake told me we had landed. "Now no one talk unless you have to." I cleared my throat and prepared to speak. "Trooper ship requesting refueling," I ground out in my deepest voice.

"State your clearance code, trooper ship."

"Clearance?" Epi's voice rose to a high squeak. I only just managed to cut off transmission before her squeal could be heard.

Malt was already on the ship's computer searching for information.

"One mo. Sshhhhhhhhhh... tran....sshshhhhhhhhhh..." I feigned static to buy a bit of time. "Come on, come on," I muttered but I knew Malt was working as fast as she could.

"I repeat, state your clearance code."

Malt brought out her other two hands and four sets of fingers flew over the keyboard. Man, she was so fast it was nearly a blur. Suddenly she stopped and smiled, turning the monitor in my direction.

"One six nine zero five alpha michael beta." My heart beat heavily in my chest. This was it. Had those balls proved to be lucky or had I signed our death warrant? The silence went on and on, or so it seemed, but in actual fact it was only a few seconds.

"Move your vehicle into the bay, trooper."

"That's affirmative, control." I had no idea what I was saying because of the harsh whispers bouncing around the cabin. I gave the rest of my 'crew' my best scowl and they stopped their chattering.

All I can say is that I was glad I had had some time in this ship because she didn't want to go quietly. I had to adjust and re-adjust as she overflowed her mark. It must have made me look like a right idiot to the guards standing around waiting to fuel us. Finally I got her where I wanted to and I killed the engines.

The section head made a series of hand signals indicating he wanted me out of the ship. Damn. I had hoped to get away without having any contact with them. While I certainly wasn't built like Epi I still had my long hair to contend with. I took a deep breath and stood up. Somehow I would have to talk my way out of this. If not, then... I patted the newly acquired firearm strapped to my thigh. "Stay put." I thought it was a waste of time saying that but knowing the Noorthi as I did if you didn't spell it out then they had a tendency to interpret what you didn't say any way they liked.

The hydraulics whirled as the ramp lowered to the ground. "Here goes," I muttered to the ship, not that it did me any good. Each step I took down the ramp was like one more step towards my death. It was agonizing and heart wrenching. Still, I had already died once in this life so what was one more?

Just as my eyesight was about to get the full view of the field a woman's voice cut through the

background noise. My eyes widened as I recognized who it was. *Oh shit!* I reached for my cap and pulled it lower over my face and I relaxed my posture in an effort to look shorter.

"You there! Captain! Why isn't Reman's ship fueled and ready to go?"

I peeked out from under the brim. It was Andriessa. Now in the light of day she didn't look all that appealing. The scales on her skin were clearly visible, as was her mottled skin. Her tongue flicked out in irritation. What was I thinking?

"This ship can wait. Get your men busy. NOW!" She yelled the last word and her skin color turned to an angry red.

"Yes, ma'am."

A number of other titles came to mind that I would call Andriessa. Ma'am wasn't one of them. I watched her slither away towards the rather ostentatious ship on the far side of the field. Did she say Reman? Now I only knew one Reman and it couldn't possibly be him. He was a four-foot nothing balding midget who came across more as a simpering sycophant rather than the next ruler of the universe. I had done a job for him a lifetime ago and he was the reason I took up drinking. Vel would eat him for breakfast. No, surely it had to be someone else.

"You," the foreman said to one of the lowly helpers, "stay here and give them what they want. The rest of you follow me." The group left at a trot to catch up to Andriessa walking across the tarmac. From here I could see her venting, her arms waving in the direction of the ship and then the stockpile of rods.

"So," the young guard said brightly, "let's get you on your way, eh?"

"Err, sure." This made things a little easier. If I had to fight my way out I only had one guard to contend with. I had no idea where the fuel went so I made a move towards the pile of fuel rods. "Can you get the hatch?"

Shit! I lifted one of the rods and nearly gave myself a hernia. Suddenly the weight lessened as the young man grabbed the other end. "Keep doing that and you'll be in the infirmary," he joked.

"Don't you guys get hurt?"

"We have robots for that but as you can see they're tied up." He nodded in the direction of the hive of activity. "You've got long hair."

This was it. Could I get to my blaster quick enough before he sounded the alarm? "Yeah, it's for religious reasons." I always found that if something was strange claim it was for religious reasons.

"Fair enough. Just don't let the boss catch you."

"The boss?" Which boss were we talking about?

"You know... him."

"The Count?" Could I find out more?

"Yeah, him."

"Doesn't he ever get tired of being called that? You know, what with his other name and all."

"From what I've seen he seems to enjoy it."

"I've never had the pleasure of seeing him. I'm stuck on outpost duty." And the further away the better. "Maybe it was the hair that sent me there."

"Maybe," he chuckled. He guided the rod into the slot and we wandered back for another.

I looked around. Maybe we could get away with grabbing more fuel than we were entitled to. All the activity was on the far side of the ground, leaving the two of us alone. I looked over my shoulder knowing that we were being watched. I hoped that some hasty hand signals would convey my wishes to my crew.

Meanwhile I kept my co-worker occupied. "So what does he look like? Back at our base we always wondered what he looked like."

"Well...", he looked around to see if he would get caught gossiping, "... he's a bit short..."

Oh no... it was him. It seemed the sycophant had delusions of grandeur. It must have been catching. First Vel and now Reman. "Really?" I tried to sound casual. "But...", I caught movement out of the corner of my eye and shifted the guard so he couldn't see what was going on behind him. "I dunno, a short guy as the next leader of the universe?"

"Leader of the universe? Where did you hear that?"

Okay, now I was confused. What the hell was going on? "Then what's he doing here?" I lifted my end of another rod casually. This conversation was proving most enlightening.

"You think they're going to tell us? All I know is that some big-ass ship comes in once or twice and all hell breaks loose. You think that was something?" he pointed to the ship at the end of the field, "this other ship draws out the entire city."

Well that made more sense. Reman never really had it in him. Still, he must have grown some balls since I last saw him otherwise he wouldn't have the post. Was he the one that sent me to Rigeus? Did he have any idea that in doing so he was putting me on a collision course with him? Or did he expect Vel to solve his problem for him? That seemed more likely. He was throwing a piece of meat to the carnivore and expected there to be nothing left

Well I showed him.

The loading of the rods was slow work and I made sure that I kept this guy busy because I certainly didn't want him discovering the pilfering that was going on behind his back. We talked about mundane things and my storytelling prowess was on show as I described life at a trooper outpost. I'm sure he would quit the force first before accepting a posting out in the spiral arm.

