

~ The Chronicles of Ratha: Book 3: Love And Other Bruises ~

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.

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

FEEDBACK: I love to hear from the readers, so please drop me a line at aurelia_fan@yahoo.com.au
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Previous books in the series are: [The Chronicles of Ratha - Book One: Revenge is Twelve Hundred Credits](#), and [The hronicles of Ratha - Book Two: Home Is Where The Heart Is](#).

I sat on the hilltop overlooking the valley that was now our home sipping my hot beverage. We had been here for about two months and life was progressing well. Not as well as I would have liked, but progressing nonetheless.

The cave had been cleaned up and was now in daily use. Malt and Rales had worked some minor miracles in delivering power to our lives but our main problem was that we still didn't have satisfactory camouflage for our hideout. We resorted to ancient methods to hide the ships with vegetation, and while it was primitive it was effective. The cave was another matter though and we had no choice but to abandon the front part of our habitat so that from the air the cave looked abandoned.

I relaxed and watched the early-morning rise of the star system's sun, enjoying the slowly warming air slide over my body. These days I found that I have come to appreciate the small things in life. There were no more bars, no more fights and no more distractions. I now saw the magic in a flower or the contentment in the rising of a sun. Who would have thought?

Beri came up the hill and sat down on the grass-covered ground next to me. "Hi there, stranger," I said cheerily.

"You're awfully happy this morning."

"I suppose I am." It was a surprising comment considering the overwhelming amount of work that still needed to be done.

"Something happen that I don't know about?"

"Nope. Just pleased to see you. We haven't had much chance to talk lately."

"That's true." Beri looked out over the valley.

I watched her reaction to the scenery in front of her and she seemed strangely calm and content. I suppose that was how I felt. Suddenly the name of this speck of dust finally came to me. It was Heaven. Yeah... Heaven.

"So what are you thinking about so hard that you have to hide yourself away from the rest of us?" Beri sounded almost hurt.

"Nothing really. I was just enjoying a bit of quiet time with my caffeine synth." I held up my cup as if trying to prove the truth of my words. "It's beautiful up here, isn't it?"

Beri glanced at me sideways wondering if I was spinning some yarn to please her. "Yeah."

"I'm not hiding or anything... really, B. It's just every now and then I like the solitude up here. Clears my mind."

"Are we getting too much for you?" she asked wistfully.

"No! No. Keep in mind that I've spent most of my life alone, B. I just need to step back every now and then and allow life, and time, to pass me by."

"Maybe I should have sent Fen."

"You don't think you can do the sensitive talks? I think you're doing okay." There had been a burning question sitting on my tongue for quite a while now but I didn't know how to bring it up. "How are you, B?"

"Me? Okay. Why?"

"No, how are you here?" I reached over and tapped her temple.

"My head?"

Alright, either she was pretending to be ignorant or she didn't understand what I was asking. I was trying to be delicate but it seemed I had to ask the hard question. "How are you coping

after... Vel?" I still couldn't bring myself to say the word. It took a lot for me to accept that I had been violated on Rigeus, and I had regularly indulged in sex. For someone like Beri who had never experienced sex it would have been devastating.

"Fine." Beri said but I could read the tension in her voice and in her face. She was anything but fine.

"Why do I get the feeling that you're not?"

"I said I'm fine, J!" This was my conversation with Sasha all over again.

"Look-"

"No!" Beri stood and glared down at me. "This is none of your business!"

"Yes it is. You put me in charge and your problem is my problem. You're my friend, Beri. I don't want to see you hurting. Maybe more importantly I was there, B. I went through it too."

Beri's eyes brimmed with tears, barely held in check by her considerable will. "She... I..."

I suspected Beri was trying to justify her anger and despair by saying I wouldn't know what she was going through. In a way I don't. I didn't have a daughter at stake. "Does anyone else know?"

"No." I watched a tear slide down her cheek.

"Not even Fen?"

"No."

"Trust me. Holding it inside is not good."

"And what should I do, huh?"

"Let it out, B. Yell, scream... hit me if it'll make you feel better. Do whatever it takes to come to terms with it."

"You do realize that we are pacifists."

"But I'm sure not one of you has been in this situation before." But Beri didn't answer me. "No one else, right B?" She looked at her feet. "So how did she cope?"

"She didn't."

"Didn't your sisters help her?"

"How, J? None of us had the knowledge of what she was feeling. She didn't want our help."

"She may not have asked, Beri, but she certainly needed it. All you had to do was be there. Let her know that she wasn't alone. Let her know that you empathize with her." Geez, I was getting good at this therapy stuff. "And in my case let her know that I know *exactly* what she is going through."

"I... I... can't."

"Yes, you can. You are withdrawing from your sisters and you are withdrawing from life."

"I can't help it. I've lost everything."

"How do you know?"

"What?"

"How do you know that your chance at motherhood is gone?"

"I just know." Beri was confused, I could see that, but if this was the first step on the road back to life then she could remain confused.

"But has anyone seen it? Been there for it to happen? You believe you can't have children because your mother said so?"

"It's our culture, J. Don't go talking about things you know nothing about!" Beri stood facing me, her face contorted in anger.

"That's true, Beri, but I'm looking at it from a fresh perspective. You have no proof that it's true but it's your belief that is driving you to give up."

"My belief is all I have!" she yelled.

I stood and moved closer to her. "Surely you know that in this universe not everything is controlled by belief."

"Why can't you leave me alone!"

"Because you are hurting, B."

"It's all your fault!"

There. It was said. It hurt that she said it but it was something that had been eating away at me. I had been responsible for a lot of things regarding these women and some of them were not pleasant. Beri's violation. Rice's death. Both weighed heavily on me.

"Yes, it's true. And I would undo everything if I could but I can't." I grabbed her hand and felt

the instinctive withdrawal but I held on tight. "I'm truly sorry, B, for everything."

Beri took a deep breath and reigned in her escalating emotions. "No," her voice broke as she spoke. "No, you warned us and we ignored it."

"No, B. I shouldn't have interfered in the status quo."

"Quo? We have a quo?"

I laughed gently. "No, B. I should have kept my nose out of your business."

"What's done is done." Beri sighed and she slumped to the ground. "I just don't know what to do."

"Then talk to me. Let me in, Beri."

She looked at me for quite a while. I could see there was an internal struggle within her. "She...", her eyes closed for a moment before re-opening and focusing on me, "she touched me, J. I didn't like it and she wouldn't stop."

"I know, hon, the same thing happened to me." I didn't want to drag this all up but I thought it was necessary for her to face it head on so she could live again. "Over twenty women pushed, prodded and felt me up, B."

"Felt you... up?"

"Yeah, what Vel did to you. You know, she touched you intimately."

"I don't understand. Intimately?"

I felt embarrassed talking about this to her, maybe more embarrassed for her than for me, so I thought a visual demonstration would be more precise. "Yeah, she touched you... here." My hand slid down to my crotch and stayed there.

"No."

"No... what?" Now I didn't understand.

"She didn't touch me there."

"She didn't?" I was starting to wonder what actually did happen. "Where did she touch you?"

"Do I have to? It... it... wasn't nice." Beri was struggling but I had to know.

"For me, please. Just show me." Her hand rose to cover her breasts and then moved down to her ass. So it seemed that Vel was content to just make Beri uncomfortable, and for that I would be

grateful. Was Beri so naïve that she didn't know the difference between being touched and violation?

"Because of her I can't have children." Yes, she was.

I wanted to laugh out loud but I knew doing that would hurt Beri beyond comprehension. It took all my concentration to keep a serious face. "Listen to me, B. What Vel did to you was awful, I know that, but rest assured you *will* have your daughter."

"No! She took that away from me!" Her hands thumped the ground.

"B, your body is still pure." Maybe her definition and my definition of pure were different. If I were her I'd be accepting my definition as the right one. "She did not violate you."

"She did! She took my innocence, J, and for that I will *never* forgive her!"

"And she will pay, B, I'll make sure of that. But it's important to me that you find yourself. Only when you are whole will I be whole." What the hell was I saying?

"What do you want from me?" Beri said.

"I want the old Beri back. She's in there, you know." I tapped Beri's chest. "Vel was messing with you, B, but she didn't violate your body. Trust me, I know." I grabbed her hand and brought it to my lips, kissing the back of it gently. "You will have your daughter, Beri. I promise." Maybe I had gone too far. How could I make a promise like that? Beri had one thing missing from her life and I wondered if I had given it to her... hope.

Beri stood and looked down at me. "That is a promise you can't keep, my friend."

"Why can't you at least keep an open mind, huh?" This damned woman was frustrating me. "Can you do that for me?"

"What is the point?"

"The point, B? The point is that you still have faith... faith in the impossible, faith in me and most importantly faith in you. Your whole life is based on faith, B, so it should come easy to you."

"Not this faith, Jordana. I... I don't know if I can."

"Fine." I was hitting my head against Bessie's outer shell and getting nowhere. "Then Vel has won." I hung my head in defeat. "Go back to the Noorthi, B. Can you organize some planting of crops or something?"

Beri nodded her head and walked away, following the well-worn path from the plateau to the cave. Damn she was stubborn. But bringing up her problem also raised the question of my own

pain. Up until now I had put it in a compartment in my mind and locked it away. Now, like Pandora's Box, it was open and needed addressing.

I looked over the valley covered in lush vegetation. Using the beautiful landscape as a cushion for my emotion I looked into that box in my mind. Logically I accepted that what had happened was beyond my control. Those women took advantage of me, finding every possible nook and cranny on me and abusing it. But that didn't stop the shame I felt and the guilt that I couldn't stop it.

I suppose I at least had the benefit of experiencing sex in most of its forms, so I was a bit numbed to what they did, but it still bothered me. Not that I would show it to anyone.

But it raised a serious question for me. The Noorthi had taken away drinking for me. Had sex become distasteful as well? Would I ever find out? Suddenly it became necessary to find out. Okay, so maybe it was also a way of 'climbing back in the saddle' as they used to say. I wanted to know if I could do it and whether I would enjoy it. Like most things in my life I would tackle the problem head on. And, as I said to Beri, I didn't want that bitch Vel to win. She had taken too much from me already.

I brought the mug to my lips but it was empty. My time off had run out and I had to return to real life. Unless I actively went looking for it I was going to remain as celibate as the women who surrounded me.

A familiar figure intercepted me on my way back to the cave. "Have you become my shadow now, Malt?"

"I'm bored."

"Have you done your chores?"

"Ages ago."

"What about the shield for the cave?" There was nothing worse than a bored Malt, except maybe a bored Malt AND Rice.

"I can see it in my head but I don't know how to do it."

"And the computer can teach you only so much, huh?"

"Yeah, something like that." Had Malt had been talking to the Noorthi?

"Maybe you need a mentor."

"A... what?"

"A mentor... a teacher."

"A teacher? I'm not going back to lessons!" Malt backed away quickly. "And you can't make me!"

"Whoa! Whoa! Hang on a minute. This mentor will help you to figure out how to move your ideas from here," I tapped Malt's temple, "to reality. You could achieve so much more, kid. I have faith in you." I used the term affectionately and I saw her eyes glisten. Of course, I still had to find someone who would fit the bill.

"I want to know more but I don't want to do the boring stuff, Jordana. I want it to be fun."

"And it will be. This is a way for you to learn, Malt." I put my arm over her shoulder and we walked back to the cave together.

* * *

My search for a teacher, suitable or not, didn't go smoothly. It seemed that there wasn't a lot of available teachers out there in the cosmos, at least not for what I had in mind. If it wasn't for Rales I would probably still be looking. He was proving to be a very useful addition to our group, not only as a first-class mechanic but also for the connections he had across the system. No matter what I asked him he knew somebody who knew somebody who knew somebody.

In the two following months it took to organize a meeting with this so-called teacher we finally had our hands on the extra ships I had asked Rales about what seemed like eons ago. They weren't new but they were pristine, having only a few million miles on the clock, and more importantly they were armed. It seemed that one of Rales' many friends knew someone trying to get rid of a couple of ships and the deal was made.

The only problem with two more ships, besides the extra fuel, was finding somewhere to park them. The plateau that held the two existing ships was full, leaving us to land the others some distance away from the cave. Actually, we later found out that the extra fuel was not going to be a problem at all. The fuel rods we, errr, liberated at the Juno airport would be helpful. In amongst the pile were a handful of different rods, ones that we found by accident, were re-chargeable. We had somehow found The Count's private stash of regenerating power rods and I was thrilled.

I finally got sick of all the walking to and from the new ships so Rales arranged a couple of skippers to add to the fleet. The tiny hover-scooters made light work of the distance and were well worth the expense. All this extra hardware put a serious dent in our credit reserve but it was all necessary.

However, Beri suddenly became suspicious of all this sudden wealth. She approached me one day after breakfast wanting to know the whole truth.

"A friendly beneficiary?" Beri glared at me. "No? Don't believe that one?"

"What are you **not** telling me?"

"What makes you think that I'm not telling you everything, B?"

"Because you're skirting around the issue. Where did you get the credits?"

She was going to kick my ass. "They were in the ship when we... I stole it. Some of the barrels in the hold were full of ochre and the others were full of credits."

"You... stole... it????!?!?"

Why did I feel like a five year-old being scolded by her mother? "Yes, I did! We have to take the opportunities as they fall, B."

"Stealing the ship is one thing, J, but this..."

"Listen to me. I'm glad I stole them if, for nothing else, than to piss Vel off. This money would have gone to Marius and his war, Beri. At least we're making better use of it."

"By buying armed ships, J?"

"I didn't start this, B, just remember that. They are threatening our very survival, in case you haven't noticed. I'm Ratha here and it was my decision. Consider it restitution for all the harm they have caused us."

While she was not happy she accepted my decision for now.

"Beri, can't you see that all this has made our lives a little more bearable? Proper food, better clothes than the rags you had." Although I did notice that most of them still wore their skimpy outfits a lot of the time. At night they would add a coat or a wrap but that was it. It seemed old habits died hard. Not that I minded the view.

In the intervening months while trying to find a teacher we expanded our little troop. Rales found us eight men who were prepared to relocate here and do the grunt work. In fact, one or two of them also had some flight experience as well, which would come in handy if one of us went down sick or injured.

I took one of the skippers and finally did some exploring on my own. Life, as we knew it, was the valley and the cave but there was so much more out there beyond what we could see, maybe hiding things that could be invaluable to us. The skipper rose swiftly up the outside wall to the top and as I suspected there was a plateau on top. It was not perfectly flat but pitted with small cracks and steps where plates of rock had broken off along flat planes, giving the plateau a sort of patchwork look.

But what struck me about the wall is that it seemed to be part of escarpment that jutted out into the valley in a 'V' shape, forcing the small river in the valley to divert its course around the obstruction. The most important point was that there was another side to this wall, one that fed my imagination and creativity.

