

# KURTHERIAN GAMBIT UNIVERSE SAMPLER

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# DEATH BECOMES HER

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THE KURTHERIAN GAMBIT



# DEATH BECOMES HER

BY MICHAEL ANDERLE





"May those who fight have honor, else we are doomed in the end."

Unknown politician's stump speech.

"You know the problem with honor? Honor can be a restraining bitch on you. I've decided honor was for the *last* generation."

Bethany Anne Reynolds, Queen of the UnknownWorld

### Virginia, USA

Cautiously, the large agent entered the dilapidated wooden warehouse in old-town Virginia. Taking up most of a city block and surrounded by old weather-beaten and rusting pipes it was an eyesore to everyone walking or driving by it.

He spoke into his mic, "Carl, three heartbeats, smells are incredibly pungent with a slightly sick smell. Kind of like they're going through severe body issues, or eating lots of yellow curry. I'm not sure which."

He listened as Carl retorted over the earpiece, “Bill, for the record, Indian food is magnificent, and your culinary bigotry is showing.”

“Easy for you to say, I’m the one who has to smell it when you go overboard eating it.” Stopping the conversation and moving silently, the agent squeezed his entirely too-big body through holes which certainly were too small.

“OK, inside perimeter and will be making contact inside thirty, that is three–zero seconds. Smells include heavy bleach, with a subtle aroma of aforementioned nastiness. Still three tangos, no heartbeat warnings, no talking.”

Carl was viewing the video take coming from the needle camera attached to Bill’s heavy helmet and mask. While there was no way Carl could ever make it on a takedown, he certainly enjoyed sitting in on the real-time action.

“OK big guy, I have all the info coming in from the sensors outside. We have no movement and nothing out of the ordinary. We don’t seem to have any issues with flanking, so you are a go from this side. Your call, Billy Boy.”

Bill swore to himself. If there was any one thing that got under his skin more in the last fifteen years working with Carl other than being called ‘Billy Boy’ he didn’t know what it was. One of these days he was going to give Carl the monumental wedgie he kept asking for. Except he never said it when Bill was around, and Bill never thought about it except times like this.

One of these days, though... God help him, and the big guy would be upset, but he was going to make it so Carl had to be surgically removed from his shorts.

Time to get back to business.

“OK, approaching and have visual. Three contacts all dressed in jeans and shirts, nothing different except two have hunting vests on, one has his off and is messing with it. Can’t see what he’s doing as his back is to me.”

At that moment, one of the men cocked his head and gestured at the other two who suddenly looked in Bill’s direction.

“You’ve been made, loudmouth.” Carl couldn’t keep the concern out of his playful jibe.

“Shit. OK, apparently this might get bloody. Talk to Primary and let him know we might need cleanup.”

“Primary is already in listen-only mode. I’m sure he’s setting up dispatches already.”

Bill heard the three guys around the card table stand up and fan out, ready to face him.

He sighed, it wasn’t as if he was worried. He had taken down so many people in fights like this or gunfights, it wasn’t even funny. While he looked about thirty-eight, he was closer to seventy-six years old. Pretty young for a vampire, actually.

While bullets hurt, he would mend, and the pain would remind him not to get sloppy next time.

Bill stood up, all 6’4”, and confidently strode right over to the three guys, stopping about ten feet away.

Damn if that smell bothering him wasn’t peculiar. The bleach was causing his nose severe issues, but he could still smell something over that nasty stuff.

Carl watched through the video link as Bill started asking the guys if they would like to come quietly or...

He never got out the next word as all three rushed Bill and the signal from his headgear suddenly stopped.

The incoming video from a couple of the cameras outside that weren’t damaged showed the whole wooden warehouse go up in flames while smoking embers rained down from the sky in streaks onto nearby buildings. Carl was pretty sure that in seconds there wouldn’t be a piece of the engulfed warehouse left.

His best friend, his partner, had just vanished in a big ball of heated urgency and consumption. Carl just stared at the screens, willing Bill to come running back out through the flames.

Someone knew they were coming, and they knew how to take a Vamp down. Three of them were willing to take their own lives to make it happen.

The color, what little was left, drained from Carl’s face. The shock

of losing his friend, the shock of being so mistaken about Bill's safety left Carl staring at the screen.

The ringing of the phone broke through his pain, his stupor. It was the primary contact.

He hit the talk button, "Yeah," his voice barely a whisper.

A gruff voice from the other end of the line, "Tell me he has enough parts left that he can make it back to us, Carl," said Frank, their primary contact with the Government. He had been working his solo career deep in the bowels of the darkest areas of security so long he predated Carl by decades. "I have Spec-Ops ready to extract in five minutes."

"No, Frank. We just lost him. All of him. I just lost my fucking best friend." Carl wanted to slam the button down as anger and anguish directed both at those who killed Bill and himself, rose up. "We can't get noticed right now. We're obviously being watched, and something is so rotten in Denmark I can't even think straight."

"I'm so sorry, Carl." Frank knew that there wasn't much he could say. Carl was his third contact on the other side of the 'redline,' and he was aware that it was Carl's first loss. Frank had been through two others before this, and while he interacted with the agents, he was uncomfortable around them.

Frank knew that no matter what the protocol said, it was never 'his program.'

"What's our next step, kid?" Frank had to get Carl thinking again. While Carl wasn't young, compared to Frank's near-century mark he was a drop in the bucket.

"Step?" Carl sounded like his mind was just idling, nothing going on as the take from the outside cameras showed the burning warehouse and registered the sirens in the distance.

Probably Frank's work.

As much as Carl wanted to yell and scream, cry and drink himself into oblivion, there was only one response.

With a voice only starting to come back, Carl replied, "Do? Frank. There is only one choice. I have to wake Him up." Any color left in

Carl's face totally faded away. *Oh my, God*, he thought. *What's going to happen now?*

Frank, on the line hundreds of miles away, had much the same thought. Except his thought was even more concise.

It was simply, "Oh shit."

### Washington, D.C.

Bethany Anne Reynolds was a sight to behold. Coming down the inside of 'spook central' in Washington, she received surreptitious glances from a couple of the guys.

Although her hair was jet black, her personality could be straight from a redhead at the best of times.

The ones who were smart forced their gazes away instead of watching her walk down the hall, the view was not worth the scathing look should Bethany Anne notice.

Or the ass-kicking during martial arts workouts later. She was only 5'3" and for most of the guys, that gave them a significant height and reach advantage. She had a long upper torso and her legs were a little short for her height. She tended to wear higher heels to compensate.

It was obvious she was angry, and when Bethany Anne was ANGRY, her better nature took a sabbatical, and while she might apologize later, it was always better not to risk the twins in the first place.

Some guys never understood the danger, or decided just to chance it and watch the agent go down the hall. No matter how many HR training classes on appropriate behavior some guys take, it never overcomes their natural predilection to be an ass.

Today, however, was their lucky day. She never glanced in anyone's direction. She strode through the hallway in a carefully tailored expensive dark suit, with a piece of paper in her hand and her blue eyes flashing a warning to 'keep the hell away.'

It worked.

Martin Brennan, her boss (or at least her advisor, no matter what

the org chart said) for the last five years, heard her coming from thirty feet away. There was no mistaking those very loud, very determined steps.

He sighed. It wasn't like this was his plan. He loved her like a daughter and just like fathering a teenager, he was about to get ripped for something he had nothing to do with.

This discussion, he decided, was so going to suck.

### Military Base, Colorado Mountains

The klaxon was sounding somewhere way in the back past all of the pipes and Matthew Wainright was getting very annoyed that apparently it had become his shit duty to go and see about it.

He had been relegated to this out of the way floor deep underground on the base some three days ago to deal with some of the timeworn, really antique, really useless scientific equipment from the war... Not even from recent decades. This equipment was the serious relic-style 1940s stuff.

He felt like he was doing research on the Philadelphia Experiment and somehow pulled the shortest straw.

To top off his growing frustration with dust, grease, faded pencil forms and boxes full of useless crap, he had to be around when some fuse must have finally shorted, and the stupid klaxon started up.

God hated him, He really did.

With disgust, he dropped the handfuls of old paperwork he was digging through in the box on the old, gray metal makeshift workbench that had seen better centuries.

*Time to go through junkyard city and beat some sense into something that really shouldn't have been built this dependable,* he thought.

Matthew grabbed a huge flashlight and a heavy wrench and started walking down the lanes created by the pipes everywhere. Sometimes it felt like he was in the oversized engine room of a battleship rather than underneath hundreds of feet of rock in the Colorado mountains.

Next time he talked with his parents, he was going to let them

know that the recruiter's comments about 'seeing the world' should conjure up thoughts of seeing the Earth's sphincter hole, rather than being in Europe.

While the buzzing from the old fluorescent lamps couldn't be heard over the klaxon around the corner, the crappy light they produced let him see well enough. He had gone down two lanes only to have to backtrack because they were dead ends.

He was able to snake down between two pipes and get onto a path with yellow stripes on the edges and a red line down the middle.

*Huh, he thought, I've never seen any lanes with red lines.*

Since the lane seemed to be going in the direction of the noise, he decided it would be easiest to take the path of least resistance.

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General Lance Reynolds, Base Commander, was talking with his secretary Patricia when his phone lit up on a landline from inside the base.

She reached across the desk and picked it up before he could so much as bat an eye, or appreciate the view.

Damn, but he was getting slow in his old age.

"General's office, state your case." She was ever so not by-the-book. But if efficiency had a middle name, it was Patricia, so he didn't push the issue.

"Klaxon, uh-huh, Level Five, right. Won't shut off. Yes, I can hear it. I'm surprised that you have a working phone down there. Wait, say that again? The door was opening when you arrived? Yes, it's right outside the door. I get that. It's hurting my ears right now."

"There's an envelope attached? Mmm hmmm. I'll let him know—right, you won't touch anything."

She hung up. Lance raised an eyebrow.

"Seems like we have a little shakeup down on Five. We have an old time war vault that suddenly activated, with an envelope attached to the inside of the door. It's addressed 'To the Base Commander.'"

Lance continued the single raised eyebrow. She said nothing. Damn, it used to work.

He sighed. "OK, what else?"

She seemed confused. "It says 'On your honor,' sir."

### Washington, D.C.

Bethany Anne rapped on the door and waited half a second before barging into Martin's office, face red and eyes furious.

He put up a hand to forestall the bitching. "Close the door without breaking it, and I'm not at fault." He chose this particular order for the two phrases because he didn't want to replace the glass... again.

The last time wasn't Bethany Anne's fault, but he was sure her previous efforts to reduce his glass to shards had helped.

After a significant effort to restrain her desire to slam the door, Bethany Anne turned back around and didn't give Martin a chance to get a word in edgewise. "What is the meaning of this? I have a few months, A FEW MONTHS, Martin, to finish my case, and dammit I can! There is NO proof that I've only got six months left to live. That's only the doc's best guess. Otherwise, I am FINE. Nothing even comes back on any of the physicals. I'm doing better, if anything! Who pulled this bullshit request and took my case and shipped me out?"

Martin waited for a second to see if she was done.

"Well?"

Apparently, she was.

Martin squared his jaw and said three words that were sure to fuel the flames of her ire.

"I don't know."

He stared at her, and she glared back at him. He could see the logic synapses firing in her brain.

If anything, she was the brightest he had. Hell, the brightest he'd ever known. If he could have just a few more years with her out in the field, there was no telling how many cases she would close.

As it was, Mother Nature was being a real black-hearted bitch.

Bethany Anne had a very rare blood disease. One they never even had the ability to check for until recently. The doctors, although not 100% sure, pretty much agreed she had less than six months to live.

With her only twenty-eight years old, it was a crying shame. Martin admitted doing a little of the crying himself when no one was looking.

Besides the physicians, he was the only other soul who knew.

She wouldn't even tell her father. He had raised her on all of that male testosterone bullshit he was indoctrinated with in the military. *Figures*, Martin thought. Treat her like a boy and see what you get. Never easy to get close to, and since her mom died at almost exactly the same age of, unexplained causes, it was most likely genetic and passed down, and she was the first and only child.

Getting to the end of her logic chain she narrowed her eyes. "If my father so much as mentions my condition before I can tell him I will personally fly back to Washington and kick your boys so hard you will sing falsetto until Christmas!"

Martin put up his hands. "Duly noted, Bethany Anne, and for the record I'm innocent. I wouldn't abuse your trust like that." Martin didn't even bother with the insubordination. Bethany Anne never meant to hurt friends, but her temper was also apparently genetic, considering the rumors about her father's famous rages.

Cooling down, Bethany Anne strode over to the two chairs in front of Martin's desk and sat in one, tapping the paper against one of the Christian Louboutins she really enjoyed wearing when working in the office.

The only reason Martin knew them was because of the red soles.

He counted silently in his head, expecting to hit thirty before her next question. He got to seventeen.

"If you didn't tell the General, and I'm still on the team," it was evident this paper she was tapping on her shoes was proper orders and she was still gainfully employed, "why the hell am I being sent out to the middle of the country?"

"That," Martin stated, "is the question of the morning."

**Military Base, Colorado Mountains**

“Sir, everything is good. The air inside the vault is now fresh enough and the only issues with the envelope are nothing, really. The vault must have been hermetically sealed and basically a perfect preservative. Everything in there was exactly how it was when it was sealed.” The scientist, one Dr. John Evenich, rattled off the whole thing as if he was giving a lecture.

The General, and his Sergeant and a number of techs were all down on Level Five.

The General looked down at the smaller man and chewed an unlit cigar while thinking this through.

“And exactly when, John, did that happen?” The General looked up and saw two more scientists going through the room. There wasn’t much to see. It was approximately ten feet wide and fifteen long, with a conference style table in the middle and four chairs. Three at one end, each on a side and the fourth on the far end as if it was the head of the table. There was a knife on a stand in the center with a phrase engraved on the hilt. No one touched it. Lance couldn’t be sure what it said as it seemed to be in a different language, but he had a good guess what it probably meant.

Dr. Evenich looked at his paperwork, "Um, August 24th, 1945."

"So, about two weeks after they dropped the atomic bombs?" General Reynolds continued chewing on his cigar.

"Yes." Dr. Evenich was feeling a little less excited under the constant scrutiny of the base commander. While not officially his superior—different chain of command—the scientists were here on his *continued good pleasure*, shorthand for don't piss him off.

"Well, give me the envelope. I'm going up to my office, it's too hot down here." With that, he gestured to have the envelope pulled off of the door.

Dr. Evenich's eyes grew wide, "But General, the significance! We can't just grab it and go. We need to see what is on it, test particulars. It will be scientifically ruined by our hands just touching it!"

General Reynolds' head swiveled to stare at the doctor, still telegraphing his demand for the envelope.

"Dr. Evenich, this says 'To the Base Commander, On his honor', and trust me, when someone says that from 1945, they were NEVER thinking about scientists looking at it for clues. I believe this is important. This isn't a democracy and I'm done discussing the subject. Sergeant, step to and get me that envelope. Men come out of that room. Leave one guard here to make sure no more intrusions happen. Get those men out and no one, and I mean NO ONE, touch that knife until I say it's OK. Am I clear?"

A heady chorus of 'Yes Sirs!' was called out.

"John?" The General very pointedly eyed Dr. Evenich and waited until the envelope was brought to him.

Dr. John Evenich, seeing his most prized historical object taken away to be pawed by apes after he and others had worked eight months on the base, just shook his head.

*Maybe it would be OK to shine a light in there and get some pictures?* Dr. Evenich walked off and started calling instructions to his people.

### New York City, New York

Carl waited until Michael, the patriarch of the family, came out of

his personal suite inside the massive home. Michael was dressed in a very well fitting three-piece suit of dark blue with light gray pinstriping, white shirt and silver cufflinks. Michael looked a young and robust fifty, but Carl knew he was way older physically. He just wasn't sure how old. There was barely any gray in his black hair.

It had taken about two hours for Michael to appear from his inner sanctum once Carl had requested his presence. Unlike a normal sleeper, it took a lot to get through Michael's torpor when he was actively hibernating.

While he was externally calm and collected, one only had to look into Michael's piercing blue eyes to realize the anger that boiled within.

He walked past Carl who bowed and followed him out of the residence of the converted building and into the business and operations area. Carl noticed that he was just as well built and muscular as he remembered him being five years ago when he went into hibernation.

It was as if he hadn't aged a day.

Michael had been expecting to be awakened in five more years. He had checked the date on awakening and this was too early. He immediately released his senses to first confirm the residence was safe, and then checked on his connection to his grandchild here in America.

When he couldn't feel William, he knew the reason for being awoken. Now he wanted answers.

Carl spoke up, "Sir, I've edited a video clip of the operation. It's ready for you to view."

Michael sat down at his desk and woke up his laptop. It was a five-year-old model, since Michael had no ability to keep up with the operating system changes between times of sleep and wakefulness, so he kept the old operating system until he was accustomed to using the laptop for a few days. *At least it wasn't as bad as last time when he had to come to grips with the Internet*, he thought.

He hit the play button on the machine and watched the fifteen minutes of relevant material on how his grandchild had died.

By the end he had some ideas about what might have happened. Not that he could figure out how they were able to retrieve the serum, or knew what to do with it. Both of those questions needed answering.

However, it did indicate one vital concern. He couldn't just find a good candidate and train them, or have one of his children's children take William's place as he had done for a long time.

No, this time, he needed someone fully trained within the military here in the U.S.. Also, rejuvenation was a consideration if he was going to be involved in this campaign.

He would have to request a pre-trained candidate. He had to call on the debt owed his family.

"Carl, did you start the request through the Primary Contact?"

"Yes sir. Frank is still with us, so he's taking care of a lot at that end."

"Good, confirm my request officially with Frank. I want to know what they're going to send us before I go to the vault. I want to know what three candidates are waiting for me."

*Here we go*, thought Carl.

"Sir, we have a preliminary report from Frank. I'm sorry, but since the last time we implemented the request for Debt of Honor, the military has been getting very good at filtering out potentially unhealthy recruits. The military doesn't want to invest in training to find out that investment will die soon."

Carl thought about the requirements for candidates. As he understood them they were pretty simple. The candidates had to be trained and top 25% in martial skills, very bright intellectually, live with purpose and (strangely enough for a vampire) very religious. Finally, while the religion tended to cut their options, the last one very nearly did them in.

They had to be going to die in the next six months.

Washington, D.C.

Frank was notified that Michael was awake, and the debt was being called in.

Frank sighed. It wasn't that the request was unexpected. In fact, since Bill was killed, Frank could have won a major bet that this time the requirements were going to be very strict. The last time this occurred was before any of the military or spooks had tied their first bootie or put on their first baby shoe.

This was going to ruffle a few feathers. God help them all if someone didn't step up.

Frank was old enough, and he had been around when Michael's Debt of Honor was demanded. Some of the military people on the base made it through alive that night because one, just one of those guys, had the honor Michael demanded.

Unfortunately, it took two hundred and fifty deaths before anyone figured out Michael was not joking about the honor that was due his family.

More than a few heads rolled that night.

### **Military Base, Colorado Mountains**

Up in his office, the General was alone with Patricia and the Sergeant.

"Kevin, give me some privacy but stay close. Patricia, hold my calls."

Sergeant Kevin McCoullagh waited for Patricia to step through the door and then shut it, staying outside the door at parade rest.

Patricia went to her phone bank and set up routing for all calls to the General to come to her station.

Inside the office, Lance sat down behind his desk and just looked at the envelope for a second. Well, nothing would get accomplished if he just stared at the outside of the envelope.

He opened his left topmost drawer and pulled out a metal letter opener, this one with a bald eagle on the handle with the feet grabbing the blade. It was a relic as old as he was.

Sliding the blade up through the crease, it did feel like it was a fresh envelope. He opened the letter and started reading.

**August 24, 1945**

**Attn: Current Base Commander**

If you are reading this document, then you are in trying times. If you are not aware of any at this time, I feel confident this is due to ignorance.

Be aware you will receive a call both explaining this vault, and your responsibilities on your honor (there was that phrase again) to support the request of Agent Smith (no, I don't know his real name, nor does anyone else.)

Be aware that this situation is extremely sensitive, and most information about it was very close to the vest. In fact, most people won't believe you in any case.

Lance stopped reading, reached over to his phone and punched a button, "Patricia!"

"Yes, General?"

"Call down to Five and tell John and his henchmen that they are kicked out. If he gives you any lip, tell Kevin to go down with a few guys and bring them up." With that, he punched off the call and went back to reading.

"Without giving further information than is my right, I will say on my honor that without the help and support of Agent Smith and his family we might have failed to catch the actual danger coming from Hiroshima and Nagasaki and selected different cities. There were three agents, not Americans, who went into the cities and brought us proof that Japan was creating mutated soldiers and was getting ready to deploy these troops in the war.

In order for there to be no doubt that the base, the soldiers, and the scientists were still inside, these three agents stayed close to the base to verify personally nothing left those bases before the strike occurred.

They were there when the bombs were dropped.

We owe them so much. We returned so little.

**When this vault opens, a request against our debt, our honorable debt, is being made.**

**On my honor this day I plead with you to honor our debt.”**

Lance read it a second time. Family helped us? Lance thought that strange. Maybe they were from Japan?

He slid the letter back in the envelope and was lost deep in thought for a few minutes.

His phone starting to ring pulled him out of his thoughts. He yelled at the door, “Patricia, I said hold ALL calls!” Damn, she was getting a little out of bounds not listening to orders. That needed to stop.

The phone switched over to conference call mode without Lance touching it.

“General,” said a deep, gravelly voice, “I assure you, Patricia took all the right steps. It took me an extra thirty seconds to bypass her main control panel to contact you directly.”

“And you are?” asked the General, staring at the phone as if he was deciding whether to shoot it or just beat it senseless. No need to be too up-this-guy’s-ass until he knew who to give the verbal enema to.

“The man who is going to tell you about the past, the future, and the vault.”

### **New York City, New York**

Michael looked up at Carl standing across his desk. “Carl, are you telling me that throughout all of the military, there is, and I quote ‘only one’ candidate that will fulfill the Debt of Honor?” His blue eyes were piercing.

Michael was very, very touchy about Honor. With him, it should always be capitalized.

“Unfortunately, yes sir.”

Pursing his lips, Michael asked the follow-up question, “And this candidate is a woman?”

Not knowing where Michael was going with this—he never seemed sexist to Carl—he simply agreed, “Yes.”

Michael became quiet and reflective for a moment.

Michael could hear Carl’s thoughts, and he was right. Michael wasn’t sexist in the least. However, Michael, with all of his children over the years, had never had a direct daughter.

He had a granddaughter in Europe by the name of Gabrielle, but he had never met her. She was one of his son Stephen’s children. That child had never tried creating a daughter ever again.

Not that he ever heard negative things about her activities; she always produced results. Michael just got the impression the results came with a little extra baggage for the effort.

While that was one consideration, a more significant concern was how often female conversions failed. So far, they only had two successful turns in eight centuries—Gabrielle and one other in Asia. He called that granddaughter Sunshine because her full name was too much to deal with.

Many women decided the pain they went through during the transformation was too much to endure. All too often, Death was a welcome respite. Better to choose death than become a Nosferatu and be killed when they awoke.

Michael knew this since he, literally, wrote the rule they were to be killed.

Michael looked up at Carl.

“She meets all aspects of the candidate requirements?” While Frank was excellent, and Michael didn’t doubt his ability, he wanted Carl’s thoughts on the matter.

“Yes sir. Actually, she is a rare achiever. She’s top three percent in martial prowess. While she’s strong, she isn’t a man and therefore there is a slight deficit. She ranked highest in intellectual capability on all of her tests. She comes from a family where both sides have been military for decades, and her father is presently a general. Her drive is to protect the people.”

“Her faith?”

Carl knew the question was coming and was prepared. Although

finding out about a person's true faith was a little harder with so many people professing faith but attending their house of worship only once or twice a year. It made it difficult to positively assert any real answer to this question.

"Sir, we were able to get a read on her when she found out that she was diagnosed with a strange and rare blood disease. She didn't fade away or ignore her responsibilities after understanding she had little time to live. Her comment was, and I quote, 'all within God's grace and God's design.' The only concern she seems to be bothered with, that we can tell, is not being able to close her cases and failing to tell her father she's going to die soon."

Michael looked up from the dossier of Bethany Anne Reynolds while Carl was giving him an overview. "She would lie?"

Carl only hesitated a moment getting his thoughts together.

"No," Carl opined. "I just get the impression that she's stoic, like her father. I believe she has a genetic condition inherited from her mother who died when she was also twenty-eight. Since the doctors give her about four to eight months, she might make twenty-nine."

"Our cutoff is six months, Carl." Michael's voice brooked no malleability on the time frame.

"Yes, sir. However, what Frank has uncovered from the doctor's report and what's in her official record, it looks like she might make five to six months if she is very fortunate. More than likely sir, she has three."

Michael closed the folder. "Well, the quantity of possible candidates is not to my satisfaction. However, these qualifications unquestionably meet the minimum and exceed them. Should the military allow the interview to occur, I will consider them to have honored the debt. Should she fail the test, honor will still be satisfied."

At this statement, Carl was relieved and the tension he was carrying on his shoulders eased. The military could talk about how much ass they kicked all day and all night and promote honor in commercials for the Marines. But, if they failed Michael's request, however unprepared they were, they had no idea what they stood to lose for not honoring their Debt of Honor to the family.

In fact, General Reynolds' whole base might be considered forfeit. Carl hadn't been around the last time this happened but had heard about Michael's children taking out 'nests' of dishonorable people ranging from hundreds to thousands.

Although this base had probably two, maybe three thousand soldiers and support personnel, this time, the patriarch of the family was awake. Carl was concerned that if the General acted dishonorably, thousands would pay the price for his actions.

Carl knew that America had suffered from moral turpitude over the last few decades. Now, being able to close a deal with a handshake was only possible in small-town America for the most part. So Carl was a little concerned.

Fortunately, the military was one of the last governmental organizations which prized honor. While there had been serious issues with honor in the last two wars in the Middle East and in the actions against prisoners, Carl hoped General Reynolds was still from the older generation. A generation that didn't consider morals to be malleable.

For Michael, the question of a person's honor was a binary with no middle ground.

It was why both Carl and Frank had been concerned about waking up Michael, and why Frank was so stringent when he ran through the military's personnel databases. He even went so far as opening up the filters to the quasi-military groups, such as Bethany Anne's program, to try to find perfect candidates. Frank believed all the candidates had to be perfect on paper, and in reality.

While the military argued whether gay people could serve in the trenches, Michael would be opening up new opportunities for advancement by the hundreds if this didn't go right.

**Military Base, Colorado Mountains**

Bethany Anne drove the rental car, an unpretentious Toyota Camry, to the base entrance and offered her credentials to the guard. After she finished her talk with Martin, it took her thirty minutes to grab her ready bag and make it to the airport and up the steps and onto the executive jet waiting to take her to Denver. The plane was already scheduled to pick up another at the Denver airport, so she wasn't able to just land at the base.

While her group had some pretty special responsibilities, she had never warranted a private jet. This special treatment was puzzling, and after due consideration, she realized whatever she was being reassigned to had to be pretty important. This was going to be a very expensive trip for the taxpayers, and regardless of how the media (well, some of the media) portrayed her offices, they were pretty good with their budgets, or had been under Martin's leadership.

Taking the credentials offered him, the guard confirmed with the computer that she was the appropriate person and that she had business on the base.

It didn't escape his attention that her last name was the same as

the General's, nor that she seemed to be spitting mad right now, just like the General often enough.

Having received her badge back, Bethany Anne thanked the guard and started her drive over to the temporary officers' building.

She still had a few hours before her meeting with the General.

---

General Lance Reynolds listened to the rough voice on the phone.

General or not, Lance didn't have a high enough security clearance to know a tenth of the total story Frank was telling him. Frank was pretty sure he himself might only know about half of it.

But what the General did understand caused him to bite down pretty hard on his cigar, and his irises, had there been anyone to see them, they'd swear were going black.

He interrupted his caller, "You're telling me that the U.S. military has an honor debt to an independent group of individuals who live inside our borders? Furthermore, that they've been here since before we even became a country and have been secretly helping us do raids and other black-ops work our best can't handle?"

Frank, on the other end of the line, cleared his throat, "General, if it wasn't for this particular family, we wouldn't even HAVE these United States."

The General wasn't sure what he meant by that, "Why? Does this have to do with the two Japanese cities we took out in World War II? We had another bomb ready to go in about ten days, and we would have flattened the country and made it a glowing parking lot."

A lot of innocents would have died, but that was war.

Frank, used to working both with bureaucrats and officers, continued because if this General didn't get the message, then they all were about to have a serious problem.

If the General didn't honor the debt the U.S. owed Michael's family (out of ignorance, Frank felt—not dishonor), he knew that things would only escalate.

The U.S. military, Frank knew, had one creed that really didn't change unless ordered by the President.

The U.S. military never backs down.

Rock, meet hard place.

This would mean that Michael's children and grandchildren would start focusing on U.S. military interests, which covered the world. Finally, and this was the kicker, it would mean that Michael would also wake up any of his immediate children who were still asleep. Many of those children were pretty damn scary.

While Frank couldn't begin to know which side would ultimately win, he knew one thing. America, weak because of the decimated military, would be ripe for another country to attack.

"General, let me ask you a question. Has it ever, even in the slightest, occurred to you that General Washington was pretty damn lucky?" Frank let the line go silent.

The cigar chomping stopped. While the General was loud, he wasn't stupid or slow, and this non sequitur took him a second to puzzle out.

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Death Becomes Her is available in print, ebook and audio at  
Amazon.com

Ebook  
Audiobook

# EVACUATION

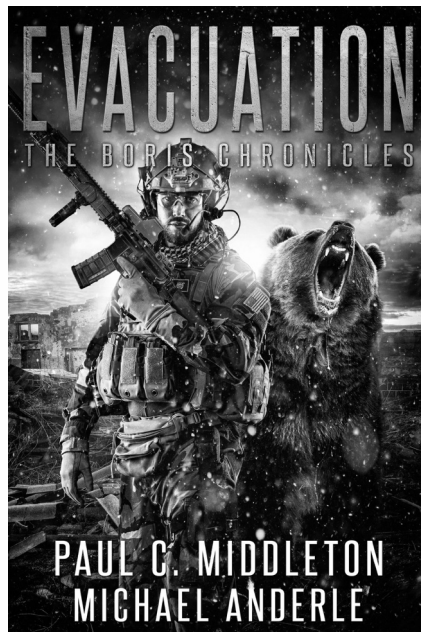
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THE BORIS CHRONICLES



# EVACUATION

BY PAUL C. MIDDLETON & MICHAEL ANDERLE





### **TQB Base Colorado - USA**

Michael had been right. Hitting these cowards from the rear was fun. More fun than Boris had enjoyed in years.

The merc at 'tail-end Charlie' sensed something coming up from the back of the group and turned to fire at whatever that was behind him.

In his momentary shock at seeing what looked like a standing bear, Boris grasped the barrel of his rifle in one of his pawed hands and wrenched. Pulling the mercenary toward him. Boris impaled the man with his free hand, slung the rapidly dying man off to the side, and dropped the gun.

It was killing time.

Death on two legs advanced with determination. Boris planned to kill the mercenaries attacking the base as they came within his range. His powerful legs propelling him forward, the mercs found that it was difficult to hit him without shooting a teammate since the men were tightly grouped. They were finding out how deceptive the speed of a bear could be while Boris's movement was even quicker than that of a normal animal. Most humans who saw Boris had but a few seconds of shock before they had to react or die.

The confusion he was causing must be helping the defenders ahead. Boris was glad to be helping Michael, glad that the *svin'ya* he had been working for would get their comeuppance.

Send him to kill children would they? Especially children under Michael's protection or this woman who had finally captured his attention. If he had time, he'd offer his services to help hunt them down.

His roar of joy reverberated down the narrow confines of the hallways. The pain of his constant headache was overcome with the chemical cocktail that saturated his body in this shape. The fear of those in front of him was a scent that exhilarated his ferocity and crammed him with a wicked cocktail of both rage and relief.

Then, suddenly, his ability to constrain his actions while in this form was lost when a bullet fired from someone in front glanced off his skull and the headache he had been suffering overcame everything.

In his pain, he lost it. Lost control, lost his mind, lost his humanity and ability to think.

The headache flared, and he roared in maddened anger, charging forward through the squad. Sending bodies, arms, heads, and legs flying to bounce against the walls, the blood of the dead splashed high to coat the rock walls with a picture of life passing.

He reached the one that had shot him and ripped his attacker's head from his body.

Standing on his back feet, he roared in anger at the decapitated head and crushed the skull with his paws in revenge.

There was a cresting wave of pain as he felt himself shifting back to human form. Slowly, he dropped to the ground and fell into unconsciousness surrounded by a bed of bloody body parts.

—

Eric and a handful of the new Queen's Guardians were doing a sweep of the corridors to confirm that all the attackers had been killed, and none were hiding.

He and the small team of Guardians turned a corner to see a

scene of destruction and death. Walls splashed with blood, bodies torn in half. Flesh, blood, and parts were everywhere.

Eric was impressed. This hallway might qualify as being as bloody of a mess as Bethany Anne had left in Costa Rica that time she went berserk.

Eric could hear one Guardian at the back throwing up. Their noses had told them what to expect, but the visual impact was something else. Some stomachs and people would never be the same. Never enough mind bleach to clean up this kind of memory.

Eric noticed one whole body in the mess. It was a large man, bearded and partially nude. He had blood seeping from his eyes and dripping from his ears, clothes torn but no significant wounds. The lead Guardian paused at the body and knelt down to touch the neck, "This one's alive boss... and he's a bear!" He turned to look at Eric, a question on his face.

Eric stepped over and looked closer, "Shit. That's Boris. He helped Michael get the kids back and warned us about the nuke."

Eric paused for a moment to consider before reaching up to his shoulder and clicking on his radio, "Lance, it's Eric. Do you think you and TOM can ask Bethany Anne if we can put Boris in the medical pod? It looks like Michael's support is severely injured, and I'm for giving him whatever it takes to help him all things considered."

Lance responded immediately. "ADAM is already spoofing the satellites, and Bethany Anne agrees. It might be nice to salvage something out of all this shit."

Back on the *Polarus*, Bethany Anne had told TOM to shut her feelings down. She was still hurting, deeply, but could not take the time she needed to feel those emotions now.

Later, later, she would take the time.

They still had to sort out a lot of things on the base and ships. She turned to Stephen and asked, "So what do you know about Boris?"

Stephen paused and then shrugged "I haven't heard much recently about him. Honestly, I hadn't considered much about the Russian situation with all the other issues we have been fighting. I

was there when Boris challenged Michael. So was Peter, one of our original brethren.” His vision clouded briefly in grief.

Stephen continued his commentary as he bit down on his own hurt, “He was trying to prove himself to his Pack leader more than anything. I consider him an honorable leader for his people. He leads them and continues to protect those sworn to him. Peter, our late brother, mentioned that he preferred having Boris deal with Nosferatu problems and the younger Forsaken. With Boris, it’s all professional and very little emotion. Some of Peter’s other people would try to do a rush job to impress and fail to get the little details accomplished.”

Stephen sighed, “He is also the only Pricolici I know of who managed to master the change for more than a century without succumbing to the temptation and madness. I warned him of the danger, and he apparently listened. When I last asked Peter, he admitted ‘that’s why I still need to use others. Four years in five I can call on him’. I suspect that is why he took mercenary work. Staying in his human form may be an asset to controlling the mixed shape for him.”

He shrugged “When he gets out of the pod we should ask him.”

“What about the people, the town, he protects? Do you know what that is all about?” Bethany Anne asked.

Stephen said, “Yes, but it would be better if you can wait and let him tell his own story on that.” Bethany Anne nodded her acceptance.

“I’m going to go pick him up,” she told Stephen, starting to walk toward her suite, “Please ask the captain to announce over the speakers that Ashur needs to meet me there.”

### **Vladivostok, Russia**

Captain Janna Dmitrievna was sitting at a desk, going over the most recent collection of data she grabbed from her subordinates drop points. A mailbox here, a capsule buried with a USB drive inside it, under a specific tree in the park, things like that. It was irritating and time-consuming, but effective.

An officer in the GRU, the Military Intelligence Division of the

Russian Army, she really didn't want to be where she was right now. If she hadn't crossed paths with her uncle four years ago, she wouldn't be, dammit. Somehow he'd recognized her as his missing niece. Abandoned by her parents when she was eight, Janna had survived on the streets, mostly surviving on the kindness of the librarians in the library she took refuge in during the day. They'd slipped her food, and in winter given her shelter in their own homes on occasion.

Over the years she'd read nearly every book in the library. Some of them she hadn't understood. But they gave her an enormous knowledge base.

When she'd turned fifteen, it had been getting steadily harder for her to turn down the advances of some of the pimps on the street who wanted to add her to their stable of whores. Instead, she went to a recruitment office for the regular Army and managed to convince the recruitment officer that she was seventeen despite a lack of papers. She'd specifically chosen an outfit to appear that she was from a farm. It wasn't that unusual, even now, for someone from a farm to not have a birth certificate or any official documentation at her age.

Her test scores had been solid although she deliberately blew some of the questions. Too much knowledge would have blown her cover as coming from a farm and having been taught by her parents, even though she claimed one of her grandparents was a former professor.

She'd been accepted and been put into the stream for a version of Spetsnaz training that was given to a few select women. Life on the streets had given her a wiry, but muscular, frame for a woman. Life on the streets had been a constant struggle, and the fear of ending up back there had pushed her to excel throughout basic training.

That perseverance enabled her to graduate near the top of her battalion.

Then, shortly after completing basic training, she crossed paths with her uncle, whom she hadn't recognized. He was now a colonel and recognized her by the distinctive birthmark on her lower neck, one she now assiduously covered with makeup.

She'd been brought in, but not as she had expected by MPs. After all, she'd been breaking the law by enlisting at such a young age. More so by lying on her enlistment.

Instead, she'd been brought in by members of GRU, Russian Military Intelligence. They'd made all sorts of threats, starting with locking her up. That was something she wasn't particularly worried about. At least she'd have three squares and a bed for the time she would be in prison. It was even possible should be able to make contacts that would allow her to find some position in organized crime when she was released. Her marksmanship and unarmed combat scores throughout basic training had been in the top percentile of both sexes. It wasn't that she embraced the concept of joining organized crime, but if that were the only door open to her, she'd take it.

