

HARDSHELLZ

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WARNING! This book contains scenes of horror and moderate violence.

It is not intended for the easily offended or young children. You have been warned, so if you read on, don't blame me.

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As with the earlier Krillaz, this story is dedicated to my fellow writer, Dai Alanye, whose Roger Fee series initially inspired this series, and whose friendship has kept me going and writing.

HARDSHELLZ

This time, Vic Vargo is hired to bid at auction for a valuable sea shell on behalf of an oligarch with more money than sense and then guard it on its way to a private museum. Easy money, Vargo thinks. What could go wrong? But that's just the start of Vargo's troubles as everything does go wrong. And is the oligarch himself a man to be trusted? Using his wits, strength and reflexes Vargo does his best to save his friends, succeed in his mission and keep his reputation as the best interplanetary recovery agent in the galaxy.

Although this is a follow-up to Krillaz, it is a stand-alone story.

CHAPTER 1: I LAND ON BATAVIA VII.

You know what makes something valuable? Scarcity – or the danger of getting it. But as there's always enough fools willing to lay their lives on the line, rarity matters far more than danger. Take an example – alright, why not take a drink as well as an example? Might as well while we wait for the Star-Liner to fly me away to Nova Veaga where the fun'll really start. Where was I?

Okay, an example. Take this drink. It's a rare whisky called Laphroaig. A peated single malt whisky from the Scottish island of Islay. That's back on old Earth itself. They say it's the most richly flavoured whisky in the galaxy. Even now, it's only made in time honoured traditional ways on that one island in the whole universe. Hand crafted by artisans or something. Even on Earth it costs a lot but on this planet hundreds of light years away, the expense is astronomical. Go on, bartender, twist my arm, I'll have another. It's not every day I get to celebrate earning a big bonus.

Where was I? I've probably had too much but I've earned it. Oh yes, rarity. Well, real Laphroaig is expensive because it's still rare. It's not mass-produced and here we are billions and billions of kilometres away still savouring it.

Now some things were once expensive but are now much cheaper. Motor cars after Henry Ford sorted out mass production hundreds and hundreds of years ago. Remember him? Or diamond. That was once the most expensive mineral on Earth but after people sent robots to mine 55 Cancri e – you've heard of it, a super-massive

world orbiting a pulsar or something only 41 light years from Earth itself – then the cost dropped like a stone.

Even I've got a knife with a blade made of solid diamond. It's saved my life more than once, I can tell you. Holds its edge well. Sorry, I can't show you as all weapons had to be checked in on arrival. But take my word for it, it's beautiful. Now, before 55 Cancri e was opened up, wars would have been fought over such a weapon. Now it's in the hands of an interplanetary recovery agent. That's me – Vic Vargo. Recoveries, rescues, rampages and all odd jobs nobody else would touch is my speciality.

Go on. Pour me another, bartender. I'm a survivor, a winner, simple as that and while I wait I'm getting wasted. That's still allowed, isn't it? The Nu-Puritans aren't here, are they? Big money and I'm alive to spend it. For now. What do they say? Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die? Well, I don't intend karking it any time soon. Not while I've got a tonne of money to burn through. Yes, pour me another – and make it large, why don't you. And why don't you say something?

Yes, I was drunk. But after what I'd survived, I'd earned the right to enjoy a blow-out in the departures lounge of Batavia VII's starport before heading out for a well-earned break on the hedonistic world of Nova Veaga. A bit of R and R never hurt anybody.

I looked up from the highly polished bar and into the highly polished face of the bartender. It was a servo-bot specially designed to wait on bars. It hovered there on its anti-gravity unit while two of its spider arms polished glasses until they sparkled, two more served other customers and another set my Laphroaig onto a

coaster. Behind it, further appendages rearranged bottles with exactitude. It could hold several conversations at once but seemed to have adopted a watchful silence with me. Probably it was wondering if it should call a security-bot.

Then, in its reflective surface, I saw the face of the man I had been working for over the last few months. Not a face I particularly wanted to see ever again, even if I live to see my half-millennium. For a start, his face looked like something from the Stone Age. Sava, as I was privileged to call him, had a heavy-jawed, slab-like face. Beneath close cropped hair, his deep-set brown eyes glared at the world as if peering out from a cave. His nose had been broken at some point and badly reset. As always, his neural implant was broadcasting nothing so it was like he was from a primitive era or something.

The guy was a true Russian from old Earth itself. From the Galactoweb, I knew he came from the city of Arkhangelsk in the far frozen north of that country. You'd have to be tough to survive that, even if you were the son of the Governor. Sava had worked hard, risen to very near the top but then he'd fallen out with the current Tsar's advisers at some point in his murky past and spent time in a labour camp. But anyone thinking he was some brutal bruiser would be mistaken as Saveliy Yemelyanovich Fedoseyev was now the sole controller of SYF Inc., an interplanetary military-industrial business conglomerate.

However, he had been out for years now and back in the Tsar's good books. His powerful, caveman's body was clad in an expensive subfusc business suit of impeccable cut that made him appear that he had a nodding acquaintance with civilisation. It was dove grey and flecked with discreet flecks of silver thread. A perfectly knotted cravat with a ruby stick-pin glinting in it encircled his neck. It was

hard to imagine those calloused hands tying that knot. I guessed he employed a valet to dress him.

Despite the amount of alcohol he'd already taken on board, Sava, seemed stone-cold sober. What is it with Russians and alcohol? Do they drink vodka with their mother's milk? Don't answer that.

"One last drink – to celebrate our mutual success, yes," Sava said. Even through my neural-translator, his voice was heavily accented. Now I'd got my bonus, I'd have to upgrade to one of the later models.

The bar-bot set up fresh glasses and I watched as he expertly poured two fingers of golden Laphroaig into the crystal glasses.

Sava lifted his. "To success – and a safe journey home," he toasted.

We clinked glasses in that age-old ritual and then Sava drained his in one swallow. I had more respect for the spirit and sipped mine. To success. That was a good toast and Sava had been successful once again. Very successful. A winner not a loser.

Mind you, despite everything, I came out ahead, so who am I to complain?

Some months earlier, I had first met Saveliy Yemelyanovich Fedoseyev. My job is erratic. Although I describe myself as an interplanetary recovery agent, I'm also open to other offers. The boss of the agency I'm contracted to asked me to book immediate passage to Batavia VII. If you've never been, that's a paradise world of

endless islets, atolls and reefs sprinkled like sparkling sugar crystals over azure oceans. I was fortunate as it wasn't many parsecs away from where I was and a stellar-liner was on its way there. So I booked passage and after only two monkey-saddle hyper-jumps, a week later we were in Batavia VII's system.

Monkey-saddle? It describes how the star-ship's drive warps the contours of space to fling the craft through illimitable billions of kilometres of vacuum. Like, in reality, how a monkey's saddle would need a raised part to accommodate the animal's tail. The star-craft 'slides' down that part before gaining sufficient momentum to 'leap' through space. That's the explanation the crew give us lubbers, anyway. In reality, it involves complex mathematics, astro-physics and 5D navigation. Also, – can you imagine the difficulties in riding a monkey with a saddle on its back?

As always, we emerged from hyper-jump in the outer reaches of the system, far away from any world. As you know, it's for our safety as it would be a disaster if we came out within a planet or moon – instant death for us. Equally, it's bad for a world if a starship comes out of monkey-saddle hyper-jump too close. Something to do with hyper-jump waves disrupting the molecular structure of any solid object. As a minimum, it causes earthquakes, tsunamis, typhoons and massive electrical storms. In the beginning, before hyper-jumps were fully understood, there was a series of terrible disasters. Krakatoa was a storm in a teacup by comparison.

However, coming out in the vacuum of deep space means that these disruptive waves are nullified. So we had a sub-light speed tour of Batavia's system to enjoy before we reached beautiful Batavia VII. The sun, Batavia, is a F-type yellow-white main sequence star which is somewhat larger and hotter than Earth's sun. It has an extensive solar system, but nothing out of the ordinary. There's a string of hot, barren

rocky worlds between the sun and Batavia VII itself. That's why it's numbered seven. These are sparsely populated by hermits, miners, prison colonies and adventurous explorers.

Beyond Batavia VII there are two large gas giants both with numerous moons. As we passed by the larger – a pinkish, greenish sphere – one of its moons sailed across the surface looking like a black disc. An impressive sight which we watched from our viewscreens for several minutes before going onto other things.

Now we were reconnected, on the ship's Galactoweb, I studied details of the main world, Batavia VII itself. Most planets out in Orion's Arm are pretty grim – not so long ago, I'd rescued some tycoon's son called Âgustin from a gloomy, rain-lashed, tide-locked world called Hancox 1. It wasn't any place I'd be hurrying back to. Especially as it was infested with Krillaz – a genetically modified terror weapon splicing together the worst of many species to come up with a horror worse than your worst nightmare. They're hi-man-sized rats – to which has been added the viciousness of a weasel, the fearlessness of a wolverine, gorilla-like arms and the iron jaws of a hyena. And they come in massed swarms.

Together with a group of managers on a team-bonding exercise, I'd rescued the foolish Âgustin and collected my reward. Despite our advanced weaponry, all the managers had fallen to the Krillaz talons and jaws which shows how tough these monsters are. I shuddered at the memory.

However, Batavia VII is nothing like that hell-hole. Like I said, it's one of those so-called paradise worlds. It has small polar ice-caps, leaving the rest of the world covered in warm, briny oceans, apart from scattered island archipelagos. The

temperature over most of the world varies between twenty and thirty Celsius with zephyr-like breezes. There's so many beaches ranging from developed to unspoiled with plenty of fishing. The most popular game fish is the fast moving spike-harpon – a dangerous predator.

But I wasn't here for sea-fishing. I had other fish to fry, as the saying goes. I was here for work and I didn't think I'd get much time to check out the delights of Batavia VII. I took my meals in my cabin and later that day, we were in orbit around Batavia VII. Looking through the viewscreens in the main assembly area, I was strangely affected. The oceans varied from deep blue, through shades of deep azures to turquoise green in shallow areas. The scattered islands glistened white in the sun and, logging onto the Galactoweb I watched clips of the beautiful people, both locals and tourists, enjoying themselves.

The shuttle craft docked and we all trooped on board. It was only a short flight down to the spaceport. As the shuttle pulled away from the interplanetary spacecraft, a little boy asked his mother why the "big ship" couldn't land. If he'd taken the trouble to look out the porthole, it would have been blindingly obvious why.

The spacecraft had been made from a rocky asteroid. Yes, an asteroid. Handles like a brick and can't operate in any kind of atmosphere but in its natural environment of deep space, that doesn't matter. A vast, rocky moonlet at least a kilometre long had been hollowed out and fitted with engines, a power plant and life support systems, cargo bays, passenger and crew living accommodation, a command bridge, a shielded computer room, thousands of kilometres of electronics. Everything a modern spacecraft needs. Portholes pierced its side making little pin points of light illuminating an array of spikes radiating out from its craggy, lumpy surface. Some

were sensors, radar and the like, others radio and x-ray transponders and receivers and still others were weaponry.

Although a cargo/merchant craft and in no way a military vessel, it still needed to be able to defend itself against pirates who sometimes preyed on vulnerable ships coming out of hyper-jump. That said, the region around Batavia VII was a well-patrolled, safe area. It's more the frontiers of space or near worlds where law and order has broken down that you have to be careful. And there's a surprising number of them. Keeps me busy, I suppose.

My mind occupied with watching the vast asteroid-craft recede behind us, we entered Batavia VII's atmosphere. The shuttle slowed, switched on its anti-gravity repellers and we coasted down through a beautifully lit, brilliant blue sky to the space-port. The port itself had been built on an artificial island as nowhere on this world was large enough to handle streamlined starships that were capable of negotiating atmospheric conditions and landing here.

The shuttle touched down, we disembarked and went through customs and disinfection. They don't want any off-world bugs getting a toe-hold here and disrupting the natural ecosystem. Then I was free and clear.

I stood there in the nu-coral arrivals hall. Everyone's neural implants was broadcasting like crazy so I filtered them out of my vision and took no notice like I ignored all the cleaning-bots, porter-bots and suchlike. Then I saw the driver who had come to pick me up. Lavrentiy Semyonovich Norin his name was and he looked less like a chauffeur or cabbie than anyone I'd ever seen. I saw that he was only broadcasting the very basics about himself – nothing about his past – so that

strengthened my belief that the man was some sort of military Special Forces. Not Star Marines, not Praetorian Guard, not Special Air-Space Services, not Trident Force. Nothing wimpy or effeminate like those ultra-tough, elite formations. No, he looked like he could eat them for breakfast and then ask for seconds.

Had to be Russian with a name like that – and from his pallid skin that the sun would never be kind to, I guessed he was a genuine, one hundred per cent Russian from old Mother Russia on Earth itself. Unless he came from one of their Gulag Colonies.

Lavrentiy Semyonovich Norin looked my way and I instantly blanked my thoughts. If he was originally from Russian Special Forces then he was probably equipped to detect thoughts that weren't even being broadcast. Fixing a smile on my face, I made my way through the tourists looking around themselves.

"Hi – I'm Vic Vargo," I said extending my hand and giving my friendliest grin.

Norin looked at me with utter contempt. Now, I've been in some tough spots – and not just that hell-hole of Hancox 1 – and fought my way out. Remember to ask me about DarkWorld one day. Or don't. That was weird. I've killed many times and almost been killed more times than I like to remember. I've been scared and terrified as well. I think – unsurprisingly I've paid to have my most traumatic memories erased. Yet, compared with Lavrentiy Semyonovich Norin I felt as dangerous as a three year old toddler.

It wasn't his build as he wasn't some over-developed man-mountain. Nor was he draped with weaponry – not that he'd be allowed in the space-port if he was. He wore a plain, though well-cut, charcoal business suit teamed with a sober cravat.

However, glancing at the suit out of the corner of my eye I noticed the subtle but tell-tale sheen of lightweight Kevlar threads running through it.

No, it was in his cold, grey eyes and the way he balanced his body on the balls of his feet ready to react immediately to any threat. This hi-man was one tough dude and he didn't need to advertise the fact. All the same, I figured that under his suit, there was more than one Special Forces holo-tattoo.

Still without speaking, Norin – as I shall call him from now on as Russian names are too long, led me out of the terminal buildings to an area reserved for VIPs' hover-cars. His attitude was starting to irritate me a little as I'd been hired by his boss to take on a mission. Wondering how to get through to Norin, I said one word. "Cheka?"

That took him by surprise and a flicker of reassessment came into those chill eyes before his lids lowered and the look of contempt returned. I was right – at some point in his career, Norin had worked for the Russian secret police. Many of their elite forces have, as brutal repression is part of daily life in the Tsar's dominions. Told me all I needed to know – Norin was definitely a man to beware of. He'd take a life with as little compunction as I would have squashing a poisonous bug. And that made his boss, Saveliy Yemelyanovich Fedoseyev, equally a man to be careful of dealing with.

Because you don't become an oligarch unless you're by far and away the toughest guy on the block.

CHAPTER 2. SAVELIY YEMELYANOVICH

FEDOSEYEV

My senses on high alert, I slipped into the passenger seat of Norin's hover-car. It had that new-car aroma of leather, carpet and warm plastic. Not the stench of old blood, vomit and dead bodies that I half expected. To be honest, I thought an oligarch's henchman would have something incredible but it was merely a luxury Hercedez sedan. That said it lifted slower than I expected so I figured it was well armoured under its vanilla exterior. Norin took it up to cruising height and speed and then let the auto-pilot do the rest as the hover-car weaved its way through dense traffic in between the high-rise condos.

You want a brief description of this paradise world? Not that it's important but here goes. If you want to really experience it, then look it up on the Galactoweb or, even better, save up your Hydrans and go experience it for yourself. The Hercedez glided over the glittering pink and white nu-coral high-rises that made up the port of Verrassa. Land is at a premium on Batavia VII so up is the only way to go.

Beyond the ranks of high-rises, the endless seas stretched in an aquamarine expanse under equally azure skies marred only by contrails from shuttles or aeroplanes heading to or from the space-port. Looking down I saw many pleasure craft out on the water, their wakes glittering white behind them as they turned and spun. Pristine snowy-white beaches fringed the land edged with imported Earth palms

together with purple fronders from New Freya and hair-ferns from wherever they come from. People strolled along, swam or merely paddled, enjoying the feel of the warm water. And above it all the yellow-white sun cast its warming rays. It was a place custom made – there had been some terraforming – for pleasure and relaxation. But I was here to work.

The Hercedez glided down towards a marina which was filled with the kind of yachts most people only see in Sunday supplements. It levitated to the ground next to a black SUV the size of a tank. Okay, a small tank but it still looked like it could hold its own on the battlefield. Still without speaking a word, Norin opened the doors and stepped out onto the quayside.

Now I was outside in the fresh air away from that new-car smell, I was even more impressed with this world. A gentle breeze blew in from the ocean, bringing a briny, ozone smell with it that made you want to jump into the nearest boat and sail away over the horizon. The yellow-white sun cast its strong light down and I adjusted my pupils to the tiniest pinpricks to cope with the light reflected from sparkling waves out beyond the marina.

Between the marina and a small town built of pastel nu-coral low-rises, all garlanded with exotic tropical blooms was a row of expensive looking restaurants and bars. The architect had gone for an nu-Italianate theme and it worked. There the beautiful people sat, chatting or making deals. It was a place to see and be seen. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to do much seeing or being seen as Norin pointed towards a nearby super-yacht. Crossing a short walkway, I stepped on board the sun-deck.

And then I was in a different world again. Everything was super-lux. Was that really Eurycerus hide on the seats? That distinctive brown stripe couldn't be anything else. Fine grained goldwood was laid on the floor – and I bet it was solid, not a veneer. On a marble tray stood a silver bucket filled with ice holding a genuine champagne bottle with a white cloth draped around its neck.

Then, a woman stepped out from the shade of the lounge. At least, I hoped it was a woman because anyone that perfect just had to be an artificial gynoid android custom built for a rich man's pleasure. That clunking sound? That was my jaw hitting the deck until I hauled it back and closed my mouth before I started drooling.

She was every red-blooded male's fantasy. Long blonde hair cascading down her back and over her shoulders, hazel eyes set over a snub nose and full, red lips. A perfect hourglass figure with legs that seemingly went on for metres. She crossed over to the champagne bucket showing an all-over honey tan with no white lines anywhere. And all that was between her and my thoughts was a microscopic white bikini.

"Glad you could come, Mr. Vargo. I'm Julianna. Did you have a good trip?" Even her voice was soft and musical that made you think of other things besides softness and music. She held out her hand and I shook it. It felt like a surge of electricity flowed between us.

"Err, yes, thanks," I said at last.

She smiled. "Did Mr. Norin look after you?"

"Oh, yes. Mr. Chatterbox – couldn't get him to stop talking. Quite the tour guide," I said.

Norin didn't say a word but slightly narrowed his eyes while Julianna uncorked the champagne with a gentle pop and expertly poured four glasses. Covertly I watched her movements, looking for that unnatural fluidity and grace that gynoids show. Although I'd seen reviews that the latest models were even more hi-man-like than before. I downloaded a couple of articles from the Galactoweb and rapidly scanned them before giving up. Either way, woman or gynoid, it didn't much matter.

Then the owner of the fourth glass came out from the lounge. Saveliy Yemelyanovich Fedoseyev himself. Compared with the incredibly stunning Julianna, he looked like a pedestal for a beautiful statue to be placed on. But you could see where the power lay. Julianna cast down her eyes as she handed him the champagne flute and then stepped back to the rail.

Sava lifted his glass. "To success tomorrow," he toasted in his heavy accent. We all clinked glasses and drank. The champagne was excellent with a sweet, yet nutty taste.

Turning to me, Sava spoke. Seemed like he didn't waste much time on small talk. "You understand your instructions? You are to bid on my behalf. You can spend up to twenty-five million Hydrans..."