The activity had finished and the fueling garrison was returning to duty.

"Well, that's about it," I said anxiously, "Anything I need to sign or what?" Signatures were a thing of the past but the meaning was the same.

"Nope. That's it. Just your name and number."

Luckily I found that before I left the ship. "Garmen, one nine seven two two."

"Thanks, have a good trip." He turned and walked back to the hangar, his hand raised over his shoulder in farewell.

"As if!" I hollered back. I had painted a picture of an outpost surviving on the edge of an exanol swamp, the horrifying smell from the gases filtering through every orifice in the place. He now knew that I wanted to be anywhere but there.

I hurried myself to the pilot's chair, jumping into it with a whoosh in an attempt to get it off the ground before the theft was discovered. "Strap in." I had barely said the words before the craft lifted off and headed towards the stratosphere.

"Whoa!" Malt was hanging onto her belt as I accelerated at a dangerous rate. "Slow down!"

"Not until we're safe." Now here safe was a relative word. I suppose it depended on whether we wanted to risk incineration escaping so fast or dawdling and get caught for pilfering, right before they discover who they have and then the real trouble starts. Now me, I'd take my chances with a risky escape, and as I didn't want a lengthy discussion on the matter my choice was the only one that mattered.

I had the computer do the calculations for a hyperjump, so that I could activate it as soon as we were out of gravitational range. This was just one more thing I would have to teach Malt. With her four hands she could do it in half the time it takes me with my two fingers.

The jump went smoothly and we exited just past Ix. I parked the vehicle on the other side the planet, out of scanner range.

"What the blazes are you doing?" Beri stood in the doorway, her clothes slightly askew.

"Hey, like the new threads." I hedged.

"Don't change the subject, J. That was a reckless thing to do. None of us were ready for that. The common room is a shambles." Beri's brow was furrowed in anger.

"Sorry, B, but I couldn't take the chance of being caught."

"Was it that bad?"

"Andrissa was there."

"And who's Andrissa?"

"She's the one who abandoned me on Rigeus."

"Oh," All the fight bled out of Beri at the news. "Just don't do it again." She looked at the kid sitting in the co-pilot's seat. "Malt, could you give me a hand to help clean up?"

"Sure." Malt jumped out of her seat and disappeared through the doorway. In her place sat Fen.

"Oh, great. What did I do now?" Whenever Fen was present I was in trouble.

"What makes you think you've done something wrong?" she replied easily as she made herself comfortable in the spare chair.

"You're here and B isn't. What more is there to say?" Fen just sat there silently. "Alright, what do you want to know?" These were battles I wasn't going to win because Fen was way more patient than I ever was.

"What's got you all fired up that you're leaving the planet like you have a fuel rod up your... ass." She hesitated on the last word.

"Ass, Fen?" I smiled. The Noorthi were not known for their cussing so it came as a bit of a surprise. It looked like I was having a bigger effect on them than I thought so maybe I should clean up my act. I couldn't have holy women cussing out the universe.

"Besides her being the one person on that planet who knew who I was, you mean?" Did I want to know the truth myself? Probably not. "This thing is getting bigger and bigger, Fen, and I don't know where it will all end. When I took on this job it was a matter of getting you girls home. I don't know if I'm up to this." I had been looking out the window at the huge visible crescent of Ix. Their sun was on the other side of the planet and we were sitting on the dark side.

Fen's hand reached over and lay on top of mine. "You'll do just fine."

Was it just that simple? Four words and everything was alright? I doubted it. "Maybe we should have just stayed put on Rigeus." Now, even to my ears that sounded defeatist. I couldn't help but glance at Fen. "What?"

"This is not like you. Are you sure you're alright?"

"I don't know. Maybe dying had a bigger effect on me than I thought." But I was not convinced and, by the look on Fen's face, she wasn't convinced either. "Hell, I don't know!"

"We all have our doubts, J..."

"Yeah, yeah. You don't have to give me the pep talk. I know all that. I'm tired, Fen. My mind is mush and I don't have the answers. I...", and then it finally hit me, "I'm scared, Fen."

"You scared of this Count guy?"

"I suppose I'd be stupid to say no. But I'm more scared of making the wrong decision. I'm scared that a wrong decision could send someone to their death. Maybe it comes down to I'm scared of failing. I've been used to being on my own where my decisions have only affected me."

"Don't you think Beri feels the same? I feel the same? We can only do what we can do and I, for one, only expect that of you."

"Is this part of your Noorthi training?" I asked suspiciously.

"More like Fen training I think."

"No wonder Beri sends you to do the sensitive talks. You're very good at it." I gave her a smile.

"So, you're feeling better?"

"A little. I just wish we had somewhere to go. I think being cooped up in here with no end in sight is getting on my nerves."

"Maybe you need to talk to someone outside this ship."

"Maybe." At least it was something to think about.

Fen was about to leave me when I thought I should make something clear. "Look, about that stuff with the Count," I mentioned cryptically. "It's between you and me. The others don't need to know about it."

"Oh, you mean you being a scaredy-cat and all?"

"Yes, that!" I growled, giving her my best glare.

"Your secret is safe with me, Ratha."

"Yeah, yeah," I grumbled as she left chuckling to herself. My secrets were piling up like the

fodder of the Misturn of Bateen IV. Now that's a huge-ass creature so you can imagine its doggy doo. The only difference between its poo and my secrets was that its poo glowed in the dark. Maybe if I worked at it hard enough my secrets would do the same thing.

* * *

Two solar days had passed and we were still parked on the dark side of Ix. I was getting cabin fever real bad locked up with nearly one hundred women on a ship going nowhere. But I had contacted Rales and I was awaiting his arrival. I had explained my dilemma and he told me to stay put.

So here we were. I was dozing... again. My death was going to be the death of me. Meanwhile Malt spent the time using the computer. I had looked once or twice to see what was holding her interest but I have to admit that it looked like a kid had gone berserk with a writing stick. She tried to explain it to me but I lost her after the first cosmic theory reference. If it made sense to her then fine, but it did prove my theory about her. She was a smart-ass smart ass.

"Are they here yet?"

"Nope." I kept my eyes closed as Beri settled herself in the chair next to me. "What's for lunch?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Probably not." The Noorthi cooking, to say the least, was a little boring. It was always the same and my taste buds were ready to surrender.