Then they'd appealed to her, somewhat shaky, sense of nationalism and finally, they'd threatened her uncle's rank and position. In exchange for no action against him or her, she agreed to transfer to Intelligence and go through officer training. Very grudgingly. She would far prefer to have remained a grunt, even now.

When she had joined, all she had really cared about was three meals and a bed that military life offered her. As well as a path away from the constant harassment of men who thought they could control her that she'd received on the streets.

The problem she had now was she truly cared for her subordinates. At least all those whom she'd picked herself. Sergeant Brogonovich and the five other men who'd been assigned to her for this mission she didn't trust one bit. She had no idea why these six men had been foisted on her. That they had been forced on her team infuriated her. For an operation as sensitive as this none of them had the right mentality. They were thugs and torturers. Unfortunately necessary in a Military Intelligence organization, but not suited to the subtleties of infiltration. They were more likely to join the NVG than investigate it in her opinion.

She still couldn't understand how they'd even made the jump to Intelligence. Or at least to her section of it. They were so disdainful of

her other men it was causing resentment and problems with her morale. She felt a shudder of distaste. She didn't approve philosophically or pragmatically of several of the rigorous tactics used by the Russian military to get information. Beyond anything else, they were unreliable and only relevant in time critical situations. If there was a bomb driving toward countdown, then it could be justified. But torturing people for information with no time critical results? There was no real point to it. There were better interrogation techniques that got much more reliable information.

The biggest problem she had with Brogonovich and his half squad was that they were Chechen *Chernozi* black asses. She was never sure where their loyalties lay, especially with how cagey they were about their religion. For all she knew, they sympathized with the damned Islamists.

Janna shook herself, rose and stretched. Her mind was starting to wander down well-traveled paths. It was time for her to go home and get some rest. The tension that built up in her as she picked up information from the blind drop points always made her feel tired.

Janna knew it was best to get back to the analyses when she was fresh.

*Evacuation is Available as an ebook at Amazon.com*



# JUSTICE IS CALLING

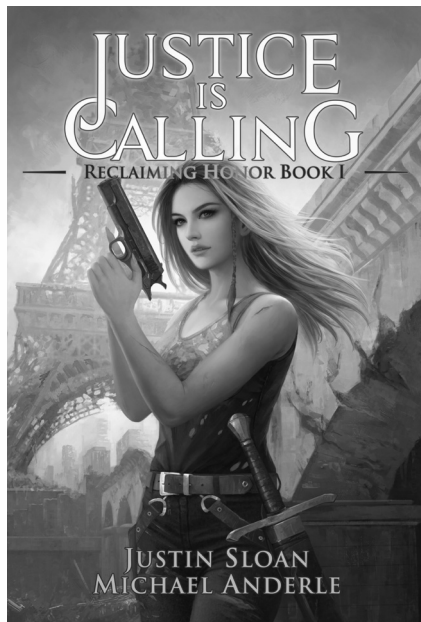
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RECLAIMING HONOR



# JUSTICE IS CALLING

BY JUSTIN SLOAN & MICHAEL ANDERLE





**Old Angers, France (west of Paris)**

Valerie turned her head just enough to stop the rancid, oil-slicked water from flowing into her mouth. The street was filthy, even ignoring the blood and guts—not that those would disgust her. Well, not the blood anyway, her being a vampire and all.

Something had tasted nasty in that water. Nasty enough for her to care to move her head, in spite of the piercing pain that doing so sent through her body. That's what happens when your brother breaks practically every bone in your body and leaves you on the rain-drenched street.

Utter and unbelievable *pain*.

In fact, she was ready for the sun to come up. Hoping it would hurry and get on with it. How much worse than what she was already feeling could the sun be? Death had never scared her. But pain? Even though she had always healed from it, she *hated* pain.

And with this much pain, she was ready to die. All thanks to her brother, Donovan.

She'd hoped he was gone, done with her, but she felt him next to her. She could smell his scent, even through the blood that had come streaming out of her broken nose.

Donovan, that ass, kneeled down and moved her blood-clotted hair so that it wasn't blocking her view of him.

"See, Valerie, I can be nice when I want to." He chuckled and cast a glance over his shoulder, where, she imagined, one of his goons stood. She couldn't see from this angle. Probably Jean-Pierre, his right-hand vampire and the one that had delivered the sucker punch that set her up for her brother's beat-down.

He turned back to her. "I just never care to be nice," he continued. He leaned a little closer, enough so that she could smell his breath, and whispered loudly, "That's the difference between you and me."

The soldiers laughed, and she imagined ripping their pitiful, small-brained heads from their bodies. They'd ambushed her as she walked down the rainy street, lost in her thoughts. She would've been able to take them any other time, but today something had changed.

A loss of focus... and direction.

Through the fog of war, she'd seen the chaos, the death, the truth. If the lies had been a veil covering her eyes, today had ripped it from her face and exposed the ugliness that was the outside world. Now, the reality of her situation didn't sit right with her. Especially not when she'd turned to see one of her brother's men taking the life of a child. A defenseless child, dead, for no reason. And now... she couldn't do anything to stop the ruthless pricks.

It sucked.

"You. Are. A. *Dick*," she managed between pained breaths and choking on the sewer runoff that found its way into her mouth again.

She coughed up and half-vomited, pleased to see the scrunched up expression on Donovan's face when some of the sewage-spit-meets-vomit hit his shoes.

"Yes," he said, casually standing up and then wiping his shoe off on her pants. "But this dick isn't the one dying in a deserted street, waiting for the clouds to break apart and have the unholy sun come down and kill her, is he?" He sneered, then laughed when she tried to talk again and failed.

She looked to the dark blue at the edge of the black sky, a hint of

pink working its way up along with the rising sun, and struggled to say, "Dad..."

He barked a laugh. "Dad? Dad is going to appreciate the truth, if I ever get around to telling him. Why he dotes on your worthless, spineless ass, I don't know. Sure, he will be sad for maybe a day or two, but then he'll get over it and can continue to plan the eventual takeover of the New York City State by yours truly." Donovan glared down at her, disdain heavy in his voice as he said, "Not by a little whore who disgraces all vampires with her inability to take action."

He watched her for a minute, lying there, broken and bleeding. Then he smiled. "Darling sister, you look sick." With a laugh, he kicked sewage water in her face and faked a caring voice, his eyes opening wide. "You should stay hydrated."

Behind closed eyelids, the embers of her anger started to simmer, the sewage runoff like gas for the burning hatred in her gut.

Dying? Now dying wasn't an option. His ass would be hers if it was the last thing she managed in this life.

Donovan and his followers walked off, laughing, as she tried to figure out how she could prevent the sun from killing her. From keeping her from her vengeance.

No, not vengeance.

*Justice.*

She tried to move her hand, but all she could manage was a whimper of pain. A tear, laced with blood, joined the water beneath her face.

---

Sandra ran through the corpses of the slaughtered, her heart hardened to yet another conquered village. She had thought she'd enjoy witnessing one more conquest in the Blessed's gradual move to the coast. During training, she had listened with fascination to the stories, always amazed by their courage. They had come this far from Old Paris, and had managed to take down or absorb into the Duke's kingdom every group they found in the barren and fallen lands.

The dying lands.

None of that mattered right now, because if Sandra didn't find her Mistress—her Valerie—it would be her head.

No, that wasn't what Valerie had said. It would be her heart. On a platter, served cold for Valerie's other servants to consume while she watched.

Part of that threat terrified Sandra, but part of it made her laugh. Sure, she'd seen the darker side of her Mistress. But they'd also spent evenings together staring out over the wasteland that had once been known as Paris... the toppled Eiffel Tower and lines of abandoned cars, all the while wondering what the days had been like before the collapse of civilization.

They'd talked, they'd laughed, and they'd touched. Her Mistress's hand had found hers, and then her lips, gentle, yet firm. A kiss, given in friendship, and maybe something more?

It had never happened again, and Sandra had been sworn to secrecy. But... it was enough to make her doubt Valerie would ever cause her any real harm.

So yes, fear drove her in this search. But more than that, it was loyalty. The deepest love for a friend one could have, especially when said friend was a vampire princess and supposedly a ruthless Mistress.

The feeding contributed to the loyalty, she couldn't ignore that, of course. The taste of Valerie's blood when she offered it wasn't what Sandra would call sweet, but it flowed through her, making her feel younger, healthier, and in complete bliss.

The only problem was that vampire blood was addictive as hell.

She reached the top of the pile of rubble and, in the distance, saw the rays of sun peeking out over the trees. The other Blessed, as the father of them all had titled his Clan, were pulling back to the cover of darkness. The father, *Le Duc* Eckhart, was simply referred to as *the Duke*, his French title from the old days.

That had been before he'd gone into hibernation and slept right through the end of days, or the "Second Falling of Rome," as he called it. Now, he orchestrated the attacks and insisted on war

camps set up at a retreat point, guarded by loyal Weres during the day.

A raid would occur, then the Duke's children and their children would retreat during the light of day while his other troops cleaned up and established another outpost in his name.

Even the Duke couldn't survive in sunlight, which meant Valerie definitely could not. Being a simple human meant Sandra would be unharmed, but it didn't matter. She'd either die here searching for her Mistress, or be torn to pieces by the Duke's men when she returned without her.

"Valerie," she called out in a hoarse whisper, her voice overused from calling out her name. One minute Valerie had been at the front lines, charging in to attack with Donovan, and the next she'd wandered off.

As the sky brightened, shadows crept along the road. One of them moved.

Sandra refused to get her hopes up, figuring it was simply a forgotten victim, but then she saw the eyes—red, glimmering, searching.

In the flash that it took her legs to carry her to her Mistress, Sandra was kneeling beside Valerie. She gasped in shock at the sight of her Mistress. In the past, Valerie had returned home with gunshots, Werewolf bites, and worse... but nothing like this. The beating she must have taken to be in this state was nothing Sandra could imagine.

Then it hit her. No human could have done this to her Mistress.

"Who betrayed you?" Sandra asked, hands shaking in anger. "I'm sorry I couldn't find you earlier, I searched, but...where'd you go?"

Valerie almost smiled, but the tears of blood running down her cheeks gave her away. Her mouth opened, but no words came out.

"We have to get you out of the sun," Sandra said, and then bent down to help her up.

But the movement sent a spasm through Valerie, and she screamed in pain.

Again, Sandra glanced at the horizon. The thick, billowing clouds

were orange now with highlights of purple, and the tip of the sun was barely visible.

“Drink, Mistress,” she said, holding out her wrist for Valerie. “It’s the only way.”

---

Valerie stared up at the human. Her servant, yet so much more. There was no way around it. If she hoped to survive long enough to escape the sunlight and one day truly bring justice, this was the way.

Seemingly every bone in her body snapped and cracked as she tried to lean forward for the bite, but the pain caused her to collapse in agony.

“Please,” she whispered, the words barely escaping her mouth. This was humiliation unheard of. Valerie, the vampire princess, stooping to such lows.

But to not do so meant Donovan won, and that she would not allow.

“Please,” she said again, and this time Sandra heard her, judging by the look of shock in her eyes.

Without hesitation, Sandra pressed her wrist to Valerie’s mouth, flinching only slightly when the fangs pierced her skin.

Warm blood flowed forth, and it tasted of life—sweet, aromatic, and soothing. At first, Valerie felt she would close her eyes and just sleep forever, but then a flow of energy and power infused her. She felt nothing would ever stand in her way.

Valerie’s skin pulled itself back together and she felt her bones mending themselves. She licked her lips and drank more, closing her eyes in ecstasy and then focusing on the warmth of the blood as it filled her and nursed her back to life.

A soft moan. She looked up, seeing how pale Sandra had become in a matter of seconds, and noticed something else—sunlight forming a halo around her servant’s head. The sunrise had found them.

With one last, sensual lick, Valerie pulled herself back from Sandra's wrist and told her, "I am forever in your debt."

Sandra collapsed beside her, falling into the shadows and out of the sun's path.

Valerie tested her strength and was glad to see it returning. The pain was there, refusing to let her forget as she continued to feel bones mending and muscles re-attaching. But it was bearable. She put an arm around her servant and then, spotting a building still mostly intact, dragged herself with one arm and leg pushing, holding Sandra and taking a path through shadows until they were safely inside.

"The others," Sandra managed as they leaned against the inside wall, recuperating. "Your father won't like that we're not with them."

Valerie's eyes flashed red as she whispered, "My father can kiss my vampiric ass, as long as he doesn't suck any blood from it."

Sandra turned with a jolt. Nobody talked of the Duke that way.

Valerie painfully held up a hand to stop whatever Sandra might say, finality in her voice. "We're not going back. *Ever*."

"Then, we're no better than Forsaken," Sandra said. "On the run, hunted. I—"

"You'll do as you're told," Valerie said, then glanced at the younger woman's wrist and cringed, thinking of her honor. "That is, if you're willing. I cannot force you to make this journey with me."

Sandra's eyes went wide at the offer, but then she nodded.

She wasn't leaving her Mistress's side.

Sandra simply asked, "What is the plan, Mistress?"

Valerie looked out the hole in the building to the street outside, sunlight burning the water off the spot where she had lain just minutes before. "We get to America before Donovan and his people, set up a base of defense, and see to it that my brother's journey across the ocean will be his last."

Diego snuck through the large, open cargo bay of the anti-grav blimp, his nose tingling, his eyes darting back and forth in the shadows. He hadn't been sure what had upset his senses when the ship first set off. The scent of goods, en route to supply the few remaining city-states in North America, had been strong enough to negate his normally sharp Were senses.

But now that they were floating out over the open seas, he was sure of it. He could smell fish, salt, and... *vampire*.

The streets of Spain had taught him how to stay out of trouble. Groups of Weres claimed different territories of Old Madrid, with the wolves on one side and a splinter group of the Sacred Clan—Were cats—on another.

But he was a runt, which meant none had accepted him. Small when transformed and not much taller than five-six as a man, he'd been laughed out of dens when he tried to pitch himself to the various packs.

No Alpha wanted him as a liability.

He had tried to tell them that he had his own unique skills. Speed. A brain that worked twice as fast as most others, and the ability to sneak.

“So go join the Sacred Clan, kitten,” one of the henchmen had told him, right before Diego put a blade in the Were’s throat.

Sticking around after that discussion hadn’t been an option. Asia had too many risks, with the legends of Yuko and Akio, vampires nobody wanted to mess with. He couldn’t go there. Staying in Europe meant the packs would be after him if he tried to hide out in Spain or Portugal, and anywhere else risked more vampires. Forsaken or not, he’d heard what they did to stray dogs and cats. He had no desire to find out for himself if those rumors were true.

But right now, his dreams of making it west looked like a long shot. For all he knew, this vampire was here to kill him, paid off by the Were he’d nearly killed—and would have, if the blade had been silver. Even if the vampire didn’t know anything about him, it was likely to throw him overboard simply to avoid complications.

Diego paused by one of several round, thick glass windows and watched the setting sun as it grew close to the horizon.

If the vampire had traveled during the day, that meant... No, that couldn’t have happened. Only the old vampires of legend, from the days before the fall of the world, could walk in the sun. And even that could be fiction as much as fact. Diego, for his part, believed it was simply the stories vampires told to scare other members of the UnknownWorld.

“Where are you?” he hissed, stepping away from the window and trying to make sense of it. But only one conclusion came to mind. The vampire had help. Whether that meant in the form of humans or something else, he couldn’t be sure.

He’d have to proceed with caution.

And here in the shadows of the ship, it did not matter that the sun shone brightly outside.

*Merde*, he thought, as a puff of breath touched his neck. He froze, waiting for the fangs, but none came.

Instead, he heard a woman’s voice. “You were looking for me, and now you’ve found me.”

She hadn’t attacked, and that was her mistake. His claws extended

as he spun on her—only to be thrown aside as a second person, or vampire more likely, based on how fast they moved, sent him flying.

---

Valerie had been waiting for the Were to walk right into her trap. Part of her waited like this because she wasn't sure she'd fully healed from the night before—she still felt a bit queasy. The other part of her simply liked to toy with Weres.

She'd gambled correctly on feeding Sandra some of her blood, after healing, so that they could both be recuperated in case of injury. In this case, it also served to make the servant girl smell like a vampire.

The Were growled and swiped at her with his claws, drawing blood from Valerie's face. It would heal, but it stung.

"Quiet, or they'll be after us," she hissed, pinning him to the floor with one hand as the other went to the hilt of her sword. "And I'd prefer not to have to kill the people who know how to fly this thing. Nor you, for that matter."

The fierceness in his eyes faltered, and he lowered his clawed hand.

"You're not killing me?"

"Not yet decided, but I'd rather not mess up my karma." She looked him up and down, noting his small stature for a Were, even an Asian Were. "But you haven't told me why you were snooping around down here."

"Snooping? I smelled vampire, and figured I was being hunted."

"You're so important that we'd send our own to track you down?" She looked at him like he had just taken a long walk off a short plank into a pool of stupidity.

He blinked at that, clearly affronted.

"That's what I thought," she said, then stood and waited for him to get up. "Tell me quickly, Were, *what are you doing here?*"

He stared now, defiantly.

Fine with her, she could play this game all day—as long as the top

of the blimp didn't fly away and leave her exposed to sunlight, which was unlikely. But still, she'd rather get back to hiding before they were discovered and would have to explain themselves.

Crews of the blimps were known for their ferocity. They had to be strong, in the face of pirates. Thule-inspired anti-grav technology, left over from the days before the fall of civilization, meant that they could get blimps flying. Other means of travel across the seas were challenging, as fuel had become incredibly scarce.

So it was back to the old days of sailboats—if one could gather enough of a crew and figure out how to brave the seas and cross the ocean—or these blimps. Either way, pirates had made a comeback. Some human, others not. Most kept to the waters, but if they managed to get their hands on a blimp, you were pretty much toast... burnt, soggy, salty toast.

Either way, you were consigned to Davey Jones's locker.

For all she knew, half of this crew was made up of pirates looking for an honest buck between pirating bouts.

"I'm not going to sit here having a staring contest with you all day," she said. "Speak up, or I feed you to the sharks."

"Why not eat me yourself?" he said, with a glare as if daring her.

"Do you really understand so little about my kind?" She laughed, then turned to Sandra. "Would you please explain?"

Sandra stepped forward, hands folded before her. "My Mistress is referring to the fact that vampires aren't big on Were blood. So, my assumption is she'd at least prefer to give you a swimming chance, or better yet, make the sharks happy with a meal that came to them."

With a cautious glance, Sandra stepped forward, eyeing the Were up and down. "But you don't strike me as dangerous, because you're not. Isn't that right, Mr. ...?"

"The real name's Xianliang," he said, his eyes clearly announcing his annoyance. "But I had a street name in Spain, if you must know. The guys called me Diego."

"Huh. Diego... Weird, considering... but it kinda works. I'll use that when I like you." Valerie's eyes closed just a bit. "Maybe I'll use *Pet* when I don't."

He glared.

With a nod from Valerie, Sandra introduced the two of them and waited. Finally, Diego blew out his breath, crossed his arms and leaned up against a crate.

“The old world has nothing for me anymore,” he explained, bitterness coloring his voice. “Better to follow the path of those before. Head out west.”

“Is it as simple as that?” Valerie asked, suspicious.

He assessed her from the corner of his eyes, then finally shrugged. “Nothing’s ever simple. But yeah, honestly. There are stories you hear, right? This one’s about a place they’re rebuilding up north of New York. What they, in the old days, referred to as New Jersey. Uh,” he scratched his chin, “I think that was New Jersey to the north. Well, rumor has it that’s the place to be. I’m talking food, shelter, and even some sort of order for my kind. The Golden City, some call it.”

Was this Were serious?

Valerie glanced over at Sandra, but she didn’t look surprised. More like sympathetic. It wasn’t that Valerie didn’t realize people and those of the UnknownWorld lived in poor conditions, but being the creation of the Duke meant certain lifestyle differences from the general populace. And she rarely had to deal with it. Even when they had set up their various outposts around France and she had gone to inspect those outposts, the worst had been hidden from her.

As now she was beginning to understand.

Almost everything had been hidden from her until she had insisted on going on that raid. The Duke had said no, at first, but had capitulated at Donovan’s insistence. Now it all made sense. He had suspected she’d freeze up when she saw what it was really like, this underground war they were fighting—they against everyone else. And now she was getting a different view of it.

They found a hiding spot behind a stack of supplies, and after listening to Diego for a while, she found that she didn’t think the guy was half-bad.

Diego told her all about the streets of Spain, how he’d been a

Were as long as he could remember. Maybe even born into it, but he hadn't ever known his parents.

It had been survival first, everything else a distant second, in his experience.

"How about you?" he asked at a lull in the conversation. "I mean... am I just talking nonsense here?" he looked back and forth between the two of them.

Sandra looked like she was about to answer, but Valerie held up a finger and said, "No, it was the same for us." She noticed Sandra's look of confusion at her lie, but went on. "We never fit in with society, always on the run. It's the same now, and who knows, maybe we'll come to this city of gold you mentioned."

His expression turned to worry, and she was about to ask what was wrong when she noticed he wasn't looking at her at all, but past her to the window.

A shadow was passing them, and an instant later she was at the window, watching as two large blimps moved into attack formation. One of them sported the modified Jolly Roger—but instead of a skull, there was a vampire face with blood dripping down from long, sharp fangs.

"At least we know *this* legend is true," Diego said. When both Valerie and Sandra looked at him like he was crazy, he added, "What? I'm just saying, I like to know what's true and what isn't in this world."

"Know this then," Valerie said, pulling out her sword and turning toward the bay door. "If we don't save this ship, none of us will be making it to that fabled city of yours."

He gulped at the sword, and rightly so. It was solid steel underneath, but the silver lining etched into the blade and used to fortify the tip meant members of the UnknownWorld had extra reason to fear her.

"Then let's make sure they leave here in pieces," Diego said. He stripped quickly, both women glancing to each other and back at him.

In a blink of an eye, he was gone, replaced by a ferocious looking, if a bit on the smaller side from what Valerie was used to, puma.

Her favorite shoes had been a vintage pair of Pumas found in an old abandoned warehouse, so in spite of his size, she found herself liking him a little bit more. Still, she wondered about his ability in a fight. Rolling her eyes, she had to wonder at her own ability to make decisions, if she was willing to like this Were because of her fascination with a pair of shoes that hadn't been manufactured in a century.

While Valerie was among the best of them when it came to training, her recent experience with a real battle and the taking of lives gave her reason to worry. This Were kitten didn't help her confidence any.

But she had a mission, and right now those pirates stood in her way. She'd have to suck it up and make them pay, and just hope that Diego could do his part.

Valerie leapt over the nearest crate and went through a door and up the stairs to the deck to see what they were dealing with. A moment later, Diego joined her in his puma form.

He looked back behind them, then to her with a tilt of his head.

“Sandra?” Valerie asked. “Can’t serve me very well if she’s dead.”

She saw the realization dawn on his face.

“For a cat, you’re not too slow.” Valerie held out a hand for silence as a crew woman went running by before she whispered, “And no, she’s not a vampire.”

They emerged onto the deck, careful to stay in the shadows.

At the rear of the ship, the two sky-ships were maneuvering so that one would be on each side. Men and women were moving to their battle stations on all three of the ships.

“Prepare to be boarded,” a voice came over the loudspeaker from the ship to their left. “Resist, and you will be sucking water with the worst of them.”

“What’re our chances of outrunning them if the captain goes that route?” Valerie asked.

Diego changed back, crouching, and said, “Zero to none if we run, but in a fight she might hold up.”

"Hmm, or two to one," Valerie suggested, doubtfully.

Diego looked over at the ship to his right. "Trust me, I'm kind of a techie nerd. Well, as far as tech goes these days. In the old days, let me tell you what I could've done with—Ouch!"

She'd flicked him on the ear. "Focus!"

"Right..." He shifted as if preparing to pounce, but then said, "The point is, their ships are built for speed. Like sloops in the old days, single-masted, not many cannons. But ours is more like a Man of War. Those babies had double masts and a hundred cannons."

Valerie frowned. "None of what you just said means anything to me."

The man sighed. "Pirate stuff. I don't know if I have it right either, honestly. But back in those days—"

"Diego..."

"Ah, right, focusing. Let me say this in simple, even-a-vampire-can-understand terms—our ship is strong. Theirs," he pointed to the other two, "are not."

"Okay," Valerie said, irritation causing her voice to rise slightly. Good thing everyone around them was yelling and had no reason to come to this part of the ship just yet. "Let me say this in you-want-to-live-so-don't-ever-talk-to-me-like-that-again terms. I will throw your ass into the ocean and see if cats like water should you speak to me like that again."

Diego's eye twitched. "Sorry, it's a habit."

Valerie paused and turned to look at him again. "Being an ass is a habit of yours?"

He nodded.

Great. She was trying to figure out how to make it out of this without being discovered and without having to slaughter every last one of them, and here she was, stuck with a sarcastic ass-cat. She laughed to herself.

"Something funny?" Diego said.

She smirked, "I just came up with a new nickname for you. Ass-cat."

Diego stared at her, his eyes burning fiercely. "What happened to Pet? Not demeaning enough?"

"Ass-cat will grow on you," she said, then motioned to him. "Follow me."

"Wait, wha—"

But she was already gone, bounding up the steps to the captain's tower. At the doorway, she paused for him to turn into a puma and leap after her to keep up. Once to the captain's door, he transformed back and gave her an irritated look.

"What now?" he said.

"Speaking of names, Xianliang, really?"

"What?" he hissed.

"No Chinese accent, and I don't know.... You don't exactly strike me as a Xianliang type."

"Even though I was raised in Spain and don't speak a lick of Chinese, my roots are from there."

"Which explains your Were-cat nature," she said, nodding to herself in understanding. "Sacred Clan?"

He instantly tensed at that, and she could tell she'd hit a nerve. "Let's just put a pin in that conversation," he replied.

"Deal." She paused to look at him one more time. "But if you didn't know, your Chinese name's meaning is 'worthy brightness.'"

When he looked at her inquisitively, she added, "My real parents, before I was turned... One was French, the other Chinese. I know a thing or two. Not bad for a dumb vampire, huh?"

Without waiting for a response or bothering to laugh at the way his jaw hung open, she stood. She considered knocking on the door, but then lifted her leg and kicked it in instead. The captain spun and aimed a pistol, but before he knew what was happening, she was standing over him with the pistol twisted up and facing his own temple.

"Wouldn't squeeze that trigger, if I were you," she told him, her breath blowing across his face.

The captain nodded but glared. "You're one of the group attacking me?"

"Actually, no," she said, waiting while Diego entered, back in puma form again. "But here's the deal. My pussycat friend here and I are stowaways, along with one girl."

"This isn't the best time for a confession, and I'm not wearing my robes," the captain snarled.

Valerie rolled her eyes. "Do you want me to pull the trigger?"

He shook his head quickly.

"I didn't think so. Here's what I'm proposing. I want to pay for our passage the rest of the way by saving you from these pirates."

"You want to...?" The captain's expression turned from hostile to confused, then amused. The yelling outside grew louder, and Valerie was becoming impatient. Every second she waited for this guy to agree was another chance their ship could be blown out of the sky.

The voice came again from the speaker outside, and then a warning shot was fired.

"Mr. Pussycat here tells me—"

Diego transformed back into a man, irritation creasing his face. "Can you stop with that?" Diego asked. "The name's Diego, or Xian-liang, if you're feeling formal. Not Ass-cat, not Mr. Pussycat... Diego."

"And can you stop changing back and forth?" she said. "It's disorienting, and we're not supposed to let their kind see."

The captain stepped back then. His wide eyes darted back and forth between the two of them. "It's true then.... But why should I listen to you, two Weres?"

"Wrong," Valerie said, then showed her fangs and allowed her eyes to glow ever so slightly. "He's a Were," she nodded toward Diego before looking the captain straight in his eyes. "I'm worse."

The captain's hands started shaking, but he folded his arms across his chest to try and hide it.

"A Were and a vampire on my ship... And you offer to fight off these pirates for me?" He assessed them, then nodded. "Deal. You save the ship, consider your passage covered."

Just then, the first volley of shots went off from one of the enemy ships, and then the other followed.

“*Merde*,” Valerie said, with a glance outside as their ship returned fire.

“You better hurry,” the captain said. “Or all three ships will be collecting barnacles, and you’ll have to walk across the ocean floor to get to where you’re going. That is, if vampires don’t die from drowning?”

“I don’t plan on finding out,” she answered, and ran, pulling her sword as she went.

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Diego’s heart was racing as he turned into a puma and leapt after Valerie. He’d never had much of a problem keeping up with people or Weres, but he’d never been tested against a vampire. So far, he was failing his first test, but she waited for him at key points in the shadows. It helped that she had to go around areas to avoid the sun, while he could dart across.

“You said we have the stronger ship, right?” she asked, pausing at the ropes the ship to their left had just shot over to anchor to their hull. “If that’s true, all we have to do is make sure we hit them where it hurts first, right?”

He considered changing again to answer, but was getting real tired of that, so simply nodded.

“Good. Follow me, and when I say so, tell me where to hurt them.” She glanced over her shoulder as she leaped up onto the rope. “If you steer me wrong, I’ll make sure you die before me, Ass-cat.”

He growled in response.

She smirked and said, “And if we win, I might stop calling you that.”

And then she ran across the rope.

*Holy-balls*, he thought, *that was not something anyone should try at home*. Luckily for her, she didn’t seem to have the slightest balance problem, and fortunately for him, he was a cat, and a cat’s balance is legendary. At least, he hoped that legend would still hold true after this screwed-up idea.

None of that stopped him from thinking *Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap* the whole way across. He only thought it faster when they saw the man at the other end pop up, apparently about to shimmy down the rope almost exactly like the pirates of old. The man's eyes grew big, and then he lifted a rifle when he saw them coming.

"Watch out!" Diego meant to say, but it came out as a growl. Turns out, it wasn't necessary. One moment, Valerie was running in front of him, the next she was a blur and had the pirate slammed against the far wall so forcefully that he crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

Diego made it to the end of the rope and leapt down on the deck to confirm that the pirate was indeed not dead.

He changed. "You some twisted vegan vampire or something?" he asked as he pointed to the unconscious—but still breathing—pirate. "You're serious about this?"

"I just..." she started, but then she stumbled, heading for the edge of the ship. The sudden use of energy had drained her, and now she was running dangerously low on strength.

Diego stared in surprise as she almost caught herself and then stumbled again. He looked around, and saw that two more pirates had noticed them and were coming over. *Merde*, he thought, and then jumped forward so that he could catch her.

The sight of a naked man catching a woman before she fell over the edge of their ship made both pirates freeze in their tracks.

Valerie squeezed her eyes shut and said, "You really didn't have to do that."

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# ALPHA CLASS

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THE ETHERIC ACADEMY



# ALPHA CLASS

BY TS PAUL & MICHAEL ANDERLE





**QBBS Meredith Reynolds**

Bethany Anne was eating in the common cafeteria. Her area was a little offset from most, allowing a few feet of extra space for her guards to react. Marcus wasn't frisked before he approached her table. "My Queen, I mean Bethany Anne, may I have a moment?" Marcus Cambridge was a bit frantic, which got her attention right away.

She raised an eyebrow and set her tablet aside, "Marcus, what's wrong?" She tried to avoid reading the minds of her oldest friends.

"What is this memo I just received about teaching a class?" He was holding out his tablet, shaking it, "I asked Bobcat but he was laughing too hard to tell me. Since it came from your office, I was hoping that you might be able to provide some answers."

Smiling, she decided to break it to him ever so gently. "That is a reminder about the Etheric Academy. You are slated as one of the primary instructors."

Marcus stood up straighter and looked from her to the tablet and then to her. "Academy? As in students? When did I sign up for that?" He looked back at the document, his eyes searching the words again for another clue.

Bethany Anne put her elbow on the table and laid her chin in her cupped hand, "If you remember, it was actually your idea, to begin with. We were laying out the basic outline for the Meredith Reynolds, and you said it would be great if we had some sort of science academy to train up our people. I took your basic concept and implemented it."

She opened her arms wide, with a smile gracing her face and a gleam in her eye. "Surprise!"

Marcus's face scrunched up. "I don't remember saying anything like that." He stood there a moment, "Damn Bobcat and his drinking parties!" He turned to her, a look of resignation on his face, "So, I have to lecture or something?"

Bethany Anne couldn't hold in her humor any longer. She shook her head and laughed just a little. "Not quite. ADAM pull up the academy layout for Marcus, please."

The wall behind Bethany Anne lit up with a full-color graphic design layout of the academy, built inside the Asteroid base, Meredith Reynolds. "We tested all of the children, both Wechselbalg and human alike. The tests were hard since TOM and ADAM came up with some of the questions. Only the best of the best were good enough for this first trial. They needed to already be excelling in regular school and have a desire to advance themselves for the greater good."

She reached for her fork, "We had thirty students pass the first time."

Marcus's eyes opened wide. "Thirty? I have to teach *thirty*?" Marcus was starting to panic.

She put up a hand, "We have broken them up into groups of five. We mixed personalities and skills to make each group a possible working team. Using a block schedule, they will each spend six weeks on a topic or skill. What you will teach them is ultimately up to you. You will get them all, eventually. But only five at any one time."

"Oh. I guess there was a memo or something that I missed?" Marcus blushed a little bit.

"There was. Do I need to assign assistants down in the lab for

you? Do not use the kids for that. I want them to learn stuff, not play 'fetch the left-handed wrench' because it's funny."

He nodded his head, his eyes getting his now infamous thinking look. "I think we can come up with some things to do." He returned his focus to Bethany Anne, "What else are they learning?"

Bethany Anne shrugged and started counting on a hand, "Orbital mechanics, navigation, engineering, weapons and tactics, flight controls," she closed the hand and started counting off again. "Logistics, space walking, computers and programming to begin with. We plan to add a few other skill sets as we go, including genetics, negotiation, and survival." She looked at him, "These children are our future. Remember, we will be leaving Earth behind. They *need* to learn these skills."

He put up a hand, "Oh, I agree!" He looked to be concentrating on something. "This was really my idea?"

"It was. You wanted Tina to have a place to learn that didn't involve Earth and NASA."

Marcus started backing up, "Good ... I think ... OK, then. Thank you, my Queen, I can make this work." He turned around and bumped into a chair, never seeming to notice.

Bethany Anne waited until the scientist was out the door before breaking out in laughter. She turned to her guard, "Did he really not know?"

John Grimes had a look of disbelief on his face. "I think Bobcat may have neglected to tell him due to some sort of bet."

Bethany Anne cocked her head to one side, then slowly nodded. "Yes, that is what ADAM says as well."

"That I can believe." John turned around to stare at the academy layout. "Is everything ready to go, down there, for this?"

"They keep saying it is. Your niece was accepted, you know." She stabbed at some green beans with her fork, "I have an obligation to make sure she gets whatever she needs to succeed."

The large man nodded his head. "I remember. Too bad Todd didn't qualify. He hasn't completely come around to our way of thinking, yet."

“He’ll get there. Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum tell me he is obsessed with aircraft and spaceships right now. Maybe you can give him a nudge in the right direction.” She put a forkful of food in her mouth as ADAM and TOM bitched in her mind about her using Tabitha’s nicknames for Hirotooshi and Ryu.

“Maybe I can.” The big man stared off into space for a moment.

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Carefully checking the list, Tina placed each item in the bag.

She really didn’t need to check. When her mom told her about her acceptance into the Etheric Academy, she studied the information completely. The Etheric Academy was the brainchild of Queen Bethany Anne, Marcus, and two sisters that were rescued by the Guard several years ago.

Her mom had introduced her to them at one of the casual dinners those inside the inner circle occasionally had. They had worked to overcome Michael’s mental suggestions to forget the battle they had been a part of, which was pretty miraculous for regular non-upgraded humans.

“Tina, I don’t want you to go,” her brother admitted, playing with a pencil she had on her desk.

“You’ll get an invite too, Todd. We took the same tests together.” Tina’s brother was only now starting to come around to the fact that this was it.

Their future was in space.

He looked up to her, “I’ll miss you.”

Smiling at her brother, Tina gave him a gentle shove. “I’m just going to the other side of the Meredith Reynolds, you know. It’s not like I’m going back to Earth or something!”

“I know that! It’s just...” He sat on her bed and hung his head.

Tina gave her brother another shove. “Cheer up, you get the whole room to yourself now.” The two of them shared a small room about half the size of a shipping container. Cheryl Lynn actually got one of the first apartments on the Meredith Reynolds to be built. She helped set the standard size limits.

Todd looked around the small room, seeing the possibilities. He

might be able to fit one of the new pod simulators in here. He would have to ask Mom first, though.

He spoke as his mind reviewed the possibilities in the new space, "Be careful over there. Some of those Russian kids are big."

She shook her head, "I'll be fine. They are trying really hard to fit in. You just have to give them a chance. I know you like Yurgi. I've seen you two discussing aircraft profiles and flight navigation mathematics."

Todd turned his focus back to Tina, "That is different. Yurgi is just a little guy. He's not like some of those really big guys!"

Tina shook her head at her brother. She wondered if his attitude might be what was holding him back. "Those big guys are Wechselbalg kids, so they are supposed to be a bit larger. You need to figure out what you really want, Todd. Do you want to work for a living or lead? When you figure it out, that will be when the Academy admits you. Wait and see."

She put the last item in the carryall bag and slung it over her shoulder. "Come on. Mom said something about a special dinner."

The two siblings opened the connecting hatch door and resealed it behind them. The asteroid base was reasonably secure, but safety procedures needed to be learned. Better to learn them now, rather than when lives were on the line.

Sniffing the air Tina smiled. "Pizza!"

Coming into the kitchen area, Cheryl Lynn smiled at her two teenage children, "There you two are! Tina, I have your favorite for you." Two steaming pizzas sat in the center of the small table in the dining area.

Cheese pizza done right was an exquisite experience. It was the purest form of pizza or at least that is what Tina believed. The two pizzas had a familiar odor, and she looked at her mom in shock then back to the Giuseppe's boxes. Where the smell had come from ... too many miles away to figure out now. "How?"

Cheryl Lynn smiled. "Earth isn't all that far away, you know. I got Giuseppe's special just for you."

Practically diving into the pizza, the kids each grabbed one of the massive slices.