The skimmer ran across the surface, hovering above the roughness of the plateau, to the other side. In my estimation the distance was about a mile from one side to the other. Now if the wall was intact then I could see possibilities for our life suddenly becoming a lot easier... well, at least for the men.

The vehicle descended slowly so that I could study the outlay of the wall. I wasn't trying to be a geologist but it was better to find any obvious flaws in the wall before any serious work was carried out. While there was the occasional hole and crack there was nothing there that I thought would be a hindrance to a little excavation.

I guessed where the hole would begin and imagined my grand scheme. If the men were willing, we could carve out a large cavern to house the ships. Would they go for it? After all they were the ones that would do the work. While the end result would be worth it convincing them of it will be another matter. Maybe I better start with Rales first.

Surprisingly, they went for the idea, as long as I could lay my hands on a couple of mining lasers. Of course Rales came up with a name and managed to arrange the exchange on the same planet that Malt and I were going to talk to her teacher. Everything was coming together and I was a happy woman. Now, if Vel would die I'd be an ecstatic woman.

* * *

We took the new ship for our trip to the planet Locar so I could get a feel for the vehicle. The flight didn't take too long with the hyperdrive, leaving Malt and I with little time for conversation. Located on the far side of Calceter and Juno, the planet was a pretty little thing. Fractionally larger than our own moon, Locar was at the crossroads of a number of star systems, becoming the hub of all technical and mechanical expertise, and spare parts, so it seemed strangely appropriate that we were meeting up with Malt's teacher here.

We were directed to land near the perimeter of the spaceport at city of Corwel, forcing me to walk the entire length of the field. Damn autocrats! I had a meeting with Rales' friend of a friend of a friend concerning the mining lasers, but Malt wasn't too happy about being left behind. I would be sending the lasers to the ship once the deal was made and she would have to pay the courier when they were safely on board. One rule I learned early in my career was to never pay up-front. I lost a lot of money that way and it made me very wary of deals made with people I didn't know.

Actually, I had another reason to leave Malt behind. I wanted to get the kid a present and I couldn't do that with her tagging along, at least not if I wanted it to be a surprise. She was not happy but I wasn't going to budge. I wanted... no, I *needed*... to see that look in her eye when she opened the gift because I got such a kick out of seeing her happy.

I had met with the miner who had the lasers and the deal went smoothly. Next on my list of things to do was to go in search of Malt's present. I checked my chronometer to see how much time I had before I had to rendezvous with her for the lunch meeting. There was still plenty of time and the lasers were already on their way to the ship, so it was safe to move about without

stumbling on the kid.

"Hey there!"

I ignored the call because I didn't know anyone here.

"Tall, dark and dangerous!"

I didn't know why I looked around. Did I think that description fitted me? The fact that I *did* look made me realize that I probably did. "Tall, dark and dangerous" she said. Well, I was tall and had long black hair, so I supposed that fitted. Dangerous? My memory went back to where this adventure began... in a bar and the fight that ensued. Just the mention of my initial was enough to make my opponent blanch. So, yeah, I suppose I was dangerous.

"You talking to me?" I finally turned to face the caller and asked. I stopped short. Wow! She was some looker! I glanced around in case she really was talking to someone else but no, she was looking directly at me. My finger came up and pointed at my chest.

"Yes you, gorgeous."

Okay, what was going on? I normally didn't get compliments in the middle of the street by a total stranger, because of my 'dangerous' look I suppose, so I looked around in case there were troopers around ready to jump me.

"I'm sorry. Do I know you?"

"Not yet," she purred.

I tried to focus on her to gauge her sincerity but she was just simply stunning. Easily as tall as I was, she had fine porcelain-like features and long blond hair. She made me think of that ancient Earth word 'Amazon'. Athletic and slightly muscular in build she didn't have an ounce of fat on her. The pit of my stomach growled. I felt something alright... lust.

It probably had something to do with the fact that I hadn't had sex since... since... oh Almighty Carn! I hadn't done anything since this whole fiasco began! Seeing this woman, and the fact that there was some response from her, made me realize how empty that part of my life had been. Were my memories of conquest slowly fading with time or quickly fading with ochre? Please, oh please! Anything but that! The only thing that kept me sane amongst these women was the fact that I still had my memories. I was on the highway to hell.

But something held me back from the obvious offer. Fen. Would this one indiscretion destroy what I was trying to build with Fen? Would she find out? Would I feel guilty afterwards and throw myself on her mercy? Would she even care since she didn't indulge in sex? Every voice in my head was screaming me to get out but my libido wasn't going to give up without a fight. Just once. That was all I needed to carry me through a little while longer. One unemotional session of sex.

She sauntered up to me and ran a long fingernail down my tattered shirt. My eyes followed the path that finger took and I suddenly noticed how shabby my clothes looked. Maybe I could invest in a new set while I was planet-bound. My mind gave up its mental shopping list when her finger dipped into my cleavage. I began to sweat as she inched closer. My heart was really thumping, either from her close proximity or the thought about what it might lead to.

"So, is it a done deal?"

A done deal. Ahhh, now I understood.

"I don't think so." I stepped back to break the contact and looked her straight in the eye. "Thanks but no thanks."

"What happened?" She looked genuinely confused.

"I may be desperate but not *that* desperate."

"Hey!" She sounded nearly insulted. "What's going on? I thought you were interested."

"Just like you're interested in credits?" I asked.

"Credits? What credits?"

"Like a business transaction?" Did she really want me to spell it out?

"Bus... oh no, no, no, no. Nothing like that." She tried to make contact again but my brain had regained control. Her spell was broken and I was ready to move on.

"Try it on someone else, honey."

"But I thought we had something here."

"We did, until you tried to seal the deal. Better luck with the next sucker." I walked off knowing I was leaving her standing there looking like the Sporian fish of Weemod Minor. It wasn't really a fish as such because it stood upright and could breathe in both water and air, but its mouth opening and closing as it gasped for air was the image that had stuck in my mind. Yeah, she would be standing there with her mouth opening and closing in confusion. I sure showed her.

Mentally I was slapping myself on the back for being strong. I hoped that Fen appreciated the sacrifice I made. Not that she would ever hear about it...

I continued with my shopping trip, putting the mystery woman out of my mind. I had a few things to pick up before I met up with Malt to meet her new mentor. Well, I *hoped* this guy would be her mentor. The kid was way ahead of me in the brains department and she was in need

of some guidance in her life.

I really hated doing this stuff, especially now. Who did I trust? Every time I brought someone new into our little community I got stressed out with the thought that this was one more person who could betray us to The Count.

Actually, now that I thought about it, I was surprised I wasn't a lump of jello from all the stress and anxiety I was carrying on my shoulders. I suppose all that was holding me together right now was spit and wishful thinking.

The shop I had been looking for finally came into view. It was certainly nothing to look at, but for what I was looking for and no questions asked it was probably what I should have expected. The door slid aside as my presence was detected and I entered.

It was dark and crowded with broken down pieces of machinery and junk. It pretty much looked like the moon of Calceter except it had air. But I was after something specific.

"May I help you?" The reedy voice came from someone behind a desk at the far wall of the building. One just never knew what could happen in these sorts of establishments. There were plenty of places for someone to hide and jump you, whether to capture you or to simply rob you, so I always went in with a certain amount of caution.

"Yes, I was looking for a tool set."

"I see. Anything in particular?"

"I have a child who is particularly gifted in constructing machines from scratch and I wanted to get her a very extensive set of tools."

The middle-aged owner of the shop studied me. I think he was trying to see what amount of money I wanted to spend. "How extensive?" he asked tentatively.

I knew if I said everything it would fill up the ship. No, I wanted something a bit more select. "I want all the basic equipment, you know the essentials, then after that in order of importance until it fills..." I looked around for something to compare a size to. My gaze settled on an old generator. "...something that size."

"Fine. Do you want me to supply the box also?"

"If you please. How long do you need and how much?"

He bent down for a moment and took out an abacus, flicking the beads rapidly one way then the other. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully before answering. "I could have it for you tomorrow at a cost of..." he hesitated.

It wasn't going to be cheap, I knew that, but his hesitation told me it was probably going to cost

quite a bit.

".... twelve hundred and fifty credits." He held his breath as he awaited my answer.

Twelve hundred credits. I remembered that number very well. It was what my life was worth.

"You can have your twelve fifty," I said, "if it includes the box and delivery to the ship."

"Done!" he answered, a smile crossing his face. It was probably the best deal he had had in quite a while. "Come back tomorrow, here, at lunchtime," he added in expectation of his payoff.

"Until then." I wandered back through the shop to the front door and I noticed a few things that could make our domicile a bit more comfortable but I decided to leave them until I came back. I didn't want to be lugging them all over Corwel. That was assuming they were still there tomorrow.

I still had a little time up my sleeve before my rendezvous with Malt. The incident with the woman in the street brought my state of dress to my attention so I went in search of some sort of tailor, clothier or fashionista, whatever they called it these days. All I wanted was sturdy, practical clothes. It wasn't like I was on the prowl for a girlfriend or anything so as long as I wasn't in tattered rags I was fine. However, it seemed that I had reached that magical line between clothes and rags and it was time for an update.

I browsed the stalls in general as I wandered along, finally having to ask for directions when I couldn't find a clothing house for myself. I hated asking for directions.

I found the side street in question, trying to decide whether the walk down the suspect street was worth the prize at the end of it. There was still human-like traffic using the alley and it seemed to be bustling enough to guarantee a modicum of safety. My paranoia was rearing its ugly head again.

About two-thirds along the alley stood the doorway to the clothing store. Above the door was its name written in Scyrian, and it liberally translated to 'Shamar's Portal of Pulchritude'. It was more like 'Shamar's Basement of Bullshit' if you asked me. I hated shopping so if it had anything near what I wanted I would be satisfied. The thought of all those women in a crowded room fighting over the last piece of clothing in the sale bin just sent shivers down my spine. Give me a barroom brawl where it's five to one against me anytime.

I stepped into the artificial light and nearly missed the step down to the shop floor. It had been so bright outside that I was temporarily blinded stepping into the dimmer interior. I bumped into something soft and made my apology. "Excuse me," I muttered.

"You're excused." The owner of the voice had a similar timbre to Fen - low, melodic and touching a chord within me.

She was about to pass me when my hand shot out and wrapped gently around her arm. "My

apologies, ma'am. It was so bright outside my eyes hadn't adjusted to the light in here. I hope I didn't hurt you." I knew I was rambling but it gave my eyes a chance to focus on the woman I was holding.

"No, I'm fine, thank you." The speaker slowly became clear.

Whoa! My mind took a mental step back. The voice may have been melodic but the face... the face... It was probably her third nostril that was throwing me for a loop, and at that moment I was glad for the low lighting so she didn't see my reaction. I stepped to the side to allow her to exit from the shop, inhaling a sickly sweet smell as she passed by that, I assumed, was a perfume of some kind. My gaze followed her out and caught a glimpse of her silhouette as she hesitated in the doorway. Oh Almighty Carn! Had I managed to strike up more than a friendship with her I could have suffered a broken hip or two.

"You were lucky," a female voice said from the semi-darkness.

"I wouldn't go so far as to say that." I didn't want to sound rude. I was sure the creature was considered very beautiful by whatever species she was from.

"I would." The owner of the voice moved closer and into the semi-light.

Now she was more like it. At least she only had two nostrils that I could count. I took the misadventure with Miss Three-Nostrils as a sign and decided not to strike up a friendship, instead moving further into the establishment to solve the dilemma of my ragged clothes. But the woman followed me, standing close to my elbow as I inspected the wares. Finally I couldn't stand the silence any longer. "Can I help you?"

"Maybe."

"What's your problem?"

"You," she said softly.

"Me?" What had I done?

"You are quite a distraction."

"Me?" I repeated. What was it about this planet? Every woman on it wanted me. Maybe there was some sort of cosmic vibe coming off me saying 'desperate female here, up for anything'.

"Would you like to join me for lunch?"

"I'm sorry, ma'am, but I already have a luncheon appointment and it's one that I can't miss."

"Then how about a coffee synth back at my home?" She seemed awfully eager to have me in her house.

My eyes slowly looked her up and down and I could see that she was looking for a casual fling. Now that usually meant she was married and the husband was away on business, so she was ideal for my experiment. There would be no problem with messy breakups or attachments. I could live with that. "Sure."

* * *

"Aren't you coming in?"

I was standing on the woman's doorstep and unable to decide my next move. Why was I even hesitating? Fen and I had no relationship so it wasn't like I was two-timing her. Then why was I feeling guilty like I was? Besides it being against their religion Fen wouldn't risk her chance at having children by having sex.

Come on, J. It's just sex. All my life that's all it has been. Sex. Nothing more. I had never met anyone that I wanted more from. This woman was beautiful, charming and willing, and most of all looking only for a casual meeting. It was perfect. "Sure. Why not?" I answered, taking that final step across her portal.

I entered the building and immediately felt the cooler air. Built of clay blocks it efficiently held back the heat of the day and kept the interior comfortably cool.

"So, where's the husband?" I asked casually.

She turned and looked at me, her eyebrow rose in amusement.

"Girlfriend?" I amended.

"Both are off-world thankfully."

But I wasn't sure whether she was kidding or meant it. At this point it really didn't matter much to me. One quick roll in the sack and I was off. "Soooo.... Errr." I didn't even know the woman's name. Was that a good idea? Would it have been safer just to remain anonymous?

"Deson."

"Jordana, ma'am." I gave her a bow and she seemed amused by my actions. "Something funny?" I was trying to be polite and she thought it was funny.

"Not at all, Jordana. I thought it was just... quaint." Her rich, elegant voice spoke almost condescendingly. Not quite, but almost. "Would you like a drink?"

"Sure." I answered. Maybe a drink was what I needed to calm myself. Normally I would have the woman half-way to the bed by now but I figured this one needed the control. I would have to work at her pace.

Deson disappeared for a number of minutes and I had already finished my inspection of the room I was in. This woman had money, there was no doubt about that, so seducing me was a diversion in her book. Hey, I didn't mind being someone's diversion. She was being mine.

I was about to go looking for her when she emerged. She had changed, if you could call it that, because what she was wearing was very little. Deson handed me the drink but the 'come hither' look told me not to take long finishing that drink. Initially I took a sip and, as I expected, I got that horribly bitter taste in my mouth. Damn! I just had a thought. What if...? I just couldn't bring myself to say the sentence in my head because if I got the same result with sex I might just shoot myself.

I was anxious to get started to find out because I wanted to be put out of my misery one way or the other. Either I was going to be enjoying myself or crying into my pillow. I put the drink down and moved quickly over to my intended target, grabbing Deson roughly and planting my lips on hers.

She pulled back. "Whoa! Hang on there space cowboy! What's the hurry?"

"Do you really want to waste time with small talk?"

"I'm free all day, Jordana." She purred and then smiled.

"Sorry, I'm not."

Her smile dropped. "So this is just a quick hello and goodbye, is that it?" Now she didn't seem so amused.