"Which should be more than enough," I interrupted.

Sava looked at me. I decided not to butt in again.

"If that limit is reached, then call me and I will authorise an extra twenty-five."

His accent was strong but I never make a mistake over money. Twenty-five or fifty million for a piece of art! How the rich live. I had been hired to go to an auction

tomorrow on Sava's behalf and buy a sea-shell. Not just any shell, of course, but a really rare, valuable one. Anybody else would be content to collect some shells off the beach to take home as a holiday souvenir but that wouldn't satisfy an oligarch with money to incinerate.

There's a scarce, mollusc-like animal on Batavia VII – well it's not a mollusc because its petal-form shell opens in seven ways unlike an Earthly mollusc's two, but it houses a slimy, filter-feeding blob of jelly so I guess it's a case of parallel evolution – whose shell is eagerly sought after by collectors. The Kississ lives only in the shallow tropical seas of this world. It can grow to an immense size – the largest shell ever recorded was almost three metres in diameter – and under the right conditions also displays beautiful colours that are like nothing else in the galaxy. Divers hunt for them. Now you can save time by not bothering to look it up on the Galactoweb.

So that was the thing I would be bidding for. Saveliy Yemelyanovich Fedoseyev didn't want to attend himself, as that would flush out other oligarchs determined to outbid him just for the fun of it. And for that simple service, he was paying me one hundred thousand Hydrans. Chump change to him but big money for me. And then another two hundred thousand to escort his acquisition to his estate on the Russian-speaking world of Khabarovsk. There he would admire the shell until he got bored and then donate it to the Hermitage Museum in St Petersburg, Earth, itself.

Ultimately, that's what it comes down to in the end for these multi-gazillionaires. Tax write-offs. They'll do anything for a tax write-off. They love to make money but they hate giving it to the government even more. So he'd rather give away a valuable item than pay a single Hydran in tax. Odd that. Not that I would know. I have to pay my tax like everyone else – although I'm luckier than most as my

finances are based on Goldsmith's World. As far as I can see, the place was only colonised by accountants, bankers, fund managers and lawyers all eager to provide a low-tax base for interplanetary nomads like me.

Anyway, Sava, as he asked me to call him, insisted I stay on his yacht overnight before heading over to the auction tomorrow. I didn't think that was a good idea as any spies out there – and oligarchs attract watchers like rare birds bring out twitchers – would immediately know I was working for Sava. I was about to say that but one look into his dark eyes made me keep my mouth shut. At the end of the day, it was his money I was spending, not mine. And what was millions to a man who thought in billions?

So I sat there in one of the loungers with a second bottle of champagne chilling by my side. Water lapped against the side of the yacht, reflections rippling off the awning. There's harder ways of earning a living, I thought.

Dinner that evening was something special. Probably nothing if you were a fellow industrialist but to a man like me it was one of the best meals I've ever eaten. We started off with some sort of pickled fish, then moved onto a meat platter with salad, crepes and caviare. Again, probably of local origin. More fish, wrapped in puff pastry, with pink flesh that tasted totally unlike salmon. Then a massive side of aetiocetus – some sort of whale-like animal, apparently – served with real, not synthi, potatoes and vegetables. A doughy cannoli comprised the dessert and finally real coffee with mints.

And every course was washed down with fine wines and high-strength grain vodka, all imported at great expense from their home worlds. I'd have to take a system-cleanse tablet later to purge my body of all the alcohol.

The only thing missing was good conversation. Sava himself spent much of the meal on his implanted phone. He'd turned off his translator and spoke in rapid-fire Russian. I guessed he was making a commercial deal – either acquiring another business or selling one of his subsidiaries. At first, I thought he was having a major argument but towards the end of the meal, he was laughing.

Norin the bodyguard was his usual fun-loving, free-and-easy self. He sat there alternatively glowering at me or else scoping out the surroundings, alert for any changes, checking out any possible threats like snipers. I guessed he had telescopic enhancements implanted into his lenses. Couldn't blame him as more than one oligarch's life had been cut short by a sharpshooter's bullet.

So that left me and Julianna. She'd changed out of that teensy bikini and wore a short yet elegant scarlet dress that clung to every delicious curve. She sat opposite me giving me plenty of opportunity to check her out. And by the end of the meal, I was still none the wiser as to whether she was hi-man or an artificial gynoid. And I didn't care.

Her conversation was fluid, witty and yet knowledgeable. And she wasn't just looking up subjects from the Galactoweb. We talked about Dart-Racing and the prospects for the forthcoming Dathykolpian race and Bezel's chances of victory, the ongoing campaign against the Bellarmine rebels, Fedoseyev's latest business ventures (which made Norin scowl even more), and, of course, the best beaches to be seen on

here and the latest trends in fashion. It had been a long time since I'd enjoyed a conversation so much. I was sorry when Sava finally stood, said "good-night" and escorted her down to their luxury suite. Norin followed exactly one minute later.

That night I lay in my stateroom listening to waves lapping against the sides. I couldn't sleep but lay awake tormenting myself with thoughts and images of Julianna. I wondered what she was doing with Sava now. I couldn't get thoughts of that caveman lying with such a beautiful woman out of my mind even as I rolled over and tried to concentrate on tomorrow's auction.

Sunlight poured into my stateroom through the floor to ceiling glass wall. It looked like I had dropped off after all. I sat up, held my head in my hands and groaned. I'd forgotten to take that cleansing tablet and now I had the mother of all hangovers. It felt like meteors were crashing about in my skull. With my hand out, supporting myself against the wall, I made my way over to the shower and took a double length, freezing cold shower. Then I pressed the insta-dry button so I felt marginally better after that.

Checking my wardrobe, I saw a well cut navy-blue business suit hanging up. Putting it on, I saw it fit perfectly. Sava must have got my details from the office. Now I looked the part to attend the auction later.

Up on the sun deck, I helped myself to breakfast. There was no sign of Sava or Julianna but Norin was standing by the gangway. He gave me a nod, merely the briefest dip of his head. I guess he'd been polishing up on his customer service skills overnight.

After I'd finished eating, he flew me in the Hercedez over the sun-warming city towards the sales rooms. As is usually the case, the auction was being held in a luxury hotel. Landing in front of the hotel – the Bourée de Lieux – a valet whisked the Hercedez away as we entered the hotel. There was no problem finding the sales room and not just because it was well signposted. Crowds of people stood outside, networking like fury, and the air was thick with their broadcasts. I recognised a couple of the galaxy's movers and shakers but mostly, like Sava himself, they'd sent representatives to act on their behalf.

There wasn't anyone I knew so I made my way into the auction room and took a seat near the front where I could be easily seen by the auctioneer. Norin sat next to me, crossed his arms, and sat there like a statue. If he wasn't careful, someone would slip a tag around his neck and auction him off. If they did, I wouldn't bother bidding for him.

Checking the time, I noticed the auction was about to start. More people entered the room and filled the empty seats and then lined up against the walls. Servo-bots flitted around serving drinks and refreshments, the lights reflecting off their highly polished chrome bodies. A man took his place next to me. I sat bolt upright when I checked his broadcast. I knew him. Knew him well. The last time I'd seen Luis Çrámerr, he was dying with his throat slit by a Krilla – one of those vicious genetically modified rat-man terror weapons I was telling you about earlier. He'd died bravely and I'd torn out his memory chip to be fitted into his clone body.

The man turned to me and held out his hand.

"Hi – great to touch base with you, Vargo," Çrámerr said. "You bidding or just spotting?"

We shook and exchanged data. I saw he was still working for Economou interplanetary Logistics, Inc. – a big, multi-world transport company. He'd been promoted and his salary, well he wasn't an oligarch like Sava but to you and me, his salary was eye-wateringly large.

Çrámerr was tall, in his forties and handsome in a cool, Nordic way with perfectly even teeth and ruler-straight nose. He'd obviously been here on Batavia VII for some time as he'd been working on his tan. His dark hair was neatly trimmed in a currently fashionable style.

"Bidding," I admitted. By my side, Norin glowered at my admission.

"Anything take your fancy?" Çrámerr asked.

Julianna, I nearly blurted.

CHAPTER 3. BIDDING AT AUCTION.

Shaking my head at what I'd nearly revealed, I wondered whether I should tell him what I was really after, but decided it would do no harm. Çrámerr was rich but nowhere near Sava's league. "Lot fifteen," I said. Çrámerr checked the catalogue and whistled. "You're dealing with the big boys now, Vargo."

"You?" I asked.

"Here to ideate and burn off some superfluity of excess fat. Lot 34 is the best of breed in its field and would look good shelved in my moon-pod."

I'd forgotten the original Çrámerr had often spoken in business-speak gibberish and that trait had been passed onto his clone. Did him no harm though – Çrámerr actually owned a moon somewhere out there in the galaxy. Soon after, the chatter and data sharing died down as the auctioneer and her assistants entered and stepped behind the podium on the dais. She had short, purple-coloured hair and wore a smart bottle-green business suit that showcased her figure. When she had everyone's attention, she outlined the rules. Nothing unusual.

Briskly, not wanting to waste time, she started the auction. All the items were fine art in a variety of mediums. The first lot was a metre high pair of ancient Chiennoise vases in a traditional red glaze. I know that from downloading the

catalogue. The bidding was quick until only two competitors were left. Finally, the vases were knocked down for well over the guide price.

The second lot was a Davvid Mersey sculpture made, like my knife blade, from a single diamond mined from 55 Cancrrie. Unlike my blade, which was strictly functional although I liked the way it caught the light, this was an exquisite statue of two lovers embracing. The only downside was that the lovers had hideous octopoid heads, outstretched wings and appeared to be eating each other's faces. Literally. It was at once an image of great beauty and hideousness at the same time. Although I could appreciate the craftsmanship in it, I wondered who would buy it. I wouldn't have it in my home.

Again, the bidding sharply escalated until it was between a museum and a private collector. Who won? Who do you think? How can a publicly funded museum outbid some plutocrat with money burning a hole in his pocket?

The third and fourth lots went quickly. At this rate, Sava's twenty million would go nowhere. I thought about getting refreshments but decided against it. I didn't want to risk missing lot fifteen. However, a man on the other side of Çrámerr who had been outbid on lot four sighed and got up. Obviously, that was the only piece that took his fancy.

I got a surprise when Julianna slid into his seat. She flicked back her hair and smiled at me – a smile that would make any man go weak at the knees. She wore a sleeveless pale green dress that was modest yet managed to make her look oh, so sexy at the same time.

"Hey, fancy parking yourself in my ball-park and touching base?" Çrámerr asked her. His broadcasts changed to show him shaking hands with Economou's President following his recent promotion and the hectare sized office he now inhabited. Images of his family vanished from view.

"Did you bring your wife with you or is she out the way on your moon-base?" I said. Çrámerr narrowed his eyes at me.

"Thought I'd see how you were getting on, Vic," she breathed.

"Haven't got to fifteen yet," I replied, "but thanks for coming." Hi-man or gynoid who cares? When a beautiful woman shows an interest in you, us men sit up and take notice. Doesn't matter who you are or what the circumstances are.

"He's playing with the big boys, now," Çrámerr said. "He'll need some serious firepower if he's gonna compete today. It's a lion eat dog arena."

"I have some big guns behind me," I told him.

"I'm sure you have a big gun," Julianna said. "A very big gun."

Gulp. What was she trying to do? Distract me? Or was she some sort of test? Or maybe Sava intended her to be part of my reward later? Who knows with these oligarchs? They're a strange bunch – a law unto themselves.

"I think I'm the unnecessary document filler here," Çrámerr said, swapping seats with Julianna. He may be irritating but Çrámerr wasn't all bad. Julianna rested her hand on my thigh and kneaded my muscle. Gulp again.

"You're all stiff," she whispered. That was so very true. And not just my quadriceps.

I tried to put her out of my mind and concentrate as lots thirteen and fourteen came and went – both for way over the guide price. Personally, I wouldn't give them house room. Overrated tat. Then it was my turn. I sat up ready for anything. Even so, I was taken aback.

The auctioneer's robot assistants brought out the shell and placed it on a pedestal before levitating it so it could be seen by the whole room. What! Was this the piece of junk Sava wanted? In form it was a large sept-valve – a huge shell over a metre and a half in diameter which opened up in seven ways. In life it would have held the slimy sea-creature safe inside but now its hard shell was dried out and open to view. Checking the catalogue, there were a number of ways it was so special. Firstly – its sheer size. Very few *Kisisium hennessyanum*, to give it its formal name reach that size. Also, it was unmarked by battle scars or marred by parasites or even just knocks or scrapes picked up over the course of its long life.

All the same, it was a big disappointment and didn't look anything like the guidebook's glowing picture. It was mostly a drab, dull khaki with dun streaks swirling over its surface. Here and there a smear of ochre. Despite its size, I wouldn't pay millions of Hydrans for it. There was muttering from the hall as it rotated in front of us.

Then the auctioneer dimmed the lights and switched on ultraviolet lamps. Instantly, the dull shell changed from being a nondescript, boring item into an object of extreme beauty. The khakis transformed into iridescent, swirling aquamarines with

flashes of brilliant electric blue. Purple spots glimmered before being subsumed into the overall fantastic scheme. I heard a gasp of awe and realised the sound came from me. It was simply beautiful – one of the most spectacular things I'd ever seen in my travels around Orion's Arm.

Julianna leaned forward and her hand gripped my thigh even tighter. She had to be hi-man – unless they had programmed a true appreciation of beauty into gynoids now. While she was absorbed, I glanced at her face, trying to see anything that didn't ring true.

My surreptitious study was interrupted when the auctioneer banged her gavel bringing everyone's attention back. She switched off the ultraviolets and the shell became dull and boring again.

"An exceptional specimen of a Kississ shell. The guide is ten million Hydrans and I'm not going below that. I'm here to sell – who'll give me ten million?" her amplified voice carried over the crowd.

There was a pause. This was one of the high spots of today's auction. Then a voice at the back called out, "Ten mill."

That broke the dam. Immediately, there was a flood of bids.

"Eleven."

"Twelve."

"Thirteen."

"Fourteen."

And all this before I had chance to even open my mouth. Julianna leaned over to me, affording me a glimpse down her front. I averted my eyes but not soon enough. Was any natural woman so beautiful? Possibly – an oligarch like Sava could afford the very best in the galaxy. On the other hand...

"Fifteen," I called above the crowd.

"A fresh spot," the auctioneer said, acknowledging my bid.

I didn't have time to check out the other bidders' broadcasts before the bidding ramped up to twenty million Hydrans. That's serious money.

"Twenty-one," I called out, just as a servo-bot hovered at my elbow with a selection of fine liqueurs. I took a Venusian Vermouth and sipped it.

"Twenty-two," another woman called out. She wore a severely tailored black business suit and short, but immaculately coiffured hair. I guess, like me, she was bidding on behalf of someone with more money than the gross domestic product of some planets.

One of the other bidders had dropped out at the twenty million mark. He must be working for a mere billionaire and not a gazillionaire like Sava. Should have got a gig with a real big hitter, I thought. All the same, I asked Julianna to send an instaflash to Sava asking for authorisation to go up to fifty. Instantly, he confirmed that.

Reassured, the bidding shot up to thirty million. Another bidder, a big Calobar guy waved his hand and shook his head. He was out so he settled back to see who

would triumph. After thirty-four million, the contest was between me and the woman. Or more accurately, between the bank accounts of the plutocrats we both worked for.

"Thirty-six," I said.

Immediately, she came back with thirty-seven. I've been around the galaxy and know a few tricks. I wondered if I could blow her out the water by seeming like I had bottomless pockets.

"Forty," I said, jumping the bid, trying to look like forty million meant nothing to me. The auctioneer permitted herself a little smile. More commission for the sales room.

The woman I was bidding against smiled and nodded to me. "Forty five," she said. There were a few gasps from the room. People who thought small, not that there were many like that here. Now I was in a dilemma. Raise by five again and see if that worked a second time. Or just slug it out million by million and see if Sava's pockets were deeper than her employer's?

Glancing over at Julianna I got her to send another discreet instafash. Basically get onto her boyfriend (or owner if she was a gynoid, but I left that out) and see if he'd go over fifty million Hydrans. She nodded her head a fraction and then got in touch with Sava.

"Forty-six," I came back, with more confidence than I felt.

"Forty-seven," the woman said. I felt a flicker of confidence as I think, by the look of concentration on her face, she was sending off an instafash, too.

I paused to give Sava time to respond until the auctioneer looked meaningfully at me. "Forty-eight."

"Forty-nine," my opponent came back with.

Nothing for it. I raised my eyebrows but Julianna shook her head, her golden hair catching the light. Sava hadn't got back yet. I played my final shot. "Fifty."

My opponent frowned, obviously she was communing with her superiors. The auctioneer paused a moment to give her time to receive instructions. Nothing. The auctioneer raised her gavel and pointed in my direction.

"The bid is with the gentleman in the middle. Fifty million Hydrans. For the first time of asking..."

I tried to suppress a grin. We'd won. Well, Sava's nearly bottomless wealth had won. I was merely the instrument of his success.

"Fifty-one million," the woman called out, her voice clear across the room. Cancel those celebrations.

Leaning over towards Julianna, I hissed, "Has Sava got back yet? Tell him to hurry or he'll lose this."

Julianna fired off yet another urgent instafash.

"I'll have to hurry you," the auctioneer said.

Still nothing.

"The bid is with the lady against the far wall. For the first time of asking..."

"You're gonna flame out," Çrámerr said. "You're boss came under-prepared."

Now Julianna leaned towards me. "He really doesn't want to lose this, Vic," she whispered. "He must be held up, unless the Galactoweb connection's temporarily down."

"Well, what do you want me to do?" I asked.

"Balls to the wall time," Çrámerr said with a little smile. It was easy for him – he wasn't sitting here out of funds.

"For the second time of asking..."

Now I was down to the last couple of seconds. At the third call, she'd bang the gavel and that would be that. The plutocrat the woman was representing would have won and Sava wouldn't be taking the shell home. That would be a huge blow to his reputation and status.

"He really wants this," Julianna said in a hurried whisper.

I caught sight of Çrámerr's smirk before, looking up, I saw the auctioneer raise her gavel. This is what I got paid for – to take some difficult decisions.

Go for it. "Fifty-two," I called out. I desperately hoped Sava would get back to Julianna by return otherwise I'd be in big trouble for bidding without sufficient funds.

"Fifty-three," the woman said. I was starting to get fed up with her voice.

"Fifty-four." Lowering my voice, I muttered, "Has he got back yet?" A slight shake of Julianna's head. However, my heart lifted as there was a pause until my opponent offered up fifty-five.

"Think she's pushing her ceiling," Çrámerr said.

Relief flooded through me when Julianna told me, "He's authorised up to seventy." Now I was okay. Nobody would find out I'd been bidding beyond my limit.

"Fifty-six." Firm and confident now I knew I had plenty of money backing me up.

Between us, the price rocketed up to sixty-five million. The rest of the room was in total silence as the price was ridiculous now – even for such a unique, beautiful piece of art. It would look great in any plutocrat's super-palace but sixty-five million for this? Yet at the end of the day, it was nothing to me. If Sava wanted to blow multi-millions, it was nothing to do with me.

"Sixty-six," I said. I was about to ask Julianna to see if Sava wanted to authorise even more funds.

There was a shake of the woman's head.

"Are you sure?" the auctioneer said. The woman waved her hand in a downcast, negative way.

Casting her gaze around the room, the auctioneer said, "Are you all done?" Knowing my luck, I expected some other bidder to raise his hand and carry on where

the woman had left off. There was a pause – a pregnant pause I believe it's called – until the auctioneer started her final spiel.

"For the first time of asking..."

"For the second time of asking..."

C'mon, c'mon, c'mon, I muttered under my breath. Bang your gavel and put me out of my misery.

"For the third time of asking..."

Hurry up...