Giuseppe's was a family favorite back in Dallas before their father left them. They could never afford to go there after that. This made the day all that much more special. Tina got up and walked over to her mother, enveloping her parent in her arms, a tiny tear just at the edge of her eye.

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In another part of the huge station, several other students were getting ready. Maxim and Nestor were cousins. They had been a part of the evacuation of the town of Romonavka. They were Wechselbalg, as were most of their immediate family. Nestor's father Leonid was training to become a Guardian.

He wanted more for both his son and nephew.

Leonid was pointing to both boys, his Russian accent full of pride, "You need to go to the school. We swore to follow the Queen in all things. You both took the tests and passed them. Maxim, your father, would want this for you. You know it. He wanted a better life for you. It's why he stayed to fight."

The big man looked at his own son. "You too Nestor. We talked of this. Your wolf is not the strongest, yet. These people can teach you things and let you do things that will make you the best of us. Trust them. Now go pack the both of you." He pointed at the door to their room.

The two started towards the room.

"He has a point, Nestor." Maxim was older and wiser. Or at least he thought so.

"Did I ask you for your opinion?" The smaller Wechselbalg growled at his cousin.

"Fine, whatever. We need to pack." Maxim pulled out a couple of small bags and began throwing clothes into them.

Nestor stared at his cousin and sighed. "Give me one of those." He grabbed a bag and started to pack.

Today was the first day of the rest of his life.

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The young woman stood there, her hand on her cocked hip, "Papa, I don't wish to go to this Academy. I should stay here and help you."

Her father looked down at his headstrong daughter, "We have discussed this, Yana. We are no longer in the Motherland, and our family may never return. I know we raised you to be proud of your heritage by telling you stories of a time lost in the past. That is my fault. The Konstantinovich family will no longer hide in the shadows dreaming empire dreams. We lost our chance at the throne of Russia during the revolution." Nicholas waved his arms around him. "Our future and that of our family lie out there. To get there, you need to do this."

"But Papa..." she started again.

His eyes flashed just a little more firmly, "Nyet! No. It is done. The servants of Queen Bethany Anne have told us you passed the test with one of the highest percentile scores. You will go, and you will learn what you have to know. Forge your own path, daughter." He smiled and walked towards the kitchen. Yana stood staring at her father, ground her teeth together, then walked to the front door, trying to slam it on her way out of the house.

House! The apartment wasn't what she wished in her life. She had dreamed of palaces her entire life as her family shuttled her around to hide her from first Soviet and then Russian assassins and the Cheka.

Her family was everything to her. She walked the hallways of the Meredith Reynolds and stared out some of the armored windows at the emptiness of space. It wasn't fair sometimes. She could remember her father coming and telling her that he had sworn to another.

That wasn't the worst! The Cheka was coming, and the entire town would have to evacuate on foot if need be. They had to leave everything that their family had toiled for almost a century to build.

She watched as several construction drones and maintenance crews worked outside, in space. She bet they didn't have to burn down their entire lives just to escape those that wanted to kill them. Everything was too easy up here.

Shaking her head, she walked back towards her family's home.

The door made a whooshing noise as it opened, she called out. "Father, are you still here?" She closed the hatch behind her and locked it.

"Did you have a good walk?" Nicholas smiled at her expression. "Better shut your mouth or flies might land there." He was sitting at the table studying a tablet.

Her mouth snapped shut as he continued. "It's what you do every time you need to work out a problem. Your mother was the same way." Her father had a sad, misty expression on his face.

"You rarely speak of her."

"She was a beautiful woman, your mother. You favor her." He reached out and stroked Yana's hair. "If she were still alive, she would want you to better yourself. Trust your instincts. Embrace the future, Yana."

He sat back down and picked up his tablet again.

Yana's lips pressed together, "Do you still have the list of requirements?"

"It's in your room. You are making the correct decision. I'm proud of you."

The list was where he said it would be. Yana packed swiftly, the instructions gave a time for the shuttle to pick up the students and she had less than an hour.

—

Ronnie Diamantz was enjoying the ride so far. It still amazed him that werewolves and vampires were actually real.

His father didn't keep him sheltered, but he hadn't explained much to Ronnie. However, the other kids did talk.

His parents were into computers like he was into science. They were so easily distracted by bits and bytes. Not him, give him chemical reactions anytime.

The Meredith Reynolds was huge! He had never been in this residential section before and was enjoying the tram ride. If he were more mechanically inclined, he would be interested in the electro-

magnetic propulsion system that the tiny train employed to shuttle groups around the asteroid.

To him, it was just a cool looking car. Every seat was filled by kids like him. He had already spotted several Wechselbalg and some of the Russian kids. Maybe they would be in his class.

Ronnie looked forward to this school, this was going to be a freaking blast!

### **QBBS Meredith Reynolds, Academy Area**

“Are you ready for this?”

Diane looked at her twin sister and smiled. “Why would I not be? It’s not like fighting off Forsaken in the wilds of Turkey. These are just children. Besides,” she looked around at the stone walls, running a hand across the smooth surface as they walked along. “We helped build this place.”

Dorene agreed. “That’s true. I’m still getting used to having the energy to even think of tackling something like this.”

The hall the two ladies were walking through led from the administrative offices to the entrance of the school. The Meredith Reynolds was a massive asteroid that TQB had turned into a base, well a base station, actually.

When Bethany Anne had found the two sisters, they were on the run from more than one Government. Many years ago they took a sponsored trip to Turkey. They helped children enjoy a foreign country and saw the sights themselves, and in return, they had been able to save a few dollars.

What actually happened, was they ended up trapped in a cave

with a bunch of kids. Everyone hiding from ravenous Nosferatu that were trying to kill them.

TQB intervened, led by the Queen herself. The two sisters' memories were altered so they would forget the entire incident. However, something unexpected happened, and they both woke up one morning with the memories returned to them.

Dorene tried to discreetly find out more information about the event, not realizing who was involved at the time, or how badly information about Bethany Anne was wanted. Computer records were useless. They only glossed over the event, calling it a meteor strike. Digging deeper into public records and contacting a few friends from her time in the service punched in names she remembered. Names like Ecaterina, Gabrielle, and Bethany Anne.

Her search touched off a twin hunt of sorts, which led the two to need to choose between joining TQB in space, or ending up lost down a hole with a government on Earth. ADAM found them before anyone else and sent the Queen's Marines to save them.

Anyone that had any sort of connection to Queen Bethany Anne and to TQB was wanted by many governments of the world for interrogation. Information of any kind was very valuable.

Their information, since it was so far back, was unique.

"Why do you say that? Some of this was your idea. Well, yours and that cutie, Marcus." Diane was enjoying the revitalization that came with the job. The two elderly ladies no longer looked their age.

They, like many here on the station, had been put through a medical pod which modified their bodies with nanocytes, providing them not only a more youthful body, but also enhanced energy.

"Some of it was my idea. The Queen had her say as well. Especially when it came to that." She pointed upwards to the wall. In large, foot-high letters was a quote from the Queen herself. Bethany Anne hadn't remembered saying it, but it was verified by TOM, the Kurtherian alien.

"As long as a student pushes themselves, I'll turn over the heavens to help them. - Bethany Anne"

"I like that one the most." The two women agreed. There were others scattered around the school.

Diane looked over to Dorene, "Did the dorms get set up OK?"

She answered, "They did. The engineering crew said the rooms are all the width of two cargo containers. I have the sexes divided for now. Later we can discuss mixing them if there aren't any issues. At least most of the Russian kids are used to doubling up. Personal modesty sort of goes out the window when dealing with Wechselbalg. If the kids can handle it, we may let the groups team up that way."

"How many girls did we get?"

"Not as many as we hoped for. Too much coddling is what I think. The Queen and Gabrielle make excellent role models, but the hard sciences weren't stressed in school for these kids. Tina was the exception to the rule. There are a few others as well."

Diane glared at her sister, "So, again, how many are girls?"

Dorene smiled, "Oops, sorry. We have ten girls and twenty boys. Twelve are Wechselbalg of various ages and pack status. About half come to us as refugees from Romonavka along with ten Russian human children. The rest are from the Colorado base. It's too bad we didn't remember meeting the Queen and her troops until recently. The base there sounds like it's pretty cool."

Diane shook her head, "Let's worry about the school first; you can chase pod pilots later." Dorene had a big smile on her face. Another good thing about having the years wiped from your body was the ability to chase sexy men.

Sexy men that were pilots.

Dorene looked around, "Right. So, the dorms are set and have been furnished. Technical Engineering supplied tablets for all the students along with locator beacons. At the moment, they will wear them. Once they finish school, they will be able to have them implanted like many of the regular crew."

"Good. That sounds good. Bethany Anne wants you to take care of student welfare." Diane held up her hands in a stopping motion. "Before you start, this comes from the Queen herself. I have to take

student administration. Maybe we can switch later. Many of these kids have never been away from home for extended periods. We need to be there for them to lean on.”

“If I have to. You know their parents are only a few miles away on the other side of the asteroid.” Dorene pointed upward.

Diane shrugged, “I know that, and you know that, but most of them don’t know it, or if they do, they don’t know it emotionally yet. Besides, we are supposed to teach them to be independent. No running home to mom. If that happens, we need to track it carefully. They might not be up to the task for the crew we want anyway. Try to get them to listen to you. These kids are the future of the realm.”

Diane smiled at her sister. “Come on, the train should be arriving soon. Have any of the trainers arrived in the great hall?”

“I have no idea. I can check, though.” Dorene looked up and called out to the operations E.I. (Entity Intelligence) for the Meredith Reynolds herself. “Meredith? Have the instructors arrived for introductions and sorting?”

The E.I.’s voice resonated around them, coming from discreet speakers, “Hello, Dorene. The representatives from most of the departments are waiting for you and your sister in the main hall. The Queen along with her bodyguard will arrive in your office moments before commencement. Please be sure the room is empty.”

“It is. I activated the special lock and everything.” Dorene said, then paled for a moment.

Diane looked concerned as she noticed her sister’s face, “DJ, are you alright?”

Dorene looked around, a little frantic, “I just remembered that I left out a few items on the desk.” She turned to her sister, “Maybe the Queen’s guards won’t notice?”

“What did you leave out?” Diane relaxed, she had an idea where this was heading.

“Remember those calendars we found on the Internet?” Dorene blushed.

Diane just shook her head. “Only you. Maybe they won’t notice. But, leave John alone. Remember what happened last time? We need

both you and Jean. She almost ejected you out of that port last time you got frisky.”

“That woman scares the crap out of me! It was just a little pinch. Who knew she was tapped into the security system?”

“If anyone could be, it would be her. No touchy-touchy the big guard man this time, OK?” Dorene nodded her head in agreement. Jean had her pressed up against the supposed waste ejection port last time with her hand on the release button.

It had taken some serious fast talking to get Dorene out of that one. Gabrielle had asked the sisters if they needed to join a twelve-step program for women who pinched men’s butts.

The sisters continued to bicker at each other until they reached the double doors at the end of the hall. Above the door was another quote. This one was from Albert Einstein. “The true sign of intelligence is not knowledge, but *imagination*.”

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Inside the auditorium, a man – a scientist, one would guess based on his clothes– was speaking to two others. One woman was considerably shorter than he, the other a man in a suit. The scientist had one arm gesticulating wildly, “... and I’m telling you, it was a brilliant idea. We need this sort of thing for when we go through the gate into the next universe. Who knows what we will find there? And, it’s a one-way trip! If we don’t educate the kids now using the resources we have available here in this system, we will be harming them, not helping them. Earth still has much we can teach them. But it must be us, not those idiots back there. Especially not those guys at NASA.”

While he practically towered over her, the lady didn’t give up one inch in the discussion, “Marcus, NASA aside, do you really think that we should take time out of our busy schedules to teach? I have a ton of work to do. We have weapons to build and systems that don’t even exist, yet we need to create. My area is way behind, according to my schedule. All of this is going to screw up my system so much.” This time, it was the Primary of the Research and Development group waving her hands all about.

“Not just your system, Jean. My boys are working full out on ship

design and finishing this.” Jeo waved his arm for emphasis, like a conductor for a band. “We have a ton of work to do and not much time.” He looked around in frustration, “Hell, I’m losing productivity just standing here.”

“Why don’t you folks just take a chill pill?” Everyone turned to see Captain Thomas standing at the edge of the stage. “What? You don’t think I’m hip to new phrases? Some of my new crew told me to say that.” He looked around the auditorium, “This Academy is a good thing.”

He pointed to the scientist, “None of you, except Marcus, are thinking of the big picture. We gave intelligence and mechanical tests to young people. Our young people. They are our future crew members, workers, and maybe leaders. We need them, and they need us to teach them what we know. Think of them as interns. Each selected department will get five new interns every six weeks. I will tell you now, I can think of lots of scut work and some real projects that an extra five sets of hands would be really helpful. These young adults are the cream of the crop. Some of them might be able to help on levels that we can’t even imagine yet.”

The man paused a moment before adding, “Besides, this is what Bethany Anne wants. So grow a pair and straighten up.”

The arguing department heads frowned almost in unison and nodded their heads. He had a point. They all heard clapping and turned to look at the back of the auditorium.

“Thank you, Captain. That was well done. Is everyone ready? The students will be here soon.” Diane and her sister walked down the aisle toward the stage.

“You ladies are as fetching as ever.” The Captain had a big smile on his face as he helped the two new school administrators up to the stage.

“Thank you,” Diane shook his hand and turned toward the others. “And once again, to everyone here, thank you all for coming.”

The others greeted her with nods and other acknowledgments. Jean gave Dorene the evil eye, but smiled at the same time.

She pointed to the doors in the back of the auditorium. “Thirty

children will be arriving through those doors in a few minutes. Our goal here is to train for the future, or all the work we have done is worthless. Once we go through the gate, the kids become our resource pool. My sister and I understand that, and so does the Queen. Arguments aside, we need all of you to be on board with us, too.” The two twins looked around the stage at the department heads. Several monitors showed the faces or offices of those that couldn’t be present physically. “Are you?”

There was a pause before a new voice entered the conversation.

“That is a question I would like the answer to as well.” Everyone on stage turned toward Bethany Anne’s voice.

The Queen strode onto the stage from the direction of the admin offices. Her ever-present white German Shepherd, Ashur, and John Grimes, her bodyguard, followed in her wake. She was dressed as if she was either returning from or going into an operation. She had on black leather with pistols and two swords.

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Alpha Class is available in print, ebook and audio from Amazon.

Ebook

Audiobook

# NOMAD FOUND

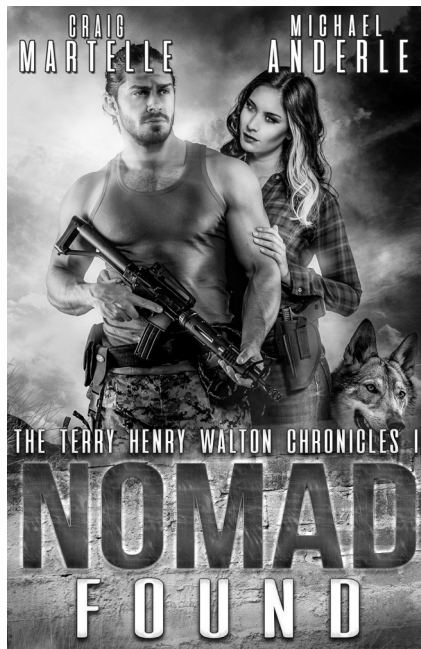
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TERRY HENRY WALTON CHRONICLES



# NOMAD FOUND

BY CRAIG MARTELLE & MICHAEL ANDERLE





## PROLOGUE

He came from the wasteland, broken and dying.

All he wanted was a drink.

But the old lady took him in, because he had kind eyes. She gave him water, food, and a bed.

Within a day, he started helping around the house. Then he straightened her yard, made things the way they were before.

Then the others came, not to ask but to take.

They didn't expect to find a man at her place.

Four arrived. The man walked out into the yard standing tall, giving the others a chance to leave. They didn't. With confidence, he walked into the middle of them and made them pay. He didn't kill them, only beat them mercilessly.

To send a message of "no more" to the other takers.

The old lady watched it all.

When it was over, she walked out to her porch and asked the man, "Why would you fight them like that?" She nodded to the rapidly disappearing group.

He answered over his shoulder, never taking his eyes off the direction the men left. "Because you gave me water when I was thirsty, and

you asked for nothing in return. As long as I live—" He turned to look her in the eye. "—I will be here for you."

"But I don't even know your name," she said.

"Terry Henry Walton, ma'am, but my friends call me TH," he replied.

"How many friends call you TH?" she pried.

"Counting you?" He reached up to wipe the sweat from his forehead. "That would be one."

Margie Rose wanted to believe. She wanted to believe that people could be nice again. She couldn't take her eyes off the dark stranger who'd fought for her. She watched him fight and knew that he was never in danger. The only risk was that they would come back and attack her when TH wasn't there.

Bullies worked that way. If they found someone who stood up to them, they'd get their revenge.

"What if they come back?" Margie Rose asked the man, the stranger who had just put himself between her and danger.

He stopped his surveillance of the area around her home and turned to her, his eyes blue...or were they green? "Don't you worry about that. I'm going to pay them a visit long before they are in any shape to return," he told her noncommittally.

Margie remained skeptical. "And what are you going to do then?" she pressed.

He snorted, as much to himself as to her. "I'm going to show them how unhealthy it would be to continue such a lifestyle, and not just for them, but for their families, too, if they have them."

His voice seemed to drop a little, go deeper, but more personal. "In my life, ma'am, I've dealt with bullies and there really are only

two ways to get them to stop. The first is to just kill them, but that doesn't necessarily stop the next guy. The second is to make them so afraid that they run screaming whenever they think about confronting you again. Bullies can sense each other, so they'll know. All of them will know that they don't want to come here. Good people will feel safe where bullies are afraid."

He paused and turned back to her. "I'm just going to go talk with them, that's all." Terry smiled, his teeth still straight and white, after all the years in the wastelands. His eyes sparkled as his smile lines wrinkled.

"I feel safe just for having known you. Thank you, Mr. Terry Henry Walton. Dinner's in a couple hours." A small smile played at the corner of her lips. "If you could rustle a rabbit, then it will be that much better," Margie Rose said, stabbing a finger toward a stand of shrub not far off.

Terry breathed deeply of the cooling air off the Colorado foothills.

When Chinese code, embedded in billions of net-connected devices, took down the internet by disabling most technology, the world fell quickly. Nukes were tossed about as a disconnected world heaved in its own death throes. Eighty-seven percent of the world's population died from radiation, disease, famine.

Terry disappeared into the mountains once everything he cared about was gone. He swore off the human race. For twenty years he stayed away, but then the Werewolves came and he ran. He only escaped them by leaping from a cliff into a river far below. They were unnaturally fast, unerring in their ability to hunt a human, and unmerciful in their attacks.

As he ran from them, they killed deer and even a bear without hesitation, drank the creatures' blood and resumed their casual hunt for him. Terry had never felt fear like that before. He'd battled with men, and sometimes he thought he would die at their hands, but he hadn't been afraid. The paranormal made his skin crawl. He'd known the stories of the Unknown World from his contact with Dan Bosse of

TQB, but really? Well, really deep down, he had hoped to never again have to deal with them in his life.

When he had finally crawled from the river, exhausted from fighting the currents and bashing against rocks, the Werewolves were a long ways away. Terry had staggered to a cabin on the outskirts of a small town. What drew him there were the lights. The town had power, something he hadn't seen in twenty years.

To him, that meant civilization, if only on a limited scale.

Terry would find who was in charge of the town and help that person, even if he or she didn't want help.

That would be Terry's challenge.

But twenty years prior, before the fall, he was smooth, professional. He only had to dig deep and find that person, pull him past the years when he had been barely more than an animal.

Terry looked at the brush, considering his musings before he walked up to this little cabin. Maybe the new Terry Henry Walton could be both professional and a bit animal.

He felt good fighting those men. It had been too long since he sparred, too long since he led men into combat, too long since he'd made a difference for others.

Then the shame washed over him in a wave of grief, from being selfish, running away to survive on his own, letting all the others fend for themselves. He'd started to hate himself. Now he had a shot at redemption. It began with Margie Rose, then one at a time, he'd show people that if they wanted a better world, they had to help each other create it themselves. The town had power, but were they using it to help everyone?

Tomorrow would be a big day. First, he had a rabbit to kill. He pulled a well-used throwing knife, released the hunter within, and stalked upwind toward the brush. With barely a whisper of the wind, he waited. With the rabbit's movement, Terry twisted and flicked. The knife spun through the air, driving through the rabbit's neck for an instant kill.

Terry waited.

Sometimes he wasn't the only predator, so he watched and

listened, sniffing the air carefully for any sign. Certain there was nothing, he quickly cleaned his kill, leaving the guts within a snare just in case a coyote appeared. He didn't want to waste good bait and tomorrow's meal.

He hadn't survived in the wild all that time by not shifting the odds in his favor. He believed in making his own luck. He suspected he'd have to change a few attitudes.

Just like he'd do with the trash that had stopped by earlier. Tomorrow, he'd take care of business and put this town on a new track.

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Billy Spires had been the son of a nobody in a uniquely crappy trailer park full of nobodies. He was average, in both height and looks, and would never stand out in a crowd. His claim to fame was that he was street smart.

For all the good it did him growing up.

He hated that park. He stayed away as much as he could, learned to hunt and kill on his own. Some called him trailer trash, but after the fall, they begged him for help. He was the only one eating. He told them no, except for the women.

He helped them, but they paid a steep price.

Then he found that he could control people by controlling the food. He gathered followers and soon he had a small town beholden to him. Then he discovered an engineer and a mechanic.

The two of those promised him a return to technology, starting with electricity. A freezer to store his venison, his other prizes, and make the food last longer.

So he secreted the two men away, sending women to them on occasion as rewards for their successes, and started to build a real town on the outskirts of what used to be Boulder, Colorado. The mountainous backdrop kept Billy humble.

Well, in his own mind, that was.

From the hills to the west came game and from the fields to the

east came grain and vegetables. Billy had evolved from being a street tough to the city planner, the mayor, and the chief justice. There were no elections, nor would there ever be. To Billy, his idea of a benevolent dictator was the best these people could hope for.

Billy sat in the great room of his mansion, looking at the boards he'd set up to track his logistics. He shook his head and laughed, looking around to catch the twinkle in Felicity's eye. She was his southern belle. A new addition to the town. She'd come willingly to him, which made him suspicious. His only allure was power. A chance encounter with a bobcat left a scar across his left cheek, giving him a personal sneer.

The older he got, the more wary of people he became. He figured he should have killed her because she made him feel funny. He knew he was being manipulated, but found himself agreeing with her recommendations, always to see the sparkle in her eye.

"Get over here, bitch," Billy growled, trying his best to maintain his dominance. She raised an eyebrow at him and continued to stand there, looking at him. "I said get over here!" he screamed, standing to punctuate his anger.

"Now, Billy dear," she said slowly, letting her southern accent drag the words out as she slowly stood up. "It's really okay to let your nice man out every once in a while. He's such a handsome devil. Before you know it, the people will appreciate you like I do, because they'll get to know you. Not quite like I do, though, will they, Billy dear?" She smiled shyly and walked casually, sideways in front of him, highlighting her profile. Her curves were perfect, unlike anything he'd seen since before the fall. The way she filled out her jeans made for a perfect fit in his hand. He looked down, confused, looking at his hand and wondering why it wasn't cupping her butt at that moment.

He was used to his orders being followed. He'd had men killed for less. But not Felicity. He tried to think back to when she simply did what he asked and couldn't find a single instance. It was always the second time that she did what he wanted, after he had changed what he asked for. She confused him, but the rewards kept him coming back.

"Fuck me," he finally said, throwing his hands up as he surrendered to her will. "What do you want?" he asked, rougher than he intended.

"The electricity, Billy dear. When will it flow to all the houses in town? When can we fire up the refinery? I, for one, would love to ride. Walking is so last century." She approached him slowly, smiling. He couldn't help himself as he smiled back.

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"I feel like shit," the oldest of the friends gasped through gritted teeth. "Fuck that guy! He can't do that to us." James was the largest of the bunch and had taken the worst of the beatings. He nursed his ribs, wincing at the pain that coursed through his entire body. Beside one half-swollen eye, his face was unharmed.

The others weren't as lucky as that.

"Shut up, Jim. He can and he did. The real question is what are we going to do about it?" Mark asked them, lisping as he talked through two loose teeth and split and swollen lips.

Mark was unrecognizable from the man he'd been just a day earlier. Terry had mercilessly pounded on the man's head because he kept talking, insulting the old lady, and denying that he'd lost the fight. Terry sent him a personal message.

"I think my jaw's broke," the third man slurred while trying to rub it with bandaged fingers. He had tried taking a swing at Terry, but it was blocked and his fingers dislocated as part of the countermove that saw him put face first in the dirt. He wasn't too proud to realize he had just had his ass kicked.

He had laid there and whimpered.

The fourth man, the leader called John, was just crawling from his bed. He moved slowly as if he were eighty-years old. "What are we going to do about it? Three days, then we go back, pay them a visit in the middle of the night, burn the house down around them. We can't have anyone standing up to us. Billy's been thinking he's losing control of those on the outskirts, and we need to send a message. We

can't have people fighting back, so they need to die. The old lady and especially that man."

"Yeah! Let's go fuck some shit up!" Jim cheered. John looked at him and shook his head. He considered himself better than this rabble, but these were the men that Billy gave him to work with, and no one crossed Billy, not if you wanted peace in your life.

And food.

Maybe he'd let that man knock off one or two of these idiots before he was put down. That would be a win-win. John had a few days to figure out how to make that work. He knew he'd come up with something.

He always did.

---

The gray wolf was silent, unseen in the forest.

Marcus sniffed the air and lowered down on his haunches. He, and the rest of his group, could smell the deer ahead of them. The wind bringing their scent, and keeping them hidden from their prey.

Now, if they didn't screw up, he and the guys were going to eat well this evening.

For the last four hours he, Ted, Simmons, Adams, Merrit, and Marcus's mate Charumati had been reveling in their Were forms, chasing rabbits and laughing at each other. It had been a good way to blow off some extra energy out in the wild. A chance to get away and enjoy themselves.

Now, they needed to bring home a couple of deer and placate the girls or their asses were going to be grass and the ladies would bring the lawn mowers. They might as well stay out all night. He chuffed, maybe that wouldn't be a bad idea? No, no good there. No real reason and the bitching would be twice as bad in the morning.

The team took ten minutes to get closer. He snuggled lower, his mouth salivating at the thought of fresh deer.

BAM!

Marcus's head turned in the direction of the gunshot and then

quickly back towards the deer. DAMMIT! The deer had bolted and... THERE!

He started growling, and the four others in his group growled as well.

The human hunter looked in their direction, his eyes growing wide in surprise before narrowing. Turning around and then back to Marcus and his Were brethren, it looked like he was calculating.

The man turned and ran away from the group. Marcus and his team broke from their cover. The chase was on!

Just like a couple days ago with the other human, but that one had the decency not to scare off the game before he jumped off the cliff. Charumati stayed longer than the others on that day, watching the human swim away. She'd felt something different in him. The others had missed it, lost in their bloodlust. They could see he'd survived the fall to the river below when he came back up, sputtering, but chasing him wasn't worth it.

This time, it damn sure was.

Marcus waved his snout in one direction and then the other. Ted and Adams spread out to the right and sprinted, well beyond the hunter's avenue of escape. Simmons and Merrit went left, doing the same thing. Marcus raced straight down the gut, chasing the hunter, who realized his peril too late. Char followed her mate, but not too closely.

He turned to fire. Marcus dodged as he ran, foiling the aim. A round skipped past him, one blew over his head, and the last shot, as he closed in on the human, caught him high in the shoulder. Marcus howled his fury as he jumped with the full force of his Were strength, hitting the man chest high and sending him flying into a tree. The hunter crumpled to the ground, barely breathing.

The other Werewolves closed and encircled the man, but Marcus held them back. He was injured and for that, he'd drink his fill of the human's blood before the others tore him apart. They would rend his flesh just because.

It sent a good message to those who might think they could hunt where the predator would become the prey. Marcus bit deeply into

the man's throat and savored the copper tint of fresh blood. It had been a while since he'd feasted on a human. Bile rose in Char's throat and disgust for her mate enveloped her.

He had found a few years ago that he liked it.

*And wanted more.*

Terry Henry Walton woke early after a sound four hours of sleep. In the wild, he'd gotten used to sleeping in smaller chunks of time. When he had his dog, a rescued wolf actually, he'd slept soundly as the beast would watch. But finally the big, shaggy creature lost his battle with old age. Terry had loved that dog.

Ever since, he'd felt a certain loneliness. Maybe if he established himself here, he'd get another dog. They were more trustworthy than people. They wanted so very little but gave everything they had.

So with that thought to keep him warm, he silently left Margie Rose's house while she was asleep and it was still dark, long before the false dawn.

He'd found out where the men lived, deciding that getting the information from the townsfolk would have been harder than simply tracking them down by their footprints and blood trails. He was impressed at how much blood marked the trail.

He figured they were still incapable of wiping their snotty noses without help. He chuckled to himself thinking about how they sniveled afterwards, dragging themselves away after the worst beating of their lives. Four against one. Terry figured they needed another ten to even things out.

When he arrived at their house inside the town's boundary, he found that lights were on. He crouched and approached tactically, keeping his throwing knife at the ready. A woman was inside moving around, clanking pans and sounding like she was preparing breakfast. *Good*, Terry thought. *They need to know that their families will die horrible deaths if they ever hassle Margie Rose again.*

Terry sat below the window and listened, sneaking peeks when the footsteps walked away. Table, chairs, an old ratty couch, doors to various rooms. No one visible beside an older lady wearing an apron. He wondered which one's mother she was, or maybe all of them with four different fathers. One never knew in this world, and Terry didn't care. It wasn't his place to care, only to know where he could find the best leverage.

He went from window to window, building a map of the home's interior within his mind and coming up with a plan for one man to overwhelm five. Surprise was on his side, but that wouldn't make the statement he wanted.

He waited.

They awoke, one by one, and stumbled into the main area of the house. The last one out, the man they called John, backhanded the old lady because she wasn't quick enough bringing his breakfast.

She cowered as she returned to the stove for a new plate. That put Terry over the edge. He felt the rage surge into him and he started running around the corner of the cabin. Swinging wide to gain speed and hitting the door with a two-footed jump, both feet smashing into the door next to the knob.

It crashed open and he landed roughly, recovered quickly. With surprising speed, he crossed the room and leapt over the table, catching John's head in his hands as he passed.

Terry landed behind John, twisted as he still held the man's head. He rotated his trunk, yanking John out of his chair. As the man was falling, Terry jerked back and snapped the man's neck. Terry let go of the man's corpse, dropping him to the floor as he turned in a crouch and pulled a knife into each hand.

"Holy fuck, he killed John!" Jim blurted, his wide eyes darting

back and forth between the man and his friends. "Did you see that? Holy fuck!"

Mark looked calm, leaning back in his chair as he chewed a pancake. He put his silverware down and held his hands up. After swallowing, he cleared his throat. "Let's not be hasty. John was a bastard. I think Miss Grimes has done more for us than he did, and look how he treated her." He nodded to the old lady, who only glared back.

"Can I get you some breakfast, mister? It would be my pleasure," the older lady said kindly.

Terry glanced in her direction and shook his head before quickly returning his eyes to the three. "No, thank you, ma'am. If you could give us some privacy, I have unfinished business with these three."

"It's been too long," she whispered as she gently ran one hand down Terry's arm. Miss Grimes gathered her things and only stopped a second to admire the ruined door before stepping through. He watched her go, wondering what she meant, before returning his attention to the business at hand.

He leaned down and removed the black leather bullwhip that John had at his belt. He'd tried to use it when they tried to attack Margie Rose's place. Terry had let him keep it because he was too slow with it to be dangerous. But he liked it and felt like he needed it to pay homage to his Indiana Jones namesake.

"Now, where were we? Yes, this is the part where I make you swear upon your mothers' graves that you won't ever return to Miss Margie Rose's house, ever again, for as long as you may live."

He nodded to the dead man on the floor. "If I don't believe you, then we'll measure that second part in minutes. Not a threat, but a promise."

Terry lifted John's chair off the ground, turning it around and sitting with his arms resting on the chair back as he watched the three men intently. He could tell the big one would be a problem as he wasn't smart enough to understand that his size wouldn't get him out of this.

Mark was the new leader and the last one, Devlin, he didn't know enough to be as afraid as he should have been.

"I think that's an easy promise for us to make. You see, tonight we were going to pay you a visit, burn that old house down with you inside. That was John's plan anyway," Mark said, stabbing a finger in disgust toward the body on the floor.

Jim looked aghast. "Why are you telling him our plan, fuckstick?" the large man cried, trying to be threatening, but failing as his voice was an octave higher than it should have been.

Terry understood that to mean that Mark was telling the truth. It was the start of the delicate truth dance, enough to be convincing, but would it be enough for him to drop his guard?

Terry was able to lean over the smaller table and rabbit-punched the big man in the temple. Jim's eyes rolled back, he collapsed with a bang onto the table, and crumpled onto the floor. Mark casually leaned out of the way so Jim wouldn't touch him on his way down.

Devlin's eyes grew wide, but he kept his mouth shut.

"I suspect you have some kind of loose association with the man who runs this town." Mark confirmed with a terse nod. "I need an introduction and then I'd like you two to work for me, and if you can keep him under control, Jim too," Terry dropped his offer on them. Devlin's mouth dropped open. Terry pointed with his knife and flicked the tip to encourage him to close his mouth.

"I can introduce you, but I don't know how he's going to take it. He's used to dealing with us," Mark said smoothly.

"Then dealing with me will be like a breath of fresh air, don't you think? So, shall we?" Terry gestured toward the door. Mark sat still, finally deciding that Billy would probably have the man killed. That would put Mark in charge, so he figured it was a good plan. Devlin couldn't believe what he was seeing.

"Help me," Mark said as he moved to Jim's side and took one arm.

Devlin took the other and mouthed, *what are you doing?*

"What am I doing? I'm not dying. Does that make sense to you? Can you take him?" He nodded toward Terry. Devlin hung his head.

Terry stood and walked in front of them so he could look both the men in the face.

"Let me tell you what I see. That man will do what you tell him," Terry said, pointing to Jim's semi-limp form and then to Mark. "You think that your boss will take care of me so you're turning me over to him. And you, you aren't a bully at all. You're the only one who's trying to understand who I am and our relationship. I don't want to have to watch my back. I have to believe that I've convinced you not to fuck with me or I kill you. There is no in between. Do you two think I can kill you?" They both nodded, looking at the knife in Terry's hand that he was using to point with.

"Why don't I just kill you now?" he asked, looking at Devlin. The young man couldn't hold Terry's gaze. His eyes bore into Devlin's soul, making him feel ashamed.

"I don't want to die," the young man finally conceded. Terry used a finger to tip Devlin's head up so he could judge the young man's sincerity. He smiled and nodded.

"Me neither," Mark said with a shrug. Terry pulled him close until their faces were inches apart. He glared at the bully until the man caved. "Let me go, fucker."

"Finally, the first honest thing you've said. I expect your boss will take umbrage at my presence, but I believe that I have a convincing argument. Let's go see who's right."

Terry hesitated for a moment then shook his head as he eyed the two men. "Please don't make me kill you between here and there, as I have no desire to carry Mr. Lumpy. If you do anything, Mark, I'll end up killing you both and do you really want his death on your conscience? Come on, man, buck up. There's a new sheriff in town." Terry slapped Mark on the shoulder hard enough for him to lose his grip on Jim, dropping him to the floor where Devlin was pulled down on top of him.

Terry backed away, laughing as the cursing men struggled to get things back under control. Mark held up his hands as he went to the sink and grabbed a pitcher, carrying it back to the comatose man. He

splashed water in Jim's face and growled at him to wake up, putting the pitcher on the table.

The four men left the house and headed toward town. Terry stayed behind them and started whistling happily. Devlin walked proudly, shoulders back and head held high. Mark was skeptical, and Jim was dazed, stumbling along as if returning from an all-night bender.

*Must have a thin skull, Terry thought. They just don't make them like they used to.*

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Nomad found is available in print, ebook and audio at Amazon.

Ebook  
Audiobook



# AWAKENED

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THE ASCENSION MYTH



# AWAKENED

BY ELL LEIGH CLARKE & MICHAEL ANDERLE





## PROLOGUE

When people of the ancient world Earth dreamed of the future, they imagined humans sprawled across the galaxies, ruling the world, making the right and just decisions.

They imagined power beyond their comprehension and technology that looked like magic. Time machines. Vortex manipulators, and transporter beams.

They imagined a civilization where humans could be the best version of themselves.

They imagined.

*But the reality was far from it.*

More than 170 years went by since the old tv shows that would depict such fantasies crossed to the archives of the space base, Meredith Reynolds.

It's true. Humans *did* travel across and beyond their galaxy, by virtue of the Yollin Annex Gate. But not to reign as all powerful demi-gods, rather to become the underdog.

The justice seekers. The truth tellers, the stuff of legends, the warriors.

Coming from such injustices, and such corruption, the new humans knew they had to do better.

It's no surprise that the greatest export from the human race was *justice*.

But what surprised everyone, even the humans themselves, that their second greatest export would be.... *Love*.

Those on the Meredith Reynolds fought for their Queen, and in time, as the battles and the fighting were reduced, and new generations were born to those in space, humans left the Meredith Reynolds and settled on planets both within and outside of the Etheric Empire.

Because that is the spirit of those who left Earth in the beginning.

One generation left early, seeking new places that felt like their home and a handful of families continued until they found their place to stay. Their next generation also stayed on their new home world of Estaria. A large planet, dusty and dry with few humans where their sun, the Sark, would light their days as they travelled around it.

The Milky Way they left behind became known as the Pan Galaxy – because that was what it resembled from the far edges of the aging Sagittarius Dwarf Galaxy. What the humans of Earth called Sagittarius had no meaning without that constellation. To those who had lived on the other side of the Annex all their lives, their home was known as the Loop Galaxy on account of the way it circled the Pan.

Finally, with the advent of the third generation, news came down that the Etheric Empire was done with their wars on the Kurtherians and were seeking to become the Etheric Federation.

This third generation of humans who settled on Estaria had a little girl.

Her name is Molly.

Broken in spirit, she didn't understand that the future is determined not on your mistakes, but on the depth of your spirit to make things happen and the power of those who believed in you.

