

~ The Chronicles of Ratha ~

Book One: Revenge is Twelve Hundred Credits

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 Book One will be answered and some will be left hanging, to be answered in a later tale.

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Love is deaf, dumb and blind... and occasionally stupid as well.

This had to be one of the seediest spacebars I had ever been in. It was located on the outskirts of the spaceport and packed to the rafters with riff raff, freighter pilots, drifters and some very unsavory characters indeed. I was seated near the rear of the establishment sipping my one very expensive, unpronounceable drink. In fact, the fuel running my ship tasted better than this crap.

I had been waiting for a few hours for my next job to turn up but it looked like it was going to be another wasted trip. I drained my glass, wincing as the ethol alcohol burned my esophagus on its way down to melt away my stomach lining.

"Jordana!" My head shot up at the mention of my name, my hand instinctively dropping to the laser pistol strapped to my thigh. "You still alive, you old bitch?"
Charming.

"And you still have the manners of an Agarian warthog, you old bastard." *Nothing like a warm greeting with an old friend...*

The behemoth of a man sat down uninvited, spilling his equally large drink over the tabletop and into my lap. "Sorry, J. What you doing here?"

"Waiting for a client to turn up but it looks like a no-show."

"Too bad. I'm about to head out to the outer rings in a few hours." My eyebrows lifted at the inebriated mammoth in front of me who was happily pouring alcohol down his gullet like water.

He was going to be lucky to find the spaceport let alone his ship.

"What do you want, Chase?"

"Can't a guy say hello to the most delicious broad in the place?"

"You've said it, now go."

"C'mon, J, what are you doing the rest of the night? No job, so how about some fun?"

I watched him with amused eyes. "Chase, you couldn't find your own dick. What makes you think I want to find it? Go and sleep it off."

"Awww, J. You know you're the best chick in this joint."

"Chase, you're wasting your time. Go home and get some sleep because that's about all you're going to get tonight."

"J, you've gotten reeeaaallll boring in your old age."

"I'm not getting older, Chase, just choosing a better class of men."

"Hey!"

"Get out of here, you old bugger. You've had enough." He pulled himself to his feet, swaying slightly for a moment and then staggered off back to the bar. Chase's forward motion was only stopped by the heavy plastic bar running the length of the room, his expanding waist rippling with the force of the crash. His head bobbed on his trunk-like neck as he surveyed the other residents at the bar, making a beeline towards a lone female a few seats down.

"Hello there, sweetheart, lonely are we?" The large man's voice boomed over the din. I could imagine his smelly breath assaulting her delicate senses and saw her draw back in reaction. I couldn't quite hear her response over the noise in the bar and I watched carefully in case she needed assistance. Chase was mostly harmless but when drunk he became a little too pushy.

"Awww, c'mon sweetheart, your loser friend ain't showin'. How about I keep you company?"
Yep, always pushy.

Sighing I stood to lend my assistance, boldly striding over to the friendly confrontation. "Hey, Chase, call it a night, OK?"

"J, butt out. She ain't your type." *My type?* "I'm just keeping the lady here company. Ain't I doll?"

It was now time to put myself into intimidation mode. I was as tall as he was wide so I was able to tower over him and give him my best glare. "Chase, go home... NOW!" I could see the

indecision in his eyes, sizing up his chances of winning this battle. At least he wasn't too drunk to realize that he was outmatched. He backed away with what pride he could muster but anyone within hearing distance saw it as the back down it was.

"I'm sorry he's usually harmless most of the time, but when he's had a few he thinks he is Koran Andover as far as females are concerned."

She batted her eyes at me, sibilantly whispering, "Thank you, kind lady. He was a bit of a bother."

"May I buy you a drink?" *What was it about her that caught my attention?*

"Yes, thank you. A Pluuvian Twist, if you please."

I waved to the bartender, indicating two drinks. Hell, my stomach lining was nearly gone anyway. "This is a bit out of the way for you, err..." I waved my hand in the hope of a name.

"Andrissa... Andrissa Mandoorva."

"Jordana at your service, ma'am." I gave her my best courtly bow, respectfully showing her the top of my head. "What are you doing here, Andrissa? This isn't exactly the nicest part of the port you know."

"Well, I was here to see someone about a delivery but I can't seem to find him."

"A job?" *Is this my client?* "What sort of job?"

"Just the delivery of a small item....," Those eyes watched for my reaction. "... no questions asked."

"Who were you supposed to meet?"

"Someone named J. Laren."

"That's me, Jordana Laren. Come. Let's sit up the back there where it's quiet."

She proceeded ahead of me, the hypnotic sway of her from behind slowly dragging me into her grasp. I was mesmerized by this intoxicating creature and was helpless but to follow.

I carried both drinks as she made her way towards the table I had just vacated. "No, take the other seat." I just saved her from sitting in the alcohol-drenched chair, moving her around to the other side of the worn table. I placed the tall glass down in front of her, spreading myself casually in the remaining chair and positioning myself to have full view of the bar. "Now, what can I do for you?"

"You were recommended by a mutual friend who said you were... discreet."

"Discreet is my middle name, ma'am." I let my smile travel to my eyes, giving an air of mild unconcern. I was interested in her and I was trying to gauge if there was any reciprocation. A smile touched her lips, giving me some hope. "Just tell me where and when and I'll be there."

"And the price?"

"Well, that depends on what I am delivering and how much the authorities want it."

"The package is me, and I would say that the authorities probably want me a whole lot."

"In that case, for you twelve hundred."

"Twelve hundred? That's an awful lot."

"We are talking about the Consortium here, aren't we? Twelve hundred."

Hell, if she was interested I'd drop my price but I was going to start high with the haggling. She sipped her drink while she contemplated my offer, her eyes never wavering from me while she considered her options.

"If you can get me to Covaris in three solar days, you can have your twelve hundred."

Covaris? That was going to take some serious flying to make that destination in that short a time. It could be done, as long as the Consortium left us alone.

"Agreed." *What have I got myself into?*

* * *

I sipped my long, tall drink slowly trying to concentrate on the soft tones of Andriessa as she explained the politics of Covaris. In reality, I couldn't have cared less about Covaris, let alone its politics, but this young lady had me believing it was the centre of my universe. What was it about her that had me spellbound? My eyes must have glazed over at some point because she had stopped talking, idly watching me until I zoned back in. I had no choice but to blush at being caught out daydreaming. "Sorry? You were saying?"

"Nothing. I haven't been talking for the last two minutes."

"Oh." I dipped my head towards my drink, giving me precious seconds to come up with something to appease her. "So, you've been in this neighborhood long? I think I would have seen you around if you had."

"No, I come and go a lot but I never stay."

"I don't blame you. It's a hole."

"Well, I wouldn't say that exactly..."

"I would... exactly." That brought a smile to her lips. My eyes slipped to those lips and my mind wandered, thinking thoughts about a client that I shouldn't be thinking. *What am I doing?*

"Let me at least buy you dinner. My ship is being refueled and we can't leave before then, and once we get going, well I'm not going to have time to cook."

She looked around the room, sizing up the quality of the cuisine by the quality of the room and its inhabitants. Her gaze returned to me, incredulity written in her eyes.

"Yeah, the food is not too bad. Almost edible. But we don't have time to wait for an opening in one of them high-falutin' joints closer to the port. We either eat here or we don't eat at all."

She told me what she wanted, giving me several choices to choose from, and I left to place the order with the barkeep, ordering another round of drinks in the process. I looked back to where I had been sitting and watched her, taking in the beautiful aquamarine mica dress that shimmered in the low light of the room. Her ramrod posture spoke volumes. She was a creature of high-bred status stuck in a dive of a bar having to grovel to a space bum like me. Under any other circumstances we wouldn't have even been on the same planet, let alone the same room. I probably would have been the mud on the bottom of her expensive boots if the Consortium hadn't intervened and thrown us together.

Why was I trying so hard to get her interested? We were worlds apart - socially, economically, emotionally and geographically. Why even try? I was going to deliver her to her destination and that would be the end of it. *Don't open yourself to heartache, J.*

Despite myself, I couldn't help but respond to that twinkle in her eye when she looked at me. Perhaps it was my loneliness that was calling to me, who knows? But I felt I had to give myself a chance. After all everyone deserved some happiness every now and then, didn't they?

I wove my way through the deafening crowd back to her, depositing the damp glasses on the table with a thud. There was a shove in my back and I swiveled, fists at the ready, as a fight broke out on the floor. "Hey! Watch who you're shoving!"

"Get out of my way, bitch!"

"Who are you calling bitch? Dickhead."

This guy didn't know when to leave well enough alone and took a swipe. The floor opened up and soon we were facing off against one another.

The barkeeper called out, "J, don't take too long, OK? Dinner is nearly ready."

A wave of laughter rolled around the edges of the circle at the expense of the unsuspecting soon-

to-be recipient of my fist.

"J?" I could see his eyes open in doubt.

"Jordana to you, numbskull." I nearly laughed as he silently mouthed 'oh shit' when he realized who I was.

He stepped back, trying to think of some way out of this but it was too late. My fist was already in motion, connecting with his jaw in a sickening thud and sending him to the floor out cold.

"That quick enough for you, Errol?" Another wave of laughter rolled around the room, people stepping over the prostrate body of my victim.

"Nice one, J!" The bartender gave me one of his toothless grins, amusing all those around me.

I sat down next to Andriessa, her eyes never leaving me. "This happens to you often?"

"Sometimes. Most of them back down when they find out who I am. Only a couple of them are stupid enough to try anything."

"So, you think very highly of yourself then." I could hear the disdain in her voice.

"No, not really. They just know what I'm capable of."

Her eyes traveled over me, burning me with their passing, and I was unable to move under her perusal of me. My mind wandered again, imagining my skin prickling under that hypnotic stare, feeling my nerve endings coming alive in sympathy. My libido was becoming inflamed under her watchful eye and I was starting to sweat.

I turned my own gaze upon her and soon she was squirming also, her eyes no longer able to hold mine. At that particular moment dinner arrived and we ate in companionable silence for a while, barely able to hear each other over the noisy room anyway.

"So, how long have you been in the delivery business, Ms. Laren?"

"Jordana please, or J if you like."

"All right, Jordana. How long have you been flying?"

"I've been flying since I was able to walk. My dad used to be one of the best until he got hurt in an accident. Someone needed to take over the family business and since I was the only kid it fell to me."

"Your father?"

"Gareth Laren." I could see her eyes widen at the mention of his name. He was a highly

decorated fighter pilot back in the old days, before the Consortium extended its reach out to the nether regions of space and this speck of dust in the cosmos. When I was growing up he used to tell these wild, fantastic stories about his exploits. As a kid I used to idolize him but as I grew older I came to realize that he was an old, worn out fighter pilot still living the glory days, immersed in his memories until his dying day.

"Yeah, sometimes it's a real pain in the ass to live up to that reputation."

"Well, you seemed to be coping all right just a while ago."

"That's my reputation, not his." I gave her my best charming smile, looking for an elusive one back.

She bent her head over the plate, continuing her eating. I watched out of the corner of my eye and I saw her eyes flicker to me, unaware that I was watching in my peripheral vision. A shy smile spread over her lips as she studied me, perhaps trying to decide whether I could be trusted or not.

The bartender came over to our table, his large hand leaning in the alcohol patch on the table. Shaking his wet hand he grabbed his grubby cloth and cleaned up the mess. "Hey, J! You in for tonight?"

I looked over to Andriessa, gauging my chances of anything more. A beguiling smile greeted me and I felt a little more confident in myself. "Not tonight, Errol. I'm working."

"Working? Yeah, right" *Hey, I worked... sometimes.* His thoughts were obviously following my own, his dull grey eyes slipping over to my dinner companion. Before leaving, he gave me a wink, silently wishing me good luck. Yeah, I was going to need all the luck I could get.

"So, is it just you, or is there someone else we have to pick up?"

"Just me, and I'd like to get started as quickly as possible." She was back down to business, the easy flirting from moments before now gone. Three days alone with her... hell, it was going to be torture. Still, the few glances she sent my way were promising and I hoped the journey would be an uneventful one.

"When are we leaving?"

I looked at my timepiece. "Refueling should be about done. Would you be ready in, say, twenty minutes?"

"I'm ready now."

"Well then, let's get this show on the road." I offered my hand down to her, feeling the coolness of her serpentine skin under my fingertips. I nodded cordially to the bartender as I escorted her from the building towards the bustling spaceport and my ship.

* * *

I steered my companion out into the brightness of the false day. I thought it was the most ridiculous thing I had ever seen seeing those damned hovering lights when I first came here but since then I had learned my lesson. When I told Andriessa that it was a hole, it was no idle curse. Aldronicus VII was a hole down to Hell itself. Its two suns could burn the skin right off a man, or woman, in a matter of hours unprotected. Only raving idiots or the certifiably insane would go outside the protection of the electromagnetic domes. Maybe that's why the Consortium left this place alone. There was nothing here but dust, heat and the odd assortment of pathetic souls who had nowhere else to go.

Currently we were on the lunar cycle, which was stupid because there was no moon. Two suns... not enough room for a moon, as I thought of it. *Screwed up, like the rest of us.*

I guided Andriessa along the pathway to the Spaceport. If we didn't jump soon we'd have to wait till the next lunar cycle fifty-eight hours' away. *Should be enough time to get in a couple of fights and rot away the rest of my stomach lining with booze.*

"Get the hell out of my way!" Vendors were shoving their wares in my face and it was seriously pissing me off. I looked over to the woman next to me who seemed unfazed by the unwanted attention we were receiving.

"Hello there, J darling!"

Oh, shit... I turned around to see someone I hadn't seen for a while, and had hoped wouldn't again for a while more. "Kat... hey." I sounded less than enthusiastic even to my own ears.

"Where have you been, honey?"

Hiding... "You know... here and there."

"More there than here lately."

"Been busy, you know how it is." I tried to brush past her but the woman grabbed my arm roughly.

"Hang on, how about a bit of fun?"

"Not tonight Kat. I've got a job." The large woman, built like a brick shithouse, slid her eyes over the petite woman standing next to me.

"Your tastes have changed, J."

Nah, just gotten better... Kat came into my life at a time when I wanted to experience everything, the more dangerous the better. Kat liked her sex rough, and plenty of it, and I was more than a willing participant. After a couple of broken bones I thought better of it and found

my appetites had tempered with age and common sense. Now... well now, sweet and tender was just as important as amorous and demanding. All I needed to do was to find someone who fit the bill.

"You're not in that much of a hurry now, are you? And I'm sure you're little... friend... here wouldn't mind waiting. Hell, if she wants, she can join in."

If I didn't think I'd break my hand on the woman's jaw I was tempted to smack Kat into next week. "C'mon, let's go." I grabbed Andrissa's mica-covered elbow and steered her around Kat in the direction of the hangar.

"Hey, J, wait a minute. I haven't seen you in months and you're trying to skip past me? You've got time for an old friend, haven't you?"

Finally I snapped. Releasing my new employer I stepped up to Kat, invading her personal space and then some. "If you don't back off, Kat, everyone here is going to see me kick your butt from one end of the Port to the other. You got me? I'm gonna kick you so goddammed hard you'll be opening your mouth to get my boot out."

With that I walked away, grabbing the smaller woman's hand in passing. *What in the wide galaxy possessed me to ever get myself hitched to that broad? Oh yeah, sex.*

What was it about the lunar cycle that brought out all the crazies? Or maybe it was the crazies coming out to look for a bit of a tan from the sun... err, suns. Whatever it was the inhabitants were on the edge, nit-picking over wares, pushing and shoving and using a liberal vocabulary that would have made my daddy's hair stand up on end, if he had any.

While one hand was guiding Andrissa in the direction I wanted to go the other rested over my blaster. It was more to protect it being stolen than to actually use it. The oppressiveness of the crowd pressed in on all sides, irritating my last nerve. If the way didn't part soon someone was going to get hurt.