"Maybe we could drop down to Ix." Beri asked hopefully.

"After we meet up with Rales."

"I could go-"

"No, I'm not letting anyone go down without me and I have to wait for Rales, so everyone is just going to have to wait." As if uttering those words announced the arrival of the second ship, I was hailed.

"Hey there. Have trouble finding us?" I said nonchalantly.

"I'll be glad to get my feet on solid ground, J." Rales sounded relieved. I suppose he was, considering the circumstances under which he left Aldronicus VII. "And find the bathroom."

I chuckled. I knew I liked this guy for a reason. "So what did Sasha say?"

"She said 'why didn't you ask'?" The female voice was instantly recognizable.

"Sasha! I didn't want to drag you into this."

"This was right up my alley and you wanted to leave me out of all the action? That's not very nice, J."

"Maybe so, but at least you wouldn't be hunted down, Sash."

"Ahh, but that makes life a bit more exciting, my friend. Dad said you needed a hideout."

"Hideout is a bit strong, maybe more a place to settle." When I explained it that way it didn't sound so much like a life and death situation.

"Hideout... place to settle. Mish mash, J. But you are in luck. I think I have the ideal place for you."

"Yeah. And where is this mythical land? In your mind?"

"Do you want my help or not?" Sasha snapped.

"Put your dad on." I waited while the transmission went quiet.

"Yeah?"

"I thought I told you not to tell her."

"She beat it out of me," he joked.

"But I didn't want her-"

"Look, J, if things are going to get as bad as you think they will I'd be a lot happier if she was with us. I don't want to be worrying about my little girl out there in the nasty universe."

I chuckled. "Your little girl? Did you hear that, Sash?" She may have been little in stature but she was larger than life.

"Yeah, and he's the only one to get away with it. You got my drift, J?"

"Yeah yeah, you midget." I could hear the disgruntled sigh from where I was sitting. "Okay, are you going to tell me what I'm in store for?"

"Huh?"

"The hideout, Sash. You haven't told me where the hideout is yet."

"Oh yeah, that. It's an old smugglers settlement."

Why was I not surprised? Considering the circles she moved in these days I should have expected the suggestion. Still, it was worth serious consideration. "Been there lately, Sash?"

"No, of course not, J."

I could hear the tinge of panic in her voice. So daddy didn't know about Sash's current lifestyle, huh? But I wouldn't be the one to break the news. After all, I was no angel either.

"Do you know Telgan?"

"Yeah, sure." It was a planet that sat on the fringe between the two star systems that Aldronicus VII and Juno belonged to and was used by the older ships as the half-way stopping off point for refueling. Ships equipped with the up-to-date version of the hyperdrive, like this one was, could get from Juno to Aldronicus VII in one jump and had no need for Telgan. The planet itself had one major city, Arcus, and the rest was uninhabited. It didn't need anything else since it was effectively an old fashioned petrol station. Now I could see why the smugglers hung around there. It had all the fuel they would need with very little sentient contact. They could plunder from two star systems and barter with them. Clever. Maybe we could do the same.

"It's on the third moon."

"Okay. Has it got air?" I knew that would be a big hurdle to get over if it didn't. Day-to-day living was going to be hard enough without worrying about environmental conditions.

"Yeah, no problem. Good vegetation and some desert. Temperatures are okay. Pretty good in fact. Or so I believe."

Yeah, Sash, don't give yourself away. She was trying her hardest to make it sound like second-hand knowledge but I suspected that it was first-hand. It seemed Sasha was still trying to protect her daddy from the truth. *Don't sell your dad short, Sash.*

"Sounds good." Too good in fact, but if my cosmic karma was in the house of the rising sun, whatever that meant, then who was I to argue? But something was telling me to be careful. Sasha had been a bad girl recently so what was there to stop her selling me out? I hoped I was wrong, especially for Rales' sake, but there was too much at stake to take what she said at face value.

"When we get back we will need to stop at Ix to replenish supplies." Goodness knows where we were going to put the stuff....

* * *

"Don't trust me, huh?" Sasha asked me from her position in the pilot's seat of her vehicle. Rales was left in charge of the Noorthi and the trooper ship while Sasha and I checked out the settlement on the third moon of Telgan.

"It's not a matter of-"

"Oh, I think it is, J. I thought you knew me better than that."

I could hear the bitter disappointment in her voice. "I did... do, but circumstances change, Sash. If it were you and me I'd have no problem at all, but I'm responsible for these women so I have to have a healthy dose of caution in everything I do."

"What's so special about them that you doubt me?"

So what did I tell her? She knew there was a bounty on my head so on that alone she could turn me in. Would revealing more make it worse? This was a test of my trust in her and we both knew that. I just hoped my gut instinct was right on this one.

"They're Noorthi." I waited for some sort of reaction and got very little.

"So?"

"You've never heard of the Noorthi?" Now that surprised me. For someone who had traveled as much as she had I would have expected more.

"Sure. What about them?"

"Obviously you don't think of them as highly as I do," I muttered.

"They're holy women, right?"

"And off limits to you, Sash."

"Hey! Look who's talking!"

Yeah, we were both going to suffer on this one. So, okay here goes the whole truth... "They were kicked out of their home on Juno by someone called The Count and abandoned on Rigeus."

"The penal planet?"

"Yep. I picked up a job at Aldonicus VII, got drugged and dumped on Rigeus as well."

"So that's how you two joined up?"

"Yep. Vel was there."

There was silence. "What did she want?"

It took me a moment to remember Sasha's history with Vel. "She is somehow involved in all of this." Sasha's hands tightened on the controls. "You okay?" But I knew she wasn't. Sasha had been one of Vel's early victims when she was still young and innocent. I didn't poke my nose in it too much at the time because of Rales. It had hit him hard and he was a friend. I let him, and Sasha, have their space.

"Mmmm."

"You want to talk about it?" I asked tentatively.

"No."

"You know if you talk to someone about it-"

"I said, NO!" Sasha barked.

I held up my hands in surrender and retreated into myself.

"Sorry, J. Not now." But those words were final. Not now, not ever.

"Okay, no problem Sash. But if you ever need someone I'm here." I settled back in my seat and looked forward. "So, what can you tell me about this place?"

In my peripheral vision I watched Sasha take a deep breath and release it, allowing the tension to ease out of her body. "I think it should do well, J." Her voice sounded more relaxed with the change of subject. "All the basic stuff should still be there. It just needs a bit of fixing up."