"I'm afraid it is, Deson honey. I have an appointment that I must keep." I moved in again and this time she didn't fight it, her fingers sliding into my hair and grasping it. There was desperation to our kisses as our tongues slid around one another, fed by the urgency of the meeting. "Where do you want to go?" I muttered between kisses.

"I don't care."

So I lifted her and backed her against the adobe wall of the lounge room, prepared to take her there and then. My lips continued to kiss her, sliding down from her lips to her neck and nipping the soft flesh residing there. Once her back was against the cool brick my hands wandered, finding the hem of the material she was wearing. I was pleasantly surprised that she had nothing on underneath. Despite her words to the contrary she was prepared for my frantic lovemaking.

One hand kneaded her breast while the other sought a baser response. I felt her soft skin under my fingertips as they slid down her body, seeking out her heat instinctively. It had seemed so long that I almost felt like a virgin all over again. Well, if I was truthful with myself my last sex was just before my contact with the Noorthi but being with those women made me think it was an eternity.

There was no doubt that she was excited and that thrilled me. Even after everything that had happened to me I still had the magic touch. Maybe there was some hope for me yet. Her slickness was stirring my blood and my fingers reveled in her enjoyment. At this point my mind was still holding back, allowing me to please the woman under my fingers but not to seek pleasure myself. I thought that was terribly bad form on my part to do that but for the sake of the exercise my question had been answered.

Deson squirmed under my knowing touch, her ragged breathing as restless as her body. "Oh, Jo-" It seemed I had left her speechless. A smile touched my lips as my ego preened under her praise. I can be an egotistical ass sometimes.

One of her hands slid down my arm to my hand buried between her, thighs her fingers entwining with mine. She didn't guide but just wanted to feel what I was doing. I didn't mind and I found the action sort of, well, erotic. There was a twinge in my crotch in answer to the fondling we were both doing to hers.

"Come on, baby," I whispered into her ear as my fingers moved with purpose. Nothing like bringing out the winning one-liners to seal the deal. My mind flitted back to the woman in the street. Was I doing the same thing she did? I used 'to seal the deal' in my head, so did that make me as bad as her? Well, for one thing, I wasn't going to charge Deson for the fun.

But I knew what it was. It was my damned scruples rearing its ugly head. I didn't want meaningless sex because I wanted love, but I wasn't getting love so meaningless sex was all that was left to me. I was going to go crazy going around in circles with the ethics of what I was doing, not to mention the fact that it was terribly rude to be thinking of other things while having sex and not paying attention to the woman in my arms.

I needed to get away and think for a while, and being in Deson's arms was not the right place to be while I sorted this out in my mind. "I've got to go." I stepped back from a disheveled Deson, leaving her leaning against the wall.

"Now?"

When I had accepted the offer I knew I would be cutting it fine. I was already late for the meeting and Malt would be worrying. While I myself didn't get relief, I was greatly pleased that Deson did. Despite the ethical dilemma, the damned ochre hadn't taken it away and I still felt like a red-blooded woman.

"Sorry."

"Can you come back? Tonight?" She sounded nearly desperate.

"Well..." I said despite my concerns. We were staying planet-side tonight because of Malt's tools, so maybe I could sneak out when Malt was asleep. After all, I still wanted to feel the thrill of an orgasm. "It would be late." Then I had a thought. "What about your husband?"

"He's off-world for another week, and late is not a problem."

I had obviously impressed Deson otherwise she wouldn't be asking me to come back. My chest puffed up with the compliment. It was always nice to know I could give a woman what she wanted. That was, of course, if she wasn't a Noorthi. Then I realized that I had answered my own question. Whether I liked it or not, I wasn't leaving Locar until I got laid.

"What time are you on here?"

"We have light for another two days, then dark for the next four."

I looked at her chronometer on the wall and did a swift calculation. "Okay, about one a.m." Despite the weird light and dark periods, it was common practice to stick to the old Earth twenty-four hour system. It made organizing meetings across different star systems easier. Recently, there had been a groundswell amongst the more affluent planets to change to a more liberal local timing system, depending on the circumstances with their own passages of light and dark. The Consortium quashed the idea of local time zones because of the confusion that would erupt. I thought they did it to remind everyone that they were still the boss and, more importantly, they did it just to piss them all off. I had to admit that I rather preferred the one time across the whole universe. For one, when I organized deliveries we were all working on the same page, and secondly, my poor old chronometer would pack it in trying to remember fifteen hundred different time zones all at once.

I made my way to the door as she answered me. "Until one a.m."

I stepped out into the bright sunlight my libido uplifted in the knowledge that I still had one vice left. Tonight I would find out if that vice was fully intact. I muttered a silent prayer to my cosmic karma to grant me this one wish and to hell with everything else.

I worked my way back to the tavern where we were going to meet this guy. Vendors were shoving their wares in my face and I didn't even care. Normally if they got too close I would shove whatever they were selling up their ass but I was in a good mood and blithely ignored their impassioned pleas. Hell, I even asked for directions twice without batting an eye. I just felt too damned good to care.

I was about a hundred feet away from the meeting place when I spotted Malt. She was leaning against the wall in the shade talking to some other girl. So, it looked like she had been busy as well. I noticed that she made no effort to hide her extra arms, which didn't seem to worry who she was talking to, and she positively beamed at the response. *That's my girl.*

"Hey there!" I called a few feet away from her. Malt startled and looked uncertainly at me, like she had been caught doing something bad. Maybe she thought she had. I stopped next to her and leaned back against the wall also, trying to look relaxed and easy. "So, who's your friend?"

"This is... errr..." Malt looked embarrassed. She had been talking to the girl and didn't even know her name. I chuckled. Hadn't I been in that same position only a short while ago?

"Begest, but people call me 'Badger'.

"That's an unusual name. Badger."

"It's a rare Earth animal. People seem to think I'm like one... fearless and once I latch onto something I don't let go."

"Really? And do your parents call you Badger as well?" I studied the girl next to Malt. While she was tiny in stature she had a bubbly personality. It was a shame really that Malt wouldn't get to know her better because while they were opposites, in some ways they were the same. Maybe it was just as well because I don't think Rice would like the competition. A threesome never worked.

Badger's head dropped. "My parents are dead."

Alarm bells were ringing in my head. "So who's looking after you?" I felt I already knew the answer but I just wanted to torture myself by asking anyway.

"No one. I live on the streets."

I didn't want to look at Malt because I knew what I'd see. *Damn it, Malt! Not another one!* But I did look and saw that pleading look in her eyes that I couldn't resist. "Awwwww, shit!" was all I said and walked away and into the tavern.

I heard the giggling behind me. Malt knew she had won this round. But what could I do? If I thought about it, our little community was made up of outcasts and waifs. How could I not take Badger in? I couldn't wait for this teacher of Malt's to knock her down a peg or two because she knew she was just too damned smart for her own good.

I found a booth for the three of us and ordered something to eat. I interrupted Malt's chat with her new friend and uttered one word. "Rice."

Malt's smile faltered for a moment before she picked up the thread of conversation with Badger. Oh yeah, she understood now.

The waiting went on and on and I was on my second drink, whatever it was. Since alcohol no longer held a fascination for me I settled for something more sedate. So here I was sitting sipping something that was loaded with sweetener and not much else. Malt and Badger were already giggling like idiots. If this guy didn't come soon I'd be joining them.

Suddenly a stick figure stopped in front of our table. His eyes would have barely reached my chest if I had been standing up and he was so thin I could have snapped him in two if I felt the inclination to do so.

"You Jeshua... Jeremy... Julia... ???"

"Jordana!" I answered annoyingly. I really, REALLY hated it when someone got my name wrong.

He squinted at me as if trying to get me into focus. "Whatever."

I couldn't believe it. He dismissed me! He dismissed **me**!! "You must be the doc."

"Palmenter Floric."

"So, Palmenter-"

"Palmenter is my title. Floric is my name," he said huffily.

"Whatever." *Two can play that game, buddy.* However I was intrigued. "What's a Palmenter?"

"A scientist of the Royal House."

"Royal House? Hang on, a scientist?" I didn't even know that there was royalty around any more.

"The Consortium thought it sounded good. As for scientist, young lady," he looked me up and down as much as he could with me seated in the booth, "let's just say I'm a hell of a lot smarter than you are."

Now I understood why he was no longer with the Consortium. He was an asshole. More than that, he was an egotistical asshole. Did I need the aggravation? I looked at Malt and saw her dislike. Was I that mean? "Sit down, Floric." Yes, I was.

"What is this offer you have?"

Floric wasn't going to waste time, which was probably a good idea before I spent money buying him a meal. "I'm in need of an inventor of sorts."

"What sort of inventing?" His eyes narrowed behind his rather ancient-looking eyewear. Not that he would have needed it. These days no one had bad eyesight anymore... at least, not unless they wanted it.

I looked at Floric and thought he would be just stubborn enough to refuse any scientific augmentation, despite his supposed history in the field. Maybe that's why he refused. He knew something that the rest of us didn't.

"Nothing explosive, Floric. It's more... defensive." I was being deliberately vague in case he decided not to accept.

"Hmmm." He looked at Malt and Badger and curtly asked, "And what are you two doing here? Shouldn't you be in lessons?" He then glared at me like I was deliberately encouraging their

delinquency.

I looked at Malt and her eyes pleaded with me. "She is the reason you are here, Floric. I'm in need of someone to mentor her. Malt here has an...", I smiled before continuing, "...aptitude for tinkering. She needs someone to guide her."

"Tinkering? You mean inventing."

"Precisely." I knew my options were very narrow indeed, so it was either him or no one.

"However, you will be required to move for the position."

"Move? Leave here?"

"Yes." Maybe this was going to decide the outcome for us all.

"To where exactly?"

"I can't tell you that."

"Does that mean I'm going to be a prisoner?" His suspicion rose once more and he studied me carefully. "Just what is going on here?"

"It's for our safety that your destination remains a secret."

"Who are you in trouble with, because I don't-"

"You listen to me," I hissed as I leaned across the table, "I'm not going to allow you, or anyone else, to get your grubby little hands on knowledge that could be dangerous for us all. You understand me?" I glared at him, giving him my best menacing stare.

He looked at the three of us in turn. "Are you on the run?" he whispered.

"Did I say that?" But I could see the twinkle in his eye behind the clear titanium. Was he excited by the thought of being a wanted man?

"But you said-"

"I didn't say anything, Floric. This is just a teaching position."

"I do not teach!" He was vainly trying to hold onto his dignity, I could see that, but I suspected that he had very little of that dignity left. I had heard bits and pieces about his unceremonious dumping from the Consortium's employment. There had been some clouding of the story as to why but looking at the man today I could see that age and his fractured mind had caught up with him. I was the end of his line.

"From what I hear, Floric, that's about all you're good for now." It was harsh, I know, but he

needed a reality check. "If you take it you will need to sever all ties, at least for now." Maybe it was all too much for him. "Look, Floric, I don't want you to think this is an easy job. It won't be. But, on the other hand, you're not going into a war zone. It's just necessary for all of us to remain under the radar for the moment."

"From who?"

"I give you that and you go looking for a reward. No. It's a once-only offer, Floric. You decide now because I leave with or without you."

"I have to decide this minute?"

"Well, the length of the meal." I waved my hand over the electronic eye on the table and a moment later a squat service droid arrived. "May...I... help... you." The monotone voice of the machine took away the intimacy of the meal. Looking around the tavern no one seemed to mind, so it must have been me. It was just a little bit too clinical for me.

Sure I had a replicator on old Bessie but that was from necessity, not by choice. For one, I was usually too busy avoiding getting caught to worry about cooking and secondly, and probably more importantly, I couldn't cook. That was not to say that I didn't appreciate a home cooked meal every now and then.

We placed our orders but once Floric knew I was paying the bill he ordered like it was his last meal. And THAT gave me my answer. Despite whatever image he was trying to present to me he was desperate and would come.

I looked at Malt to see her furrowed brow. She saw his desperation too and didn't like it. Her eyes met mine and I could see the unspoken question. *Why?* I reached over and patted the back of her hand. *Because it's good for you.* She sighed in resignation. I had won for once.

We didn't talk much over the meal but I watched in amazement as he steadily ate everything that had been put in front of him. Maybe he had a second stomach to handle the volume, I don't know, but for someone whose lean figure wouldn't have cast a shadow he sure as hell ate a lot.

I had been sipping my caffeine synth while he was finishing his dessert. When the final morsel passed his lips I asked, "Well, have you made up your mind?"

He seemed to take his time to answer but he wasn't fooling me. *Come on, old man, say it!* He fussed over his plate, dabbed at his lips and placed the serviette down on the now empty plate. I was about to withdraw the offer because he was seriously pissing me off. We both knew it was a show but that didn't mean I had to like it.

"Yes. When?"

That was all he said. "We leave tomorrow around lunchtime."

"Until then." He stood to leave but I stopped him.

"Whoa! You're not leaving alone. Malt?" The young girl looked at me. "Would you and Badger escort Palmenter Floric to his house and watch him while he packs his things?"

"You don't trust me?" His voice was filled with incredulity.

"No, I don't."

I addressed my buddy. "Once he's packed, Malt, show him back to the ship and you all wait there for me. You better get Badger to collect her things as well."

"So why are we waiting around until tomorrow?" Malt was just too nosy for her own good.

"I'm waiting to pick up something."

"What something?"

"Something that's none of your business, missy!" But I did grin at her, taking the sting out of the words. The moment she grinned back at me I knew I shouldn't have said that. Damn the kid! If she kept this up I'd never surprise her. It was then that I decided to go back to the shop and see if I could hurry things along. If I couldn't change the surprise then maybe I could change the timetable. I couldn't have the kid thinking I was predictable.

I watched Malt and Badger leave, allowing Floric to lead the way. In a way I felt sorry for the poor old guy. Little did he know he was entering female hell and hot on his heels were two of the meanest hounds in the universe.

I spared a smile at the sight of the three of them heading off towards his home, wherever that was, before turning to find the shop again. It wasn't much time but I would take whatever he had. With some luck I could get it aboard the ship before Malt's return. Of course this changed my plans for the middle of the night. Damn! And I was looking forward to that!

It took a wrong turn or two before I finally reached my destination. The door swept aside at my arrival and I entered the dimness with a certain amount of familiarity.

"Back again so soon?"

How did he do that? I could barely see him at the other end of the shop, so unless he had superhuman eyesight he must have cheated. I scanned the ceiling and found this secret weapon. Why was I not surprised that he had visual surveillance of the front door?

"Yeah, plans have changed." I yelled as I walked down the aisle towards him. My voice dropped as I got closer to him. "Do you have anything for me?"

"I've only managed to put together a small kit. I could have the other items for you by morning."

I could see the disappointment there as his big sale was flying out the window.

"I'm sorry. It looks like we'll be leaving before the evening bell." Because day and night was one in the same here, the local lawmakers resorted to marking sunrise and sunset with an alarm.