BANG!

CHAPTER 4. TAKING CHARGE.

For a moment, I thought I'd been shot as the gavel fell. I'd done it! I'd won! One hundred thousand commission coming my way.

Julianna jumped up and squealed with delight. Would a gynoid feel such a level of emotion? Or was she merely displaying an excellent simulation? When she hugged me a moment later, all such thoughts vanished. Who cares when she pressed her perfect body tight against mine? There were cheers from those members of the audience carried away by all the excitement. Julianna planted a kiss on my lips before stepping back.

Çrámerr stood and, gripping my elbow, shook my hand. "Well done – at the end of the day you actioned the challenge." Sure, whatever that meant.

As the auctioneer readied Lot sixteen, Julianna and I edged out of our row of seats and made our way up to the front of the room where we were greeted by one of her assistants. One man even wolf-whistled at Julianna as she passed by, her dress clinging gracefully to her figure. Like the auctioneer, her assistant wore a well-tailored business suit in pastel mauve. To be honest, the assistant looked like a younger clone of the auctioneer herself. Perhaps she was – or maybe she was merely flattering the senior woman's style in an attempt for promotion.

We completed various e-forms and Julianna transferred over eighty-six million to the auction house. Eighty-six, I hear you say? Thought you'd only bid sixty-six. That's true, but when you add in the auction's commission, planetary sales tax, Multi World Council's galactic sales tax, insurance and various other fees, the sum soon ramped up, as Çrámerri might say.

Julianna grinned hugely. "He'll be so pleased. Thank you," she said before kissing me again. I could get used to this. I'm not sure why she was so enthusiastic as any fool could have bid on Sava's behalf. However, now came the real part of my assignment – guarding the shell and keeping it safe from harm.

I watched as robots crated the shell with millimetric exactitude and sealed it with the auction house's logo. The robots placed it on a hover-sled and then stood by waiting for further orders. I assumed Sava had fixed up storage for his purchase. Norin entered the room. Now there was a man who was as cold as those metallic robots lined up against the wall. Not trusting either myself or the robots, he scrutinised the crate before stepping back, apparently satisfied.

Stepping over to him I asked where his boss wanted the shell storing. Norin forwarded an instafash telling me Sava had arranged for it to be stored in a bonded warehouse's vaults overnight and then it would be shipped off to his estates on Khabarovsk the following day. Naturally, I would be staying with it in the warehouse, just in case all the metres-thick, titanium plated walls, arrays of electronic alarms, CCTV, well trained Security Officers and all the rest of it wasn't good enough.

Robots placed the crate onto an anti-grav sled and loaded it up onto a pantechicon. I climbed into the back so I could keep an eye on it throughout and

make sure nobody pulled the old switcheroo trick. More than one buyer has found that, when they eagerly opened their crate at journey's end, what was inside wasn't worth a bean.

It was only a short journey to the space-port and Norin handled the paperwork at customs. Then we hung a left and were at the warehouse's entrance. It would do as the place looked secure, surrounded as it was by fences – the inner one advertised as being electrified, savage bear-dogs (another genetically modified monster, in case you were wondering), thick walls, forests of CCTV cameras and platoons of guards, both human and robot. The crate was unloaded and taken down to an underground storage room. The door was at least two metres-thick. It would take a laser hours to burn through.

Norin supervised the crate's installation and then stepped back, satisfied that all was in order. Julianna looked around and then gave me a kiss.

"Goodnight, Vic," she murmured. "Pleasant dreams."

And then the door swung closed, leaving me locked in with the shell while they returned to their jobs of guarding and pleasuring Sava. That kiss confused me. Gynoids are programmed to serve their owner – but you know how it is. The more intelligent a droid is the more they develop their own personality. And I wasn't even sure that Julianna was a gynoid. She could just as easily be a woman – in which case all bets were off.

Thinking about Julianna, I took a superstim pill to keep me on high alert during the night and then ate a concentrated meal pill. All the nutrients you need in a convenient capsule form. Not as good as that banquet I'd enjoyed last night but it

keeps you alive. That done, I decided to log onto the Galactoweb and catch up on the news.

Dunk and dunk again. I couldn't log on. The walls were so thick and I was underground so I couldn't get a signal. The most boring night of my life loomed. I'd rarely been without the Galactoweb – who has these days, except on some back-to-nature colonies? – and the experience wasn't good. I couldn't even close my eyes and rest as the vault was brilliantly lit and I had taken that superstim which made me hyper-alert. I paced up and down like a caged predator and cursed.

Pressing the intercom, I spoke to one of the security guys up in the control room. "Hey – can you leave me something to do?" I asked.

The guy – a true sadist if there ever was one – chuckled. "Sorry, *amigo*, no can do. The door's on a time lock so no way can we open it until eight when it's time to load your cargo onto the spaceship. Sorry." He chuckled again, enjoying my plight. "Have a nice night." I heard a click as he signed off.

I punched the door but only succeeded in hurting my fist. Nothing for it. I sat down on a plastic chair that had been provided and reviewed my memories, glad for once that I hadn't deleted them when I last backed them up.

After I'd rescued that tycoon's son, Âgustin, from the Krillaz, I'd earned a hundred thousand Hydrans and spent a large wedge of them on the sybaritic pleasures of Las Sirte. Hoo boy! Well, I had to blast those nightmare memories of Hancox 1 from my mind, didn't I? I enjoyed reliving those memories in full, technicolour vision but it wasn't as much fun as living them the first time around.

Then, after I got through them, I thought some more about Julianna. I still wasn't sure whether she was truly hi-man or gynoid but it didn't matter. Either way, she belonged to Sava and no way was I taking her from him. I've done some foolish things in my time but getting on the wrong side of a Russian oligarch would be beyond stupid. Those guys don't mess about. With their wealth – and connections – if they want you dead, then you're dead. End of. And they don't stop there. They go for your family and friends as well.

It was just as well I'd been fitted with a bionic bladder sometime in the past as there were no facilities in the vault. As you can picture, it was merely a titanium lined room with CCTV cameras fitted high on the ceiling and thigh-thick bars locking the door. All that was in it was myself and one large crate.

So I sat down and slumped in a corner and waited. And waited. And waited.

Eight in the morning announced itself when those girder thick bars retracted into the walls and the door swung open. Norin stood there together with an anti-grav sled, a blue-uniformed Security Officer who was stifling a yawn and two brushed steel robots that looked at me with their flashing yellow eyes. If I didn't know better, I would have thought those metallic creatures were laughing at me. Instead, they extended a variety of grapplers and carefully loaded the crate onto the sled and escorted it out the room.

Norin looked at me with contempt as I struggled upright and flexed my back. I heard a few creaks and I thought I should make an appointment with my doctor to sort out another course of anti ageing medication. Don't worry about it now but I'll cover

anti-ageing in another story. Basically, if you can afford it, and it doesn't come cheap, human life spans have been greatly extended.

Anyway, I stood up and followed the little procession out of the vault, along a corridor, turned right, then into an elevator that took us to the first floor. There we came to a loading bay and the pantehnicon which had brought us here. A bank official stood waiting and more e-forms were signed acknowledging transfer. The robots loaded it into the back of the pantehnicon and then we lifted off and drove away, heading through the downtown flight lanes of Verrassa.

Not that I got to see much as I was locked in the back with the crate and the robots. However, I could tell that the journey was smooth and trouble free as the pantehnicon glided along without being disturbed. The sunlight hit my eyes when the back opened and I saw we were in the space-port next to a freight shuttle. It was painted a vivid lime green and if I hadn't already worked out who it belonged to from that colour scheme then its logo, Economou interplanetary Logistics, Inc., gave the game away.

Economou are a big multi-world outfit shipping outfit and I know one of their top execs. You're ahead of me here – it's your friend and mine, Luis Çrámerr. Looking around, I half expected to see him networking or interfacing or whatever the management buzz-word of the week is but there was no sign of him. Still more e-forms were filled in – in triplicate, no doubt, customs cleared and then the robots took the crate up the cargo ramp and inside.

Norin looked at me pointedly and I followed the crate up the ramp and then made my way to the passenger seating area where more CCTV cameras ensured I

could monitor the crate every second of the journey. Did I mention that I was getting heartily sick of the sight of that box and felt I knew the crate's appearance like I know the back of my hand?

I sat and waited until the shuttle was fully loaded – which took a couple of hours – and then it blasted off, soaring up into the stratosphere and beyond entering the blackness of outer space. Accessing the shuttle's external cameras I watched as the main starship came into view. The shuttle looped around the starship as if to give us all the best possible view before entering the massive cargo bay from the side.

Like the starship which brought me to Batavia VII, this was another converted hardshell asteroid. But it was even larger being over two kilometres long and 750 metres thick at its widest. But like most asteroids, it was a knobbly, cratered object. Lights twinkled over much of its surface and white hot sunlight reflected off projecting wings, antennae, rockets, weaponry and all the other stuff you expect to see on the outside of a spacecraft.

Did I mention that a broad, lime-green stripe ran down the centre of the ship and its name – President Perseus P. Porter – also in lime-green, was highlighted by the stern?

Our transport entered the cargo bay and a corridor snaked out from the side and docked with the shuttle's airlock. There was a brief hiss as the atmospheres equalised and then we were good to go. Knowing my place in the grand scheme of things, I walked back to the shuttle's cargo area and hung about the crate.

Eventually, the ship's robots got around to collecting the crate and took it to the giant star-craft's hold. These weren't beautifully polished constructs of brushed

steel and chrome but looked like they'd worked from one end of the Orion Arm and back again. They were scuffed and battered and one even had traces of rust around an old welding seam. A nasty grating sound came as it adjusted one of its work-arms.

Safely secured in a locked hold, I was free to go. Nobody expected me to sit locked in a hold for the entire duration of the journey to Khabarovsk. At least, I hoped they didn't because they'd be disappointed.

There wasn't much cargo to take on board. Batavia VII doesn't export much – fishing trophies mostly – so it was mostly passengers on the first stage of their journeys home. Many of them were returning to Rööthersphere – a highly developed industrial world. Rööthersphere itself is a high-G world and the dense atmosphere and high gravity makes its inhabitants shorter and squat, low to the ground but generally stronger than the average. Even through my translator program, their blue-collar tones were still noticeable as the men bragged about how many fish they'd caught while the women compared shopping malls.

I sighed as I thought how I'd be stuck with them for the two weeks it would take the President Porter to reach Rööthersphere. I'd almost rather be locked in that hold with only the crate for company. Almost. However, there were compensations. The women were all glammed up, even on their journey home, and had beautifully tanned arms and legs and weren't worried about showing a little leg, even if their thighs could politely be called 'chunky'.

Perhaps there was something up with me but I couldn't be bothered. A few of them tried flirting with me, one last fling before returning to the concrete charms (I'm being ironic here) of their home world.

Instead, I was thinking of one hi-man female, or possibly gynoid – who could tell? Either way, she had got under my skin and caused an itch I couldn't scratch. So I was thinking of Julianna and how beautiful she was when – to my very great surprise – there she was coming down one of the passenger corridors.

For the second time in my life that clunking sound was caused by my jaw slamming onto the floor.

CHAPTER 5. UNDER ATTACK.

She wore a silvered, figure-hugging jump suit that left little to the imagination. No, make that very, very little. It must have been only molecules thick. She clutched a small purse in her hand. Even I recognised the designer's logo and knew that bag cost a small fortune.

"What are you doing here? Why aren't you with Sava?" I managed to say.

She shrugged and pouted, tossing her hair as she did so. "A change of plan. Sava had to charter an express direct to Earth. An important business meeting with the Tsar's industrial adviser, Count Aleksei Timurovich Pozdnyakov himself," she said, giving the Count his full title.

I whistled. Even I was impressed. Count Pozdnyakov was a legend – he'd crushed a worker's revolution by sending them all to the Gulag colonies but then he'd reformed the Tsar's dominions on Earth and off world by offering some concessions while clamping down on dissent. Sava played with some very big hitters indeed.

"Mr Laughter gone with him?"

Julianna nodded. "Yes, Norin never leaves Sava's side. He's counting on you to protect me as well as the shell." She smiled as she said that, and I guessed that Julianna could look after herself. All the same, given the choice, I'd far rather take care of Julianna than that overgrown mollusc's cast-off home. I thought I'd need to

start my bodyguard role early as two Röötherspherian men strolled past and made no secret of their admiration of Julianna's charms. Röötherspherians pride themselves on their brass necks and these two were no exceptions to the rule.

"Eh, up – tek a dekkko at the gazongas on that, Barry," the fat one said. "Don't get many of 'em to t'kilo." He made an unmistakable squeezing gesture with his hands in front of his chest.

"Don't ye be daft there, lad. Them's one o' them fembots I read about on t'web. Obvious, innit?"

I felt like punching them out but it wouldn't have done my mission much good if I'd been clapped in the brig. Instead I clenched my fists and pretended that I didn't understand what they had said. This, given that their dialect was mostly incomprehensible noises, was likely.

They turned the corner and disappeared from view.

"I'm not, you know," Julianna told me. I saw tears in her eyes and I felt an urge to lean forward and kiss them away. "I'm a real woman, not a..., a... gynoid. People always think I'm too good to be real. They don't think about how much it hurts me inside." She touched between her breasts, making impure thoughts flood my mind and I immediately blanked my emotional broadcast status.

"Well, I never doubted it," I lied. "Anyone can tell you're a hi-man." And a very lovely one, I wanted to add, but as I didn't want to end up chipping rocks in a frozen Gulag in some remote part of Orion's armpit as a result of falling out with Sava, I kept my mouth shut.

She still looked upset. "Come on, I'll buy you a drink," I suggested, taking her elbow and escorting her to the elevators. She smiled.

"We can put them on Sava's account," she said. That cheered me up and I wondered what the most expensive drink at the bar was.

There was a good choice of watering holes on the President and I took her to one which had superb viewscreens showing the Batavia system as the starship moved towards the edge of deep space. The ship was travelling through an asteroid belt at the time and an impressively cratered moon was floating past. In reality, it was thousands of kilometres away but the cameras made it look much closer.

We sat at two stools at the highly polished nalohamy wood bar. There were a few Röötherspherians at the far end but the bar's voice-muting systems kept us from hearing their raucous conversation.

The servo-bot floated over. "Champagne. The real stuff if you've got it." I said, trying to sound like the hero of the latest holovision movies.

"The '56 vintage if you have it. Not the '61 vinegar. I wouldn't wash the floor with that," Julianna said, entering into the spirit of the thing.

"Very good, sir and madam," the servo-bot intoned. Using eight of its many arms it placed two crystal flutes before us, set them on coasters, filled a silver ice-bucket, fetched down a bottle of '56 vintage, uncorked it, poured out two glasses and then set the bottle in the bucket with a genuine linen cloth around its neck to catch any condensation.

We touched glasses and drank. The clink sounded a note of sophisticated civilisation. I didn't know that was the last time I'd hear such a beautiful tone for a long time. "To an enjoyable cruise," Julianna said.

"I'd settle for a safe one," I said. Though as Julianna was with me, it promised to be more pleasant than safe. However, I would have to remember to behave myself. And the way she was sipping that champagne with her full, red lips was testing my resolve to the limit.

"You were saying that people sometimes mistake you for a fembot?" I said, pouring her a second glass.

"Yes, ever since I grew up. There's something about the way I look." Yeah, you're too good to be true, I thought. "But I remember when I was a girl growing up on New North Carolina. I remember going to school – everything."

This meant precisely nothing. The best gynoids are pre-programmed with artificial memories to make them seem more human so they can interact better with their owner. Surely she knew that. Yet who argues with their own recollections? It's what makes us who we are. Our memories are the core of our being. That's why I download mine for safety – except for those I've deleted, of course.

So I was none the wiser. I would love to strip her naked as I'm told that they have a small mole, discreetly hidden, where – if you set your retinal magnifiers very high – you can see the manufacturer's serial number. It would be fun searching for it anyway.

I tore myself away from my lascivious thoughts when somebody took the vacant stool next to Julianna. I should have expected it as why wouldn't he ship out on one of his company's own transports? It was my good friend Luis Çrámerr.

"See you're taking a high-altitude view while drilling down into the incentives offered by our luxury cruise-liner," he said.

Even from him, this was an enigmatic pronouncement. Whether she was hi-man or gynoid it took Julianna time to process this statement. I didn't bother but nodded as if I understood his management-speak.

"What are you drinking?" I asked.

"Having a fully loaded, up to the max corporate charge-account, I'll acquisition these." Çrámerr pointed to a bottle of Venusian Rose liqueur and ordered a shot. If he wanted to impress us then he failed – Julianna because she was with one of the wealthiest men in the galaxy – and me because, well, I'm not struck on show-offs. However, the Röötherspherian execs propping up the far end of the bar opened their eyes wide at such a show of conspicuous consumption.

"Ay – see tha', Hereward? Big man's drinkin' tha' rosy stuff – twa 'undred Hydrans a sip tha' is."

"Gurly stuff, tha', our Jezza. Wouldnae touch it mesel'."

The Röötherspherians were as incomprehensible as Çrámerr himself. I turned away and wondered how to suggest to Julianna that we move somewhere else, maybe make a dinner reservation on one of the several restaurants on board. But before I

could say anything, Julianna spoke. "What's that? What's that coming out from behind that asteroid?"

I looked at the viewscreen she was pointing at. At first, I couldn't see what she was looking at. There was just that massive, cratered planetoid by now edging off the screen. Behind it appeared a smaller asteroid, this one a dull grey indicating a high iron-nickel content. It came out some more and I now noticed pinpricks of lights down its side. It was another artificial construct – a spacecraft of some kind.

Frowning, I wondered what it was doing out here. I'm no space pilot but I thought the other craft was too close if we were going to engage our monkey-saddle drive and enter hyper-jump soon. As if in response to my thought, the lights in the bar dimmed slightly. It looked like power was being diverted to the bridge and other important places.

"That shouldn't be interfacing so closely to our operating parameters," Çrámerr said. He stood and smoothed down his suit. I guessed the material had a high percentage of natural fibres. But my thoughts were distracted when a red light flashed out from the other ship. The light rapidly grew larger and shot into the President and our ship juddered. My drink slopped out of its glass and onto the highly polished bar. Instantly, the servo-bot wiped the spill away. But it was no use as another light flashed out and our ship shuddered again. I noticed an external gantry melt and fall away, spinning away into the utter blackness of outer space.

"We're suffering from an aggressive hostile take-over," Çrámerr said. Even now, his love of management-speak hadn't left him.

"We're being attacked!" I shouted. "Space pirates!"

A third red shot hit our side. One of our weapons pod exploded in a shower of sparks and metallic fragments. I may not be a spacer but I know my weapons. The pirates were using excimer lasers. The red beams told me that they were standard neon lasers – probably the most common ship's weapon.

Whoever was up on the bridge knew their stuff. Like many captains, he had probably learned his trade in one world or another's navies before transferring to a better paid private sector job. He manoeuvred our craft to present as small a profile as possible while activating our force-shields. The next few shots bounced harmlessly off into outer space. Also, I felt the power surge through the hull as the President accelerated. However, our massive craft was built for cargo and passengers, not war or rapid manoeuvring. Basically, it handled like a brick.

"We should repel their overtures," Çrámerr said to no-one in particular.

More shots from the pirates slammed into the force-shields and I could almost feel them buckle under the attack.

"Do you think we'll be able to enter hyper-jump and escape them?" Julianna asked.

Çrámerr shook his head. "To be transparent, that's a negative."

"No," I interrupted. "You can't enter hyper-space with force-shields up. Something to do with magnetic effects or something."

"Can we fight them?" she asked. Have you noticed how the so-called fairer sex can be surprisingly blood-thirsty? Still, it was a fair question.

"I don't think we'll be upscaling our attack options in the foreseeable," said Çrámerr.

"No – we're a sitting target here," I said. I drained my drink – I didn't know when I'd be drinking such quality liquor again.