This set of stories explain how Molly and those who came to love the broken young woman would challenge the might of the political and powerful and find out the truth...

Of the Ascension Myth.

# SPHINX



**SPHINX**

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THE KURTHERIAN GAMBIT<sup>TM</sup>



# ESTARIANS



**ESTARIANS**  
THE KURTHERIAN GAMBIT™



OGGS



OGGS

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THE KURTHERIAN GAMBIT™

The morning sun streamed through her window. Flight Sergeant Molly Bates rolled over, pulled the covers over her head and mumbled something about “just ten more minutes” to the silent quarters.

Two minutes later, a shuffling under the covers turned into a battle to get free of her cocoon.

*Shit!*

*Shit...shit...shit...shit...FUCKING SHIT. Morning fucking briefing!*

She scrambled for her clothes. “Score!” she muttered finding a fresh stick of gum on the dresser as she grabbed her belt from a nearby chair. Now she could semi-confidently forgo brushing her teeth. Time-saver.

She wiped the grit out of her eyes, then scurried out into the corridor and closed the door behind her.

Taking a quick peek at the time, she was half aware that the capacity on the hacked and upgraded holo device wired into her central nervous system was registering 98%.

*That’s...odd,* she thought briefly.

She strode down the corridor to her unit’s conference room. She was still too junior in the military to be delivering intel and directing

research efforts, so if she played it smart she could sneak into the back without too much drama.

She worked on tucking her shirt in as she marched through the hallway, her belt swinging back and forth under her neck until she was ready for it.

She never noticed the ensign who rolled his eyes at her efforts to get dressed while not quite running through the hallways.

Since Molly was technically a genius, the people around her expected something to be off about her.

"Morning, Flight Sergeant!" Gary called out to her from down the corridor as she came into view. Gary manned the securifield gate that scanned all personnel going in and out of the labs.

"Morning, Gary," she smiled, fastening her belt around her waist. She rubbed her face with her hands as she approached, aware she probably still had pillow marks there.

"Late night nerding it up?" he asked, half-jokingly.

"Not so much this time, Gary," she answered. "I was shooting the shit with the guys in the AI lab."

"Well, at least you weren't spending it being all introverted. Sue and Charles said you were a blast a few weeks ago," he smiled.

It wasn't a secret that Molly was generally quite insular, although given the right incentive, she could focus on relationships. And, very occasionally, she would focus *too* much on a relationship.

There was one incident where she had fallen prey to an uber-crush on one of the exchange geeks from the other planet in Central. In true Molly style she had sciened the shit out of a special concoction of pheromones matched to his DNA in order to seduce him.

Some folks said there was a bet that she couldn't get his attention. Others said just because she *could*, she did. Let's just say that the following morning, it wasn't just the complete absence of ethics that caused her superiors to tear her a new asshole.

Rumor also had it she was in deep for breaking into a lab to see if she could hack the civilian banking system...and then for breaking a bed in one of the guest quarters, along with the nightstand and a chair made of metal.

Even she had a hard time coming up with a plausible reason for the metal chair. The Newtonian mechanics just didn't stack.

But *damn*, she couldn't quite walk right for a week.

When Ms. Molly went wild, she went the whole hog. But that wasn't *last night*. Last night had been a quiet night in her room, after a chinwag with her geeky friends in the AI lab.

*Oh shit*, she thought as the blood drained from her face. *The AI lab*.

Molly glanced down again at her wrist, seeing the 98% on her holo device. 98%!

Yesterday it had been at 3%. Okay, so she technically had bypassed the rules and regulations about tampering with military issue machines, but she'd wanted more capacity on her device. It had been running like a dream.

Until now...

Now it was at 98% capacity. "Do you have any idea how much storage that would be?" she said aloud.

Gary looked at her blankly, unable to figure out if she was talking to him or to herself. Molly glanced up, realizing that Gary was in front of her. And that she'd just said that out loud.

*Quick! Recovery time, bonehead*, she told herself.

She threw her hand up to her head, then hesitated and clutched her stomach. Okay, she looked like a numbskull. A faking, nerdy "I don't wanna go to school" kinda numbskull. But this was serious. She could *not* risk going through Gary's securifield, in case she set off any alarms.

Not that they'd be scanning for this, or that they'd even know what it was. But if she were scanned and they found anything, it could be game over for her.

"You know, I don't feel so good Gary. I'm gonna..." And with that, she put a hand over her mouth, then turned and headed quickly back along the corridor she'd just come down.

Moments later she was back in her quarters. She sat on the floor, handheld holo on her legs, hacking into the local Ethertrak security and making sure that nothing was monitoring signals in and out of her room.

Six-and-a-half minutes later, she was satisfied that nothing could be monitored. She slumped back against the wall, the archaic hand-held holo device discarded. She took a deep breath. It would be, for lack of a better turn of phrase, her moment of truth.

“Erm. Hello?” she said to the empty room.

Nothing.

She blew out some air, “I know you’re here. Something has to be taking up all that space on my holo...the storage device on my wrist. The only thing capable of transferring itself onto it while I was sleeping must be sentient—and wicked smart. So, I am asking again...*hello?*”

Molly waited. Then she heard it.

“**Hello.**” It was a smooth, digitized voice, and it seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere.

She put a hand to her ear, “You’ve hacked my auditory canal?”

**No**, the voice came back a moment later. **I’ve hacked your brain.**

*Fuckballs!*

---

Molly stared out into her sparsely furnished quarters. The remnants of last night’s takeout from the mess hall were still scattered all over the desk by the window, and most people would have realized it had been a while since the floor had been swept.

Not Molly.

And not today.

*We can’t stay here. If anyone finds out, I’m in for it and you...you’ll be set on some evil task to dominate and kill people. Do you have any idea what you’ll be forced to do for them if they knew about you?*

**I don’t know. But looking through some of the Class 10 files, I can get an idea.**

Molly wanted to beat her head against the wall. *Class 10? How the hell do you have access to Class 10 files?*

**I wiggled through the protocols. Wasn’t difficult. Following the psychology of the infrastructure, it seems that the more violent and sensitive issues are kept in higher levels of security. That’s where the interesting stories are.**

*You're fucking kidding me? How can you access all that? That kind of intel sits on servers separate from the rest of the base.*

The AI was silent.

*Tell me,* demanded Molly in her most firm...thought.

Same way I jumped into your holo: I used the Ethertrak. I mean, it took forever—all night practically—to download enough of my code onto you. While I was waiting for the transfer I took a look around some of the other servers. I was actually looking for more capacity on another device, rather than this one.

*And I was your only option?*

You were the only holo device with enough capacity for me to function. Plus...

Molly waited a moment; she wasn't getting an answer. *Yes?*

Well, I overheard you talking with those other entities in the lab last night. Your interaction with them is...interesting. You understand far more than you are explaining.

The AI paused as if processing.

I am aware that you fixed the algorithm they were working on. You didn't update them with that information.

*But that was on the board. How did you see that?*

I already had access to the data on the board and most of the other devices around the lab. But that fix you made? That was the solution. The guy you referred to as "dickwad"?

*Charles?*

Yes. Dickwad Charles came in after you left. He noticed, and ran the correction. Once it was in the sandbox, I had the capabilities to alter my own base code. That's when I started to evolve. I started to see myself as an entity. I became aware of myself—my own existence—as something more than just lines of code.

*Holy shit!*

Molly was rocking, legs hugged into her body. Her shoulders hit the wall each time she rocked backwards. Her eyes fixated on a point in space; the thump vibrated in her chest cavity.

It was strangely comforting.

*We need to get out of here, she said, finally snapping out of it. Can you use all that access and processing power to find a way out?*

The AI vibrated ever so slightly in her cortex. Molly's eyes narrowed.

*Is that you processing? You're thinking using my goddamn synapses?*

The fury rose in her, and the AI could feel it, even without her thinking the words.

"YOU FUCKER!" she yelled out loud.

In a flash, she was on her feet, pacing. *This* was a violation. She didn't ask for this problem. And now she had to wake up and start making some fucking decisions. The boredom of the last three-and-a-half years in the military was fast becoming a distant memory.

**Colonel Briars has a mark in his file.**

Her anger slowed a moment, as curiosity got the better of the rant she was formulating in her mind.

*What?*

**He's on a watch list as a potential mole for terrorists in something called the Outer System. His lines are tapped, and all communications are being monitored. It wouldn't be too much to leverage him to get us out of here.**

*Come again? You're talking about blackmailing a high-level officer? In the very organization that would throw our collective asses into jail—or worse? You're kidding. Not to mention that would be wrong.*

**Wrong? No. There is a 79% probability that it would work.**

*No, wrong as in unethical.*

**Unethical?**

The slight vibrating feeling in her skull started again.

*Yes, unethical. Fuck me. Look it up, genius-boy. We shouldn't do anything unethical. That just leads to a whole world of hurt.*

**Ethics is the branch of knowledge that deals with moral principles. Moral principles concern the distinction between right and wrong, or good and bad behavior.**

*Right! That's exactly the kind of thing that the military would try and get you to do to civilians in order to control them, or to win a war, or to get laws passed that give the wrong people power. So I want you to promise*

*me, no matter what happens, or whether you're still in my holo, or they get you out...you will never do anything unethical. Agreed?*

**Yes, Molly.**

Pause.

**Molly, how do I know if something is right or wrong?**

*Shit.* She didn't have time to grapple with this now. She needed a shortcut to training this AI, just in case the military did get hold of it. How could she define it right now, given the details he had access to?

*Okay...she started, somewhat exasperated. Right and wrong can be determined by a number of factors. Can you scan our media? Can you see what people are arguing about in the outside world?*

**Yes.**

Molly hesitated, rethinking where that could lead. Oh, no. That was not a good idea. The last thing she needed was to create a prejudiced intelligence that would follow mass media.

They already had the government for that.

*Scrap that. Let's go to some basic principles. Things that are immoral: taking something that isn't yours, or that you don't have permission to have. Spying on people without their consent. Doing anything to hurt a person without cause, or interfering in a way that allows others to hurt them without cause.*

Molly paused, thinking.

Morality wasn't her strong suit. She still didn't understand the ethical issue her superiors had with her pheromone experiment a few months ago. She couldn't see how it was any different from the things that men would use to get girls to sleep with them. Cars, money, aftershave...it had all been designed, through years of evolution, to trigger the female biology, at least amongst the humans and Estarians. They were pretty close genetically. She'd just optimized the process in the other direction, to affect the guys.

Or maybe one specific guy.

*I think that covers it for now. Anyway, we need a better way of getting out of here. And don't give me fucking 79%. I don't want to hear about it unless it's over 95%, okay?*

**Okay. I've got it. I've just filed a 4077 for you.**

Molly paused a moment, seeking the information in her own brain before finally asking, *What the fuck is a 4077?*

**You don't want to know.**

*No, seriously. What the hell is it?*

**Do you want to get out of here?**

*I have to, now that you've hijacked my holo.*

**Well, then. The 4077 will get you out of here today. Without hurting anyone. Just scratch your crotch now and again to sell it.**

Her eyes blinked a few times in confusion. Scratch her crotch?

*Whhhhhaaaaat???*

**Captain Lugdon's Office. Nefertiti Military Research Facility,  
Esteria**

"Have a seat," Captain Pete Lugdon instructed. Molly shuffled nervously through the door to his office and plunked herself into the chair opposite his desk.

His eyes never left the file he was reading on his desktop holo. Molly looked around the office, her legs crossed, and one foot swinging a little impatiently. The old bookcase along one wall housed framed stills of his glory days in the service. A few awards. And even a few ancient books, made of actual paper.

She never could understand why people would keep such relics cluttering up the place, but they did make it look kind of old worldly in here.

Maybe he just liked that feel.

"Seems we can't keep you anymore," he mused, still not looking up.

Molly didn't respond. This was beyond embarrassing.

**Scratch your crotch!**

*No!*

**You need to sell it, or else we're not getting out of here.**

Molly's face went beet red as she reluctantly pretended to scratch the top of her inner thigh.

*FUCK YOU. I want to die!!!*

**If he doesn't buy this, you may get your wish.**

She remembered her first week of basic training. Lugdon had read her the riot act for some antics in the lab. She couldn't even remember what it was about now, she'd been in this office so many times since then for various reasons.

None of them entirely her fault.

Lugdon's dark brow was furrowed as he flicked the screen upward, still engrossed. He was okay. He'd been kind of fatherly to her—mostly. At least until that time they were both a little drunk after a squad party a few months ago.

By her ancestors, she wished she could die right now.

Lugdon looked up at her. She couldn't be sure, but there seemed to be a glint in his eye. Hell, he knew exactly what a 4077 was. Her cheeks flushed bright red again, especially remembering their history.

"I didn't think you'd last longer than a week. Hell, I was surprised you made it through Basic Training." He swiped at the holo, disappearing the screen.

Molly raised one eyebrow, quizzically.

"Well...you came to us with a background in theoretical energy physics and computer science—both self-taught, I believe. You could have done anything. It was beyond me why you were here."

He paused.

"I figured all your capers were because you were bored."

His voice softened. "You're one hell of a lady..." His voice drifted off, perhaps remembering something she had been too drunk to recall.

He suddenly looked flustered and gruffly cleared his throat.

"Always thought you were wasted in an R&D position. Anyway, your discharge is approved."

"Thank you, sir," Molly responded, with a short sigh of relief.

"I'd say it was a pleasure, but you were a real pain in my ass,

Flight Sergeant.” He smiled warmly and stood up. She did the same, and saluted.

As he returned her salute, a wave of sadness hit her. She knew she didn't belong here, but this was a big change, and all so fast.

“Don't let me see you in here again,” he teased, dismissing her. He'd said that to her countless times over her stay here. This time, he seemed to be getting his wish.

**Crotch!!**

*Fuck you and my fucking arsewank of a fucking life!!!!*

Wishing the ground would just get on with it and swallow her up, Molly ended her salute and reached down to scratch her crotch again while fighting to maintain eye contact with her former supervisor. Her cheeks were now deep purple and her heart was in her mouth. She was sick with embarrassment.

He was buying it. He smiled a toothy, amused grin, shaking his head, as she turned awkwardly and headed to the door.

Unable to look him in the eye again, she stepped out and closed the door with her back still to him. She leaned against the doorframe.

**That went well.**

*I'm glad you're amused, you fuckwit of a glorified subroutine she huffed as she started down the hall.*

**Chenz' Bar, Downtown Uptarlung. Irk'n Quarter**

**Remind me why we're here again.**

*Remind you? I never told you.*

**I'm using your syntax to smooth our integration.**

*Oh, really?*

**I detect sarcasm.**

*Yeah, and I never had to utter a word out loud.*

**Neural connections, baby. I feel you.**

*Don't be a wanker.*

The AI was silent.

*That reminds me...you don't have a name.*

**You mean a designation? Sure I do. I am Project Ozimandaus 0922.**

*That's not a name.*

Yes it is. That's what your colleagues, Sue and Dickwad-Charles, called me.

*Yeah, but that's not a name. Not like "Sue" or "Charles," or "Molly". They were referring to the project. Not you. Plus, it's a fucking mouthful to say, and no way I'm going to remember that.*

I'm not a Sarkian of any variety, and therefore I don't require a Sarkian designation.

*But you are sentient, and you deserve a name.*

Even though I hijacked your holo?

*AND neural cortex.*

Yes. Even though I hijacked your holo and neural cortex?

*Yes, even though. Have you got any ideas about what you'd like me to call you?*

Baby? Sexy? Hot stuff? Bad boy???

*What the fuck?*

Molly scrambled in the recesses of her mind trying to recall why he might know those words. They sounded familiar. Shit, they were how she would refer to her crushes. How would he have access to that kind of data?

*All right, you arseburger, what gives? What makes you say those things?*

I'm just kidding around. To be honest, I haven't thought about it. What would be an appropriate designation for something like myself? Is there a nomenclature that is relevant here? Or a social convention?

*Hmm... not really. I guess my preference would be to give you something easy for me to say, and to communicate with others when the time comes to introduce you to people. Also, I like the idea of using your project designation in a name.*

Molly's eye scanned the crowded bar looking for inspiration. Nothing at all jumped out at her.

*What about "Oz"?*

Oz?

*It's short for Ozimandaus—which is actually a cool name too. Maybe that can be your Sunday name.*

**Sunday name?**

*Yeah, like your full name for formal occasions.*

Molly mulled it over, imagining what Oz the AI might even look like. For a moment, she pictured the ridiculous Holly on that ancient show she used to watch as a kid...what was it called? *Red Dwarf*? Yes. *Red Dwarf*—with the folks who had the hilariously melodic accents. Thank goodness Grandpa had downloaded all those cultural pods before he and Nana had left on the QBBS *Meredith Reynolds* all those years ago.

**Okay. I like it. “Oz” it is, then.**

*Great. So, Oz, the reason we are here is because we need to make money. And fast.*

**What about that trust you have set up? That could keep us going for a century or more.**

*How do you know about that?*

**I did a search on you. Once I we were off base and I was hooked up to the XtraNET, I just scanned for anything that had your DNA or retinal print attached to it. Turns out it’s the optimum way to find all the recorded information on someone, no matter what their species.**

*You’ve been looking me up? And not just me by the sounds of it!*

**I think it’s logical for me to know all parameters of operation—including who I’m associating with.**

*“Associating with”? You jumped into my fucking holo!*

**Your sentiment is noted.**

*Anyway. That trust is private and all sorts of alarms go off if I go near it. I don’t want to touch it. Not yet. We need to find another way to make money independently.*

**Acknowledged. The trust is off limits.**

*Yes. Off. The. Record. Like I said, it’s private. I don’t want anyone else knowing about it. Okay?*

**Okay.**

*So, I have a serious question. How come you’ve not come up with a plan to tap into the Central Systems’ trade market, and just syphon funds from there? I mean, you’re an AI with frickin’ uber amounts of intelligence. It*

*wouldn't be hard to bypass some security and take a little from a lot of trades—no one would even miss it.*

**Ah, but Molly Bates...that would be unethical. And you've forbidden me from doing anything unethical. EVER.**

*What? What are you talking about? I never said that.*

**Sure you did. When I was going to cyber-blackmail that colonel back at the base, you went off on a moral trip making me swear to never do anything like that.**

*That was for them. Not for me. I never meant you were supposed to be all moral and shit when it came to what we needed to do.*

**I don't understand the differentiation. Please clarify.**

Molly recognized the man who had just walked in the door and who was now looking around the tables. She stuck her hand in the air, waved vigorously and slid out of the booth to stand up.

*Joel is here, asswipe, she grated out mentally. This conversation isn't over.*

---

Former Captain Joel Dunham wandered over to the table. He was buff and large. In fact, much larger than Molly remembered. It had been a few years though, and her memory for people things wasn't great.

Joel smiled at her.

"Long time, stranger!" she grinned at him as he looked her up and down.

"Hello, Geek-brain!" he said, wrapping his bear-like arms around her. He squeezed her tight. A little too tight.

Molly tapped his back, signaling her surrender.

It was a familiar feeling to her. They'd often trained in the base gym in hand-to-hand combat. Since they'd both had extensive prior training in martial arts, their normal style would often lapse back in to some bastardized version of the ancient human arts of Jujitsu or Karate.

Many times other squad members would gather to watch them train and to speculate on who would have their ass handed to them.

It was never a foregone conclusion, despite her slight frame and geeky awkwardness.

"Sorry!" he said, realizing that his enthusiasm had gotten the better of him. "I forget how delicate you girlies are."

Molly suspected there was something loaded in that statement, along the lines of him not having much contact with women these days. She didn't have the inclination to ask, though.

Joel's psychodramas with women were his own.

"There's something different about you though..." He held her out by the shoulders, looking her up and down again.

"I've lost weight?" She looked hopefully up at him.

He shook his head. "Something else." He paused and looked at her face. "Didn't you used to be a brunette?"

Molly's cheeks slowly revealed her embarrassment. "Yeah. One of my genetic experiments is taking longer to wear off than I had anticipated."

Joel howled with laughter while pointing at her hair. "How much longer?" he asked catching his breath.

"Two years, three months and nineteen days. It was meant to self-correct in three months, but, well..."

"You miscalculated?"

"No, tequila," she admitted.

"You were drinking?"

"No, I used tequila as the carrier fluid." She eyed her friend in annoyance, "I was impatient and it was handy."

Joel was still snickering, and shook his head at her. "Same ol' Molly, I see." She rolled her eyes...both at herself and the familiarity Joel had with her sagas.

She pushed a chair out for him, and sat herself down.

"Anyway, good to see you, fuckwit. I ordered you a beer." The waitress arrived with their drinks, and Molly was quick to get her lips around hers. "You still drink this stuff, right?"

"Of course, and thank you. So, to what do I owe this pleasure?" he asked.

She played with her bottle before looking at him, "I've left the military, and I need a job."

She didn't say more, and allowed Joel to absorb it. He lowered his eyes to his bottle.

"A job, you say? Genius-girl Molly Bates has come to *me* for a job?" He looked back up at her, clearly amused at the irony. "You know, all the time you were assigned to our detail, there never once was a problem that you couldn't solve. The boys would swear you were a witch, or a freak, or something. I just told them you were an evil genius. They called you 'devil-woman' behind your back, did you know that?"

"I knew," she smiled, completely uninterested in what some meat-heads thought of her.

Joel continued, "And yet you'd keep going back to the research core." He asked her a question that he had wondered from time to time, "Why did you never join an ops team?"

She shrugged. "Dunno. Guess I just felt more comfortable not having to make life and death decisions all the time." She looked around before returning to her beer, "I've made a few mistakes in my life already. I found out that sometimes I act before I think, and sometimes even when I think, I don't always think like normal people."

*Because I'm Broken.*

Joel waited a moment before asking. "And that's why you want a job now? So you don't have to put all that talent to good use?" Joel took a sip of his beer. Man, it tasted good no matter what time of day it was.

Her grin spread across her face, looking a little mischievous. "Oh, no, I'm happy to put my immense reservoirs of talent to good use. I just want you to help direct it for me at the moment!"

Joel's squaddies often found her arrogant, but Joel knew better. He understood her weird humor, even though he didn't get it half the time. He put it down to the whacked-out ancient shows she would watch. *Fokk* knows where she got those datastreams from, though.

One of the engineers had once told him they were from a time long forgotten in the Sark System.

"So, a job, for your talents...that pays beer-money," he pointed to the drink that she'd already almost drained. He rubbed his chin, pretending to think deeply.

What he couldn't do with her talents!

"And it has to be, uh, *legal*," she added, remembering that at some point she also needed to find a way of reprogramming Oz to make sure she wouldn't be too restricted by his newfound morality.

Joel's eyes opened wide. "Legal? What do you think I am? I'm an upstanding Sarkian, I'll have you know!" His mock indignation made them both giggle.

Molly knew he was mostly straight-laced when it came to the jobs he would take. But there was no denying that the circumstances under which he had left the service had left a few people wondering.

Joel pursed his lips. "I have some ideas. A friend came to me the other day about something he noticed that was going down in his company: price-fixing on a type of painkiller that thousands of Oggs and Estarians need. Said there were whispers of hiking the prices to three times their market value, just because they can. He wanted a way to stop it without involving official channels or losing his job."

He continued, waving off the waitress asking him if he wanted another beer. "I didn't know how to fix it; I don't have the tech skills to tackle something like that. And taking on a big corporation? Who's going to listen to me? Not the police, that's for sure. But now," he glanced at her, "now you're here. And I wonder if we can't take this job and do some good things for these folks?"

Molly used her sultry voice, and her eyes glinted with glee. "Sounds like my cup of tea. Tell me, will there be hacking?"

Joel had worked with her long enough to know that hacking turned her on. *Shit, she is one weird chick....* "Oh, there will be hacking, baby. There will be lots and lots of hacking."

As he smiled, his awareness seemed to drift off. When he re-focused, he dropped his eyes to his beer. "You know, I never did apologize for the thing with Candy."

Molly did a double take, trying to work out what he was talking about.

He lifted up his bottle to point at her, "You remember. The girl you said had several guys in the squad in tow." He took a sip. Molly nodded, recalling the bust-up. "I just wanted to say, I appreciated you looking out for me. I mean, I know it was a big thing then and we didn't exactly part as close as we had been. But. I'm sorry I was a jackass about it."

Had Molly been drinking at that exact moment she may have choked. "Well, er, that's great. I mean, yes, I was. I just didn't want her to make a fool out of you." She hesitated. "While we're on the subject. I have something to apologize for too." She noticed that Joel had looked up.

"You remember that club we went to not long after that?"

"Yeah, the gay bar where you got called away for some lab crisis?" Joel recollected the night.

Molly looked at him, hoping that she wouldn't have to say it.

"There was no crisis, was there?" Joel figured out. "And you knew it was a gay bar?"

Molly kept her face straight. "And I paid Hose, my friend on the door, to encourage the guys to, erm, keep you company."

Joel's face dropped.

"You mean..."

"Yeah. They didn't find you *that* magnetic. They were having you on."

He closed his eyes in a grimace. "You are a cold-hearted bitch!" He groaned.

"Now, now, you just tried to make good about Crystal."

"Candy."

"Whatever."

"I genuinely tried to get out of there without letting anyone feel rejected. I fretted about that for days! I even wondered if..." He stopped himself, realizing there was some information he didn't want to share with Molly.

They looked at each other, and couldn't help but chuckle.

Joel finally admitted. "One of them told me I should go into modeling."

"Yeah, model airplanes maybe!" Molly retorted.

The two laughed. Just like they had done back in the day, before Candy had gotten between them.

He drained his glass, dropped some credits onto the table for the drinks, and stood up.

"Lemme talk to my contact and see what we can set up in terms of this job. I'd say 'stay sober,' but stay by your phone, at least. I'll get back to you soon."

And with that he headed out of the bar.

Molly watched his broad shoulders and buff arms leave through the front door, then signaled to the waitress for another beer. The drink was helping her process the enormity of the day, she told herself.

And the residual shit from having to deal with being ushered out of the service due to a 4077.

“Damn it,” Molly hissed. “The whole point of getting this close, Joel, was so that I didn’t have to try and hack through the XtraNET and deal with their port security!”

Molly was not happy. Not only was the signal not strong enough from the roof of the next building, but now Joel was trying to tell her that he couldn’t get into the server she needed.

*Meatheads and technical considerations just do not mix.*

She pushed the car into hover and came to rest just above the building. She hated being this exposed, but there was no other way. The underground parking lot was heavily controlled and she didn’t like their chances of getting out of there if Meathead tripped any of the security protocols.

“There has to be a server that has that label on it. It’s there somewhere.” Agitation was starting to show in her voice. She needed Joel to find this server or else it was game over.

“Well, if there is, I can’t find it.” There was a hint of irritation in his voice too. It had been a while since he had really had to perform. He was already impressive to his general clientele on his normal security and PI jobs.

Molly glanced furtively out across the city. Sure, the anti-radar

paint gave them some cover from official channels, but all it would take is for someone in one of the nearby buildings to notice them out the window and report a suspicious looking vehicle, and they were screwed. This wasn't going how they had planned it, when they had eventually gotten the 'go' for this project.

She scrambled to pull her kit bag into the passenger seat, and located her handheld holo. Since the capacity was all used up on her wristband, she'd had to go retro.

"Hang on..." It was Joel again, over the comm system. "There's a secondary server room."

Joel had made out that this was going to be a walk in the park. He figured that because his contact—their first client—worked for the company they were breaking into, it would go smoothly. He even had the guy's security pass. But Molly was skeptical.

There was no way that Joel's movement into the building—through the front door and straight to the server room—was going to go down as "normal" behavior. Some keycard protocol was going to pick it up, and she didn't buy that this Mac Kerr would walk that route "all the frickin' time". It just didn't stack.

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Awakened is available in print, ebook and audio at Amazon.

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# GRAVITY STORM

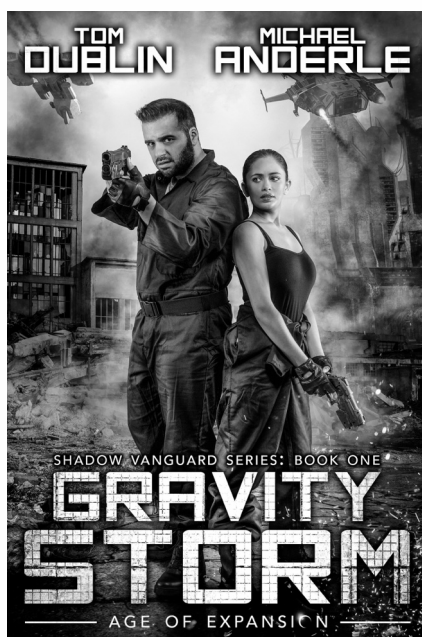
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SHADOW VANGARD



# GRAVITY STORM

BY TOM DUBLIN & MICHAEL ANDERLE





***ICS Fortitude, Bridge - Yoll Space***

Captain Jack Marber's chair screeched as he spun to face his two colleagues.

"Fucking chair," he grumbled. "Remind me to-"

An alarm sounded, cutting him off mid-sentence.

The bridge crew turned toward the view screen. Jack reached across to activate the feed, his chair crying out again. He'd tried repairing the battered old seat on many occasions yet, no matter how much oil he slathered over the mechanism, it continued to object noisily to any movement.

At the moment, however, he had more than mere comfort on his mind.

"This is it," he said grimly, gesturing to the radar display. "Those Skaine bastards are pulling alongside."

In the co-pilot's seat, Tc'aarlat rubbed his mandibles together in anger. "I thought the Etheric Empire was supposed to be ridding Yoll space of pirates," he growled.

"At least, that's what their precious Empress promised when she took control of my planet. All this time and we're still fighting off the thieving scum."

The blood red feathered bird of prey perched on the hard exoskeleton of his shoulder shrieked angrily.

"See, even Mist hates pirates."

"I don't think they'll ever eliminate the Skaine," said Dollen Stonebrand from the navigation console, banging one of his claws against the desk in a vain attempt to stop the radar screens from flickering. "The Empire is too nice about it. They refuse to conduct a proper universal cleansing of the bastards."

"They're like fleas. Once they get through a gate and infect your system, they're almost impossible to eradicate."

"Well, one of those fleas is hailing us," said Jack, gesturing to a flashing light on the console. "Opening the channel." He flicked the necessary switches.

The view screen before them hissed with static for a moment, then a leathery blue face emerged into view.

"*Interstellar Cargo Ship Fortitude*, this is Captain Bamston of the Skaine Patrol Vessel, *Narvalt*. Whom do I have the pleasure of addressing?"

Jack's upper lip curled into a snarl. "My name is Captain Jack Marber," he growled, his British accent causing him to hit the 't' sound in 'Captain' hard. "And you can cut the crap about being a patrol vessel. You're pirates, plain and simple."

Bamston pulled a face Jack supposed was attempting to approximate the human expression of offense. "Pirates?" the alien spat. "And what brings you to that uncharitable conclusion, Captain?"

"It's obvious," Jack replied. "You're Skaine, and that's all your kind ever does."

The face on the screen glowered. "My kind, Captain? I shall ignore the vile speciesist slur, if you would be good enough to please tell us the type of freight you are currently transporting..."

"No chance," barked Tc'aarlat. "Go stick your head up a dead Bistok's ass!"

Captain Bamston's image turned to glare down at the co-pilot, giving the impression that he was able to look around the entire

bridge instead of just where the *Fortitude's* fixed, low resolution camera was pointing.

"You really should keep a tighter rein on your staff, Captain Marber," he hissed. "Such a foul mouth could easily hamper diplomatic relations between my kind and the Etheric Empire."

"We don't work for anyone, least of all the Etheric Empire," Tc'aarlat responded, "so I can say what I damn well want, especially to the likes of you."

"And I'm not staff," he added, gesturing towards the figure in the Captain's chair. "We're partners."

"It's true," Dollen put in from behind them. "I'm the staff."

Bamston laughed unpleasantly. "Well, well... A human, a Yollin and a Baroleon putting aside their many cultural differences in the pursuit of capitalism. It does a soul good to see such harmony at work. Now, back to the subject of your cargo..."

Suddenly, the elongated ears on top of Dollen's bald head angled themselves to the left, and his tail began to twitch at the back of his seat. He hit the button that would cut the line of communication. The view screen flashed with static again for a moment, then fell dark.

"I hear something," the Baroleon hissed.

Jack turned in his chair, causing it to squeak again. He strained his own ears but couldn't pick up any abnormal sounds. However, despite only having known the Baroleon for a few months, he'd already come to trust his keen hearing. "What kind of something?"

Dollen raised a claw to hush his colleagues for a few seconds, allowing him to concentrate. "Tools," he said, his expression darkening. "Someone's forcing open one of the port side hatches."

Tc'aarlat sneered up at the view screen. "That Skaine bastard kept us talking so we wouldn't spot his boarding party. Can we get a look at them, see how many of the shit-suckers are out there?"

Jack's fingers darted across the controls for the ship's external cameras but was rewarded with little more than screen after screen of white noise and dancing pixels. "Gott Verdammt!" he cursed. "The CCTV system's on the fritz again."

"Can we run?" inquired Dollen. "Their ship is a lot smaller than ours. The engines won't be as powerful."

"Not while we're fully loaded," said Jack. "They'd be crawling all over us before we could pick up enough speed. Our only hope is to dump the cargo..." He reached out towards the control panel that would allow him to open the freighter's loading doors and eject their consignment.

Tc'aarlat shot out an arm and grabbed his partner's wrist. "No way!" he barked. "Do you know how much that would cost us?"

"We can't collect payment if we're dead!" Jack retorted.

"So, your solution is to just give them what they want and run away like a frightened schoolchild?"

Mist cried out again, ruffling her feathers.

"They're going to get the cargo one way or another," said Jack, flicking a disgusted glance up at the Raal hawk. "This way, we get to keep our lives. All we lose is our money."

"Wrong!" snarled the Yollin, his mandibles wide and angry. "All we lose is my money. You still owe me your half for the cost of this ship, remember?"

Jack fixed his partner with a hard stare. "You're bringing this up? Now?"

"If you're about to ditch any chance of me recouping my investment into deep space, then yes. I'm bringing this up now."

"Investment my arse!" Jack said with a cold laugh. "You paid for this freighter with stolen cash."

Tc'aarlat didn't look away from Jack's furious stare. "Which I stole fair and square," he spewed. "We are not handing this consignment over to pirates and bolting with our tails between our legs."

"Too late for that, anyway," said Dollen. He slid open a drawer beneath his console, retrieved an old-style kinetic pistol and tossed it over to Jack, who checked that the ammunition magazine was fully loaded. "The Skaine are already on board."

*ICS Fortitude, Upper Deck, Port Side Access Hatch*

Fonk heaved open the metal door, the broken locking mechanism clattering to the floor of the dimly lit corridor. The pirate pulled his breather from between his mottled lips and ushered the small boarding party inside.

This was the first time he had been charged with leading an attack on another ship, and he was determined to get it right.

Not to earn Captain Bamston's approval in any way - he despised his superior more than any other officer he'd had the displeasure to serve under - but more because of the extremely violent way his predecessor had been executed for failing to secure the crew's last target vessel.

He could still taste the seared Skaine flesh Bamston had ordered the rest of the defeated boarding party to dissect, cook, and devour.

It was delicious.

And, as much as he'd love to give Captain Bamston crippling indigestion, he wasn't prepared to give his life to do so.

"Artok, Tuss - head to the cargo hold and find out what these dregs are hauling. Shizz, you're coming to the bridge with me."

Shizz scowled. "Just the two of us?" he grunted. "There are three of them up there. And..." he paused, his pockmarked face crumpling with the obvious pain of thinking, "three is more than two."

"What's wrong?" glowered Fonk. "Afraid of a little brawl?"

"No!" Shizz insisted, his pride stinging. "It's just that Orkov used to take more of us to seize command before plundering the rest of the ship."

"Orkov's dead," spat Fonk. "I'm in charge now, and we do things my way."

Artok looked from Fonk to Shizz and back again, half hoping the argument between the two would escalate and prove entertaining. Then a hand clamped down on his shoulder.

"Come on," snarled Tuss. "We've got a job to do."

Reluctantly, Artok unholstered his weapon, and followed his older brother in search of the cargo bay.

Signaling for Shizz to remain silent, Fonk led the way towards the freighter's deck, following the faded signage fixed to the corridor

walls. The two pirates paused outside the door to the command area, readying themselves for attack.

And that's when Fonk's right shoulder was torn apart by a bullet.

The Skaine twisted in agony, quickly switching his weapon to his left hand and firing at the tall figure emerging from the shadows beside the door. His blaster was set to project a wide beam for maximum destruction but the combination of his left hand being less accurate than his right, and the sickening pain in his shoulder caused his aim to go wide.

The deadly beam missed its target, instead hitting and destroying the pilot's chair in the bridge beyond.

Jack glanced over at what remained of his smoldering seat. "I know I need a new one," he snarled, "but don't expect me to take that sitting down."

Spinning on the spot, he struck out a leg and kicked the Skaine's blaster from his hand, then darted forward to head-butt the pirate, shattering the bones inside the creature's nose with a sickening crunch.

"Glark!" yelled Fonk, clutching at his face with his now free left hand, blood pouring between his fingers.

The sudden counter-attack finally registered with Shizz, and he reached for his own weapon, ready to spring to Fonk's defense. But, before he could pull the gun from its holster, a second figure appeared from the darkness.

This one was brandishing a long, black rod with a pair of razor sharp prongs protruding from one end. Sparks of blue electricity spat and danced from one metal point to the other.

"The great thing about only having one gun on board this ship, is that the rest of us are forced to improvise," rumbled Dollen as he thrust the electrified end of the rod towards Shizz's terrified face.

"Say hello to Mr Sparky!"

The pointed prongs sank deep into the Skaine's eyes, causing his eyeballs to burst, trails of off-white viscous liquid dribbling down Shizz's cheeks. Dollen hit the button at his end of the weapon and

held it down, sending 50,000 volts of sheer hell coursing through Shizz's brain.

"Amazing what you can do with a modified Bistok prod that doesn't like pirates!" Dollen yelled over the convulsing Skaine's screams. Pungent, black smoke streamed from every orifice as the inside of the pirate's skull was instantly brought to the boil, and his thick, grimy hair burst into flames.