As if someone had read my thoughts a path opened up in front of me and allowed us to make up some time to the hangars. Maybe one of the numerous life forms calling this place home picked up my vibes. I looked up to see my image on one of the many enforcement screens floating above the crowd. Staring back at me from the mass of bodies on the screen was a woman whose anger was written in every line of her body.

Did my butt look big? I continued to stride towards the hangar but my eyes couldn't help but look at the screen, observing every imperfection I could find. I hadn't realized that I had run myself down so much and swore off the alcohol... again. That was the fifth time this solar week.

It was a little game I played. I looked at myself, got disgusted, swore off the alcohol then broke that promise as soon as I could find another bar. This time, however, it was going to have to wait until my return. How was I ever going to last that long? I wanted a drink already.

* * *

"There she is." I pointed at the small craft tucked away in the corner of the large area loosely called a hangar. It was more a large expanse of dust where they parked the ships not in use during the lunar cycle. Of course, the ships were towed under cover before sunrise otherwise the controls melted into place.

"That?"

"Yes, that!" If I didn't need the money I would have told her to hit the skyway.

"Will we fit in it?" Her nose shifted as if sniffing something that had turned bad.

"Of course we will fit in it! Did you think I was going to strap you to the underside?" It was one thing to question my flying ability it was another to insult my ship. "It's one of those 'it's bigger on the inside' things."

I could see she seriously doubted the space worthiness of my little 'Bessie' but I knew her well. The mechanics often laughed that I had given my ship a name, but as soon as someone muttered it in one of those archive tapes from that planet... you know, third rock from the Sun... I knew it was the name for my gal here. It was a friendly name, a name that we could have conversations to. It was lonely out in the cosmos and a gal had to keep herself busy or go crazy in the process. *Hmmm....*

"Come on. Time's a wastin'." I nearly pushed the woman towards Bessie as she resisted. I had to get into the air before she changed her mind. The creature had surprising strength in that slim body, slowing my progress to a crawl. Before she had time to adjust I lifted her in my arms and boarded my vessel. She glared at me and I just muttered, "You were taking too long." *Well, she was.*

I lowered her into the co-pilot's chair and strapped her in. Her eyes widened, the irises narrowing to thin slits as she expressed her irritation. I backed away and strapped myself in, firing up the engines before she could react. The sooner we were off this rock the better.

"Hey!" The single word echoed down my earphone. "Wait up!" Standing in front of the ship was one very angry head technician.

"Hey, I owe ya, Rales. Pay ya next lunar!" I tried to sound nonchalant but we both knew it was a plea for credit.

"Yeah, yeah, and I know Corath Blane."

I knew he didn't. Did anyone know the most powerful creature in the known universe? I suspected very few and they were living in constant fear of being found and terminated.

"Sure you do, Rales." I waved him off and he reluctantly stepped aside, allowing Bessie to

spread her wings, metaphorically speaking, and fly. Well, it was more like she had a solar flare up her ass but the wings image was much nicer.

* * *

"So what do you think?" I was showing off, I knew that, thinking that the woman would appreciate the comfy little vehicle she was traveling in. We had been in space for a day and a half now and I heard nothing but society yakkety yak from her. Who gave a stiff if she was going to be married to some jerk or other when all this was over?

"It's... quaint."

"Quaint?" She was insulting my girl! "It's the fastest thing this side of Barracker's Reef."

"Nevertheless it is what? Fifty years old?"

"Fifty? Hey, she's twenty if she's a day!" I patted the panel in front of me, trying to make the hunk of junk feel better. It was then that I realized I had been in space too long and AndriSSa didn't seem so appealing anymore.

My companion shuddered "Do you want something to drink?"

"Sure." There was a small replicator out in the corridor programmed for non-alcoholic beverages. That was for my benefit. I had to stay sober or I would run the old gal into a nearby piece of space junk.

While the temperature seemed just right to me, AndriSSa sluggishly rose as the cold played havoc with her metabolism. *Good riddance*. This joy ride couldn't be over soon enough. She had no idea what Bessie meant to me and that's fine with me. We'll just kick her ass off at Covaris and be on our way, credits lining our pockets until our creditors found us.

AndriSSa returned too quickly for my liking but she did bring me a hot caffeine synth. Maybe that would clear the fuzzies from my head. "Thanks." My hand wrapped around the familiar cup and I downed the hot beverage without much thought.

The woman sat in the co-pilot's seat, a secret smile crossing her features before disappearing behind the heated mug in her hand.

"What's so funny?"

"You." The liquid in her throat accentuated the slight hiss in her voice.

"Me? I know I can be the life of the party with my jokes, but... but..." My head was spinning and my vision suddenly went black.

* * *

I have to say that I felt like shit when I woke up. The first thing I noticed was that Bessie was gone. What the hell happened to my ship?

"You son-of-a-... No, scratch that...", I bellowed, "...you bitch!"

There was a deathly stillness around me, borne from the heat and the wide open space. There was nothing on this planet, only ochre dust for as far as the eye could see. Oh, there was the occasional rock here and there but that was it. That... that... serpent stole my Bessie and marooned me here on whatever this hellhole passing for a planet was.

"You could have at least left me a drink!" Why was I hollering? No one could hear me. "Err... water, I mean water!" I amended. Damn! I really had to get hold of my drinking problem.

I sat up and instantly regretted it. My head spun like an imploding black hole sucking in what common sense I had. Here I was left to die and all I could think about was my Bessie and where the next drink was coming from.

While my body was quite content to just laze around for a while my brain was telling me to get up and get out of the sun. It must have been that craziness that seemed to be visiting me at the moment. I looked around a bit more closely, trying to decide what to do. My body was being smug, muttering to me, *Ha! Ha! See? I told you. Nothing but rocks and dust!* But my brain was being condescending. *I can see that, butthead, but you can't sit around all day. Get up off your lazy ass and get moving!*

Suddenly the hot arid sun was not so much of a danger any more. I was nine-tenths the way to insanity so there was little to lose. Besides, one direction was just as good as the other at this point.

In the far distance was a small puff of swirling dust, which made up my mind for me. Hauling myself to my feet I set off towards the disturbance hoping against hope that it would actually lead to something.

* * *

If my life wasn't hanging in the balance this little stroll would have been the most boring time of my life. The furthest I ever had to walk was from Bessie to the bar. It was surprising really that I wasn't the size of Chase by now. I was tempted to break into a trot just so this dreary exercise could be over... then again, maybe not. Exercise was vastly overrated.

And so the day went on, putting one foot in front of the other towards a dust cloud that seemed to be slowly getting closer. Now I knew that I wasn't moving that fast so it must have been moving towards me also. I was so tempted to just park my butt where I was and wait but that was too lazy even for me.

Some sort of contraption was slowly coming into focus, approaching at a speed that was barely

above what I was accomplishing. Okay, now I was worrying. If this was the best this planet had to offer I was in real trouble.

* * *

Finally, the thing was within throwing distance and it was unlike anything I had ever seen, and believe me I had seen a **lot** in this particular cosmos. The engine sounded more like a squeak than a hum or even a rumble, making me wonder if there was an engine at all. The small platform housed six women, two of whom seemed to be using their limbs to move the thing. The other four, dressed in rags that revealed more than they covered, stared at me with some hostility.

"Hey, I seem to be lost..." My words were cut short by a rock thrown at my head. "Owww. What was that for?" A second rock followed and I was ducking and weaving the hail of rubble. "Will you quit that!"

"How did you get here?" A big-boned, dark-haired woman glared down from her lofty height of a foot and a half off the ground.

"Some bitch kicked me off my Bessie and took off!" Now **I** knew what I was talking about but it soon became apparent that they didn't.

"Someone took your woman?" This particular activity was obviously frowned upon in their society. The women bristled at the news, brows knitting together in anger.

"Yeah, she did." Since the statement got them on my side, who was I to argue?

"Which way did she travel?" The dark-haired woman searched the horizon in all directions until I pointed skyward. She sighed and stared out over the desert momentarily before waving me onto the contraption. It seemed I was saved from a stoning, at least for now, but if they ever found out that Bessie was a spaceship a stoning would be the least of my troubles.

"So, where am I?" Someone had to start a conversation.

"Rigeus."

That was it, nothing more, just one word... Rigeus.

"**The** Rigeus? As in the 'Planet of the Amazon Women' Rigeus?"

"Rigeus".

This woman needed to seriously expand her vocabulary but my question only needed one word. Rigeus was infamous throughout the known universe. It was a prison planet for women. Only the seriously demented and dangerously insane were abandoned here, and I was in the middle of it. Maybe I should have taken the offer of that stoning when I had the chance, especially now there would be no bar in sight.

* * *

Trying to get someone to talk was like getting credits out of my pocket... it was empty. I had a better chance of a decent conversation with Bessie than I did with these women, whose hyper-vigilant observance of the surrounding land was beginning to annoy me.

The contraption we were on was something so primitive that I couldn't even recall anything from the archival material I had gleaned once in a while that it could be remotely similar to. It moved on wheels. Wheels hadn't been used for a few millennia now, replaced by the less archaic hovercraft. Even more primitive was the fact that the wheels seemed to be activated by manpower or, more to the point, womanpower. There didn't seem to be any power source for this vehicle except for exertion. Life was going downhill rapidly.

* * *

"So, where are we going in such a hurry?"

That earned me a death glare for the woman who seemed to be in charge, not that she answered me. Her attention returned to the horizon, her head constantly swiveling on her thick neck. "There!" As her finger pointed towards a small puff of dust in the distance the other women moved into action, trying to turn the vehicle around and head in the opposite direction.

Even I could see that whoever it was who was chasing us would be upon us very quickly. Maybe these women should ask for mechanical tips from their enemy because it didn't take long for them to catch up. While the foreign vehicle looked vaguely similar to the contraption I was in now the only glaring difference was that it had an engine. Rudimentary, of course, but it was still an engine which pushed along their vehicle at a much faster pace.

I reached to the holster at my side and cursed. That bitch of a woman took my sidearm! That was nearly as unforgivable as taking Bessie. Andriessa's list of indiscretions was growing long and varied and when I caught up with her.... well, let's just say I'll be finding out if she can shed her skin.

Their contraption overtook us easily, the air filled with the sound of 'putt, putt, putt' from what I assumed was their engine. Small puffs of black smoke were released in time to the sounds, creating a nearly musical scenario. But the passengers on board were anything but peaceful. Hostile faces were staring at us, eager for someone to resist.

"Don't even bother!" It was a warning that my fellow travelers were taking seriously, slowing their vehicle down to a stop.

"What are you doing?" I hissed.

"Nothing," the big woman muttered.

"Then count me out." The women with me barely put up any fight at all so I seemed to be able to match all of them at the same time. It was nearly like they had given up even before the fight had

begun. This was not an auspicious start for a prison break.

We were escorted back to a tangled heap of twisted metal which could be loosely called a compound. There were maybe twenty women training in an open space of dirt, makeshift metal poles in their hands as they practiced moves of war. Other women were assigned to cooking, washing or guard duty. It looked like a pretty disciplined tribe that knew how to subdue its enemies.

My fellow travelers looked around wide-eyed and nervous. Obviously whatever tribe they came from had no such rituals and it explained a lot about their surrender. It was easier to surrender first before getting the crap kicked out of them and then having to surrender.

Now me, I liked a good fight, and I was not one to make it easy for anyone. But I liked good odds as well, and at the moment thirty-plus to one was just a little too one-sided for my liking. I would have to bide my time.

* * *

"Well, well, well. It seems my luck has changed."

I knew that voice and it was one I hoped never to hear ever again. *Oh crap!* "Hey, Vel. How's it hanging?" I always wondered if she was a man in a previous life.

"Much better, now that you're here."

I finally got the nerve to look her straight in the eye and what I saw was not good. We hadn't separated on the best of terms, if you could call a broken jaw on her part good. She was a nasty bitch that made Kat look like some tiny tot playing in zero gravity. Vel liked inflicting pain during sex. It was not to my particular taste but she was a friend of Kat's. It was during one of Kat's playful sessions that Vel crossed the line, giving some poor young thing they had picked up in a bar a severe beating that Vel had no intention of finishing. I had to step in before she killed the girl, breaking her jaw, and my hand, in the process. Kat suggested that I take a long, long holiday somewhere far, far away. Hence, my current address at Canaris Minor. I couldn't go any further out without leaving the universe. By the look of the feral smile on the woman facing me maybe I should have left my last job well enough alone and stayed put.

"Sit down a spell. You're going to be here for a while."

Knowing Vel as I did I suspected that my life right now was worth shit. She was a woman who never forgot an indiscretion against her.

"Now, you six...", Vel faced the captured women as if she was their queen, "you should have known better than to get involved with this one."

"Yeah right, Vel. I told them my life story after I fell from the sky." I was being sarcastic and it earned me a backhand across the mouth. "Well, that accomplished a lot." Another smack. The taste in my mouth was familiar but I ignored it. *Shut your mouth, stupid!* I was giving Vel

exactly what she wanted.

"Take them away. I'll decide their fate later."

The woman was in her element as the leader of a group of women who would do her bidding. Vel always seemed to be a megalomaniac in the making, now it looked like she got her wish.

"But you, my dear J, I think we have something to settle up right now." That stoning was looking better and better by the minute.

* * *

"You don't look so good." The big-boned woman stated the obvious

"Tell me something I don't know." Vel had finished with me... for now. I had been bodily thrown into some sort of hut with my other captives. My mind had taken a holiday for a while as Vel proceeded to show me her bad side. It could have been worse I suppose, not that I know how. I ached from head to foot, trying to take solace in whatever inch of muscle and sinew I could find that hadn't been abused.

"You know her then?"

"Of course I know her!" My hands came to my head to stop it toppling off my neck. "Yeah, you could say that," I whispered, "but she ain't no friend of mine."

"I can see that." The brunette replied smugly. She was obviously enjoying my discomfort. It was probably because while Vel was whaling in on me she wasn't turning her attention on them.

"Any chance of escaping this hellhole?" Even the desert seemed preferable to sitting here waiting for lesson number two.

"Nope."

"No? That's it? Aren't there more of you out there?"

"Yep... and yep."

"Well, what are they waiting for?"

"Not for us."

"What sort of Amazon group are you, huh? You just abandon your women?" Why did I have to talk? It hurt!

"Once captured by the Velkren no one returns."

"Velkren? Figures." Looks like I was on the mark about megalomania. "Well, I don't know about

you but I'm not waiting around to find out what comes next. I'm outta here." My mind and my body were at it again, arguing the pros and cons of actually moving. This time I put my own two credits' worth in and made an executive decision. I was going to get out of here if, for nothing else, than to piss Vel off. I was that sort of a woman.

"That's not wise."

"Why? Has my butt fallen off or something?"

"They will catch you and you will die," muttered one of the younger women hugging the wall of the makeshift hut.

"I think that's a foregone conclusion now, blondie. I'm dead either way." I looked around at the defeated faces. "So that's it, huh? You're just going to sit here and let her kill you?"

"That is our way."

"You had me fooled. You threw rocks at me."

"We didn't know who you were."

"But... you threw rocks at me. You had no idea who I was and...you... threw... rocks... at... **me!**" Why was I all of a sudden taking it as such a personal affront? I was in enough pain to last me a lifetime and I was arguing with women who were adding to that pain.

"It... was to scare you off."

"Where was I going to go, huh? There's nothing out there but dust and more dust. You're sending me mixed signals here."

"We are a peaceful race," she whispered, "but sometimes there is a need for that fact to be hidden."

"So it's okay for Vel to know you're cowards but me you have to beat the crap out of?"

"That is not right."

"Oh, but it is, sweetheart. I see it all now. One is more than enough for you to handle, huh?" My anger seemed to exacerbate my abused body but I couldn't stop venting. "You've got to work on your people skills."

"You could have been sent to spy on us."

"A spy?" I stopped for a moment. "Alright, I'll give you that one. But to set the record straight, I'm not a spy. Some snake in a snazzy dress left me here for dead. End of story."

"If you say so, stranger, it does not matter now."