He lay what he had on the table, wrapped in a cloth. He wanted to show me what he had found but it was useless as far as I was concerned. Apart from the most basic of mechanic's tools I wouldn't have the faintest idea what he was showing me.

I bought the set for two hundred credits and eased his pain by buying some of his spare 'junk', finding a couple of portable generators, heat amplifiers, and lengths of old carbine sheath which we could use to cover outdoor shelters. Just before I left I even found a broken down sub-light communication system. Sub-light hadn't been used for many years but as we had nothing, sub-light was an improvement. It wasn't working so I got it dirt cheap, but I was relying on Malt, Rales or Floric to fix it.

The shop owner graciously leant me a hover trolley to get the stuff to the ship, however he wasn't that generous that he left me alone with it. So all the way back to the vessel he was constantly trying to sell me something. By the time we got there I didn't have the heart to tell him that he was steadily losing another customer by harping on about his wonderful merchandise.

So, here I stood in front of my ship waiting for Malt to return. I looked at my chronometer to see it was just short of the evening marker. If they didn't get back soon we would be here until the morning bell. While it was still light there was a curfew on travel during the 'night' hours. It was hard enough to sleep while it was still light without the added noise of ships coming and going. I have to admit that I won't be too heartbroken if the kids miss the bell.

The deadline came and went and still no sign of my passengers. I had a lot going on in my head, what with my growing community and all, and if I wanted to stop my head from exploding I was going to have to delegate. That was something I had difficulty with because I had never found someone who thought like me and would do the job the way I wanted it done. But I knew I could stretch myself only so far and I needed to start trusting these people with the day-to-day running of the little village.

Ha! What a thought that was. I was never one to conform to the rules but here I was trying to enforce them. Maybe I should just let Beri and Fen have their little committees and divorce myself of the whole proceedings. Rules and regulations were never my style anyway.

I immersed myself in thought, trying to plan the next few days of my life, which really wasn't my life any more. Suddenly I had become an administrator and I didn't even see it coming.

"Hey!" Finally a familiar voice drew me out of my trance. I looked up and saw the scrawny doc and two snarkophants. Well, that's what they looked like. Not literally, of course, because they were big heavy ugly beasts of burden but they were well known throughout the universe for their remarkable ability to carry ten times their own weight. The doc was carrying a case, leaving the rest to poor Malt and Badger. Even with her four arms, Malt was struggling under the weight.

"Where's the food replicator?" I asked jokingly.

"Do I need one?" Floric asked innocently.

"Are you sure it's not amongst all that junk?"

"Junk?!?!?" Floric was most offended at my offhand remark. "I'll have you know that in there is my most delicate equipment!"

"And you're getting the kids to carry it? That was brave."

"And that's not all of it," Malt piped in.

"There's more?"

"You did say that I wouldn't be back for quite a while. Well, I need all this." It was apparent that Floric wasn't leaving without the contents of his entire house going along as well.

"Malt, how much more?"

"More than one trip," she replied.

My ship had more than enough space to take everything he had but it was a matter of principle that I was objecting. Still, he did say 'equipment'. Maybe whatever he was carrying would make up for the shortfall in Malt's present. Then there was Deson. She was still in the back of my mind and the extra trip or two to pick up Floric's belongings would push our departure back safely into the curfew hours. Hey! I admit it. I have a selfish streak in me and this particular streak was telling me I had the time.

* * *

I found myself standing on Deson's doorstep with a few minutes to spare. It took some work to get all of Floric's belongings to the ship then settling everyone down to sleep. I had debated with myself about this rather impulsive act all the way to Deson's house. Maybe I should have stayed put and slept the night away but I just knew that if I didn't take this opportunity I may never have this chance again.

I did, however, lock Floric in his room as a precaution, leaving a sleeping Malt safely tucked up next to Badger. Damned they were so cute together! There was a moment of guilt as I watched the two young women cuddle up together. What sort of a message was I giving them by going to get laid? But damn it! I was sick of giving and giving and not getting anything in return.

So here I was ready to take that step that would satisfy a basic need in me. I knew I shouldn't feel guilty about it but somehow I did. My hand rose and passed over the electronic eye, announcing my arrival. Too late now.

"Hey!" Deson had a surprised look on her face.

"Didn't think I'd come back?" Maybe she wasn't expecting me.

"The thought did cross my mind, but I hoped you would." She smiled and stepped aside to allow me to enter.

I walked into the familiar living room and looked around cursorily. It's funny how humans are creatures of habit. I already knew what was in the room and yet I looked. Maybe something was different. But the question was 'why did I care?' After tonight I would never see the woman again so if she had a giant phallic statue to the deity Ornus on a pedestal surrounded by six dancing naked women I shouldn't care less.

Well, this was awkward. I stood there with my hands in my pockets wondering what I was supposed to do next. Do I have the unnecessary pre-orgasmic drink or do I just grab her and get this show on the road? Maybe Deson read my mind because she pulled one of my hands out of my pockets and led me towards what I assumed would be the bedroom. Now she was talking!

"I won't bite... really," she joked.

"Sorry. I wasn't sure what was expected of me."

"Lots of things, J, but I won't waste them on formalities."

Now I supposed I should have twigged that something was wrong when she called me J, but stupid old me wasn't listening to my brain at this point. Regions further south were driving this baby tonight.

We arrived at the bed and she began to reach for my clothes. She certainly was in a hurry. Maybe she had a ship to catch, I don't know, but she was undressing me faster than I could remove the offending clothing. I glanced at the bed and it was enormous.

"That's a *big* bed," I stated huskily.

"Yeah, my husband is a little on the large side," she answered between nips of my skin. Large? The guy must have been monstrously huge. "He's Vendan." Ahhh, that explained it. That particular species prided itself in its well endowed proportions and wealth, in their culture, was often determined by the size of the owner in question. Over the years they had physically mutated themselves searching for short-cuts to the physical perfection that would guarantee their affluence. Looking at the size of the bed he slept in this guy that must have been loaded.

I'd only seen a couple of Vendans in my lifetime and I have to say that no amount of money would encourage me to climb into the same bed with them, so unless this particular guy had some hidden talent Deson was obviously in it for the money.

All I can say is that this woman was a fast worker. In the time it took for me to think about what

her husband looked like she had me naked. The air was cool but not cold but it was enough to brush my nipples erect. Or was it the fact that Deson stepped back and with two swift hand movements her attire dropped to the floor, leaving her as naked as I was? Why did I get the feeling that she was well practiced at this?

Suddenly the moment didn't seem so special and that I was one in a long line of somebodies passing through her life. And yet wasn't I doing the same thing? I was trying to make some emotional attachment to the moment when I had gone into it as a diversion.

A gentle shove had me on my back on the bed. I was about to move myself towards the center when Deson stopped me. "It's easier here," she whispered. I sat up to see what she was doing and my breath caught in my throat as her tongue found the heat of me while her hands gripped my thighs and eased them apart, settling herself on her knees on the floor. Was she on the clock or something? Was I supposed to leave the cash on the table afterwards?

Her tongue teased me and all thought left my brain. With every lick of her tongue my body responded as it twitched to her rhythm. Even as I screamed out in passion she continued her assault, her fingers adding to her delightfully agile tongue. It went on and on and just when I thought my body would collapse she stopped.

Hallelujah! Praise Almighty Carn! I couldn't say how happy I was that I was still able to feel that particular vice. A lot had been riding on tonight's performance... my sanity, for one.

"Just lie still," she whispered to me. Her hands rose up my body to my breasts and began tracing a path around them.

"Wha..." My mouth, and my body, felt like jello. "What about you?" I felt guilty that I was getting all the attention.

"This is *your* night."

Who was I to argue? "Alright. If you say so."

"I *do* say so," she muttered, right before her lips kissed my skin, sliding up slowly to join her roving hands.

I didn't think I had another orgasm in me so soon but she somehow managed to do just that. Whatever the woman had she should market it as an all-purpose aphrodisiac then she wouldn't need to be married to that husband of hers... unless, of course, she was into that sort of kinky sex. Hmmm. Maybe I should introduce her to Vel. Then again, maybe not. One Vel in this universe was one Vel too many.

Her hands slid slowly over my stomach, lightly massaging my skin as they went. It was an unhurried and thorough seduction, designed to relax me even further. Any more relaxed and I'd be asleep. Her index finger slid through my pubic hair, residing on the small bundle of nerves. Slowly her finger circled it, neither hard nor soft in its touch but more a firm determination to see

me at that idyllic place once more. But all the stimulation was slowly turning to pain. The saying 'the agony and the ecstasy' came to mind and at that point I knew exactly what it meant. I wanted her to stop and to continue, but was it worth the pain for that one final orgasm? I must have debated in my head for too long because that familiar swell was gathering momentum in my loins.

I barely heard her words over the din in my ears. "Come on, baby, one more time." One more time and I wouldn't have to worry about Fen, Beri or Vel... I'd be dead. But I couldn't stop that tidal wave from crashing over me as my body heaved to its own selfish desires and all I could do was hold on and hope I didn't drown.

It took quite a few moments before I was aware of my surroundings, just barely acknowledging someone clapping.

"I've got to give it to you, J. You always knew how to enjoy yourself."

That voice! My hand rose and covered my eyes. I had just done the most foolish thing of my life. Lifting my hand away I sought out Deson, who now stood next to my mortal enemy. I had been so concerned about betrayal from within that I let my suspicion skip a total stranger. I had no one to blame by myself for this one.

"Hello, Vel." What was it about Vel and me being naked?

"Long time, no see, J. You've caused me a lot of trouble."

"Good." I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and sat up. Every eye in the room was on me, from my crotch to my breasts, and let me tell you it was uncomfortable. I had a horrible flashback to Rigeus and my day in the sun.

Vel grabbed my clothes off the floor and handed them to a trooper standing behind her. "Search them." He did as she asked, taking the credits that were in my pockets.

"Hey!" I complained, not that it would have done any good. The dozen troopers watching me shoved their laser rifles forward in threat. There was little I could do so I held my hands up in surrender.

"Get dressed," Vel said as she nodded to the guard with my clothes. He threw them at me and I caught them swiftly. But nobody moved.

"Don't I get some privacy?" Not that I expected any. I buttoned my mouth shut to stop any smart-ass remark escaping my lips. At this point I didn't want her to change her mind about my state of dress, or undress as the case could be. Being naked outside on Rigeus was one thing, but being paraded through a city of this size in my birthday suit was **not** on my to-do list.

"It's a bit late for that, J. Everyone's seen everything you have." She chuckled at my obvious annoyance and it was one more thing to get under my skin.

I slipped my legs into my trousers and leaned over to stand up. Something cold landed on my skin at the base of my spine, trickling down to my ass crack. What the hell was that? I wanted to check it out but any sudden movement from me could set off a fire fight that would probably put a dozen holes in me. So I let it pass, even though I felt my nose crinkle and my eyes squeeze shut as I stood and the cold traveled further down into my butt crack. By the time I did up my trousers the cold had warmed and I couldn't feel it anymore. It was just going to have to stay put until later. Then again, considering where it was sitting I didn't think I wanted to know what it was anyway.

Just as I slipped my arms into the sleeves of my shirt, my boots came flying at me and hit me in the chest. I had to move fast to catch them before they fell to the floor.

"Nice catch," Vel mumbled. "You have thirty seconds to get dressed otherwise you go out as is."

I said nothing as I scrambled to get my boots on and button up my shirt. I fell short of the allotted time by two buttons, but at least I'd covered all the essentials. For the moment Vel was calling the shots and there was nothing I could do about it.

"What, J? No smart comment?" She chuckled softly as I glared at her. "You disappoint me."

It was like I had an Edon worm wriggling around in my mouth, its bitter taste ready to make me puke. The words wanted to come out and I was hard pressed to hold them in because Vel had the knack of bringing out the insults in me.

"Okay, be boring then. Take her to the ship."

Two troopers approached me with magnetic manacles in their hands. Before they manhandled me or, in this case woman-handled me, I held out my arms to await the shackles. They clipped them on around my wrists, not too tightly but firm enough that I felt them constantly. The guards took a few steps back before Vel touched her belt and the two bracelets clamped together, holding my wrists in place with a strong magnetic field.

There was no point in struggling because I knew the manacles were escape proof. A buddy of mine in the Consortium Corps had a set and we had tested it a while back. The only way out was the control button that activated it. They used to have ankle manacles as well but after a number of broken bones and one or two deaths it was deemed unsafe to use both at the same time. One small flaw in the system was that it occasionally malfunctioned and the ankle and wrist bracelets attracted to one another with devastating force. I had heard of one guy who got folded in half backwards when the manacles backfired, snapping his spine in two.

As I was being escorted out of the house I stopped in front of Deson. "I hope it was worth it."

"Twenty thousand credits!" she exclaimed gleefully. The bitch wasn't even repentant.

But it was nice to know that my value had gone up so dramatically. I snickered at the thought but

it came out as nothing more than a quick exhale out my nose.

"What's so funny?" Vel asked curiously.

"Nothing." I wouldn't give her the satisfaction of an explanation. I got pushed in the back and I moved, stepping out of the house and into the evening sunlight. We gathered out in the street awaiting Vel's arrival.

She stopped for a moment and nodded to her captain of the guard. He turned and walked back into the building, his hand reaching for his weapon. A moment later I heard the tell-tale blast from a pistol and then silence.

"Was that really necessary?"

"I suppose not," Vel replied blandly.

"They why do it?" It was a bit of a rhetorical question I suppose because I had a feeling that I knew what the answer would be.

"Because I can."

And that was Vel in a nutshell. She had come a long way from her days merely as an enthusiast of rough bedroom games. She was now a fully-fledged sociopath.

The captain emerged, holstering his weapon as he walked. He handed over the chit to Vel who crumpled the document in her hand. She gave me a glance before looking in the direction of the spaceport. "Let's go!"

I was in deep trouble and nobody knew it except me and Vel.

* * *

We made our way through the city surprisingly quickly and quietly. I thought Vel would have had a parade for capturing me but no, she was more intent on getting me to her ship. Was she afraid that I would escape? Well, that was promising... she was scared of me. Suddenly I felt happier because she scared the shit out of me. She was crazy, cold and unpredictable, but at least she was giving me some healthy respect.

The ship at the spaceport was, well, opulent to say the least. It wasn't for practical purposes but more for lavish comfort. Why was I not surprised? Vel wanted the whole universe to know she was in charge. The ramp was a travelator to the outer hatch and beyond. I followed the guards into the interior and whistled low. Almighty Carn! I hadn't seen anything like it! It was a palace, or so I imagined, since I'd never been invited into anything fancier than a local governor's office. In the center of the ship was one large room with six large chairs.

"Sit down." Vel pointed to a comfortable chair facing away from the cockpit. Who was I to argue? It was a hell of a lot better than hanging by my fingernails. Vel sat opposite me and

reached for her seatbelt. "Buckle up."