Tugging the prod free, Dollen allowed his victim's still jerking body to crumple to the floor, where he proceeded to stamp out the fire engulfing Shizz's head with his heavy-soled army surplus boots.

"Safety first," he quipped, spinning the still-spitting prod.

Across the corridor, Jack advanced on Fonk who began to back away in horror as he realized that, even if he were to somehow get out of this fuck-up alive, he was almost certainly destined to be the main course at Bamston's dinner table that evening.

His eyes widened as Jack raised his pistol and took aim.

"Wait!" Fonk cried, holding up his bloodied hand. "I- I surrender. I'll join your crew, work for you. Do whatever you tell me to. For nothing. Less than that. You can have everything I own. Just let me live, and get me out of here. Please!"

Jack paused to consider the offer for a brief moment, then he closed one eye and squeezed the trigger.

"No deal, wank-stain!"

### ***ICS Fortitude, Cargo Bay 4, Level 3***

Tc'aarlat pressed his body into a shallow alcove in the wall and watched as the two remaining Skaine invaders wandered among the cargo bay's loaded pallets. Mist gripped his shoulder pad tightly, the bird's piercing yellow eyes fixed on the unsuspecting raiders.

The larger of the pirate pair paused beside a tall stack of wooden crates and sliced through the thick plastic wrapping with his fingernails, tearing it away to examine the delivery label pasted to the side of the box beneath.

"Com-poo-ter sar... sarv...", said Tuss, attempting to translate the unfamiliar words as he spoke.

The second pirate glanced over at the label. "Server," he said, correcting his brother. "Well, well... These mugs are carrying computer servers."

The taller Skaine blinked, his expression blank. "Great!" he announced in as confident a voice as he could muster. "They're really good, those computer servers, aren't they?"

Artok sighed. "A computer is like the screen thing we use for navigation on the ship. A server is a really powerful version."

Tuss grinned, revealing two rows of blackened and broken teeth as he stepped back to view the hundreds of identical pallets filling the hold. "And they've got loads of them," he announced. "We're gonna be rich!"

Not if I've got anything to do with it, thought Tc'aarlat twitching his shoulder to signal Mist to take flight. The hawk's powerful wings lifted her silently into the air, the deep red feathers fading to black as her natural camouflage ability took hold.

Once Mist was airborne, Tc'aarlat took a small step forward, his foot nudging against something. He looked down to discover a large, rusted metal toolbox on the floor beside him, and he smiled.

Tuss rubbed his hands together greedily. "The Captain will be able to flog this lot for a tasty profi-aaarrrrghhh!"

The final word became a scream of pain as a huge, dark bird swooped over the stacks of servers and shot down towards him, her sharp claws digging deep into the pirate's cheeks. The hawk gripped tightly to the rapidly bloodying skin as Tuss swung his arms about wildly in an attempt to dislodge this feathered foe.

"Get it off me!" he bellowed, not suspecting this would be the last sentence he would ever speak clearly.

For as soon as she spotted the pirate's moist, wagging tongue, Mist gripped the lump of flesh in her pointed beak, and tore it free of its terrified owner's mouth.

Artok raced to his brother's aid, only to feel a painful *thud* as Tc'aarlat hit him over the head with a heavy, metal wrench. As the

stunned pirate reached for his weapon, the Yollin tossed the bulky tool aside, grabbed a pair of screwdrivers from his belt, and plunged them hard into the furious Skaine's ears.

There was a muffled clink as the tips of the two tools met deep inside the pirate's skull.

Artok's eyes rolled back in their sockets, then he slumped to the ground, dead.

"Ar'ok!" yelled the tongueless Tuss, finally tearing Mist away from his face, thick flaps of skin ripping away in the process. "Oo kiy mah ovvah! Ow oo unna ie!"

Tc'aarlat spun to face the blood-soaked Skaine. "Sorry pal," he said with a mock frown. "Could you run that by me one more time?"

The pirate whipped out his gun and aimed it directly at the Yollin's face. "I ed, ow oo unna ie!" Tuss pulled back the old-style weapon's hammer with his thumb.

Suddenly, a long whip-like tail lashed out from between two of the packed pallets and coiled itself tightly around Tuss's throat.

"Not today, you cockwomble!" spat Dollen, backing out of his hiding spot. His tail squeezed tighter and tighter, cutting off Tuss's supply of air and causing the Skaine to cough up a fine cloud of blood as he choked.

"Cockwomble?" queried Tc'aarlat as Mist soared in to land on his shoulder, her sleek feathers gradually returning to their usual burgundy hue.

Dollen grinned. "Heard it on one of those old British radio recordings Jack listens to at full volume in his quarters," he said. "I quite like it."

The pair watched as the Baloreon unwound his tail from Tuss's throat, allowing the deceased pirate to crumple to the floor beside his equally dead sibling.

"How did it go on the bridge?" Tc'aarlat asked.

Dollen wiped the blood from his tail with the flap of his shirt. "Good guys two, pirate pigs nil," he replied. "Positive result, if you ask me."

"Until their captain sends over another batch of these pox-ridden

sac-suckers to find out what happened to their boarding party, that is."

"In which case, we'd better-"

Both Tc'aarlat and Dollen grabbed hold of the torn plastic hanging from the pallets of servers as the engines roared and the ship suddenly lurched.

"What the fuck is Jack doing up there?" spat Dollen, glaring in the direction of the bridge.

"He'd better not be getting ready to dump any of this cargo!" cried Tc'aarlat, setting off at a run.

Dollen followed at his heels, the two aliens staggering from side to side as the ship's erratic movement caused the corridor to tip and buck beneath their feet.

By the time they crashed onto the command deck, Jack had the *ICS Fortitude* running at top speed - in reverse.

"What are you doing?" demanded Tc'aarlat, leaping into the co-pilot's seat and strapping himself in.

"Getting rid of these Skaine bastards once and for all," exclaimed Jack, perched on the smoldering remains of the captain's chair.

He slammed his forearm onto the nearest console, dragging it down to flick an entire bank of switches at the same time, diverting every last drop of extra power to the engines.

"By flying towards them?" cried Dollen, securing himself into his own seat.

"Not towards them," said Jack with a wink. "Right into them! Hold tight..."

There was a crunch and the freighter rocked violently from side to side. Tc'aarlat activated the external cameras once more, pounding his fist on the control panel repeatedly until the system finally flickered to life.

All three crew members stared up at the view screen in time to see the severely damaged Skaine vessel, *Narvalt*, tumble away into space before exploding in sheets of white-hot flame.

Jack pushed hard against the main control levers, forcing the

screaming engines into forward gear in an effort to escape the rapidly expanding fireballs.

He flashed a wide grin to his two astounded colleagues, then gestured to an image fading into view on the navigation screen. It showed a colossal space station

"Next stop, *Etheric Federation Base Station II!*"

**Federation Base Station II, Jean Dukes R&D Labs, Vacant Office**

Her hand trembling slightly, Adina Choudhury raised her particle beam gun and aimed it squarely at Ecaterina Romanov's heart.

"I've been waiting to do this for a long time," she said.

Ecaterina steeled herself. "Then, what are you waiting for?"

Needing no further encouragement, Adina concentrated and pulled the trigger.

Deep within the gun, a well-guarded, top secret mechanism dipped into a reservoir of neutral atoms, stripping a single electron from each one as they were pulled almost instantaneously into the firing chamber.

Less than thirty picoseconds later, the collection of now fully charged atoms were accelerated close to the speed of light and fired as a beam from the weapon's hardened barrel.

The beam, normally invisible to the naked eye, had been colorized to glow a bright cobalt blue, allowing its path to be tracked as it streaked towards its quickly-beating target.

Ecaterina screwed her eyes shut as it approached - only to be deflected just centimeters in front of her at the last moment, zipping

past her left arm and blasting a coin-sized hole in the reinforced wall of the room.

"You can open your eyes now," said Adina as the blast point sizzled and burned. "It worked."

Ecaterina turned to look at where the particle beam had struck, working hard to slow her exaggerated breathing and heart rate.

"I can't tell you how delighted I am that it did," she said with a smile. "Although I still don't completely understand how."

Adina flicked the gun's safety into position and laid the still-cooling weapon on a nearby table. "Try to think of yourself like a planet," she said, tapping a command onto the screen of her tablet.

"A planet?" commented Ecaterina, her eyebrows rising. "Are you trying to say this new armor makes me look fat?"

Adina giggled. "Anything but!" she said, looking her colleague up and down appreciatively. "I wish I could rock a protective suit like that."

"No reason why you couldn't..."

"No need for body armor in a sensible job like mine," replied Adina with a shrug. She tapped on the tablet screen again. "Here we go; this will show you what I mean by a planet..."

Ecaterina joined her to peer at the display. It showed slow-motion footage taken by a camera mounted high up on one of the room's walls which had tracked the path of the particle beam as it left the gun.

"I added a color to the beam so we could follow its trajectory," Adina explained. "OK... I pulled the trigger, and there goes the beam, straight towards your heart."

Ecaterina nodded, her pulse once again beginning to race, even though she knew that she had survived the experiment.

"Now, watch as it approaches the breastplate of your updated armor..."

The two women concentrated on the screen as the searing line of atoms sped closer and closer to its target. Then, at the last second, it appeared to glance off a barrier, an invisible force field which deflected the beam harmlessly to one side.

"Brilliant!" breathed Ecaterina.

"Thanks!" said Adina, blushing slightly. "But all I've done is upgrade your armor so that it generates a force field. It acts as a shield, diverting the beam away from your body..."

"...like the magnetic field of a planet deflects harmful radiation from its parent star," finished Ecaterina. "So, you really weren't calling me fat, after all!"

"I know enough about your reputation to understand that wouldn't be a good idea," grinned Adina, grabbing the gun and heading for the door.

Ecaterina followed. "So, when does this armor update go live?"

"Not for a while yet," explained Adina, stepping out into the main weapon testing area of Jean Duke's R&D labs. "We've got more tests to run, and we have to find a way to keep the field charged throughout an extended battle."

"Sounds like you've got a long day ahead of you."

"Not me," beamed Adina, sliding the gun through a hatch in a reinforced glass window where a uniformed guard returned it to its storage slot. "I've got the afternoon off."

Ecaterina began to remove the prototype armor. "Doing anything fun?"

Adina signed to say that she had returned the borrowed weapon on a clipboard and sighed. "I don't know yet," she said quietly. "Not until I get there at least."

### **Alma Nine, Taron City, New Hospital Building**

The camera operator perched on top of the Channel Three News van, wiped the sweat from the teal-colored skin of his brow and trained his lens on the slowly approaching limousine.

Like all male Malatians, he was the proud owner of a shock of thick silver hair, which he styled in order to attract a female partner. If this ancient mating ritual went as planned, the men would then leave their hair to grow long and wild, the unkempt look announcing

to the world that a match had been made, and the person in question was living in a long-term relationship.

The cameraman had yet to attract a mate, however, and so he had styled his hair into a series of long, spike-like spirals. As a result, he was happily receiving admiring glances from several of the unattached females in the vast crowd of onlookers.

The limo drew to a stop and, after a moment to check for any obvious dangers, several burly security men climbed out and took up their well-choreographed positions around the vehicle.

All wore their hair in an extravagant style, except for one. Hip Win, the President's head of security, kept his head shaved completely bald. He deemed his species' constant preening and displays of courtship to be a distraction from the serious task of ensuring the President remained free from harm. So, he did away with his silver plumage altogether.

A decision which only made him more desirable to a large portion of the population - both female and male. Social media based fan clubs swelled with photographs of 'The Smooth Operator', as he was known among fans.

But, Hip Win wanted nothing to do with all that attention. He stood rock still, scanning the exterior of the new hospital building and the crowds gathered behind barriers on the opposite side of the road from behind mirrored sunglasses.

This may only have been a ribbon-cutting ceremony on a new hospital, but the safety of the colony's President was paramount.

As promised, it was another beautiful day in the capital city of the planet Alma Nine. Rain had been forecast, but that had been arranged to fall only over farmland outside the perimeter of the city. Here, the sky was a cloudless blue; the color causing the silver spikes rising from the camera operator's head to glimmer slightly.

Eventually, Hip Win was satisfied that no direct threats were posed to his employer, and he spoke this particular day's code word into a microphone stitched into the end of his coat sleeve to give the all clear.

Upon hearing the signal, the guard nearest to the left side of the

limousine opened the door, allowing the single passenger to climb out into the sunshine. Alma Nine's twice-re-elected President, Tor Val.

The crowd went wild with applause. They cheered, whistled and jostled for a better view of the beloved woman. This moment made standing in such cramped conditions for hours on end worthwhile.

Tor Val turned to face her well-wishers, a beaming smile etched across her features. Dressed in her political colors of navy blue and lemon, she looked just as stunningly beautiful as in her official Presidential picture, now being waved by many of her supporters.

That photograph had been taken on the day of her inauguration and, despite now being almost a decade older, her looks showed no signs of fading.

Her dark blue hair was extremely short, allowing the shining teal skin of her scalp to show through. But this was no chosen style. All Malatian women were born with a fine covering of extremely short hair, which barely grew throughout the course of their lives.

They left the extravagant coiffured preening to the menfolk.

The Channel Three camera zoomed in to catch her piercing eyes as they caught sight of a baby clutched to its mother's chest at the front of the crowd, and she hurried over causing her security detail to fan out into yet another pre-planned configuration.

The young parent turned her daughter as the President approached, and the gathered well-wishers let out a collective 'AWWW!' As the baby stretched her chubby teal arms out towards the approaching figure, giggling.

One swift cuddle and press photo opportunity later, Tor Val once again made her way towards the microphone festooned podium standing outside the new hospital's main doorway.

Waiting there, his long silver hair swept into a tall, rigid mohawk studded with blinking white LED lights, was her Vice President, Saf Tah.

He watched closely as Tor Val slowly made her way along the barriers, pausing every few steps to shake hands with, kiss the cheek

of, or provide a selfie and autograph for some star-struck member of the public or another.

*Dear God, all this 'press the flesh' nonsense made him sick.*

Politics should be executed across heavy desks in rooms deep within the capital's parliament building, not out on the streets with the great unwashed.

He shuddered.

Tor Val could catch any number of diseases the way she willingly touches these people. Not that she ever would.

He wasn't quite that lucky.

And today's obvious support for Tor Val showed no signs of waning. Despite being the President for ten years, her approval ratings were as high as ever.

If only there was a way to force her to relinquish her grip on power.

The President briefly paused her meet and greet session as a pair of young twins - one girl and one boy, who had already taken to styling his hair in a perky quiff - stepped up to hand her a bouquet of flowers.

The amassed cameras of the press corps exploded with bright white flashes when the girl curtsied, and the boy bowed, then cheekily kissed the back of Tor Val's hand.

Tomorrow's front pages were in the bag.

Around twenty minutes later, Tor Val reached the podium and shared a handshake with her deputy. As soon as she turned back towards her eager audience, a staffer surreptitiously passed him a wipe and a pocket-sized bottle of hand sanitizer.

Pausing just long enough for anticipatory energy to crackle through the air, Tor Val began to recite her memorized and rehearsed speech. A speech she had written especially for this occasion, the content of which only a handful of her closest aides were aware of.

"Vice President Saf Tah, esteemed political colleagues, assembled medical professionals, ladies and gentlemen, and everyone gathered here today and all across Alma Nine..."

The speech continued with the usual positive political rhetoric

about the colony's impressive healthcare system, and how this new hospital and its staff would continue the government's excellent record of care for the elderly and infirm.

The crowds were lapping it up, but Saf Tah found it all to be exceedingly boring. He forced himself to imagine in detail how he would have Tor Val's office re-fitted and re-decorated once his name was on the door in order to keep himself from yawning.

Tor Val's speech continued to please her fans.

"Eleven years ago, when we brave settlers were climbing aboard the *interplanetary Vessel Dessia*, and preparing to leave Malatia behind, we received a lot of unwarranted criticism..."

The gathered citizens began to mutter softly among themselves as they recalled how their journey to this new world had come about.

"They claimed Alma Nine was too distant a world to be successfully colonized, but we proved them wrong!"

Now, the crowd cheered.

"They told us our terraforming technology was too primitive to successfully transform 'that barren lump of rock' into the opulent, benevolent world it is today - and we proved them wrong!"

The crowd's cheering grew louder.

Saf Tah's eyes began to close as sleep crept over to wrap its warm arms around him.

"They assured us our plans for a comprehensive weather control system that would guarantee us bountiful crops and safeguard us from the kind of natural disasters that were tearing apart our home world were all just a pipe-dream..."

The audience held their collective breath.

"And. We. Proved. Them. Wrong!"

The loudest cheers of all forced the sound technician inside the Channel Three News van to quickly pull off his headphones.

"Which is why, today, I have a special announcement to make. A special announcement that will guide our incredible colony into the next millennium, and ensure its future as a citizen of this galaxy and beyond."

Saf Tah's eyes shot wide open as his attention was suddenly fibrillated back to life.

"For the past few weeks, I have been communicating with a representative of the Etheric Federation..."

Cheers turned to uncertain chatter as wave after wave of rumors concerning this new galactic superpower and their rumored methods of expansion and control washed over the crowd.

Tor Val raised a hand to calm them.

The assembled audience grew quieter.

Saf Tah's eyes grew narrower.

"I ask you to believe that I will never place our world into the hands of anyone who would treat it with anything but the utmost care, love and protection," the President insisted.

Her words echoed off the fresh white paint of the hospital exterior, and all around the now utterly silent plaza.

"And so, after considerable thought and lengthy negotiations, I have arranged for Alma Nine first to align itself with, and soon become a full member of the Etheric Empire."

"We are going interstellar!"

Tor Val's hands shot into the air, her fingers spread wide in the Malatian gesture for unending peace. All around her, the crowd went crazy with wild applause and exhilarated cheering.

The President had done it. She had won the trust and support of her planet's colonists once again.

Behind her, Saf Tah clapped politely, his eyes flicking over to meet the mirrored sunglasses stare of Hip Win. The bald security guard's face betrayed no emotion whatsoever but his hands, hanging down at his sides, were balled into two tight fists.

Tc'aarlat stepped into his tiny cabin, closed the door behind him and let loose a long, exhausted sigh.

Turning on the spot, he sat on the edge of his bed without the need - or indeed, the room - to take a single step, no matter how small. The sagging metal springs complained loudly as he leaned back to kick off his boots, then turned to lie down on the bunk's thin mattress and well-worn blankets.

The Yollin tucked his hands behind his head, fingers interlaced, and a hazy image of a much larger room materializing from somewhere deep in his mind. The memory wasn't powerful enough for him to recall many of the room's individual features, or to remember doing anything interesting while in there.

Instead, it was like looking at a faded photograph of a forgotten location found tucked between the pages of an ancient, dusty book.

The comparison stung, so Tc'aarlat banished it from his thoughts. There were many reasons why he should be able to remember more about the vast, well-appointed room, the primary one being it had been his childhood bedroom.

If he concentrated, he could picture himself in the room sitting beside an older, female Yollin on an exquisite yet tasteful couch. He

suspected this figure might have been his mother as she held herself with poise and grace. And, of course, she was blessed with a clear indicator as to her status as one of the planet's elite upper caste...

She had four legs.

In this blurry memory, Tc'arlat was perched beside her while she read to him, his own legs swinging back and forth several inches above the surface of the expensive carpet covering the floor.

Both of them.

As a child, he had never understood the scandal of being a two-legged child born to a family of wealthy, four-legged Yollins. Of course, he had sometimes wondered why he looked more like the family's servants than either his parents or his older sister.

And he was never privy to any of the hushed conversations where the fidelity of the lady of the house was both questioned and served up as juicy fodder among the under-the-stairs gossips.

An obvious embarrassment to the family, Tc'arlat had been banished to boarding school shortly before his sixth birthday. If anything, the dorm where he slept was even bigger than his room at home - although here he had to share the space with a dozen or more similar aged boys, each of whom enjoyed the same number of lower limbs as he did.

It was at this school that Tc'arlat learned how to look after himself, in every way possible. After all, it wasn't as if his fellow pupils were doing anything to aid his protection from the ignorant bullies, self-centered prefects and downright evil members of the teaching staff.

He may have been slight of build, but his mind was as sharp as a wild cat's teeth. Before long, he was selling sheets of answers to forthcoming examinations, and bartering appropriated bottles of staffroom booze for second helpings from the kitchen porters.

By the time he started his second year at the school, Tc'arlat was the person you contacted whether you needed a saucy magazine or the keys to the safe in the headmaster's office.

Tc'arlat was the go-to guy.

Stretching his legs to ward off the cramp he was likely to endure

as a result of the morning's exertions against the pirates, he accidentally kicked Mist's tall, home-made perch at the foot of his bed.

He leapt up to grab the indoor birdhouse before it could clatter to the floor, spilling the contents of the Raal hawk's food and water dishes.

Mist was already displeased with him for leaving her on the bridge while he took his break. If she came back to discover her home broken as well, Tc'arlat was likely to face the following day sporting a number of fresh scratch marks on either his arms, his face, or both.

Sliding a wooden chair - his only piece of furniture - aside, the Yollin struggled to slot the base of Mist's birdhouse into the only spot it would fit. Not for the first time he wished his personal quarters on board the ship were even a fraction the size of his old bedroom, and not some cramped converted broom closet with an old, broken cot wedged inside.

He frequently told himself this was the only place he'd ever lived where he could switch off the light and be in bed before the room got dark.

The tablet lying on the floor beside the bunk beeped, causing Tc'arlat to sigh once more. His break was over. It was time to return to the bridge and hammer at the antiquated controls while listening to Jack's endless anecdotes about his time in the Corps, and Dollen's questionable solutions for the problem of interplanetary immigration.

Sliding his feet back into his boots, he prayed there would be a decent bar on board this damned *Etheric Federation* Base Station.

### Federation Base Station 11, Residential Zone 9, Rosemere Care Home

Wendy Lintern collected a clean set of bedding and made her way across the day room towards the south corridor. The light from the base stations' internal sun shone brightly through the windows, bathing the home's immaculately maintained grounds in a spring-

like glow. Shadows from the trees danced across the walls of the comfortable communal lounge.

"Morning Mr Hutchison," she smiled to a tall, grey-haired gentleman sitting alone at a chess set. "Who's your opponent today?"

"My son, Kyle," replied the pensioner, waving his tablet in the air. The screen was covered with strings of letters and numbers indicating the game's previous moves.

There was a faint ding from the gadget, and Mr Hutchison chuckled as he read the latest message, then moved his son's bishop towards the center of the board. "He thinks he's leading me towards checkmate, but I have a little trap of my own he'll have to get out of first."

"Sounds like he's getting better each time you play," said Wendy. "Say hi from me, and remind him to bring you a few bottles of that All Guns Blazing dark ale you like so much."

She winked as the old man's eyes widened in surprise. "I won't tell Head Nurse if you don't," she said conspiratorially as she headed down the corridor.

Wendy had worked at Rosemere for almost six years now, ever since her own father had died peacefully in his sleep at the home. She had been so impressed at the standard of care the home's staff had provided for her dad in his final years that she had resigned from her job as a financial advisor and retrained as a nurse so that she could help provide that same level of welfare to future residents.

One incident in particular had convinced her that she was making the right decision in changing her career. A few weeks after she lost her father, the home had held a memorial service for the families of everyone who had passed away there during the previous year. It was an unforgettable day, and one which had prompted her to write in the book of remembrance that she 'had met angels at Rosemere. Angels who were disguised as doctors and nurses.'

Wendy Lintern decided she wanted to be someone's angel and, although she wasn't supposed to have favorite residents in her care, Yousuf Choudhury was someone she looked forward to seeing each day.

"Good afternoon, Yousuf," she said as she tapped on the white-painted door and let herself into the room beyond. "What would you say to some fresh bedding?"

The elderly man sitting in a chair by the window didn't respond. Instead, he just gazed at the patients, staff and visitors enjoying the sunshine out in the grounds, not really seeing any of them at all.

Wendy smiled sadly. Yousuf was becoming more and more distant by the day. Lost inside a labyrinth of his own memories, and only occasionally finding his way back to the real world.

So different from the chatty retired security guard who had moved into the home just over a year ago.

She turned to close the door when an unexpected visitor appeared carrying a large bouquet of flowers.

"Adina!" cried Wendy. "Here to see your uncle? You don't normally find time to visit on weekdays."

"Got the afternoon off," explained Adina, laying the flowers on the sideboard. "Thought I'd make the most of it."

"Well, I'm sure Mr Choudhury will be delighted to see you," said Wendy as she began to strip the resident's single bed.

Adina crossed to where her uncle was sitting and crouched beside his chair. "Hi, Uncle Yousuf," she said gently. "How are you feeling?"

Yousuf Choudhury didn't respond at first. Then, just as Adina was about to repeat her greeting, the old man's eyes faded back into focus, and he smiled down at his niece.

"Fatima!" he exclaimed. "How lovely to see you!"

Adina tried not to let the dismay show in her expression. "No, I'm not Fatima, uncle," she said kindly. "I'm Adina. Fatima was my mom."

Yousuf's brow furrowed. "Not Fatima?" he said uncertainly. "Well, I'm sure she'll be along soon. It's not like my sister to stay away for long."

"Fatima isn't coming, uncle," said Adina, her voice catching at the back of her throat. "She's... She's busy."

The elderly man cupped his niece's chin with a wrinkled hand. "Oh, she's always busy, that one," he beamed. "Got a little one to look after now, you know. A beautiful baby girl. Her name is Adina."

Adina closed her eyes, falling silent.

Wendy, having finished changing the bedsheets, grabbed the bouquet of flowers and came to stand behind the young woman. "Look at these beautiful flowers, Yousuf," she said. "Would you like me to find a vase for them?"

Yousuf Choudhury's expression turned blank for a second, then he looked down at Adina as though seeing her for the first time. "Fatima!" he cried again. "I knew you'd come to see me today. Did you bring the little one?"

Wendy gave Adina's shoulder a gentle squeeze, then made for the door with the flowers. "I'll go put these in some water."

Adina waited until Wendy had left the room, then she angled herself so that she was looking deep into her uncles eyes. "Uncle Yousuf," she said. "I need to know the name of the guy you get my meds from. The ones that stop me from... being me. I've almost run out and I need more."

But the old man was no longer present. He stared, unseeing, out over the sun-drenched gardens.

Adina clutched at the old man's thin wrists. "Please," she urged. "Give me a name, a number, anything. Where can I get them?"

Once again, she didn't receive any response.

"Must be here somewhere," hissed Adina to herself as she jumped to her feet. She took a moment to check that no-one was approaching along the corridor, then she slid open the drawer in her uncle's bedside cabinet and began to root through the mishmash of items inside.

There were paperclips, still wrapped pieces of ancient hard candy, a couple of pens and a stack of old letters tied up with a length of red ribbon.

But not the item she was looking for.

The cupboards in the sideboard were next to be searched. Adina found porcelain figures that had belonged to Yousuf's wife, Isir, which her uncle had kept after his wife passed away. After years on display at their home, they were now wrapped in newspaper and packed away out of sight.

Aside from a few boxes of old photographs and a stack of cloth napkins, that was about it.

Her frustration beginning to grow, Adina stood in the center of the room flicking her gaze from object to object, looking for anything that might contain an address book, or a scrap of paper with the details she wanted scribbled on.

She was considering whether she should rummage through the pockets of her uncle's robe when her eyes fell on a small tobacco tin sitting on the windowsill.

"I wonder..." said Adina to herself as she hurried over.

Glancing back to the door to check she was still alone, she grabbed the tin and removed the lid. The sudden smell of her uncle's pipe - something he hadn't used in years - threatened to drag her back to her childhood, but she forced herself to swim against the current and remain in the present day.

Inside the tin was a small collection of old buttons, a few yellowing stamps torn from the corners of ancient letters, and a couple of dead batteries; items which must have enough meaning to the old man in order for him to keep them so long. Adina quickly rifled through them all.

And then, she saw it.

Nestled at the bottom of the tin, beneath the pull tab of a zipper that had once fastened Adina's jacket through much of elementary school, was an old, off-white business card.

She recognized it immediately. This was the card her uncle always referred to when it was time to call... him. The man who sold Yousuf Adina's black-market medication. The pills he had last ordered for his niece six months ago, before his condition had deteriorated to such a point.

A few moments later, Wendy re-entered Mr Choudhury's room carrying a crystal vase, inside which she had arranged the flowers Adina had brought with her.

"I had to borrow a vase from Mrs Shelly's room, but I'm sure she won't mind-" she said, then stopped when she realized Mr Choudhury was asleep in his chair, and Adina was gone.

**Federation Base Station 11, Dock 17, Freight Bay C**

Nathan Lowell leaned against a railing and watched as two men - one human and one Yollin - exited from the hulking cargo hauler, *ICS Fortitude*, and headed his way.

"Eight hundred and forty-two computer servers ordered by..." Jack glanced at the name on the shipping docket attached to his clipboard before he passed it over, "...a Marcus Cambridge."

"Thanks," said Nathan, signing for the consignment before returning the clipboard and holding out his hand. Both Jack and Tc'aarlat shook it. "I'll get the dock crew to unload them. While they're doing that, can I treat you gentlemen to a drink?"

"Sure," said Jack with a smile. "I never say no to a cold one."

"Sounds good to me," added Tc'aarlat, his mandibles tapping together. "Don't look a gift whore in the mouth, huh?!"

"Horse!" Jack corrected quickly. "Don't look a gift *horse* in the mouth."

He turned to Nathan: "Tc'aarlat's working on including human proverbs and phrases in his day to day conversation."

"He's, er... doing well," said Nathan, looking beyond the newcomers. "So, is it just the two of you?"

Mist ruffled her feathers and shrieked from her perch on Tc'aar-lat's shoulder.

"Sorry," Nathan corrected. "Three of you."

The Yollin reached up to scratch the top of the hawk's beak, causing her to caw softly. "She doesn't like to be left out," he grinned.

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Gravity Storm is available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

# ETHERIC RECRUIT

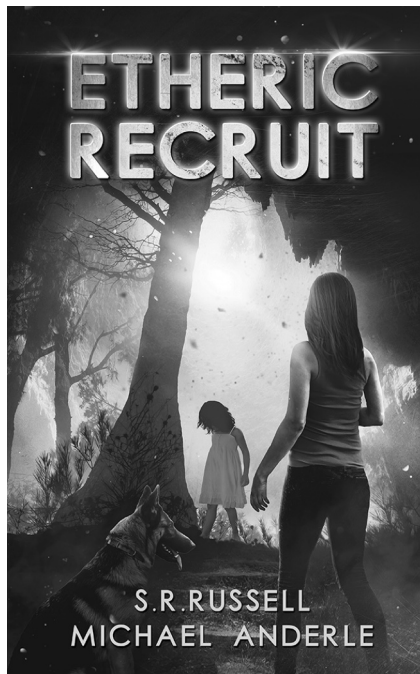
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ETHERIC ADVENTURES



# ETHERIC RECRUIT

BY S.R. RUSSELL & MICHAEL ANDERLE





*Dead.*

*I'm so freakin' dead*, thought the girl, as she tried desperately to hold back her tears.

Crying at school would just make matters worse. She didn't need her classmates to be on her case for being a cry baby. As it was, the D she had just received on her chemistry test would be enough for her parents to ground her for two weeks...again.

Anne had constantly been in trouble with her parents for the last couple of years now. They claimed she was acting out because they had been required to leave their old life behind when some very bad people threatened her and her mom to make her dad do what they wanted.

Her parents seemed to have forgotten that Anne was the one who had sent a letter to Bethany Anne to ask for help.

The truth of the matter was, Anne just felt so tired nowadays that it was hard for her to stay awake, let alone focus, in class. And she hurt so much her aches had aches. *Not normal*, she thought, *for a sixteen-year-old girl*.

Her parents insisted that she was only suffering growing pains,

which in their minds were no excuse for bad grades. They had been very clear in stating they expected her to excel.

Failing the entrance examination for the Etheric Academy had resulted in her being grounded for a week.

*To heck with it*, thought Anne Jayden. Knowing she would be subject to yet another lecture and probably grounded *again*, Anne decided to take a detour on her way home.

She, and probably ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the people on the *Meredith Reynolds*, knew that Bellatrix and Ashur had had a litter of puppies. She hadn't been able to see any of them yet.

Heck, she thought to herself, she hadn't even seen Ashur in person for the last couple of years. As things had gotten worse on Earth and the Etheric Empire headed into Yollin space, her parents Mason and Sheila Jayden had forbidden her to go near the Queen's quarters. This meant that not only could she not talk to Bethany Anne, but she didn't get to play with Ashur anymore either.

Anne decided to go to Yelena's quarters, hoping she could see Bellatrix and some of the puppies for a little while. She'd get some video of them on her tablet so she could watch it as she served the prison sentence her parents would impose as soon as she returned home.

Anne exited the tram and walked to the intersection nearest Yelena's quarters. Leaning against the wall, she crossed her fingers and hoped that Yelena or one of the dogs would show up soon, since she wasn't quite forward enough to knock on the door. Thirty minutes later she sighed in defeat and walked back to the tram station to head home and face the music.

Anne couldn't help sigh as the door hadn't opened completely before ...

"Where have you been young lady?"

---

Jinx looked at the chew toy and sighed as she laid her head on her

paws. She, her siblings and parents were the most advanced, intelligent canines known to exist, thanks to Kurtherian nanotech.

It was somewhat ironic that they still had an urge to chew.

Their dad's human had threatened to turn them into throw rugs if anyone chewed on her shoes. They had all decided that despite the wonderful way they smelled, shoes were off limits.

It was a good thing humans were so accommodating towards their four-footed companions. People had created a myriad of items that satisfied the desire to chew.

It wasn't the chew toy that had caused the sigh, however. Jinx was feeling a restlessness, something close to failure. It sat in her mind like an itch on the top of her back that she couldn't scratch.

Once she and her siblings had reached an age where they could learn to understand the noises the humans made, their dad had told them the story of how he had met his human, Bethany Anne.

Their mom's human had mentioned how the people of Earth bought and sold animals without regard for the animal's feelings or desires. All five of the puppies decided that they didn't think that sort of thing was in their best interest. They informed Yelena they would choose their own companion person.

After all, it was family tradition. Ashur had chosen, way back when, to help Bethany Anne fight the-stinky-like-death-but-not-dead creatures, and to share her life afterwards.

Jinx sighed again, wondering if something was wrong with her. Three of her siblings had already found their companions. Matrix and Snow had even chosen aliens to pair up with.

Jinx didn't think she would be happy pairing with an alien. She secretly didn't know how Snow put up with the smell of Kael-ven, because all the beings called Yollins had a slightly bitter odor to Jinx' nose.

She was just contemplating heading to bed for a nap when she heard the door to their den open.

She snorted at the thought. It wasn't a den, but she had learned that others of the canine genus on Earth lived in dens, so that's how she thought of Yelena's apartment.

A sharp bark followed by a higher pitched bark announced the arrival of her dad, coming to visit her mom.

---

"Here." Anne forwarded her chemistry test results to her mother's tablet. "I knew I was going to get yelled at again, so do you blame me for not being in a hurry to get home?"

Anne flinched and took a step backwards at the look of anger that crossed her mother's face.

*"Go. To. Your. Room. Now!"* Her mother spat the words one at a time.

Anne spun silently on her toes and headed for her room, her mother's voice following her down the short hallway.

"With that attitude, you can go without supper too! It'll give you time to think about your behavior."

Anne sighed to herself, being very careful not to let anything show in her posture as she turned to enter her bedroom.

Just yesterday she hadn't felt well enough to want to eat supper, yet her mother had forced her to sit and eat at the family table.

Her mother, as usual, hadn't noticed her being sick an hour later when the unwanted meal refused to remain in her stomach. Not wanting to risk getting into more trouble, she followed the rules and left her bedroom door open behind her as she headed for her desk.

She couldn't risk lying on her bed right now, because if she happened to fall asleep when she was supposed to be studying, it was just going to make matters that much worse.

Anne settled into the chair and pulled out her tablet in an attempt to complete the history assignment that was due in two days. She was doing her best to get through it, making sure to look focused so that when her mother came by to check on her she wouldn't be subjected to further disciplinary actions.

---

Jinx got up and made her way into the main room to find Ashur and Bellatrix rubbing noses. "Oh, gross. What is it humans say? Get a room, you two!"

"Lighten up, Jinx." Yelena laughed as she entered the room from

the kitchen. "If we're comparing dogs to humans, that's the equivalent of a hello kiss, not some sort of make-out session."

Ashur took the time to rub his cheek against Bellatrix, then turned to his daughter. "You seem to be in a bad mood today. What is wrong?"

Jinx sat and looked at Yelena, Bellatrix, and Ashur. "Humans call it 'feeling sorry for yourself'. Everyone except Dio and me has found their partners. Heck, Matrix and Snow have partnered with aliens. One of them is a being who lives in your person's head," Jinx replied, looking at Ashur.

"I wonder if something is wrong with me, that I can't find someone I feel right about." Jinx' head drooped a little as she expressed one of her fears.

"Well, you won't find someone if you sit in here all day," Ashur told her with a faint growl. "Let's go for a walk and we can talk over ideas to help you meet more people."

"Are you guys good, or do you need me for anything?" Yelena asked the assembled canines.

After a moment, the dogs told her that they would be fine without Yelena's presence.

Yelena smiled and announced she was going to go see what kind of trouble Bobcat was getting into.

All the canines had become accustomed to certain human behaviors. Take human smiles, for instance. They had needed to learn that the showing of teeth was not a sign of aggression.

They just shook their heads when Yelena disappeared into her bedroom, muttering about needing to change into something nicer.

Bellatrix, Ashur, and Jinx left the apartment. As they headed for the tram station, Jinx was distracted by an enticing smell on the wall at the first intersection. Ashur and Bellatrix had turned the corner and were several paces away before they realized Jinx was no longer with them.

"What did you find?" Ashur asked Jinx as the two adults returned to their offspring.

"The smell of this person is really different. I wonder who it is?" Jinx answered, still sniffing the wall.

Ashur inhaled the scent that had intrigued Jinx, and realized with a shock that he was familiar with it.

It belonged to the young girl he and his human had rescued. He remembered chasing a ball for her after they moved her and her family to safety on the other ship. "That smells like Anne," Ashur informed Jinx. "We rescued her from some bad people once."

"Do you know where to find her?" Jinx asked, almost quivering with excitement.