However, our captain had decided to show that the President had teeth. Orange light shot out from our weapons pods. I groaned. Cheapo sodium lasers only. Not in the same league as the pirate's excimer lasers. More red neon laser fire shot out from the hostile.

A voice echoed over the ship's tannoys. It was designed to sound reassuring. "Ladies and gentlemen. Although we are experiencing localised difficulties, there is nothing to worry about. Merely as a temporary precaution, please could all passengers return to their staterooms and relax in their G-couches until further notice. Servo-bot stewards will escort you to your rooms. Thank you."

The Röötherspherians finished their drinks and hurriedly left. Çrámerr shrugged his shoulders. "They see us as low-hanging fruit but they'll find we're not sleeveless. We can show them a trick or two."

How did this man become a top executive? Bribery and corruption, probably. Anyway, turning my back on Çrámerr, I watched the action on the nearest viewscreen. Red and orange beams criss-crossed against the blackness of the void. Then, a brilliant white star appeared on the pirate's hull, rapidly gaining in both size and intensity. It came from a large barbette fitted onto a rocky prow of the enemy ship. A moment later, there was an explosion, cracking our force-shields. They

shimmered and greyed out. I've seen enough holo-movies to know that's not a good sign. Another star appeared, speeding towards us.

It smashed into the remnants of our force-shields and they blinked out leaving us defenceless.

"What are they using?" Çrámerr asked aloud.

I'd kept up with my reading on the subject. Working in my business, I have to keep ahead in weapons technology. After all, who knows when I could next be facing it?

"I think they're firing Livermorium shells – it's a super-heavy metal at the high end of the periodic table. Highly radioactive – so it breaks force-shields – but with a short half-life so the radiation doesn't linger."

"Livermorium? But that's latest technology. How have a bunch of pirates got hold of that?" Julianna said.

I wondered how she knew such stuff. Then I figured that she probably picked it up from one of her boyfriend's arms deals on behalf of the Tsar. However, that was a good question, but it didn't really matter how the pirates had obtained Livermorium projectors. The fact was they had them – and were using them.

Another Livermorium shell smashed into our hardshell hull. Great chunks of rock blasted off. There was no way we could take much more damage like that without our hull cracking. Then we'd be in deep trouble as the ship's air would be sucked out into deep vacuum closely followed by our choking, freezing bodies.

Meanwhile laser blasts were criss-crossing each other. Occasionally one beam would strike another, dissipating harmlessly. But the pirate craft still had its shields up whereas we were as helpless as a turtle out of its shell. Enemy lasers burned deep into our hull, turning rock into lava where it froze into strange, tortured shapes as the molten rock met the absolute zero of outer space.

Still another Livermorium shell smashed into our hull by our propulsion rockets. The President faltered on its beam. Our craft had a hard, rocky outer shell but no way could it withstand this amount of punishment.

"We have to give up – we can't take more of this," Julianna said again.

I cast a glance at Çrámerr's broadcasts – it seemed he was busy working out the costs of surrendering the President on a spreadsheet. I'm not sure why he was so troubled – ultimately Economou would claim back the ransom from their insurers.

That's what the pirates were counting on. They didn't want to destroy us – there would be no profit in that. They wanted to capture us, mostly intact, take us back to some isolated, out of the way world, and then claim billions of Hydrans for our release. They'd claim billions but, after negotiations, pirates usually accepted about a quarter of their original demands.

The criss-crossing lasers stopped their dance and I reckoned our Captain had hoisted the metaphorical white flag. There was a warning ping from the tannoy and then the Captain made an announcement. At the same time, it was downloaded to my neural interface. It didn't sound like the Captain was at all happy about what had happened.

His tone was calm and reassuring and designed to prevent any panic. It succeeded and I wondered if minute traces of tranquil-gas had been introduced into the air system. "Ladies and gentlemen, as you aware we have been under attack and are about to be boarded. For your comfort and safety, please do not leave your staterooms until further notice. Your safety is our first concern at Economou..." There was more and he actually finished by saying, "...I and my crew hope to see you again the next time you travel."

CHAPTER 6. BOARDED BY PIRATES.

I shrugged and reviewed what I wanted to broadcast as I didn't want the pirates knowing I was an interplanetary recovery agent. Not that I was too worried about our safety. Most pirates these days are only interested in collecting a big payoff. Random murder and mayhem only brings you to the notice of the Multi World Council's navy and then they'll hunt you down, disable your ship and then aim it straight at the nearest sun. Allegedly. It was never proved at the Commodore's trial.

This isn't the bad old days of the interregnum when anything went. Whole worlds were picked clean with entire populations shipped off into slavery. When pirates operated in fleets and nearly brought civilisation to an end in some distant parts of Orion's Arm. When the larger, more powerful worlds ignored their differences and formed the Multi World Council, in part to tackle the pirate scourge.

But I was worried about the contents of the hold and more specifically, Sava's great big shell he'd paid a fortune for. I was tasked to protect it and I didn't want to fail in my mission. If the pirates discovered it, they'd ramp up their demands. Worse, I'd have Sava and all his hired goons after me, chasing me from one end of the Arm to another – from the Pit to the Wrist, as the saying has it. Probably. But I didn't want to take that chance.

Through the viewscreens, I watched as several small craft launched from the pirate and shot across the void. They were a random mix of lifeboats, a fast pinnace and something that looked as if it had been cobbled together from any old scraps.

"Last drink. It may be some time," I said and ordered us a magnum of the best champagne behind the bar.

"Put it on my tab – as a goodwill gesture from Economou," said Çrámerr. That was decent of him. We three clinked glasses.

"Hope we're not going to be held captive too long. Sava will miss me," Julianna said, wiping away a tear. Genuine emotions or just what she'd been programmed with? I was still none the wiser.

"Probably not," Çrámerr reassured her as he put his arm around her shoulders. A gesture that made me see red. Well, any red-blooded male would resent Çrámerr at that point. "Last time one of our ships was taken, we got it back in under three months. It's the endless negotiating that takes time."

By the time we'd finished our champagne, the pirate craft were out of sight and I reckoned they must have docked. Of course, they'd secure the bridge, power plant, life support systems first but I knew we'd be hearing from them soon.

And I wasn't mistaken. Shortly after, the Captain issued another broadcast requesting all passengers to assemble in the main atrium. It was the largest place on the ship, apart from the cargo holds of course, but the holds had no air.

"Let's go," I said and we made our way down to the atrium along with a couple of other passengers who had also ignored the Captain's request to return to

their staterooms. We found ourselves in a crowd of people from many different worlds. There was a large number of Röötherspherians and they were all trying to look tough and unimpressed. There was even a few pale skinned Russians mixed in the crowd. And they were genuinely tough and unimpressed. Nobody can do dead-pan stoicism better than a Russian.

Then the door at the gallery at the top of the atrium opened and a man – I think it was originally a man – stood there. That's the trouble with the uncontrolled gene splicing that went on some centuries ago – not every hi-man is 100% homo sapiens.

He had a broad forehead, incredible heavy jaws which showed yellowed fangs when he yawned, more facial hair – okay, call it fur – than I liked, deep-set brown eyes with no trace of pity or mercy in them. Through his flattened, ape nose was a thick gold ring. He stood over two metres tall and was powerfully built. I reckoned he shared DNA with certain species of carnivorous anthropoid apes.

He wore blackened and battered, well worn battlefield armour put together from several different manufacturers. In his great paw he carried a M-88 Metallist Hi-Ripper – about sixty centimetres long with an extended magazine. It's a stubby, brutal weapon that does what it says – if he pulled the trigger, it would rip through us standing down below, shredding us into ribbons. In short, it's a nasty but effective close-quarters weapon.

"Ugly lookin' booger there, Tavy," one of the Röötherspherians whispered.

"My name is Knohahgginarebagz," the ape-man announced in a deep bass voice. "Captain of the Objurgatory." He paused, as if we should be impressed by this

news. Unfortunately, nobody had heard of the sesquipedalian named pirate or his ship before.

Another pirate stepped out from his Captain's shadow. Like his leader, he was tall. Unlike him, the top of his head was bald. The rest of his face was covered with fur except where an ink-brier scar defaced him, competing with a fading holo-tattoo of a moth-of-prey. He wore the bronzed armour of an officer of the Praetorian Guard which, if he'd taken that in combat, rather than merely stealing or buying it from another pirate, proved he was one tough dude. He'd give Norin a run for his money.

"I'm Ghomatzaki McGraw." Unlike his apish leader, he didn't pause for acknowledgements. "Behave and you'll come to no harm."

Unfortunately, his leader chose that moment to open his fanged mouth in a wide grin which rather spoiled the effect. A few women screamed. And, in fairness, so did some men.

"We will start checking passenger IDs while mech-bots complete repairs to the hull and drives before we enter hyper-jump," Ghomatzaki told us. Two pirates brought in a table and hand scanners and set them up near the atrium's doors. Obediently, we formed an orderly queue and proceeded to be verified while the pirates checked us off against the President's register. I wasn't too concerned as I usually travel pretending to be a moderately successful freelance writer. I altered my broadcasts to reflect this.

There was nobody of interest among the passengers. Sure, some of the Röötherspherian executives might have been worth holding for ransom but

Röötherspherians are notoriously tight-fisted and hate parting with 'brass' as they call Hydrans so it's not worth the hassle of holding onto them.

Trouble only started when it was our little group's turn. As a senior Vice-President of Economou with a stratospheric salary, Çrámerr was definitely worth hanging onto. "But you're not seeing the whole game-play here," Çrámerr blustered to the pirate. "You need me batting on your side in order to maximise your return."

I wondered why he hadn't adjusted his broadcasts to make out that he was merely some lowly overworked and underpaid junior exec with his foot on the first rungs of the corporate ladder. Then the pirates would have taken little notice of him and included him in the general release. As it was, he was a valuable bargaining chip.

The pirate, an ugly looking Cyclops – yet another by-product of gene-splicing – called his leader over. The ape-man Knofahgginarebagz looked Çrámerr over. "Bet you think you're something special, big chief. Bet you think you own the universe, don't you?"

Keep silent, I mentally willed Çrámerr. But he couldn't resist boasting. His broadcast changed to show a rocky moon orbiting a pink-and-blue swirled gas giant.

"Well, actually, I bought this moon a few years back. Only a little home-from-home, somewhere to decompress and let off steam from my high-pressure job. You wouldn't believe the mortgage repayments on the place..."

The pirates looked on in amazement.

"We're in the wrong jobs, lads," Knofahgginarebagz said to his crew. Turning back to Çrámerr, he said, "Your ransom's just gone up by ten mill. Hope Economou

thinks you're worth it, otherwise..." And Knofahgginarebagz made a throat slitting gesture.

Despite being in the running for most irritating hi-man in the universe, Çrámerr wasn't lacking in the courage department. He merely looked coolly at the brutal features of the pirate captain. "I am."

For a moment, I thought Knofahgginarebagz would strike Çrámerr to the floor – or should that be deck? – but he mastered himself. "Fifteen mill, then," he snarled.

Turning to Julianna, who was next in line, the pirate captain seemed taken aback by her extreme beauty. He deepened his already bass voice until it was a subterranean rumble. "Well, hello," he said, running his great paw through her golden tresses while ogling her figure. "I could make your captivity very comfortable, you know what I mean?"

Displaying incredible self control, Julianna didn't scream or shudder. "I am Yemelyanovich Fedoseyev's girl. You don't want to get on the wrong side of him."

The big ape-man checked his data banks and whistled – or at least tried to make a whistling sound. "Very impressive. No doubt he'd pay a lot to get you back. But he's not here and I am. Maybe I should offer him a reduction for damaged goods, what d'you think?"

Under her tan, Julianna paled and I saw Çrámerr bunch his fists. The exec went up in my estimation. However, I stepped forwards.

"Excuse me. Sava told me that she is a gynoid. He's programmed her so that if anyone other than himself uses her, then she'll explode. Great way to go, I guess, but a hell of a price to pay for one night's passion."

Julianna looked at me wide-eyed. Did she really think I was telling the truth? Knofahgginarebagz looked at me from those deep eyes of his.

"And who are you?" he rumbled, turning to me. He checked my broadcasts. "Writer are you, Vargo? Written anything I might have read?"

I doubted if he'd ever read anything. "Historical fiction mostly, set during the Second World War. Back on old Earth."

"Never heard of it."

"No? Well, it was one of the worst wars before the Space Age. Tens of millions got wiped out. Well over a millennia ago so don't suppose it matters now....," I was waffling and then disaster struck. The bald ape-man, Ghomatzaki McGraw, approached.

"If he's a writer, then I'm a Röötherspherian oil changer. That's Vic Vargo – an interplanetary recovery agent. He broke up my smuggling ring from out of Wilfred's World."

Now he mentioned it, I remembered that job. Unfortunately, I'd deleted and stored most of my memories from that time – you know how it is. I vaguely recalled something about a gang smuggling hi-tech military computer components to an interdicted dictatorship somewhere.

Knofahgginarebagz looked at me with new respect. "Nice try, Vargo. Should we throw you out the airlock now – or later?"

"Later would be better. But you should ask yourself why I'm on board." I was willing to trade information for my life.

"Go on – but it better be good," Knofahgginarebagz told me.

"Well, I've already saved your life by telling you about Sava's gynoid's surprise package. Now I'm going to make you rich. In the hold is a shell I'm guarding – a Kississ shell – which Sava paid sixty-six million for. That's got to be worth something."

The two pirate leaders looked at each other. "Okay – you've earned yourself passage – a passage to hell," Knofahgginarebagz said. Turning to the Cyclops, he told the pirate to lock us in Çrámerr's stateroom and keep us under guard.

Jabbing a laser-pistol at us, the Cyclops escorted us to Çrámerr's suite and locked us in. The pirates knew what they were doing as we had no access to the President's onboard computer and the viewscreens were disabled. We sat in the luxury stateroom and waited. I knew the pirates would be processing the other passengers, but I doubted if they would find any as valuable as us three. While we cooled our heels, I heard mech-bots repairing the damage caused by the battle and preparing the ship for hyper-jump.

Eventually, long after we had run out of things to say, everything must have been in order for Knofahgginarebagz's voice came over the tannoy, ordering us to lie on our G-cocoons and relax. Çrámerr pressed a button and three cocoons ascended

from the floor. We lay back and the cocoons moulded themselves perfectly to our bodies. They were comfortable and their combination of mild hypnotics and massage ensured we were sufficiently relaxed to enter hyper-space.

Then came that unusual and indescribable sensation of entering hyper-space. The best I can do is to say that it's not unlike being sucked up a series of plug holes. Yes, up. And if that sounds odd, it's because it is. People aren't meant for hyper-space.

Anyway, we were there and once we'd entered, our bodies soon adjusted to the sensation and we stepped out of our cocoons as soon as we felt able. As the view-screens had been disabled and we had no access to the computer, we were left with plain walls to look at. Fortunately, Çrámerr had brought plenty to read.

"Where do you think we're going?" Julianna asked.

"Some out of the way hole," I said. "Somewhere the MWC navy won't find us."

And that was more true than I knew. Apart from one time when I was taken to the hold to show Knofahgginarebagz and Ghomatzaki McGraw the crate containing the Kississ shell, we were confined within Çrámerr's stateroom. We entered and exited hyper-space several times over the next couple of months but, with no idea where we were, we could have been almost anywhere in the Arm.

The pirates behaved decently towards us – apart from leering at Julianna when they brought us food. We were obviously far more valuable alive than dead. Eventually we popped out of hyper-space for the last time. The pirates reactivated the view-screens and I saw our destination. There was nothing to get excited about – or so

I thought at the time. How wrong I was. All I saw was an Earth sized world smothered with dense, grey clouds. It looked depressing. Not long after, the pirates herded us all to the atrium and took us to the shuttle bays.

"Where is this place?" I asked one of the more civilised looking pirates – one who didn't look like he'd kill you just for the fun of watching you bleed out before him.

"You won't have heard of it but it's called Sepharvaim."

As the shuttle ferried us down to the surface, I checked the limited data I could gather from the shuttle's tenuous connection to the Galactoweb. What do they say? Forewarned is forearmed but what I read made my heart sink. The pirates couldn't have found a more inhospitable base for their captives if they'd searched out the entire galaxy. There would be no escape.

Sepharvaim is a much younger planet than Earth – only about one billion years old instead of Earth's four and a half billion. Like with Earth at that stage of its development, the major cometary bombardment had stopped, allowing a rocky crust to form. At that stage, Earth had a poisonous atmosphere of methane, ammonia, carbon dioxide and water vapour. The water vapour stayed in gaseous form until the bombardment stopped allowing the planet's surface to cool below a hundred degrees Celsius.

Only then did water condense into rain and pour down onto the land. Gradually, water collected in low lying areas which eventually became primitive oceans. This all took several million years to accomplish so I guess Sepharvaim was

looking at a never ending rain storm. I guess that, maybe in a few billion years, this planet would be a pleasant place to live.

But I'd never live long enough to see that time.

CHAPTER 7. WELCOME TO SEPHARVAIM.

The shuttle touched down onto a patch of smoothed rock in front of a cluster of squat, blocky buildings whose lights were only distantly visible in the monsoon. The light outside was dim at best and rain lashed the shuttle's hull with a drumming sound and ran in torrents down the portholes. A bulky, high-sided personnel carrier – some military surplus looking thing – trundled out from one of the larger buildings and docked at the shuttle's airlock. We all shuffled aboard and then it took us to the buildings.

They had been built from local grey stone and Konkreet and looked plain and functional apart from steeply pitched roofs. Water cascaded down from the roofs and sluiced away to a nearby river. For a moment, I was surprised there was no fence surrounding the buildings but then I realised there was nowhere to run to. Nowhere at all.

As I peered through the porthole, I spotted a shooting star flame through the soupy atmosphere. Looked like the cometary bombardment hadn't quite ceased. As it crashed behind a range of low mountains, I made a wish. No, I'm not superstitious but old habits and thoughts die hard. I turned away from the dispiriting scene.

The transporter carried us into a barn-like structure. Heavy metal doors slid down behind us and I heard the muffled hum of an atmosphere changer. When a green light flashed over the carrier's door and it opened wide, we all trooped off and stood in

the barn. The air in the barn was hot and clammy. One or two of the Röötherspherians complained.

"You don't like it – take a hike," the pirate guard snapped. "Outside the air temperature is over eighty-five deg C, humidity one hundred per cent. The air is poisonous. It'd be a toss-up whether you'd boil or choke first."

That shut up the Röötherspherians.

"Good news is, you've got all the comforts of whichever sorry planet you're from. There's food and water and once Economou pays up, you'll all be free to go. Captain Knofahgginarebagz is a man of his word."

That was good to know, although personally I wouldn't have trusted the ape-man further than I could throw him. About one metre on a good day. The pirate crew led the passengers away, the Röötherspherians still moaning like drains. As high value captives, us three were held separately. We were taken to another building and locked in.

"Wait there – Captain Knofahgginarebagz has plans for you," the pirate said as he slammed the door. An instant later, I heard the buzz as a magnetic lock engaged and then the hum of a low-grade force-field. They certainly didn't mean for us to escape.

In the quiet, I fiddled with the view-screen and looked out at the dismal scene. I saw the landing strip, the huddle of buildings, the low mountains. And constant, unending, torrential rain. Lightning flashed over the peaks. There would be no let-up

in my lifetime. Turning to Çrámerr, I asked him how long it would take Economou to pay the pirate's ransom demands.

"String theory," he said, enigmatically.

"What do you mean?" Julianna asked him before I could.

"Meaning, 'how long is a piece of string?' There all sorts of factors to be equated. Like political pressures, how valuable the spacecraft is, commercial dynamics..."

"So basically we're on our own?"

"No – as a Vice-President, I'm a high-value commercial asset and the board will pull out all the stops to get me back onside."