I struggled to put the seatbelt on as my wrists were still bound together by the manacles, only just locking myself in as the ship took off. "They're not going to like this."

"Like what?"

"You're breaking curfew," I said.

"Screw 'em."

"Tsk tsk, Vel, breaking the law like that."

She laughed. "I was wondering where that smart mouth had gotten to." Touching her belt I felt the manacles fall away from one another. "Relax."

'Relax' she said. I suppose I had no choice, after all where could I go on a ship with guards that was about to hyperjump, I assumed, to Juno? I relaxed about as much as a person going to their death could be. Well, probably not death, at least not straight away. There'll be a lot of pain and discomfort before that'll happen.

I shifted my hands from my lap to rest them on the seat, rotating my shoulders as I went. Before they had even touched the surface, the manacles pulled my wrists down to where I was going to put them, magnetizing them to the armrests.

"Can't have you wandering around free now, can we?" Vel just grinned at me. She was enjoying manipulating me way too much for my liking.

"No, **we** can't." Who the hell was she talking about? Was it a joint decision between her and me that I needed to be restrained? I don't think so.

Vel sat there expectantly. I think she was waiting for some pithy remark from me so I decided not to oblige her, instead staring at her until her eyes turned away. "Awww, come on, J. Aren't you the least bit curious about what's going on?"

"Nope," I said matter-of-factly. Of course I wanted to know what was going on but my job here was to piss off as much as I could. Not playing her game was a good start.

"Your loss," she muttered before turning her attention to activating a small screen attached to her chair. "I've got her." Vel was obviously talking to her boss.

"When will you arrive?"

That voice sounded vaguely familiar but I couldn't put my finger on it.

"We're about to jump. Three hours."

"Good. Contact me when you land." Before she even had a chance to answer the screen went blank.

I tried very hard not to laugh at her expression. She obviously didn't like being hung up on like that. "You better get used to it."

"What?" Vel's brow wrinkled in annoyance.

"He's the boss. You better get used to being cut off like that."

"Screw you!"

"I told you I wouldn't do that, so get it out of your mind right now." I admit it. I didn't see it coming. Vel's hand balled into a fist and punched me right in the mouth before I even had a chance to inhale. My head snapped with the force and the copper taste in my mouth was familiar.

She didn't even wait to see my reaction to the hit, instead walking away and returning with a drink. The synth was quickly consumed, followed by another. When she was suitably mellow I decided to gently probe her with questions.

"The Consortium's not going to like this you know."

"Wha-? What are you talking about?" Vel blinked a few times as she tried to focus on me.

"They're not going to let you muscle in on their territory."

"They won't know what's hit them until it's all over." Vel took another swig of the synth, swallowing heavily.

"Yeah... right!" Incredulity tinged my words. If I sounded skeptical then maybe she would reveal more.

"You don't believe me?"

"If you say so," I hedged.

"Ahhh," she dismissed me, "You don't know what you're talking about."

So I had to give a little to get a little. "No? I've got one word for you... drugs." That made her sit up. "Drugs and mud... an unlikely combination that's for sure."

"A lucky guess."

"A guess, Vel? You know very well that I'd have to have an IQ of two hundred to make that sort of intuitive leap." Now where did that word come from? Maybe the ochre was improving my IQ

as well. It was certainly improving my vocabulary.

"You've got a point," she said thoughtfully.

"But getting the universe hooked on drugs is nothing new. Many have tried and failed."

"Ahhh," she said waving her finger in the air, "but they don't have the secret ingredient." Vel took another mouthful of the alcohol, her face grimacing as it slid down her throat.

"But it's only mud, Vel. Everyone will soon discover that."

"That's only part of it," she winked conspiratorially at me. "It's what goes with the mud that makes it special."

I knew that as well. But what the sisters gave me wasn't habit-forming by any means, so maybe the bad guys were substituting something else instead of the oil. I had an epiphany there and then. Was that why the Noorthi were so mysterious? Was this the secret that they hid away from the universe? In the wrong hands the ochre could be modified to be anything.

"Yeah, Vel. Special mud. You get high on it. Woo." I had my skepticism set on maximum in the hope of Vel telling me something I didn't know.

"That's one. Mind control is another." Vel giggled and put her hand over her mouth. "Oops."

Vel was giggling and it wasn't pretty. In fact the giggle sent chills up my spine, but finally I had gotten an answer. Mind control would be a good universe-conquering tool. "Yeah, you know the old saying, 'loose lips drive ships into black holes'. He won't like you mouthing off like that."

The one question that had been driving me nuts was 'who the hell was in charge?' because whoever it was wanted me dead. I didn't think I had pissed off that many people in the known universe who would take such drastic action. Then again, maybe I had.

"What does he know, huh? The little pissant," she grumbled.

Little? Was it who I thought it was, was it? "You mean Reman?"

"Him? You **must** be joking!" She laughed long and loud, obviously sharing my opinion of the little runt. "No, Marius Grummin."

I had a feeling that I should have known the name but it escaped me.

"You don't remember him? He certainly remembers you." Vel stood up and disappeared for a moment, returning with a synth caffeine and a tablet. She sat back down in her chair, popping the tablet in her mouth and washing it down with a mouthful of caffeine. In a matter of moments she sobered.

"Feel better?"

"No!"

"But you need to be sober when you meet him, huh?" I knew I had guessed correctly when she stood, took a step or two towards me then slapped me across the cheek. "It just burns you that he's in charge." This time she grabbed my nipple and twisted it. "Owww. That hurt!"

"That's the point, J. Get used to that feeling." She looked at her chronometer just as a voice came over the intercom.

"Coming up on Juno, ma'am."

"Ma'am??!?!?" I laughed loudly, earning another brutal pinch. "Aww, come on Vel, where's your sense of humor?"

"It's waiting for you in a deep dark basement on Juno, J." She smiled wickedly at me. I have to admit I didn't see the humor in it but then I wasn't looking at my face. Maybe it was saying something to her that I was blissfully ignoring. It was probably better that way. "Now strap yourself in, J, it's going to be a bumpy ride."

"I'm sure it will be, Vel, but I seem to be at a disadvantage at the moment."

She touched her belt and the pressure on the manacles stopped. Her finger hovered over the button as I secured my seat belt properly. Maybe she was waiting for a wrong move from me. It would have been nice but the escape options were nil. No, my best chance was on the ground before I reached the compound.

I held out my wrists awaiting the power to activate them. She looked almost disappointed at my meek surrender to her will. "I'll remember this moment, Vel."

"I'm sure you will, but I hope that in the next few days we will make some beautiful memories together."

"You are one sick woman, you know that?"

"Why thank you," she said brightly, as if I had just given her a compliment. Her smile seemed genuine so maybe I had. I mentally changed sick to certifiable. "So, do you want to know what's in store for you?"

"Not particularly, no. See, unlike you, I like surprises."

"Awww, J, where's your sense of humor?" she threw back at me.

"Now let's see, I had it when I left Locar. Ahhh, yes, your guard pocketed it along with my credits. Tell him I want them back after this is all over."

"Believe me, J, when we're finished you won't need either of them."

"Promises, promises," I said jovially. Just as I thought. It wasn't going to be pretty. As I said the words there was a gentle bump as we landed. My time had run out.

We had arrived in the solar cycle and the sun was still shining brightly for the middle of the night. I looked around the vaguely familiar spaceport, glancing at the hanger to see if Bessie was still here. There she was, her antenna sitting above the line of the ship parked in front of her. My thoughts wandered to fonder times when Bessie and me flew through the universe in search of adventure and our next pay check. Would we ever see those days again? If it was within my power we would.

"Come on. Your destiny awaits." Vel said as she stood up.

"Really? You're going to die? Great!" I fumbled with the catch on the belt then stood up awkwardly.

Vel let the comments slip because I think she was too busy thinking about what she was going to do to me. Now me, I was trying to think of everything else but that. She extended her hand with a flourish. "After you."

"Yeah, yeah." I walked towards the two guards standing at the exit, unbowed and unbroken. Yeah, I know. Who was I fooling, right? At the bottom of the travelator was a hover car waiting for us. Apparently Vel was making sure that I didn't have the chance to escape. Yep, I was right. I was in deep, deep trouble.

* * *

After an uneventful, and short, trip from the spaceport to the compound I found myself in an enormous foyer. "The guards will make sure that you are comfortable," Vel said as she looked into my eyes.

"You're not joining me?" It was a false bravado that tempted the offer.

"My, my, J. You **are** in a hurry."

When she walked away I couldn't help a parting shot. "Off to report to your master, huh?" I made a move before she could think about hitting me again but I knew I had found her weakness. On any other solar day I would have exploited that weakness but considering the situation I was in it was probably prudent to just shut the hell up. "Let's go," I said to my jailors.

I lost count of the stairs as we descended but the outside light slowly faded away the further down we went. Finally we reached the basement, lit by portable lighting jammed into wall crevices. It was cool, it was damp and it was dark, and it suited Vel's mood perfectly. In one corner of the large basement was a small room, if it could have been called that. It was a space of floor surrounded on two sides by rock and the other two by an invisible force field. For want of a

better word it was a holding cell, but at least there was a bed in it.

"Turn around," came the command and I obliged. Two guards stood back and focused their weapons on me while the third disconnected the magnetic bracelets. He stepped back and placed his palm on the scanner on the wall. "Step back three paces." I did as he asked then watched as he waved his hand over an electronic eye to re-engage the force field.

"I could use some food." I hadn't eaten since my lunch with Floric and my stomach was starting to grumble.

Two guards left while one stayed on duty. Did that mean I would eat? I looked around the small space that was now my home, finally deciding to lie down on the makeshift bed. Time passed by and nothing happened. "Hey," I called to the guard, "Are you going to feed me or what?"

He glared at me for a moment before standing and going to the intercom.

"What?" I barely recognized Vel's voice as she barked out the word. It looked like her meeting with the boss didn't go too well.

"She wants food," the guard said curtly.

"Fine."

I could hear the click from where I was. She was really pissed and I was her outlet for that anger. I just hoped my last meal was first class. Then again, the way my luck had been for the last twenty-four hours I wasn't holding out much hope.

More time passed without my guard stirring. Either he was giving great thought to what he was going to bring me or I wasn't eating any time soon. "Any news from the cook?" I asked politely. I didn't feel polite and I didn't want to be polite but here I was... being polite. He glanced over at me and went back to his contemplation of his naval fuzz. Well, that's what it looked like.

Just when I had decided that Vel was going to starve me to death a woman came down the staircase and glided across the room. And when I said glided I meant 'glided'. She moved smoothly like she was floating on air. She was Noorthi. There wasn't any distinguishing physical feature that labeled them as Noorthi but I found that it was more an aura about them that defined them. Having lived with Beri and her tribe for a while now I could easily identify this woman by her poise. Of course the tattoo on her wrist would help a little too, not that I could see it at this point in time.

She placed the tray on the floor next to the fence, stepping back when the guard ordered her to do so. He deactivated the force field, his weapon ready in his hand as I reached for the food. I barely got the tray inside when the barrier came up, sending sparks off the metal in warning.

The woman was about to leave when I spoke up. "Can you stay a while?" She looked uncertainly at the trooper. "Just to talk, that's all." To my surprise he nodded and she pulled up a chair to sit

against the wall.

I sat cross-legged on the bed and picked at my food, eating a pinch of food at a time. "So, what's your name?"

Again she showed a guarded look. I could only guess why but I suspected that it was a reaction borne from years of internment.

"My name is Jordana. Nice to meet you, Noorthi lady." Her eyes now took an interest in me. "You have an air about you."

"You have met my sisters?" she asked almost wistfully.

"Some of them."

"Do... do you...," she hesitated as if afraid to ask. "Do you know Beristhamée?" It was a look of hopefulness.

"I'll tell you what. You tell me your name and I'll answer your question." I had my suspicions as to who this woman was but a name would be helpful if I ever escaped from here.

"Tarsthamée." She looked around as if saying her name would strike her down.

"And Beristhamée is your daughter, isn't she?" She didn't speak but nodded instead. I wanted to tell her that everything was all right but something was stopping me. Maybe it was the betrayal that I had suffered only hours ago. "I knew Beristhamée."

"Knew?" she looked stricken and I hated to break her heart but I couldn't take any chances. I was in the belly of the beast and I didn't want to bring any more death to this universe than I already had.

"Sorry, I was off-world when there was an explosion. It destroyed the entire settlement. They're all dead." My heart thumped heavily in my chest as a lone tear slid down her pale cheek. She stood and walked slowly to the stairs, her stoic façade firmly in place, but I could nearly feel the emotions rolling off her. If I was wrong about her then she could curse me later.

The guard glanced at me and chuckled.

"What's so funny?" I asked angrily.

"Nobody seems to like you."

"It's not that she didn't like me. I just gave her some bad news."

"It's all the same and you're here alone."

He seemed amused by my predicament and I stared long and hard at him, as much to memorize his face as it was to stare him down. *Your time is coming, pal.*

"What was she doing here?" An angry female voice broke my concentration.

"She was bringing the food for the prisoner," he said defensively. From where I was standing he looked like he was scared shitless by this woman.

"Anything happen?" Why was Vel so edgy?

"They talked for a bit before she left."

"What about?"

"I don't know. Couldn't hear them. But she left kind of sad-looking."

"What did you say?" Vel finally turned her attention to me.

"Nothing. Just talking about family, that's all." I studied Vel and she seemed anxious. "Why? What do you care about her?"

"Don't let it happen again." She glared at the guard. Oh yeah, if he didn't do what she wanted he would find his ass somewhere dark and nasty. She would see to it.

So, Tarsthem... Tarstho... oh shit... Tars meant something to this Marius guy. I thought she was a prisoner but was she more? Suddenly this changed a whole lot of things. Was Beri's mother a traitor to the sisterhood? Now I had no way of finding out, unless Vel wanted to oblige me and spill the beans, but looking at her expression I think she had the same idea for me.

She stood in front of me on the other side of the force field. Damn, she was a fine looking woman. It was such a shame that she was a certifiable nut case. Her almond-shaped eyes were dark brown pools of malice, simmering with unfulfilled retribution. But it was her mouth that had always taken my fancy-and I'm talking facial features here as the rest of her body was on a whole other level-because they were perfect. Her lower lip always had me salivating, wanting to nip at it in invitation. It was a shame that the curve of those beautiful lips were a lie. Tilted upwards at rest I had always thought she was a sweet girl. It didn't take me long to realize that her face was a fraud, masking the inner sociopathic tendencies simmering inside her.

In my peripheral vision I caught movement. It was hard to break the visual contact Vel had made, and I had to force myself to look at the stairs. Two burly guards were manhandling a rather large, solid-looking chair into the chamber, followed by an elegant-looking older gentleman carrying a box. Oh, this was not good.