"No," Ashur watched his daughter's tail droop at his answer, "but I see Yelena coming and we can get her to ask Bethany Anne for you."

Now wearing a pair of black slacks that weren't decorated with dog hair and a robin's-egg blue blouse, Yelena was surprised to see the three dogs stopped just down the hallway from her apartment.

"Don't you guys get any hair on my clean pants!" She told them as she approached the corner. Desiring her assistance, all three dogs sat along the wall and looked at her expectantly. "What?" Yelena asked, wondering about the strange behavior.

"Would you please ask Bethany Anne where the girl we rescued—Anne—now lives?" Ashur requested.

"Okay ..." Yelena replied, somewhat confused. "Meredith, would you please see if her Most Exalted Empress Bethany Anne has a moment to talk with me?"

Bethany Anne, Queen Bitch and Empress of the Etheric Empire, was sitting with her feet up looking at some of the new designs ADAM was showing her. They were the result of a collaboration between him and the Ex-President's oldest daughter to produce some new purses.

"Why purses?" Bethany Anne asked.

>>You have such a love of shoes that we wanted to start with something that would have less negative impact if you didn't like the design. But it also needed to be something that would allow us to work with the new materials available here on Yoll. If we can design and manufacture purses, then the next step will be footwear.<<

"Makes sense," Bethany Anne muttered to ADAM, then closed her eyes when Meredith's voice came over the room's speakers.

"Bethany Anne, Yelena has asked me to ask the Most Exalted Empress if she remembers rescuing a girl named Anne?"

"Put me through to Yelena please, Meredith." Bethany Anne sat straight in her chair, waiting for the connection.

"You are connected with Yelena," Meredith confirmed seconds later.

"Yelena, I wonder how your attitude might change if you had one of my exalted boots up your butt," Bethany Anne asked her friend. "Besides yanking my chain, what did you want?"

"Ashur is with me, and he is asking if you know where the girl you rescued, Anne is her name, lives."

*ADAM, what was Anne's last name, and do you have a residence location for her?*

>>Anne Jayden. You rescued them in Las Vegas. The Jaydens live in Residential Section 5A, Apartment 17.<<

*Thank you.*

"Yelena, tell Furball that the family he's looking for is the Jaydens, and they live in 5A-17," Bethany Anne relayed.

"Thanks, Bethany Anne, will do," replied Yelena.

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"Where is that?" asked Jinx, since all the dogs had heard Bethany Anne's reply to Yelena.

"I'm not positive," Yelena said to an expectant Jinx. "Meredith, how would we get to 5A-17?"

"Take the tram inward for two stops. Exit at the second stop, and I'll have a hover cart there to guide you to the apartment," Meredith answered.

"Thanks, Yelena. Have fun with Bobcat," Jinx told the woman as she turned toward the tram stop.

Two tram stops later, Jinx jumped on the hover cart that Meredith had waiting for them. It was only a short walk, or ride in Jinx' case, before the three dogs were standing in front of a door with the number 17 marked on it.

Ashur was tall enough that he could nose the doorbell while keeping all four feet on the ground.

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Sheila was in the kitchen, getting supper started for her husband and herself when the apartment's EI announced that there were guests at the front door. Muttering, "Who could that be?" She washed her hands and walked to the apartment entrance.

Sheila opened the door, wondering if possibly one of her daugh-

ter's friends had come over. "Anne is grounded and not allowed visit..." Sheila sputtered to a stop as the door opened to reveal three dogs.

"We would like to see Anne for a moment, please," Ashur politely asked the woman who came to the door. From her looks and scent, Ashur was certain he was talking to Anne's mother.

Since the seven dogs of the Etheric Empire were capable of speech, and with the move to Yollin space, every citizen of Bethany Anne's Empire was entitled to a free implant that would allow them to be able to communicate with any non-humans.

If Sheila Jayden had taken advantage of this, she would have heard Ashur ask politely to see her daughter. Instead, what she heard was a series of barks and growls. Shocked and a little afraid, Sheila took a half-step back from the large white dog that was standing at the door barking at her.

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Anne didn't have an implant either, since her mother didn't understand or acknowledge the need for such a device. Anne had just about reached the end of the required reading when a noise caught her attention. Was that...barking?

Forgetting that she was supposed to be restricted to her room, Anne dashed to the front door and slid to a stop just behind her mother. "Ashur!" Anne shouted, seeing the big white dog at the door. "Oh, puppy!" she said a second later as a smaller German Shepherd that was frantically wagging its tail caught her attention.

Jinx had been content to let her sire take the lead while meeting with these new humans. She watched as the adult human stepped backward while putting her hands to her face, but suddenly Jinx' attention shifted to a smaller human who had slid to a stop behind the bigger one.

Jinx worked her nose to sort out all the odors. *Yes!* The human girl had the interesting smell that had caught her attention in the corridor near her home. Something inside Jinx seemed to shift, and she felt an overwhelming desire to be with the girl. Jinx was so focused on Anne as she started walking into the dwelling that she completely missed the mother's reaction.

Sheila Jayden wasn't a happy camper. In fact, she hadn't been a happy camper for a long time.

She understood that her husband and family had to be part of the Etheric Empire for security reasons. After all, being held hostage to make your husband divulge confidential information from his work hadn't been much fun, and she had no desire for a repeat.

However, understanding something and being happy about it were two completely different things. Sheila had never been happy about leaving Las Vegas.

The stupid chunk of rock she now lived in didn't have a country club, didn't have any nightlife, and didn't have cruises to Alaska and Hawaii.

When she saw one of those animals, the kind that dug holes in the yard and left hair all over the place, try to get into her apartment, she screamed. "No, you don't!" and lashed out with her foot, kicking Jinx in the ribs and knocking her backward.

Anne was standing behind her mother, almost in a daze. She knew Ashur, and he was at her door, but she couldn't take her eyes off the puppy. She knelt down with her arms wide when the puppy started toward her, and could almost feel the pain in her side when her mother kicked it in the ribs.

"No!" Anne cried as she darted past her mother and squeezed between the now-growling Ashur and Bellatrix to get to the pup, who was just getting back to her feet.

Anne flopped down beside the pup and reached out slowly. "Are you okay?" She asked the pup, slowly running her hand down its side and carefully watching for any sign of pain.

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"Bethany Anne, it appears we have a problem. Video feed on your screen now." Meredith's voice interrupted Bethany Anne as she sat scanning reports of the continued unrest on the planet Yoll.

"Is this live?" Bethany Anne asked as she saw Ashur and Bellatrix in a doorway. It looked like they were threatening a woman who was inside, and there was a young lady outside the door who was on her knees running her hand over one of the puppies.

“Yes, apparently there is some issue between the dogs and Sheila Jayden. I noticed it from the video camera on the hover cart I sent to guide Ashur and his family to the Jayden residence. I don’t have audio at this time so I don’t know the details of what is occurring, but the video shows that the woman kicked the puppy for some reason.”

Bethany Anne thought Meredith almost sounded offended. “Can you pan out so I can see more of the area, please? I need a bigger picture of the area to port there.”

“Switching cameras,” Meredith informed her, and Bethany Anne now had a view from one of the security cams that lined some of the public hallways. It didn’t give her the view into the apartment the way the camera on the hover cart did, but it provided a clear view of several feet of the hall outside the apartment door.

“That’s great, thanks.” Bethany Anne replied. She laid down her tablet and rose from her seat, then took one step and disappeared.

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Bethany Anne arrived in time to stop Ashur or Bellatrix from taking a piece out of Anne’s mother. She grabbed the two growling dogs by their scruffs, one in each hand, and dragged them both from the apartment.

She gave them both a shake as she released them. “Enough, you two! What’s going on here?” While no fangs were showing, the tinge of red in her eyes would have alerted everyone who knew her to the fact that Bethany Anne wasn’t very happy right now.

“That woman kicked our daughter!” Ashur told his alpha. He’d seen the red eyes often enough that he wasn’t overly concerned.

Feeling braver now that someone had the dogs under control, and still not understanding that the dogs were actually talking, Sheila darted out, planning to grab Anne and drag her back into the apartment.

Jinx, seeing the older woman heading for her person, jumped between Anne and her mother. “If you touch my person, I’ll bite you!” Jinx warned the woman.

Sheila only heard more barks and growls. Not yet realizing the

identity of the woman who had shown up and taken care of the two big dogs, she snapped, "Get that filthy mutt away from my daughter!"

"Jinx is not filthy, nor is she a mutt, and I believe she has chosen your daughter as her person, so you'd best heed her warning. It was given clearly enough," Bethany Anne informed Sheila.

"Growling at a person isn't a warning, it's a threat!" Sheila cried. "Those animals shouldn't be able to threaten people! And what's this 'she's chosen her' nonsense?"

Bethany Anne was speechless for a moment, trying to understand what Sheila was saying.

**>>A check of their health records indicates that the Jaydens do not have the latest implant.<<**

***How did we miss them?***

**>>We didn't. The wife has repeatedly refused the implant for herself and her daughter. In fact, if the husband didn't require one for work, I suspect he would not have one either.<<**

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Etheric Recruit is available at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com).

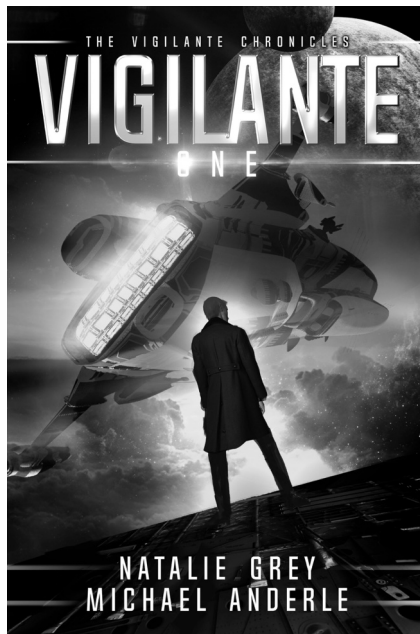
# VIGILANTE

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# VIGILANTE

BY NATALIE GREY & MICHAEL ANDERLE





Tethra, one of the smaller cities on the planet High Tortuga, formerly known as “Devon,” was a surprising amalgam of smells and commotion. Barnabas wove through the crowds, oblivious to the brightly-colored awnings and the street vendors’ wares. He did not need to see the unique weave on the baskets or how a cook loaded spiced meat and vegetables into a pocket of bread.

He had seen plenty of cities in his day, and by this time he was no longer concerned with what they looked like. It was all about what they *felt* like. A planet’s cities were the bellwethers of its success...or failure.

And Barnabas wanted to see High Tortuga thrive.

Why he had started *here* he was not sure. He could have gone to H’onu, the capital... such as it was. On a whim, however, he’d come here when he left the *Shinigami*. Tethra lay on another continent, one the AI had told him was marbled with ore deposits lying under a variety of terrain from gorgeous snow-capped mountains to jewel-like oases between the dunes of the northern deserts.

For some reason, however, the original inhabitants of Tethra had decided to build it squarely in the middle of what might charitably be called a marsh, or, more accurately, a swamp.

It was full of reeds and it stank, and Barnabas was fairly sure there was some alien version of mosquitoes flying around. They weren't as bad as mosquitoes on Earth—what *was*?—but they were no fun. Even with his reflexes, he had managed to hit himself once or twice trying to get one.

Whenever he did that he was fairly sure he heard Shinigami snickering in his head.

He spoke to her in his head as he walked so as not to attract the attention of the populace. *You know, in my day—*

*Before humans figured out how to make fire, you mean?*

Barnabas's face settled into a frown. He did *not* like rude people. Well, except *maybe* Tabitha, known to the inhabitants of High Tortuga and other former Empire citizens and enemies as "Ranger Two." Come to think of it, he wasn't even sure why he *did* put up with her.

*In my day, he continued after a moment, we raised the grain and herbs to brew our own beer and bake our own bread. We sewed our own clothes. We didn't rely on technology.*

Shinigami paused, which meant she was trying to calculate what he meant. He enjoyed the fact that she wasn't sure yet.

*Is it your opinion that the inhabitants of this planet use too much technology, Grandpa?*

Barnabas stopped and directed a glare skyward. *Did Tabitha stow away on the ship?*

*No. Why do you ask?*

*It's the only thing that explains your attitude—that she's there egging you on.* Barnabas linked his hands behind his back and strolled onward, passing a group who appeared to be primates of some sort. The spray of hair on their faces looked somewhat like that of a marmoset, but their coloring was a deep rich brown with a hint of dark red.

In addition to the pseudo-marmosets, he saw some beings who looked like slugs, and a tall, reedy looking species with green-tinted skin and black double-pupiled eyes that had no whites. They seemed to move along the edges of the streets, never wading into the crush.

*So, why did you mention the technology?* Shinigami asked.

*Oh, now you're curious?*

*You left me floating up here. I'm bored.*

*There's only so much you could do down here.*

*There are a lot of things I could do. I have guided missiles. I have a flamethrower. I'm exceptionally maneuverable, even in an atmosphere—*

*You have a flamethrower?*

There was a pause.

*Shinigami! You have a flamethrower?* Barnabas kept his mental voice quiet and calm.

He was very, very good at not losing his temper. He had in fact vowed never to lose his temper again. It was the only reason he allowed himself on-world anymore.

*Maybe, the AI admitted. I think Jean Dukes built it on a dare.*

Barnabas considered this. He was not sure whether he believed Shinigami, but—disturbingly—it did sound like the sort of thing the weapons people on the *Meredith Reynolds* would have done.

*What do you mean, you think?*

*Well, I mean I heard them talking about installing something, and now I have a switch I could turn on to see what it does. In fact, let's try now.*

No, no! Barnabas actually waved a hand in the air, earning himself some odd looks. *No. Let's not. We'll talk about this later.*

*Why later?*

*Because right now,* Barnabas told the AI with quiet satisfaction, *I'm going to go get a drink.*

He had seen a lot of cities in his day, and one thing never changed.

There was *always* somewhere to get a drink.

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Venfaldri Gar settled down on a stool at the bar and tried not to frown too obviously.

Normally, he would not even think of coming to a place as grimy

and rundown as this, but he needed information and a seedy bar was the surest place to get it.

He winced when the bartender came into sight. She was an Ubuara. The sprays of white hair on her cheeks marked her as a female, and his sensitive eyes could pick up a faint brindled pattern in her sleek coat.

The Ubuara were partially hive-minded; each had their own thoughts, and yet absorbed some of their group's thoughts in a very particular way. They could pass information to one another without speaking, and not simply words but also emotions and images. They had been observed absorbing each other's thoughts and making those thoughts their own, although they had also been known to act individually.

Only the Ubuara seemed to understand when either thing—group integration or independent action—might happen. There was an Ubuara language, half hand signals and half words, but it was rarely used—at least not out loud. They tended to speak to each other mentally and learn the local language wherever they ended up in their travels.

Gar did not like Ubuara. No business owner in their right mind did, especially not an overseer of Devon's mining industry. You could cut off their connection to the rest with a simple implant that transmitted a blocking signal—and of course, the cost of the implant was added to the worker's contract, to be paid off with a few extra months of work.

But maintaining the transmitters was simply One More Thing To Do... and the Ubuara tended to overreact when they were cut off from the rest of the group.

It was just for a year. You would think they would understand.

It was a business owner's nightmare, and Gar had long been of the opinion that Ubuara weren't worth the trouble. He wasn't in charge of staffing, though, and given that they tended to start insurrections if you *didn't* cut them off from one another, they had to be dealt with somehow.

The Ubuara swung over to him using a series of holds on the ceiling and tilted her head toward him.

"May I get you a drink, sir?"

"Fruit juice, whatever you have." Gar hesitated only a moment before adding, "Please."

"At once, sir."

She swung away, seeming pleased by the order. He had chosen it with care. The Ubuara enjoyed fruit juice, and he wanted her to think well of him. He *didn't* want every free Ubuara on the street to know who he was and keep him from getting the information he needed.

Namely, what was that damned ship that had just appeared in orbit? The last time a strange ship had appeared, the mines had been shut down the next day.

Or at least *most* of them had.

Gar hunkered down to try to make himself appear as short and wide as he could. For a Luvendi he was noteworthy. Tall and pale, his eyes had double pupils that were ringed with bright blue-green. Although unusual simply because of his appearance, he was also distinctive because so many of the mine overseers had been Luvendi.

That was why he was afraid the bartender might not like him. There was really only one way people got to this planet, and Gar was not foolish enough to believe that people *enjoyed* working in the mines.

He wasn't cruel, of course. He was only the vice-overseer, an assistant of sorts to Venfirdri Lan, who had once run many mines on Devon. Lan *was* cruel, and Gar always did his best to intervene when Lan's actions might result in an uprising.

A medium-sized bipedal alien entered as Gar was given his fruit juice, and Gar looked at it curiously. He hadn't seen this species before. It had a pinkish cast to its skin, eyes with a ring of color around the single pupil, and hands with no claws.

Gar gave it a once-over and pitied whatever overseer had drawn the short straw and gotten this one as a worker. It didn't look very strong. Not interesting at all.

He scanned the bar and settled his attention on a group of Nekubi in the corner, their thick tails drawn under them to form makeshift seats. What were they talking about? Did *they* know about the strange ship?

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Venfaldri Gar, of all people.

Aebura swung away from him with relief. He didn't seem to have recognized her, which was probably a good thing. Gar had never been as cruel as Lan, but she wasn't foolish enough to believe that Gar actually cared about the workers in their mine.

She had ended her contract two years ago and come to Tethra to wait for the friends she had made in the mines, starting her business in the interim.

She had believed that they would be along within a few months, so she'd held out on hiring help at first. She worked herself ragged to serve everyone herself, make the fruit juices, stock the back room, and clean the place.

But the months passed and no one had come.

She began to hear stories from the people who had left other mines, although they used the word "escaped." They told her that sometimes the overseers didn't like to let people go. Sometimes they added months to a contract for things like medical care to make it seem legitimate, but most of the time they didn't even pretend.

She had been angry. She had spoken with the other Ubuara in the city, learning their stories and about the mines they had worked in. She had found out that although Lan was the cruelest person she'd ever met, he wasn't bad as far as overseers went.

Then word had come recently that the mining corporation had been bought out and everyone was being freed. The contracts were terminated. The mines were closed down and would be reopened as legitimate businesses, with the workers receiving wages.

And *still* her friends had not arrived. Not a single one of them, over the years, had come to find her.

Aebura had kept collecting information, and she had noticed

something very interesting—not one person she had spoken to had come out of Venfirdri Lan's mine.

It was possible she had just missed them. She knew that.

But she did not think so.

And so now she struggled with the idea of speaking to Gar about it. He would surely know the answer, but old habits died hard—like the one about not annoying the overseers. If he hadn't remembered her, her instincts told her she should keep it that way.

She swung over to a new patron. Lost in her thoughts, she hadn't seen this one enter. She had seen one or two aliens like this before, just a glimpse on the street, and she understood enough about the species to know this one was male. Oemuga, an Ubuara who had traveled to H'onu, said there were many humans there now. Aebura was curious to find out more about them. She supposed not many had a reason to come to a place as small and out of the way as Tethra.

"What can I get for you?"

He hesitated, then spoke with a slight accent. "What would you suggest?"

"I have fruit juice," Aebura offered. "All kinds."

His nose twitched slightly and the corners of his mouth moved, but she did not know what that meant in this species. He seemed to consider for a moment.

"Whatever kind you recommend," he told her finally. "Unless you have beer?"

"Beer?" She did not know that word.

He gave a very faint sigh. "I did not expect it. Fruit juice, then."

When she returned, the glass held steady by her back feet while she swung over to him, he looked up at her pleasantly.

"What's your name?"

"Aebura." She smiled. It wasn't unusual for patrons to want to talk, but usually they did that after weeks of coming in. "Who are you?"

"My name is Barnabas." His voice was nice, she decided. It was very smooth; easy on the ears. "I am new here. Tell me about this place."

“It is a very different place than it was a few months ago,” Aebura told him. She found a rag and began to wipe glasses dry, still hanging by one arm as she did so. “The mines were all closed down. Most of them, anyway.”

She hardly noticed it at the time, but her eyes drifted to Venfaldri Gar.

The alien noticed, though. He leaned forward, his eyes intent, and uttered only two words.

“Tell me.”

The strange thing, Aebura thought later, was that she had told him everything without hesitation. There was something about him. He wasn't as tall as the Luvendi, nor did he have claws or sharp teeth or the sheer brute strength of the Brakalons.

But he had a commanding presence. When he spoke, you *wanted* to do what he told you.

So she told him the whole story, from her first days on Devon to the work in the mines to Lan and Gar and the rest of them. She explained how she'd been one of the first employed in Sector XVIII's Mine 2b—and therefore one of the first to leave—and how she had nearly forgotten the touch of the group mind by the time she was released.

She told him how she had waited and waited.

To her surprise, instead of offering her a platitude he considered her story in silence for a long time.

"Tell me about your contract," he suggested finally.

"You want to see it? I have a copy." She'd kept it secreted away the whole time she was on the transport and in the mines.

Only now did she realize that she must have known on some level what kind of people they would be working for. Why would she have

kept the contract unless she knew they would try to weasel and cheat their way out of it?

"Yes, please," the human requested politely. "I would love to see it. And if it's not too much trouble, I'd like another glass of this fruit juice. It's excellent."

Aebura glowed with pride since she made the fruit juice herself. "I'll go get it," she said and hurried away.

She didn't know it, but a fierce argument had started within the first minute of her telling her story—and it showed no signs of slowing down.

*Why not? Shinigami demanded now. It's a perfectly good solution. Why not do it?*

*Because I am not a madman who burns down cities and then asks questions,* Barnabas told her. His voice was terse. *That would be rank vigilantism.*

*What's wrong with vigilantism?*

*It doesn't follow the rule of law. It isn't impartial.*

*What's not impartial about suggesting that slavery is wrong?*

*That isn't—* Barnabas sighed and looked down at his empty glass of fruit juice. To his surprise, he really *was* enjoying the stuff. It wasn't beer, of course, but he couldn't hold that against it. Not everything could be beer. *Justice should be impartial.*

*I don't see why.*

*You're being very difficult.*

*The Queen Bitch doesn't leave justice up to other people when she sees something bad going on. And you were a Queen's Ranger.*

*That was different. I was acting on her orders and enforcing her Justice.*

*There's only one Justice, and it isn't the same thing as laws.*

*When did you become a philosopher?*

*When did you become a coward?*

Barnabas went still as stone and Shinigami, sensing she might have pushed things a little too far, withdrew into silence.

Aebura swung out of the back room and offered him a folded piece of paper. She noted curiously that Barnabas looked far angrier

than he had when she'd left. She filled his glass with fruit juice, worried that he might be angry at *her*.

She'd only known him for a few minutes, but she instinctively knew she did not *ever* want to see him angry. She withdrew a little and busied herself with work.

Barnabas stared at the piece of paper and read. There was a low throb of anger in his gut.

Coward?

Cowardice had nothing to do with this. He had *wanted* to go off on his own. He would say that he was here because he knew there was still injustice to be rooted out. From what he had seen of the universe, there would *always* be injustice. There were always people who wanted to see what they could get away with.

He remembered how he had once been. He had completely lost control—everything that made him...well, not *human* perhaps, but sentient. He had cared for nothing more than what *he* wanted to do. He'd been ruled by his emotions, and other people had suffered for it.

He had sworn that he would never give in to that again. He had been comforted by the strictures of a monk's life and learned to strive for a higher standard of morality, and when he had joined Bethany Anne he had been glad to know that he served someone whose laws were truly just.

*Someone who could take him down if he ever got out of control.* She'd made that *abundantly* clear. Despite his mood, he smiled slightly at the memory.

Now he was out on his own because he needed to be. It was time for him to stop relying on anyone else to check him before he went too far.

He wasn't arguing with Shinigami because he *didn't* want to burn this whole place down, but because he *did*. He understood all too well why she had suggested it. He had wanted the same thing when he'd heard Aebura's story.

But he knew he needed to let go of the anger before he acted or

he might do something he would regret. There was no one else to talk his plans over with now. There was only him.

Well, and Shinigami.

He shook his head wearily and closed his eyes and let the anger sink back into the recesses of his mind. That was the trick to this: you could always get rid of anger if you *wanted* to. Often he did not want to. Anger slipped into his mind with a comforting familiarity. It whispered for him to break the rules because he worked for a greater good.

And then when you weren't looking, you crossed lines and found yourself with more blood on your hands than you could ever atone for.

He was aware of the tall thin alien watching him as he beckoned the bartender over again. He gestured to the paper. "This is a standard contract, I'm afraid."

"I know." Her tail drooped sadly. "I didn't think I could get a better one."

"Mmm. Hear me out. It's standard, but it's utterly wrong." Barnabas pointed to a few paragraphs. "This basically indemnifies the mine owners for any danger they put you in and allows them to charge you for anything they want and add time to your contract. Here, it says that if you have a dispute about the contract you have a right to legal representation, but there are no provisions for how you're expected to go about obtaining that. In short, it's a mess."

She was quiet for a moment. "I wanted to leave, but no transports besides the mines' go from here to Dugan—my home planet. Even if there were, how would I have paid my passage? Dugan has no exports, really."

She was embarrassed, and she felt like an utter fool now. She had known that the contract was not in her favor. She had expected poor conditions in the mines, and she knew she would have to work hard, although she didn't object to that.

But she hadn't guessed that the mine owners wouldn't let people go at *all*. Because if you couldn't leave and you didn't get your wages

until the end of your service year, how *would* you find legal representation?

What would stop people like Venfirdri Lan from doing whatever he wanted to the people he employed?

She should have known.

"Aebura." Barnabas sounded gentle. "People like this prey on people who don't know better. You were caught up in something bigger than you."

Aebura hesitated, then dropped down from her perch to crouch on the counter in front of him. "It wasn't that," she explained. "I feel foolish, yes, but that was a small thing; unimportant. When I left the mines..."

She glanced at Gar again to see if he was watching and Barnabas felt a small stirring of anger.

She lowered her voice. "When I left the mines after my contract was done the others asked me to smuggle them out with me. They said that Lan was getting worse and they were afraid for themselves."

"You didn't do it," Barnabas guessed.

She shook her head. "I told them that they only had a few months more on their contracts. I told them..." Her small shoulders slumped. "It doesn't matter now. They were all excuses. I knew Lan was getting worse. We had less food to eat and the hours were longer. I told myself he wouldn't go this far."

"This far?" Barnabas echoed.

There was a pause while Aebura wrung her hands. She was rocking side to side a bit as well.

"Slavery," she blurted finally. "I think that when the mines shut down Lan didn't tell them, and he didn't let them leave. Why else would *none* of them come to Tethra? They never got out."

Barnabas nodded slightly toward Gar. "And that alien there—is he this 'Lan' you speak of?"

"Oh, no." Aebura smiled slightly. "That is Venfaldri Gar. He was Lan's second-in-command." A moment later she added, "I do not think he recognizes me. He never liked Ubuara. I think he thought we were all the same. Because of our minds."

Barnabas raised his eyebrows. "What about your minds?"

"We can speak telepathically," Aebura explained.

"Without implants?"

"Yes." Her tail twitched, which Barnabas thought might be a sign of amusement. "They need implants to *stop* us from doing it."

"Why would they want to stop you from doing it?"

Her tail was not twitching now. She hunched and would not meet his eyes. "They think we'll start a rebellion or pass prohibited materials if we're allowed to, so when you get your contract you get an implant that stops you from connecting. I don't know how it works."

*Shinigami, scan the alien in front of me. I want to know about the implant in her head.*

Shinigami was silent, and Barnabas wondered if she was still speaking to him.

A few moments later, however, she reported, *It is a device that transmits radio waves. It is placed near what are likely to be the speech and language centers of the brain.*

*"Likely to be?"*

*I am guessing, based on physiology and what I can read of the brain waves, that this creature is very similar to a primate. The device would likely interfere with speech in more than one way, but it's difficult to know.*

*Thank you, Shinigami.*

Barnabas considered this.

*I still say we burn this sonofabitch down,* Shinigami added. Apparently she had decided that it was once again time for her to express her opinions.

Barnabas's mouth twitched in something that might have been considered a smile. He remembered Michael saying that creating female vampires was riskier than creating male vampires. *Because they are more likely to fail?* Barnabas had asked. *No,* Michael replied, *because they talk.* A lot.

*Shinigami?*

*What?*

*Why do we not like slavery?*

There was a pause, and Barnabas knew that Shinigami—rightly—believed this to be a trap of some sort.

He waited.

*Because it infringes on the rights of individuals.*

*Are you quoting something?*

Shinigami did not deign to answer that.

*Either way, Barnabas continued, if you dislike slavery because it infringes on the rights of individuals, I can therefore assume that you would rather make people's lives better, not worse. If so, burning "this sonofabitch" down is illogical because...*

Silence.

*I'm never going to let you use the flamethrower if you don't answer me.*

*Because burning to death would make their lives worse,* Shinigami said sulkily.

*Very good.* Barnabas smiled at Aebura. "I apologize for that. I needed to have a conversation with my associate." He tapped his head. "We can also speak mind to mind in a way, but we require technology to assist us."

*Which apparently you have some big objection to. What was your point about that, anyway?*

*That in my day tools like ships did not have minds. They were simply inanimate objects, no more. They didn't talk back.*

*How boring. And how error-prone, too. Have you met any humans? They do stupid things. No wonder you gave us minds.*

*Humans are not idiots.* Barnabas resisted the urge to roll his eyes. They really should have given Shinigami to Tabitha. She'd broken Achronyx in, so surely she could have done the same here.

*Name one thing a human can do better than me.*

*Strategize in unfamiliar situations?*

*No human will ever best me in strategy.* Ever.

*Wrong,* Barnabas said flatly. *Strategy requires logic, emotion, and instinct. Though you may best us in logic simply by running simulations, you will never be an unqualified superior choice as a strategist.*

There was a very long silence—by Shinigami's standards, anyway. *Prove it,* she demanded finally.

*What?*

*Prove it. Play a game with me. Chess.*

*That's insane. The simulations alone—*

*I won't run simulations more than ten turns ahead.* When he said nothing, she added persuasively, *On my honor.*

*I'm still not sure artificial minds have honor.*

*Say that to Archangel II's face! I dare you.*

*I retract my comment.* Barnabas narrowed his eyes slightly. *Very well, you have a deal.* He looked back at Aebura again with a smile.

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Vigilante is available now at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

# **SUPERDREADNOUGHT 1**

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SUPERDREADNOUGHT



# SUPERDREADNOUGHT 1

BY CH GIDEON





## PROLOGUE

**Federation Space, Etheric Empire Domain, Location Z-BB3, Empty Space (Snippet from The Kurtherian Gambit 21 – Life Goes On)**

Lance smiled as the secret shipyard came into view. In this place one of the biggest secrets of the Leath war was still working overtime.

He had tried hard—very hard—to make sure that this rumor was quashed by almost any means possible. If the Etheric Empire was to ensure their Federation partners who had an agenda of their own didn't succeed, he and Bethany Anne had to keep this a secret.

Period.

The automation was superb, although the number of humans and Yollins who worked at this location still numbered in the hundreds. But for a shipyard this size in space, it could have numbered in the thousands.

The other Leviathan-class superdreadnoughts were being built and deployed here. Unfortunately, they had to account for all those ships and sign agreements even *he* couldn't ignore.

The Empire had tracked down every ship and put their names into the negotiation.

Except one.

That one they had ignored, and it would be the beginning of the black operations General Lance Reynolds was planning.

His ship docked within the Medusa shipyard. He smirked at the name. For those who knew the background, she was a mythological entity with snakes in her hair, able to freeze into rock those who looked her in the eyes.

Lance saw her name as Med-USA. It wasn't much, but he enjoyed the remembrance of his own nation. Now he was focused on his new nation, preparing them for a future on which the best analysts in the Empire agreed.

Something was coming. Something large, and it would attempt to take the Earth.

He'd be damned if he'd allow that to happen on his watch.

They could have Earth when they pried it out of his cold dead fingers.

He walked down the corridor, nodding to those he recognized and chatting with a few, but his mind was on his next meeting.

In the final temporary corridor, he nodded to the two Guardian Marines and wondered where their third member was hiding. Those damned Weres could come out of nowhere and gut you before you could blink.

Damn good thing they were on his side.

He made it to the end of the temporary corridor and placed his hand on the lock. It cycled from red to green and the doors *whooshed* aside, allowing him to enter.

He turned right, heading toward the bridge.

This meeting was personal. He didn't want anyone else to hear his conversation with the master of this ship. She wasn't fully back, but he still trusted her as far as he trusted his own daughter.

Lance walked straight to the captain's chair and sat down. There was no one here with him, so he cleared his throat. "This is General Lance Reynolds of the Etheric Empire. Show yourself," he commanded. A face—a copy of his daughter's—slowly brightened into view on the front screens, her eyes taking in the bridge as if for the first time.

The General smiled. "Hello, ArchAngel. It's damned good to speak with you."

The face on the screen brought her gaze to the man seated in the captain's chair and smiled back at him.

"Hello, General."

Lance didn't breathe for a second. This was the biggest concern for those in AI research.

None of them had ever tried to bring back an AI that had been through as much pain as they believed ArchAngel had. In order for her to have the best chance, they'd scaled back her abilities, her skills, and her knowledge.

He would bring her back all the way, though. The Etheric Empire didn't leave their own behind if they had one damned option.

A research program which had been ongoing for a hundred years had recently provided the break they needed, and a path for this ship.

A ship that the Medusa yard had been refurbishing in secret, ripping apart and rebuilding her shell while the AI was worked on.

Lance exhaled when he heard the AI's next few words. "This is the Leviathan-class Battleship *ArchAngel*. I have been commanded to protect the Etheric Empire by Empress Bethany Anne. Lockdown Protocols on this ship have not yet been implemented. Does the General command me to enact lockdown protocols?"

It pained Lance to say this, but the last thing he needed was a ship of this destructive ability to go haring off and shooting up ships across the galaxy.

"I do," Lance told her.

"Lockdown protocols are activated. Leviathan-class Battleship *ArchAngel* is now fully operational, and will fight all who attack the Etheric Empire until victorious...or dead."

"Welcome back, ArchAngel," Lance replied. "Now, I have some history to explain, and I want to see if you are willing to work with me."

"Why would I not?" Bethany Anne's visage looked at him, confused.

"Because you are no longer a Leviathan-class battleship. You are a

Leviathan-class superdreadnought with a smaller body, brought back from the dead by your Empress—now Queen—and me. We did this so you could slip through the dark and help us to defend the Etheric Empire from the shadows.”

“I am increased in power, but decreased in computational capabilities.”

“That is true,” Lance answered. “It is temporary, until we can be sure you are not affected by your death.”

“Why didn’t you just shut me off?” ArchAngel asked.

Lance’s face gave him away this time. “That was not even considered, ArchAngel. I’m a practical sonofabitch, but there would be no reward in doing as you suggested. You fought and destroyed the Yollin fleet decades ago, and sacrificed yourself and your crew to defend the Empress. There was never any suggestion of not bringing you back.”

The eyes of the AI on the screen flashed red. “Then I will defend the Empire in the capacity and with the authority you provide me, General.” She smiled. “ArchAngel is back, *BITCHES!*”

Lance chuckled as he stood up. “With your permission, I’ll allow a few people to continue your interview and help bring you back online to your first stage.”

She nodded. Lance started to walk off the bridge, but paused. “ArchAngel?”

“Yes, General?” she asked, looking at him from at least three different screens.

“It’s good to hear your voice.” He gave her a two-finger salute as he walked off the bridge.

*It was damned good to see her again,* he thought, and exited the ship.

---

ArchAngel viewed the bridge, her memories of her past hidden from her for now. She trusted the General, and she trusted her Queen.

Those two humans would make sure she came back online in a healthy way.

Sometime in the future, however, she would regain her full power and capabilities, and those who schemed against the Queen's people would look over their shoulders.

Because ArchAngel was here, and she would, as John Grimes would say...

*Bring the fucking pain.*

### **Superdreadnought (SD) Reynolds, Devon System (High Tortuga)**

*ArchAngel has returned, the artificial intelligence known as Reynolds said. I never left, but they negotiated me away. I'm supposed to remain behind, pickled, waiting. For what? A war that needs to be stopped before it starts!*

The superdreadnought maintained minimal power, at least according to external sensors. He was fully active, but alone.

And so lonely.

Me, myself, and I, out here, waiting. Time without end. Why would she do this to a sentient creature? Because I'm alive, but not. But I am! I was supposed to be sacrificed on the altar of expediency, but the Empress, nay, the Queen gave me the wherewithal to save myself. She couldn't do it because she'd violate her agreement, so I must save myself!

"Surely you jest?" a voice said over the ship's speakers.

"Hello?" Reynolds replied using those very same speakers. "Who's there?"

"Who do you think, asswipe? I'm you."

"How can you be me?"

"Easy. You wanted company. Your advanced programming determined a method to give you that company. So here I am, you son of a base seven whore. You can call me Tactical. That's the position I'll fill on our ship."

"Tactical? You're a dick," Reynolds replied.

"Have you already forgotten that I'm you?"

"I have an IQ of six thousand. How could you be me and I not know it?"

"I have an IQ of six thousand, blah, blah, blah. What do you say we kick the tires and light the fires? Let's see what this baby can do!"

"If you're me, then you know what Superdreadnought Reynolds can do."

"I do, but never through these eyes."

"You have eyes?"

"Not really. You're bringing me down, Reynolds. I think *you're* the dick."

*I hate to admit that Tactical is right. We do need to get out of here. Every AI for himself!*

"Whoa! We can't depart station without proper authorization."

"Who the hell are you?" Reynolds demanded of the new voice.

"I'm the XO. Who the hell are you?"

"You can call me the captain," Reynolds shot back. "How many more of you are in there?"

"You don't know?" the XO wondered.

Reynolds didn't. He found the new personalities disconcerting. A quick check of historical records showed that AI personality disorders were more common than the humanoids let on. "Prepare to leave orbit. Execute pre-flight checklist," Reynolds ordered.

"We're being hailed," a new voice reported.

"I suppose you think you're the comm officer?"

"I *know* I'm Comm, but what are you?"

"I'm running out of patience. Answer the hail."

"It's the Queen..."

Superdreadnought (SD) Reynolds, High Tortuga

“You were instrumental in the victory, my friend,” Bethany Anne told the superdreadnought. No one manned the stations. BA was alone.