I wondered about that. The company I work for is nowhere near the size of Economou interplanetary Logistics, Inc. but there are men who would happily step into my shoes without a second thought. Some would even stab me in the back to get there as well. I know who they are and I keep my eye on them. Yes, that most certainly includes you, Peterson.

However, at Economou, I knew there must be loads of thrusting, dynamic executives all eager to fill Çrámerr's shoes. They would have mastered his strange management-speak and would also be pushing hard for promotion. Depends how much the board wanted him back.

But I had a different problem. I'd failed and I'd never failed before. That's why I was the best interplanetary recovery agent in Orion's Arm. That's why I get the best

– and most lucrative assignments. Yet here I was, stuck on this hell-hole while the pirates held Sava's Kississ shell – and his consort (or gynoid). That wouldn't look good on my CV.

But for the time being, I was at a loss. Without a protective suit, I couldn't leave this building. With a temperature of over eighty-five C and a poisonous atmosphere, I'd be dead before I got ten paces.

Still there were compensations. In the form of Julianna. And our suite – although basic – wasn't too bad. It was better than the alternative. Which was death.

Later that day – or early the next – Knofahgginarebagz himself entered our suite. He wore a brown heavy protective suit that made him look even more bulky than before. Water dripped from his suit and onto the tiled floor where it steamed in the cooler air.

The ape-man pointed at me. "You. Come with me," he snapped, throwing a spare suit onto the floor before me. As he did so, I noticed he had a dagger strapped onto his belt. I knew that blade – knew it well. It was my own blade carved from a solid diamond. It cost a small fortune and it had saved my life on many occasions. I wasn't happy about seeing it at the ape-man's side but what could I do? Nothing.

"You only had to ask," I said mildly. I slipped on the suit and sealed it. Çrámerr checked the seals for leaks.

"Take care, Vic," Julianna mouthed as I followed Knofahgginarebagz out the airlock and into the rainstorm beyond. Water rattled against the insulated cloth. The

suit smelled foul – of old sweat and body odour. Don't pirates ever take showers? Or is it part of their macho image to smell bad?

I studied my surroundings carefully as we left our building and crossed a wide, cleared area. In the driving, torrential downpour, I couldn't see much. The clearing was mostly flanked by buildings, some obviously used for accommodation, but Knofahgginarebagz took me to a long, low metal structure that had to be a storage warehouse of some kind.

As we walked, I saw a few more distant meteor strikes. It seemed as if this world was undergoing a cometary shower but as Knofahgginarebagz didn't look worried, I tried not to show any emotions. The percentage chance of being struck by falling space rocks is very small anyway.

Knofahgginarebagz unlocked a pedestrian door set next to a larger vehicular gateway. We stepped into an airlock, through my suit I heard the hiss of an air interchange, and then on into the main warehouse itself. We unsnapped our helmets and I was glad to breathe fresher air again.

It wasn't as full as I expected. I sort of expected something you'd expect from a child's holo-movie about space pirates. You know the sort of thing: a warehouse crammed to the ceiling with treasures looted from one end of Orion's Arm to the other. Jewels, high-tech machine parts, valuable artworks, high-powered sports-flyers, furs and hides from endangered species, bottles and barrels of rare liqueurs and sad-eyed slaves waiting to be sold on in one or other worlds where slavery is legal – or at least goes on under the authorities' noses.

Instead, there wasn't much here and I guessed that their previous stolen property had not long been fenced. Knofahgginarebagz led me over to a well-known crate and pointed it out to me. I looked at it. Knofahgginarebagz took out a HandPad and scrolled down the cargo manifest. His evil apish eyes glared at me.

"So this thing is worth sixty-six mill?" he growled, shaking his head. "Let's have it open and see it."

"Do you think that's a good idea? I mean, I'm just a guard – not an art specialist."

"Just as well I've got some servo-bots who are programmed to handle delicates. Let's see it." The word 'delicates' sounded odd coming from Knofahgginarebagz's fanged maw. He pressed his HandPad and two multi-armed robots swooped from out of the corners.

"Open that crate – break what's inside and I'll have you dismantled. Got that?"

"Yes, sir," one of the robots said. Its voice was tinny and mechanical and I hoped its handling techniques were better than its vocalisation. I sat on another nearby box and watched as the two servo-bots rapidly unscrewed the crate, their multi-arms working quickly, then stacked the sides neatly and undid the packaging.

Soon, there it was, exposed in all its glory. One and a half metres of dull, disappointing nothing. Knofahgginarebagz looked at me.

"You should see it under ultraviolet. It looks very different then," I told him.

"I know what I'm doing. I am aware of the special properties of *Kisisium hennessyanum*. But no way is that worth sixty-six mill of anyone's money. I won't get anywhere near that amount for it."

"Oligarchs," I said. "Money's meaningless to those guys. I wouldn't pay that much for it myself but if they want something bad enough, then they've got to have it."

"Something smells fishy about the whole deal," he grumbled.

I sniffed the air. The shell had been thoroughly cleaned out and I couldn't smell anything fishy. Only the stench of under washed pirate leader but I didn't tell him that.

"Well, at least we know it's undamaged. I tried to keep our shots away from the cargo holds but sometimes accidents happen." Turning to the servo-bots, he commanded that they re-crate the shell.

On the way back to the airlock, I asked how long he intended to keep us passengers but he didn't answer me. He seemed deep in thought – probably contemplating the folly of people with more money than sense. He escorted me back to our suite but took my suit away with him when he left. I hadn't really expected he'd forget about it.

When I entered our room, I heard Çrámerr telling Julianna, "My wife doesn't appreciate the 24/7 365 commitment of the modern work-life interface. I'm a work hard, play hard kinda guy."

Julianna was sitting on an easy chair with an unreadable expression on her face. All the same, I didn't want Çrámerr getting over-friendly with her. This out of the way world hadn't been connected to the Galactoweb – or else dampers had been fitted to these buildings. Either way, nobody was broadcasting anything so he couldn't show us his vast office, teams of lackeys and underlings, personal moon home, chauffeured private shuttle etc. We were strictly on our own, cut off from the rest of hi-manity.

"When they cloned you, did the docs get rid of that embarrassing social disease at the time? Oops, sorry," I said, putting my hand over my mouth.

Julianna grinned at me but Çrámerr gave me a foul look. That probably put the temporary blocks on his take-over bid.

All the same, we were thrown back on our own devices with no idea how long we would be confined for. I wouldn't have minded being alone with just Julianna for company – unless her gynoid programming was deeply ingrained, I might have got somewhere. And if she was a real, live hi-man, I would definitely have got somewhere. I saw the way she looked at me when she thought I wasn't looking.

But we had Çrámerr in with us. He really missed his thrusting, corporate boardroom environment and spent a lot of time mooching about. He tried to engage us in discussions about corporate strategy, ultra-futures, takeover bids and leveraged finance but we weren't that interested. Weeks passed and I guessed that when we got back to civilisation, we'd all be deleting this time from our memories.

The pirates were polite and after that initial visit with Knofahgginarebagz to the warehouse, I didn't see him again. They brought us food, made sure we were okay but that was about it. Every time I looked out of the inset porthole I was greeted by the same view of distant black mountains veiled by constant rain. Occasionally, as if to break the monotony, a distant meteor strike lit up the horizon.

We endured. That's all we could do. We talked about escape but with the lethal environment outside there was nothing we could do. We speculated as to how negotiations were proceeding and how long we'd be stuck here. However, the pirates never told us any news. Occasionally I wondered about the Röötherspherians and whether they had yet been released but the pirate guards never told us about them neither. More importantly, they never told us how negotiations for our release were proceeding.

More weeks passed. We slept, ate, talked, sat silent, and looked out the window. And argued and bickered and squabbled.

On a Nineday, it was the same routine as usual. Same old, same old. The pirates brought in our meals and placed them on the metal table. As always, there were two of them, one to serve the food and collect the empties while a second stood by the airlock and covered us with his weapon. They were efficient and had obviously looked after hostages before. Their protective suits steamed and dripped water onto the floor making them look like prehistoric animals newly emerged from the slime.

I wasn't expecting anything out of the ordinary and was doing my exercises, keeping myself in trim. I'd just done my fortieth squat thrust while holding the metal

table out at arm's length to maintain upper body strength. Both Çrámerr and Julianna worked out but not to my extent. The pirate watched me idly – he'd seen it all before and doubtless he'd see it all again until our ransoms were met.

Then a flash of light lit up the porthole followed an instant later by a tremendous explosion.

CHAPTER 8. BREAKOUT 1.

It sounded as if an old-style hydrogen bomb had been detonated outside. The earth shook like it was jelly and not solid rock. A deafening boom washed over us. Çrámerr, who was taking the food trays from the pirate, fell against the other man and they fell in a tangled heap of arms and legs. Julianna tumbled out of her easy chair her mouth open in an unheard scream of surprise and fear. The pirate by the airlock rocked on his feet and looked as shocked.

They don't call me the best interplanetary recovery agent in the galaxy for nothing. Okay, they don't call me the best interplanetary recovery agent in the galaxy at all. That's how I like to operate – under the radar, my skills known only to those who matter. As I stumbled forwards, unbalanced by the tilting floor and the heavy metal table I was holding, I flung it at the pirate by the airlock's door.

It caught him square on the chest before I fell flat on my face. Didn't do him much damage, especially in that thick protective suit he wore, but it knocked him over. Like a fool, he dropped his weapon and it skittered across the bucking floor. He was fast – I'll give him that – but I was faster. I was up from my sprawl in a nanosecond and on the pirate. His hand was stretching out for his pistol but I kicked it away into the room.

Kicking him in the chest made no impact – not in the soft slippers I had on against that protective suit, so I lifted up the metal table by two legs and swung it like

a clumsy club against his head. It didn't do much to improve the pirate's gorilla-like appearance. A spray of blood splashed out over the wall and floor. A second, more savage blow put him out for the count.

No time to pride myself on taking him out so quickly. Looking around, I saw Çrámerr wrestling the second pirate. Çrámerr may be an irritating specimen of the hi-man race but he wasn't lacking in neither the courage nor uptake departments. That's two reasons why he was a top V-P of Economou. He'd seen what I'd done and reacted instantly.

However, his pirate was obviously a veteran of countless starport bar fights and knew how to handle himself. He was a squat, muscular ape-man with straightened black hair and several scars crossing his face. Guess he thought they added to his fearsome appearance. I couldn't take a wild swing with my table for fear of hitting Çrámerr so I threw my arm around the ape-man's throat and hauled him back away from Çrámerr.

He made a strangled sound and jerked his hands back behind his head, his thumbs seeking my eyes. But that left his face open and vulnerable. Çrámerr snatched up a fallen plastic spoon, reversed it and plunged the handle deep into the pirate's eye.

He screamed as his eyeball popped and his hands flew back to his face trying to push back the incredible pain he was feeling. I tightened my grip on his neck, cutting off his air supply. I maintained my choke hold and gradually, the pirate's struggles weakened and ceased. Only when I was sure he wasn't faking it, did I release my hold. He fell face forward onto the tiled floor and didn't move.

For a moment I felt sorry for the pirate. Not a nice way to die. He hadn't been a bad man in his own way – uncommunicative and unfriendly – but he'd never harmed us. Well, I thought, if you take up a life of crime, then a violent death is always on the cards. That's the way it goes. I put the man from my mind.

Panting with exertion, I stood. Julianna held the pirate's pistol and I took it from her. I wondered why she hadn't used it. Of course, gynoids are usually pre-programmed not to take life – but maybe she was merely shocked and unused to fast-paced combat situations. Glancing at the pistol, I saw it was a Maz-Blazter, a standard energy weapon. Not my favourite but better than nothing.

Çrámerr grinned. "So what's the gameplay, Vargo? Can't pretend these two got caught in the explosion."

No. There was no way we could get away with that. We'd nuked our spaceships, as the saying has it.

"Right – this is what I'm thinking. We need to get out of here, rescue the President's crew – or at least the essential ones – then steal a shuttle and get back on board the President. Then hyper-jump out of here."

Çrámerr grinned, his cool Nordic face lighting up. "Sounds inspirational – and just think of the massive bonus when we save the President."

I'd forgotten how money motivated he was. And rescuing a multi-billion Hydran craft would be another feather in his cap. Another step on his way to the Board of Directors.

"I'm not leaving without Sava's shell," Julianna said. And that made things much more difficult. I didn't want to leave it behind neither. Failure wasn't an option for me – no excuses, no exceptions.

No time to waste. I tugged off the protective suit from the ape ape-man I'd strangled. Unsurprisingly, it didn't fit too well. "Çrámerr, you're coming with me. Get dressed." Çrámerr was a known quantity, I'd fought with him before against swarms of Krillaz on Hancox 1 so although he was too gung-ho and bloodthirsty I knew what he was capable of.

Julianna looked a little annoyed but I just didn't know how she would cope in a sudden emergency. And if she was a gynoid, then she might not be able to fight anyway. I let her check our seals and then I picked up the second Maz-Blazter and tucked it into its holster. The protective suits' helmets concealed our identities and I was pleased to see that the life-support systems were nearly fully charged. We had hours.

"Let's go," I told Çrámerr. Dragging the pirates' bodies through the airlock, we left Julianna to clean up our suite. That way, if other pirates checked, she might not get into trouble. She could plausibly explain that they left after dropping off our food. I hoped so, anyway. How she'd explain our absences I didn't know. Maybe she could say we were in the bathroom. Together? Hmm...

I pressed the button, the airlock rapidly recycled the air and then, with a second press, the outer door opened. Gesturing for Çrámerr to stay back out of sight, I stepped out into the open. Immediately, rain lashed down upon me. It was like standing under a waterfall. Water poured over the open ground before me, sluicing

away into drainage ditches where it would finally end up in this world's forming oceans.

But that didn't concern me. Men in protective suits ran around like ants after their ant-hill has been kicked in. Under high-powered arc lamps casting bright white light over the scene it was easy to see what had happened. A meteor had smashed into the base, demolishing a couple of structures – maybe storage sheds but it looked as if a fusion-generator power plant had been damaged as sparks and electrical bolts flashed up into the clouds.

A new crater, still smoking, took up the end of the clearing. We had been lucky as only another hundred metres or so it would have smashed into our building, killing us all instantly. It would have ended our problems at a stroke but I breathed a sigh of relief it had missed us. A stroke of pure luck it had impacted where it had.

Pirates were moving vehicles out of the way, others were tackling the blaze while a knot of men stood around the burly form of Knofahgginarebagz as he directed operations. Others seemed to be rubber-necking and getting underfoot. Basically it was a scene of organised chaos. Perfect. Nobody would be checking up on the two dead men for a while and all the confusion gave Çrámerr and I perfect cover.

Ducking back into the open airlock, I called Çrámerr out. Together, we hauled out the pirates' bodies and dragged them through the deluge until we came to a dip in the ground well out of sight of the main base. No reason for anyone to stumble across them there. We left their bodies in the dip where they lay forlorn in a puddle of muddy water.

Not wanting our radio transmissions to be overheard by any pirates monitoring them, we touched helmets.

"First things first," I said. "We need to make sure there's someone who can fly a starship. The captain or some of his crew. Then we need a shuttle to get us off-world. We'll want more protective suits. And also, we're not leaving without Sava's shell."

"A long shopping list, my friend. But doable – though we'll need to get all our ducks in a row. Let's go."

Together we crossed over to a well-illuminated three-storey building made out of prefabricated Konkreet slabs. Among the collection of buildings and outbuildings, it seemed the most likely to be the accommodation block as, in the perennial gloom of this world, its lights stood out brilliantly and reflected off the surface water as rain poured off its steep sided roof and flowed across the hardpan. We kept our heads down as the deluge bounced off our suits. There was no let-up – and wouldn't be for the next few million years.

Çrámerr flashed me a grin as I pressed the airlock's opening button. There was no electronic key needed as who would leave this building in order to suffer a terrible death? Any prisoners of the pirates were as secure as any felon held in one of the MWC's super-max penal colonies.

We stepped inside the moment it opened and waited for breathable air to cycle through. As soon as it did, I took the lead, Maz-Blazter raised. On the inside, we found ourselves in a corridor. Fortunately, it was deserted. Çrámerr wasn't anybody's fool – that's why he was a VP at Economou. He blocked the air-lock's interior portal

so it couldn't close until it was unblocked. That would stop the pirates on the outside coming in through this entrance. We took off our helmets and breathed deep of the building's fresher air as the pirates protective suits smelled rankly of bodily secretions.

Doors – all closed – lined both sides of the corridor.

"Wanna put your money where your mouth is?" I asked Çrámerr. "Open one and I'll cover you."

I had to hand it to Çrámerr. As I've said before, he was no coward. Aiming his own Maz-Blazter at the opening, he pressed the wall-mounted control panel. A green light shone and the door slid open. Lights flickered on revealing a store room lined with more protective suits. They looked like desiccated brown corpses hanging there from the walls. Various tools were stored on racks or in boxes on the floor.

"Useful," Çrámerr commented.

"C'mon," I said. "We've got loads to check out."

We found little else of interest on the first floor – a canteen and kitchen area that didn't look as if it would pass any hygiene inspection. Chairs were scattered about in the rec room as if the pirates had all left in a hurry – which they had. We came to a bank of elevators and rode up to the second floor. As the doors opened, I pointed my Maz-Blazter both ways up and down the corridor but there was nobody in sight.

We came to a door that wouldn't open to my touch. Its control light stayed adamantly red.

Çrámerr raised his sculpted brows. "Looks like we may be steering towards the right ball-park here."

"Stand back," I said, aiming the Maz-Blazter at the panel. Well, it works in all the holo-movies so why not? I aimed and fired. A bright red bolt flashed from the muzzle, exploding against the panel in a shower of sparks. An acrid smell of burning plastic hit my nose and I coughed. I fired a second shot and this time the panel itself exploded. There was a crackling, popping sound and then the door itself slid open with a sad groan.

We stepped into a well appointed stateroom. A frightened looking woman stood against the far wall by the view-screen. She held a plastic knife from her last meal before her body and assumed a karate stance.

Aiming my Maz-Blazter kept her from doing anything stupid. She was a small, petite woman, brown skinned with jet-black hair and liquid almond eyes and I guessed that her ultimate origins were somewhere from Earth's South Asia region. She wore a lime-green jacket and trousers – the uniform of Economou Logistics.

She frowned. "Aren't you Luis Çrámerr? One of our VPs?" she asked looking over my shoulder.

Çrámerr smiled as he stepped forwards. "Correct. And you would be...?" Without access to the Galactoweb, he was at a bit of a loss. Not that that ever stopped him.

"Nanisha Suna Paravithana, Under Captain of the President Perseus P Porter, sir," she said. Her voice was sweet but with a definite off-world accent.

"Pleased to meet you, Captain," Çrámerr said. "Can you approximate the location of your crew and can you co-ordinate us off this position?"

Under Captain Nanisha seemed totally clued-up. Well, you don't become captain of a star-craft if you're a dim-bulb and she understood Çrámerr's speech without the benefit of a translator.

"Some of the essential crew – the engineering and maintenance people mostly, together with the Chief Captain – are up on the President repairing any damage caused during the fight. I know some flight crew are being held here. As to the stewards and the like, well I guess they've either been ransomed or sold as slaves. But if we can reach the President then we should be able to escape, sir."

"Sounds like you're a Grade-A positive thinker and reading from my manual," Çrámerr said approvingly.

"However, it would greatly help if we can put a spanner in the pirates' works first and stop any pursuit, sir. We won't be able to outfight or outrun them," Captain Nanisha said.

That sounded like good advice and I'd been thinking along those lines myself. "Let's find and rescue the rest of the crew and get to a shuttle."

Taking a small bag with her, we left Nanisha's room. She led us to where the rest of the crew were held captive and after a few shots from my Maz-Blazter, I opened the door. There were only eight of them, both men and women. These days, even large star-craft can be operated automatically and the human crew is mostly a

fail-safe. And to reassure the passengers as, even now, people like to know there is somebody on hand in case everything goes belly-up.