My eyes returned to Vel, looking her straight in the eye. A slow smile crossed her face. My heart started to race. All that was left to me was the hope that I didn't make a fool of myself or that I didn't soil myself.

"Yessss," she hissed, "you should be afraid."

"Me? You **must** be joking!"

"Your eyes don't lie, J."

"What do you want, Vel?"

"I want you to suffer, but before I can have my fun we need some information."

"We, Vel?" I saw her bristle and knew I had struck a nerve. "You know, you could have just asked then these nice men wouldn't have to injure themselves carrying down that chair." I looked over at the chair in question and the two men leaning on it breathing heavily.

"Luckily that chair will also come in handy later."

Later. That was the part that was worrying me. "Well, let's see how this goes first, eh?" I said jokingly, but we both knew it didn't matter what I said because nothing was going to save me short of a rupture in the time-space continuum or a fusion bomb. Maybe I should just do something foolish like try and escape and get shot for my trouble. Now **that** would piss off Vel no end.

Vel took two steps back and the guards' weapons were pointed at me as the shield came down. "Make yourself comfortable." She nodded at the chair.

She was almost too happy when she said that. Vel enjoyed her torture just a little too much. "What no alcohol?" One of the guards slapped me on the back of the head. "Hey! That's her job!" I knew my jibes were going to be the death of me so I was going down swinging.

"Thank you, J." Vel laughed and shortened the distance between us and cuffed me over the head as well.

"That's better," I said softly as I sat down. The seat was uncomfortable, being bare metal and all, but it was probably designed that way so there was less comfort on all aspects of the torture.

"Are you going to make this hard for us?"

"I told you...," Vel raised her fist and I held up my hand to stop her. "Okay, I'll stop." Vel reached for her belt and the manacles gripped the metallic armrests. "Happy now?"

"Very," she retorted. "Now just relax. Fighting it will only hurt more."

But I knew she wanted me to resist if, for nothing else, than to see me in pain. "Well, that depends on whether we get on well or not. I may ask it out to dinner."

"I'm going to miss that razor wit of yours."

"Miss it? Is it going somewhere?"

"Possibly. Then again, if you lose your mind it won't matter."

My eyes moved to the old man with the box and I heard Vel laugh. She was manipulating me perfectly. I returned my gaze to my nemesis but it was too late; she knew she had won this particular battle because I had looked.

"And what makes you think I haven't already done that? After all, I'm here with you, aren't I?" It was all so pointless really. My mouth was not going to save me this time. While this conversation had been going on the elderly gentleman had given the box to the guard standing by the chair and had opened it. My peripheral vision watched as he took out a piece of what looked like clear film, extracting a second, larger piece.

"Ahh, I see he's ready," Vel exclaimed excitedly. "I haven't seen this done before so it will be an education."

"Well, I'm glad you're happy about it."

"And you're not, J?"

"And if I tell you what you want to know now?"

"Awww, don't disappoint me like that. Where's your backbone?"

"Holding me up in this chair you piece of shit!" We both knew that swearing at her was the last act of a desperate woman.

"Sticks and stones...", she started to sing.

"...in my hands would beat the crap out of you." Now I was starting to get angry because I was partly responsible for the position I was in. I let this happen and did nothing to stop it. Fear was added to my roiling emotions as the gentleman, or should I say torturer, put the film on my forehead. I stared into Vel's eyes and I could see the intense scrutiny that she was giving me. It was almost like studying hummers scurrying about on the ground when I was a kid... right before I stomped on them.

"What are you feeling, J?" Vel asked. It was like I was some kind of pet science project to her.

"Well a lot of different scenarios about how I'm going to kill you come to mind."

"That'll pass once your mind is gone."

"Don't write me off yet, Vel." I had to have some hope if I was to have any chance of surviving

this.

She nodded to the old man and his finger rose to the large strip of film resting on the box. "Bye, J. Can't say that it hasn't been fun."

"I can, you sack of bones." At that moment I could feel the pressure on my forehead slowly building in intensity. I kept my face calm while this was going on because I didn't want to give the woman any satisfaction at my discomfort. The pressure turned to pain, starting as a pinpoint in the center of my forehead and radiating from there inside my head. It was like a wave that washed through my brain, sluicing over brain cells and synapses and paralyzing them. My body jerked as it took hold of me, heaving me to and fro as it slowly shut down my control over it.

"How's it going, J. Are you still able to hear me?"

"Arrgllle..." I gurgled. My tongue just wouldn't work no matter how hard I tried. Drool slowly dripped from the corner of my mouth but I was only barely aware of it. The jerking stopped and I felt little. My mind, or what was left of it, was barely cognizant of anything.

"It works on nerve conduction," the old man explained to Vel, "covering the skull in a type of electrical neural net. Then, like a virus, it buries into the brain and into the conscious and subconscious mind until it takes control."

I had heard it all but understood none of it. Vel hovered over me and her distorted image swam in front of my eyes. "Whhaaa." The word was there but just wouldn't come out.

"J, listen carefully. J!" she barked at me to get my attention. "Where are the Noorthi?"

"Noo... aaccchhh..." Suddenly I had this compulsion to tell her but I resisted. That neural net he had spoken of tightened and buried into my pain center. I screamed but I wasn't aware of it, or at least I didn't think I was.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm reducing the intensity."

"Leave it where it is."

"But it could kill her."

"Never mind that. We want that information by any means."

My mind floated as the conversation took place, like a ship cast adrift in the vastness of space. Whatever they had said meant little to me because any awareness I had was nearly gone.

"J?" Something hit my face. "J! Answer the question! Where are they?"

"Hee..." The word sat on my tongue and was trying to come out involuntarily.

"Helix Four?" Val asked hopefully.

"Hee..." I repeated.

"Hesic Minor?"

"Hee... hee... heav...n."

"Heaven? Did she say heaven?"

"Yes, you idiot. Make her more aware."

"I'll try."

"Don't try! Do!"

Suddenly the fuzziness lessened and my awareness increased. I still had the urge to tell her everything but at least the drooling stopped. So much for trying to keep my dignity intact.

"J!" Vel rapped on my head. "Are you in there?"

"Quuiiiitttt iiitttt," I moaned

"Where are the Noorthi, J?"

The urge returned and I didn't fight it this time. "Heeavvveenn."

"Heaven? Did you mean heaven?"

"Heavveennnn."

"Does that mean they're all dead?" When I didn't reply she grabbed me and shook hard. It was like I was numb to everything around me as my body flopped around with the shaking.

"Heeaavveeeenn." And that was the last thing I remembered.

* * *

There was black... that sort of black that one gets lost in. My mind was mush so I couldn't put two thoughts together.

"Is she still out?"

"Yeah, been three days now."

The words together should mean something but I could only grasp a word or two. Three... days...?

"She won't be happy."

"Probably not. This is the first one that survived."

The two male voices continued the conversation but I lost concentration. I barely knew who I was let alone what they were talking about. My body wanted sleep so I didn't fight the urge, dozing off in mid-conversation.

Over the next day or two I woke for a moment or two before going back to sleep. It was a long process but I was slowly gaining strength with each day. If Vel wanted me she was going to have to wait. Finally she couldn't stand it any longer and she visited me, prodding me to move.

My memory had been improving gradually over my recuperation period, so luckily I knew the name of my enemy and the fact that I **knew** she was the enemy. The details were a little fuzzy so I was hoping to pick up a few clues from her as we went.

"Whaaaa.." My voice sounded foreign. Had something happened?

"How are you feeling, J? Congratulations. You survived the interrogation."

"Int...eeee...rrr.." I felt like my jaw had been unhinged.

"Having trouble, J?" She seemed amused at my struggle and that made me instantly dislike her. She was not nice. "Lucky for you you told the truth. That bitch confirmed your story. Now all that's left is what I want."

Truth? Bitch? It was like my mind was a blank page and she was scribbling all over it. To me it was the meaningless scrawl of a two year-old child.

Vel crooked her finger over her shoulder. "Here's something to make you feel better." Some old guy came around from behind her and touched something cold to my neck. There was a warm sensation flowing through me, one limb at a time, that made we want to rise. Not that Vel helped me any in that department.

I sat on the edge of the bed and dropped my aching head into my hands. "Wha..aaa..tt." I cleared my throat and tried again. "Wha-t w-was that stuff?"

"Just a pick-me-up."

"This is dangerous," the old man whispered to her.

"Dangerous?" Now she had my interest.

"The dose was way too high," he continued.

"She won't be alive long enough to be worried about the side effects, doctor."

"Does Grimm know about this?"

"You answer to **ME NOT HIM!!!**" she screamed.

"I shouldn't even be here. You knew the procedure was banned across the entire system."

"And yet you were quite happy to take the credits, doctor, so don't go preaching to me about morals."

My brain was swimming with the drug the old man gave me, slowly reversing the numbness that had a hold of it. The words started to come together, firstly as phrases and then as whole sentences. I still had a bit of trouble with the meanings but I was getting there. Whatever he gave me was working wonders. The only concern I had was the dire warning... both warnings in fact.

"This is the last thing I do for you," the old man stated, picking up his small folder and leaving.

"Prick," she muttered to his back. "Pick her up and take her to the wall."

The two guards grabbed me roughly by the arms and dragged me over the twenty feet to the far wall. Embedded in the rock were two metal squares about two feet apart and about six feet from the floor.

"Strip her!" Vel ordered and the two guards jostled me. "Stop looking at one another and just do it!"

Slowly the buttons came undone and my shirt was stripped off. One of them fumbled with the pants. "Come on, hurry it up!" There was a sudden jerk as the guard yanked my belt violently. I just closed my eyes and let them do it.

"Back to the wall!" They held up my hands above my head for a moment before the magnetic cuffs took over, securing me in an outstretched position.

"Now leave us." The two guards looked uncertainly at one another. "Go!"

Suddenly there was just her and me. As I hung there memories came flooding back and I remembered just about everything, at least up to the moment that the old man put the film on my forehead. But I digress. This was the climax of our association together, as it were. Whatever she had in mind was lethal and I was not in a position to stop her.

She grinned evilly at me. "Stop worrying. You'll live past today. I promise."

I said nothing.

"Come on, J. No witty repartée?"

I barely had the energy to stand upright. What made her think I wanted to talk? My mind was still trying to boot up after being shut down so any fancy conversation on my part was out of the question. I just stared at her.

"I have something special in mind for today, J." She walked over to a cloth covered table and wheeled it over next to me. "You always were too independent. There's only one Alpha female here and it's me. So..." She grabbed the cloth and pulled it off to reveal three rings slightly smaller than my finger, a length of chain and a rather nasty-looking spike. "I think you need to learn a little discipline....," she paused as if waiting for a reaction from me. I had absolutely no idea what she was talking about, although I felt I should have. "...slave."

I must have had a blank expression on my face because she punched me in the mouth. "Pay attention!"

What had I done to this woman that she hated me this much? Maybe in time it would all return to me. Oh yeah, according to her I have no future. Oh well, I'm just going to have to die in ignorance. I barely felt the wetness sitting on my chin as she glared at me.

"Now....," she said as she reached for the spike, "lesson one. It's all about pleasure and pain, J." As if to illustrate it she held the spike in one hand, while her other hand ran down over my abdomen, through my pubic hair and into my folds. It was an instinctive reaction that made me jump.

Vel just grinned and began to move her fingers back and forth. "I can't let you go into this cold, as it were." She laughed harshly but she was the only one that understood the joke. I was really not in the mood for all this fondling. My mind was still fuzzy and I just wanted to be left alone but she was going to make sure that didn't happen.

"Ahhh, there you go," she cooed, her face moving closer to mine. Vel looked at me seductively as if she was doing me a favor. If this was her idea of foreplay no wonder she had to resort to tying women up, but while my mind was resistant to the advances my body had other ideas.

The tingling started in the pit of my stomach and simmered. Vel didn't increase the stimulation, content to keep me on the edge of arousal. She lifted her hand for a moment and studied the glistening film before returning it to the warmth of my crotch. "Hmmm....," she hummed. If she was expecting that little move to turn me on she was sadly mistaken, so I just closed my eyes and tried to think of all the inhumane things Vel had done.

There was an audible crack that drew my attention. Opening my eyes I saw that Vel was now kneeling in front of me. She looked up and smiled devilishly as the hand that had been fondling me stopped and prised open my labia. In that same movement her other hand rose, the spike hovering over the now exposed area. While the steel was not thick the tip was razor sharp. It suddenly occurred to me what she was going to do and I just couldn't watch.

There was no escape. I frantically searched for some niche in my mind where I could hide while this was happening but found none. There was a harsh pinch a second before intense cold turned to searing pain. Oh, Almighty Carn! I swallowed the scream building in my throat, funneling it into a deep breath as I tried to get a grasp on the agonizing pain now residing in me.

"Let it our. You know you want to," Vel murmured. "Pleasure and pain, J. You can't have one without the other."

I had to admit the pain was cutting through the haze in my head like a laser scalpel. Or maybe it was just the adrenaline running rampant, I don't know. It took me a moment to realize the cold metal was gone, right before another piece of cold metal made contact. The searing pain was replaced by a dull throbbing... hot, angry and violent. I tried to spread my legs further just so they didn't touch it.

I don't think Vel liked me doing that because she tugged hard on the ring, sending a bolt of red-hot lightning through my body. Up to this point I hadn't said a word since the old man left and I think this pissed Vel off. She wanted to hear my pain. Whether it was the sexual, emotional or the sociopathic side of her that needed this input I wasn't going to give it to her... or at least I hoped not to.

"One down, two to go." My eyes were still closed and I jumped at the closeness of her voice. It seemed she had gotten up off the floor and was standing nose-to-nose with me.

The thought of two more sources of agony was nearly my undoing and I could feel the swell of panic inside me. But just as suddenly the panic subsided and I was filled with calm. It was hard to describe it but it was like somebody else was helping me carry my burden so that I could face the challenge head on. I opened my eyes and looked at Vel, showing no response to her tortured preferences. She growled in my face and her hand shot down to grab the ring again. I felt the shock as she pulled but this time the raw intensity of it was cushioned somehow. Thank Carn for small mercies.

Unfortunately this only fueled Vel's viciousness and I could see that she was hard pressed to continue with her plan of subjugation. I think she wanted to plant the spike in her hand deep into my heart and the only thing stopping her was need for torture. She pinched my nipple tightly and pulled outward, aiming the spike at it. As the muscles in her arm tightened for the swing a masculine voice halted her.

"What the **hell** do you think you are doing?"

We both looked towards the staircase. A man in his forties dressed in obscenely ornate clothes stood with six guards surrounding him, and he looked none too happy.

"Marius, what are you doing here?"

Marius? So this was the person who I was supposed to know? I looked again. I thought I knew

him but I couldn't concentrate with the ache pulsing up from my crotch. Vel still had my nipple between her fingers and it was starting to throb as well.

"Catching you torturing **my** prisoner, by the looks of it," he stated firmly. He glared at Vel who remained stock still. "Will you let go of her!" he warned.