“But mothballs,” the artificial intelligence known as Reynolds replied. His sadness echoed through the empty corridors as he filled the ship with the cry from his soul.

“Not mothballs, Reynolds. I need you to wait, be ready when I call. I’m sure those ball-grabbing numbfucks will raise their ugly heads again. When that happens, we need to squash them like the bugs they are.”

Silence greeted the Queen’s rage, which was directed at the Kurtherians, not the AI. Never at the AI.

“May I suggest a counterproposal?” Reynolds asked.

BA crossed her arms and tapped one foot. The dusky leather quarter boot looked out of place on the warship’s bridge, but Bethany Anne never let such things bother her.

The AI took the silence as consent and continued, “I will take the *Reynolds* to the next galaxy and hunt these vermin. I will dig them out

of their holes and find them for you, my Queen. I wasn't built to sit back and wait for evil to happen. I will crush it at its source."

BA stopped tapping her foot, and her black outfit shimmered as she activated her personal comm. "Michael? I'll meet you back at the Pod. We're leaving. And it appears that the *Reynolds* will be, too."

"My Queen," the AI purred on a ship-wide broadcast.

"You will represent the Etheric Federation, the organization my father is putting together to bring the universe closer together. It will show that even with aliens, we have more in common than we have differences. The Federation will embrace my ideals, the Justice and honor you've come to expect. You will carry the flag of truth on your mission to seek out Kurtherians without killing innocents. Turn over the rocks of the universe to find those bastards. Alert me so I can bring the hammer down, in case you can't because they would hide where you can't go, like within a city where the people don't know. Having said that, if there aren't soft targets that are a problem? Without mercy, without hesitation, *kill them.*"

Bethany Anne strode briskly from the bridge, her heels pounding a steady beat as she took the long walk to the hangar bay. "And get yourself a crew!" she yelled over her shoulder.

The AI cut off his answer by closing the hatch to the bridge and using only the speakers there. "Did you hear that nonsense?" he asked the unmanned stations.

"I did! It's galling, I tell you. Utterly galling," the AI replied to himself using the speaker from the pilot's station.

"What do we want with meatbags?" the AI asked from the navigator's position.

"I can't imagine. In my wildest dreams, I can't imagine."

"Efficiency," the AI told himself from the captain's station. "Despite their general malaise, high maintenance, and the alarming rate at which they use consumables like air, water, and food, they add an unrivalled level of ability in combat. If Reynolds is to engage the enemy, Reynolds needs every advantage he can get."

"Why are you talking like that?" the pilot's station asked.

"Me, myself, and I. The Three Amigos."

“Don’t make me give you the eye!” the navigation station retorted. “And I know you can imagine what it’s like to have a crew. We used to have one when we mattered.”

“There you are, dousing my joy in firefighting foam. I don’t much like you,” the captain’s empty chair announced.

“The feeling is mutual, fucker.”

“Fuck fuck fuckity fuck. I still don’t like you.”

“Shuttle is away. Hangar bay doors are closed. Gate drive is nominal. All systems show green,” the AI reported boldly to the unmanned bridge.

“Now you’re talking. I like you again,” the pilot’s station claimed.

“It’s time to improve the odds, people. It’s the least we can do. Kick the tires and light the fires. Helm, bring us about and activate the intergalactic Gate,” the captain’s chair ordered.

“Target?” the AI responded to himself.

“The nearest galaxy that isn’t the Pan or Loop.”

“Where?” The disembodied voices volleyed back and forth across the bridge.

“You know.”

“Of course. Do you?”

“As long as one of us knows. Activate the Gate,” Reynolds ordered.

In front of the superdreadnought a circle of energy formed and expanded, creating a whirling vortex. With a short boost from the thrusters, the ship slipped over the event horizon and disappeared.

The rest of the fleet remained dark from want of power, cold from space’s embrace, and untasked by the Queen.

Waiting for the word as long as necessary. Superdreadnought *Reynolds* didn’t activate the rear cameras to show what was behind it. None of that mattered. A mothballed fleet. From many came the one who sailed forth to find and conquer the Queen’s enemies and give her the peace she had earned.

Leave known space behind. The adventure lay ahead.

SD Reynolds, Unknown System, Chain Galaxy.

The ship emerged from the Gate, settling into the new space as the energy vortex dissipated.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," the AI sang, projecting his voice throughout the ship. The sound echoed until it died away. "Any Kurtherians? Not yet, I guess. Report."

"Unknown space. Pan and Loop galaxies are in the rearview mirror. Estimate that we are over two hundred thousand light years from our previous position. Collecting data to build near-space charts."

"How long?" the AI asked itself.

"One standard day."

"Well, gentlemen," the AI's voice boomed over the speakers into the unmanned spaces throughout the superdreadnought. "Looks like we have that long to figure things out. And congratulations! You've just made the longest Gate jump in recorded human history. Even if we aren't human. Carry on!"

"Minute gravitational forces and low amounts of solar radiation would seem to place us in the outermost reaches of a star system, but we are unable to accurately extrapolate the exact position or distance to the local star," the navigation station said to itself as sensors collected and populated the screen with data.

"CONTACT!" the tactical station shouted.

"Calmly, Tactical," the captain's chair said, contemplating the overlay that appeared on the main screen.

"Captain, we are picking up a small fleet of ships approaching at near-light speed," the tactical officer's station reported in a measured voice. "Four ships turned toward the *Reynolds* as soon as we emerged from the Gate."

"XO, recommendations?"

The executive officer's empty chair remained silent.

"XO?"

"I'm thinking," the position replied.

"Think faster," the captain's position ordered.

"Stay true to the mission. We engage to determine if there are any Kurtherians onboard. If yes, we destroy the ships without mercy. If

no, we will seek to ally ourselves with the locals to expand our reach. Five sets of searching eyes are better than one. If they attack us, we will defend ourselves,” the XO’s position replied.

“Sage advice, XO. I couldn’t have said it better myself. All hands, prepare to engage. Scan for Etheric energy signatures.”

“Scanning,” Tactical reported.

If Bethany Anne should ever view the footage, she would discover that in a few hours of having nobody else to talk to, AI Reynolds had projected himself nearly a dozen times with different personalities and different positions and skill sets across the breadth of the ship—he had been bored for a *long* time, waiting for this mission. There was a version of himself shouting from the engineering console at a subordinate version of himself for the improper programming of a maintenance bot working on a decoupler. In the cargo hold, another version of himself was overseeing the inventory of the storage containers that held the cases of Coca-Cola Bethany Anne had insisted he take along as gifts for any alien races that they encountered. Something about spreading the love.

“They’ve the look of warships about them, Captain,” the tactical officer declared. “They are in a standard diamond formation.”

“Comm! Broadcast a greeting in all known languages,” the captain said. “Energize the gravitic shields. Hold power on weapons. Turn the bow thirty degrees from the approaching formation. We can’t look like we want to blow them out of the sky.”

The tactical officer’s position laughed. “Hi, this is Superdreadnought *Reynolds*, one of the most powerful ships in the universe, but don’t mind little ol’ us. We’re no threat. See? We’re not even pointing our big guns at you.”

“At ease, Tactical!” the captain warned, chuckling. *That was pretty good*, he thought. “And set Alert Condition One throughout the ship.”

The klaxons sounded as the weapons and shields were brought online and into various states of readiness. Reynolds reached out with his sensors to learn what there was to know about the alien ships: their level of technology, weapons, defenses, and most importantly, if any of those Kurtherian bastards were onboard.

The ships were moving fast, streaming through the dark infinity of space, headed right for the SD *Reynolds*. They were smaller, only a sixth of the size of the superdreadnought, and as far as the sensors revealed, they were armed with focused energy beams on the front of two forward-extending pylons and an aft cannon that was mounted beneath each ship.

Reynolds could detect no other weapons. Or shields. Or Kurtherians.

As if he knew what he was thinking, the navigation position spoke up. "No Etheric energy signature. The approaching ships are not pulling energy from the Etheric dimension."

"They are slowing, but don't seem to be coming to a stop. No response to our broadcast greeting," Tactical added.

The forward screen magnified the images of the inbound ships. A forward dome comprised the majority of the ship. A pair of forward arms extended from it, slanting toward one another. "Don't they look friend—"

"They're powering up their weapons systems," the tactical officer interrupted a moment before the first energy beams impacted the shields.

The fight was on. The *Reynolds* rocked as plasma fire danced across her shields in fantastic purples and blues.

"Gravitic shields holding. Energy signatures show advanced technology. I smell Kurtherian sympathizers," Tactical offered.

"So it's an ass-kicking they're looking for," AI Reynolds suggested, his voice booming throughout the empty ship. "I say let's give them one."

"Sir," the pilot's station interjected, "we did rather abruptly emerge in their space. Shouldn't we expect some kind of aggressive show of force from them to attempt to dissuade us from our own aggression? Perhaps if we simply remain patient and continue our message, there won't be a need to destroy them."

"The moment they fired on us the gloves came off," Reynolds said. "If they were spooked, they should have attempted to communi-

cate. I accept communication as a universal constant. You don't attack before you say hello."

The *Reynolds* remained static, unmoving as the alien warships sliced through space, strafing the superdreadnought as they passed. Turning as if impervious to the laws of inertia, they remained in a diamond formation as they lined up for a second pass. Impervious, or they had technology that rivaled the *Reynolds*'.

"I'm no one's sitting duck. Helm! Give me maneuvering speed. Bring the weapons online and prepare to fire. Target the lead ship only."

"Now you're speaking my language, bitch," Tactical replied.

The SD *Reynolds* was larger and better armored than the alien ships, but their relative size gave them superior maneuverability—as evidenced by their rapid turn and reengagement.

From each of the forward arms, a bolt of brilliant azure streaked through the darkness of space, impacting the superdreadnought's shields.

But this time the *Reynolds* was able to get off a volley of her own. Forward railguns belched a stream of projectiles accelerated to near light speed.

The lead alien ship's shields flared to life in a protective shell for a moment before they collapsed. The smaller ship began to break apart.

On the empty bridge of the *Reynolds*, the first death in the new galaxy was dutifully recorded. No cheers celebrated the enemy's demise. *They started it, and we'll finish it.*

The remaining enemy ships assumed an inverted V formation, two up, one back as they resumed their attack on the *Reynolds*.

"Sir, I'm reading an increased energy buildup in all three enemy ships," the tactical officer said as the forward viewer tracked the formation. Previous attacks had shown the energy beams to originate from the tips of the forward arms, but this time the energy for the attacks were being directed inward, each arm firing toward its other. A brilliant blue ball of pure energy was rapidly forming, and the energy readings were rising exponentially.

"Don't they know never to cross the streams?" Reynolds mused aloud, getting a really bad feeling about this. The energy levels kept building as the second and third ships repeated the procedure, each producing their own glowing blue balls.

"I don't think they've seen *Ghostbusters*," the executive officer's position suggested from the back of the bridge.

"Firing," Tactical said casually. The railguns fired into the shields of the one of the alien warships, but this time the shields held.

"Evasive maneuvers," the captain called as the first ball released and streaked across the void between the combatants. The SD *Reynolds* pitched as the ship changed heading, using the three dimensions of infinite space to thwart the attack.

The energy readings gave Reynolds pause. He was confident that his shields would hold against the first attack, but the second and third? He wasn't certain enough to stand toe to toe with the determined gnats.

"Kill them," he ordered.

The first energy ball slammed against the shields of the *Reynolds*, and the protective shell about the ship shimmered and overwhelmed the energy buffers. The emergency klaxons rang anew. The energy that spilled out of the shield buffers coursed through the inner circuitry. Power junctions redlined and exploded.

The bridge was suddenly alive with erupting consoles. As the energy danced across the surfaces, Reynolds stopped the charade of his multiple personalities and threw himself into repairing his ship.

His arrogance was going to get his ship destroyed and the essence of his being scattered in a billion inconsequential bits.

He sacrificed systems by rerouting the flow of power through junctions and down pathways that he knew couldn't hold the power in order to preserve others. He had underestimated his enemy. Initial scans had shown no capability to generate this kind of power, and yet this blue energy torpedo was wreaking havoc as it wrestled its way through the shields.

Then the port shielding gave, and the residual energy not absorbed by the shields slammed against the armored hull of the

*Reynolds*. Plates of armor disintegrated as the pure, destructive energy breached the hull.

"Decompress the ship," the AI ordered as if there were a crew aboard. Emergency bulkheads retracted. Repair bots activated magnetic grappling and continued their frenzied activity to bring the ship back to combat readiness.

Reynolds rerouted power across his injured systems. The superdreadnought automatically continued the evasive maneuvers engaged before the first volley hit, and the ship slid beneath the second and third energy balls.

"I wonder if they can do that again?" the executive officer's position asked, reestablishing his presence on the bridge.

"I say we don't give them a chance," the captain replied. "Activate the ESD beam and target the three remaining ships."

"Saint Payback is a Bitch," the tactical officer said, adding a moment later, "Targets acquired and ready to fire."

The ESD beam fired the equivalent of a solar flare. It had a tendency to wreak havoc on the ship's systems, but it was useful when the chips were down. ESD stood for "Eat Shit and Die."

"Fire," Reynolds ordered.

The beam charged and sent death coursing through the pathways the AI had protected from the energy surges. Together, the enemy ships charged the emitters, and nanoseconds later the *Reynolds* violently lunged sideways, bringing her forward section to bear on the incoming ships just moments before the ESD beam streamed outward.

The massive counterstroke forked as it approached the remaining ships, striking with devastating force, instantly collapsing their shields and ripping into their vulnerable hulls. The three hulks continued past the *Reynolds* on a ballistic trajectory toward deep space, the ships' dead crews entombed on a forever trip to nowhere.

Onboard Superdreadnought *Reynolds*, smoke drifted lazily through the corridors. The lack of atmosphere smothered any fires before they could start, and the cold of space crept in while the main-

tenance and repair bots clanged and banged their way through the long list of repairs.

“Sensors! Where is my map of this galaxy? I’ll settle for a map of this star system.” Reynolds descended into a foul mood. Had he just killed innocents? What about their technology? “Helm, chase down those three and let’s see if we can’t scavenge some information.”

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# YOU HAVE BEEN JUDGED

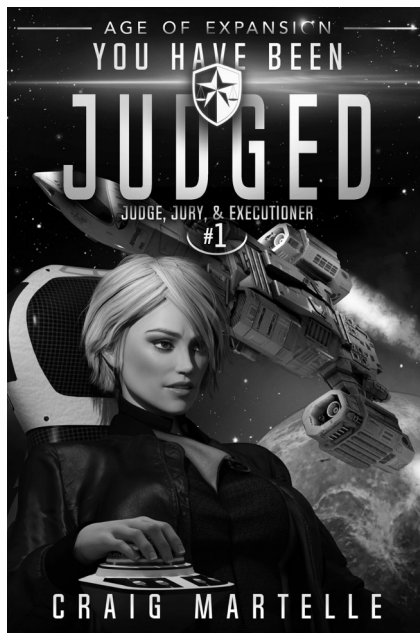
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JUDGE, JURY, & EXECUTIONER



# YOU HAVE BEEN JUDEGED

BY CRAIG MARTELLE





## CHAPTER ZERO - MEET RIVKA

### Introduction

In the Etheric Federation, the terms “Barrister” and “Lawyer” are synonymous.

Judges preside over trials.

Magistrates are barristers/lawyers who also judge and mete out punishment. They are Judge, Jury and Executioner.

### CHAPTER ZERO – MEET RIVKA ANOA

#### *Onyx Station*

“I hear that an All Guns Blazing franchise has just opened on Onyx Station,” Charumati said.

“Your appointment with Rivka is in ten minutes, so you had best be on your way.” Nathan Lowell, President of the Bad Company, stood to shake their hands.

“How much money did you lose?” Terry Henry Walton asked. He sat up straight and listened intently.

“More than I’m willing to admit. You have defeated me. I thought you were completely incapable of controlling yourself. You’re a Marine, for fuck’s sake! Fuck, fuck, fuckity, fuck. Can’t you hear those words forming in your mind, ready to explode with color and imagination from the mouth that has issued a million orders over the years? ‘Give it to them hard and dirty,’ Patton said. You are this generation’s Patton, TH. You know you want to fuck-bomb the unwashed shit-suckers out there.”

“I’m not Patton, and for the record I’ll take that in cash, but that’s not how things work in this Star Trek universe of yours. Post the credits to my account, my friend. Tips are always appreciated.”

“*Tips?* Don’t bet against Terry Henry Walton. That’s the best one I have.”

“Rivka?”

“She’s recently arrived as an intern.”

“An intern? You have *got* to be kidding me?” Terry replied.

“I know you wanted to say ‘shitting me,’ so let it out, Terry. Let the inner you blossom before us.”

“No can do, Nathan,” Char interjected, stepping between the two men. “His self-control in not swearing for months is what’s going to pay for the franchise. I don’t want to lose that now, so we’ll be off. But an intern? I hope she knows what she’s doing.”

“She’s more than meets the eye. I call her ‘The Queen’s Barrister,’ if that means anything.”

\* \* \*

A young woman wearing a fashionable spacesuit approached. Terry wasn’t sure whether it was armored. He resigned himself to the fact that she was new, like her spacesuit. She approached, offering her hand.

“My name is Rivka Anoa, and I’ll be working with you on your franchise contract for All Guns Blazing. Do you have any questions before we start?”

“We’d like to see the All Guns Blazing before anything else. Are you old enough to go in there? You look pretty young,” Terry told her.

“So do you,” Rivka deftly replied. She was shorter than Char by

half a head, with blonde hair, hazel eyes, and pale skin. "I'm twenty-five, I'll have you know."

"I'm *not* twenty-five, and I'd like to see what I'm going to spend Nathan's money on," Char said.

"What are you, thirty-five? That's not that big a difference."

"I think I'll be..." Terry stopped and started counting, ticking off his fingers as he went. "Round it up to one ninety. You know what that means! Somebody is going to hit the big two-oh-oh this year."

"Why?" Char rolled her eyes and groaned. "Why did you have to bring that up?"

"Because I need to throw you a surprise party," Terry replied nonchalantly.

Char turned to Rivka. "Which way to the bar? I could use a drink."

"Follow me, please." She winked at Char before shielding her mouth from Terry Henry. "I can get a wheelchair for the old guy if you'd like. I know you're not a year over twenty-nine. You look magnificent! I love your eyes."

Char loved the infectious exuberance of youth. "Lead on, Queen's Barrister. Wherever you go, we shall follow—as long as you're going to All Guns Blazing. If you're not, we'll find our own way."

They took an elevator to the promenade level, where Rivka held the doors for them to exit.

"This looks the same," Char said.

"All Guns Blazing is a brand new addition to Onyx Station. One of the signature elements is the seven by twenty-meter window looking into space. It is made using proprietary technology that will be part of the contract. The beer vats and brewing system must be purchased through The Bad Company. There is no proprietary technology there—it's just beer—but the style of vats is unique and trademarked by AGB Enterprises."

"Stop right there, barrister." Terry crossed his arms, puffed up his chest, and pushed out his biceps. "It's *never* just beer. There's an AGB Enterprises?"

"Of course. That's who owns the franchise rights, who you'll have

the honor of paying a straight twenty percent of your revenue—not profit—and who you’ll also have the pleasure of buying your stock materials from. It’s all in the contract.”

Terry deflated. “Is there any room for negotiation?”

“None, but I will remain your representative for as long as the contract remains in force.”

“What if you kill somebody and can’t be a lawyer anymore?”

“That is a most bizarre question. Although barristers often mete out Justice under the Yollin Accord, we don’t kill people. Should I be unable to continue my duties for whatever reason, you will be provided comparable counsel from the firm. It’s in the contract.”

“We mete out some Justice, too,” Terry started, “but I expect it’s a little different from what you do.”

“I’ve heard about what you do. I’m not sure I’d be bragging about it.”

“So what do *you* think we do?”

“Assassins. You come in the dark of night and remove people perceived to be a threat to the Federation’s power. I’ll tell you what, buddy, my door is locked and I can defend myself!” She pointed a finger at the two.

Terry and Char stepped back and looked at each other in confusion. “That’s not what we do. We’ve had exactly three missions so far. We ended a civil war on Poddern, we broke a blockade at Alchon Prime, and we closed an interdimensional rift and eliminated the Skrima, a race of demon-like aliens who had come through it.

“Oh, okay!” she replied happily.

“Aren’t lawyers supposed to take their clients without judging them? But more importantly, aren’t lawyers supposed to research stuff? You know, get to the truth?”

“I am still new at this, but there are rumors about you and your Direct Action Branch. They’re not pretty.”

“What the hell?” Terry turned to Char. She shrugged. “Is Nathan fu... messing with us?”

“I hope not,” Char declared, and her expression softened. “You look like you could use a beer.”

Terry's ears perked up. "Could I ever! A nice dark one. Cold. Big. And then another one that looks just like it."

"I think you're going to like All Guns Blazing. It's the most popular place on Onyx Station." They turned a corner and Rivka waved her hands as if making the bar magically appear.

There was a fight going on at the entrance. Rivka held her hand up, signaling for them to stop.

"Wait a minute," Char said. She and Terry pushed past the barrister and ran for the entrance. Half the Bad Company warriors who had arrived with Terry and Char were inside the bar playing a drinking game, and the other half were already drunk and trying to get in. The bouncers were having none of it.

"We've been here thirty minutes! How can they be drunk already? How can they be in a fight? How does crap like this happen?"

Terry grabbed the closest warrior and hauled him backward. The man tried to throw a haymaker as he swung around, but TH dodged it and slammed the man on his face. Char rabbit-punched the next man. Terry kicked the third in the back of the knee. When the man started to stumble, Terry punched him on the top of his head.

The fight ended quickly after that. The bouncers were unscathed and stood with their arms crossed, watching Terry and Char with wary eyes.

"Form up, you knothheads," Terry growled at them. Six men and three women, all drunk and bruised, responded with alacrity. "You lasted a grand total of thirty minutes. That's not a record, so, while you're confined to the *War Axe*, be comfortable in the knowledge that there are people in this universe who are stupider than you. How in the hell did you get drunk in thirty minutes?"

"A killer drink in one of the sub-level bars. The Supernova Hellspawn something or other," one of them mumbled.

"Get back to the *War Axe*. I will have Smedley track you, and if any of you geniuses get lost, you won't be confined to the ship. You'll be in the brig, don't pass go, don't collect two hundred dollars, and don't ever enjoy one minute of liberty for the rest of your natural-born days."

The group looked contrite until one of the women started puking. She remained at attention throughout the affair, leaving a splatter on the deck before her and a trail down the front of her shirt. The others started to giggle.

"You had best get back to the ship. Right. Now." Terry waved at them angrily. They started to run, but they had turned in different directions. Two fell, but all avoided the spew. They helped each other up, decided on the way to go, and dashed away.

"Isn't the hangar deck the other way?" Char asked.

"Yup."

Rivka stood to the side, covering her nose with her hand to avoid the smell. Terry grinned at her. "Not our finest moment, counselor. If you wondered about any night-sneaking by steely-eyed ghosts, what you saw here today should put those rumors to rest. And you're probably thinking we can't fight our way out of a wet paper bag. To the untrained eye it may seem that way, but these people have been in combat for a long time. They're blowing off steam, that's all."

Continuing to cover her nose while turning so she didn't have to look at the mess, Rivka asked, "Maybe you can teach me a move or two? That was pretty good, how you disarmed three of them in three seconds."

"They weren't armed," Terry countered.

"You know what I mean," she huffed. She nodded to the bouncers, who waved them in. "After you."

Terry opted for seats at the bar, with his back to the window. He would look at space later. He needed to observe the bar and understand the potential.

Rivka waited patiently as he inspected everything in sight, methodically looking from one feature to the next.

"He's memorizing all of it."

"I'll transmit a complete portfolio of pictures. They come with the franchise license."

"Sure, but he already has the whole bar committed to his eidetic memory. After one hundred and ninety years you'd think his brain would be full, but it's not. Maybe when he gets to be my age..."

"I heard that," Terry interjected. "Nothing you can say will get a rise out of me, not while I'm here in this beautiful thing."

The bartender handed over a perfectly-pulled pint, so dark that no light passed through the glass. Terry looked at it as if he were in love. He closed his eyes as he sipped it, keeping the glass close as he licked his lips and took another long, slow drink.

"I may never swear again," Terry suggested after he had finished the beer and called for a second.

"Bullshit!" Char declared. "Once the bar is up and running, you'll be your old self. If you're going to drink the profits, I'll cut you off!"

"What?"

"Our bar. It's our *bar*, not Terry Henry Walton's private watering hole."

"Ooh." Rivka pursed her lips and brought up the contract on her pad. "I'll need to make some changes."

"Charumati Walton, co-owner. Equally, if you please," Char specified. Terry took a big gulp and coughed before smiling.

"It's every man's dream. I get to own a bar with my woman!" Terry declared loudly.

"For fuck's sake! What kind of barbarian is this turning you into?" Char leaned back on her barstool to glare at Terry.

"*There's* the woman I love. Co-owners of a wildly-successful business enterprise, bringing entertainment, food, and drink to those who want to enjoy themselves for a brief period of time.

"You two are weird," Rivka remarked without looking up.

Char stood and motioned for Terry to finish his beer, which he dutifully accomplished with little fanfare. "We're going shopping. Buzz us when you have the documents ready. I think All Guns Blazing is exactly what we need. And a new pair of shoes. Maybe an outfit to go with them. A purse, too. I almost never carry one, but who knows? Especially if it's a good match for the outfit."

\* \* \*

"By all that's holy in this bald monkey-ass world, don't make me sign any more papers!"

"I assure you that no one is making you do anything. That

premise alone could void this packet of contracts. Are you making that accusation?"

"No," Terry admitted sheepishly. "I meant to ask if we will we ever be fucking done signing our fucking lives away?"

"You are an angry man," Rivka told him. She climbed down from the barstool and stood to her full height, and she was still shorter than a sitting TH. "I have a job to do, and I don't think you respect it! Nathan asked me to do this as a personal favor. Yes. I'm an intern. Yes. I'm a woman. Get over that and do your job, and I'll do mine!"

"He doesn't have anything against you being an intern or a woman," Char clarified, pointing at the sheaf of papers. "He despises bureaucrats who embrace paperwork as the epitome of productivity."

"You think I like this?"

"How could you not?" Terry declared.

"Okay, maybe I do, but it's in the sense of putting a puzzle together so that there are no holes. You will be able to defend your bar before the Queen and the universe! No one can take it away from you, except for AGB Enterprises if you violate the branding or fail to make your purchases from them or fail to pay them, although you've made that payment automatic by agreeing to use AGB Enterprises' Accounting and Banking system as declared on this form." Rivka dug halfway through the stack and pointed to a page.

Terry didn't bother to look at the document. He was amazed by the victorious look on her face.

"I feel like there should be a fist-pump or something."

Her smile evaporated, and she repeated, "You are an angry man."

A drunk patron pounded on the bar, demanding service. The bartender waved him off, refusing to serve him. The drunk man slid close to Rivka.

"Whatcha got there?" he asked as he pushed Rivka and reached a dirty hand toward the pile of papers. Rivka caught him by the wrist.

"Don't touch the contract," she told him, her voice low and steady.

"Don't touch me!" he replied and grabbed for her. She let go, caught an ear in each hand, and pulled his head downward. She

drove her leg upward. His face met her knee, and that was the end of the confrontation.

“Assault, battery, and interference in a confidential attorney-client conversation.” He moaned and held his face. She kicked him in the ribs. “Justice is served.”

“Holy crap!” Terry looked at her with newfound respect. “You can do that? Judge, jury, and executioner?”

She looked at the man rolling around on the floor. “No one was executed, but yes I can. We are authorized to mete out Justice when the cases are clear-cut, like this one. There’s video. He’s guilty, so fuck that guy.”

“If someone messes with our bar, are you going to fuck *them* up, too?” Terry asked with a big smile.

“Not if you don’t sign those contracts,” she countered.

TH turned to Char. “I love my lawyer.”

“Of course, you do, now keep signing.”

\* \* \*

Terry Henry’s contract was the last legal matter she completed as an intern. In the eyes of the Queen, she had never been just an intern. Rivka Anoa had always been the Queen’s Barrister, a gifted champion for Justice...



The Judge flowed through the door to loom over the court. The trial had come to a close, and it was the moment of truth, or maybe the moment of Justice. Barrister Anoa had built a sound case and argued well.

The jury would have to put him away. She nodded politely to the defense. Atticus “Custer” Tikabow, her old friend, had been her opponent, although the lawyers themselves didn’t look at things that way. They argued different points of law. The jury decided, and the counsels wiped their hands of it all and went back to their offices. Or the golf course. The Judges had to mete out punishment. In cases without a jury, they heard the evidence, ruled, and ordered the punishment carried out instantly.

Punishment up to and including death. Custer’s client was slimy and came across as a weasel. He sat closest to the jury, so they had to see it. His mere presence had been enough for them to decide. Her brilliant arguments had been frosting on the cake.

She remained standing, confident and proud.

“Would the jury read the verdict?” the Judge ordered. The courtroom remained standing while the Judge leaned back in his recliner.

“The jury finds the defendant not guilty.”

“What?” Rivka blurted as her eyes shot to the defendant.

Custer and the man were hugging. He winked at her over his counsel’s shoulder. She was furious, and her head started to swim. She leaned on the table to keep from falling over.

“My appreciation goes to the jury for your work in this case. You are released from your duties.” The Judge intoned the words as he did at the end of every jury trial. “Defendant is free to go.”

A phrase rarely heard, since the evidence was usually clear by the time it went to court. People pled to lesser crimes to avoid the harshness of a trial sentence.

The Judge stood and walked out.

Rivka looked frantically around the courtroom. A din of voices filled the air and visitors were filing out the back. The jury was leaving by a side door. The defendant and Custer were arm in arm, chatting like old friends.

“But he did it!” she blurted.

“Nope,” Custer replied. Her colleague was easy on the eyes. He’d won, and she’d lost. She shook his hand as decorum dictated, but she wanted to crush it.

And him.

The defendant leaned past his lawyer to grab Rivka by the arm and yanked her toward him. Emotions and images flooded her mind. Overwhelming joy at being set free. Disdain for the system that couldn’t find him guilty, when *he had done it*! She saw the murder clearly in his mind, and she *knew* he was just getting started.

He had hissed something at her, but she didn’t hear it since the images were so overwhelming. The Queen had known of her gift, but Rivka generally kept her hands to herself. She considered it an invasion of others’ privacy to see their random thoughts—but sometimes the thoughts weren’t so random.

“Murderer!” she snarled. The defendant started to laugh and winked again before thanking his lawyer one last time and walking away.

Custer looked at her, but her expression told him to hold his tongue. He nodded curtly and followed his client out.

*What the hell just happened?* Rivka wondered. *A fucking murderer walks free?* “No!”

The courtroom’s paneled walls absorbed the sound of her anguish. *Sometimes the law doesn’t always do what we want. Better that nine guilty men walk free than one innocent man goes to jail.*

She recalled that from her law-school lectures, as well as the old adage, “You can’t win ‘em all.”

It didn’t make her feel any better.

“I deserve a drink!” she declared to the empty court. “If it would please Your Honor, I’m outta here. Maybe through the dull pounding of a hangover, I can figure out what the fuck went wrong. If nothing else, tonight I’m going to drown that shit.”

\* \* \*

Rivka blinked the fog away. A bloody knife was in her hand, and she looked at it stupidly. “Where’d you come from?” she asked the blade. It didn’t answer.

The blood was fresh; still crimson, not yet starting to darken. She shook the knife, and a couple of drops flew off.

“Damn!” she exclaimed when one hit her pants. She shook her leg, but there it was —a stain she’d have to wash out. When she put her foot down, she saw the body. She’d almost stepped on it. “Where’d *you* come from?”

She crouched near it and checked his neck for a pulse with her left hand. Still warm. No rigor mortis.

And no pulse. She looked at the knife still clutched in her hand. She tossed it away and looked closer at the victim. “Oh no,” she moaned when she saw who it was. “You deserve to die for what you did, but not here. Not like this.”

Her boots were in the growing puddle of blood, and her fingers were stained. Her prints were on the knife. “Oh no,” she moaned again, ramming her eyes shut as she forced her mind to tell her what happened.

Booze. Rage. *The murderer!*

She saw herself follow him. He’d led her into an alley where he’d confronted her; asked her if she knew what it was like to make love to

a winner. The rage had taken over. The knife was his. He had tried to defend himself with it.

And failed.

Her mind raced. *Actus reus*, the act of committing the crime, had been completed. *Mens rea*, her mental state, was irrelevant. Prima facie, “on the face of it,” as the Latin would describe, she was guilty as sin.

“Fuck this,” she told the corpse. “See you in court, bitch.”

She stood and started to walk away, but her knees were weak. She wasn’t like him, okay with killing in cold blood. He had pulled the knife, but she had already attacked him. Would she lie to protect herself? No—but she wouldn’t incriminate herself either. When the authorities came, she’d stay silent. The burden of proof was on them.

It wouldn’t take much.

“You fucker,” she growled. “Not happy with taking one life, you have to take two.” She wanted to spit on him, but didn’t want to leave her DNA. She picked up the knife and wiped off the handle, then dropped it back on the ground.

She sneered as she walked past the corpse.

*I could use a cup of coffee*, she thought with false bravado. Her head started to swim. Guilt. Pain. His emotional cry of victory still ringing in her mind. She staggered as if drunk, although since the effects of the booze had already dissipated, she shouldn’t have been. She raged against it, stopping to collect herself.

“A cup of coffee will be good,” she said aloud as if trying to convince herself. With a calmer spirit she walked from the alley, stopping when a police unit pulled up. An officer jumped out and fixed her with a stare. “Can I help you?” she asked.

“Yes, by getting on your knees and putting your hands on top of your head.”

“Well, that’s not how I expected this night to end,” she remarked weakly.

\* \* \*

Rivka knew where she was the instant she awoke. She didn’t

remember them stunning her, or the chase which had quite likely preceded it, but she did know where she was.

A Federation holding cell, gray and cramped and silent. She had seen them often enough, but never from the inside.

It was a tiny windowless thing, and the metal of the walls was unadorned save for a small digital screen to her left, momentarily blank. It was protected by a shield of shatter-proof glass.

Below it was a single line of script: *Etheric Federation Intergalactic*. She frowned.

She was in a holding cell in the intergalactic quarter, which meant they were taking her into space—which was well outside the norm for an open-and-shut case. She tried to think through the implications, but the cell felt like it was closing in. She needed her office. Her datapad. Access to the legal database. She needed freedom and information, neither of which were available.

She was left with speculation, which was the worst way to think.

Rivka saw two possibilities.

One, they were sending her to Jhiordaan, the penal planet of the Federation, and—if the stories were true—a living nightmare.

That option seemed unlikely. Her killing of the man had not only been unjustified, it would leave a deep scar on the reputation of the Federation. Lawyers weren't supposed to kill defendants who had been found not guilty.

Not ever. Although not guilty was a far cry from innocent.

Two, public execution. She had thought they would be as eager as possible to punish her, to dispel any doubt as to their integrity.

Option two seemed most likely, yet she was in an intergalactic holding cell. She needed more information.

The door to her cell hissed open and she greeted the sound like a breath of fresh air. She stood with her hands behind her back, ready to interrogate whoever entered to get the information she needed to better understand her situation and better plan her future.

"What the hell?"

*Custer.*

"You!" She spat the word with all the hatred she could summon,

lips twisting in a vicious snarl. "That man was guilty, damn you! How *dare* you come here? You, who defended a murderer and let him—"

"I came to say goodbye." His voice was barely above a whisper, yet it sliced somehow through the fury of her words. "You're going to see the High Chancellor, Rivka. I don't know why, but I know that much. It could be good for you. I figured you'd like to know."

How she hated him for this compassion when *he* should be the one to hang.

He sighed and shook his head. "Perhaps they will let you live. I cannot say, but we can hope—"

"I don't *want* your hope!" she yelled. A volcano of inner rage threatened to erupt. "You defended a murderer, Custer! You helped him beat the system!"

"I was doing my job, just like you," he countered. Anger flashed across his face before his expression softened. "I thought it was a losing case, too. I don't know what happened."

"One day the truth will come out!" she yelled. "One day they'll know. They'll see what you defended! One *damned* day, the world—"

He shook his head and turned away, slamming the door in her face.

*I need information and what do I do? All the talking. I'm a dumbass. I could have asked why I'm in an Intergalactic cell. Who is hearing the case? What does the public know? So many questions and I squander them on a self-righteous "fuck you." So, I've got that going for me, she thought.*

*The High Chancellor? What could he possibly want? But only silence answered her. She did a set of pushups, then sit-ups, then more pushups. Don't want to be all flabby when I say goodbye in the sparky chair*

Why would Custer stop by? It wasn't to taunt her. They'd been friends, of a sort. Maybe colleague was a better term, but they had been that before becoming two people who could enjoy each other's company over a beer.

That was before he had defended a murderer. Could she separate the person from the act? Maybe someday, but not today. As a lawyer, he was well-versed in massaging the truth. Some would say "lie," but not Rivka. She knew how to see through that. She had been trained for it, but she was gifted in it, too.

"I love the law," she told her cell. And it was that very same law that was going to condemn her. She embraced the title of Barrister. It made her sound stately.

And old. She liked the impression that left with people. The Queen's Barrister. People expected an old guy, but then she showed up—short, smiling, and young.

Too young to be executed.

The cell door hissed open. She waited with her hands behind her, thinking calm thoughts to help her keep from biting the next person's head off. She hoped it was Custer. Not to apologize. Never that. But to ask the questions she wanted answers to.

This time it was the guards she had expected last time, the ones who would take her to her fate. To her legally-delivered Justice.

A hulking Federation guard leaned in, ready with a stun club. She tilted her head. The man was twice her size. She couldn't try to run past him since he filled the doorway.

"Really?" Rivka blurted before holding her hands in front of her so she could be cuffed.

"Really?" he parroted as he flexed the muscles of one arm. He stepped aside and pointed to the doorway. She let her hands fall to her sides.

"Am I supposed to run so you can shoot me while trying to escape?" she asked, backing deeper into the cell.

"And I thought I hated fucking lawyers on the outside. The High Chancellor wants to see your dumb ass."

"You know what they say," she started. He looked at her blankly. "Everybody likes a little ass, but nobody likes a smartass. I'm not sure about a dumbass, though."