No, it didn't matter. We were in Vel's hands and at her mercy, me even more so. So I moved, cursing internally every so often as I tried to bring myself to an upright position. What a bunch of losers. Vel had it all over these women. Well, not me. She can rot in hell. I made my way to the door of the hut and listened.

"There are a couple of guards outside."

I scowled at the idiot who nearly yelled out the response. "Well, thank... you... very... much!" As expected, the door opened and I was the first in line for a punch. The others stood back and I cursed as loudly as I could. I was really not up for a fight but I was not up to getting the crap kicked out of me twice either. Trust them to leave a woman's work to a space bum like me. I jumped in, feet and all, and swung at anything that came into view. I figured I must have come in contact with more than the two guards because anyone who came up on my blind side got hit.

"I could use a hand here!"

Finally, with the fight nearly over, the other women joined in, earning my disgust. What were they teaching the women these days? But I made damned sure that I was the first one out of the hut. I did the most work so I got to go first.

"Where's this contraption of yours?"

"Con-trap-shun?" The short blond looked at me as if I had spoken in the Hynerian Bog language. Now no one could understand that gibberish because that's what it was... gibberish.

"That... that... thing with the wheels."

"Our car?" The big-boned brunette answered.

"Car? What's that?"

"That thing with the wheels."

"That's a car?" This conversation was going round in circles and unnecessary. "Just... just... go!" My body was screaming at me to stop what I was doing. I was sick of waiting and just wanted to get the hell out of here.

It was pretty easy to find the 'car', as they called it, and while it saved us walking its speed left a lot to be desired. If we were chased the Velken could outrun it quite easily. To increase our chances of any sort of getaway, I armed myself with a piece of titanium pipe and went looking for Vel's own 'car' to do a bit of creative tinkering. If they were going to catch us they would have to run.

As our 'car' sped away at the amazing speed of two feet a second I looked back at Vel's kingdom.

It was built out of scrap metal and junk from eons ago that had either fallen from space or had been abandoned in one of many explorations.

"Some of it is from the outpost."

Did the big woman read my mind?

"Epi."

"If you say so."

"That's my name. Epi."

I decided I'd better keep my thoughts to myself. "Did you say an outpost?"

"Sure. The guards at the outpost."

Of course. Why didn't I think of that? It was probably because my brains were scrambled. I could barely remember my own name at this point. "Where's the outpost?"

"That way." Epi pointed out towards the desert, not that it meant anything to me.

I looked around the vast expanse of dirt and wondered how she could distinguish between one rock and another. "And where do you come from?"

Her finger changed direction to the front of their 'car', pointing towards the purple sunset. "Twelve clicks that way."

At that point I gave up. It was slowly getting cooler with the setting of the furnace called a sun and my body was really starting to hurt. My head ached, my muscles had stiffened up and my closed eye was pissing me off. A number of times I had to stop myself from punching someone into next week because they came up on my blind side.

* * *

It was after dark by the time we reached wherever we were going. Well, I couldn't see because it was dark. That's usually how it worked... no light, can't see... so I had to trust that these women knew where they were going. I just had to hope that I hadn't traded in one crazy woman for another.

"You're late."

I couldn't see who owned that voice but it was deep and melodic. I was in love.

"Vel."

"I see. Come on."

Was this the tribe of the non-speakers? It was going to get pretty lonely if they didn't speak. Now me I love to talk, especially about me and Bessie. For a gal to be right in my book she had to accept me and my ship. That might seem a bit feminist but that was the way I was and I was not going to change for anyone.

Two women who I had not met before steered me towards a cave entrance, leading me carefully inside and down a tunnel until we reached a large cavern. The space was large and surprisingly comfortable, except for a slight chill in the air. A space blanket was shoved in my face and a finger pointed to an available corner. After that I was left to my own devices to find a suitable sleeping place.

I suppose I could have complained about not having any food but as I was being left alone I decided not to push my luck. Suddenly a plate of hot something, what I could only assume was food, was shoved in front of me. There goes that mind-reading shit again. I sniffed it suspiciously trying to decide whether to take my life in my hands and eat it. Considering the other option I could be dead either way.

I dipped my finger in it. Damn, that was hot! Experimentally I touched it to my tongue, allowing my taste buds to make a decision. Actually it wasn't at all bad but if they ever told me what was in it...

"It's got..."

"No! Don't tell me!" I didn't want to look up to see an amused grin aimed at me. I just wanted to be left alone for now. Tomorrow was another day and I'd be in a better mood to face whatever shit I had got myself into this time.

So I ate my glop. It really did look awful but I'D eaten worse. My stomach was only interested in it filling up, not the actual contents it was trying to digest. I had barely finished the contents of the bowl when an urge to sleep overwhelmed me. Not one to ignore such a strong demand, I closed my one good eye and drifted off to sleep.

* * *

I woke up to what I assumed was morning. It was a bit hard to tell with one eye swollen closed and in a cave but there seemed to be a hive of activity.

"Up."

My good eye focused on the worn out boots in front of me. I slowly drew my vision up the body to the face hovering over me. Her visage was in half shadow but I could see that she had short cropped blonde hair. Now I could see where Epi got her conversation skills from.

"Up," she repeated impatiently.

"And this is how you treat all your guests?"

"Never any guests. Only prisoners." Her eyes shifted to the two women beside her, signaling some assistance. Roughly they each grabbed an arm and bodily hauled me upright.

"Hey! Watch it!" I never took too kindly to be manhandled, especially first thing in the morning. Obviously they were still treating me as a spy. I had no idea what it would take to convince them otherwise.

"Come." The woman wandered off and fully expected me to follow.

I got the subtle hint when I was pushed in the back by one of my minders. "Remind me to recommend you to 'The Galaxy Guide to the Must See Holiday Stopovers'. Yeah, for those who like to rough it." When that earned me another shove in the back I muttered, "I've got to learn to keep my mouth shut." I was a smart ass, I admit it. Of course, I was hoping for a lovable smart ass.

When my brain finally woke up I was able to take notice of what was actually happening in the cave and none of it was military. These women were sitting ducks.

There were small hydroponics gardens scattered everywhere taking up what precious ground there was available to grow food. A small underground spring gave them much needed drinking water, but there was not much else. An occasional metal packing box occupied the available niches. It was obvious that Vel's tribe had the bulk of the metal and the firepower on this planet, leaving this tribe vulnerable to attack. Maybe that's why there were underground, as much for defense as for protection from the elements.

How did I get myself into this situation? Two days ago I was happily drinking myself into oblivion, now look at me. Marooned on the planet of the seriously pissed off women and stuck between two tribes who both wanted to beat the crap out of me. And this was only my first day on this rock. Imagine what I could do in a week! I berated myself for my sick sense of humor. I really was too sarcastic for my own good.

Finally I found myself at the entrance to the cave and daylight. At this point I was glad for my swollen eye so that only one eyeball was cooking in its own juices. It looked like the day was going to be nasty, an intense heat already palpable so early in the sunrise.

"So, what's on the agenda for today?" Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut?

The blonde woman, who seemed to be the leader of his rag-tag group, just glared at me. I could now see her clearly, well as clearly as I could from a serious case of flashover. My vision was awash in white spots from the severe brightness.

The woman was shorter than I was but her physique spoke of a hard life. Clearly defined muscle was on display under the skimpy outfit that she wore. Pale eyes watched me for a reaction but I wasn't going to give her one. While she was pleasing to the eye she wasn't my type.

"What's your name, cutie?" A broad hand clipped me over the back of the head. "Ma'am," I amended.

"Beri."

"Tasty." While there was a snicker behind me it didn't stop another smack for my cheekiness. A tiny movement drew my eyes to Beri's shoulder or, more to the point, past her shoulder.

"Cap'n." It was that voice from the night before. My woman.

My eyes connected with hers, clear hazel pools studying me with both amusement and interest. Her pale brown hair sat atop her head in a riot of curls, sprouting like some massive brown bush.

"And who might you be?" I put on my best 'courting' voice.

Beri glared at me. Maybe I was moving in on her girl, I don't know, but something had certainly deflated her cordiality. She had it in for me, I could tell. "Fen," Beri replied abruptly.

"Hi, I'm Jordana, but my friends call me 'J'." I smiled widely, ignoring the pull on my split lip and Beri's eyes. "I'm sorry I must look a mess..." My hands swiftly tried to push everything back in place but by the look on their faces I was not very successful. Damn Vel! Not only did she do a number on me now she was messing with my love life.

Fen leaned in and whispered in Beri's ear, her hands resting familiarly on the blonde. So... I was right. Still, as the ancient saying goes, 'all's fair in love and war', and this looked like it was going to be a bit of both. Now I don't mind the odd fight or two as long as it didn't interfere with my love-making. And that was where Vel lost me. She was keen to combine the two, well more on the pain side than the love side, and to me I just didn't get it. I had had some experience of that love/pain thing and it was not for me, so whatever Vel enjoyed about it she was going to have to enjoy alone.

My move towards the luscious fawn-haired woman was blocked by Beri, her stance making it very clear what she thought about me moving in on her territory. Was it worth the effort? I looked again into those eyes. Yeah, it was. Let the games begin.

Beri was about to turn her back on me when I asked, "So, what about me?"

"What about you?" Beri's words were dripping with condescension.

"What am I supposed to do?" She wasn't going to leave me out in the desert alone, was she?

"Whatever you want to do, I don't care."

Yes, she was.

"Now hang on there one minute..." My hand shot out and grabbed her arm. The muscle bulged

and I took a step back. Damn! She could probably arm-wrestle me into the dirt. "You picked me up and now you're dumping me?"

"And you have probably brought down the Velkren on top of us."

"Listen, sweetie, that's not my fault. Vel's been pissed off with you long before I arrived." But we both knew better. By now Beri had the whole story. Vel would dig up the whole planet inch by inch to find me because she was a vengeful bitch.

"Besides, I think you need my help."

"Oh, really?" Those two words were dripping with so much sarcasm that there was enough left over for a few more sentences.

"I suppose your friend there neglected to tell you that it was **me** who got your girls out of there." Now I was getting angry.

"They did what they were ordered to do."

"You told them not to escape?"

"No, I told them to offer no resistance."

"And that's different... how?"

"Resistance would only end in suffering. We have learned that lesson."

"In that case, why don't you just turn up on her doorstep and put yourselves out of your misery?" I couldn't believe these women. "Call yourselves the scourge of the galaxy? Wimps more like it!" I wandered off muttering, "I'm not risking my skin for a bunch of... of... women!"

I stopped in mid-step. What was I doing? If I wandered off too far the door would be slammed in my face. I turned around to see the two women watching amusedly.

"I'm assuming here that you girls should be able to fight. After all, to get here in the first place you must have done some nasty things, right?" I didn't wait for an answer. Instead, I put my arms around their shoulders and guided them back into the cave. "We have some planning to do."

"Wait. We will do nothing."

I knew it was a failing of mine. I butted in where I was not wanted, but this time it was warranted.

"And what did that accomplish, huh? Getting yourselves killed!"

"This is **my** tribe!" Beri finally snapped, shrugging off my arm and stepping into my personal

space and then some. Her face came level with my shoulders but her demeanor meant business. "I make the decisions here, outsider!"

"I think you've been living here too long, blondie."

"I agree. We all have. A lifetime's worth." The woman let go of her anger and stepped back.

"You can change it all, you know. Vel has you all living in fear."

"And what do we do?"

I think Beri meant it as a hypothetical question but I answered it anyway. "You... **we** fight back."

"But she has the weapons..."

"Then take them back!" Did I have to lead these women all the way? "Have you forgotten everything so soon?"

"Soon? We barely survive from day to day, intruder. Some of us have been here for many years. We no longer know anything outside our world here." As Beri spoke Fen moved behind her in silent support, her hands resting on the blonde's shoulders.

"Then maybe it's time to step back into the universe..."

* * *

I waited outside while Beri held a meeting, taking the time to study the landscape without the fear of dying in it. A shimmering haze rose from the surface, stimulated by the heat baking the earth. There was nothing. No food, no water, no life. How were these women expected to survive? Maybe that was it. They weren't. Anyone sentenced to Rigeus was effectively dead.

And yet here they were. These women were resourceful and their need for survival strong but they balked at defending themselves against a stronger enemy. Had their instinct for their day-to-day survival overwritten their need for protection? But it was only a survival to the end of their days. As their one basic ingredient for procreation was missing there would be no future generations to pass down little pieces of themselves to. This tribe had one generation before extinction, unless Vel found them first.

I sat in the small cave entrance watching life, or the lack of it, pass by. I searched my memory for any recollection of Rigeus. Most of it was in idle threats and intimidation but there had been a useful piece of information here and there. The outpost. What was it about the outpost? I had forgotten about it until Epi mentioned it. It was the only habitable piece of earth on the entire planet. Or so everyone thought. Somehow two tribes had found life on a planet that had none.

Now I knew Beri's story. What about Vel's? Her tribe seemed to exist above the surface. How was that possible? What about food? Any food crops would have withered away under the

intense heat. Unless Vel also had an underground crop where did their food come from? There was only one possible answer and that sent a shiver down my spine.

* * *

It was some time later when Beri finally emerged from her counsel with the tribe. Now I could see why they didn't fight. They probably couldn't agree on a plan of action for a week or two. If I was in charge I'd be knocking some heads together.

"So, what's the verdict?"

"We are divided."

"And there's your problem. You need someone to make an executive decision, none of this wishy-washy stuff. Haven't you got the balls to take charge?"

"Balls?"

"You know..." My hand swung between my legs.

"We are a democracy."

"A democracy doesn't cut it in war, sweetheart. In battle you can't stop every so often to convene a meeting. You need a general to make those split second decisions for you." There. I had made my point now all I wanted to do was to find the nearest bar to deaden my aching body. I had been without a drink for two days now and I didn't like it.

"War? We don't want war. We're quite happy with the way things are."

"Really? You mean you don't want to get off this rock? Go back to families, friends and loved ones that have probably forgotten your names?"

"We're not talking about..."

"But we are, darlin'. The first step is to get Vel before she finds you, after that the outpost. Then after that? Well, the universe is the limit."

"We can never leave..."

"Where do you think the guards come from, huh? Sprout up out of the ground? I don't think so. They would have to rotate them every so often and they would do that by **ship**. Savvy?" This woman was really out of touch. I was starting to wonder that maybe she was the one that sprouted out of the ground. Something needed to be done, and soon.

"We should be preparing not standing around arguing about it!" Time was running short. "Does Vel know where this place is?" There was an imperceptible shake of the head. "Well, thank goodness for small mercies."

Beri turned and took Fen's hand, heading down the tunnel towards the cave.

"Hey! We have things to do!" I called after them.

"No!" Beri's voice echoed in the chamber.

I strode quickly down the tunnel to catch up with the stubborn woman. My hand slapped down on her shoulder and I forcibly turned her around. "You don't understand..."

"No, you don't understand!" A small hand full of immense strength landed on top of my own, squeezing down hard on my flesh. "There will be no fight."

I ignored the pain shooting down my arm. "Whether you like it or not, Beri, the fight will come to you, and unless you are ready Vel will swallow you up." The pain subsided as my words started to sink in. "If need be I will fight anybody here to become leader, elder... hell, I don't know, the Lord Almighty Carn if need be. I am not going to let that bitch take me without a fight."

I didn't know whether it was the rhetoric, the intonation or the expression on my face but Beri took a step back. I didn't want her job but if that was what it took to get these women to fight back then that was what I would do.

"Whether you like it or not you need me, just as I need you." There was nothing like stating the obvious.

The blonde said nothing but continued her journey down the tunnel, her hand firmly grasping Fen in comfort. I was going to have to wait.

* * *

Beri finally caved in under my constant harping, but I always thought that it was under protest that she allowed me to teach these women to find their fighting spirit that had somehow evaporated.

"Okay, let's get this show on the road." I look at the small group of would-be fighters standing there looking at me. "I want you to split into groups of two." That was a simple enough instruction, or so I thought. They stood there looking at one another. "Into twos... NOW!" Hesitantly they did as I asked. Had they forgotten everything so soon?