Vel's hand backed away from my nipple as if it had burned her. "We got the information, you know that. And as she was of no further use to you-"

"That's my decision, not yours. Need I remind you who is in charge here?"

In my books it took a brave man to dominate Vel, but if I were him I'd be watching my back very closely.

"But Marius-"

"Let her down... **NOW!**" he yelled, letting Vel know in no uncertain terms that she had crossed the line. While she hesitated and tried to decide what to do the two absent prison guards entered. "And where were you?"

"My... my Lord, we were ordered to leave." The older guard looked uncertainly at Vel.

"And why are you here now?"

"We heard raised voices-"

"At least you got that right. Let the prisoner down." The guards looked at Vel for some sort of confirmation. "Don't look at her! I'm giving the orders here! Get her down!"

The manacles gave way and I found myself on the ground. I rolled around in agony as pressure came to bear on the ring. The two guards picked me up and supported me so I was upright.

"Get her dressed."

Oh Carn! The thought of material rubbing over my crotch made me resist as I was dragged to the holding cell. It took more strength than I knew I had for me to get dressed. The copper taste was in my mouth again so I must have bitten down and drawn blood but I pushed myself to continue. At least Vel wasn't stabbing me again.

Two troopers came up and put their shoulders under my armpits and supported me, moving me quickly to the staircase and out of Vel's way.

"But what are you doing?" There was confusion in Vel's voice.

"I'm just removing the temptation, Vel."

"Now just one minute..."

"In fact, I think you need some time to think. Take ten steps towards the back wall," Marius said with authority. I couldn't see his face but I did see Vel's. He must have been giving her a hard look because she had lost some of her aggressive posturing.

"But... but that will put me in the holding cell."

"I think you need some time to cool off, Vel. Do it." She was reluctant to move. "Guards! Give her a hand to move." Suddenly Vel found herself in my position, locked in a tiny room and looking out through a force field.

Marius motioned for us to go up the stairs. When the two prison guards attempted to follow he stopped. "You stay here. Give her...", he looked at his chronometer, "three hours then let her out." He turned to leave then stopped. "On, by the way, I would make yourselves scarce once she's free."

Every step up from the basement was like a stab in the crotch. I soon started dragging my feet as the pain became unbearable.

"Come on. Don't stop now," Marius whispered.

"But... but... why? I don't understand."

"I'm always saving your butt, J."

"Huh?" At this point I was confused but my mind was not up for riddles. It was too busy trying to get my legs to move and to cushion the pain.

Marius reached up to a small ornate button on his left shoulder and tapped it. His image started to flicker until Sasha appeared in his place. "Holographic camouflage," she whispered before she disappeared under cover again, once more walking beside me as Marius Grimm. Considering that she had done it in front of the guards made me realize that she wasn't alone in this foolhardy rescue.

We stopped at the top of the stairs and for that I was eternally grateful. "There's a Noorthi in here."

"We haven't got time."

"We'll make time." One of the guards spoke and I wondered which one of the sisters he was. If I had to guess I'd say it was Beri because she was the one most eager to rescue the woman.

"Do you know where she is?"

"No."

"That settles it. We have to leave without her," Sasha decided finally

As we stood debating our next move, the old man from the basement crossed the corridor towards the outer door.

"Get him!"

"Who? Him?" Sasha pointed at the figure trying to leave.

"Yeah," I winced as I moved. "Doctor. Prisoner." Sasha just looked at me. "Trust me."

"Doctor!" Marius called out, stopping the elderly gentleman in his tracks. "One moment!"

"Sir! How may I be of assistance?"

"I have a job for you but it's at the spaceport. Will you accompany us?"

"It will be my pleasure, sir." He took his place beside Marius as we began to walk. The heavy wooden door had been flung open and we moved through it as a group. Just as we started to descend the few steps to the courtyard a feminine voice called to Marius.

"My Lord? May I join you?"

Sasha looked at me and I shrugged. What could we do? Sasha mouthed 'name' and I muttered back "Tars... something". She glared at me. Yeah, I knew it wasn't much help but that was all I could remember at the time.

"Surely, my dear. We were just going to the spaceport. Would you like to go for a walk?"

She stopped suddenly and stared closely at Marius.

"Is something wrong?"

"You've never let me out of the compound before, Marius."

"There are more than enough guards to make sure you don't run off. Just this once I'd like your company on this walk." I silently congratulated Sasha on coming up with the explanation as the Noorthi woman relaxed. Maybe this would be easier than I thought.

The party progressed at a leisurely pace, trying to look unconcerned about the crowd we were attracting. After all, Sasha was wearing the disguise of the man in charge of the garrison. The rawness from the savage piercing slowly abated as we walked, the ring snugly tucked between my folds, and as long as I didn't do anything too strenuous I was able to walk normally on my own.

I have to say that I had never seen anything as good as that spaceport as it came into view. We still had some time before Vel was free but there was always that chance that someone would discover the ruse. I wouldn't breathe easy until we were far, far away in space.

The old man looked around at the field and asked, "Where do you need my services, sir?" He searched for some kind of emergency but there was none.

"That ship over there, Doctor. There is a sick woman on board." Sasha had brought one of the new ships in our fleet, so at least it looked like we had credits. The party walked across the expanse of ground to the ship and the doctor was escorted inside by two of the guards. Tars stayed close to Marius, seemingly content as he held her hand. That little detail didn't go unnoticed by me and another. This particular guard watched the Noorthi woman's every move very carefully, a frown crossing his features at the obvious show of affection by the woman to her captor.

I sidled up to this guard and muttered, "I'm sure it means nothing." Actually I didn't mean that because I knew Beri was upset with the turn of events, but this was the time for a little white lie to ease the way.

"It doesn't look like it to me."

"Beri?" I suppose I just needed to know.

"Yeah." I could hear the disappointment in his voice.

"There's time to sort this out later, my friend." I suddenly remembered a ship and certain passengers I had left behind. "What about Malt? Is she safe?"

"Yeah. She contacted us and one of the boys flew the ship back."

"Good." Marius drew Tars into the ship and one of the guards signaled us to board quickly. "Damn..."

"What?" Beri looked around for trouble.

"I'm leaving Bessie... again."

"It's been taken care of."

My heart thumped quicker. "Yeah?" I wanted all the details and I wanted them now but Beri was pushing me up the ramp to the door. "What? Stop pushing!"

"There's time to sort this out later, my friend," she threw back at me.

Her hand slapped on the button to close the hatch and draw in the ramp. Before we even had a chance to find a seat somewhere the ship rumbled and took off, shoving me back into Beri's

chest. The image flickered as it was hit, rippling until the image stabilized. Beri tapped her left shoulder and the male image faded, leaving behind a disillusioned Noorthi. "You look awful," she said.

"Yeah," I replied. It was stating the obvious but I needed the attention so, good or bad, I'd take it. "Been better days." She helped me to a seat and I collapsed into it, forgetting about the ring. I jumped in painful surprise, settling once again slowly and more carefully.

"Grit will see to that when we get home."

Home. I hadn't had a real home for a few years, at least not since dad was alive. The Noorthi were now my family and the family was growing. My thoughts went to the extra passenger with Malt. "And how is Parmenter Floric?"

"That self-righteous, egotistical..."

"My, my, my, B. I thought all Noorthi were pacifists and thought well of everyone."

"He doesn't count. What in this universe possessed you to enlist him, besides to annoy me?"

"Malt needs a mentor, B. We discussed this and you agreed. I know he's a pain in the ass but he's got the credentials." I figured that since I used another big word my brain must be just about back to normal, well at least normal for me.

"Yeah," she sighed, "I suppose he did save your ass."

"Him? Is he here?"

"Nope, but the holographic camouflage is his invention. It was in amongst all the junk he kept telling us was his luggage."

Praise Almighty Carn that I let him take all that crap onto the ship otherwise I'd be getting a nipple ring or two courtesy of Vel.

"Thank the stars!" Rales stood in the doorway, his features etched with concern.

"Hey, buddy." I just didn't have a smart ass comment in me at the moment.

"How did that bitch get the drop on you?"

Oh crap! How did I get out of this one? "Later, Rales. How's Bessie?"

"She's on her way home, J."

"Did you check for tags?"

He looked at me as if insulted. "As if..."

"Yeah, stupid question." I looked from Beri to Rales and back again and I could see they were waiting to hear the story. "Do you guys mind if I lie down? I'm kind of bushed... and sore." At least it would give me a bit of time to decide what I was going to tell them. I don't know why I was agonizing over this. After all I was a normal healthy female stuck in the middle of a group of celibate women. Where else was I supposed to go? And yet I didn't want to see their looks of disappointment either. The conflict made my head hurt so I put aside my decision for later.

* * *

"Ashman, but why?" The sound of voices stirred me from my sleep and I could hear the pain in Beri's voice.

"I thought you were all dead, daughter. I had been a prisoner for ten years. What was I supposed to do?"

"But you have strayed-"

"And you have not? Look at you! Dressed like some... some... savage." Tars said the last word with contempt. "I at least have kept my dignity."

"Dignity, mother? And holding hands with him is considered proper protocol for a prisoner?"

I was eavesdropping and it was bad of me but making my presence known at this point would bury away secrets that would probably never surface again. No, Beri and her mother needed to face the truth... together.

"How dare you!"

"No, mother, how... dare... you! Betraying the sisterhood and your own ideals."

"I had no choice. You had left me and I was alone."

"Left you? That man that you hold so dear kidnapped all of us and abandoned us on the penal planet of Rigeus. He left us there with nothing, to scratch around in the dirt and heat to survive. Despite the fact that we had no water, no food and no shelter we kept to our beliefs. Even as our Elders were captured one by one by Vel we kept to our beliefs. So don't go judging us by how we are dressed."

"You lie. It was Vel not him."

"Do you think that woman would do something so drastic without him knowing?" Tars didn't answer. "Exactly. Your sweet man is not so sweet, mother."

"I want to be taken home."

"That's what we're doing."

"No, back to Juno. That is my home."

"Have you left something more than a man on Juno?" I couldn't help myself and I was butting in as usual.

"Who **are** you?" Tars asked curiously.

"You don't know? Doesn't your husband tell you everything?" I saw her bristle but continued. "I'm the woman who seems to have become an obsession with Marius."

"This is none of your business outsider."

"But it is, mother. She is one of us."

"Her?" The incredulity in her voice sent me into action.

"Hey! I think I should be insulted."

"Hold on, J. Let me handle this." Beri glared at me. As much as I wanted to respond I think Beri needed to take control. "She is our Ratha, Ashman."

"Ratha? What in this universe possessed you to do that?"

"Marius, mother. He... and Vel. She was hunting us down like prey on Rigeus and Jordana here was the only one we could count on to help us." Beri smiled sweetly at me. She can be such a sentimental fool sometimes. Still, it was a smile I hadn't seen in quite a while and it pleased my heart to see it. To reinforce her words I held up my wrist to show the tattoo.

"Bah!" Tars dismissed me immediately. This Noorthi had issues.

"I have a question for you."

"And why should I answer it?"

"Because it will determine how you are treated where we are going." But how would I know if she was telling the truth? Could a Noorthi lie? "Why has he kept you alive for ten years? Is it the obvious or is there something more?"

"Obvious?"

"Do you really want me to spell it out in front of your daughter?" Tars stared at me as if she was daring me to continue. "I think we all know about your relationship with Marius..." I waited a moment to give her the chance of denying the claim but nothing came. "Did you tell him what he wanted to know?" Tars didn't look me in the eye, instead content to let her gaze roam the room.

"Does that mean 'yes'?"

"Yes."

"Then why are you still alive?"

"Because he likes... loves me."

"No. There's something else, isn't there? Something about the ochre." I picked up the slight twitch around Tars's eyes. "Are you going to make this hard for us?"

"Us or you, stranger?"

I chuckled gently, drawing Beri's attention. "It just took me back to when we first met, remember? You called me 'stranger' as well."

"It seems like a lifetime ago."

"Indeed it does, my friend."

I turned my attention back to Tars. "You haven't told him everything, have you?"

"I told him all that I knew."

"And that was about four years ago, was it not?"

"How did...?"

"That was the time that Vel came to Rigeus and the mine started. Do you have any idea what you have done?"

"Of course I do." Tars tried to look confident in her answer but she was looking at me and then Beri as if looking for some sort of affirmation.

"No, you don't. That ochre has been turned into a drug, a very addictive drug. He has plans to use the ochre as a mind control agent as well." I waited for a reaction and saw only confusion. "It's only a matter of time before he finds what is needed to mix with the ochre to give him the desired effect."

"He will not get that information from me."

"You seem so sure about that."

"I do not know."

"No?"

"No. No one Noorthi knows everything."

"So your sisterhood understood the gravity of possessing that knowledge by spreading it across the known universes, and yet you told him. Why? Did he torture you for it?"

"No. He would not use me in that way."

"Lady, you've got to get those eyes checked because you've played right into his hands." I looked at Beri and she stared back. Did she realize what had been done? Did any of them? Did the Consortium need to know before it was too late? I walked away before my head exploded, leaving the two women facing one another.

I walked the few steps down the corridor to the common room where the rest of the rescue party and the prisoner were seated. The holographic camouflage had been removed and I could see that most of the rescuers were the men, which would make sense considering the risk of running into trouble was high and the women refused to fight.

"I demand to know what is going on!" the old man cried.

"Firstly, your name."

"Name?"

"Name, unless you prefer me to call you 'old man'."

"Lorin. Sertech Lorin."

"You Consortium types certainly do love your titles." The word 'sertech' identified him as a medical officer, similar to the ancient earth title of 'doctor'. It was no great surprise considering everyone who came in contact with him was calling him 'doctor' anyway.

"What do you want of me?"

"I want you to help me kill Vel."

The look of surprise on his face couldn't have been more acute than if I had told him that we were about to crash into a nearby sun. "You want me to... what? Are you mad?"

"I know you hate her."

"Everyone hates her, woman!"

"Jordana, Lorin."

"If you think I'm going to help you kill someone, you must be joking!" he scoffed.

"And yet you were quite willing to use that 'thing' on me. What would the Consortium say if they found out you knowingly used a banned procedure? I'd hate to be in your boots, Lorin."

"Are you blackmailing me?"

"Me?" My sight scanned the room, touching on each and every one of my rescuers. "Am I blackmailing him?"

"No!" "The stars forbid." "I didn't hear anything." There was a chorus of support from my fellow outcasts.

"But Vel could easily report you to the authorities. You will need my support to refute those claims."

"And it comes at a price."

"I'm afraid so, yes. Still, with Vel gone so will be your problem."

"And what's to stop you killing me afterwards."

"Very little, in fact, but you did try to reduce the intensity of the device. For that I will give you one reprieve. If you wish to earn another, tell me what is in store for me." He looked at me quizzically. "You told Vel there was danger in giving me the drug. What is it?"