"And what makes you think no one else is using it?"

"I don't, so it's probably a good idea that we're checking it out." She looked at me sheepishly.

"Alright, you have a point."

"How visible is it from the air?"

J, it's a hideout! That's the point!"

"I will need it scanner-proof, Sash."

"Why are they so intent on tracking you down, J?"

"If I knew that I wouldn't be running, Sash. I hate this backing down. It's just not me. But I have to think of these women. They are pacifists and they are celibate."

"That's a deadly combination, J. They don't fight at all? So who does the fighting? You?"

"Yeah, me!" I tried to sound indignant. "Don't write me off yet, shorty!" She chuckled and I continued. "There was a mine on Rigeus. They were taking the ochre out of the ground but I don't know why."

"I may know why," Sasha murmured.

"You do?" Finally! Someone had an answer.

"Drugs."

"Drugs? We're talking about dirt here."

"Yeah. A new drug came out about four years ago that was rumored to have come from some rare kind of mud. Not that anyone believed that rumor. Like who would ever make drugs from mud, right?"

"Riiight." Four years ago. That was when I last saw Vel. Had she gone from Aldronicus VII to Rigeus to supervise the mine? Makes sense. But the leap from ochre to drugs was just a little too wide a chasm for me to accept. Still, didn't the Noorthi ceremony use some sort of oil with the ochre? That sensation I felt at the time was nothing short of pleasurable. Even the tattooing was nearly orgasmic. Maybe there was a grain of truth to this so-called rumor. It might also explain why a Noorthi was captive on Juno. They were trying to get its secret from her.

"Did you ever find out who was selling this stuff?"

"No. It came out through the Crannik Corporation. That's all anyone ever knew about the stuff."

So whoever headed the Crannik Corporation was who I was looking for. I wanted to know who seemed to think I had stepped on his toes somehow. That's if he's got toes.

"Okay, let's go see this Shangri-La you seemed to have found for us."

* * *

I wasn't sure what I was expecting from this hideout. If it had a bed I was there. But as we looked out over the hideout in question I was having second thoughts. It was a dump, being nothing more than a cave. We were moving from a cave underground to a cave in the side of a mountain. I had hoped we had gotten past all that. Damn that cosmic karma!

"How long ago did you look at this place?"

"Not long ago..." Sasha looked at me and saw my face. "Okay, it was a couple of years ago."

"Uh-huh. And you think this is our salvation, huh?"

"Sure, it's a great little fixer-upper."

"Looks more like a fusion-bomb demolition job to me." To say I was disappointed was an understatement.

"Now come on J, give me a chance here. Can't we at least take a look?"

"Okay, it's your credit."

I followed Sasha down into the valley and up the path to the cave. We stood at the entrance and I looked out over the surrounding countryside. Okay, the land wasn't bad but we stood out like a sun going supernova in a darkened sky. "And this is your idea of camouflage?"

"Yeah, well, that needs a bit of work. But look in here..." Sasha disappeared inside.

I followed her into the darkness. "Yeah, it looks great," I said soberly. I couldn't see a damned thing. So far this place hadn't impressed me at all.

"Give me a minute."

"I could give you all day, Sash, and it's not going to improve. This is a shithole!"

"But it's in the middle of nowhere, J. Isn't that what you wanted?"

"Are you saying that this is right up my alley?"

"Well, isn't it?"

"So, you're saying that I don't deserve something better than this?" I was getting angry now. I suppose I didn't want to present this place to Beri and the girls. The Noorthi had been through a lot in the last few years and I didn't want to exchange one hole for another.

"Look, I'll give you a hand to clean up this place." Sasha finally found some light that illuminated the inside of the cave. "See? It's not so bad." She tried to sound cheerful and my gaze moved around the abode.

I didn't say a thing, instead trying to put some spin on a bad situation. Could we make this work? At least here there was bedding and makeshift beds, which was better than the dirt floor on Rigeus. Okay, that was one plus. I started to draw up a list in my mind, one side the positives and the other the negatives, in an attempt to decide whether to stop looking or not.

"What's the traffic like around here?"

"Practically nil."

"Practically?" I didn't want 'practically', I wanted 'nil'. Any visitors, even accidental ones, were a danger to us.

"Just the odd passer-by, that's all."

"And that's two years ago. Right?"

"Yeah, sure!" Sasha sounded enthusiastic, thinking I was coming around to her way of thinking.

"So you don't know a damned thing about this place!"

"What do you want here? The Plinith?"

"If I could get rooms for a hundred people, then yeah." The system's most expensive motel would take one look at us and throw us out.

"Sorry J, that ain't gonna happen. Unless you want to keep looking, this is as good as it gets."

"Well you don't have to be so happy about it."

"And you're not? Geez, woman, I bend over backwards to help you..."

"Oh please, don't even put that image in my head. Those women are driving me crazy as it is." I wondered about Sasha because she didn't strike me as the sort of woman who would stay in one place for any length of time. She hadn't done it in the past so what was going to stop her now?

"So when are you moving on?"

"Hey! I just got here."

"And normally by now you're climbing the walls to get out. What's stopping you?"

"Why are you in such a hurry to get rid of me?" Sasha's voice hardened.

"No reason. I just got lots of things to do and I want to know who I can count on." As soon as the words flew out of my mouth I knew I was in trouble.

"Count on?!!?" I could see Sasha wanted to say more but she faltered. "So you don't trust me, is that it?"

"Not at all-"

"You think I'm going to go running off to turn you in the first opportunity I get?"

"I hadn't thought that up until now, no-"

"I thought you knew me, J, but it looks like you don't know me at all."

"I know you enough to know that you don't stay in one spot for too long, Sash." There was something I had to know. "Why did you come?"

"I thought you needed help."

"That may be but there's another reason, isn't there?"

Sasha's fist lashed out and struck me on the chin. I reeled back from the impact and shook my head to clear it. Sasha threw herself at me and I let her come, wrapping my arms around her body

as she pushed me back. "Come on, Sash, tell me what's wrong," I whispered into her ear. I nearly laughed. Since when did I become a therapist?

"Why did you have to involve him, huh? He was happy where he was."

"Rales?"

"Yeah, Rales! You're going to get him killed!" She struggled and I held on grimly.

"Killed? I'm not planning to get anybody killed. Hey, all I did was ask him for the name of a good pilot. That's all. He did this all on his own."

"You asked, J! He would do anything for you, you know that!"