"Now take a swing."

"A... swing?" A young redhead asked hopefully.

"Yeah, you know, hit her."

"**You** want **me** to hit... **her**? Why"

I sighed. "Because that is what fighting is all about. You want to knock out your opponent. That's how you win."

"Why do I want to win?"

"Because... errr..." There was silence. "Your name?"

"Rice."

"Okay, Rice, because if you don't she's going to kill you."

"Her?" Rice's finger pointed at her fellow tribeswoman.

"Noooo. Vel's women." Internally I shook my head. It was going to be a long session.

* * *

It took some time to get the women to make an aggressive move let alone to actually come in contact with one other. It seemed that their passive nature was ingrained into the very fabric of their society and it was going to take some fancy footwork on my part to override the effective brainwashing of whoever led them first.

"Now, come on! Vel's coming this way. Are you going to let her get everything you have without a fight? Because let me tell you she's not going to worry about you. Her warriors will kill you as much as look at you. Resistance or not, you are dead." I only wished I had the children card to play.

"Alright. I want you all to go outside and run around until I tell you to come inside."

"But... but... it's hot out there!"

"Then you better start now before it gets any hotter!"

"Now..."

"What! You want to complain? Come on then. Tell me."

Rice hesitated, looking around at the others in the hope that someone else would face me.

"No? You are just too soft!" I stepped into Rice's personal space. "You think you're tough? Let me tell you, you're nothing! Less than nothing! You are a zit on the backside of the universe!" Before I had a chance to finish my yelling a hand swatted across my cheek. There was a deathly silence as they waited for me to react. "About time," I mumbled, adding a wide grin to my words. "Now **that's** a start!"

* * *

"The women don't like you." Beri stood beside me as I waited at the cave entrance.

"Tell them to get in line." I seemed to make a habit of pissing people off.

"What do you hope to accomplish?"

"Vel's downfall."

"Why do we have to destroy them? Can't we all live our own lives?"

"You've been doing that now. Is that good enough?" I was getting tired of this conversation. It was an irresistible force meeting an unmovable object. Neither of us was going to change our opinion so we agreed to disagree.

"Yes, it's all we know."

"But what you know is so limited. There is so much more here... out there... for you. You have meekly accepted your lot in this life and you don't have to. The first step is to stop Vel."

"No, **you** think the first step is to stop the Velkren. You are determined to destroy them and you're using us to do it!"

"You don't get it..."

"No!" Beri growled, her finger jabbing me in the chest, "**You** don't get it! We're not interested in war. You're going to get us all killed!"

I sighed as Beri wandered off down the tunnel, leaving me to face the unforgiving landscape.
"Two steps forward, one step back..."

* * *

I had just about given up all hope of converting the tribe to my way of thinking. Sure, they participated in the self-defense classes, but I felt that their hearts were never in it. They simply didn't believe it was necessary to launch an attack. What if I was looking at this all wrong? If they weren't going to fight then maybe I should look at their defense. After all, it was my defense too, at least for the moment. When I said I needed them it was true. I had no where else to go.

An idea had been swirling around in my brain, staying just out of reach while my focus was on aggression. I didn't really think too much about when I first came in contact with these women. I could see their 'car' approaching from a long way off, just as I suppose they could see me. There was literally nowhere to hide. I smiled. What if I could fix that?

I cornered Fen to discuss my idea. Yeah, I was being sneaky, I admit that. I'd use any excuse to get Fen alone without Beri hanging around, so I would take my victories where I could. We sat at the mouth of the tunnel, looking out over the never-changing landscape.

"I was wondering. How do you sneak up on anybody out there?" My head nodded towards the dust.

"You can't."

"Exactly, and you've never given any thought to solving that problem?"

"No."

"What do you do all day? I would be bored stupid without something to do."

"I didn't say we didn't have anything to do."

"Alright, I'll bite. What do you women do?"

"Oh, this and that." Fen's index finger doodled idly in the dirt.

"This and that..." I murmured, "...that's helpful. Alright, I take the hint. I think I have come up with an idea to make you invisible."

"Not possible."

"Will you at least say more than a few words? All this non-conversation is driving me nuts. You people can keep all your secrets, I don't care. But I would appreciate a little civility." *Civility?* Where in the Milky Way did that come from? I barely knew what it meant let alone used it in my lifetime. Fen's eyes widened. It seemed I didn't fool her either.

"Yeah, well, you get my drift. It's as if you are dismissing me and I don't like it."

"We don't mean to, stranger. It is just our way." Her hand touched my knee and I nearly jumped. Fen had a way of making me feel eight years old when I had my first crush.

Ahhh, yes, my first crush. His name was Simeon and his family lived next to mine in the commune on Galaxis VIII. He and I went to education lessons together, and we played, wrestled and cheated for each other. I thought he was the greatest. That was before I knew better.

My mom died around that time and it tore dad apart. I seemed to handle it better than he did, leaving me to take mom's place in his life. I was a domesticated eight year-old who wanted to fly to the stars. My dad had done it and I was, if anything, daddy's little girl.

All his stories about the 'good old days', as he called it, glamorized war in all its forms but I was a kid and only saw daddy's adrenaline-fueled adventures. It took me quite a while to see the war for what it was, especially when my only input on the matter was an old man's mutterings.

Anyway, I digress. Back to my crush on Simeon. I thought he was sweet and totally cool. He

wanted to play with me. He was my friend. Or so I thought. My story was an age-old one of a two-faced little runt who was having fun at my family's expense behind my back. But in those early days when I was unaware of his deceit... ahhh, he was the center of my universe.

And that was how Fen made me feel, that giddy optimism of a new-found love. And I didn't even know how she felt about me yet. I was probably opening myself up for heartache but I was unable to stop the feeling.

"Now, do you have any adhesive?"

* * *

I completed my little project and told Fen to come find me. I watched from my hiding place as she scanned the landscape. Her hand rose to scratch her head and I smiled. It was good to not feel like an idiot because if this experiment had failed that's what I would have been, at least in her eyes, an idiot.

But she was not finished yet. Fen lay down on the ground and let her eyes sweep over the ground once more. When she smiled I felt my world burst into color. It was breathtaking. My heart beat erratically as she came towards me, her smile widening in joy.

I didn't move, instead allowing her this small victory. She had figured it out and was enjoying the fruits of her labor.

The space blanket came off the top of me in a flurry, the harsh light nearly blinding me. "Pleased with yourself?"

"Very." She examined the simple construction and nodded. "Very clever."

"And simple. All you need is this blanket, a little of that sticky stuff from the weeds and some dust and hey, presto!" Luckily they had plenty of all three ingredients, but would they use them? "I know you don't want to fight but this might also save you from being captured."

"I will show Beri." Fen turned on her heel and walked away without so much as a 'well done' or a 'thank you'. I suppose I should have been grateful there wasn't a 'mind your own business' in there either.

* * *

The afternoon classes continued despite the tribe's obvious dislike of war. Maybe it was as much for the exercise as it was to stop my constant whining on the subject. We had just finished and I went topside to get some fresh warm air. Rice joined me, as she had for the past few days, and we watched the sun slowly descend in the sky while we talked. I had actually found someone who used more than one word in a sentence.

Rice turned out to be quite a character who had a slightly warped sense of humor. I liked the kid. She was rambling on about her love life, reminding me of my failed seduction of Fen who was

the center of my universe but to her I was a burnt out star system.

It was while Rice was monologuing that I saw it. "Do you see that?" My finger went up automatically, pointing at a distant spot on the horizon.

"What?" The young woman had no idea what I was talking about.

"There's something moving out there." I squinted in the hope of making the object bigger. Huh, as if. That only worked in Bessie.

Rice stared long and hard, her conversation long forgotten. Moments later she stood, brushed herself off and trotted down the tunnel.

"Okayy, don't believe me," I mumbled. At this point I didn't know what it was. It could have been anything from one of Beri's tribe to Vel's 'car' or even those guards that no one ever saw. Hell, it could even be Rales here to collect his mechanic's fees. Sadly, I knew it wasn't Bessie. That bitch took her and if it was the last thing I did... That was a bad thought. The way it looked the last thing I did would be on this speck of spit. Why did I have to bring that up? Now I wanted a drink.

I didn't think I had been contemplating my life that long but the next moment I was conscious of being surrounded, Beri and Fen standing in the position of authority at the front of the group. The blonde drew up a cylinder to her face, peering through it. "Gan," she muttered, setting off a wave of murmuring through the women.

"Let me have a look!" I snatched the cylinder away and examined it. "Ahh, it's a set of maculars. How is it powered?" I rotated it in my hands but there was no switches, buttons or power pads. "How does it work?"

Fen sighed in disgust. I just knew she thought I was an imbecile. Her hand snatched it away and she shoved one end up to my eye. Her other hand grabbed my own and placed it on the barrel, moving my fingers to rotate the cylinder.

"Ahhh," At that moment I agreed with her. I **was** an imbecile. It was all so ridiculously simple. Sometimes technology wasn't all it was cracked up to be. As I focused on the blurry image Fen moved it through my fingers until the picture came into focus. The woman didn't look in good shape. Even from this distance I could see that Vel had really roughed her up. "This could be a trap."

"She is one of our sisters." Beri turned her head and murmured over her shoulder. "Go."

"Don't say I didn't warn you..." I murmured as I watched their car move away at the speed of a Voxian androgenous sloth. If it wasn't so damned hot I would have run past it just to prove a point, but I had a bad feeling about this.

The rescue was going to take some time, with both the car and the victim traveling at sub-light

speed, so I retired to the cave for a cool drink and a light nap. A meal wasn't coming any time soon with all the tribe outside watching the proceedings. To me it was like watching water evaporate on a cloudy day. Not like today. It was burning hot out there and I was tempted to strip down to my skin, but such a maneuver would probably be frowned upon despite their own scant clothes.

So here I sat, leaning against the cavern wall sipping cool water from an ancient metallic cup. Just like everything of use in this cave it was worn and had been discarded by someone else.

My mind sifted through a number of scenarios, none of which seemed particularly good. What if it was, indeed, a trap? What was my... **our** options? As an exercise I stood and surveyed the enclosed area. If we were cornered in here was there any way out? I owed it to myself to find out. Oh, and of course these women. So I proceeded to check every nook and cranny, and then some.

I investigated everything, from those pesky nooks and crannies to the sparsely scattered metal trunks hidden away in said nooks and crannies. I did find some useful stuff which obviously the tribe didn't think they would need. At least they had the good sense to store it away and not throw it out. I extracted a few little items and pocketed them. As for the rest, I let them be... for now.

* * *

I don't know how much time had passed as it meant little here. It wasn't until the sound of voices echoing down the passageway that I suspected it had been quite a while. Did I fall asleep?

It was a quiet murmur that accompanied the arrival of the injured woman, as if they were enacting some ancient ritual. She looked in bad shape. Her left arm hung uselessly from its socket. Vel really did a number on this poor soul. I was no meditech but even I could see that the damage was extensive. The most advanced medical droids in the universe would have been tested to repair the blatant carnage. Maybe this would be the catalyst to make these women see their enemy for what she truly was.

* * *

"How is she?" I enquired as Fen took a seat beside me some time later.

"Not good. She'll probably lose the use of her arm."

"Hmmm. Did she say why Vel did this?"

"She was to deliver a message."

"I see." And I'm sure it was to convince them to turn me over, right before she swept through the camp and killed them all. No, I take that back. Not all of them; she'd want to save some for dessert later on. "And you're here to deliver me the bad news?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"Well, at least you were straightforward. No bushes to beat about out in that heat." Damn my foolish humor. "So, now what?"

"Well, that depends on you."

"On whether I put up a fight or not?"

"Yeah...", she sighed, "...something like that."

"Of course, there is another option." Not that I believed for one minute they would accept. 'Surrender first' wasn't that their motto?

"Not as far as we can see."

I looked into those hazel eyes and saw sympathy. "So you can look me in the eye and send me off to my death, is that it?"

"Yeah..."

"...something like that," I filled in for her, "You need to expand your vocabulary, Fen."

"Don't need it. Not here."

What the hell... I grabbed the woman and kissed her. If I was going to die anyway, I might as well do what I had wanted to do since I got here.

"Why did you do that?" The eyes widened as she backed away, confusion written in every line on her face. She was young, much younger than I was, but the harsh climate here had aged her, adding lines and texture to her soft skin.

"Call it a prisoner's last request."

Her rough hand came up to my face and she shortened the distance between us, planting an almost chaste kiss on my lips. It was so full of sweetness that I felt the pain of it in my chest.

"Why did you do that?"

"Call it a prisoner's last request."

I had to know. "If I wasn't going to my death, would I have stood a chance?" My own hand followed the contours of her face.

"I... I don't know." Fen stood and gazed down at me once, right before she turned to walk away.

"Vel won't stop at me, you know."

"I know."

"Then why don't you fight?"

She stopped and turned around. "Fighting is what got us here in the first place, stranger."

"Jordana," I whispered.

"Jordana," she smiled, "This is our punishment. We accept that."

"Do you all think of yourselves as past redemption? That your punishment includes whatever Vel can think of to do to you?"

"Maybe. Maybe not."

"Will... will you come and see me before..."

"Yes... J."

I smiled at her endearment. After she had left I sobered. I couldn't just sit here and wait for my death. I had to do something and I really needed a shot of liquid courage.

* * *

"So this is the place, huh?" I looked around the desert. It was miles and miles of nothing in every direction. How could they pinpoint an exact spot without any visible markers? It had me stumped. Still, there was no point in wasting my time wondering about such things. My life was worth... what was it? Ahh, yes, twelve hundred credits, and I suspect some interest.

"That was the arrangement." Beri'e eyes never stopped scanning the horizon. She turned her attention to me for a moment. "You surprised me. After all that talk of resisting here you are submitting to the exchange."

"Yeah, it kind of surprised me as well. I usually look out for number one."

"Then why?"

Why indeed? I had a full-scale court case going on in my head since Fen's delivery of my termination date, pros and cons zipping back and forth in the vapid atmosphere of my mind. It was against my nature to submit so easily to what I knew was going to be a long and painful death. So why did I do it? I suppose there were forty good reasons why I did, and I saw one in each set of eyes I came across in the following forty-eight hours. For once in my life I had to think of someone other than myself. Damn, what a time to become a hero!

"Why? Let's just say I'm doing you a favor." I hope. I really didn't want to explain myself. All this emotional stuff was making me sick. "And what are you doing here? You could have easily

sent along a couple of your girls to escort me."

"Me?" Beri gazed off into the distance. "I suppose I wanted to see the woman."

"That could be a risky wish, my friend, and it would probably be safer not to be here." I looked closer at the self-appointed leader of the tribe. "She'd like you."

"I'm not scared of her."

"You could have fooled me." Despite her bravado I could nearly smell her fear. "You don't have to prove anything to me. I'll be out of your life soon enough." I smiled. "Or did you wish to size up your enemy?"

"She is not my enemy," Beri said blandly.

"She keeps killing your girls and you still won't admit that she's your enemy. Why? What are you so desperate to hide?" I moved to her side and whispered, "What is the secret that you are so intent on keeping?" Beri's lips tightened. "Obviously a secret you don't want your *enemy* to know about. Am I right?" Green eyes stared at me and I knew I had hit the mark. "I'll make a deal with you. If we ever meet up again you tell me why. Deal?"

Beri hesitated, sizing up my ability to keep a secret. "Deal."

"Now get out of here."

"There!" Rice called out as she spotted a tiny speck of disturbed dust.

"There's still some time to make your escape." I didn't want any more blood on my hands than there already was. Besides I sort of liked these two. "You don't need to be here."

"You keep trying to get rid of us."

"Rice, this is not one big adventure, okay?" I stepped in front of her and grabbed her shoulders. "This woman is crazy and she is likely to just kill you for the fun of it."

"I'm not afraid of her."

"Well, you should be. If I were you I'd be long gone."

"Then why aren't you? What's stopping you?"