"Normally the drug is given in a lower dose and the recovery is slow. Vel pushed me to bring you back immediately. The drug will accelerate your mind until it burns out."

"So it'll leave me in the same condition as if I didn't survive the procedure?" What a lovely thought.

"Generally, yes. The effects are slightly different but the end result will be the same."

"Is it reversible?" I tried to sound nonchalant about my life but my heart was pounding. I'd already died once. Was I going to die again?

"Not here, no."

"Then where?"

"On a Consortium medical ship."

"That's out of the question and you know it."

"Then you are left with only one option."

"And what's that?"

"You die."

"That's an option I refuse to accept." I wasn't going to give up without a fight. "How long do I have?"

"Not long."

"A number, doctor."

"Two days, two weeks, two months. Who knows?"

"Surely you must have some idea otherwise you wouldn't know that it will kill me."

"Two weeks, perhaps."

"Then you better get busy because you **will** find way, doctor."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I will find the first area commander's office and drop you off to face the consequences of your actions. **You** did this to me, doctor. Here is your chance to make amends for it." I walked away before I punched the man. Facing someone who had effectively signed my death warrant tended to bring out the violent part of me.

I moved to the cockpit, still trying to get my equilibrium, and found Sasha driving and Rales in the co-pilot's seat. I leaned on the top of the pilot's chair with my arm. "Hey, there" I said quietly. "Thanks for coming to rescue my butt."

"No problem. We couldn't let Vel have any fun now, could we?" Rales looked at me sympathetically. I wondered what I looked like to him. If it was anything like how I felt I must have been a mess. "So, how did she get the drop on you?" He was eager to know because it was the second time he had asked that question.

"I didn't want to say it in front of the girls."

"That bad, huh?"

"Yeah, worse." I hesitated and stared out into space for a moment or two.

"Worried we'll judge you?"

"Yeah, something like that." I chuckled. How many times had I gritted my own teeth when I heard that phrase. Now I was using it. "I...", I took a deep breath and just blurted it out, "I got caught screwing around." My eyes closed as I awaited the comments.

"And?" Rales said.

"You go girl!" Sasha added.

"I mean literally screwing around. I was in bed in the middle of... everything when Vel was just there. The woman I was with was in on it and I got caught naked and aroused. How embarrassing is that?"

"Pretty..." Sasha seemed too amused by my situation, which only made me more uncomfortable.

"But what was I to do, huh?" Now I was trying to justify my actions. "Surrounded by women I can't touch. Sasha, surely you understand how hard it is."

"Of course I do, but I'm not the one caught with her pants down." She chuckled and then laughed out loud.

"Stop it!" Rales berated his daughter. "She was tortured. Just remember that."

"Sorry, dad." Sasha turned her attention back to the blackness of space.

"Are you all right?"

"You've got nothing to say, Rales?"

"What could I say that you haven't already said to yourself?"

He was right. Maybe I felt that I deserved a few harsh words for doing something so monumentally stupid. I was the leader so wasn't I immune to stupid mistakes? Apparently not.

"How did you find me?"

"Malt said she planted a tag on you."

"No, she didn't. Vel's men searched my clothes and they found nothing."

"Not on your clothes... on you."

"Me? How? When?"

"She said when Vel gave you back your clothes she dropped a tag from a small window in the ceiling." Ahhh, so that was what that cold feeling was that slid down to my butt crack. My hand instinctively went to my backside as Sasha talked. I wonder if the thing was still there? It had been there for a while now and it could wait a little longer until my next shower. Then it hit me. Malt had been there when I... I... did **it**. Oh, Almighty Carn! Now she'd want to know what I was doing. Wasn't that conversation something that came with motherhood? As if my life wasn't

complicated enough at present now I would have to give **the** talk to Malt, and I suspected Badger as well. Shit! Then Rice would know as well. That would certainly be contributing to the delinquency of a minor, and a celibate one at that.

"So, errr..." I looked nervously at Sasha. It was probably time to mend some bridges but I didn't want to do it in front of her dad.

"Excuse me, I think I hear Beri calling."

Beri did no such thing but Rales always was a smart man. I took his polite leaving as a sign that the time was right. "Look, Sash, I..."

"J, let me speak. I'm so sorry for that fight we had. I was just letting off some steam."

"But it was true, wasn't it?"

"In a way, yeah, but it was borne of jealousy. He idolizes you, J."

"Only the stars know why. I'm no angel."

"No, you're not," Sasha said with a smile, "but, as you said, you were there. You were always there and I wasn't."

"But you're here now." I felt that she had proven her worth and was going to release her from her father's control. "I'll talk to Rales and you can move around freely. I think you've earned it." And, of course, I had been so busy worrying about betrayal from within that I had ignored the dangers from outside.

"No, that's okay," she said rather quickly. Maybe I had a curious face because she continued, "I kind of like dad's attention, and things are working out okay."

"Are you sure you don't want him to know that things are settled between us?"

"Well, yeah, but not the 'ignore Sasha' bit. It's nice to be Rales' daughter again."

"I'm glad my plan worked." My hand patted her shoulder.

"What plan? What are you talking about?"

"You don't think I put you two together by accident now, did you?" I gave her a sly wink. "Sash, you did a great job today. It mustn't have been easy to face Vel like you did but you did fine."

"Yeah I did, didn't I? I hadn't really thought about it at the time because I was busy trying to get you out. Did you see the look on her face when I told her to put herself into the cell? Now **that** made it all worthwhile." She smiled at the image then added quickly, "Oh, and rescuing you too of course."

"Of course," I replied then smiled. It seemed that there were many hidden bonuses in my incarceration. Unfortunately, I had the deficits but I would keep them to myself for now. Gossip about my conversation with Lorin will get around soon enough, so I will take what peace and quiet I can get before all hell breaks loose.

"Why don't you go and lie down."

"Why?" Had my attempts to hide my lethargy been that bad?

"You look like hell. Go get some sleep. We've got a couple of hours before we land."

"Yeah, and before a hundred nosey women will descend on us," I replied. What a terrifying thought.

"Heh," she chuckled. "Scary, isn't it?"

I patted her shoulder and left. Maybe another sleep would help. It couldn't hurt. I walked back to the tiny room that had been my bedroom, tired beyond all reason. The room was now empty and I hoped that Beri and her mother came to some mutual area of acceptance. I couldn't hear any arguing so maybe they had.

My bladder began to ache and I realized that it had been quite a while since it had been attended to. I found the tiny room that was barely bigger than the toilet inside it. Carefully I lowered my pants in the hope of catching whatever had invaded my butt crack earlier. There was nothing... not in the pants, the underwear, the toilet bowl or the ass crack. It had disappeared. There was only one other place it could be and I had a burning question that needed to be answered.

After doing my business and re-dressing I rushed to the cockpit and looked for the communicator.

"What's up?" Sasha looked over her shoulder at me as I made a mad scramble for the switch.

But I directed my question to Rales. "Can a tagger be back-traced?"

"If it's still hooked up, yeah."

I reached for the switch and contacted the cave. "Get me Malt!"

"Hello to you too!" Epi berated me.

"Yeah, hi. Now get me Malt."

It took a few seconds before I heard the familiar voice. "Jordana. It's so good to hear-"

"Later, kid. That tag you put on me, is it still viable?"

"Sure is."

"Now listen. I want you to do a quick sweep to locate it then shut it down. You hear me? I want it dead."

"But why?"

"I think it fell out in the basement where Vel had me. If she gets her hands on it she can trace it back to you."

"I'm on it." Then the line went dead.

"Errrr, bye Malt," I said to empty air.

"Does she always do that?"

"I have no idea, Sash. She only came into my life just before you arrived." I smiled as I remembered the grubby-faced kid that stood silently in front of me that first time. Even then I think I sensed something special about her.

"She sure is as pushy as you, J."

"I'll take that as a compliment, Sash." Now that the emergency was over the adrenaline rushing through me was crashing, as was my body. I staggered back to the tiny room that housed my bed.

I fell onto the pallet clumsily, foregoing the energy to lie down gently for a quick journey. At the moment it felt like home and would probably be home for the rest of my life. What was in store for me? A slow deterioration of my mind? A quick collapse of my body functions? An agonizing death? All were distinct possibilities and none of them appealed to me.

The ceiling was bland and gray to my eyes as I lay on my back. Was there anything I could grasp onto to get me through this? I had hoped to nurture my relationship with Fen but even that now seemed to be out of reach. Still, what if I had succeeded and she was willing to give up her celibacy for me?

"Hey there." That sensual low voice had haunted me from the first day I laid eyes on Fen. "How are you feeling?"

"Tired. Sore." I added 'devastated' in my mind because I was not going to bring the conversation down with negative talk. She probably knew, being in the common room when I talked to the doctor, so there was no need to mention it.

Fen took the few steps to reach my bedroll on the floor. She knelt down next to it, her hand gently touching my hand. "I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me too."

"How did you get caught?"

I hadn't wanted to tell her but considering my life span had been cut down to nothing, there didn't seem any point holding it back. Well, there was but I didn't want to die knowing I had lied to her. "Where to start..." I murmured.

"At the beginning," she replied, seating herself cross-legged on the floor.

"I was wondering a while back how much this tattoo had changed me. I don't drink any more, I hardly ever lie and I'm more focused. In other words, I'm the complete opposite of the normal me." I hesitated as if waiting for some comment from her, but she just nodded for me to continue. "Anyway, I was wondering about other stuff that I liked to do, so when I was on Locar I picked up a woman and we..." I swallowed heavily, "we had sex."

Despite my decision not to look I did and I saw... I don't know exactly what I saw. There were a number of emotions crossing her face, one of which was disappointment.

"Look, you said yourself that you don't indulge in that stuff so what was I to do? Give it up altogether? Why did I do it? I wanted to know if the tattoo had taken that away from me as well. I wanted to know that I still had some feelings running through me, Fen." Maybe there was a touch of desperation in my voice because Fen's hand slid up my arm. I jumped as her fingers danced lightly over my skin.

"And that was what I was feeling last night? It...it... was strange and yet..." Her lips curved into a sweet smile.

Oh. I hadn't even considered that. "Probably. It's even better when you're actually there." What was I doing? I knew I shouldn't be encouraging her but I would be insane to pass up the opportunity if it presented itself.

"Does... it... hurt?" Fen asked shyly.

"Not if you do it right. But then if Vel is involved yeah it gets very nasty." I smiled at her. "Now me, I'm a Solurian Carpler." This creature, a long lost, very distant relative of the Earth house cat, was known for its timidity and gentleness. That's probably why it was close to extinction. "No, it doesn't hurt, Fen. In fact, it makes you feel really good."

Her eyes glazed over for a moment as she remembered the echoes of my orgasm. I so wanted her to feel it first hand but doing that would take away her beliefs and, more importantly, her ability to have children.

"So, back to the story. I was in the middle of... you know..." I just couldn't say it, "...when Vel and her troopers were just... there. She caught me naked and aroused and I could do nothing

about it. It was my own fault, Fen," I berated myself, "I was worried about being betrayed from within our midst and I made the most basic of mistakes and got caught. I deserved what happened to me and I'm sorry for all the hurt I caused you girls."

There. It was out and the room was silent. I just couldn't look at her so I turned my sight to the wall. What a fool I was. Her hand grabbed my chin but I refused to turn my head. She became more insistent and I felt the strength in her fingers as she dragged by head around to face her. "What is worrying you?"

"Nothing," I said childishly, my gaze refusing to meet hers. Fen said nothing but waited until I looked at her. Damn the woman and her infinite patience! "I thought you would be disappointed in me."

"And that worries you? What I would think of you?"

"Yes," I whispered. And now Fen knew how I felt.

"Silly girl," she said sweetly. There was something in that voice that made me look harder. "You have nothing to worry about. You did the only thing you could do."

"I could have done nothing."

"Yes, you could have, but you must have felt that you needed it otherwise why risk yourself like that?"

"I wasn't thinking."

"I'm sorry that I couldn't help you."

"Me too." I looked at her hand on my arm, slowly sliding up and down as she spoke. "Why are you doing that?"

"Doing what?" Her hand stopped.

"That." I nodded my head towards her wandering hand. "You....," I stammered, "you're caressing me."

"I am? Is that bad?" Fen said soothingly.

"No, in fact it's very good, but you should stop before things get out of hand."

"Things?"

"This is what could be called teasing, Fen. It's a prelude to making love." Oh Carn! Did I just say 'making love' to Fen? It was just as bad as me talking to my dad about sex. Both incidents were to be avoided at all costs.

"Really?"

"Fen, please. Don't."

"You...", she sounded hurt, "you don't want me?"

"Of course I want you with everything that I am but this is not your way. Do you really want to risk your chance at motherhood?"

"Maybe I do."

"And maybe I don't. I don't want you to live with regretting this because of a moment of weakness."

Fen was about to stand when I grabbed her arm and pulled her towards me. My lips moved quickly to claim hers, imparting a kiss that was as far away as a friendly kiss as I could get. I teased, I tasted and I conquered, gaining access to her mouth when I felt her jaw slacken. I didn't push her past that but I wanted to impress on her what it was like and what it could be.

Time slowed down as we kissed one another but I kept a tight rein on the exploration, allowing nothing more than our lips to participate. My heart rate increased as I felt the warm skin under my fingertips. I wanted her so much I thought I would explode...

I woke up in a sweat, lifting my head and dropping it on the soft pallet time and again in frustration. Fen wasn't on the ship but back at the cave so it was all a dream and it would probably stay that way. Damn Vel to hell!

"Coming up on Telgan. Another ten minutes, J." Sash's voice blared over the intercom.

"Are you okay?" Beri stood in the doorway watching me.

"How long have you been there?"

"Long enough." Beri took a few steps inside the room, closing the door behind her. "We'll be home soon and Grit will fix you up."

"What I've got, Beri, Grit can't fix." I replied sadly. It sounded final saying it out loud and I struggled to keep myself from falling apart.

"You once told me to have faith, J. Now I'm asking that of you."

"There's one difference, B. I'm not a Noorthi."

Beri came over to the pallet and crouched down. She grabbed my arm and looked at the tattoo.

"But, J, you are. You have nothing to fear."

"I wish I believed that."

"Faith," Beri said with utter conviction.

"If you say so, but I don't know if it'll help. The interrogation Vel put me through had a side effect that will burn up my brain in about two weeks. That's all I've got, B. Two weeks. Two weeks to organize everything that will go on after me."

"You can't do that, you've got too much to live for. Malt, I am sure, has lots of questions to ask you."

"And I'm sure that Sasha can handle that."

"I need you here, J."

"No you don't, Beri. You never did. You all managed quite well before I butted in."

"No, J. **I** need you. I... I'm pregnant." She looked directly at me for a reaction.

"That's great news! See? I told you everything would be okay-"

"And you're the father."

THE END

To be continued in Book 4: "The Root Of All E-Vel"

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