I let go and pushed her back. "I do **not** know that! Where do you get these ideas?"

"He worships you, J." She said with a tear in her eye.

"I think you need some macular regeneration, my friend-"

"My eyes are just fine. Don't you see? He wishes **you** were his daughter, not **me**."

"Come here-" I moved closer.

"Stay away from me! I've been thinking about this for a long time, Jordana Laren. Do you know what's it's like to live up to the expectation of you?" Tears were streaming down her face, twin tracks swollen with moisture cascading off her chin. She was crying so hard she would have barely been able to see me.

She struggled hard when I approached her and I had no choice but to plant my fist on her chin and her body slumped to the ground. I gasped for air as I waited for my heart to settle from its pounding rhythm, taking a seat on the stone floor before I fell down. This now created another problem for me. Would Sasha's departure also mean the departure of Rales?

While Sasha was passed out I lifted her up and put her on one of the makeshift beds. I put aside my concerns for the moment and took the time investigating the cave to see if it was of any use to us. What I really wanted was a nice cosy hideaway with all the modern conveniences and a household robot or two. Somewhere where no one knew us or cared. But that place only existed in my head. If we stayed here we were fractionally better off than Rigeus, but not by much.

On the positive side, we had a ship and could go buy what we needed as well as scavenge around Calceter. We were far enough away to be off the main routes but close enough to have access to them. If I were this Count guy I would probably search the most remote areas possible to find me, so in that respect we were somewhere in between. Hopefully, by that time Malt would have weaved her magic and come up with something to camouflage us from their scanners.

There was a power unit there for lighting and warmth, which was another plus, but it wouldn't start, at least not for me. Maybe it had Sasha's problem and was being temperamental. Then again, it hadn't been used for about two years so it probably just needed a kick or two in the right place.

A moan drew my attention back to Sasha. She was coming around. At least I had the forethought to take her pistol away from her. "There you are," I said as I approached the bed.

"What did you do that for?" Sasha rubbed her jaw.

"Now, play nice or I can send you back out." I lifted my fist in threat. She settled down and lay quietly on the cot. "That's better. Now let me tell you something-

"I'm not interested in anything you have to say!"

"LISTEN!!!" My shout had its effect. Her body involuntarily cringed at the word but her look of defiance remained. "Didn't you hear anything your father said when we met up? The reason he came along was that he wanted to look after you, you idiot! He was worried about what was happening out there and I wanted to make sure you were safe."

She gazed at me warily as if trying to gauge my sincerity.

"You don't believe me? Ask him! He'll tell you like I'm telling you now, you are a deluded idiot!" *Man... I was a therapist. Deluded? Good one, J.* "He got out of Aldronicus VII because Vel was moving in. And she brought an army with her. He knew you wouldn't pass this job up and he wanted to make sure that you two were together when things got ugly. Think about it! It's probably a whole lot safer here than it will be on Aldronicus with Vel."

Sasha said nothing but I could nearly hear the wheels turning in her head. I had given her a lot to think about and I hoped by Almighty Carn that she did because at the moment she was my weak link. She could easily turn around and betray me. A lot was riding on my gut instinct and I was praying that I had enough negative stuff owing in my cosmic karma thing to give me this one lost soul.

"I know that you and Vel don't get on," I started.

"Don't get on??!!!!!!? You're kidding, right? I hate the woman's guts!" Sasha made no attempt to rise, content to vent her anger from the bed. "You just don't understand."

"Oh, but I do."

She looked me up and down once. "Vel wouldn't try it with you. She only picks on the more vulnerable. So don't talk to me about understanding!"

"Don't understand, huh?" I sat on the edge of the bed and tapped my finger on her chest. "I understand perfectly well, Sash, so cut out this crap and get on with your life."

"Don't talk as if you know, J. You can't possibly know."

I had wanted to put it all behind me but Sasha seemed determined to dredge it all up again. "So you think Vel was sick when she knew you, huh? That's nothing to what she is now. She is crazy... certifiable. I saw her kill a young girl for opening her mouth. She disemboweled her for speaking out, Sash. I looked into that woman's eyes and saw the madness there."

"Unless you've been through it you can't begin to-"

"Oh, but I have. On Rigeus." I closed my eyes for a moment and saw it all unfold. "Oh yes," I whispered, "I know only too well what she is capable of, Sash." When I opened my eyes I saw her staring at me. She was going to need details. I sighed deeply before beginning, "She captured me and strung me up naked outside in the desert. For the rest of the day twenty women fondled me, touched me and debased me. Twenty women who wanted to have a piece of me and I couldn't do a damned thing about it, so don't go whining about what she did to you!"

Sasha remained silent. "The final insult was the leather collar she put around my neck and paraded me around naked at the end of the day. I want to kill her, Sash, believe me I do, but I have to find the right time to do it. She is too well guarded at present so it is a suicide mission to go storming in now."

"It sounds like a worthy cause if it means killing her. What's stopping you?"

"For one thing, I promised to look after these women. For another, I would like to come out of this alive." I tried to find something for her to latch onto. "Don't you want your dad to live through this? Because it's not only your own life you have to think about now."

Sasha lay back on the bed and I saw the tension leave her body. But I didn't want to carry the whole blame for her troubles with her father so I continued. "And don't go blaming me for this mess."

"Now, wait just one minute!" Sasha sat upright and swung her legs over the side of the bed.

"No, you wait a minute. You're as much to blame here."

"Me?" I knew she couldn't believe my audacity but it was time she had some home truths.

"Who was the one who took off to the stars and left dear old dad behind, huh?"

"But I always came home! Don't go shifting blame-"

"Stop it! If anyone's shifting blame it's you. You may have come home, Sash, but how long did you stay, huh? A week? Two weeks? Then you were off again on another adventure."

"But-"

"What did you expect him to do, eh? Sit and wait around for you to come home for one week at a time? And did you ever think of him when you left?"

"And you took him away from me!"

"No, Sash, **you** drove him away. He was lonely and I was around a bit. All I did was befriend him, nothing more. He still loves his little girl, Sash. You just have to give him your time."

Her head hung in sadness. Had she seen the truth in my words?

"Think of this time as a bonding experience, Sash. Use it to get re-acquainted with your dad." I had hoped that I had made some sense because I wasn't sure where she stood with me. Could I afford to risk her loyalty? "Come on let's go back to the ship."

We walked towards the entrance. "Have you made a decision on this place?"