In my peripheral vision I could see the group getting closer... too close. ""You! All of you are stopping me!" My eyes flitted to Beri. "There! You wanted to know? I don't want your blood on my hands." My fingers tightened on the bronzed skin. "Don't you understand? I don't want you to die, not because of me and not if I can help it." My voice dropped to a whisper, "Please, Rice, get out of here before it's too late." But as I said the words I knew that it was already too late, the

sound of the engine-powered vehicle just touching the range of my hearing. To run now would have only provided sport for Vel's soldiers.

"Stand your ground, Rice." Our eyes touched and I knew Beri understood the gravity of the situation.

In a matter of minutes the three of us were surrounded, makeshift spears pointed inwards towards our chests. The circle broke with the arrival of Vel.

"So, you decided to come yourself?" Why couldn't I learn to just keep my mouth shut? "Couldn't trust your own girls?" Vel just had a way of bringing out the loudmouth in me.

"For you, J, I would have crawled here."

"Then why didn't you?" *Damn it, woman, shut up!* I got a jab for my trouble, opening up a nick in my skin.

Vel just smiled. I could see all the limitless possibilities for my suffering in her eyes. "Take them all," she muttered, turning her back and walking away in dismissal. She was lowering our worth by not watching, adding insult to our future injury.

"We brought you the woman, now leave us be."

"Did you honestly expect me to let you go?" She laughed, her eyes blazing with a dark fire.

"That was the agreement."

"And what did J tell you?" Beri remained tight-lipped. "You should have listened to her."

"Now just one minute!" Rice took one step forward.

"Rice!" I hissed. "Shut up!"

"No! I won't shut up! She broke her word!"

Vel's attention was now on the girl.

"Just ignore her, Vel. She's only a kid."

"I am **not** a kid! She promised!"

"Rice!" I yelled a second before Vel attacked, her hand swiftly jabbing towards the girl's abdomen. My jaw dropped as I watched Vel viciously swipe her hand across the bronzed skin, disemboweling Rice in one swift movement. My heart leapt into my throat as she fell in slow motion to the ground, her hands vainly trying to hold in her intestines as they oozed around her fingers.

Beri rushed to her side, gently cradling her limp head in her lap. I joined the two of them, my hands sweeping over the fallen girl as if trying to incant some magic spell to make it all right.

"Awwww, Rice, why did you have to go and do that?"

"Be... bec... because I want...ed to be l-l-like y-y-y-you." Rice exhaled on the last word, her life leaving with her last breath. Her eyes stared vacantly into my eyes, death already claiming her soul.

I didn't want to look but my eyes were drawn to the cut Vel had made. The flesh hung open from a jagged tear from one side to the other. It was brutal, forceful and uncaring in its deliverance and it showed on the ruptured skin. My eyes came up to Vel, who was hovering behind Beri. "She was a kid, Vel," I whispered

"She was a troublemaker, J." Vel said soberly but the madness in her eyes told me that Rice was dead whether she had spoken or not. No, Rice was a warning to those who would come looking for us.

I looked at Beri for her reaction and saw a mixture of emotion swirling in her eyes. Whatever belief she held true she was fighting hard to keep. Anger sparked in those green depths, at war with her passive nature.

She looked at me for some sort of response and my hand motioned her to stop. I shook my head minutely. Now was not the time for rash actions.

My hand caressed the cooling face, my thumb stroking the now still cheek. "She was a good kid."

"Yes she was," Beri murmured. She sighed deeply and let go the anger, once more finding that plane of passivity that she existed on. "She moves on to a better place."

"Do you really believe that?" I didn't. Too many bad things had happened in my life for me to believe in any sort of divine being looking over us.

"Yes, I do." She smiled benevolently at me, bestowing on me some kind of absolution for the young woman's death. I think she knew I wanted... needed that. Guilt weighed heavily on my shoulders and knowing that Beri did not blame me for it helped a little, not a lot but a little.

"Alright, alright, get up you two." Vel had had enough and she was going to make the separation uncomfortable. Vel just didn't care.

"Come on," I murmured, sympathizing with the Beri's pain. "There's time for mourning later." I came around Rice's body and helped Beri up, giving her the support that she so sorely needed. In a way I saw a bit of myself in Beri. Not the pacifist part cause I loved to fight, but more the stoic part. She would not give Vel the satisfaction of feeding the woman's perverse pleasure but I

knew she was hurting inside. Rice was a good kid and deserved better than what she got.

Two guards manhandled Beri onto the platform, forcing her against the front railing. Vel stepped up to me and stared right into my eyes. "You should have left well enough alone, J."

I didn't know that I had stuck my nose into anything, so whatever the cryptic message was it was lost on me. "Left alone? Fine, Vel, if I knew what you were talking about."

"I'm sure it will come to you sooner or later." She turned away waving at her women to take me. "Then again," she stopped and turned, "it would probably be better sooner. You may not be up to any serious thinking later." She chuckled and continued on to the 'car', sidling up next to Beri and pressing herself against the smaller woman.

The blonde's body language was as easily read as if she had shouted to the sky. Vel was making her very uncomfortable and everyone knew it. Vel chuckled louder as Beri squirmed around trying to put space between them.

Meanwhile, I was barely on the platform at the back shackled to the handrail. It was only my fingernails that held me on the contraption, otherwise I'd be dragging along behind in the dirt.

I'm not exactly sure what had happened but suddenly I was doing just that, my back taking the brunt of the contact with the ground. I just knew my luck was not going to last. The 'car' picked up speed, increasing the scraping against my clothed back. It didn't take long for the cloth to be rubbed away, leaving my bare skin exposed to the abrasive dust.

I tried to find somewhere inside myself to get lost but the stinging slowly increased until I couldn't stand it any longer. Layers of skin were disappearing quickly under the constant scraping, leaving my nerve endings exposed and inflamed. This was just the start and I was ready to throw in the towel. . I was ready to find religion if it would just stop the pain.

* * *

I must have passed out because the next thing I knew I was stationary, staring down at shadowed dirt. My eyes swiveled around as I tried to take in my surroundings before the pain kicked in but it was only a brief gaze as the sting on my back was unbearable.

"Lie still." I had been around the woman long enough to know it was Beri's voice. A slow drizzle of water ran over my back and I was hard pushed to hold at bay the cry that was building in my throat. "I'm washing off the dust," Beri cooed to me soothingly.

"F-F-F-Fine. Just don't... take... too long." I was barely hanging onto my brash exterior. "Ch-check my pockets." Was I ever thankful for stealing those little items from Beri's stash. The water stopped, pooling in the small of my back. As it slowly evaporated in the warm room Beri jostled me as her hand fished around in my pants pockets. On any other day I would have encouraged her but right now I couldn't wait for her searching to end.

"What's these?" She held up the half a dozen small packages nestled in her palm. She picked up

one of the items in question.

I was rather occupied at that particular moment trying to find a compartment in my mind to shove the intense pain but if I had thought about it I would have wondered what planet she came from. The items in her hand were widely known and used and yet she had no knowledge of them.

"That thing in your left hand is medispray. Push the button on top and spray it over my back."

"And what will it do?"

"It's medispray. It... it... it will put a thin film of artificial skin over my back while it heals." As I finished the last words I could feel the chemicals starting to kick in. Besides the protection there was also an anesthetic and antiseptic in it, so I was grateful for the relief. Inch by inch my body relaxed as the spray started to take effect and despite our dire situation a smile crossed my lips. I was just happy that I was lying down and the stinging had subsided because I knew that the situation would change soon enough.

"So what did I miss?" The words came out on a sigh. My voice held no volume; it had been ripped out along with the skin off my back.

Beri shrugged. "Not much."

"Huh..." The word hurt. I could guess. I was probably bodily hauled and thrown into this room. As to what happened to my companion, well it was a matter of I don't ask and she wouldn't tell, which meant that Vel, being Vel, probably played a game of touchy-feely with her prisoner. Beri tried to hide the discomfort behind those emerald eyes but I knew better. Hey, I may be a bitch sometimes but I can do sensitive.

"Sorry. You okay?" There was no point in asking for more because I wouldn't get it.

"What are these?" Beri changed the subject and I let her.

"The long cylinder is a laser. For the stars sake don't point it at anything you don't want to put a hole in." The 'long cylinder' as I called it was really not more than a palm's width in length and about half an inch in diameter.

"How does it work?" Beri waved it around unconcerned.

"Will you stop that! Arrgghh!" The jostling sent a spike through my back nerves. It seemed the medispray was still trying to work. I tried to relax, allowing muscle, sinew and more importantly skin surface, or lack thereof, to loosen. I was in trouble. "There is a small depression on the barrel near one end. That's the end you hold and point it away." Should I insult her and ask if she knew what a laser was? Maybe not.

"The other small tube that rattles has water tablets in it." Actually it was rehydration tablets but the more common expression was 'water' tablet. We were in the desert so I figured I would need

them sooner or later. It looked like it was going to be sooner.

"Water... tablets?"

Wherever Beri had been hiding in the universe it must have been a lonely place. "They're rehydration tablets." The woman's expression didn't change. "Alright, when you're out in the desert you get thirsty. If you don't drink you dehydrate... lose moisture from your body. These tablets help to slow down that moisture loss. It doesn't replace water but it helps to keep you going." I knew a little more about it but trying to explain things like electrolytes and such would be just a waste of time for both of us. "You better give me a couple of those."

"Do you need water?"

"Well, yes, but that's not the reason. I want to keep them handy for tomorrow."

"Are you going somewhere?"

"Well, hopefully only a few feet away, but who knows what Vel has in mind." One thing about Vel, she was very inventive when she wanted to be. When Beri stood to make her way to the water bowl I suggested, "Find hiding spots for those things. Don't want them to fall into Vel's hands."

She nodded and I watched carefully where she put them. *If something happened...* I stopped that thought. Nothing was going to happen. I tried to make that promise to myself. Beri was here because of me and so responsibility for her safety was mine. This was a dangerous precedent. Next thing I know I'll be a one-woman army for the tribe. *Stop it, J! You've got to find a bar, and soon!*

Now why did I do that? I had been going along fine without a drink and now my conscience was trying to entice me with the promise of alcohol. Did my brain have no scruples at all?

The blonde came back with a tin cup, easing herself down to the dusty floor to feed me the water. I struggled to my elbows the tugging on my back stung every now and then, but for the most the pain had receded. "Thanks," I muttered between sips.

"So what's the other stuff?"

"Rations mostly." I was hoping that she wouldn't ask, especially with her aversion to violence. I didn't know how old or stable the explosives were but if it came down to a last resort, well.... Beri would be far away from here before that happened.

"So, I see you've made yourselves comfortable."

I didn't need to look up to know who it was. There was only one person on this planet who would talk to me like that. "What do you want, Vel?" Even to me my voice sounded weary.

"I've come to tuck you in, J. Tomorrow's going to be a *long* day." I didn't like the way she said 'long' because it probably meant trouble for me.

"Well, I'll set the alarm for seven then. Tell room service I want a large breakfast."

One of the guards kicked me in the side and Vel just laughed. "Good, J. Very good. Let's just see if you have that same sense of humor by tomorrow night."

As she turned away, I couldn't help but call out, "What? No dinner? That's bad manners on the part of the hostess, Vel."

She hesitated but continued out the door without uttering another word.

"Why do you do that?"

"What?"

"Make her mad like that?"

"Yeah, I know, it's a failing of mine. I just can't help myself."

"And because of that she may not feed us."

"Sorry..." I lowered myself back down to the dirt, inhaling the sand up my nose. I sneezed and instantly regretted it. "Shiiiiii.....eeez that hurt!"

* * *

Despite my baiting dinner arrived soon afterwards, giving me a fairly good idea that I was going to need all the strength I could get for whatever Vel had in mind. While not in the class of Augur's Emporium on Alterius Proximus, the food was quite palatable. At least it was better than the glop Beri's tribe survived on, which again made me wonder where Vel got all this stuff. Maybe I should ask her. Yeah, get her to reveal the whole plot before I perish, then I escape in the nick of time and foil her plans for universal domination. I chuckled. Good plot for a holomovie.

"What's so funny?"

"Just thinking of ways to get Vel to reveal what she is up to."

"And that's funny?"

"In my mind it is." She was about to question me further but the adrenaline was wearing off, leaving me weak and tired. "Let's get some sleep. Vel promises tomorrow will be a big day." At least for me...

* * *

The day had barely begun when I was kicked awake. "No thanks, mom. Just one more hour..." I wanted to roll over but I was quickly reminded why I was sleeping on my stomach. This time that smart comment earned me a whack on the back. I reacted with the speed of a SP-48R laser rifle, standing on my feet before the woman had even deposited the end of her weapon on the ground. I closed my eyes and I could see the heavenly skies behind them, flashes of white exploding on a black backdrop.

No sound came from me but my eyes watered from the contact. I was only glad that I had the medispray on my back. I didn't even want to think about what it would have been like on unprotected skin. "Sooo.... Where's breakfast?"

One plate arrived and was quickly handed to Beri. "None for you. Come."

My eyes connected with my fellow captor's and I smiled in an effort to allay her fears. "Be back soon, honey. Have dinner waiting on the table, will you?"

"You have a smart mouth!" The elder of the two guards snapped.

"I've been told that." And it was that smart mouth that was probably holding me together right now.

"We'll see...." That didn't sound promising.

I was marched out to the edge of the compound to where Vel and a handful of her supporters stood. A structure had been built overnight, effectively a large upright 'X'. Now I could imagine all sorts of things that they could do to me on that 'X', none of them pretty, and I was only hoping that it didn't involve my back. Vel's smirk didn't give me much hope of that happening.

"Strip." Vel's voice carried the few feet to my ears.

"Now? Shouldn't we go back to your place...?" A metal pipe collected me across the back of my knees, collapsing my legs.

"J, don't make it any worse for yourself. Strip."

"Any worse, Vel? Sooner or later I'm done for, so what's the point?"

"But how you get there, J, is up to me. You can make this easy or you can make this hard."

I sighed. "Alright but no complaints if they start giggling." My head nodded towards the audience. The metal pipe rose to my ass, stinging the muscle with the contact.

"Next one is across your back."

"Been there, done that," I muttered. Maybe I wanted to add a comet or two to that star field

behind my eyelids.

Now normally I didn't worry too much about undressing in front of people but having such a large audience while I did so was a little unsettling. I stumbled over removing my shirt to hide the movement of the water tablets from my hand to my mouth. I pushed them towards my cheek, not breaking the capsules until the time warranted it. My instincts were telling me that I was going to need them later on.

Finally I was down to my birthday suit, trying to stand negligently at ease as I was inspected from head to toe. The looks of hunger made me feel like fresh meat ready to be consumed. Usually I was the hunter not the prey so it was a new sensation for me, one that made me want to be more courteous to my lovers in the future. But I understood myself and knew that it was a hollow promise. Once back in the civilized universe I would be back to my old bitchy ways. It was who I was and I wasn't going to apologize for it.

I was strapped to the cross and left to the elements. Vel stood in front of me and just stared into my eyes. "Have a nice day," she murmured, enjoyment lacing every word.

"You go to hell."

"I probably will. Oh, by the way, your little friend will have a nice day too. She will have my *personal* attention." She knew she had hit the mark when I struggled against my bonds. "By the time I've finished with her she'll be begging me."

"Begging, Vel? Yeah, begging for a *real* woman." I saw the fist coming in slow motion and was unable to stop it. I felt the warmth dribble down over my lips and sit on my chin. I just glared back, trying to look unaffected by the punch. Vel's eyes narrowed and she turned away, striding off towards what looked like her hut. Had I made things worse for Beri? I sure hoped not.

* * *

So here I was just hanging around watching the day go by. The heat had started early and I just knew I was going to get a severe suntan by the end of the day. The bitch sure knew how to inflict pain that was for sure, leaving me out here to fry without food or water.

The first part of the day was easy and it was just a matter of staying upright. I kept my wits about me and studied the Velkren. These women were as diametrically opposite as they could be from Beri's people... aggressive, angry, violent and eager to be off this planet. So why were they here?