Now we'd got the crew, there didn't seem much point hanging around and I was mentally congratulating myself on how easy everything was going. I was leading the group back down to the first floor storeroom where they could put on protective suits when a shout from behind me made me change my plans in a hurry.

CHAPTER 9. BREAKOUT 2.

"Down!" I shouted. As one, the star-ship crew threw themselves to the floor as a Maz-Blazter bolt crackled overhead splashing onto the wall too close to my head to make me happy. Molten plastic dripped down the wall.

Dropping to one knee, I wheeled around and fired back over the crew's prone bodies. A pirate ducked back into a room. "Make for the exit," I told the crew. They were well trained – many of them must have been ex-Navy – and started wriggling forwards on elbows and knees. Under other circumstances, it would have been quite funny watching them do the stomach shuffle.

I snapped off a couple more shots at the doorway – more to keep the pirate from getting any ideas rather than expecting to hit him. Bolts of energy zinged down the corridor exploding harmlessly against the walls. Chunks of Konkreet fell to the floor, leaving craters on the walls.

"Keep going," I called back over my shoulder.

The pirate took advantage of my distraction by sticking his wrist out the door and firing a couple of unaimed shots in our direction. Konkreet rained down on the last crewman, giving her a big incentive to hurry up.

I smiled. What had worked once would work a second time. Usually. "Hurry up you lot, I can't hold 'em for ever!" I shouted.

Once again, the pirate extended his wrist beyond the jamb and squeezed the trigger. The Maz-Blazter is an inaccurate weapon at best so I gripped it two-handed, stilled my breathing – I've got an implant letting me temporarily control my lungs and heartbeat – aimed and fired. The searing red-hot energy bolt shot out straight and true and hit the pirate's wrist, severing it. The pirate's own Maz-Blazter dropped to the floor and the pirate screamed with pain and shock. There was no blood as the bolt's heat cauterised the wound.

The man lurched out of the door and into the corridor waving his stump in the air. This ape had pallid skin and a Mohawk haircut. Immediately, Çrámerr leaped to his feet. I almost felt sorry for the pirate as Çrámerr swung at him. Almost. I heard the crunch as the ape-man's flat nose broke and freshets of blood flowed freely. The pirate clutched his broken nose. Çrámerr's next blow knocked the ape-man to the floor and a kick left him out for the count.

Stooping, Çrámerr picked up the discarded Maz-Blazter, pointed and fired at his head, atomising it.

"Bit of overkill there?" I commented.

"Finalising his options," Çrámerr said with a grin.

I'd forgotten just how aggressive Çrámerr was.

Alert for further pirates, we made our way to the exit. He must have been the only one left to keep an eye on the prisoners while the rest dealt with the meteorite strike. In the store room, the crew donned protective suits and helmets and checked each other's seals. As experienced spacers, they were familiar with the procedure.

"What we need to do first is pick up Julianna, then grab ourselves a shuttle and get off this hell-hole," I said, taking a spare suit for Julianna. I didn't mention Sava's shell at this stage, but I wasn't prepared to abandon it. No way – I have a reputation to consider. Once we were all suited and booted in our protective gear, Çrámerr and a couple of others moved the junk out of the airlock and we stepped inside. We were all tense and on edge as we waited for the airlock to go through the motions as, for all we knew, the pirate inside could have radioed his mates on the outside and we could be walking into a firing squad.

Maz-Blasters held high, Çrámerr and I stepped through first. If we were gonna die, we weren't going alone. Of course, it would be worse for me as Çrámerr had another clone on standby if Economou didn't hear from him.

On the outside, we were immediately caught in the non-stop deluge. The rain seemed even heavier than normal, like this world was trying to compress its ocean filling by a few thousand years. Water streamed off our protective suits and, in the permanent gloom, it was hard to see where we were going. Even the suit's infra-red sensors were useless with eighty-five degree temperature rain. Squinting, I peered through the downfall. Nobody seemed about apart from a couple of scurrying figures in the distance.

Putting our helmets together, I suggested that Captain Nanisha and the crew find a shuttle and get on board and wait for us. Çrámerr and I would rescue Julianna and meet them there.

"But we don't know where the shuttle is," Captain Nanisha said.

There's always a fly in the ointment but I pointed vaguely in the direction of some vast metal sheds that looked like hangars. "Must be in there," I said. "Don't go without us unless you have to."

Nanisha shook her head.

"Get this right and I'll boost you all up the corporate ladder," Çrámerr promised. "Promotions for all."

The crew nodded their thanks and then followed their leader over to the hangars. Without a weapon between them, I hoped they'd be careful. But we had no option except trusting to luck. Crouching low, Çrámerr and I made our way back to our quarters. Hot rain beat on our backs but we got back safely. I punched the air-lock's pad and we entered the building. We'd left a peaceful scene – well, except for the dead pirates, of course – but came back to a scene of chaos. It was easy to see what was going on. Taking advantage of the confusion outside, two pirates were trying to inflict a 'fate worse than death', as romantic novelists have it, on Julianna.

She stood behind the table, her clothes ripped and torn and her hair all mussed. Two ape-men were backing her into a corner. One of them had a hand raised to his cheek trying to staunch blood leaking from several deep scratches. Attagirl, I thought. The shorter ape-man had freakishly long arms covered with matted hair and I guessed he had more than a dash of gibbon in his genetic make-up.

They spun around as they heard the air-lock's hiss.

"Interrupting something, boys?" I asked.

Dropping the spare protective suit I raised my pistol and fired. A red hot bolt of high energy splashed into the ape-man's chest sending him flying over the table and crashing into the wall. He gave out a half scream before his voice was stilled for ever. There was that ozone smell you often get from an energy weapon mixed with the smell of burned flesh. Not nice.

A split second after I fired, Çrámerr took out the other one.

"Headshot," I said. "Nice shooting."

Çrámerr grinned. "Top five per cent gets the cream."

Whatever. Julianna's eyes opened wide and then she burst into tears. Had to be hi-man, I sort of decided. Would a gynoid be worried about another man using her body for the purpose it was designed for? Probably not. Unless she had been equipped with the full range of emotions?

I put those thoughts out of my mind as she ran round the table, still clutching her rags around her. She flung her arms around me and covered my face with kisses. Would any gynoid be programmed like that? Who cares. I enjoyed the experience until Çrámerr coughed, bringing us back to reality.

"Don't like to interrupt but we need to maximise our opportunities by implementing our plan of attack. On the up and up."

He was right. There was a chance that more pirates would burst in at any moment. Helping Julianna into her suit, I filled her in on what had happened. She picked up one of the dropped weapons – a rapid-fire needler – while I helped myself to a spare dagger. Which only made me miss my trusty diamond blade all the more.

Back on the outside, the rain was still pelting down and what little daylight remained was rapidly failing. Night drew on, which worked to our advantage. Touching helmets, I told them that we weren't leaving without Sava's shell. Partly I didn't like the idea of failure – and partly I didn't want Sava thinking I was the pirate raiders' inside man and coming after me. No way did I want to be hunted down by Norin and Sava's thugs. Julianna also wanted to recover her lover's – or owner's – property so Çrámerr was outvoted.

Trouble was, it could be stored almost anywhere. After I'd showed him the crate, Knofahgginarebagz could have easily moved it to a more secure location. No point blundering about checking all the warehouses or sheds as we'd be here until the rains stopped and the sun came out – many millions of years hence.

"We need up to the minute intel," Çrámerr reminded me.

"So let's get some," said Julianna.

I looked at her. Her face was distorted through two visors but I saw she meant it.

"Well, we could find a computer terminal – they must have records of where they've stored their loot," I said. "But we'd need passwords and all that."

"Just grab somebody, stick a knife in his ribs and he'll talk," Julianna said.

What is it with women – or gynoids? Beneath the surface they can be surprisingly vicious. All the same, she spoke sense. It would be far quicker to find somebody who could take us straight there. Only problem was finding a pirate on his own without getting into a big shoot-out.

However, we had the element of surprise as our escape hadn't yet been discovered by the main body of pirates. Using hand signals, I directed the others behind a row of outbuildings which took us out of sight of any observers and we ran towards where the pirates were still dealing with their broken fusion-generator. There were no sparks flying into the atmosphere now and with this rain there was no chance of fire.

Others were hauling stuff out of the smashed shed and placing it onto flat-bed anti-grav trucks. One man climbed up into the cab of a fully laden truck and drove it away – towards us. Meanwhile, the others kept busy with their loading. No doubt they wanted to get the job over and done with as quickly as possible so they could return to their quarters and get out of their hot and stinky protective suits.

Pointing to the approaching truck, I said, "Soon as he turns into a warehouse, we'll get him."

"He's gonna have a bad case of the Monday morning blues," Çrámerr grinned.

At a run, but still keeping out of sight of the main group of pirates, we chased after the truck. It made a right, vanished from view behind a hangar before reappearing in the gap between that and the next. There didn't seem much order to the layout of the pirates' base. Basically, if you wanted a new building, just level a space and put it there. Not like anyone else wanted to live on this hell-hole world.

However, it didn't reappear again.

"Must be that one," Julianna said.

Gripping our weapons, we ran up to the building. It was built of galvanised metal, now dulled and rain streaked. There were no doors or windows our side. Cautiously, we made our way to the end and I peered round the corner. Nothing to break up the unrelieved extent of corrugated metal. I swore. That meant the entrance was on the side facing the pirates. Hoping that they'd be too busy to worry about what was going on behind them, we ran along the building's edge until we reached the front. There was just a standard vehicular entrance so we were in luck as there was no air-lock.

"They must store stuff here that won't be affected by this atmosphere," I said, more to myself than the others.

Looking over at the distant group of pirates, I saw they were still toiling away. And in this rain-swept gloom, they would be less likely to spot us – unless it all got noisy. Trying to look as if we belonged, I walked around the corner and pressed the gate's opening pad.

Nothing happened.

The light stayed red.

CHAPTER 10. SHELL SEARCHING.

What? I pressed it again and again but nothing happened.

"Shoot it off?" Çrámerr suggested.

I shook my head. No. That would be a sure-fire way of attracting unwanted attention. Knocking on the door, I used my voice modifier implant – a complete waste of money until now – and called, "Lerrus in, pal. Gorra 'nother load 'ere." For some reason I'd adopted a Röötherspherian accent. I banged on the door again making it rattle.

Then the light turned green and the gate slid up on its runners. A pirate – an tall, thin ape-man with a multitude of facial piercings – stood within. He blinked in confusion when he saw us standing there but no anti-grav truck. He cottoned on quickly when I shoved my Maz-Blazter into his chest, making him stumble backwards. Immediately, we followed and Çrámerr hit the door panel, lowering the gate again.

"Eh, wherras t'big shell tha' yuz tuk?"

The pirate blinked and looked me with confusion. So did Çrámerr and Julianna. I'd left that stupid accent on. Deactivating the implant, I spoke again.

"Where's the giant sea shell you took from the President P Porter?"

"I don't know," the man said.

"Then you're no use to us." I aimed the Maz-Blazter at his forehead and tightened my grip on the trigger.

"Wait! Wait!" he cried out.

Funny how imminent death improves memory.

"You mean the shell some rich dude paid sixty-six million for?"

"You've got more than one here?" I asked.

"No! I mean, we were all talking about it. That's the reason we attacked your ship. It's in the strong house."

It would be. "Take us to it," I ordered him. "And no silly ideas about radioing your buddies."

The pirate looked around nervously. "You'll never get away."

"All factored in," Çrámerr said, gesturing with his pistol towards the still open gate. Given no choice, the pirate started walking.

What do they say about fortune favouring the bold? Even if it doesn't always feel like it at the time. Just as we approached the still open gate, an anti-grav truck entered. It was loaded with salvaged machine parts or something. The driver pulled up and saw immediately what was going down. He flung himself out of the seat and combat rolled across the Konkreet floor drawing his pistol as he did so. Both Çrámerr and I fired at him, the blasts gouging craters out the floor and scattering red-hot

chunks of Konkreet in all directions. The pirate returned fire and I felt the heat of his shot as it missed my head by centimetres.

Instinctively, I dived backwards, but needn't have worried. Çrámerr's next shot caught the pirate on the upper thigh almost severing the limb as well as cauterising the wound. Even through our nasal filters, there was a smell of roast meat. The pirate screamed with pain. Stepping forwards, Çrámerr took aim and blew the man's head into red atoms.

"You like your head shots, don't you?" I said.

"Extra points," he said callously.

Crossing behind the truck, I dropped the tailgate then ran around to the front. Sliding behind the joystick I tilted up the nose of the truck until all the parts tumbled out the back and fell with a clatter onto the Konkreet. I wasn't too worried about noise as the incessant pounding of the rain masked anything short of a meteor strike.

Julianna got in the passenger seat leaving Çrámerr and the pirate to climb up into the flatbed. Çrámerr kept his Blazter jammed tight into the pirate's ribs.

"Strong house," I said over my shoulder as I backed the truck out the warehouse. As soon as we were outside, rain slashed down, washing over us. If I got out of this, I was booking a vacation to the nearest desert world.

His eyes white in his dark apish face, the pirate directed us away from the line of warehouses – and away from the bunch still dealing with the meteor impact.

"What security do they have?" I asked.

"Usual, I guess," the pirate replied. "Electronic sensors and there's always two men posted inside."

What I'd figured. The main danger here was some light-fingered pirate helping himself to the valuables as there was nobody else around for light years. We drove down a narrow gap between two metallic buildings and saw the strong house. It stood on its own and I spotted CCTV cameras mounted on the corners under the eaves and a remotely operated machine gun on the roof.

Looking as if we belonged, we drove straight up to the front gate. As we did so, I noticed the CCTV cameras adjust their angle to keep us in focus. Somebody inside was on the ball. Touching helmets with the pirate, I told him that his job was to get us inside. After that, we'd take it from there. But if we didn't get in..., I made a throat-slitting gesture.

The pirate pressed the intercom above the door keypad. "It's Chabbat here; got some more stuff for you."

"Whose that with you?" a tinny voice sounded from the intercom.

"The hired help – who do you think? Some of this stuff is heavy."

There was a pause. I reckon brainpower isn't always needed for a career in piracy. "We've got robots for that," the man said eventually.

"It's delicate gear – fragile," I butted in. "Has to be handballed. You with me?"

There was another pause but then the door light flashed green and the airlock opened. Thinking about it, I reckoned the pirates had become lax and overconfident. After all, they'd never had any trouble on Sepharvaim before.

I glided the truck into the airlock and we waited anxiously until the atmosphere changed and the inner door opened. Pushing the joystick forward, we glided out of the airlock and into the strong house. Two pirates – both in ordinary clothes stepped forwards followed by a multi-armed cargo-bot.

"Alright, Chab, – what've you got for us?" one said. He was a burly, ape-man who sported a droopy 'tache. My shot took him in the chest, killing him instantly. Çrámerr's shot came a split second later, decapitating the second. Blood, brains and bits of bone sprayed out from his ruined head. Both bodies hit the floor at the same time.

"Don't believe it – another head shot," I said with some admiration.

"Making the difficult easy," he boasted. Think that was one of Economou's advertising slogans some time ago.

Glancing back, I saw Julianna had her hand to her face – well, her helmet but it comes to the same thing.

"I'm sorry but we couldn't let them live," I said softly. "Hang in there – we'll be away from here soon."

The cargo-bot stood there, its metal arms and grabbers hanging still. There was no threat from that quarter. We jumped down from the truck and I gestured for the pirate to get down, too. Grabbing a roll of duct tape from the truck, I bound the

man's hands tightly behind him as well as taking off his helmet and gagging him. That would stop him radioing for help.

Then we realised we may have been a bit quick offing the pirates. The strong house wasn't large – maybe twenty metres by twenty. There was an office up a flight of metal stairs but the rest of the building was crammed with crates and boxes. Some were piled haphazardly about while others were stacked neatly on shelves that lined the building. More full shelves stretched down the centre aisle.

"We'll never find it in time," Julianna said. "But we've got to get it back for Sava."

I peered about. I remembered that Sava's crate was brown and covered with lading and customs labels. Trouble was, there was literally hundreds of similar crates in this room.

"Maybe we'll find it on the computer?" I wondered. "Julianna, check the office while Çrámerr and I search down here." We might get lucky – it might be one of the first boxes we checked.

"I think it's in the middle somewhere," Chabbat volunteered.

Well, that gave us a clue. Not a lot but a bit of a hint. What's that word Çrámerr uses? Incentivise? That's it. Incentivise. "If you show us where it is – and help us get away – then I'll make sure Sava sorts you out a big reward. New ID, loads of money, new life on some pleasure-planet. Slaves if you want them. Got to beat Sepharvaim."

"He's the big cheese – he can do it," Çrámerr added. "And I can get Economou to transport you anywhere in the Arm – no paperwork, no nothing."

I've never seen anyone's eyes light up so much. Evidently the idea of leaving this crew and this horrible world behind appealed. He hurried down the centre aisle eagerly scanning the crates. Çrámerr and I followed behind.

In all the excitement, I guess we forgot Julianna. We were reminded of her when she screamed – her shriek echoing around the building. Wheeling around, at the top of the staircase we saw some huge guy with arms like – well, he was a cyborg and his arms were metal with tendons like hawsers. Ruby eyes flashed from his ruined face above a mouth filled with razor-sharp fangs. A man who could terrorise a whole load of civvies by his appearance alone. One arm was wrapped around Julianna's neck while the other contained a laser attachment which was pointing directly at me.

"Drop your weapons and walk towards me slowly. You too, Chabbat." His voice was harsh and metallic. "Or I'll tear her head off and use it as a bowling ball."

He could do that so there wasn't much we could do about it. With Julianna blocking his body, it would be a difficult – almost impossible – shot. Only the side of his head, a hideous amalgam of flesh and metal was exposed. I dropped my pistol and in the silence its clatter as it fell sounded loudly. So this was the end. Soon the rest of the pirates would notice our absence and come looking for us. And when they found us, after the trouble we'd caused, I didn't think they would bother with our ransoms.

Somehow, I always knew my end would be squalid and violent. But I didn't like the thought of failing in my mission. Arms outstretched, I walked towards the office.

A blast of super-heated plasma shot over my head and I felt my hair char as it passed. An instant later, the bolt smashed right into the pirate's face. Molten metal sprayed out as the back of his head blew off. There was a sound of high-pitched electronic feedback and then the cyborg keeled over, dragging Julianna down with him.

I snapped around to behold Çrámerr grinning widely, still in his shooter's stance. "Another headshot. You took a big risk there."

"Always aiming to please," Çrámerr said, still grinning. That was another one of Economou's slogans. "I had this clone enhanced with a hyper-reality program. Lets me zero in with pin-point accuracy, among other things. Mostly, it lets me focus better. Great for decision making."

I'd heard of that program – it's on the cutting edge of technology but a rich man – or a clone – like Çrámerr could easily afford it. We ran upstairs and with difficulty freed Julianna from the dead cyborg's embrace.

Her protective suit was charred and blobs of metal adhered to the surface and underneath its skin, she was trembling and shaking but holding it together well. Not being fully hi-man and subject to their programming, maybe gynoids don't fear death as much. After all, are they truly alive? I don't know. Or was she simply a strong woman who didn't scream with panic? But I didn't have time to ponder the question. We had to find Sava's crate and get out of here before the rest of the pirate crew swarmed round our ears.

We stepped into the office. It was filthy, the floor littered with food and drink cartons and the walls covered with pornographic holo-images culled from the dark

depths of the Galactoweb. It smelled like an armpit. However, the terminal was displaying a schematic of the strong house. Brushing away an empty drinks-sac, Julianna leaned over the terminal and typed in the word 'shell'.

It brought up eighteen hits – but most of them were for ammunition which was stored in a separate warehouse. She scrolled through the rest but nothing looked suitable.