It was a question that I had been asking myself, even as Sasha said it. Was I going to find anything better within the restraints that I had put on it? "I suppose I have. It's not ideal but it has some positives."

"So that's a yes?"

"Yes." Despite my misgivings I had found us a home. I just hoped it wasn't too permanent.

"Okay, let's go." Sasha sounded as if the matter with her dad had been resolved. I didn't know if it could be that easy. Maybe it could be but I know if it were me I still be simmering over the confrontation. I was going to have to keep an eye on her that was for sure.

I stood at the entrance to the cave and watched Sasha make her way down to the valley floor. "You can come out now," I murmured.

A figure moved from the shadows to stand in the light. "How did you know?"

"I caught a glimpse of you when we arrived at the cave." She looked disappointed that I had known so early in the visit. "Now what are you doing here?"

"Watching your back."

"Malt, I can look after myself quite well thank you."

"And what if she tried to kill you?" The girl remained unrepentant about stowing away and following me.

"I didn't see you jumping out to protect my back."

"She would have killed me!"

I couldn't argue with that. Well, I could and I would. "Malt, if you protected my back, as you call it, it wouldn't get that far, now would it?" I looked outside and Sasha had disappeared. "Now let's go before Sasha decides to maroon us here."

Malt quickly scanned the surrounding countryside from the cave entrance. "She's gone."

"I know that. Now let's move it!" Malt sheathed her knife. "Should I ask where you got that?" I nodded at the knife.

"When I was scavenging."

Of course. I was too busy dying to look at what she had found. As I scrambled down the rocky path I mentioned, "Malt, we're going to need some sort of camouflage here."

"I'm on it," she answered. Now the kid was reading my mind.

"Why didn't Rice stop you from doing something this foolish?"

"She was the one who suggested it."

Figures.

* * *

It didn't take us long to get to the small plateau that we used as a landing site, but there was one problem with that. No Sasha, or, more importantly, no ship. "That... that... bitch!" My worst fears were being realized.

"Where's the ship?" Now Malt was stating the glaringly obvious.

"Well, Malt, I don't know. Can't you see it?" There was really no point in being sarcastic but that was just how I felt at the moment. Seriously pissed. I had thought I had gotten through to Sasha, but obviously not.

"So what do we do now?"

"Sprout some wings?" I shouldn't be taking it out on the kid but who else was there?

"You know, this is not getting us anywhere," she growled.

Malt was right. But it was interesting to hear her stand up for herself. Good one, Malt. "You're right. Sorry, Malt, you didn't deserve that."

"I... I..." Malt stammered.

"Don't you dare apologize!" Malt backed away as if expecting a hit. "Come here, silly." I pulled her into an embrace, my hand rubbing her back. "Listen to me. I want you to feel comfortable in expressing yourself." I was really getting the hang of this therapy stuff. Maybe I should hang out a shingle or something. "It's okay to get angry, Malt. I'm not that scum back on Juno."

"I know that," she mumbled into my shirt. "It's just going to take some time."

"Take all the time you want, kid."

"So what do we do?"

"We hide, I suppose."

"Hide?"

"If Sasha took off without us she's going to betray us."

"Would she really do that?" Malt sounded surprised.

"It looks that way. But she doesn't know you're here so when they come for me I want you to hide, okay?"

"No!"

"You're not going to do anyone any good by getting caught as well. If you ever get back to Beri tell her I'm sorry."

"No!" A tear slid down Malt's cheek. "I won't! I won't let Sasha..."

"Malt, listen to me. If she comes back she's going to bring a whole heap of trouble with her. Stay out of this!" I so wanted to protect Malt. I had enough guilt over Rice without adding Malt to it.

"Rice said 'stop being so pig-headed!'"

"Yeah well, Rice, when did you become the grown-up in this conversation?"

"She said 'since you've become such an ass'. Hey, don't blame me. I'm just passing on what she said."

I figured it would be a while yet before Sasha's return. It was a bit of a jump back to Juno to claim her reward. I was backing Juno as the likely port because I knew Sasha didn't want to meet up again with Vel in this lifetime. So we had a few hours to kill before then.

I just couldn't sit around waiting for my capture. Hell, I wouldn't even wait around for the sun to set. Patience was in very short supply in my blood so I had to do something... anything. "Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"Back to the cave. No point in hanging around here." I was disappointed in Sasha, but what was her dad going to think? I knew Rales loved her, even though Sasha couldn't see it, and I knew this would probably kill him. He was a scrupulous man who thought he had a scrupulous daughter. That was why he said her name when I asked about a pilot. What about when he found out he was wrong?

We turned our backs on the spot on the ground where our betrayal had taken place and started back towards the only place we could go. Well, I suppose the positive was that I was going to find out if we could have survived here.

We were just about to the rise on the edge of the flat plain that we had used for landing when I heard it. Sasha couldn't possibly be back so soon. Even on a good day a hyperjump would take a while, let alone convince The Count that she had us cornered. But there it was, Sasha's ship, slowly landing on the spot where it had landed once before.

"Did she change her mind?"

I was sure that Malt had a bit of the psychic in her because that was *exactly* what I was thinking. Then again, it would have been the logical question for whoever asked it.

"I don't know. Guess we'll find out soon enough." It was the only comfort I could offer Malt unless I told her an outright lie. She knew as much as I did and that was practically nothing.

So we both stood there, backlit by the sun's rays, presenting easy targets should Sasha decide to use her ship's weapons. I lifted my hands from my sides, offering no resistance to her. If she was going to kill us it would have to be in cold blood.

The gangplank lowered to the ground and Sasha sauntered down it until she stood on solid ground. "Are you just going to stand around all day or do you want to get off this speck of dust?"

Malt and I looked at one another, wondering if we had missed a whole scene in the latest holomovie. Sasha was acting like nothing had happened. Still, until I was on board I was not going to question it. At least there I had a chance to wrest control of the ship from her if things got nasty.

"Come on." I started to jog towards the ship and I could hear the steady thump of Malt's shoes on the ground as she followed close behind.

"Where did you come from?" I knew Sasha was surprised to see Malt.

"She stowed away. It seemed that she felt I needed protecting." I looked pointedly at Sasha and she was suitably abashed. Now there was a witness to what had happened back in that cave.

We boarded the vessel and strapped ourselves into our chairs as Sasha took off and headed out into space. When we were safely away I finally asked my question. "Where the hell were you?"