Obviously they had been sentenced to spend the rest of their days here but I thought I knew Vel. She and I were not great pals by any means but I had had enough contact with her to know how she thought. She wouldn't be on this speck of space dust without a reason. Vel was too clever to be somewhere she didn't want to be.

I feigned discomfort early in the day because I didn't want Vel thinking this kind of torture was too easy for me. The last thing I needed was her to think up something more devious. But as the hours passed by my arms started to lose feeling, pins and needles tingling in my fingers. My legs

ached from the constant standing and the dehydration sent my muscles into cramp. I bit down on the first capsule in my mouth wishing in some way that it was actually water. I was a bit disappointed that I didn't feel any different. If it wasn't for the fact that I knew what it was I wondered if I had taken anything at all.

But the thing that really got on my nerves was the constant jeering and fondling. Being tied up like I was, arms and legs spread-eagled on that cross, seemed to be a passport for a free feel. Some of these women overstepped even my bounds of propriety. Now if I had been in their shoes I would have probably caressed a bit of skin or two, maybe even steal a kiss, but some of them... hoo wee! I could see why they ended up on this piece of shit called a prison. The way I was tied seemed to be an invitation to push and probe wherever they liked. All I could do was memorize faces and take names. Revenge is a dessert best served cold, or so they say.

By the end of the day every inch of my skin was bone dry, and I mean every inch. Anyone hoping for a response from me was out of luck. I was tired, I was dehydrated and I was very, **very** pissed.

I watched Vel stroll towards me. The sun was hanging low in the sky changing into a lovely violet hue, not that I cared by that part of the day. It had been long, hot and tiring and I just wanted it to end.

"Hello, J darling. How was your day? Mine was very...", she paused and slyly smiled at me, "...enjoyable." Her eyes rested on my crotch and her lips widened. "I hear you've got a fan or two."

"Yeah, we're going out on a date tomorrow night." My voice was barely heard, the dryness having robbed any volume I had. But I stared at her, showing that she had not broken me.

Vel moved close and slapped her hand down hard on my shoulder, aggravating the sunburn and causing me pain with the sting. "My my, you should have worn some protection."

"Nah, I was trying for an all-over tan. What do you think?" I suspected I looked like one of those crusty claspers from Ro whose bright red shells make them a favorite for crusty hunters. While their meat was very tasty, the actual catching was quite tricky, necessitating the need to wear a cup over a certain piece of one's anatomy. That is, if one owned that particular appendage.

"Just like you do everything, J, it's overdone." Vel nodded to the two guards. She could see the question on my face as my bonds were untied. "Get some rest. Tomorrow is another day. Wouldn't want you to catch a chill and die on me now."

Ahhh, so it was for her benefit and not mine that I was being taken inside. Still, I couldn't care less if it was for the benefit of someone I didn't know two light years away, I'd take the relief where I could get it.

Just when I thought the humiliation would end Vel lifted her hand and waved it back and forth, a piece of leather dangling from her fingers. "Just one more thing..." Vel was taking too much

perverse pleasure in my suffering. I really hated the woman. Her entourage laughed along as she buckled the collar around my neck. "There. Now everyone knows whose bitch you are."

My muscles flexed in reaction to the insult and I barely held them in check.

"Before you do something stupid just remember whatever you do to me will happen to that lovely blonde of yours." Vel was making damned sure that I knew she held all the cards. Well, she could play cards all day with herself for all I cared. All I needed to know was that I held the Joker and was just waiting for the right opportunity to play it.

"Enjoy it while you can, Vel," I growled.

"Or what, J? We both know it's a hollow threat."

"Do we?" I didn't elaborate but just smiled. Her grin dropped to become a thoughtful pursing of lips. I had her worried.

"Take her back."

I looked at the pile of material on the ground that was my clothes. "What about those?"

"You won't need them, you being a big tough girl and all."

"Suit yourself." It made me realize just how petty Vel could be. She was a mean-spirited bitch and I just couldn't give a rat's ass about her anymore. I didn't wait for her dismissal, instead walking away from her gloating towards the shed classified as the holding cell. Wolf whistles and lewd remarks were thrown at me as I walked but they meant nothing. As far as I was concerned they were a bunch of juvenile delinquents with nothing to do.

As I neared the row of metal sheds I grabbed a bucket of water that was lying around for the guards' consumption and dumped it over my head. A deep sigh escaped my lips as the cool liquid ran down my burnt skin. I could nearly imagine the steam rising off my body from the contact. A smack upside my head followed but I couldn't have cared less. The deed was done and my body said 'thank you'.

* * *

"Are you alright?" Beri's concerned voice told me that I didn't look good. It was probably all that sun I got during the day.

"Sure, nothing to worry about." I leaned negligently against the wall of the hut until the guards left. Once out of their sight I slumped, allowing Beri to see me falter.

"Come. Sit down." She deliberately ignored my nakedness and the spiked collar around my neck. As soon as my ass reached the floor she rushed over to the bowl and filled the cup to the brim with water.

I was tempted to just open my mouth and pour the whole thing down my throat without swallowing but I knew I needed to take it slow otherwise I would make myself sick. "How was your day?" My voice wavered as the liquid hit my vocal chords.

"Fine."

I studied her closely and saw the tight lines around her eyes. There was a bruise here and there but those deep green depths told me more than she would ever utter to me. Vel had used her and used her well. If I could change places with her I would but my place was not much better than hers.

Beri grabbed her blanket and draped it over my shoulders, the rough texture acting like the gravel I was dragged through yesterday. A hiss bled through my lips at the touch, drawing a look of concern from my fellow prisoner. "Sorry," she mumbled.

"Don't be. I've had enough of being naked for today." *And the constant jeering.*

While I had initially thought that Beri was a woman of the universe I had never seen any indication of sexual activity from her while I was present. Come to think of it, I didn't see *anyone* doing anything naughty. Hmmm...

"Eat." She handed over her plate to me, nodding and pushing the food in my direction.

I could see that she hadn't eaten and I was worried about taking the food out of her mouth. "What about you?"

"I'm not hungry."

"I tell you what, how about we share, huh?" Maybe I could encourage her to have something. "You need to keep your strength up." I knew my mouth was referring to the both of us so to shut it up I popped in a piece of whatever the vegetable was into my mouth.

Reluctantly Beri took a piece and nibbled on it. When I scowled in her direction she pushed the food into her mouth before closing it. She made a show of eating it and I smiled back.

And so we sat, eating until the plate was clean and finishing it off with a cup of water to wash it all down. My stomach grumbled at the food, being the first sustenance I had had since the night before. It was such a ridiculous sound with its high-pitched *guurggllluurrggllluurggggggle* that we giggled, acting as a stopgap to the tension surrounding us.

The guards came in to see what the disturbance was about and found us laughing. I suppose we looked like we had finally gone over the edge to insanity, giggling like imbecilic inpatients from a local madhouse. Shaking their heads they left us to our laughter.

"Ohh, I needed that." My laughter lessened to a slight chuckle before I sobered. The situation was dire but there was magic in that laughter.

"Hmmm."

"We have to get out of here." I could see that Beri was not handling the situation well but I wondered if I was in any shape to affect an escape.

"We do. What do you suggest?"

"Was that affirmative action I heard come from your mouth?" I grinned at the woman's discomfort, trying to take the sting of my words. "I'm joking, Beri. Don't take it so seriously!" But Vel's words came back to haunt me. She had said that I might not be up to any serious thinking later on. I guess she was right. "I can't think straight right at the moment. How about we rest for a bit?" About two seconds after that I was asleep.

* * *

"Wha...?" Something prodded my side and I tried to swat it away. Exhaustion lapped at my energy and I didn't want to be disturbed. There was another touch, this time on my arm. The sting sent a shock along my nervous system to my brain, forcing my eyelids open with a rush. "What?" I asked angrily. Had I been woken up in a bar or something? I wasn't ready to fly yet. "What do you want?"

"J. Wake up."

"Go away and come back tomorrow."

"J!" The letter came out as a whispered bark, the prodding increasing in strength to become a heavy pat. The stinging pain animated the star field behind my eyelids, adding a sun going supernova. "It's me, Fen."

"Ahhh Fen... sweet, sweet Fen," I murmured, smacking my lips in satisfaction.

"Aheemmm..."

My eyes shot open and I looked around. There was some sort of dim light in the otherwise dark room. "What?" Shadowed hazel eyes watched me wake up and I knew I could feel the blush flame my face. The heat could even be felt above the heat from the sunburn. Had I said what I thought I had said? Oh Almighty Carn, what have I done?

"Errr... You didn't hear that."

"Fine."

"So are you here to rescue me?"

"Sort of. I'm here to free you so you can rescue us." But Fen couldn't wipe the grin off her face. She was enjoying immensely my slip of the tongue.

I suppose I shouldn't have been surprised. My tongue had been hanging out over her since I first heard her voice, not that I had made any headway in that department. I finally had to admit that this supposed love affair was one sided and she was on the other side of the fence.

"How in the stars did you find us?"

"I took your advice."

"Advice?" Maybe I missed that particular conversation because I couldn't remember any instructions that would get Fen here.

"About hiding in plain sight."

Ahh. She was referring to the sand-encrusted space blanket. "How long were you out there?"

"Most of the day."

And I didn't see her. The woman was good. "Good job. So, how many of you are there?" I was imagining a small force of warriors ready to storm the compound and take on Vel.

"Me."

"And? Who else?"

"Me."

"You? That's it?"

"Epi came with me but she's returned to the village."

"And hopefully bringing help?" I tried to sound optimistic but a fact was a fact, there were three of us to fight thirty blood-thirsty women. Not three... me. **I** was to fight thirty blood-thirsty women. The only thing going in my favor was the fact that they wouldn't expect me to do something so stupid. Well, they should have known better. I **was** that stupid.

"They will return in the morning."

"The morning is too late, Fen. We need to do something now while the Velkren are asleep." My brain seized up. "Hang on, how did you get in here?" I knew very well there were at least two guards outside. Had Fen actually used violence to get inside? I felt a deep sadness that she had been forced to do something that was so abhorrent to her tribe.

Fen held up a large, lethal-looking thorn.

"Poison?" The sadness turned to guilt. Had Fen killed them?

"Sleeping tincture. Almost instantaneous." She smiled. Maybe my face was imitating my thoughts.

"Good. Very good. Help me up..."

* * *

After I retrieved my clothes and got rid of that disgusting collar we went on a mission of disabling the opposing army. I liked the sound of that because it was better than saying 'a bunch of women'. Well, that's how I will remember it when I retell the story in some broken-down back room of whatever bar I will be drinking in.

I took the thorn and began jabbing the prone bodies. At least they didn't have too far to fall since most of them were still asleep. I felt a lot better about doing the pricking, leaving Beri and Fen to tie them up. I didn't want my beloved to feel guilty about having to perform such a task. It was going to take some mental slapping around to stop myself from referring to Fen as 'my beloved'. That particular ship had taken off and was heading to the far reaches of the universe.

It didn't take long to run out of rope, forcing us to improvise with whatever was handy. Wire, cord, cable, strips of metal, belts, anything that could be used to incapacitate them was used. Some women were tied together in compromising positions just to save on the stuff.

There was only one hut left, the one that contained the woman I was eager to subdue. I slid easily inside to stand against the hut wall. Fen stood outside with the light, casting a muted glow over the interior. Approaching slowly and quietly I could feel the thorn slip between my sweaty fingers. I wanted this woman with a vengeance. She was a boil on the backside of the universe and I was the cure.

I pounced quickly, holding my arm across the naked neck available to me. I was about to touch her skin with the thorn when her head moved to face me. It wasn't Vel but her second-in-command and by the looks of her state of undress they had been having a good time earlier in the night.

"Where is she?" I growled. I was in no mood for chit chat.

"Gone."

"Obviously." I pressed down on her windpipe. "Again, where is she?"

"Outpost," she gasped. I studied the woman under my arm and wondered what on earth Vel saw in her. To me she was an ugly bitch so she must have been good in bed. Maybe she enjoyed Vel's games, I couldn't tell, but Vel would only keep her around if she served Vel's purpose.

"Why?"

The woman didn't answer but just smiled.

"She knows them that well, huh?" Well, that answered my suspicions about where the food came from. And yet even Vel's skills were not worth that much. There must have been something else. "Come on. Give. What is she up to?"

When nothing came I insinuated my knee between her legs, lifting my leg slightly so I could put pressure on her crotch. I leaned in and shoved, drawing a yelp of pain from her. A smile spread across those dark lips. Oops, wrong move. I was just feeding her. Damn. I removed my knee, leaving her wanting more.

"Uh uh. Naughty, naughty. What is she up to?" I closed off her windpipe until she was clawing at my arm. "What... is... she... doing?" I spat out the words in contempt.

"A... mine..."

"Where?"

"That...", the woman gasped trying to fill her lungs, "that way." Her head flicked upwards.

"How far?"

"Two... clicks."

"And where's the outpost?"

The women hesitated, still holding onto the loyalty she had for her leader.

"She'd sacrifice you in a heartbeat, honey, so don't think you hold some place in her heart." I allowed her some air, easing off her throat for a moment. "The outpost. Where is it?"

She seemed to think about it for a moment before relenting. Her head pointed in the same direction. "Four... clicks." As she muttered the last word I sent her into oblivion.

"So now what?"

"Well, Fen, unless you want to go stumbling around in the dark I would suggest we wait until dawn." However I did think it prudent to mark the direction Vel's woman had pointed because in the light of day it all looked the same. The outpost? A mine? What was Vel up to?

I was running out of energy so after a quick check of the camp to make sure all the women were tucked away tightly I commandeered Vel's hut and slept in a bed for the first time for what seemed like years. Beri and Fen took turns to stay awake while I slept, and I was forever grateful for that. Despite the fact that I had been with the tribe for a while now I never really got used to roughing it. Okay, I admit it. I was a tough bitch who liked her creature comforts.

The sunburn was irritating me but I was so damned tired that I just ignored the sting running over

the surface of my much abused skin and fell asleep almost immediately. I was content to leave my troubles to the light of day.

* * *

I don't know how long I slept but it must have been a while. I could feel the heat of the day already and I was still in bed.

"Time to rise!"

Why did Fen have to be so happy about it? "Yeah yeah, I hear you." But my response was less than enthusiastic.

"Our sisters are here."

"Why didn't you say so?" I threw off the blanket and made a move to jump out of bed but my skin screamed in protest and forced me to slow down. My mind was willing but my flesh was a weak son of a bitch. Vel was getting away and I was left to drag my sorry ass at the speed of Beri's damned 'car'.

We left a handful of sisters behind to keep the Velkren in line, having my blessing to knock them out again if the need arose.

We headed off in the direction of the outpost, stopping half way to find the mine Vel's woman had mentioned. Apart from the vehicle stopped outside it was well hidden, the entrance barely more than a shallow indentation in the ground leading down a tunnel to the mine itself. With the possibility of attack I led the assault while Beri and her sisters followed behind.

The sound of voices and crying reached our ears before we actually saw anything. It was the sound of degradation and suffering and it took all my willpower to stop myself jumping to their rescue. A hand came to rest on my arm, squeezing gently. I looked over my shoulder to see sympathetic eyes staring back. Epi understood my need to help them but she was advising caution.

This was all so new to all of us. I had to learn some restraint and Beri and her sisters were about to get a taste of first-hand violence. Epi had seen me take a swing or two but Beri and Fen, my sweet Fen, were going to see the ugly side of me.

The deeper we went down the passage the lighter it got. By the time we reached the edge of the cavern it was lit up with an orange glow. Small light packs were buried in the clay-like walls, illuminating the work area effectively.

Beri reacted to the sight, her eyes sweeping over the disheveled women covered in ochre slime digging with makeshift shovels. She had obviously recognized some of the prisoners and wanted to rush to their sides. My hand rose and grabbed her arm. When her eyes met mine I shook my head.