"Input Sava?" Çrámerr suggested.

Various items with the phrase 'sava' in the word popped up. Gems from Savannah's mines, an original painting of savage dryads in Grenard's forested world by a famous artist – who spends more time in the gossip columns than in her studio – and even some of the new 'Savant' computer programs. They'd be worth taking with us. I know a few people who'd take them, no questions asked. I made a mental note of their location.

"Try kississ?" I said.

Bingo. One item only – third shelf at the end.

We clattered back downstairs. Then I remembered something crucial and I could have kicked myself. Chabbat. We hadn't dragged him up to the office with us. I heard the airlock cycle through the last of its program. Somehow, while we were fighting, he had freed himself and gone to seek help.

"I'll get the truck, you two find the shell," I ordered, even as I ran for the truck. Fortunately, it was still where we'd left it – Chabbat had simply legged it. Swinging

into the driver's seat, I gripped the joystick, elevated the truck and it hovered over towards the third shelf.

Çrámerr and Julianna had found the crate and were pushing it towards the shelf's edge. It had its own anti-gravity unit to help with manual handling and so was effectively weightless. I backed the truck to the edge of the shelf and they slid it onto the flatbed. Julianna switched off the anti-gravity unit and the crate settled down. She took her place by my side while Çrámerr crouched in the flatbed.

"Let's get out of here," I said, hoping we hadn't left it too late. Chabbat would be spilling his guts any time now and we could expect the pirates to show up mob-handed. I steered the truck into the airlock, pressed the button and waited for it to do its thing. My fingers were drumming on the console and I willed myself to stop. There was nothing I could do about the situation, little though I liked it.

"Hope the shuttle hasn't left without us," I muttered.

"Bad career move. They'll be massively blamestormed." Glancing back, I saw Çrámerr peering down the barrel of his Maz-Blazter. No, it would be a mistake to leave a V-P of Economou behind unless they had absolutely no choice.

Outside, rain lanced down in the light cast by arc-lamps. Looking around I pointed the joystick at the hangars and took the truck up to its top speed. Which wasn't fast.

Too late. All the alarms went off.

CHAPTER 11. PURSUED BY PIRATES.

It sounded like the end of the world. Even muffled by our helmets, the noise was ear-splitting. Klaxons whooped and roared. Then it all got a whole lot worse. A slew of trucks flew round a warehouse near the impact crater and raced towards us, their headlights stabbing the gloom. There must have been eight or nine trucks but as they weaved in and out, overtaking each other, it was hard to be sure. Pirates packed the flatbeds or stood precariously on running boards. The more aggressive of them started firing the second they saw us.

Hi-energy bolts sizzled by us, boiling puddles as they hit. More dangerously, metal and plastic flechettes whistled by. In our rear cameras I saw one pirate standing in the bed of his truck, leaning on the cab roof, firing an M-88 Metallist Hi-Ripper. That's one of my favourite weapons, excellent for close-quarters work when you want to shred your enemy but the range was too long for accurate shooting.

One pirate even had a bassoonka – it looks like a primitive musical instrument but it fires high explosive shells instead of songs. An explosion lit up the night sky about three metres to our right. That was a little close for comfort and our anti-gravity truck wobbled with the force of the blast.

Julianna clung to the console. Touching helmets, I reassured her that we'd be alright. I just wished somebody would come and reassure me. Swerving and swooping the truck about the air threw the pirates' aim off but slowed us down.

Nothing to lose now as the pirates had spotted us. I pressed the truck's radio button. "Shuttle! Calling the shuttle! Calling Captain Nanisha. Come in!"

There was a slight pause – which felt much longer than it really was – then a burst of static. "This is Captain Nanisha Parनाविथाना. What's going on out there? We can hear firing."

Enemy fire was incoming. More bolts sizzled all around us and there was a rattle of flechettes against the truck's side. But the pirates weren't having it all their own way. Crouched behind Sava's crate, making himself as small a target as possible, Çrámerr was blazing away. Even as I watched, I saw the guy with the bassoonka's head explode. The driver of that truck swerved to the right and sideswiped the one next to him before crashing into the ground.

"Good shooting, hotshot. But stop showing off," I called through our intercom. Then, switching channels I said to Nanisha, "We're coming up to the hangars; come on out with your cargo ramp down and prepare for blast-off."

Somebody else had a bassoonka – or some sort of rocket launcher – because another explosion buffeted our truck. Fragments hit the side and Sava's crate. I took our truck rapidly up to fifty metres and then dived back down. Anything to throw off the pirates' aim.

Meanwhile Çrámerr was still firing away – "Play hardball with me? Used to be Economou's hatchet-man," he was muttering to himself. Even now, he was still talking business-speak. "This is a real work-spasm." Another pirate flung up his hands and crashed to the ground. I didn't see if he was missing his head or not.

Unbelievable – the man was enjoying himself. I guess fighting pirates is a little more exciting than sitting behind a desk, but all the same... I turned my thoughts from Çrámerr as two explosions close together almost crashed us into the ground.

All the same, the pirates were gaining on us. Where was that shuttle? No, Nanisha wouldn't run out on us – not with her boss here? Then, from out of the final hangar, emerged the sleek hull of the shuttle. It was best thing I'd seen in ages – and I'm not excluding Julianna from that. As it came out, its wings automatically extended into their optimal launch position.

"Almost there!" I yelled, twisting the joystick to find that last kilometre of speed.

"Pure gravy," Çrámerr responded. Whatever that means.

I aimed the truck so it was directly in line with the shuttle's cargo ramp. One hundred metres, eighty, seventy. Then the wheels came off, as Çrámerr would put it. From out of the bunch of anti-grav trucks behind us shot a two-man speeder. The driver accelerated until he was right by our side. Even though the gunner wore a brown protective suit like everyone else, with that massive bulk and those freakishly long ape-like arms it couldn't be anyone else but Knofahgginarebagz himself.

Contemptuously, he turned in his seat and looked me in the eye. The weapon he held had a wide bore which looked like the mouth of a MAG-lev tunnel. He fired and a white hot ball of energy slammed into our truck's side. I guessed he'd fired an Augmented Flux-Blaster. Nasty piece of kit, that. Desperately, I wrestled with the joystick trying to keep us afloat until we made the shuttle.

No such luck.

A second shot punched us into the ground, our truck's side just a tangled wreckage of metal. We scraped along the rocky ground, sparks mixing with sprays of water as we rapidly slowed down. I fought the truck, trying to raise it again but a third shot destroyed the anti-gravity unit and we juddered to a stop. Çrámerr tumbled from the flatbed, as did Sava's crate.

The speeder shot past but wheeled around for a return run. Meanwhile, the shuttle hovered above us all, its delta wings partly shielding us from the rainfall. Sensibly, Nanisha had taken it above small-arms range – especially that deadly Augmented Flux-Blaster.

"Sell our products dear," said Çrámerr as he picked himself up and resumed firing. Another decapitated pirate fell. I pulled myself out of the shattered ruins of the cab and helped Julianna to her feet. More shots zinged around us. The pirates' trucks were almost on us now and some leaped to the ground. The first ape-man who did so died, as did the second.

Keeping low, Julianna switched on the crate's anti-gravity unit and it hovered weightlessly a few centimetres above the ground. She started pushing it away. Had to give the woman a hundred per cent for loyalty. Unless she was merely programmed that way. Not that it mattered now.

Another loyal woman was Nanisha Suna Parनावithana, Under Captain of the President Perseus P Porter, herself. Seeing what was going on below, she lowered the shuttle to give us all a chance to board.

"Run for it," I shouted above the mayhem.

Çrámerr squeezed off a final shot and started running after myself and Julianna, who was still pushing the crate. Some pirates flew after us while others made the night lively by still blazing away at us. Bad mistake that, as a stray shot took out one of their own. One down – about forty or fifty to go.

And still the near-boiling rain sluiced down, distorting the scene and making it seem like some outpost of hell. Which Sepharvaim is. Even aided by state of the art computers aboard the shuttle, Nanisha's piloting skills were superb. She lowered the shuttle until it was hovering just above our heads with the cargo ramp scraping the ground.

"Hurry up," she called through the radio. Her voice was still calm and collected. Some of the pirates were now diverting their fire from us to the shuttle. I hoped they didn't hit anything vital.

One bit of good news. Some of the shuttle's crew crouched at the top of the cargo ramp and were firing at any pirate they could see. High-energy bolts criss-crossed back and forth like directed lightning strikes in this storm. They weren't military and in this poor visibility and with the pirates dodging the blasts I'm not sure if they hit much. All the same, it tilted the odds slightly in our favour. Any rip or tear in their suits meant an agonising death in this poisonous, near-boiling atmosphere and I guess the pirates were reluctant to die for their leader.

"C'mon," I shouted back over my shoulder at Çrámerr who was still providing what he thought was covering fire. Some pirates were firing while others were running forwards to recapture us. Then that speeder shot back towards us.

Knofahgginarebagz leaned out over the side. Beneath his reflective helmet, I made out his ugly face grimacing in triumph. He raised the wide-bored Augmented Flux-Blaster. The first shot missed but not by much, melting a crater into the rocky ground. Adjusting his aim, his second didn't miss. Basically, he blew Çrámerr's legs off. Literally. Çrámerr's torso toppled to the ground and twitched. He was a goner and we all knew it.

"Not again," I moaned. Çrámerr had died beneath a Krilla's claws during our hunting trip on Hancox 1 but I'd saved the day by removing his memory chip so it could be re-implanted into his clone. Looks like I'd have to do it again. Not that I wanted to as the pirates and Knofahgginarebagz were almost on top of me. On the other hand, the bonus I'd picked up from Economou had made it more than worth while. Of course, the risks today were worse than I'd faced on Hancox 1.

Wildly, I looked around. Çrámerr's body – what was left of it – was only a few metres behind me and most of the pirates were further back. With a slice of luck, it might still be possible.

Giving the crate a shove, I shouted, "Keep pushing," to Julianna. I doubled back and knelt by Çrámerr's ruined body. His blood was being rapidly washed away but he still lay in a large pink puddle of his own blood and gore.

He was still alive. Only just, but he was hanging in there. I patted his shoulder. What else could I do? Not caring about the agony of his last breaths, I pulled off his protective helmet and threw it away. Çrámerr looked up, choking in poisonous air and with his skin reddening and blistering as eighty-five degree temperature rain scalded him. Summoning the last of his ebbing strength he raised his pistol and aimed it at my

face. For one horrified second, I thought Çrámerr was delirious and was about to shoot me. Instead he moved the barrel a couple of centimetres past my helmet and squeezed the trigger. Involuntarily, I jerked my head and saw a pirate who had been standing just behind me. No longer.

Çrámerr gave a twisted, dying grin. The last he'd ever make. His terribly blistered lips formed one last word. "Headshot."

He'd saved my life and I owed him for that. Rolling what was left of his body onto its front, I drew my knife, dug its tip into the hollow at the base of his skull and pried out his memory chip. If I made it out, it could be implanted into his next clone. The techies at the clone-lab would take care to delete any bad memories relating to his death. After all, they'd done it before. Dropping the bloody tangle of wires and neurons into a suit's pocket, I stood.

Too late. Knofahgginarebagz himself stepped out of the speeder. Looking around, I saw other pirates had encircled Julianna and Sava's crate. At the very edge of success, we'd failed. Seeing that, Captain Nanisha levitated the shuttle up out of weapon's range but still didn't fly off. I wondered if she'd seen what I'd done for her boss and wanted to see if she could somehow escape with the memory chip.

No time to wonder about that. Knofahgginarebagz stepped towards me. In one gauntleted hand he held a Metallist Hi-Ripper which was aimed straight at me. In the other, my prized diamond blade. Me, I was helpless, kneeling by Çrámerr's corpse with only a knife in my hand. For one insane moment, I thought about reaching for my Maz-Blazter but that would be a short-cut to suicide. When you can't fight and you can't run and you can't hide, you have only one option.

Talk.

So I dropped my knife and held my hands away from my sides. "Hey, monkey-man, you think you're king, don't you, with the rest of your inbred tribe backing you up."

Knofahgginarebagz growled in his throat. "You can't get to me, hi-man. I've got what I want now..."

"Yeah, except looks, brains, talent, charisma. Hey, you ever had a female you didn't have to club into submission first?"

I could just make out his fanged maw twisting with rage. However, through the radio channel, I heard the rest of the pirate tribe tittering as I ranked out their leader.

"Thought not. Bet you think you're rock hard don't you? Bet you think you could kill me easy?"

"You know I could, hi-man. You know I could rip your arm off and beat you to death with it."

"Yeah – with your whole clan holding me down, maybe. But *mano a mano* – or *mano a monkeyo*, bet you couldn't."

"That's a bet you'd lose, hi-man. Not that you'd be alive to pay up."

Got him. Easy as taking a banana from a baby monkey. "You want to make a wager? Single combat with knives? I win then me and my friends go free. You win then I'll tell the shuttle's Captain to land – don't forget, I've got Çrámerr's memory

chip here and she'll not want to leave without that. Economou will pay big money for that." With that I took out the chip, holding it up to view. They're quite robust but I could destroy it before I got killed.

Knofahgginarebagz scowled. He knew he'd been suckered but he couldn't back out now without losing mega amounts of face. Refuse, and his authority would be badly weakened and it wouldn't be long before his position was challenged. However, he was built like a mountain and you don't get to be a pirate leader without being able to handle yourself. He outweighed me by about a hundred kilos and his reach was much longer than mine.

"Okay – you want to die, I'll kill you now. I'll slit your suit and you'll choke and boil to death."

"No!" Julianna cried as she ran away from the crate and stood by my side. "Don't do this, Vic. It's not worth it. Let them take us as prisoners. Sava'll pay any ransom – I know he will."

I never knew she cared so much.

CHAPTER 12. MANO A MONKEYO.

No – I'd had no idea she had feelings for me. So she had to be hi-man – a gynoid is responsive only to her owner's needs. I think – it's hard to tell with the latest, most advanced models.

Touching helmets, I whispered, "It's the only way. Win and we get away. Lose – well, you're no worse off than we were before."

"But I'll be on my own. You and Çrámerr will be dead. I don't want to lose you, Vic, I really don't."

Touching. Through the rain streaking down her visor, I saw tears in her eyes. She looked genuinely upset. I never knew she cared. I held her close, trying to give her what comfort I could. Through the thick layers of our protective suits, I felt her body shake.

"I'll be alright," I murmured. "Few minutes time, we'll be out of here – with Sava's shell."

Meanwhile the pirates had formed a rough circle. Knofahgginarebagz was showing off his strength and skill with his – really, my – diamond blade.

"Chickening out, hi-man?" he taunted.

"No, just giving you a few seconds of extra life." Picking up my knife from the ground and giving Julianna a gentle push back out of the arena, I prepared myself. Despite my air of confidence, my heart was beating fast and adrenalin was pumping through my system. Despite the suit's cooling system, I felt hot and sweaty.

One ape-man appeared to be taking bets. Knofahgginarebagz was the clear favourite. No surprises there as he was much larger and stronger than me. But he was up against Vic Vargo, the best interplanetary recovery agent in Orion's Arm (well, that's what I say and I am currently looking for fresh commissions), and I'd survived situations that would turn the pirate's fur white.

On the other hand, maybe today would be the day I died.

Thrusting that thought from my mind, I prepared myself for Knofahgginarebagz's attack. It wasn't long coming. With a deafening roar that caused electronic feedback through my radio earpiece, he charged. He was probably relying on his size and appearance to terrify me. Big mistake, monkey-man.

It was nearly my mistake. For all his bulk, Knofahgginarebagz was fast. Fast as an intercontinental MAG-lev train at max speed. He barrelled towards me, the diamond blade glinting wickedly under the arc-lamps. I sidestepped, only just in time, and he rushed past me, pulling up just before he crashed into the ring of watchers.

He wheeled around and rushed me again. I guess he was trying to impress his followers with his strength – to stamp his authority on them. But they were dangerous tactics. In this environment, a torn suit was deadly, unless you got it patched immediately. Probably there was a repair kit in one of the trucks. All the same, if I'd been him, I'd have hung back and used my greater reach to my advantage.

I stepped away and accessed another implant to calm my breathing. I'd need all my wits about me if I was to survive this. Crouching, making as small a target as possible, I held my knife out before me. Not a tactic I'd usually recommend but against this ape-man, I figured it would work. I tossed my knife from hand to hand, catching it. Taunting him in other words.

It worked. Knofahgginarebagz roared again and ran towards me. I won't say the ground shook beneath his feet but it might have done. I rolled out of the way and lashed out with my leg as he passed. He stumbled and tripped but recovered quickly. I slashed at his suit but only scored the surface. Not good enough.

All the pirates were cheering on their leader so I muted my suit's radio. I didn't need to be reminded I was the underdog here. Knofahgginarebagz approached, more carefully now, the diamond blade twinkling almost hypnotically in the light. Through the lights reflecting off his visor, I couldn't see his eyes so had no idea as to the focus of his next attack.

But I could guess. He'd go for my torso as one good rip in the fabric and it would all be over. Even as I planned my attack, Knofahgginarebagz was on me. He was deadly fast as well as big and strong. No wonder he was their leader. Using his abnormally long arms, he feinted with his right. I dodged the blow, leaped backwards in alarm and saw the knife was in his left and coming at me a second time.

How I dodged that strike I don't know. The point missed me by bare millimetres. That was too close for comfort and for the first time, I wondered if challenging Knofahgginarebagz was a good idea. But what other choice did I have?

As Knofahgginarebagz recovered, I did a straight-arm thrust. Yes! More by luck than skill, the point pierced his suit, leaving a small hole. Air rushed out allowing some of Sepharvaim's lethal atmosphere in. All around, the pirates leaped up and down and I thought the ape-men were about to rush me but Knofahgginarebagz waved them back.

Stepping away, I held up my own blade defensively, my eyes alert for another opportunity. I swore. Even as I watched, the rent in his suit shrank as the suit repaired itself. Checking my own suit's capabilities on the visor's heads-up display, I saw it had no self-repair function.

A lightning flash brighter than most others – millions of volts of electricity – struck a nearby hill. Lightning leaped up into the storm-wracked air. Taking advantage of my distraction, the ape-man was on me again. One giant gauntleted fist connected with my visor, sending me sprawling while his right stabbed down. Frantically, I rolled away across the wet ground twisting and turning like an eel.

But an eel with teeth. On my back, I doubled up my legs and pistoned them out into my enemy's groin as he loomed over me. I thrust him away but it was only a very temporary respite. Before I could stand, he was on me again. His booted foot caught me in the side, sending me crashing back onto the hard rock. Even wearing a thick protective suit, it felt like he'd cracked a few ribs.

Then the monster was upon me, using his greater size and strength to kick me further away. My suit was thick and layered with insulation but I still felt it. Knofahgginarebagz slashed at me, the diamond blade slicing through the outer layers

of my suit. Padded insulation material billowed out, soaking immediately in the downpour. Instantly, he thrust at me and frantically I rolled out the way.

I was out of breath and panting, desperately sucking oxygen into my lungs. I had to concentrate solely on beating this man-monster and not be distracted by thinking about Julianna or Sava's shell. I'd already found that Knofahgginarebagz had a bad temperament and wondered if it was worth taunting him again. If I could make him lose his cool, maybe I'd stand a slightly better chance.

"Hey, were you born ugly or have you been working on it?" I asked, switching on my radio broadcaster. Although I couldn't hear his followers' laughter, from the way some were capering about, I reckoned they were enjoying their leader's discomfort.

"You should get yourself over to a civilised world. Cosmetic surgeons can do wonders these days – you know, shorten your arms. Even a shave would help."

Knofahgginarebagz must have been vain about his appearance. Don't know why as he was one of the uglier characters in the Arm. He charged, the diamond-blade in his right hand. I sidestepped to his left and then – he was so fast, again I didn't see the switch – the dagger was in his left and I nearly impaled myself on it. Only my reflexes saved me but even so, the tip scored down my chest and more wadding ebbed out of my suit.