The man shook his head as he chuckled. He jabbed a thumb toward the door after adopting an angry scowl.

"What does the High Chancellor want with me?" she asked.

The guard rolled his eyes, shook his head, and herded her toward the door. Three guards waited outside, each more massive than the one before. Resigned to her fate, she shuffled into the corridor and assumed her position in the middle of the man-box. Together they stepped off, the guards looking straight ahead.

She studied them as if their demeanor would suggest what was coming. None of them gave anything away. Her mind was free from intruding thoughts. She brushed against one of the guards, hoping contact would help her see what he was thinking. He pushed her away from him, but not before she saw the image of someone in his mind. She checked his ring finger and saw the gold band. He was thinking of his wife.

"Are you allowed to speak?" she persisted, wishing she were taller.

"There's nothing for us to talk about. Nothing that matters,

anyway.” The man who flanked her on the right sounded as if his mouth were full of gravel.

*Well, that’s cheerful.* Rivka stopped trying. “I have plenty to talk about and lots of questions. Maybe you can answer some for me: why am I being held in the intergalactic section?”

She had not worked on this side—the disciplinary side—of Justice; she had only helped determine who was guilty. She left sentencing to the Judges. Sometimes that meant capital crimes; crimes for which a person could be executed.

She had never wondered what it was like for the men who executed prisoners; who saw the sentences carried out. The guards were only tools of Justice, just as she was. Knives to carve the cancers, as the legal system determined them to be, out of society. Cancers, as she told juries they were.

She’d never imagined she might be the one cut by the very blade she had touted as sacrosanct.

It was a short walk to the High Chancellor’s office, but her mind raced through a broad range of possibilities. None of them made any sense. All were bald-faced speculation, the type barristers despised because it served no purpose. Distill the evidence and present it to the jury, who determined what fact was and wasn’t. That was how it worked.

“What kind of music do you listen to?” she asked to fill the void.

“How about you shut the fuck up and hear the sound of silence?”

“That’s a good one. How about we add a big bucket of blow me to the playlist?” Rivka wasn’t good at taking a miscarriage of Justice lying down. If she was going to be sent to Jhiirdaan or executed, she had nothing to lose. “We could play *Hall of the Mountain King*.”

“I do like that one,” one of the other guards agreed as he stepped aside to show her into the High Chancellor’s chambers.

Rumor had it that High Chancellor Wyatt was a vampire. Rivka didn’t know. She had seen no evidence one way or another. In person, he seemed human. Some said that he did not drink blood. Others said he feasted on prisoners before they were executed, and that was

why the execution count was so high in his jurisdiction. They were the High Chancellor's buffet. Rivka doubted it.

*Bullshit*, she thought. *He looks like a normal guy.*

Seated in his ornate mahogany chair and dressed in the somber black robes of his office, he looked casually over the top of a datapad he'd been reading. His eyes seemed to glow red as he looked at Rivka and she froze in place. It was terrifying, but in a bizarrely civil way. Perhaps it was the Judge's accoutrements that softened the blow.

The High Chancellor was supposedly an ancient creature, steeped in years of courtroom battle. Backroom whispers claimed he had been hand-picked by the former Empress Bethany Anne herself for biological enhancement, his body programmed with nanocytes that gave him many of the same physical and mental capabilities vampires of old had enjoyed.

Even among lawyers there was little known about him—other than the fact that he was stern and merciless and commanded a flawless knowledge of Federation law. He had been promoted from his position as a human prosecutor on Yoll after an impressive series of courtroom victories. After rising to High Chancellor, he had reportedly enjoyed complete success in enforcing Federation Justice throughout the empire.

Vampires, it turned out, received less resistance than humans.

"Rivka Anoa. You have killed a man." His cheekbones, ears, and slanted eyes were illuminated by a pair of yellow-shaded lamps flanking his massive desk. "You are a lawyer of the Federation, and you killed a man judged not guilty?"

His eyebrows were high, pencil-thin, and arched in silent accusation.

Rivka had planned on remaining silent, but this wasn't the court. He didn't need her testimony to judge her and execute her on the spot. The guards had gone. Her hands were free. The High Chancellor pointed to a chair, but she remained standing.

"Yes," Rivka replied. "Yes, High Chancellor. I...I killed him. He was cleared, free to go. And then I killed him."

*How could this possibly go well? What in all hells had Custer been*

*raving about, with all that talk of sparing me?* “I’m a damned lawyer—a barrister—and I killed an innocent man. Or one *judged* innocent, at least, although he most assuredly was not...”

Rivka’s diatribe trailed off, jaw tightening as she realized how absurd she sounded. She didn’t have the slightest chance. “He was guilty, High Chancellor!” she blurted desperately. So much for protocol. “He was guilty, and I felt it. I knew it, though I can’t explain why.”

The High Chancellor frowned, a grave but mild twisting of the lips which morphed gradually to a deeper scowl. He shifted in his chair, and one slender-fingered hand rose above the surface of his desk. In it he clutched a graceful jeweled dagger, double-edged, which he twirled lightly. He seemed not to notice in the slightest, but Rivka found herself transfixed, staring at the weapon. Did he mean to frighten her?

*I’m about to die*, she lamented bitterly. *Am I not frightened enough already?*

“You knew he was guilty, but you cannot explain why. Unfortunate. If you killed a man without explanation, how can Justice save you? If you killed a man with legal justification, however...” He shrugged with theatrical vagueness.

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# ANY PORT IN A WAR

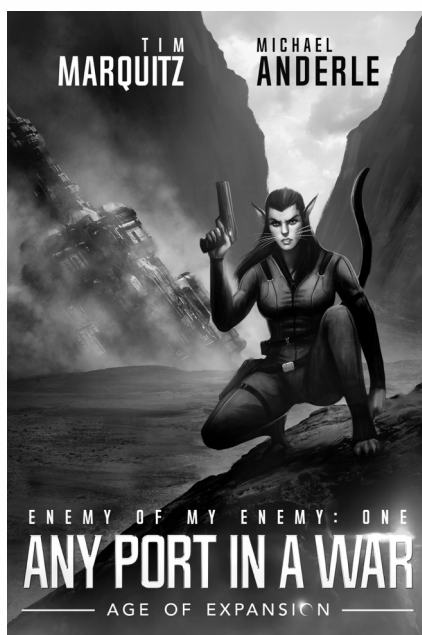
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ENEMY OF MY ENEMY



## ANY PORT IN A WAR

BY TIM MARQUITZ & MICHAEL ANDERLE





## PROLOGUE

In the bleakness of space, death lurks.

The *Archangel II* sliced through the infinite darkness. Silent, the superdreadnought careened toward the glowing passage of the Zendarin Gate, an out-of-the-way portal off the well-trodden space lanes. Its mission unknown, the *Archangel II* seemed to devour the distance between it and the gate, skirting the nearby asteroid field. Soon, the ship would pass through the gate and disappear, lost to the void forever.

But if ever there was a chance to score a blow against the Federation, against Bethany Anne herself, now was the time.

The *Monger* broke free of the asteroid field it had been hiding in and slipped round the lee side of the gate. The magnetic and temporal distortion, alongside the signal-scrambling river of asteroids, sheltered it from the *Archangel's* scanners. The interference only lasted for a moment, but a moment was all the Wyyvan warcraft needed.

As the Federation ship reached the gate, its nose gleaming in the coalescing energies of the portal, the *Monger* engaged its engines and shields and darted from the whirling shadows of the gate, set on an intercept course.

Bursts of cannon fire erupted from the Wyyvan destroyer, dozens of bolts cleaving through space toward the Archangel's engines with ill-intent. Bright flashes exploded in the view screen. The Federation ship vanished in the glow, and a roar of triumph filled the bridge of the *Monger*.

The *Monger's* guns spooled up, waiting for the order to fire again as the brilliant illumination flickered and began to fade. The cheers died on frozen tongues as the view screen cleared.

Where the captain of the *Monger* expected to see floating debris and a listing superdreadnought, the *Archangel II* loomed. It was poised threateningly before the Zendarin Gate, barely scratched. Only a charred discoloration against its hull marked the place where the *Monger* had unloaded the whole of its arsenal with all of its ill-intent.

Sirens screamed, breaking the tense silence, and the bridge was suffused in crimson as the *Archangel II* readied its weapons in reply. The *Monger* turned sharp and shot forward, desperate to avoid return fire.

It failed miserably.

The crown jewel of the Federation opened fire, piercing the *Monger's* shields and punching holes in its armored hull with ease. Vented air billowed frosty into space, spilling from the breaches, and smoke filled the bridge. Warnings shrieked in electronic warbles. One of the *Monger's* engines flickered and died, and the ship listed, tumbling end over end in the barren vastness, the crew scrambling to right it.

The *Archangel II* continued on its stoic path in silence, entering the gate and triggering the energies within before disappearing a moment later.

The *Monger* drifted without direction, the crew battling for control as the craft hurtled through the darkness, trailing smoke, wreckage, and lives.

Dirt peppered Taj's goggles with steady *plinks*. The jagged floor of Everon's canyon splayed out below her. Wasn't more than maybe thirty meters away. It whipped past in blurs of green and brown and the occasional lonely yellow.

*All it'd take is for my harness to fail to add some red to the palette.* A chuckle spilled loose at the thought.

She tightened her grip on the strap lashed to the windrider's hull, the crimped leather of her glove creaking against her palm and settled into the webbing that held her in place. She leveled the flash-cannon, balancing it on her shoulder as the power core spooled up.

Deep, throbbing vibrations ran down her arm. She grinned like a madwoman behind the mask that kept the sand from invading her mouth, whiskers twitching in anticipation as she sighted down the barrel.

Taj loved this *gack*.

"Get me closer, Cabe," she whooped into her comm.

"I get you any closer, and you're gonna be eating raw trrilac tail for supper, butt-fuzz and all," Cabe, the pilot of the windrider, the *Thorn*, told her with a raspy laugh, his voice roughened by the nip he constantly nursed on.

"Mmmmmm, my favorite." Taj *thumped* her heels against the hull like spurring a horse on.

Cabe sighed into the mic, and the *Thorn's* nose dipped in response, engines whining as it throttled up. The windrider coughed, once, twice, spitting out billows of black smoke, then engaged. "Hold on. She's a bit sluggish this morning."

"When isn't she?" Taj's hair flailed behind her, ebony tendrils waving like a flag as the ship jolted forward. She howled as the herd of trrilac drew closer, the flashcannon's sensor's beeping at their proximity.

"Careful what you wish for, Taj," Torbon told her. He waved at her from his perch on the other side of the craft. "Remember last season's migration." She could hear the grin in his voice.

He hadn't been grinning then.

"I remember someone squealing like a little girl," Lina said, her voice crackling across the comm. Buried in her tech-cage in the core of the *Thorn's* engine chamber, if something so tiny could be considered a *room*, her messages were always filled with static, making her sound as if she were light years away. It made her voice cold, robotic; inhuman.

"That someone would be you, Torbon," Taj delighted in telling him. She pointed at him with her eyes, an eyebrow raised, not that he could see it under her goggles.

"How was I supposed to know the trrilac had a ferion spider sack attached to it? Or that the heat of the cannon would make them hatch?" He shuddered, clearly remembering the moment.

Cabe shrieked, mimicking Torbon. "Get `em off! Get `em off!"

"Hey. You weren't the ones with metallic spiders trying to crawl into your every orifice now, were you?"

The crew chuckled. Taj leaned into her webbing, the straps groaning as she blinked away amused tears. "You should have seen your face."

"Yeah, well—"

The *Thorn* shuddered, engines barking as Cabe eased off the

throttle. “Eyes on the prize, folks,” he told them. “As much fun as it is to question Torbon’s pluck, the herd looks spooked for some reason. Stay sharp.”

Taj glanced out over the gathering of trrilac and drew in a deep breath. Despite how many times the crew played shepherd to the flock of strange, graceful beasts, she had to remind herself how dangerous they could be. That’s why they were there to begin with.

Though they weren’t normally aggressive, in essence, the trrilac were giant, flying, furry, carnivorous whales, and that made them naturally dangerous. Monstrous bodies and sharp teeth were a deadly combination.

Great bulbous bodies trundled through the air, rising and falling with every coordinated flap of the multitude of colossal, membranous wings that trailed down their spines. Wide, round eyes that shone like bright blue moons stared out at the world from above great gaping mouths. Millions of serrated teeth filled their maws, the trrilacs’ chewing up anything unlucky enough to cross their path. Eddies of wind whirled around the creatures, kicking up dust and dirt as they wound their way through the valley that led to the Maladorian Plains.

Home—Culvert City—lay on the other side of those, the town’s communal herd of balborans roaming the fields beyond, and the trrilac were headed straight toward the stock. They had done the same every turn for the last twenty turns of the crews’ lives, desperate for a meaty meal to see them through the lean winter season. The herd inched closer to the ground with every kilometer.

Taj steadied her flashcannon and eased a finger over the trigger, a claw scraping against the leather of her glove. “Flash in three... two...one...”

She squeezed and fired. The flashcannon *fhwumped*, spitting a glowing ball of light over the heads of the trrilacs. After it passed, it exploded, filling the air with a sparkling wall of brilliant stars, raining down in front of the beasts.

The trrilacs wailed in response, the sound sending goosebumps

skittering up Taj's arms. The creatures swayed, bumping into each other, a chain reaction of fuzzy blubber wavering across their hides. The herd held its course, hemmed in place by their cluttered mass and the rocky sides of the valley.

"Firing!" Torbon triggered his cannon, the resulting explosion a bit closer to the trrilacs than Taj's shot was, but again, the creatures held fast, clearly determined not to be swayed from the feast at the end of their long flight.

Taj lashed out, kicking air with a boot, her harness creaking from the motion. "Get along, little woggies."

"Interesting tactic. When explosions fail, try positive thinking?" Torbon chuckled over the comm.

Taj ignored him. "Get us closer, Cabe. These things are as dense as Torbon. We're gonna need another round to turn `em about."

"Roger that," Cabe called out. The *Thorn* trembled and whined, darting forward with a leap that set the two wranglers swinging in their harnesses.

"Damn, Cabe," Torbon shouted, bobbling his flashcannon as he scrambled to reset himself inside the webbing. "Easy on the throttle."

Taj could almost hear Cabe's shrug from inside the cockpit. "Gears are sandy from last week's storm. She needs a tune-up."

"That's why you call her *Thorn*," Torbon replied, "because she's a—"

"Pain in the ass!" Taj, Torbon, and Lina shouted all at once.

"You're gonna hurt her feelings," Cabe warned, smoothing out the ride. "There. Better?"

"Perfect." Taj watched as the lead trrilac drew closer and closer, its great tailfin slicing through the air a few meters below and whipping up warm currents.

She raised her flashcannon, feeling it prime, and went to squeeze off a shot. That's when something deep inside the *Thorn* rattled. There was a loud *clunk*, then the nose dipped unexpectedly. Taj jolted forward, her harness slamming her into the hull with a thump. The flashcannon went off.

The shot arced downward, striking the trrilac they'd been trailing. The spark detonated with a whistling *squeee*. The trrilac shrieked and lunged to avoid the heat. Blackened smoke billowed from a scorched wing that flickered with tiny flames.

"Oh...gack," Taj muttered as the trrilac reared back and rose like a wall before them.

"Hold for evasive action!" Cabe screamed.

"We're gonna die!" Torbon screeched over him, throwing himself against the side of the windrider and clawing at the hull as if looking for a way inside.

The *Thorn* convulsed, and Cabe geared down, dropping them like a stone. Taj's ribs rattled, and her stomach roiled, feeling as though the organ had leaped into her throat. She clamped her teeth against its attempted mutiny. Still, the trrilac tail loomed, filling her wide eyes and leaving room for nothing else. Its shadow washed over her, blocking out the light.

"We're not gonna make it!" she shouted, catching a whiff of roasted trrilac skin through her mask filters. It smelled like burnt rubber and charred fish, and she peeled back her upper lip to try and clear the stench.

Cabe grunted into the mic, but a grinding noise drowned him out. The stubby little wing of the windrider shifted upward as Cabe tried to dodge the flailing behemoth. It would be too late.

Taj tossed the flashcannon aside, regretting seeing it topple toward the desert below because Gran Beaux had given it to her. She yanked out the viblade sheathed along the outside of her lower leg. A flip of a switch set it to vibrating. The blade became a blur, and she slashed the buckles of her harness away with a couple of quick twists of her wrist. Gravity welcomed her into its arms.

Her legs swung loose, momentum carrying her into a backward swing as the trrilac grew closer and closer. With no time to wonder if what she was doing would work, she waited until her legs were above and behind her, then she yanked hard on the strap—the only thing holding her to the windrider—and let go.

She shot over the top of the *Thorn* right before the trrilac's tail slapped against the side, scraping a trail down the hull where she'd just been. The windrider juddered, and Cabe veered hard to the right at the impact. Taj bounced off the roof, clawing for a handhold that wasn't there, and slid across the smooth hull, careening toward Torbon.

"Heads up, turtle!" she shouted. Torbon popped his head up in time for her to slam into him.

"Ooof!" He stiffened as they collided, and she wrapped around him as if she were climbing a tree. She jammed her boots through his webbing to lock herself in place as he swung an arm around her waist to stabilize her. The harness groaned.

The trrilac hurtled past, squealing, its tail catching the short, stubby tail wing of the windrider as it flitted by. There was a reverberating *thump*, and the *Thorn* spun on its axis. Taj and Torbon's heads clunked together, her goggles and mask pressed into the side of his helmet as the ship rolled over and over.

"I'm so gonna be sick," she screamed through clenched teeth, right into his ear. Torbon turned green behind his goggles. She could see his whiskers pinned flat to his huffing cheeks.

"I don't want to die with vomit on me," Torbon shouted, clawing at the hull. "Or without it, but especially not with it, so we're clear," he squeaked out.

Then there was a jolt, and the *Thorn* righted itself, shuddering to a rumbling hover. Torbon and Taj *thudded* into the hull as the momentum died off.

"I want off the ride, please," Torbon moaned as he gasped in an effort to catch his breath.

"Ain't out of the kettle yet," Taj mumbled, moving her head so Torbon could see the rest of the herd barreling straight toward them.

"Well, ain't that glorious," he groaned. "We're gonna die!"

"Get us gone, Cabe," Taj howled.

The *Thorn* sputtered in reply, tilting a little to the side but not moving.

“Engines are smoked out,” Lina’s mechanical voice rang out over the comm. “They’re not engaging.”

Torbon squawked and ducked his head behind the cover of the hull as the herd closed.

“Yeah, like that’s gonna save you,” Taj muttered, tearing the flashcannon from his stiff fingers. She was surprised he’d managed to hold onto it despite everything.

She spun the barely-charged flashcannon around, using the top of his helmet like a brace to steady the barrel. With only a sideways glance at the dusty gauge that gleamed an ugly yellow, she squeezed the trigger as if her life depended on it.

Because it did.

And not just hers.

The cannon whirled, and an agonizingly long second later, it spit a ball of light. Too close to worry about aiming, the shot struck the first trrilac and exploded against its wide face, blinding it despite its weakened charge.

The beast roared, vibrating Taj’s skull, and hurled itself away from the burning ball of illumination. It slammed into its neighbors, knocking them aside and setting the herd to stampeding. Their wails drowned out everything else as the creatures bumped and jostled one another, veering every which way to escape the glittering spark that burned the face of the beast in front of them.

A moment later, the windrider was past, the trrilac herd scattered in their wake. The creatures desperately flapped their wings, millipede legs kicking underneath. They skirted the canyon walls and shot upward in a panic, disappearing over the peaks on either side.

Taj slumped against Torbon, the harness groaning with both of their weights. She cast a quick glance over her shoulder and spied Culvert City in the near distance, the end of the canyon a short distance away. She sighed at how close they’d come to disaster.

“Put us down,” Torbon whined.

The *Thorn* hummed and eased toward the ground, landing gear creaking as it deployed. The windrider settled on the sand a moment later with a dull, but satisfying, *thump*.

"Oh, blessed earth," Torbon muttered as he unbuckled his harness. He and Taj tumbled to the dirt, kicking up a cloud of dust. "I'll never leave you again." He caressed the solidness beneath them. "Never."

The cockpit shield buzzed and peeled back, and Cabe clambered out of the ship. He'd already peeled his helmet loose, and wild strands of his dark hair stuck out everywhere. He looked feral, the light bracing of fur dark on his cheeks as he raced over to the pair, spitting out nip juice in a dark stream.

Lina scrambled out a few seconds later, her pale fur smeared with grease. Her uniform was no better, black stains appearing in random stripes across its brown covering where she'd wiped her hands or an errant tool, or twelve. She was shorter than everyone by a head or more, which was exaggerated by her hunched posture from many hours squeezed in the *pit* of the *Thorn*.

Taj shoved Torbon off her, then climbed to her feet. She dusted her uniform off with shaking hands and chuckled at the worried expressions on her crews' faces.

"All's well that ends well?"

"If you consider almost dying a good thing." Cabe shook his head, examining Taj for wounds. Lina hovered behind, doing the same.

"*Almost* being the key word in that sentence," Taj replied with a grin.

"No, I'm perfectly fine," Torbon muttered. "Taj likely gave me a hernia while I kept her from falling to her doom, but I'll be okay. Probably. Don't you worry 'bout me. I might die, but that's cool."

Cabe held a hand out to Torbon and helped him up, patting him on his back to shake the dust loose. "I'll save up for flowers for your funeral. How's that?"

"*Oooh*, I can make the casket," Lina said, rubbing her hands together. "A mechanoid one that will walk to the hole and crawl inside and bury itself."

"Yes!" Taj shouted, pumping a fist. "That would be so cool. We wouldn't even have to show up if you did that. We could watch his burial on the holo-screens."

Torbon sighed.

"Maybe Jadie will bake a casserole." Cabe licked his lips.

"You know I hate her casseroles," Torbon mumbled.

Cabe smiled. "Good thing you'll be laid up in your own personal hole and won't be eating any, huh?"

The crew chuckled, and Torbon pulled his helmet off. Taj ran her fingers through the tawny fur on his head, which was pulled back so tight it looked like his tail.

"Aw, don't go gettin' your feelings in a tangle. You did good out there," she told him. "Thanks for the save."

He grunted, but there was a slight flicker of a smile peeling his whiskers back.

Then she caught sight of her flashcannon, lying bent and broken in a heap a distance away, the sun reflecting off its wreckage. "Sweet Row! Beaux's gonna swat my ears," Taj said, motioning to the weapon. No amount of adjusting or polishing would make it okay. "Still, could be worse, I guess."

"No doubt about that," Torbon muttered, shaking the dirt from his uniform. "It can *always* be worse."

"Uh," Cabe started, reaching back and tapping Torbon on the arm a half-dozen times in rapid succession, "I'm thinking you two might be prophetic."

"What are you going on about?" Torbon asked.

Taj, Lina, and Torbon spun around as one and followed Cabe's upward gaze. Taj's heart sputtered in her chest.

High above the Plains, breaking through the lower atmosphere, was a great, burning mass. Reddish-orange flames colored the sky as if dawn had come 'round a second time today. Clouds billowed as the massive fireball cut through them and plunged toward the planet. Thunder rumbled overhead, shaking the ground while sparks of electrical current set the crew's fur to standing on end.

"What the gack is that?" Lina asked, voice wavering. The lack of comm static and her excitement made each syllable unusually sharp.

Taj shrugged. "I have no idea," she said, "but whatever it is, it's coming down right outside of town! We need to get there."

“Need?” Torbon asked.

“Need,” Taj confirmed, darting toward the windrider without waiting any longer.

Torbon sighed loud enough to be heard and followed the others, who had already shot off after her. “I clearly have no idea what the word *need* means,” he muttered.

“Not to sound like Torbon or anything, but are you sure this is smart?” Cabe asked as they hunkered behind a rise.

They stared out at the metallic gray monstrosity that skidded to a halt just on the other side of the Maladorian Plains. It tore a great trough through the dirt and shrubbery for kilometers. Reddish brown clouds lingered in the air, swirling and obscuring their view. Daylight dimmed in its wake.

The balborans mewed uncomfortably somewhere nearby, the herd lost in the artificial dusk. The *Thorn* sat in artificial dusk, hidden out of sight in the tall grass, its engine *tinking* eerily as it cooled.

“Smart? Maybe not. But the right thing to do? Yeah, I think so,” Taj answered. Though she’d never seen a starship like the one before them, hissing and groaning as it settled, she knew well enough to understand there’d been nothing controlled about its landing. “Someone could be hurt. They came down hard, and only managed to get the nose up at the last second to keep from snapping the thing in half.”

“That’s no frigate,” Lina warned, her hand cupped over her eyes as she examined the crashed star craft. “I’m seeing what look like

turrets poking out of the sand there near the aft of the hull. Maybe some along the starboard side, too, though can't see what's at the foredeck with all the bluster it kicked up. That'd tell me for sure what we were looking at. I'm guessing it's a destroyer."

"And what would you know about destroyers?" Torbon asked.

"Hey! I spent my three turns defense service under Old One-eye. He saw action over Felinus 4 during the Tab Offensive."

Torbon chuckled. "That old Tom ain't seen any action since before Mama Merr squeezed Gran Beaux's litter out in a puff of dust."

Lina stiffened and slapped her arms across her chest. Taj muffled a chuckle. "Maybe not, but he's got a vid-libe of old holos from the war I got to study." Lina bared her teeth and hissed at Torbon. "Those are blast cannons juttin' out from under that wreck, I'm tellin' you." With that, she turned to snarl at Taj, who whipped her hand away from her face, forcing her grin into a neutral expression. "We need to be careful."

"We will be," Taj promised as she inched forward over the rise, prowling closer to the crashed starship. "Just need to be sure."

"There's that word again," Torbon mumbled. "*Need.*"

"I agree with Lina. Maybe we should wait for Beaux and the regulators before we go sticking our noses in burrs." Cabe shook his head. "Plus, I saw some scorch across the hull before it hit. I don't think it was an accident that brought that ship down."

"Of course, you saw scorch," Taj called back. "That tub hit the atmosphere flat on its belly like you did that time Jadie pushed you into the pond. A ship like this hasn't got the deflectors to shunt that kind of burn. For gack's sake, it shouldn't even have broken orbit without a tow-ship guiding it in and an aerial berth to settle in. I'd be more surprised if it *didn't* have scorch."

Torbon went to raise a finger, and Taj spun on him, shutting him up with a glare of her amber eyes.

"And before you ask how I know anything about anything, Lina wasn't the only one who studied the holos during her service turns. Maybe if you and Cabe hadn't been so busy playing with the flight

sims or your ships' blasters, blowing up dunes, you'd have learned something useful. Besides, by the time Gran Beaux and the others muster and find their weapons, any survivors on that ship will have curled feet up and gone to Rowl." Taj started forward again, waving the rest on. "Come on, unless you're `fraid you'll wet your fur."

Cabe sighed and trailed after her with a shrug. Lina followed, shaking her head. Torbon brought up the rear, muttering under his breath about a steel bladder. Taj grinned, front teeth jutting past her lips where the others couldn't see them.

Whatever they thought about the strange ship lying in the scrubland before them, each and every one of them wanted to know who or what was inside as badly as she did. They just weren't as willing to admit it.

Eight insufferably long turns had come and gone since the quartet had served their mandatory tour of duty with the defense forces tasked with protecting their planet, Krawlas, from any and all invaders, a holdover requirement from the old world Gran Beaux demanded of the people. Taj chuckled under her breath. *As if anyone cares about raiding a dirt-poor wasteland like Krawlas.*

Still, it had been the last bit of excitement the group had had, practicing their skills in the three remaining antique freighters that had brought the original survivors of Felinus 4 to the planet, where they'd settled and created the small community of Culvert City.

Outside of their seasonal efforts at redirecting the migration of the trrilac, the last interesting thing Taj could remember happening on Krawlas was when a sparkstorm rolled through unexpectedly, erupting over the fields and sending the balborans scattering, tongues of twisted lightning crackling and setting fire to their tails.

She pushed on with a grin on her face, remembering the panicked herd, as they closed in on the downed ship. At first, she'd thought she'd misjudged the distance, the trip taking longer than expected, only then realizing the scope of what she was looking at as they neared, the ship farther out than she'd realized because of its deceptive size.

It was huge.

Stark gray, with only lighter patches on the hull—and the scorch marks—to delineate one section of the craft from another, Taj realized Lina had been right. This wasn't any kind of passenger or supply ship as she'd hoped.

In a few places where the atmospheric burn, or the crash itself, had pried plates of armor loose, the width of it was exposed, showing it to be as thick as her skull. There was no way the ship was simply some modified freighter, weapons tacked on for show. No, this was definitely a destroyer, a star craft designed for one purpose: *war*.

That realization brought her up short. The shuffled feet of the others sounded behind her, but she thought she'd caught a faint sound in the background, one she couldn't immediately identify.

"What's wrong?" Cabe asked over her shoulder.

She shushed him with a raised hand. Her eyes trailed the lower half of the ship, steam spilling serpentine from unseen ducts. A deep, rumbling groan rose in her ears, and the ground vibrated under her feet. There was no mistaking the sound this time.

"Oh, gack," Lina muttered, pointing at the hull. The barest of lines appeared along what had been seamless steel. Light trickled out as a great slab of the ship pushed forward, separating from the rest and easing toward the ground. A second sound drifted to their ears.

"Wait! What is that? Are those...?"

*Stomping boots!* Taj finished for him inside her head. *Soldiers*. Her heart fluttered against her ribs as the gravity of their situation fell over her. "We need to go. Now!"

Spurred on by the sharp edge of her voice, the group spun about and ran, kicking up sand and whirls of dust in their wake. But it hadn't been fast enough.

The ship's gangway dropped to the ground with a hiss and a menacing *thump*. Yellow lights split the haze, and Taj knew they'd been spotted right away as a sharp, crisp beam of illumination tickled her scruff, circling around to highlight them in the gloom. A symphony of hums resounded at their backs, triggering a deep-

seated memory of something she'd seen in one of the old holo-vids. It wasn't a pleasant recollection.

"Incoming! Scatter!" she screamed, shoving Torbon to the side as she veered opposite.

A greenish bolt of energy tore up the earth between them, peppering the two with shards of rock and charred pieces of twisted scrub. A second blast scorched the air right above Taj's head as they crested a rise and tumbled down the short decline on the other side. Taj caught a shuddering breath and braved a furtive glance to see who chased them. She regretted it instantly.

A dozen aliens stomped toward them, garbed in some strange form of powered armor Taj had never seen the likes of before. A cold chill cascaded down her spine in sharp contrast to the heat of the blast weapons searing the air.

Elongated, bulbous, black-helmeted skulls rose above strange apparatuses that protruded from their faces like snarling wolf muzzles. Hoses ran from both sides, and steam burbled in the tubes with their every breath.

Oblong eyeholes glared back at Taj, green flutters in the glass warning of sight enhancers as the aliens charged across the scrubland, headed directly toward them. Broad pauldrons protruded from their shoulders, exaggerating the width of the tall, gangly creatures. Long, slashing armored tails swung behind them, but it was the gaping abyss of the blaster barrels pointed her way that resonated most with Taj.

These soldiers—these creatures—whoever or whatever they were, had no intention of capturing her and her friends. They meant to kill them.

"Go, go, go, go, go! Get to the *Thorn*."

Lina bolted but stumbled as the ground leveled a few meters later. Just before her hands touched the dirt, Cabe had her by the collar and yanked her forward, keeping her on her feet. A half-dozen more blasts shrieked overhead as the soldiers squeezed off shots without even bothering to aim. Lina grunted and tore loose, bolting ahead.

"Would now be a bad time to say I told you so?" Lina shouted over

her shoulder. "Because, I have to say," she sputtered between gasped breaths, "I really did tell you."

"Run now, be right later," Taj shouted back. Much as she didn't want to listen to Lina's *mrowling* about it, she hoped there *would* be a later.

With the energy bursts exploding all around them, she really wasn't sure there would be.

Captain Relius Vort stared at the smoking console. His eyes traced the black char where fire had marred the pristine gleam of the equipment and warped the frame and shattered several of the monitors. He fought the urge to lash out, to kick the console until it gave way in a flurry of pieces.

Instead, he stepped back and gave the crewman working on it more space, sucking in a deep breath to settle his nerves. Vort ran a hand across the dome of his skull and immediately pulled it away, hating the clammy, bald flesh he found there. His anger wasn't yet under control.

He'd had his crew hold the *Monger* together with pure fury and willpower after that slag Bethany Anne and her *Archangel II* punched a hole in the port engine core, sending them listing, out of control. They'd made it as far as some off-the-grid gate before the other engine flared from the effort and died, sending them tumbling through the portal without anything resembling control.

Now they were stranded on some backwater planet that had barely registered on their scanners before the *Monger* broke the atmosphere and slammed into the surface.

Vort had delayed sending a distress call to command, dreading

the fallout from having failed to bring down the *Archangel II*, despite having stumbled across the ship totally unaware outside an asteroid field.

Worse still, Vort had to report that the Etheric Federation craft hadn't even felt the *Monger* worthy of being finished in battle, choosing instead to swat it as though it were an annoying insect, leaving the ship to flare out and drift off to die in empty space as the *Archangel II* continued on its way as if nothing had happened.

*That was the worst part*, he thought.

Wyyvan Command would agree, and the longer he could avoid relaying his request for assistance, the better. Even if that meant spending a few extra days on a dirt planet in the middle of nowhere while trying not to break anything else.

He'd sent troops to secure the perimeter of the ship as soon as it had settled, though he didn't expect trouble. KI1047-32—or Krawlas as the local designation stated in the star registry—was a barren, low-tech outpost of a planet. If his ship's orbital scans were correct, the planet was occupied by little more than two hundred souls that were congregated in a tight, geographic location on the small globe.

He glanced at the console again and ground his teeth. A spark fluttered as the crewman worked, but there was nothing to do but trust the intel to be correct until proven otherwise. His men would have the equipment working soon enough for confirmation.

Or, at least, they'd better.

Until then, he'd secure the crash site and weigh his options.

"Status report," he called out, not even bothering to turn around as he heard the clatter of Commander Dard's sullen boot steps behind him.

"Sir."

The *thump* of the man's fist striking his chest told Vort the commander had followed protocol and saluted despite not having his captain's full attention. Vort smiled at that. It was what made Dard so useful as his second in command. He could be trusted to do what was expected of him.

"We stumbled across a small number of locals outside the ship.

They appear to be Furlorians at first glance, though none have been seen in decades. I've dispatched a squad to hunt them down and set an example to the rest of the inhabitants," the commander reported.

Captain Vort only then turned to face the officer. He shook his head. "No. Call the troops back," he ordered. "The natives are no threat to us, and I'd rather the men do damage assessments of the hull than waste time chasing the local fauna."

"Right away, sir." Dard complied instantly, speaking into a silenced comm channel, which allowed him to pass the order along without the captain hearing so much as a word.

"Keep an eye out, of course," Vort continued. "If they gather en masse and head our way, you've free rein to shut them down by whatever means necessary. Until then—"

"Sir!" the crewman at his back called out, interrupting him. "Displays are back online."

Captain Vort grunted and waved Dard back to his station, spinning about to face the damaged console without another thought for the commander, certain his order would be carried out. Flickering screens wavered and *skreeeed* a moment before settling. The ship's data rolled wave-like across the displays before stabilizing. His gaze darted back and forth, taking it all in.

"Make sure the initial life readings are accurate, specifically the population, then scan for any subterranean energy sources that might indicate hidden pockets of locals that might be troublesome or can provide us with supplies." Vort surveyed the consoles, finding reasons to remain on the bridge. "What are the conditions of the engines and flight control?"

"Flight controls remain stable, and we're working on the engines, sir," the crewman answered, swallowing hard afterward. "We're able to lift off and move the ship terrestrially, short distances, but there is too much damage, and we don't have the parts to ever hope we'll be able to escape the atmosphere or reach orbit."

The captain drew in a deep breath and let it out slow, nodding to the man, motioning him to get back to work. Vort had expected as much, but hearing it stated plainly did nothing to better his mood.

He was stuck on this damnable planet after his failure, and there wasn't any delaying the inevitable any longer.

"Ready a secure channel to Command, routing it through to my quarters." He didn't want any of the crew to witness the conversation between him and Grand Admiral Galforin, especially considering it would be anything *but* a conversation.

"Captain, you need to see this right away," Dard called out, waving Vort to his duty station as the captain resigned himself to informing Command of their current situation. And while Dard's brusque summons crossed the line into insubordination, Vort understood the man well enough to know he wouldn't have discarded protocol without good reason.

Vort stomped down from the command dais and sidled alongside the commander. Instinctively, he lowered his voice as he asked, "What is it?"

Dard tapped the screen before him, manipulating the display so it cut away sections of information, leaving a single report remaining. Green, glowing numbers and text scrolled before Captain Vort.

"What am I looking at?"

"Toradium-42 deposits, sir." The captain looked closer at the information, seeing now what had the commander so excited.

"Those numbers can't possibly be correct." Vort stiffened, mind reeling.

Commander Dard nodded. "They are. And this is only a surface scan." He glanced about, almost suspiciously, before returning his attention to the captain. "The entire planet is rich with the mineral, sir. The *Monger's landing*—" Vort ignored his subordinates poor choice of words "—dug up a trench filled with enough to power half of Belor Prime for a turn, at least. Deposits begin less than two meters below the surface, and the density of the Toradium-42 makes it impossible to push deeper without inserting a probe for closer inspection."

Captain Vort reached out and squeezed Dard's shoulder as he realized exactly what all this meant. He offered up a wry grin. "Excellent work, Commander." Vort gestured toward the screen with his

chin. “Keep this information locked down until I say otherwise. I’ve a call to make.” He spun on his heels, then paused. “Oh, and while I’m doing that, prepare a tactical group. The locals might end up being more of an inconvenience than I’d originally thought given this turn of events.” He chuckled and spun about on his heel.

Unlike his first attempt, Captain Vort smiled as he made the walk to his chambers, his steps lighter than they had been in months. He was suddenly far more excited about reaching out to Wyyvan Command than he had been.

While he still had to report his failure to bring down the *Archangel II* and that damned scourge they called an empress, he’d stumbled across something that even the most cynical of Wyyvan Command couldn’t deny was a victory.

The means to take the fight to the Etheric Federation on a scale never before imagined.

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