I studied the layout of the mine, taking in the placement of the guards and prisoners. By my reckoning there were perhaps ten guards and thirty workers and despite being outnumbered the guards were in total control, hitting and shoving the near-exhausted women to work beyond their capacity.

My brain was swamped with emotion when I needed now most of all a clear head. I knew I tended to jump into a fight before thinking of the consequences but this was one of those times where finesse was needed in order to save casualties. What the hell had happened to me? In my book I was a loner not a leader. Maybe I should just leave them all behind and go and do what I do best... knock some heads together.

I was about to say so when I turned around and looked at the expectant faces. Somehow I just couldn't do it. This was as much their fight as it was mine. With a series of hand signals I directed some of the sisters to the right and others to the left, indicating to use their thorns to subdue the guards. It seemed that was something they were prepared to do so who was I to spoil their fun? They could do it their way and I could do it mine.

When everyone was in place I signaled, diving into the fray with my usual enthusiasm. There was nothing like a good fight, especially when I was fueled by some anger and righteous indignation. I started with fists, slugging the first jaw that came into the path of my hand, but soon I had a rod of titanium and was swinging it with abandon. Heads were bouncing around like balls as I smacked left and right.

I felt sorry for them really. They were taking the brunt of my fury so they really didn't stand much of a chance. It took a few seconds for me to realize the fight was over, I was so wrapped up in the excitement. It wasn't until the cheering broke through the haze surrounding me that I was finally able to let my guard down. To see the joy flowing between these women made it all worth while. It was the reunion of a nation, old and young finding the other they thought lost.

Fen came up to me and reached for my hand. "Thank you," she said. Nothing more, just 'thank you'. It was a sentiment that I felt down to my soul. "Now let's take our sisters home."

"Now hold on just one minute..."

* * *

I eventually got my way and we were about to storm the outpost with a force of precisely five.

"This is not going to work." Epi's muffled voice came from between canisters of ochre.

"Of course it'll work. They won't know what hit them."

Gan was dressed as one of the guards, driving the vehicle a little erratically. The rest of us were hidden in the trolley attached behind the truck.

"If she keeps driving like that they'll know something's wrong."

"Epi, you worry too much." But I had to admit the thought had crossed my mind as well. "Gan, you're doing great."

I finally figured out why she was driving the way she was, her hands were shaking so badly she could barely keep it straight. If it wasn't for the fact that she was the only one who sort of looked like one of Vel's women and fitted into the clothes I would have left her behind.

"What do I do now?" Gan's voice rose to a high squeak. She was terrified.

"Drive up to the gate. Keep your head down and give them a wave." Maybe that was too much for her to take in. But she did what I told her and we all breathed a collective sigh of relief when the gate opened.

"Now, drive up to the door and stop."

Gan did as she was asked and sat there with the motor running.

The door opened and a guard stepped up to the truck. "We weren't expecting a delivery today."

"That's okay," I answered as I leapt from my hiding place and vaulted over the side, "we're not delivering." My fist was already in motion as the guard tried to bring his weapon to bear, beating him to the draw and felling him with one blow. "One down..." I muttered.

"Do we know how many are here?" It suddenly occurred to Epi that we could be walking into real trouble. I had that thought the moment we left the mine.

"Nope." I grinned evilly.

"Are you mad?"

"I've been told that on occasion. Lighten up, girl, enjoy the mayhem."

"I'm the one who hates violence, remember?"

"You could have fooled me. Don't worry, Epi, I'll protect you from the big bad guards." As if they had read my mind two guards emerged from the lift to the upper levels. I looked on these upcoming fights as therapeutic, plastering Vel's face on each and every one of them as I knocked them out.

* * *

"Where is she?" I growled. My fist was wrapped tightly in the guard's shirt, twisting the material until it was cutting off his windpipe. We... I had now whittled down the number of guards to one and he was feeling my wrath.

"I...I... aaarrghhhglllglll," the wet gurgle was accompanied by drool running down his chin.

"Come on, where is she?"

"He could probably answer you if you ease up on your grip." Epi had a slight smirk on her face, belying the fact that she believed in non-violence. It seemed she harbored a secret desire for him to suffer, at least just a little.

"Oh, yeah." I was so intent on getting an answer that I was hindering my own questioning. "For the last time..." I still had his shirt in my hand so it wasn't cutting off his air. My other hand had unconsciously balled into a fist and was resting over my shoulder ready to hit him.

"She's off-world."

"She... left?" I couldn't believe it. "She can come and go as she likes?"

He nodded his head frantically as my fist shifted restlessly.

"Just what the hell is going on here?" Surely he must have some idea otherwise he would question Vel's apparent freedom of the planet. "And I'm sure you can fill me in." I pulled him closer until he could see the anger in my eyes, but I could see a mixture of emotion in his. "You better get rid of that thought or I'll rip it out of your head!"

"Jordana!" Beri barked, trying to draw my attention away from the imminent violence. "That is not the way!"

"No, it's not **your** way. **My** way gets results." I shook him violently, my strength fed by the anger inside me. Again by hand tightened on his shirt, this time allowing me to lift him upwards and bring him onto his toes.

"Uurggh... Iiaaaahhhhhh..." If he was trying to answer I wasn't letting him.

I suddenly let go and he stumbled. I used his loss of balance to my favor, pushing him against the wall and pinning him with an arm across his windpipe. "Tell me."

"I'm trying to. She left about an hour ago."

"She didn't use your ship." What did the woman do? Sprout wings and fly off or something? Somehow, that wouldn't surprise me.

"No, someone picked her up in some little old junker."

"Junker?" I had a bad feeling about this. "What did it look like?"

"One of the 'D' classes. It was a tiny thing with a laser burn on the underside and a split in the antenna dish."

"Bessie? That bitch is in my Bessie? I'll... I'll..."

"Bessie is a ship?"

Oh oh. Epi now knew the truth and I knew I would be in for a tongue lashing. "Err, yeah. I'd been meaning to tell you..."

"Just as well you didn't... stranger." The last word held menace but I suspected it was more for my benefit rather than actual intent.

"So what does all this mean?" Beri came up to my side and looked me straight in the eye.

"It means that I was abandoned here on purpose. The person I was working for at the time drugged me and left me for dead on Rigeus. Now she's using **my** ship to transport Vel. That is so... so... **not** right." My blood was about to boil. "I hope she got her twelve hundred plus interest because when I find her she's going to pay big time!" My fist lashed out, slamming against the wall next to the guard's head. The pain acted as a drug, swirling with my anger and indignation into a cocktail of adrenaline.

"Don't hit me!" He was nearly peeing in his pants at the sudden act of violence.

"When is she coming back?" I ground out. I didn't like the thought of having to wait for my chance to give Vel some payback.

"Dunno. I don't think she was."

"You... mean... to... tell...me... she's disappeared **and** keeping Bessie?" Now that's crossing the line, even for Vel. "**My** Bessie?"

"J, will you drop it already?"

"Oh no, no, no, no. This is not the end of it. Not by a long shot."

"It's just a ship." Epi watched me as she spoke, knowing very well she would get a response from me.

"She is not just a ship, woman! She is my best buddy, my pride and joy, my-"

"Wife?"

"Are you asking for a smack in the mouth?"

"No, J, but everything comes to those who wait."

"Well, Epi dear, I'm not known for my patience."

"I can see that."

"Ahem." A masculine voice cut through the argument.

"You know...", The guard should have been happy for the diversion but he broke the cardinal rule by interrupting a conversation. "...I would be keeping my mouth shut if I were you." I glared at him and he ducked his head.

Before I had a chance to say anything more Epi touched his skin with the thorn sending him into an enforced sleep.

"What did you do that for?"

"He wasn't going to tell you anything more."

"You don't know that!"

"Too late now." Epi grinned.

I didn't know what the matter was with her but she was getting too much fun out of my misery. My fingers let go of the unconscious guard still caught up in my fist. He fell with a thud, landing in a tangled heap on the floor. I couldn't help but brush my hands off, finishing with a flourish.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Not right this minute, no." Epi continued to taunt me.

"How about checking out the ship?"

"I don't know anything about ships, and you know it."

"Then go and learn!"

"Don't be silly." Was the woman asking for me to smack her?

"Then **I'll** go and check out the ship!" This woman was seriously annoying me.

"Then I'll come-"

"No. You stay here and... and... supervise! Yeah, that's it. Supervise!" The crestfallen look was nearly my undoing. "Look, tie the guards up tightly. Can you do that?"

"Of course I can do that!" Epi was nearly insulted.

"Look, I'm sorry, but you being smart-mouthed about it isn't helping any." Epi just smirked at me. "What? What is your problem?"

"Are you listening to yourself?"

"What did I say?" Obviously I wasn't.

She shook her head. "You're really not a 'people' person, are you?"

"It's not that. I'm just used to looking out for myself, that's all."

"Isn't that what I just said? Aren't you just a *little* bit sick of getting hit every time you open your mouth?"

"I thought it was their problem, not mine."

"Well, J honey, I hate to tell you... it's you."

"Really?" I was perplexed. "And you're telling me that the people I insulted didn't deserve it?"

"I didn't say that, J. I'm just explaining why you telling me I have a smart-mouth is a reflection on you."

"You know what?" I knew it was going to sound out of place but... "This is the most I've heard you speak since I've known you. Did you swallow a computer chip or something?"

She chuckled and pushed me away. "Go and see to your ship, troublemaker."

"Hey! You were the one losing this argument."

"Fine. If it'll make you happy, I was losing the argument."

"See..." I mumbled as I turned away, "...told you so." What was so enjoyable about having the last word? Ahh yes, being right.

* * *

I had been thinking about how to get these women off the planet and it seemed my prayers had been answered, metaphorically speaking. I was not a big fan on religion so prayer was not an issue for me. Still the sentiment was the same. I wished for something and hey, bingo, it was there. What were the odds?

The ship was huge. Too big really for the half a dozen guards on duty at the outpost. So why would they need something so big? My curiosity was piqued and so I did the only thing I could do. I snooped around, and am so I glad that I did. This particular ship had a very large cargo hold and it was already full of metal boxes. Dozens and dozens of them.

Of course my nosy nature wouldn't let me stop at that. I just had to find out what was inside. My smile widened as I saw what the cargo was... credits, thousands and thousands of credits. "I'm rich!" I giggled. I just had to check every box I could access and found more of the same, changing my estimate to hundreds of thousands of credits. "Almighty Carn!" I blew my breath

out through pursed lips and it came out as a whistle. What the hell had Vel been up to?

This amount of money smacked of illegality. What was I saying? Anything Vel did was illegal, even the bedroom stuff, so why would this be any different?

Tucked in one corner of the hold were a number of cylindrical barrels. I popped the lid on one to find the ochre mud from the mine. Okay. Was she transporting a bit of home to wherever she was going? Mud? I suppose only Vel could answer that one.

But now I had a dilemma. Vel would be back, despite what the guard said. She wouldn't leave all this behind without a reason. I suspected that she would be returning with a large force to collect what she thought was hers, or maybe she was planning to tie up all the loose ends she was leaving behind.

Now here was the dilemma. I really wanted a piece of this woman and was prepared to wait for her return. However, some of Beri's tribe could get hurt or, worse, get killed. On the other hand, we could all leave this rock with her money and drive her insane. Could I wait a while longer for my revenge? I admit I rather liked the idea of stealing her ship and her money. Of course I didn't give the idea of all that money being mine a second thought.

As I sat in the cockpit with my feet resting on the control panel I contemplated various scenarios that could be my future. There wasn't much internal courtroom drama for me to make up my mind about what to do, even though the only sticking point was my lack of morals in stealing what was obviously crime money. I justified it to myself as getting back at Vel and that seemed to make it all right. Now all I had to do was convince Beri of my plan.

* * *

"We need to get moving."

"Why? Where are we going?"

"Off this dustbowl for one thing. Come on, Beri, get your girls in gear."

"What's the hurry? Didn't that guard say-" Why was Beri being such a pain in the ass?

"Yeah, I know what he said! Now I'm saying let's go!"

"Alright, what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on."

"And you're a terrible liar, J. What are you not telling us?"

"I think Vel's coming back, okay?" I only hoped she didn't ask any more.

"And?" Her eyes bore into mine. "I thought you'd jump at the chance to exact some revenge."

"Now **that** surprised me, Beri. You, of all people, have preached non-violence and now you are encouraging me?"

"Not at all J, I just know how you think. There is something more you are not telling us." She held up her hand before I could answer. "But... but to save time we'll discuss this later."

I just knew the discussion would be an argument. "Get the guards on board."

"Are we taking them with us?"

"Just as far as the cave. We'll pick up the Velkren on the way."

"What do you have in mind?"

Now this was the part of my plan that might cause a stir. "We're going to put them all in your cave then seal it off."

"Seal it... off? Are you mad??" Beri's hands began to move. "You'll kill them!"

"It won't kill them!"

"I would consider a cave-in a death sentence."

"Listen, we really don't have time..." But Beri's mouth continued to move. "...Alright! Alright! We just seal the cave mouth to hold them for a while, that's all. We need to be long gone from here before they surface."

"And why do we need to do that?"

"You are really being a pain in the-"

"There is no need for bad language, my friend."

"Can't you just take my word for it?"

Beri stepped up into my personal space, her face tipped up to make her point. "We will talk later." Why did I feel like an eight year old who had been caught in the middle of a prank? Beri was my mother figure and I was in for a scolding at some point in the future. I had the feeling that facing Vel and her horde would be preferable to Beri's verbal scolding.

"Come on then..."

* * *

It was a busy few hours as we made sure that Vel's little empire was unusable. With all the prisoners in tow, we emptied the cave of anything useful, leaving behind food and water for their

survival. After much deliberation on Beri's part and stubborn refusal on mine, I reluctantly punched a hole in the roof with the ship's lasers. It seemed Beri thought the prisoners deserved to breathe fresh air. I suppose I was still arguing that point as I sat in the pilot's chair muttering while doing what she asked.

So everyone who wasn't part of Beri's tribe was tucked away in the sealed up cave happily sleeping through the ordeal. By her reckoning they still had some hours yet before they woke up to their new surroundings. It was more than enough time to finish what I had in mind and be out of here and lost in the cosmos somewhere.

Any vehicles were driven to the mine and cut into pieces with the handy little lasers I had found in one of Beri's metal boxes. Her women then stuffed the pieces into the cavern, filling every nook and cranny, right before I used the explosives I had carried. I was playing my Joker and it was game and match. If Vel ever tried to reopen the mine she had all that twisted metal to contend with.

There was one final thing to do and I had been looking forward to it with a salivating mouth. I know it was a bit of overkill but I wanted Vel to know that she was not welcome back here on this rock and, well, I just wanted to blow something up.

The ship was full, with perhaps a seat or two spare, and I was ready to leave this hellhole. I circled the ship around the outpost, looking at this beacon of authority with some disdain. Beri didn't want to watch the wanton destruction but Epi was in the co-pilot's seat studying the landscape with some interest.

My thumb pressed the button and I felt the discharge as if it had passed through me. The deadly ray streaked towards its destination, exploding on impact as it reached fuel supplies. I continued to fire until the whole complex was in flames, making sure that landing was impossible.

Without looking back I guided the ship to my final destination, Vel's camp. "Do you want to do the honors?" My eyes swept over to my co-pilot and I could see that Epi was sorely tempted.

After some internal deliberation she exhaled. "No. I should be trying to stop you doing this."

"Somewhere deep down you want to do this too."

"I know, and that's wrong. Our philosophy has been one of peaceful intent. Wishing such things is not the way."

"Look at it this way, wishing is one thing doing is another." I was certainly not one to be philosophizing on the merits of non-violence.

Epi chuckled. "Yes, oh master," she muttered.

"Yeah, yeah. I don't know where that came from either." I turned my attention back to the metal town. "Alright, let's get this over with." I made damned sure that nothing was left standing.

Everything was leveled to the ground, leaving a junkyard of twisted metal and flame. I had left my personal signature on the damage so that Vel knew exactly who was responsible. She would come after me not them. "That's for you, Rice," I muttered.