Back pedalling away from Knofahgginarebagz, he jabbed out and the knife's point connected with my helmet. A star appeared in the Perspex and a crack formed. If the visor gave way, then it would all be over for me and I'd die a horrible, boiling,

choking death. Just like Çrámerr not so long ago. I squinted at the crack, willing it to hold.

Taking advantage of my weakness, Knofahgginarebagz launched a flurry of attacks against my head. With his longer reach, there was little I could do except defend myself and our blades collided many times over the next minute or so. But even then, my ordinary blade couldn't withstand my old diamond-blade. Using his greater strength, my enemy forced me down to my knees.

I was losing and we both knew it.

But I had more than one trick up my sleeve as the saying has it. I was glad I'd used some of my last bonus wisely. Implanted within my heart's left ventricle was a capsule of super-super stimulant. Cost a bit and it's not recommended but if you know the right people, then anything's possible. All the same, I had to undergo a thorough medical before the surgeon administered the implant. I sent a coded command from my brain to that implant. It ruptured, spilling its dose of super-super stim direct into my bloodstream.

Within seconds it took effect. The super-super stim had the effect of speeding up my body to the power of ten. At least, that's what they claimed and I had no reason to doubt it. It's like time slowed down for me allowing me to see everything in crystal clear clarity while everyone else was slowed down like they were on the far side of a black hole's event horizon. Cheating? Who cares – all's fair in love and war and this was most definitely war.

Slowly, so slowly, Knofahgginarebagz raised his arm to deliver the killing blow. As he did so, I saw his fang-filled mouth open in a roar of triumph. Faster than

the speed of light, I rolled out the way of the thrust as it approached centimetre by slow centimetre. As I did so, I leaped to my feet and plunged my knife deep into Knofahgginarebagz's heart.

He didn't have time to register he was dead before I was behind the ape-man. I swung a roundhouse kick into his kidneys and watched as he began his final fall.

Then the super-super stimulant wore off. It only lasts a few seconds as the human body cannot take more than that without suffering unbearable, life-threatening stresses. As it was, I felt that distinctive bitter taste as the chemical dumped out of system and I knew I'd crash from exhaustion any time soon and sleep for hours.

Glancing around, I saw the overconfident ape-man pirates slow their cheers and victory dance as they saw their leader clutch the knife hilt embedded in his chest and fall, kneeling, to the ground. Knofahgginarebagz looked around – his last sight was of his stunned followers standing still while I stood over him with a triumphant grin. Through his visor I saw him give a disbelieving look before he crashed face down into a puddle.

Stooping, I picked up my diamond blade. I felt drained and my muscles trembled. I couldn't show weakness – not yet anyway. Trying to appear nonchalant as if killing giant ape-men single-handed was an everyday occurrence, I stood there daring anyone else to take their leader's place. And suffer the same fate.

One pirate stepped forwards from the small crowd. He glanced down at the still form of his ex-leader. Inwardly, I shook with fear. With the chemical after-effects of super-super stim coursing through my body, there was no way I could take this dude as well.

Switching to my broadcaster, I said, "You heard the deal – my friends and I go free." Like super-super stim had been shot into my bloodstream, I injected authority and command into my voice to give it extra resonance. Yes – that's another implant. The pirate stood before me and drew a Maz-Blazter from his holster.

"That deal was with Knofahgginarebagz, not me."

I recognised that voice. It belonged to Ghomatzaki McGraw, the second in command here. Or was before his leader's demise.

"You're the boss. What you say goes. But you saw how easy I killed Knofahgginarebagz."

"You reckon you're faster than a Blazter bolt?" McGraw asked.

It was a good point – super-super stim's good but not that fast – but I was played out. However, I was saved from answering as the rest of the pirate clan jammed the airwaves. Through their distorted chatter, I caught the sense of what they were saying: that Ghomatzaki McGraw should honour their late leader's wager. That bad luck would follow if he broke the deal. Like many spacers, these pirates set great store by superstition. Despite scientific evidence to the contrary, those in hazardous occupations believe in the power of good fortune and that you can appease it. It's probably something inherited from our primitive *homo sapiens* ancestors.

Anyway, I wasn't about to argue especially as this time fortune was working in our favour. McGraw stepped over Knofahgginarebagz's body – the symbolism wasn't lost on me – and held out his free hand. We shook, each gripping the other's gauntleted hand, and then broke apart.

"Go – before I change my mind," McGraw said.

I didn't say anything. Instead, I radioed to Captain Nanisha to lower the shuttle and take us and Sava's crated shell on board.

We'd done it, we'd made it. But I only allowed myself a little smile once the shuttle had left Sepharvaim's turbulent atmosphere behind and we were safely aboard the President Perseus P. Porter itself. I was too tired to check on Sava's shell, but reassured it was safe now, I lurched to the nearest unoccupied first class stateroom and collapsed in a stupor.

I knew no more.

CHAPTER 13: ENDGAME

The following day, I woke up. Despite the medication the ship's auto-doctor had pumped into me, I still felt like a football at the end of a match. However, I was cheered up when I saw the view-screen was displaying the pure blackness of outer space as we headed towards the edge of Sepharvaim's solar system. Better still, there was no sign of pursuit as, even set to maximum, our sensors could find nothing behind us.

We'd made it. We were free. Even if the pirates launched their craft now, it couldn't catch us before we'd reached the optimum position to engage the monkey-saddle and launch into hyper-jump. Putting on fresh clothes, I made my way over to the restaurant and requested breakfast. As one of only two passengers on board, I felt like a billionaire as the servo-bot brought my food. As I ate, I watched as a brilliant white moon belonging to a gas giant swung by. It was a beautiful sight and my heart lifted as it dropped behind.

Julianna joined me. She looked as ravishing as ever, even wearing a formal, chalk-striped trouser-suit. Her hair was immaculate. She laid her hand on mine and my skin thrilled to her touch. "You did well, Vic. You rescued the shell and got it back safely. I know Sava will be really pleased and I'm sure he'll reward you."

I gulped. I knew what I wanted for a reward but I doubted Sava would give it – or her – to me, no matter how grateful he was. Gussed I'd have to settle for a

monetary reward instead. Never mind – at the rate I was going I'd soon be able to afford a gynoid of my own.

Later that day, a medic-bot administered the relaxants needed to enter hyper-space. Cocooned, we slipped into that weird beyond-space that is still not fully understood by scientists. We dipped out of it once to refuel hydrogen from a gas giant before continuing.

After Sepharvaim, any planet would look good but, as you know, Batavia VII is one of the most beautiful in the whole of Orion's Arm, especially when sunlight reflects off its oceans. I'd rested during the journey, been treated by the medic-bot, and felt good as new.

Captain Nanisha put us in orbit and a shuttle shot up from the surface to dock with us. I didn't envy her as she'd be spending weeks being debriefed both by law enforcement as well as Economou's lawyers and security types. Not that I'd escape that rigmarole myself. All in a day's work for an interplanetary recovery agent, I thought.

The shuttle docked. I was surprised when Sava himself stepped through the airlock, closely followed by Mr Fun himself – his bodyguard, Norin. I wondered what strings he'd pulled but if you're a gazillionaire, I guess you can put yourself first in the queue.

Sava walked into the first class lounge. I stood politely as he walked past and kissed Julianna full on the lips.

"I've missed you, I really have," he said as he gazed into her eyes. Possessively, I thought. I turned away and saw Norin staring at me with those cold, dead eyes of his. There was a man who regarded me as little more than an insect.

Eventually, Sava broke apart from Julianna. "I hear you did well, Vargo. I'm impressed and I thank you for saving my shell. Shall we go and check it out?" Well, that was me told about his priorities.

We all took an express travelator down to the star-craft's holds. We entered the huge chamber carved out of the asteroid's rocky interior. Summoning a multi-tooled cargo-bot, we stood before the crate.

"Open it," I ordered the machine.

Immediately, its arms whirled as it carefully unfastened the crate, dropping the reinforced sides and exposing the interior to view. I was eager to see it again – that object I'd fought so hard and risked everything to save.

The cargo-bot's arms twirled in their complicated dance as it removed the packing material. There was a dull silence in the hold broken only by the machine's whirring servomotors and the rustling of packaging. Horror coiled around my heart like a snake; a snake poised to sink its fangs deep. Something was wrong – very, very wrong. Where was that massive sept-valve? Had the pirates removed it and put it within another container? My heart sank at the thought of returning to Sepharvaim and doing battle with the pirates once again.

But it was worse. Far worse than that. At the bottom of the crate was a collection of shards and fragments. A few were about half a metre in diameter but

they were rare. Most of the rest ranged from a few centimetres down to dust size. I stepped forwards and sifted them through my fingers. There was no doubt in my mind. This was Sava's Kississ shell, now in a thousand pieces. Like Çrámerr, it hadn't survived the fire-fight. That was sixty-six million Hydrans wasted.

Standing, I brushed the dust from my fingers and turned around. I was in deep trouble – I felt I was at the bottom of a black hole's gravity well.

"It's ruined," Sava said. Looking at his face, I saw how he'd become an oligarch. A relentless drive to succeed, single-mindedness and ruthlessness were all reflected. Worse, Norin's hand was within his suit jacket and it didn't take a rocket scientist to work out what he hid there. His cold, dead eyes were focussed on me. They had all the pity of an ice-world locked in perpetual winter. One word – that's all it would take to see me killed.

Spreading my arms wide, I tried to smile. "Listen...", I started. Desperately, I tried to think of some way of exonerating myself. After all, it wasn't my fault the shell had been destroyed. He wanted me to get it back and I'd done my best. All the same, I knew my excuses would cut no ice with Sava. These guys were only interested in results – not self-justification.

That said, I didn't fancy getting blasted to atoms before my shredded corpse got thrown out of an airlock to be flash frozen by the vacuum of outer space. My eyes flicked over to Julianna. She stood apart from our little triangle. Her hazel eyes looked alarmed and she was nibbling the side of her fingernail. I wondered if she'd say anything but swiftly realised there would be no help from that quarter. Either hi-man

or gynoid, she'd be sticking with Sava. And my pride wouldn't let me shelter behind her skirts.

Oh, okay – if my life was on the line, I'd hide behind anything. Licking my dry lips, I said, "Listen – there was no more I could do. I tried but there's no guarantee..."

Sava looked at me. In his hard slab-like face, his eyes scrutinised mine from beneath his heavy brow. He frowned – and it was an uncomfortable sensation being on the receiving end of his inspection. But far more comfortable than what I expected would happen to me in the next few seconds.

"Totally destroyed. The most beautifully decorated Kississ shell to appear on the market within the last half century. I was going to donate it to the Hermitage Museum in Russia itself but now I can't – do you have any idea how much status I have lost?" he asked. His voice was calm – deceptively so.

"You can explain – it wasn't your fault," I said.

"You do not know the Tsar. Excuses are rarely accepted."

Norin's hand was deep within his jacket. I could see he was looking for the go-ahead to doom me. It was hard to tell from that impassive face but I thought nothing would please him more. My hand slipped down to my belt, reaching for my diamond-blade's hilt. Not that it would be much use – a knife against a pistol – but if I was going down, then I wouldn't go meekly.

Then Sava's ugly face split in two with the widest grin I'd ever seen. He bellowed with laughter, his guffaws echoing around the hold. He doubled up with laughter, giving himself over entirely to his humour. Leaning up, he clung onto the

cargo-bot, which was still hovering there, for support. He slapped his thigh, looked up at me and then hooted with laughter again. I'd heard about the mercurial Russian temperament but I couldn't see any reason for his sudden mirth.

All the same, it was better than the alternative.

Norin didn't share in the laughter. He looked at me with those cold ice-blue eyes and his hand never strayed from inside his suit.

Julianna also wasn't laughing. She looked at Sava, at first with alarm and then relaxed. Maybe she'd seen it before. Her eyes flicked to mine and the corners of her mouth lifted in a brief smile. That sight reassured me more than anything else could have done.

Eventually, Sava's laughter subsided. He stood up, still holding onto the motionless cargo-bot.

"You did exactly what I wanted – more – you succeeded beyond what I expected," he said, wiping tears from his eyes.

Now it was my turn to frown. I wasn't the only one as Julianna looked confused. "What do you mean?" I asked.

Through his grin, Sava explained. "You don't think I actually wanted that shell, do you? I'd never see it again once it entered the Tsar's collection in the Hermitage Museum."

"I thought that's what you wanted it for. To donate it to the museum."

Julianna stepped over and stood by me. "Yes, that's what you told me as well."

"Originally, yes. That was the idea. But the Tsar's gratitude is short-lived so I insured it for one hundred million Hydrans. Then I got in touch through intermediaries with Knofahgginarebagz who agreed to raid the President Perseus P. Porter."

"How did you find a bunch of space pirates to do your dirty work?" I asked.

"As you can imagine, I have lots of business interests. Some of them involve some rather unpleasant people. Norin was very useful in that regard."

"You put us at risk – we could have got us all killed," Julianna said. She didn't look at all pleased with Sava's revelations. "And Çrámerr did get killed – he didn't deserve that."

"It's alright – Economou will have him cloned again. He'll soon be back as good as new – even better than new," I told her.

"I had enough respect for Vargo's abilities to think he'd keep you safe. He is supposed to be the best interplanetary recovery agent in the galaxy. And I think he's lived up to that reputation."

That was high praise.

Sava laughed again. "And killing Knofahgginarebagz was a bonus. He was the only one among the pirates who knew about our link. So you did me a favour. A tax write-off plus one hundred million from the insurance – not that the money matters..."

Nice to be one of the super-super rich.

"...But it also means that the ungrateful Tsar won't get this shell for his collection and he can't complain about how it got destroyed. Maybe now he'll detach more warships to help combat the pirate scourge near Khabarovsk."

So that was what this was all about. Some political machinations within the Russian spheres of influence. I shook my head. What are small-fry like me to big hitters like Fedoseyev Yemelyanovich Saveliy? We are merely pawns in their astral-chess games. Best to do what they tell us and grab the crumbs from their table. Though in my case, they were big crumbs.

"You know, you're a real hardshell yourself, Mr Fedoseyev," I said with a smile. Despite myself, I held out my hand, swapped data, and we shook.

THE END.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Freedom fighter, jungle explorer, international mercenary, Riviera jewel thief, jet pilot and gigolo. I've done them all. In my dreams.

You can connect with the author, Morris Kenyon, by emailing me on morris.kenyon@ymail.com and I look forward to hearing from you. Thank you.

OTHER BOOKS BY MORRIS KENYON:

Morris Kenyon is rapidly establishing himself as an acclaimed writer of fast paced, exciting thrillers. However, he likes to challenge himself and write in other genres as well.

*** *SLEAFORD NOIR 1:***

McTeague's once trusted friend and associate, Wheelan, has broken off part of the older mobster's crime empire around the east Midlands. Far worse, Wheelan has also taken McTeague's much younger second wife, Claire, away with him.

Knowing the rest of his empire will fall away or defect to Wheelan if he fails to act, McTeague sends his trusted and lethal enforcer, Hennessy, to Sleaford to show

Wheelan who is chief and to take Claire back home. So Hennessy starts a campaign of violence until Wheelan has no choice but to return Claire. But that is only the start of both gang boss's problems...

*** *SLEAZEFORD (SLEAFORD NOIR 2):***

One sleepy Fenland town. Two Polish chancers eager to make a fast buck with no questions asked. A group of businessmen with funny handshakes wanting to rake off big bucks from town planning contracts. A neo-Nazi bigot who'll jump at the chance of becoming Mayor as his first stepping stone to total power. His bunch of thuggish skinhead hangers-on. Add a huge, abandoned industrial complex on the edge of town ripe for redevelopment. Put them all together and what could possibly go wrong? Except that matters soon escalate way beyond anything any of these groups expected.

Welcome to Sleazeford...

*** *BULLETS DON'T LIVE FOR EVER***

A round-up of shorter stories, including the prize winning 'Journey'.

A collection of shorter fiction in a variety of lengths and genres from A for Action through Z for Zombie. Action and adventure, crime, horror, humour, romance, sci-fi. There should be something to please everybody in this collection. It also includes the prize winning short story, 'Journey'.

*** THE HORROR FROM THE BLIZZARD.**

Any scientific expedition to the Arctic expects plenty of risk. However, Dr. Welham of Miskatonic University's survey uncovers far more than the usual geologic and ethnographic samples. In the severe blizzards of the far north, the team comes across a hideous object from an elder age. A relic that brings earth shattering terror in its wake...

This story is loosely inspired by H. P. Lovecraft's short story from 1918, *Polaris*.

*** DINING AT LENG.**

To celebrate their first anniversary, Abe Roseman decides to treat Julia to a special meal in Leng's – the new restaurant that's opened in town to rave reviews. Perfect. But Leng's is not all it seems on the surface and hides dark secrets inside. Unwittingly, the young couple stumble into a vast realm of horror unlike anything they have experienced before where their only hope of salvation rests on the unexpected...

*** KRILLAZ**

You'd need a good reason to visit Hancox I – a tide-locked world infested by biological terror weapons – Krillaz – a nightmare genetically modified cross between rats and humans. Even hunters avoid the place. However, interplanetary recovery agent Vic Vargo has one million reasons to go. In line to collect a million Hydrans if he rescues a playboy from the talons of the Krillaz, he teams up with a group of executives on a management bonding exercise and heads out to an abandoned city.

There, Vargo realises they have all bitten off far more than they can chew. Unlike the Krillaz...

Includes the bonus short story, 'Sideways Through Time'.

*** *HARDSHELLZ.***

This time, Vic Vargo is hired to bid at auction for a valuable sea shell on behalf of an oligarch with more money than sense and then guard it on its way to a private museum. Easy money, Vargo thinks. What could go wrong? But that's just the start of Vargo's troubles as everything does go wrong. And is the oligarch himself a man to be trusted? Using his wits, strength and reflexes Vargo does his best to save his friends, succeed in his mission and keep his reputation as the best interplanetary recovery agent in the galaxy.

Although this is a follow-up to Krillaz, it is a stand-alone story.

***THE NICU CARAMARIN SERIES FOLLOWING THE
ADVENTURES OF A ROMANIAN GANGSTER AND HARD
MAN:***

* **WARNING:** These books contain scenes of a sexual nature, graphic violence, strong language and drug abuse. They are not intended for those easily offended or persons under eighteen years. You have been warned, so if you read them, don't blame me.

**** 200 STEPS DOWN:***

When his crime boss in Odessa, Ukraine, decides to up his game by getting involved in people trafficking, Nicolae Caramarin must make a choice. Should he turn a blind eye to the horrors he witnesses and carry on being a good soldier for the gang; or take his stand and bring them all down in the only way he knows how?

**** LOOKIN' FOR TROUBLE:***

With little choice but to flee his home city of Odessa, Nicolae Caramarin must recover a gang boss's missing valuable painting if he ever hopes to return. He follows the trail to the windy and rainy city of Manchester. There, he soon falls into his bad old ways with the local underworld. But things soon escalate out of control. Who can

he turn to for help? Who can he trust? Soon Caramarin finds himself relying on his strength and wits in a battle for survival where just staying free is a bonus.

He follows his misadventures in Britain in the next story in the series:

*** *TWO WAYS OUT:***

Having fallen on tough times, hard-bitten ex-con Nicolae Caramarin is lying low. However, he's thinking of going back to the only life he knows – crime. Yet when an old friend asks him for a simple favour, he has no idea of the trouble he'll soon be in. Hours later he's standing in front of a murdered Prosecutor's body – and dead centre in the sights of a group of corrupt cops from Romania's Black Sea port of Constanta.

Only question is how will Nicu Caramarin get out from under and clear his name?

*** *SNOWBIRD:***

The fourth in the series. To be written...