"My sensors picked up a ship approaching the moon so I thought it was better to be safe than sorry and move since we didn't have anywhere to hide the damned thing. I thought you didn't want anyone to know you were here."

How could I argue with that? That's exactly what I said and she followed it to the letter. And after all the nasty things I was thinking about her in my head. I was ashamed-well maybe only a little-but surely that was worth at least a swear word or two.

"I know what you're thinking," Sasha said, "You thought I'd taken off without you."

I didn't say anything.

"Or at least not coming back for you." She glanced at me. Maybe it was the stoic façade I was presenting or the fact that I hadn't said a word that made her continue. "I know, I know, I sort went a bit berserk back there but I think I've got a handle on it now."

"Have you?" Maybe I should just let the whole matter rest.

"I don't know why it affected me like that. It... it was a mistake."

"Damn straight it was a mistake!" I growled, "So what am I supposed to do now, huh?"

"Why? I'm still here." Sasha defended herself.

"And nothing's changed, right?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Wrong answer, Sash. *Everything* has changed. How am I supposed to trust you now? You just can't take it all back."

"But this has nothing to do with those holy women." Sasha could see her position in this little group slipping away.

"It has everything to do with this project, Sash. I need someone I can trust implicitly." Wow! I'd used the word twice... and properly too. Will wonders never cease? But I didn't want to get side-tracked from my righteous indignation by patting myself on the back for using correct grammar. "Now you've planted that little seed of doubt. You hate me, Sasha. Those words came out of your mouth. Now I don't give a shit what you think of me but my trust in you is not the same."

"Give me a chance-"

"Why should I, huh? So you can maybe take a pot shot at me later on? Hand me over to Vel?"

"I'd never do such a thing!" she shouted defensively.

"Not now maybe, but what about later when that little devil of yours sits on your shoulder and tells you what a bad girl I am? That here was a chance to make more money than you have ever dreamed of. I can't afford to be waiting for that knife in my back, Sash."

"So what do I do now?" Sasha sounded lost.

"Well, that depends."

"Depends on what?"

"When we get back to the Noorthi I want you to find your dad and tell him what happened."

"Are you crazy?"

"No, because it will be up to him whether you go or stay. *He* will have to guarantee your loyalty, so keep that in mind when you eventually decide what to do." It was a risky decision but I felt she needed to keep in mind that her actions would directly affect those closest to her. Sasha was a good pilot, I had no qualms about that, but I needed a loyal pilot as much as a good one.

It was funny really. If I had been in her position a few years ago I'd probably be going down the same path she was on. The only thing different this time was that I had given Sasha a choice. What had changed? I looked at the tattoo on my wrist and wondered if it came with scruples. Since I had this thing put on everything else had been taken away from me... my love for booze and the right to my own existence. Hell, I couldn't even get laid, so why not this as well? I had been happy with the way things were before all this began, so why did the ochre object? Or maybe it wasn't so much the ochre as the sisters. Were they surreptitiously manipulating me through the tattoo? I could see that I needed to delve more into this dilemma, just not now.

I allowed Sasha to fly the ship without my interference, although I did take notice of the coordinates she fed into the computer for the hyperjump. No point in being too laid back. Malt was certainly getting an education in the subject of human emotions. I looked at her from time to time to see what she was thinking. She had been thoughtful but as the silence lengthened she became bored and turned her attention to the ship's computer. Why was I not surprised?

We finally entered the orbit of Ix, gently coasting along its outer stratosphere until the Noorthi ship came into sight. We were hailed as soon as we were within visual range.

"How did everything go?" The familiar gruff voice hailed us.

"Hey, Rales." I tried to sound chipper. "It's not perfect, but I didn't expect it to be. It seems good enough." I looked at Sasha who nervously gazed out the window.

"Hey, darlin'," Rales asked, "How was the trip?"

Sasha and I exchanged glances. *You!* I mouthed.

"Great, dad. Smooth sailing." Sasha watched me all the while she talked to her dad. "I'll fill you in after we dock."

She went through the motions of docking with the other ship and we were finally reunited once more. Sasha wandered off with her dad, leaving me to wonder whether this was *the* talk. I waved Malt to come over and I whispered in her ear, "Can you keep an eye on her? If she so much moves a muscle out of place I want to know."

"Sure," Malt murmured and turned to leave.

I grabbed her arm and pulled her close. "And thanks, kid." I let go and allowed my hand to ruffle her dark hair. By the stars, the look in her eye just had a way of making me feel all mushy inside. She trotted off after her quarry to do as I asked. Even if she wasn't such a wiz with making stuff I'd still keep her with me. I shook my head in wonder. Maybe I was going all hormonal on myself. Me care about a kid? I muttered to the tattoo on my wrist, "You have a lot to be responsible for, buster."

Beri and Fen joined me in the cockpit of the larger ship as I sat down and put my boots up on the dashboard.

"So how did it go?"

"It was... interesting." For now I was keeping what actually happened to myself. No point in worrying the sisters.

"Interesting good or interesting bad?" Beri asked carefully.

"A bit of both, I suppose. It's got food, water, vegetation. The cave has beds and is pretty roomy."

"So what's wrong with that?"

"B, I didn't want you to go from one cave to another. I guess I wanted your lives to be better."

"Is it in a desert?"

"Nnoooo!"

"Well, then it's better." Beri was satisfied.

"Don't you wish for *your* house and not just a cave?" I knew I did.

"J, we have lived in that cave on Rigeus since we were kids. A lot of us don't remember much of

the compound any more. If you think it's an improvement on Rigeus then it's fine. I, for one, will be happy to have a bed and not sleep on the ground."

Beri patted my arm trying to comfort me, so maybe it was just me who was disappointed in my performance so far. I wanted everything to be perfect. "If you say so."

"Let me go tell the sisters." Beri left but Fen stayed, making herself comfortable in the seat next to me.

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Sure. Why?" I didn't look at her, instead staring at the huge dark sphere of Ix.

"I don't know. I felt uncomfortable earlier, while you were away. I just had a feeling that you weren't happy."

"You're feeling me now? Isn't there some sort of law for that?" Now I was getting defensive.

"Only reading thoughts, J, but you already know that. What are you getting all fired up over?" Fen tried to get me to look at her but I was having none of it. "Why don't you look at me? Have I done something wrong?"

"Of course you haven't. I just thought you saved all that emotion stuff for when you... you know." I didn't want to be crude and blurt it right out.