My thoughts rested on the one lost innocent soul who needed to find rest. "Now let's take Rice home..."

* * *

We were well on the way out of the system and heading towards the unknown. With the auto pilot on I went in search of Beri. "Alright, your time is up. What was so important that you had to hide it from me?"

"I could say that it is none of your business."

"I beg to differ. My life was on the line so it makes it my business." Even now she was still trying to put me off. "Come on, Beri, what's so important that you risked everything for it."

"We are the Noorthi."

Now I didn't know a whole heap about the Noorthi. They were a closed Order shrouded in mystery, at least to most of the galaxy, so what I had heard about them was probably myth rather than actual fact. It was an order of women, a sisterhood if you like. As far as I was aware they were not a religious order but the lack of knowledge about them encouraged the thought that they were. Well, if they were I certainly didn't see any of that in my time with them. Sure, they had strange rituals but nothing I would have openly claimed to be religious. Still for Beri to keep this fact secret was not worth my life.

"And?" I didn't blink an eye.

"I said, we are the Noorthi."

"I got that part. And what was so important that you had to hide it?"

"We are known for our passivism, J. She would have come for us."

"Beri honey, she already knew that, even without your label. You didn't fight back, at least not until now. Vel just picked you off one by one. It was more fun for her that way."

"Oh." The crestfallen look on Beri's face was nearly my undoing. Over her shoulder I saw Fen approach, standing behind her leader and resting her hand on the blonde's shoulder.

"Still, what are you doing there? Setting up a new base of operations?" I tried to be jovial to take the sting out of Beri's disappointment.

"No," Fen piped in. "We were kidnapped and abandoned on Rigeus."

"Kidnapped? Why in the stars would anyone want to kidnap the Noorthi?" My brain asked the same question a split second behind my mouth.

"We do not know."

"How long had you been there?"

"Time does not have meaning here, J. You know that." Fen continued, We were but mere children when we first arrived."

"So where are the Elders?"

"Gone, like so many of our sisters, or so we thought. A few survived the mine but they are old and frail. We are all that remains. The Children of the Noorthi."

"How many of you were there?"

"We numbered over a hundred but time, and the Velkren, took its toll until we are all that are left."

I knew Vel hadn't been on that rock for that long, my own contact with her four years ago confirmed that, so these women must have been there all alone for many years before that. How had they survived? Suddenly the myths and legends reared up in my head whispering of mysterious rituals and forgotten magic that possessed the Noorthi. Could any of it be true? Were the Noorthi as mystical as all the rumors?

I had seen how they lived with my own eyes and yet apparently they had started with nothing. Subconsciously I took a step back, not unnoticed by the two women facing me. I looked into their eyes to see disappointment there. Had this been the galaxy's reaction to them all their lives? I smiled in an effort to bridge that gap once more.

"So any of it true?" I could see they knew what I was talking about.

"Some."

"That's it? Some?" I wanted Fen to elaborate but she was tight lipped.

"And some you do not know," Beri added.

"Alright, I get it. Keep J in the dark."

"No, friend, it is not that. Some you would not understand. Some that is best not to know."

"And you were afraid if Vel knew she would use that?"

Beri just nodded. "It was bad enough that she used our sisters as labor in her fiendish mine."

"At least they are still alive."

"True, my friend. I think we owe you a 'thank you'."

"You're welcome, Beri. Now let's go and find your home."

"Or we could have just stayed on Rigeus and remained unknown."

"But what about your sisters in the other star systems?"

"You could deliver the message that we are alive."

"But... you have so much good that you can do out there. Besides, don't you want to know why?"

Fen and Beri looked at one another. I could see that they wanted to know why they had been left to die. I know I would. "Alright, sister."

Sister? Had I earned enough trust for that title? I supposed I had considering they had told me their secret. I grinned from ear to ear and they responded in kind.

"Come." Fen moved from behind Beri to stand in front of me. She grasped my hand and led me to the common room. There stood the tribe, murmuring in low tones at my approach. The circle of women broke to allow the three of us to stand in the middle.

One of the older women stepped forward, beckoning me to sit. She unrolled a small parcel wrapped in cloth. Laid out on the floor was a primitive set of tools. "Your wrist, sister." The deep tone was intoxicating and before I even knew I had done it my wrist was in her palm.

A very sharp needle began to puncture my skin rapidly, tiny drops of blood spreading out in a small ornate pattern. The other women chanted softly and the air above them shifted, tiny orbs of light dancing in the re-circulated air. The pain seemed oddly a friend, like it was not pain at all but a warm inviting sensation. I watch fascinated as the ritual unfolded, dimly aware that I was probably the one person in the known universe to see such a mysterious ceremony let alone participate in it.

The pain receded and it drew my attention back to the tattooing. The woman wiped away the tiny drops of blood and rubbed in what looked like the ochre dust mixed into a paste into the marks. She rubbed gently, massaging in the orange mixture thoroughly. When she was satisfied she bandaged my wrist, leaving the paste to sit over the punctures. She put her hands together and bowed, murmuring some words that seemed to be just out of my understanding.

The tiny orbs of light burst into pieces, showering all of us with tiny sparkles that seemed to stick to our skin. Slowly the lights faded, their blessing given and received with reverence. Beri and Fen helped me up and smiled benevolently. "Welcome to the sisterhood, J."

"I'm a Noorthi?" I was so numb with astonishment that I didn't even realize what I was saying. I knew it was a big deal. Geez, I can be a real dimwit sometimes.

"Yes you are, sister." Beri pointed to the bandage. "Leave that on until Grit removes it. It is most important."

I just nodded. "What is that stuff?"

"It is the ochre from the mine."

"You know what it is?"

"Yes, we do." But she said no more. Was I supposed to just accept the fact without an explanation?

"And? Why is it so important that they would go to these lengths to keep it hidden from the Consortium?" Maybe I had partially answered the question myself.

"Because they did not want the Consortium to get it."

"Even I figured that out, Beri. Tell me something that I don't know." I hated these word games they played. "Obviously it's special. How special is it?"

"We were barely out of childhood when we arrived here. Our instruction was incomplete."

"So you're telling me you don't know but it's really **really** important?"

"Yeah...", Fen grinned at me.

"...Something like that." I was really getting sick of that phrase. "You women think you can get around me with a vague answer and a smile?"

"Yeah...",

"Stop it, Fen! Now I want the truth!"

"That is the truth, J. Instruction in our Order is ongoing through childhood into adulthood. When we were abandoned here the instruction continued for a while but as our teachers were captured one by one it fell away. Soon there was no one left to teach so we had to adapt what we already knew."

"I hope you're not expecting me to follow in your footsteps. Passivity is not my strong suit."

"J, you are one in a billion. I wouldn't even try to change you."

"Then why all this ceremony? Why... me?"

"You may not feel it yet but you are one of us, at least in spirit." Beri looked deep into my eyes and I started to squirm under her intense stare. "You were passive in your own way, J. You tried to warn us about Vel, tried to keep us out of trouble, but you took action when the situation called for it. You were our protector."

"You mean I'm now the Noorthi's enforcer?"

"That is such a harsh word but in effect you are."

"The sisterhood won't like that."

"Maybe they won't but I'm sure you will talk them around to your way of thinking." Beri winked then laughed at my shocked expression.

"Sure, I'll just sweet-talk them to a standstill." Oh boy, what had I gotten myself into?

"Now let us introduce you to your fellow sisters, Ratha."

"What was that? Ras-Res..."

"Ratha. It's means 'defender'."

"Uh huh. Does this mean that I don't get any sleep any more? Are you going to have me flying all over the universe being your personal messenger girl?" I was skeptical with this arrangement. To me it sounded like they were getting a girl with a ship for nothing. How much was this appointment going to impinge on my profession as a space bum?

"You can go back to being a 'space bum' as you call it."

Had she read my mind?

"Yes, Ratha, your mind is an open book."

Was this a trick or something?

"No trick, J, you just give yourself away."

Stop that.

Only if you agree to be our Ratha.

Now just one minute.... Beri was in my head. Now that was out of line because it was my turf and no one else's.

"Isn't that against the law somewhere in the known universe?"

"It is outlawed in many systems. I was just, how did you say, 'making a point'?"

"I suppose it's too late to back out now, especially with this tattooed on my wrist."

"You can still change your mind, J."

"What about the tattoo?"

"If you do not wish to be our Ratha simply remove the bandage." But I could see the sadness there. Beri had hoped that I would jump at the chance to be one of them. "Do not decide right now. Think about it and let us know your decision tomorrow morning. If the bandage remains then we know your answer."

I couldn't ask for more than that, except that I now had to make a life-altering decision. Did I want all this grief from a band of defenseless women? They were the Noorthi, sure, and it would look great on my resume but did I want the aggravation? I grabbed my space blanket and went in search of a nice quiet part of the ship. It was going to be a long night.

* * *

I woke with a start. Despite the prediction last night I slept like a baby. Had my mind made a decision that I wasn't aware of yet? I suppose it must have otherwise I would have been complaining about the lack of sleep. As the bandage was still around my wrist I knew my answer. Now all I had to do was to tell everyone else.

I was awake now and walking towards the common room but my conscious mind was arguing all the way. Maybe I should have just sleep-walked there then I wouldn't have two voices debating in my head.

I stood outside the entrance to the room, hesitating to take the last steps that would seal my fate. Did I really want to do this? I had been a loner most of my life and until now I had been quite happy with that arrangement. Did I have a subconscious need to belong to something? I hadn't thought so but here I was about to do just that. My wavering did nothing to solve the problem; in fact, it only seemed to make it more complicated.

The door slid open and I was face to face with the one person who wanted my answer. Beri. Maybe she could see the confusion on my face, I don't know, but she ushered me back along the hallway. "Come with me," she requested.

I followed along after her, catching up with her smaller steps in a stride or two. "So, what do you want?"

"More to the point, what do **you** want?" She stopped and faced me. "You do not need to fear this, J. If you say no there will be no repercussion."

But I felt she needed me, needed my acceptance of both the situation and the belief. "It's not that,

B." She smiled at my slip of the tongue. "It's...", I hesitated. How could I put into words what I didn't understand myself? There was something there and it was just out of my reach, something that would make everything crystal clear.

"I know you have doubts. We were born into this life, J. Born and raised. We have our own fears about returning to the Order. While on Rigeus our beliefs strayed, mutated... changed. We are no longer what we were when we first arrived on that planet and it's something that we all have to come to terms with. That is probably why we are hesitant to return to the fold. Our sisters wouldn't understand our new lifestyle, and especially our acceptance of you, my friend, but my belief in you is keeping me strong."

It was a pretty speech and one that was drawing me in. "I don't know, B. I'm so used to being on my own I don't know if I can get used to caring for you guys."

"Caring, J?" She chuckled. "You?"

"Yeah, I know. Strange, huh? But you had a way of getting under my skin, or maybe I should say under my **new** skin, eh?"

"I would give you more time if I could but the tattoo will become permanent if you take much longer."

I looked at my wrapped wrist, staring at it as if it contained all the secrets of the universe. Maybe it did, at least as far as my own life was concerned. "I'm probably going to regret this but...", my eyes connected with Beri's, "okay, on one condition though."

"What?" She must have expected me to ask for something impossible because there was apprehension in those eyes.

"No more sneaking a peek inside my head, okay? And that goes for everyone else too. It's the only place I've got that's my own, you know?"

"Rest assured that we do not make a practice of doing such a thing. You were... ummmm..."

"An easy target?" I offered.

"Yes, a very easy target. Your mind was filled with such..."

"Depraved thoughts? Yeah, I can't help it..."

"No, not that. Bursting with life, J. It was refreshing, and an education." Beri smiled at my blush.

"My brain has a triple-X rating stamped on it. Sorry."

"Don't be, my friend. It's part of what makes you so unique."

Unique? Me?

"Yes you."

"Hey!"

"I didn't read your mind but your face told me a lot." Beri moved up beside me and gently placed her hand on my shoulder, ever mindful of the burn. "Come and meet your sisters..."

I stepped through the common room door to a familiar scene. The tribe was once again assembled in a circle, as they had been the night before. Grit was on the floor in the same position awaiting my arrival. Well, this was it. I was moving into unfamiliar territory for me and I wasn't sure I liked it. One thing I had always felt about myself was that I was confident of my abilities to handle any situation, but this... I felt like a human out of oxygen, struggling to understand and breathe in the foreign atmosphere.

"Sit, sister," Grit said, her deep voice rising above the faint chanting of the tribe.

When I was settled, with my long legs crossed, the older woman held my wrist in her palm. She murmured something that again set my nerves on end, something that was just out of my reach to comprehend. The wrap was removed and I studied the crusted tattoo. It didn't look or feel any different to when the wrap had been first applied, so what was all the fuss?

Grit removed a small vial of viscous liquid, popping the lid and spilling a few drops on the ochre. She muttered reverently. It almost seemed like a prayer but unlike any prayer I had ever heard. Beri stepped in and took the vial out of Grit's hand, allowing the older woman to continue the ceremony. Her thumbs massaged the oil into the ochre, once again making it a mud-like consistency. I could feel the warmth enter my wrist and travel up my arm, spreading out from there to fill my body. But it was a friendly warmth, a mysterious warmth, a warmth that seemed to come from everyone around me.

Suddenly Grit's words came into focus. "Sordi ka une junto na." *Our sister is now one with us.* I knew Grit had spoken the words but my mind had translated them. It was both strange and frightening.

My face must have shown my turmoil because the next thing I knew Beri and Fen were on either side of me seated on the floor, their hands resting on my shoulders. Grit wiped away the ochre to reveal the tattoo, blazing with a mystical fire before fading to its orange shape. It was a pretty pattern, looking something like a flower.

"It's the *lokaleen* from our home planet. The oil that you were anointed with comes from the plant."

Anointed? Now there was a word I hadn't heard of for many a year. The fact that Beri used it lent an age-old flavor to the ceremony. And it probably was. The Noorthi had been around for centuries and yet as much was known about them today as it had been centuries ago. It was a

secret jealousy guarded by those who lived the cloistered lifestyle. Now I was one of them.

"I have a question. Why didn't any of you have sex while I was with you?" I knew it was an obscure question but it was something that had niggled at me.

"We are a chaste order-

"Then I'm out of here!" I started to rise, but the two hands on my shoulders held firm.

"We seek the emotional connection rather than the physical."

"But, but, you said you were 'The Children of the Noorthi'. How can... why... who..." Okay, I admit that they had me stumped.

"Only if the body remains pure can we have children."

"Children *without* sex? Is that what you're saying?"

"Beri told you you would not understand."

"Ahhh, so it's one of those 'I don't want to know' situations, huh?"

"In time you will learn."

"Oh no no no no, I like my sex, thank you very much."

I had noticed that Beri had been silent through the conversation and I snatched a glance at her face. There was a deep sadness there and I knew why. Vel had destroyed something else with her interference.

"I don't have to give that up, do I?" I sure hoped not.

"You hold a special place in the sisterhood, Ratha." Beri finally spoke, her voice wavering on the words. "You are one of us but you are not bound by the restrictions of our vocation. You can come and go as you please."

"But when you yell 'help' I come a running, right?"

"Yeah..." Fen grinned.

"...something like that," I finished for her. I just knew my woman was a troublemaker. "So where are we headed?"

Beri hesitated. "Parnus Helix in the Braxus system."

"Can you narrow that down a bit? Braxus is a pretty bit place."

The blonde's eyes shifted to Fen for help. "Juno"

"There, that wasn't so hard, was it? Now let's take Rice home."

* * *

So here I was, flying a ship whose cargo hold was full of credits, taking a bunch of holy women back to their home planet and now tied to them forever because I foolishly said 'yes' in a moment of weakness. What was going to happen to me? Was I ever going to have a life of my own now that I was committed to being their 'Ratha'? Would I ever get to spend any of the money I had stolen? When would I finally get my revenge on Vel? What had I done to get myself into this situation in the first place? Did I really care about any of this?

I suppose in time all will be revealed to me.

THE END....

...for now.

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