"Yeah, it's not normal. It was strange. I've never felt anything like that, at least not in the presence of the person concerned."

Now she had my attention. "So you felt something for me?"

"*For* you? That might be a bit strong. I definitely felt something which I associated with you."

"But you felt *something*, right?" I was feeling giddy. In terms of the Noorthi this was like getting to first base. She felt something for me. I had all but given up any sort of connection with Fen but this fanned the flames of my desire. But could I be happy with an emotional relationship rather than a physical one? Hell, I'd just be happy to be talking to her. This needed careful nurturing.

"Yeah, something and I'm not sure how to handle it. What got you so unhappy?"

"Sasha left without us. I was certainly pissed about that. But she came back. We're all sorted out now." I wasn't going to tell her any more.

"She left?"

"She got to the ship first. There was another vessel approaching and she decided it was prudent

to hide our presence. She moved the ship and came back once the other craft had left. Of course I didn't know that at the time." I tried to sound unconcerned with the turn of events because at the time I was anything but. I could feel her watching me and I knew she was trying to decide if I was telling her everything. "Everything's fine... really."

"If you say so." Fen stood and left but I had a feeling that she wasn't convinced. "Hey, Rales!"

I heard Fen's hail coming from the corridor and braced myself for a not very pleasant conversation. There was a scrape of boot on the door frame. "Come and sit down," I said before he had a chance to announce himself.

"How was the trip?"

I knew he had already asked me the question but it was an icebreaker and I accommodated him. "Not bad. There are a lot of positives there, even if it is a bit rough."

"Look, I don't know what to say."

"Then don't. The decision is up to you."

"What decision?"

I began to wonder what she did say. "What did Sasha tell you?"

"That you two had a fight or something and that you wanted to throw her out." He didn't sound angry so maybe I had a chance of pleading my case.

"That's it?"

"Pretty much."

"Did she tell you why we had a fight?"

"Something about me, I think. She was a bit vague about that."

"I'm not surprised. It seems that your daughter thinks I am trying to usurp her position as daughter in your family." My dad would be proud of me using all these big words. I never really had much use for them before but they were sure coming in handy now.

"Usurp?"

"She thinks you love me more than her."

"That is stupid."

"That's what I told her, Dad... just kidding. We had a bit of a scuffle and she left without us for a

moment." I really didn't want to tell him any more, instead hoping to keep some faith in their relationship. "But the problem is that her loyalty is in doubt."

"She would never-

"That's what I thought, Rales, but with something this important there can't be any hidden plots for revenge. I need a pilot who would rather die first than betray us to Vel. I told her to talk to you because *you* are going to have to be responsible for her, my friend. If you think she can't do the job then speak up now, because once we move that's it. I want you to think long and hard about this, for both you and Sasha, because now is the time to get out if you want to change your mind."

"How long have I got?" He nearly sounded defeated.

"This time tomorrow? Is that long enough?"

"I suppose it will have to be."

"Look, go and talk to her and see what she thinks about it. I'd still like to have her because she's a damned fine pilot, but I can't afford to have a loose cannon running around in our midst."

"That's it?"

I got up out of my seat and moved over to the co-pilot's chair. I knelt down next to him, swiveling the chair until he was eye-to-eye with me. "This changes nothing about the way I feel about you, my friend. You are always welcome in my home you know that, as is Sasha, but this is something that needs to be sorted out now." I patted his arm. "I'd feel a lot happier moving to our new location knowing that everyone is on my side. Do you understand?"

"And what happens if Sasha's not on your side?"

"She will be, Rales. She just needs a bit of family interaction that's all. She hasn't been home a lot and I think she just needs a bit of down time with dad. Don't worry, I won't crack the whip straight away so you two can get to know one another all over again."

"Are you sure?" He looked hesitant as if I was going to take back everything I said and throw them both out into space.

"Yeah, I'm sure. I just thought if you were responsible for her she would think carefully before doing something stupid."

"Hmmm, you have a point."

Now he could see where I was heading with the plan. "Now go tell Sasha to get her butt in gear. We have some supplies to get down on Ix."

* * *

We were on our final leg of a journey that had seemed interminably long. Who knew looking for somewhere to live would be so hard? We had just come out of hyperspace and were coming up on the third moon of Telgan. I really had to find out the name of this clump of dirt because I didn't want to be calling it the 'third moon of Telgan' for the rest of my life.

There was a buzz around the ship, the Noorthi nervously chatting about their new home. I think we were all ready to get out of this floating coffin. We had been locked up way too long for normal humans to stay sane.

"Ahem." There was a male clearing of a throat.

I had been expecting Rales for a while now because he still had to give me his answer. To save all sorts of explanations and embarrassing pauses I said one word. "Yes?"

"Yes." That was all he said before leaving.

"Good," I muttered to the now empty cockpit.

I hadn't thought much past getting everyone here before now but I couldn't help but think about the next step. We really needed a few more men to do the muscle work around the settlement because I knew that there would be a lot of construction work, but mainly it was to keep Rales sane. As one man amongst one hundred women, and celibate women at that, he would slowly go insane.

"Everyone strap in. I'm going to land this thing," I announced over the intercom. Seconds later Malt trotted in and took her customary place in the co-pilot's seat, snapping the seatbelt into place with ease. It seemed that was how she thought of herself now... my sidekick, I had been a loner all my life so I was sort of surprised how easily I accepted Malt's role in the way of things. I had never felt at ease with anyone as I did with her. It was nice to have someone who thought as I did and easily anticipated my next move.

"Well, here we go," I muttered and I caught a glimpse of a smile from her in my peripheral vision. The descent was smooth and problem-free as I brought the ship to hover over the plateau, moving to one side of it to allow space for Sasha's ship to land as well. As the ship touched the ground I turned to my young companion and announced into the intercom, "Welcome to your new home, everyone!"

* * *

So here we were starting a new life on a more hospitable planet than the one we had met on. I still felt that I could have done better for these women but the looks of joy on their faces as they disembarked the ship satisfied me for the moment. But it would not end here. I had promised to get them home and it was a promise that I intended to keep. This was a safe haven only while I unraveled the mystery of the Count and his plans, and Vel's involvement in it. And of course Vel still had a debt to pay, both to me and those unfortunate souls whose lives she took so violently.

Oh yes, Vel, and Andrissa, would pay.

END BOOK TWO

To be continued in BOOK 3: LOVE AND OTHER BRUISES

Aurelia's Scrolls

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